FROM THE SIDEWALK TO THE PODIUM: THE SUBCULTURAL REBELLION OF SKATEBOARDING IN THE OLYMPIC TRANSFORMATION

Marin Sladkarov, Krastio Zgurovski
National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski", Sofia, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT
Introduction: Skateboarding, once confined to urban spaces and characterized by rebellion, creativity, and disregard for formal rules, is entering a new era – making its debut on the Olympic stage. The aim of this review is to outline the academic perspectives on how skateboarding's identity as a subculture is transforming in response to its inclusion in the Olympic Games. The emphasis is on revealing the clash – and sometimes harmony – between subcultural values and the institutional governance of sport.
Methodology: This literature review is based on 23 articles. The search was conducted in ResearchGate, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus, using the keywords "skateboard," "subculture," and "Olympic Games." The articles were examined to build an understanding of how skateboarding functions at the intersection of street ethics and formalized sport.
Results: Although the Olympic Games have introduced systems of control, standardization, and visibility, the core spirit of skateboarding – marked by autonomy, improvisation, and intolerance of hierarchy – continues to exist. Organizations such as World Skate are attempting to balance cultural authenticity with the demands of global sporting institutions.
Conclusions: What emerges is not a story of defeat, but of transformation. Skateboarding is not simply surviving in an institutionalized environment – it is reconfiguring it according to its own rules. The subculture is not disappearing, but reinventing itself.

ORCID
Marin Sladkarov
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9849-5825
Krastio Zgurovski
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8510-9789

Cite this article as:
Sladkarov, M., Zgurovski, K. (2025). From the sidewalk to the podium: the subcultural rebellion of skateboarding in the Olympic transformation. *Proceeding book of the 4th International Scientific Congress "Applied Sports Sciences", 2025, Sofia.* pp. 562 - 568.
https://doi.org/10.37393/ICASS2025/87

Keywords: *Olympic Games, Sportification of action sports, subculture, skateboard.*

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympic Games – debuting at Tokyo 2020 – signaled a seismic shift for a practice long associated with street culture, rebellion, and creative autonomy. Once relegated to sidewalks, parking lots, and outlawed urban spaces, skateboarding has been propelled onto the world's most prestigious athletic stage. This literature review explores the tensions and transformations that accompany skateboarding's Olympic trajectory, focusing on how practitioners, scholars, and institutions negotiate the contradictions between subculture and spectacle.

Skateboarding's journey demands an analysis grounded in subcultural theory, cultural geography, and critical sport studies. As numerous scholars emphasize, skateboarding is not merely a physical activity or a competitive discipline but a form of cultural expression steeped in resistance to authority, institutionalization, and commodification (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Borden, 2019). Skateboarding's Olympic transformation presents a paradox: while institutional validation offers resources, visibility, and potential for inclusion, it also risks undermining the very values that define skateboarding's cultural core.

At the heart of this transformation lies the contested notion of authenticity. Beal and Weidman (2003) argue that authenticity in skateboarding is rooted in participant control, anti-competition ethos, and nonconformity – a value system that often resists commercial and institutional interference. Similarly, Slee (2011) and Cantin-Brault (2019) highlight how skateboarding values "style over score," emphasizing personal expression and community validation rather than hierarchical achievement. These competing logics—subcultural legitimacy versus institutional recognition – frame much of the critical discourse around skateboarding's inclusion in the Olympic Games.

The cultural politics of space also play a central role in skateboarding's identity. Historically, skate-

boarders have reclaimed urban architecture – rails, ledges, and stair sets – as sites of creative resistance (Howell, 2001). However, as skateboarding enters the Olympic sphere, performances take place on custom-built courses designed for broadcast and regulation, distancing the practice from its street-based origins. Glenney and Hölsgens (2024) describe skateboarding as a multisensory, improvisational interaction with urban ecologies – an interaction flattened by Olympic standardization.

From an institutional perspective, scholars such as Batuev and Robinson (2017) and Schweer (2019) document how skateboarding's transition to the Olympics required significant structural adaptation. Unlike traditional sports governed by centralized bureaucracies, skateboarding emerged through a decentralized network of media producers, brands, and local scenes. The path to Olympic inclusion, therefore, involved negotiations not only between organizations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and emerging skateboarding federations, but also between competing visions of what skateboarding is and ought to be.

The commercial dynamics of skateboarding also complicate its Olympic turn. While the subculture has long maintained a critical stance toward commodification, branding, and sponsorship have increasingly shaped the landscape, especially through media exposure and digital platforms (Vargas-Barraza et al., 2016). Glenney and Hölsgens (2024) critique the "capitalist infrastructure" underpinning much of modern skate culture, noting how corporate interests often sanitize or repurpose skateboarding's rebellious image. Yet scholars like Snyder (2017) highlight the agency of skaters who navigate these contradictions, leveraging commercial opportunities while preserving symbolic resistance.

Equally important are questions of inclusion, representation, and gender. Although skateboarding has been historically dominated by white males, the rise of women skaters reflects an evolving subcultural landscape (Borden, 2019; Schwier & Kilberth, 2019). Beal and Ebeling (2019) and Bäckström and Blackman (2022) caution that increased representation does not automatically dismantle the patriarchal and racialized hierarchies embedded in both sport and skate culture.

Taken together, these themes – authenticity, spatial resistance, institutional adaptation, commercial co-optation, and identity politics – form the analytical framework of this literature review.

METHODOLOGY

This literature review employs a narrative synthesis approach to analyze and interpret the cultural and institutional transformation of skateboarding in light of its Olympic inclusion. The study focuses on a curated body of 23 scholarly articles, theses, and book chapters. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the central research question: How has skateboarding's transition from street culture to Olympic sport reshaped its core subcultural values, practices, and meanings? To locate relevant literature, a comprehensive search was conducted using academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and ResearchGate. Key search terms included combinations of:

- *"Skateboarding subculture"*
- *"Olympic skateboarding"*
- *"Skateboarding authenticity"*
- *"Sportification of action sports"*
- *"Urban resistance and skateboarding"*
- *"Skateboarding governance"*

The inclusion criteria for the literature were qualitative and thematic rather than strictly chronological or disciplinary. All texts were previously reviewed in-depth and are cited accordingly throughout this paper. They span various academic fields, including the sociology of sport, cultural studies, urban geography, and subcultural theory, ensuring a multidimensional understanding of the topic. While some articles examine skateboarding's spatial and aesthetic practices (Howell, 2001; Borden, 2019), others focus on commercialization and governance (Batuev & Robinson, 2017; Vargas-Barraza et al., 2016), while still others explore issues of authenticity, identity politics, and gender dynamics within the skateboarding community (Beal, 1995; Bäckström & Blackman, 2022).

The review process involved identifying recurring themes, contradictions, and conceptual overlaps across the texts. Key themes were coded manually using a comparative reading strategy that prioritized intersections between subcultural theory and Olympic institutionalization.

RESULTS

The transformation of skateboarding from an urban subculture into an Olympic sport presents a complex interplay of competing values, shifting power structures, and cultural negotiations. This thematic discussion synthesizes the reviewed texts around five major thematic clusters that emerged consistently across the literature. These themes collectively illuminate how skateboarding's Olympic

turn has both challenged and reconfigured its subcultural identity.

1. Authenticity and Subcultural Legitimacy

Authenticity emerges as the cornerstone of skateboarding's cultural identity. Unlike conventional sports, where legitimacy is determined by official recognition, records, or medals, skateboarding has historically grounded authenticity in shared values such as autonomy, creativity, and nonconformity (Beal & Weidman, 2003). These values are cultivated through peer validation, personal style, and an ethos of doing it "for the love, not the podium".

Beal and Weidman (2003) emphasize that real skaters demonstrate control over their practice and resist external interference, particularly in the form of corporate branding or structured competition. Similarly, Slee (2011) emphasizes the importance of individual style and self-expression over victory, noting that Olympic scoring systems are often perceived as antithetical to the creative essence of skateboarding.

Yet authenticity is not a static concept. Snyder (2017) argues that subcultural credibility is increasingly mediated through digital platforms and visual media—most notably skate videos and Instagram clips – rather than live contests. In this sense, authenticity has evolved to include digital performance. The Olympic stage, although globally visible, often lacks the intimacy and peer validation that sustain authenticity in local scenes (Bock, 2019). As skateboarding enters the realm of institutional sport, its practitioners must navigate a dual system of legitimacy: one rooted in subcultural values and another imposed by global sporting norms. Moreover, the threat to authenticity is not limited to competition formats. Glenney and Hölsgens (2024) argue that even well-intentioned representations of skateboarding in Olympic broadcasts often fail to capture its spontaneous nature. The sensory, tactile knowledge developed through falling, improvising, and interacting with urban surfaces is hard to translate into the sanitized spectacle of Olympic sport.

2. Spatial Politics and Urban Resistance

Skateboarding has long been entangled with urban space—not as a neutral backdrop, but as a site of struggle, improvisation, and creativity. Howell's (2001) influential concept of the "poetics of security" illustrates how skaters reappropriate public architecture in resistance to urban designs that prioritize control and exclusion. Skaters make use of the "edges" of the city – stairs, ledges, handrails – not merely as obstacles but as opportunities for expression and defiance. This relationship with space is a defining feature of skateboarding's subcultural rebellion.

As Borden (2019) explains, skateboarding challenges dominant urban logics by treating the city as a playground rather than a space of commerce or order. However, with Olympic inclusion, skateboarding is increasingly performed on controlled, artificial courses designed for camera angles and broadcast appeal. Schäfer (2019) traces this spatial shift historically, showing how the move from pools and ditches to standardized ramps and skateparks represented early steps toward sportification. Nonetheless, some scholars argue that this transition is not wholly reductive. Glenney and Hölsgens (2024) posit that skaters retain a layered, affective relationship with urban environments that cannot be fully absorbed by institutional frameworks. The concept of "temporal ownership"—where repeated skating of a space fosters emotional connection—continues to animate skate culture even within the constraints of formal venues. Moreover, as Radikonyana et al. (2017) demonstrate, skateboarding in marginalized spaces, such as South African townships, continues to serve as a form of spatial empowerment and resistance, independent of global competitions.

3. Commercialization and Brand Dynamics

The paradox of commercialization lies at the heart of the debate over skateboarding's inclusion in the Olympics. On one hand, corporate sponsorships have brought financial viability, media exposure, and infrastructural development to the sport. On the other hand, they risk commodifying skateboarding's subversive image, turning a culture of resistance into a marketable lifestyle.

Vargas-Barraza et al. (2016) examine this dynamic through a comparative study of skateboarding in Mexico and the U.S., showing how branding has increasingly supplanted peer influence in shaping identity. Skaters align with brands not just for performance gear, but for cultural capital—an alignment that can simultaneously affirm and dilute authenticity. Corporate entities like Nike SB and Red Bull have gained legitimacy within the skate community by aligning with credible skaters, but their involvement also introduces tensions between market logic and cultural values.

Snyder (2017) frames this process as a "subcultural enclave economy," wherein skaters monetize their

craft through sponsorships, media, and entrepreneurial ventures. While this enables economic survival and visibility, it also embeds skaters within precarious creative labor markets. The Olympic spotlight amplifies these contradictions: only a select few benefit from global visibility, while most skaters remain in economically unstable positions.
Moreover, the marketing of skateboarding often relies on a stylized version of rebellion—what Borden (2019) calls the "aesthetic of marginality". Kilberth (2019) warns that Olympic skateboarding may be particularly vulnerable to this aesthetic flattening, as corporate sponsors seek to balance edginess with broad market appeal.
Snyder (2017) and Schwier (2019) both highlight the agency of skaters who strategically engage with sponsors while preserving their creative and cultural autonomy. Sponsorship does not automatically equate to sellout status; instead, it represents one of many ways that skaters navigate a hybrid cultural economy.

4. Institutionalization and Governance: Skating Between Autonomy and Regulation

One of the most contentious elements of skateboarding's Olympic journey is the shift from an informal, decentralized culture to one increasingly governed by formal institutions (Colberg, 2019). Unlike traditional sports, which operate within national federations and international rulebooks, skateboarding has historically resisted hierarchy, instead organizing itself through fluid networks of brands, media, and peer communities (Batuev & Robinson, 2017).
Batuev and Robinson (2017) argue that skateboarding's Olympic inclusion was not merely a top-down imposition but the result of negotiated alignments between cultural legitimacy and regulatory legitimacy. While governing bodies like World Skate held formal recognition from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), they lacked deep roots in the skateboarding community. Conversely, grassroots organizations and figures like Tony Hawk and Gary Ream wielded cultural clout but lacked institutional authority. This created a "dual legitimacy" framework, where Olympic success depended on satisfying both bureaucratic expectations and subcultural sensibilities.
The compromise was visible in the adoption of the Street League Skateboarding (SLS) format, which prioritized individual style and creative lines within a judged contest structure. While this format maintained some subcultural aesthetics, it also introduced rankings, regulations, and pressure to perform in line with Olympic expectations. Schwier (2019) and Schäfer (2019) suggest that such institutional adaptations risk reducing skateboarding to a performance metric, stripping it of its social and symbolic dimensions.
However, scholars also highlight skateboarding's ability to adapt without entirely surrendering its identity. Bäckström and Blackman (2022) frame this institutionalization as a dialectical process, wherein skateboarding both conforms to and resists Olympic structures. This duality, according to Schwier (2019), is what defines modern skateboarding: a scene that operates simultaneously within and against institutional norms.
Glenney and Hölsgens's (2024) warn that scholarly engagement with skateboarding—particularly when framed for policy or design interventions—risks reinforcing the very systems it seeks to critique. The institutional gaze, whether Olympic or academic, always carries the risk of fixation, classification, and eventual containment (Bindel & Pick, 2019).

5. Identity, Inclusion, and Gender Politics in a Global Arena

While institutionalization and commercialization dominate debates about Olympic skateboarding, equally vital are questions of identity, inclusion, and equity. Historically, skateboarding has been a male-dominated, largely white, and Western-centric space. Its integration into the Olympics introduces new pressures and possibilities for broadening participation and visibility across gender, race, and geography.
Beal (1995) was among the first to highlight how authenticity in skateboarding is unevenly distributed, with women skaters often marginalized or dismissed as "posers." This marginalization persists despite growing female representation in both grassroots scenes and global contests. Borden (2019) and Schwier & Kilberth (2019) note that the Olympics may serve as a platform for challenging these hierarchies, especially as female skaters like Letícia Bufoni and Rayssa Leal gain international prominence.
However, symbolic representation is not the same as structural inclusion. Glenney and Hölsgens (2024) caution that while the visibility of diverse skaters may increase, the underlying logics of competition and media framing often reinforce normative ideals—centered on youth, able-bodiedness, and commodified "diversity."
At the same time, local and grassroots movements

continue to redefine what skateboarding looks like and who it includes. Initiatives such as Skateistan, All Girl Skate Jam, and Skate Like a Girl foreground alternative narratives that emphasize collective empowerment, peer learning, and anti-oppressive community building (Radikonyana et al., 2017; Glenney & Hölsgens, 2024). These practices often exist outside Olympic circuits but reflect the most progressive and transformative aspects of skate culture.

Moreover, the global diffusion of skateboarding has introduced new cultural dimensions that complicate traditional narratives. In Hungary, Béki and Faragó (2020) document ambivalent public perceptions of skateboarding, shaped by post-socialist values and limited infrastructure. In South Africa, Radikonyana et al. (2017) reveal how skating provides youth with alternatives to crime and alienation, challenging stereotypes of deviance. These case studies highlight the importance of cultural and geopolitical context in understanding how Olympic inclusion is received and reshaped around the world.

Ultimately, skateboarding's Olympic transformation is not merely a matter of institutional regulation or media packaging—it is a question of who gets to define the culture, and on what terms. As Schwier (2019) writes, skateboarding today is a site of symbolic struggle: between branding and rebellion, inclusion and exclusion, spectacle and expression.

CONCLUSION

Skateboarding's ascent from street corners and DIY parks to the Olympic stage encapsulates a powerful cultural tension between institutional validation and subcultural rebellion. As this literature review has demonstrated, the journey "from the sidewalk to the podium" is not a story of simple assimilation, but one of negotiation, resistance, and redefinition. The 23 reviewed studies converge on a central insight: skateboarding's identity is forged not in spite of contradiction, but through it.

At its core, skateboarding is a practice deeply rooted in authenticity, self-expression, and opposition to regulation. These values are not incidental—they are central to the lived experience of skaters across generations and geographies (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Slee, 2011). Olympic inclusion, with its codified rules, national representation, and corporate sponsorships, has challenged these values in both symbolic and material ways. Yet, as multiple scholars affirm, the subculture has demonstrated resilience and creativity in adapting to its new terrain without abandoning its foundational ethos (Snyder, 2017; Borden, 2019; Schwier, 2019).

Rather than framing institutionalization as the death of skateboarding's soul, the literature calls for a more nuanced understanding of cultural transformation. The Olympics may impose new structures, but they also offer a global platform for showcasing diversity, challenging gender hierarchies, and expanding access to previously excluded communities (Bäckström & Blackman, 2022; Glenney & Hölsgens, 2024). This ambivalence—between conformity and critique, inclusion and erasure—is precisely what gives the current moment its analytical richness.

Importantly, the literature also highlights the risks of romanticizing skateboarding's past. Subcultural spaces have never been free from exclusion, whether based on gender, race, sexuality, or class (Beal, 1995; Vargas-Barraza et al., 2016). Olympic inclusion thus offers not only challenges but opportunities: to question existing power dynamics within the culture, to support broader representation, and to imagine new futures for skateboarding that remain rebellious even within institutional frameworks.

In conclusion, skateboarding's Olympic transformation is not a singular event, but a process—one that reveals the enduring tension between rebellion and recognition. As the culture continues to evolve, it invites ongoing scholarly attention to the complexities of identity, power, and performance that define its ride from the sidewalk to the podium.

Recommendations for Future Research

- ***Critical Institutional Engagement**:* Scholars and practitioners should continue examining how institutional frameworks - ~~like~~ World Skate and the IOC - interact with local scenes and subcultural values. Ethnographic work on skaters' experiences before, during, and after Olympic cycles would provide deeper insight into these negotiations.
- ***Intersectional Perspectives**:* Future research must prioritize voices historically marginalized in skateboarding, particularly women, queer, and non-Western skaters. Understanding how these groups navigate both subcultural hierarchies and Olympic structures is essential for developing a truly inclusive cultural analysis.
- ***Spatial and Ecological Inquiry**:* Given skateboarding's unique relationship with urban space, studies that investigate how Olympic infrastructures reshape the built environment—and how skaters respond—could reveal much about the politics of public space, accessibility,

and resistance.

- ***Media and Platform Analysis**:* As digital platforms increasingly mediate what counts as "authentic" skating, media studies approaches should explore how algorithmic visibility, branding, and social capital shape skateboarding's future.

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Corresponding author:
Marin Sladkarov
National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski",
21, Acad. Stefan Mladenov str.
Sofia, Bulgaria
E-mail: sirmarich@gmail.com

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Design: Slavka Asenova, Svetla Kostova
Publisher: Scientific Publishing House NSA Press
ISBN (Online): 978-954-718-803-7