

Women in Skateboard and Product Development

by

Griffin Carlborg

An honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

Undergraduate College

Leonard N. Stern School of Business

New York University

May 2017

Professor Marti G. Subrahmanyam

Faculty Adviser

Professor Adam Alter

Thesis Adviser

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Women in Skateboarding and Product Development	4
Chapter 1: Sun Kissed Surfer Boys	5
Chapter 2: A Boys Club	8
Chapter 3: No Support for Girls.....	12
Chapter 4: Potential Success for Female Specific Products	16
Chapter 5: The Female Foot	18
Chapter 6: Implications and Feasibility of Gender Specific Products in Action Sports ...	22
Chapter 7: Steps Necessary to Yield Success	26
Chapter 8: Disruption of Female Skateboarding Leading up to the Olympics.....	29
Chapter 9: Post Nike	31
Chapter 10: Future Research.....	31
Acknowledgements.....	33

Abstract

In the sport's relatively short life, skateboarding has grown from a past time for surfers into a multi-billion-dollar industry. Males historically dominate the demographic of skateboarders; however, female participation continues to grow. A new prioritization of style, creativity and individuality amongst skateboarders lowers barriers to entry and makes skateboarding accessible to more participants. Even as the demographic of female skateboarders grows, skateboard companies do very little to support this subset of consumers. A few female specific skateboard companies have products on the market, but not a single skateboarding shoe exists that a company developed around female foot. Major corporations such as Nike that have a presence in skateboarding have the resources necessary to innovate with regard to product development. The growing demographic of female skateboarders, especially as the sport gets closer to its debut in the 2020 Summer Olympics, presents an opportunity for a major corporation to release female specific skateboarding footwear. A product of this nature has the potential to drive female skateboarding performance forward.

Women in Skateboarding and Product Development

In the summer of 2001, I found my father's Logan Earth Ski skateboard. I was six years old and I found the skateboard in the basement of my grandparents' house in Saint Charles, Illinois. The triangular shaped surface, or deck, and clay wheels had few similarities to the skateboards that I ride today. At the time, I had no idea that this unfamiliar method of transportation would change my life. I always enjoyed riding the board, but I was clueless that skateboarding would grow to become a multi-billion-dollar industry, that skateboarders could earn a living professionally, and that people all over the world would find interest in the sport and buy skateboarding products. Had my introduction to skateboarding taken place in 2017, the environment would have been entirely different because in 2001, skateboarding was not an Olympic sport, Nike was a year away from being one of the first major corporations to involve itself in skateboarding, and many of today's top professionals were finding their first skateboards. Traditionally males dominated the sport, but more females are beginning to skateboard. Female skateboarding receives exposure from non-traditional media channels such as The New York Times, Urban Outfitters, Vogue, Vice, and Nylon. In addition, traditional skateboarding magazines Thrasher and Transworld Skateboarding release both videos and editorials supporting female skateboarders. Lastly, premier competition circuits such as Street League Skateboarding and Vans Park Series include women's divisions and have made it possible for women to compete on a global scale for large prize purses. The inclusion of women's skateboarding in the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo illustrates an incredible step forward for the sport. This thesis seeks to explore the growing demographic of female skateboarders and identify opportunities for product development to support this new segment of consumers. Academics rarely explore skateboarding and very little data exists pertaining to the

sport and female participation. As a result, I derive support for my analysis from interviews with industry professionals. I spoke with...

Professional	Role
Carolyn MacNaughton	Vice President, Under Armour, Women's Footwear Team Leader
Frank Messmann	Chief Executive Officer, Absolute Board Co.
Lacey Baker	Professional Skateboarder, 2016 SLS Women's World Champion
Lisa Whitaker	President/Founder, Meow Skateboards
Martin Buckley	General Manager, Nike Skateboarding
Jason Papadopoulos	Director of Strategic Planning and Finance, Nike Skateboarding
Eric Lonsway	Senior Director of Footwear, Nike Skateboarding
Kelly Bird	Global Brand Manager, Nike Skateboarding
Brianna Zilles	Global Brand Manager, Nike Skateboarding
Greg Gorski	Global Brand Director, Nike Skateboarding

I disperse facts, figures and testimonials from all the interviews throughout the document and mark them explicitly. Before I turn to the question of how women adopted the sport, it proves important to examine the origins of skateboarding.

Chapter 1: Sun Kissed Surfer Boys

Skateboarding has a relatively short history. The sport began in the early 1950's as a substitute for surfing. Sun kissed boys from southern California cut surfboard shaped decks from two by fours and nailed roller-skates to the bottoms of these decks. With the complete boards, the boys would surf the sidewalks when the waves were too flat or the conditions too choppy because of the wind on the Pacific Ocean. During its early years, participants did not even call this radical sport skateboarding. However, by the 1960's the sport came into its own and surf companies began to sponsor skateboarding specific competitions. In the 1970's, skateboarding specific companies and groups of skaters, known as teams, came to fruition and the niche community of athletes began to speak about the first professional skateboarders, Stacey Peralta and Tony Alva. Simultaneously, Alan Gelfand invented the ollie. The execution of an ollie involves intricate footwork that brings a skateboard into the air as the skateboarder jumps. When

a skateboarder does an ollie, he can jump up and down curbs, over obstacles, and down sets of stairs. This maneuver serves as a foundation for modern skateboarding and differentiates skateboarding from any other board sport. At the start of the 1980's, the invention of the Video Cassette Recorder, VCR, laid the foundation for skateboarding media and made it possible for geographically separate subcultures of skateboarders to monitor and gain inspiration from the progression of their peers. VCRs also crippled and constrained many skateboarder's as they allowed skateboarders to communicate and promote a right and wrong way to ride a skateboard. Before, the 1980's the sport was a stylized extension of surfing and by the early 1990's skateboarders were riding backyard ramps and doing skateboarding-specific tricks in the street. As the sport continued to progress, a clear gender segmentation remained prevalent for nearly the next 25 years. I will explore this divide in depth in the following section of this dissertation.

These twenty-five years have immense significance as skateboarding progressed dramatically as a sport. Skateboarders began trying the most technical tricks possible on the biggest obstacles. For example, professional skateboarder Mark Gonzalez would ollie up and slide down handrails and even did an ollie down a massive set of stairs known as Wallenberg, a 19-foot gap in San Francisco. The X-Games introduced the public to the sport in 1995. Prior to the X-Games, baby boomers often identified skateboarding as a pastime for hoodlums. T.V. broadcasting educated the public about the sport and helped to eliminate the hesitancy many parents had about letting their kids begin to ride a skateboard. This change in mentality drastically increased the number of people riding skateboards because the sport became more socially acceptable. In the 2000's, more and more millennials sought to identify with the skateboarding subculture and began to empty their wallets to buy skateboarding apparel, shoes,

and accessories. By 2007, the growing interest turned skateboarding into a \$5 billion industry.¹ This newly lucrative industry caught the attention of major companies, and both Nike and Adidas began to allot substantial budgets to develop skateboarding specific shoes and apparel. These companies also began to offer skateboarders endorsement deals for sums of money large enough to earn an honest living. In 2010, professional skateboarder Rob Dyrdek founded Street League Skateboarding. This competition circuit transforms arenas around the world into premier skateboarding spots that serve as a global stage for top professionals to compete for prize purses valued upwards of one million dollars. The scale and money of Street League Skateboarding made street skateboarding look a little more like the National Basketball Association (NBA). After five years, in 2015, Street League Skateboarding introduced a female division to the competition and changed the landscape of women's professional skateboarding forever. The Vans Park Series, founded in 2016, provides the same elite stage to transition, skateboarding on ramps instead of street obstacles, skateboarders. Both Street League Skateboarding and the Vans Park Series make global competitive skateboarding scalable and in 2020 skateboarding will premiere at the pinnacle of international sport competition, at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo.

The progression and commercialization of skateboarding allows young skateboarders to dream of an honest career practicing the sport that they love; however, it also contradicts the raw, reckless, and rowdy origins of skateboarding. A new counterculture of skateboarders now opposes what they perceive as unwanted commercialization.

This subgroup of skateboarders prioritizes style, creativity, and freedom of expression. The group does not make the execution of the most technical maneuver on the biggest obstacle the norm, but instead try to skateboard in a personal and stylized fashion. Skateboarders who

¹ Higgins, M. (2007, July 16). Skateboarding: Sponsors sign tots. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/16/sports/16iht-BOARDS.1.6673226.html>

prioritize personalization and stylization share the experience via social media and the creation of video parts. Millions of fans, skateboarders and non-skateboarders alike, consume skateboarding media at a high frequency and through viewership allow non-competitive skateboarders to reach an audience and make an impact. For example, 204,000² and 84,900³ people respectively follow Dylan Rieder and Austyn Gillette's, non-competitive professional skateboarders, Instagram accounts. In 2014, the Street League Skateboarding Nike SB Super Crown World Championships aired on FOX and peaked at 2.8 million viewers.⁴ All factors have made skateboarding the quickest sport to develop. In under seventy years, the sport transformed from a past time of southern California surfers to a multi-billion-dollar industry. If the sport continues to grow, companies that build innovative products will have the opportunity to capture market share and serve a growing demographic of consumers.

Chapter 2: A Boys Club

Between the ages of six and eleven, I rode my skateboard every day. When I was not practicing in my driveway, I skateboarded at a small skatepark in Millbrae California, a San Francisco suburb, nearly every week. Over the span of five years and more than 200 visits to the skatepark, I never saw a girl skateboarding. In addition, in a paper titled *Female Skateboarding: Re-writing Gender*, Dani Abulhawa researched 77 companies from December 2007 to April 2008 and only 14 of the companies she researched sponsored a total of 38 female skateboarders.⁵ The

² Instagram. (2017, May 9). Retrieved May 9, 2017, from https://www.instagram.com/swankfuck_inc

³ Instagram. (2017, May 9). Retrieved May 9, 2017, from <https://www.instagram.com/austynGillette>

⁴ SLS On Fox This Sunday. (2015, October 08). Retrieved from <http://streetleague.com/2015/10/08/sls-on-fox-this-sunday/>

⁵ Abulhawa, D. (2008). Female Skateboarding: Re-writing Gender. *Platform*, 3(1), 62-62.

absence of girls at Millbrae skatepark and the lack of support for female skateboarders from skateboarding brands clearly illustrate the prevalent gender divide.

Historically, female participation in skateboarding represents a small fraction of total participation. In 1996, in a paper titled *Alternative Masculinity and Its Effects on Gender Relations in the Subculture of Skateboarding* Becky Beal explains that, “One common explanation for the low number of female participants was that skate-boarding does not promote the traditional feminine appearance of the immaculately groomed, petite female.”⁶ In response, many female skateboarders dressed like the guys to try and fit in. Beal also exposes the historical sexism prevalent amongst skateboarders. Beal interviewed skateboarders who identified “female appearance,” “female natural aptitudes,” and “female social roles” as factors inhibiting female’s participation in the sport. In the late 90’s, when the paper was published, many of the girls she interviewed identified that acceptance within the sport stemmed from exhibiting masculine traits.⁷ In the early years of skateboarding, professionals Patti McGee and Peggy Oki still exhibited feminine characteristics while skateboarding; however, this did not last and masculinity dominated the sport in its early years. These factors proved present during my early years as a skateboarder.

At the age of eleven, in 2006, I went on a hiatus from skateboarding. Other sports caught my attention, and though I still pushed my skateboard around, I did not practice the sport seriously. However, nine years later, in 2015, during my Christmas break from New York

⁶ Alternative masculinity and its effects on gender relations in the subculture of skateboarding.. (n.d.) >*The Free Library*. (2014). Retrieved May 09 2017 from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Alternative+masculinity+and+its+effects+on+gender+relations+in+the...-a018668787>

⁷ Alternative masculinity and its effects on gender relations in the subculture of skateboarding.. (n.d.) >*The Free Library*. (2014). Retrieved May 09 2017 from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Alternative+masculinity+and+its+effects+on+gender+relations+in+the...-a018668787>

University I started skateboarding again and I became obsessed with the sport. In 2015, the cultural landscape and gender split of skateboarding looked entirely different from where I left the sport in 2006.

During my winter break, I regularly drove up to the Alga Norte Skatepark in Carlsbad, California and slowly regained my skills. The demographic of skateboarders was entirely different and the perimeter of the Alga Norte Skatepark looked more like the sidelines of a youth recreational soccer tournament. Parents of young skateboarders set up folding chairs to sit and watch their sons and daughters hone their skills on the board. This detail indicates a paramount shift in the culture surrounding skateboarding. Though the public had scorned skateboarding for many years, in 2015, I saw parents supporting and encouraging their children to pursue skateboarding. Synonymously, during every session I saw at least one female progressing, trying advanced tricks, and taking the sport seriously. The increase in female participation extends to a global level. In 2015, Skateistan, a non-profit organization that seeks to use skateboarding to empower youth in Afghanistan, Cambodia, and South Africa, taught 1,129 children in Afghanistan to skateboard and saw 42% female participation.⁸ Cambodia saw a 46% female gender split and South Africa saw a 28% female gender split.⁹ In developing countries, Olympic athletes often receive funding from the military, government or the public which will empower more females to pick up a skateboard in hopes of being able to represent their country at the Olympics.¹⁰

⁸ *Skateistan Annual Report 2015* (Rep.). (2016, October 2). Retrieved https://www.dropbox.com/s/fbr3rc88az8ft31/Skateistan%20_%20Annual%20Report%20_%202015.pdf?dl=0

⁹ *Skateistan Annual Report 2015* (Rep.). (2016, October 2). Retrieved https://www.dropbox.com/s/fbr3rc88az8ft31/Skateistan%20_%20Annual%20Report%20_%202015.pdf?dl=0

¹⁰ Olympic Funding Often Reflects Country's Values. (2009, October 27). Retrieved from <http://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2008-06-16-olympic-funding-often-reflects-countrys-values-66821302/374425.html>

I also began to see more women skateboarding. On a crisp fall morning in 2015, at the Lower East Side, LES, Skatepark in lower Manhattan I first saw Emily Tarnacki. She dressed from head to toe in white, and she accented her outfit tastefully with a pair of pink high-top Converse Chuck Taylors. She did not stand out to me because of what she was wearing or because she was one of the two girls skateboarding at LES that morning. Emily stood out to me because she rode her skateboard with style and individuality, and was not trying to be anything but herself. After watching her skate, I wanted to skateboard more stylishly, uniquely, and effortlessly. That morning, I complimented her on her style and followed her Instagram account, *lilnicegirl*. Over the next few months, I watched the account grow from 700 to 17,800 followers, confirming that other skateboarders felt the same way as I did about Emily Tarnacki. The tricks she posts on her Instagram are not incredibly challenging, but the simplicity yields accessibility, boosts her popularity and reinforces the notion that skateboarders today place less emphasis on executing the most technical trick on the biggest obstacle and more emphasis on style, creativity, and freedom of expression. The mentality lowers many barriers to entry associated with skateboarding and invites new entrants to participate. In addition, new female skateboarders no longer feel as if they must skate like the boys. Women have a different style and approach and the skateboarding community welcomes both as this community thinks more progressively.

Women's skateboarding currently seems to grow faster than skateboarding as a category. The New York Times publishes articles about all girl skate crews such as the Skate Kitchen, Urban Outfitters has a video series called Skate girls, following the lives of female skateboarders, and women will compete alongside men at skateboarding's inaugural appearance in the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. The skateboarding subculture outgrew Becky Beal's

1996 conclusion that skateboarding “reproduced patriarchal relations.”¹¹ Skateboarders welcome female participation and based on media exposure, the public seems to have more interest in female skateboarding than male skateboarding. Due to the recent rise in female participation very few female skateboard products exist. The first companies that begin to think about catering to this market have an opportunity to provide for an underserved market.

Chapter 3: No Support for Girls

Every time I show up to a skatepark in Manhattan I see girls push themselves to skate in new and creative ways. Women are skating together and progressing rapidly. I find myself wanting to stop skateboarding and wanting to start watching. So many female skateboarders prioritize style, and I personally find this way of skateboarding far more enjoyable to watch. Lacey Baker, the 2016 Women’s Street League Skateboarding World Champion, prioritizes style and looks for unique ways to ride her skateboard. During an interview, I spoke with her extensively about the changing mentality amongst skateboarders. She agrees that skateboarders prioritize style and said, “somebody can do the gnarliest thing, and it’s like wow that’s really impressive, but would you watch that over and over and over like you would with a Dylan Rieder part.” In his short 28 years of life, Rieder helped make style a priority amongst the skateboarding community. In a piece celebrating his life, *Rolling Stone Magazine* wrote Rieder, “had style practically brimming out of his Huf shoes: He rode smoothly, popped super high and seemed magically at ease on his board. He was a joy to watch, the way anyone meant to be

¹¹ Alternative masculinity and its effects on gender relations in the subculture of skateboarding.. (n.d.) >*The Free Library*. (2014). Retrieved May 09 2017 from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Alternative+masculinity+and+its+effects+on+gender+relations+in+the...-a018668787>

riding a skateboard is joyous.”¹² *Transworld Skateboarding* wrote, “we lost one of the best to ever step on a skateboard today. Dylan Rieder, whose flawless style, explosive power, and epic video parts influenced an entire generation and beyond, passed away today due to complications with Leukemia.”¹³ The remarks from notable media and a top female skateboarder confirm that currently the skateboarding community prioritizes style and creativity.

The table below lists female skateboarders on Instagram who approach skateboarding with this mindset. The number of followers confirms that thousands of people feel the same way as Lacey and I do.

Skateboarder	Handle	Followers
Emily Tarnacki	“lilnicegirl”	17.8 K
Rachelle Vinberg	“rachellevinberg”	54.1 K
Nina Moran	“ninamoninamoninamo”	12 K
Savannah Headden	“savheadden”	25.3 K
Marissa Martinez	“mamaskate”	13.9 K

The prioritization of style and creativity lowers the barriers to entry for all participants and helps to explain the growing number of male and female skateboarders. Synonymously, women skateboarders are championing their gender. A lot of female skateboarders are comfortable identifying and embracing the differences between male and female skateboarding. Lacey explained further that, “women’s skateboarding is growing at such a rapid rate and people are beginning to celebrate that and not exclude it.” She felt that, “we are all skateboarders, but it’s important to celebrate that I am a female skateboarder and there are things about that, that make it special that a dude doesn’t have.”

¹² Clark, J. R. (2016, October 13). Dylan Rieder: 5 Videos That Defined Skateboard Phenom's Career. Retrieved from <http://www.rollingstone.com/sports/videos/dylan-rieders-legacy-late-skaters-5-best-skate-videos-w444751>

¹³ Dylan Rieder, 1988-2016. (2016, October 12). Retrieved from <http://skateboarding.transworld.net/news/dylan-rieder-1988-2016/#ERybf8WiDVV4oqWh.97>

I see so many female skateboarders. I see so much potential. Traditional skateboarding publications such as Thrasher Magazine and Transworld Skateboarding release pieces focusing on the rapid changes surrounding women's skateboarding. Mainstream media such as The New York Times, Vogue, Urban Outfitters, Vice and Nylon are releasing pieces praising the culture surrounding women skateboarders. Skateboarders and non-skateboarders alike are reading about female skateboarding more than ever before. In addition, in 2020, 40 top female skateboarders will compete on the utmost premier stage at the Summer Olympics. These factors make today the most supportive time for female skateboarders in the history of the sport. Despite the size of the market, growth, and exposure of the segment there are very few female specific skateboard products to help drive female skateboarding performance forward.

As a skateboarder, I prioritize two pieces of equipment. I prioritize finding the right board and I prioritize finding the right pair of shoes. As a male, this task proves easy because males run nearly every skateboard company and release graphics that cater to male taste. Every skateboard footwear brand designs shoes around men's feet. Therefore, when I walk into a skateboard shop every product serves me as a consumer. There are female specific skateboarding companies. The choices prove limited but if a female skateboarder wants to support a skateboard brand founded to support female skateboarders she can choose between Hoopla, Meow, Rogue, Gnarhunters, and Cheers. However, female specific deck companies do not necessarily help with performance because differentiation exists because the brand offers different graphics or sponsors a team of all female skateboarders. Gender specific footwear has the potential to enhance the performance of female skateboarders. Female skateboarders shop for shoes in a horrible retail environment. In all skateboard shops and skateboarding shoe retailers not a single shoe originates from a women's last. Female skateboarders feel lucky if one of the male styles on the wall runs in sizes

small enough to fit a female foot. I draw the comparison that a retail environment of this nature resembles an environment in which a women's marathon Olympian looks to find the perfect shoe for her next race and must choose from a wall of all men's shoes. Of course, she might find a pair of shoes that will suffice and allow her to compete in the race. However, this product will not allow her to push her performance forward and compete to the best of her ability. No one would ever consider this hypothetical situation to take place in the real world; yet, this exact situation happens right in front of our eyes within the skateboarding community.

Lastly, skateboard companies currently rarely take care of female team riders. Though Lacey Baker holds the world champion title, she cannot earn a living from skateboarding. Lacey worked as a full time graphic designer while living in Los Angeles and now works as a barista in a lower Manhattan coffee shop. In our interview, we spoke about the impact of these circumstances on her performance as a skateboarder. In January of 2017, she released her "My World" video part. This video had an influential impact on women's skateboarding and *Thrasher Magazine* wrote, "Skateboarding has long been dominated by primarily male participation, but the women are rising up and growing in numbers, and we love it. This video part shatters every preconceived notion of girls vs boys. Technically incredible and thoroughly enjoyable, Lacey Baker just brought down the house. Hell YES!"¹⁴ Lacey said that while working as a graphic designer it took nearly a year to get the first minute and a half of video footage. However, as soon as she stopped working, she finished the part in under three months. This anecdote perfectly illustrates that women's performance will increase exponentially when they receive support from brands and can spend more energy focusing on skateboarding. Lacey also speaks candidly to the media about her relationship with brands. In an interview with Vice, Lacey said that "Vans send

¹⁴ Lacey Baker's "My World" Part. (2017, January 23). Retrieved from <http://www.thrasher magazine.com/articles/videos/lacey-baker-s-my-world-part/>

me shoes but they are never going to go further than that. I have been on Bones [Skateboard Wheels] since I was like 12 and still can't get a plane ticket or any other type of financial support to skate and travel.”¹⁵ The experiences of Baker show that the skateboard industry historically has very little interest in pushing female performance forward.

Chapter 4: Potential Success for Female Specific Products

The growing demographic of female skateboarders and the lack of female specific products offer an opportunity for skateboarding brands. However, the potential success of female specific skateboarding products proves uncertain. Both Penny Board and Meow Skateboards illustrate examples of success stories for female specific skateboarding products.

A Penny Board consists of a 22-inch plastic deck, stock aluminum trucks and large urethane wheels that glide smoothly on most surfaces. Penny Boards hit the shelves in 2010 and quickly became one of the trendiest accessories for millennials and generation z. I still remember arriving at NYU and meeting new friends. When these friends found out that I rode a skateboard it was common for them to ask if I “could teach them to Penny Board.” This illustrates a phenomenon known as genericide, which involves “replacing generic names with brand names.”¹⁶ Examples of genericide include calling skateboarding, Penny Boarding, calling tissues Kleenex, or lip balm Chapstick.

The boards come in a variety of colors with gender specific graphics and are always very photogenic. I spoke with Frank Messmann, the CEO of Absolute Board Co., the holding

¹⁵ Bailey, H. (2015, December 17). This Pro Skateboarder Wants the Skate Industry's Views on Women to 180. Retrieved from https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/pro-skateboarder-lacey-baker-wants-the-skate-industry-to-start-respecting-women

¹⁶ Nemecek, K. (2010, December 1). The Real Names of Brand Name Products. Retrieved from <https://brokenssecrets.com/2010/12/01/the-real-names-of-brand-name-products/>

company for Penny Board, to understand the brands success and consumer base. Messmann told me the brands “mission is to get more people skateboarding.” In addition, most of Penny Board’s consumers are people buying their first skateboard. Consumer’s choose to buy Penny Board because, “the expectation of what you’re supposed to do on a Penny Board is way lower than the expectation of what you are supposed to do on a street skateboard. You’re not supposed to be able to ollie up a curb, you’re not supposed to be able to ollie down anything, you’re supposed to just roll around.” As a result, at its high point the brand saw a gender split of 60% males and 40% females. When Penny Board made the sport less intimidating the barriers to entry were lower and more people started riding skateboards. Messmann feels that Penny Board has “arguably attracted more girls to try skateboarding than, perhaps, any other brand in skateboarding.” He concluded that, “the entire skateboard industry vastly underestimated the volume of people out there that just wanted a skateboard to roll around on.” Despite the criticism from the core skateboard community, Penny Board has helped the entire industry grow.

Accessibility becomes the core issue when thinking about the growing number of skateboarders. As mentioned previously, greater accessibility applies to traditional skateboarding. The prioritization of style, creativity and individuality lowers the barriers to entry just as Penny Board did. Currently, the gender split of traditional skateboarders falls between 10% and 20% female. However, gender representation continues to grow more equal and if a brand can make female specific products accessible and relatable it will find in market success.

Meow Skateboards serves as another success story for female specific skateboarding products. The company makes skateboard decks and female skateboarders run the company with the intention of serving female skateboarders. I spoke with Lisa Whitaker, the founder and president of the brand, and she confirmed that year after year the financial performance of Meow

Skateboards improves. The brand's sponsored team of three top professional skateboarders and six up and coming amateurs illustrates another pillar of success. Current world champion Lacey Baker skateboards on this team. In our interview, she provided insight into her decision to skateboard for Meow. Baker said that Meow gave her the opportunity to have a pro board, earn a paycheck, and "be a part of something so important." Meow gives female skateboarders the support that traditional male dominated companies do not and as a result finds immense success making female specific skateboard products for female skateboarders. Female specific skateboarding footwear represents an area unexplored by brands.

Chapter 5: The Female Foot

I remember as a young skateboarder yearning to have a foot big enough to fit in a size 6.5 shoe. Skateboard companies generally do not make high performance shoes in sizes smaller than 6.5. Prior to growing into size 6.5, I was limited to the couple styles of boy's shoes that skateboard shops would carry. A size 6.5 US men's shoes equates to a size 8 US women's shoe. Though the average women in the US has a shoe size between 8.5 and 9¹⁷, there are female skateboarders with a shoe size smaller than a men's 6.5. Skateboard shoes smaller than 6.5 lack the technical components prevalent in many men's shoes. Lisa Whitaker, owner of Meow Skateboards, and team manager of one of the top female skate teams in the world, explained in an interview with me that "a company doesn't have to reinvent the wheel, they don't have to spend a huge amount of money and redesign something. A lot of the girls are just asking companies to make that good skateboarding shoe in smaller sizes. A lot of top girls are skating in the boy's shoes. A lot of the styles that they would prefer to wear that are more advanced don't

¹⁷ Laurence, J. (2014, June 3). Why Our Feet Are Getting Bigger. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/why-our-feet-are-getting-bigger-9481529.html>

come in those sizes.” Lisa articulated what I believe marks the first essential step footwear companies must take to show support for female skateboarders. The largest players in skateboarding footwear are Nike, Adidas, and Vans. Vans makes performance men’s shoes down to a size 6.5. Adidas makes performance men’s shoes down to a size 6. Nike makes performance men’s shoes down to a size 4. From a sizing standpoint, Nike serves as the only major footwear corporation making performance skateboarding shoes in sizes small enough for all women. However, this represents preliminary support and skateboarding companies have the potential to do more.

A woman’s foot and a man’s foot are very different. A woman’s foot moves differently. A woman’s foot is shaped differently. Running footwear companies understand these differences. In an interview, Karl Hartner, an industry expert and the owner of Moving Shoes, explains that the first women’s running shoes came to market in 1978, but were still built from a men’s last. A last is a mechanical model of a human foot. Footwear companies use a last to represent a foot while building a shoe. The “ratios of sizing, i.e. the ratio of heel width to forefoot width, length of arch, etc., remained the same, so essentially women’s shoe were men’s shoes only in smaller sizes.”¹⁸ In the 1980’s Nike built the first running shoe from a women’s last. Karl remembers the shift and explains further that, “in the old days most female runners ran in men’s shoes; the size difference was approximately 1 ½ sizes, so if a woman came in and said she was a size 9 in a woman’s shoe we sold her a men’s 7 ½. Today we almost never sell a woman a men’s shoe because of the vast improvements in women’s models and the expansion of in sizing.”¹⁹ Many parallels exist between running and skateboarding. Companies such as Nike have done the

¹⁸ Harter, K. (2011, November 9). The First Appearance of Women-Specific Running Shoes. Retrieved from <http://movinshoesmadison.com/the-first-appearance-of-women-specific-running-shoes/>

¹⁹ Harter, K. (2011, November 9). The First Appearance of Women-Specific Running Shoes. Retrieved from <http://movinshoesmadison.com/the-first-appearance-of-women-specific-running-shoes/>

diligence to scale men's skateboarding shoes down to the appropriate women's sizes; however, no company has made the investment to build a women's skateboarding shoe from a women's last.

After speaking with Carolyn MacNaughton, I learned about the value of women's specific footwear. MacNaughton, leads women's running footwear at Under Armour, and understands the importance of building women's footwear from a women's last. The benefits of women's specific product in any sport are as much psychological as they are physical. Physically, the proportions of women's feet are different than men's feet. A women's foot is not as wide, her height and weight are different from a man, the position of her ankle bone is different, the arch variability is different, her heel is narrower compared to the forefoot, her foot has different weight distribution and is more flexible. Perceptively, there is a big difference between how women like their arch and heel support. In addition, women are six times more likely to get ACL injuries than men.

I think about a female skateboarder rolling up to a set of twelve stairs. She wants to execute a backside flip down the set of stairs. First, she must roll up to the stairs with enough speed to clear all twelve steps. Then, she must pop the board into the air, and flick her front foot to cause the board to roll 360 degrees and rotate 180 degrees. Simultaneously, her body must rotate clockwise 180 degrees while catching the board to stick her landing and roll away cleanly. The difficulty of a backside flip and the smallest error can cause all to go wrong and lead to a brutal slam. The danger of executing a mentally and physically difficult maneuver in footwear that lacks arch support, where your heel slips out and your forefoot shifts side to side exemplifies the importance of footwear that fits. I personally feel uncomfortable jumping up and down a red curb if my shoe is a half size too big. Yet, female skateboarders deal with this inconvenience and

still push performance and innovation within the sport. The implications of building a skateboard shoe from a women's last have the potential to drastically change performance amongst female skateboarders.

An in-person interview with Eric Lonsway provided further clarity. Lonsway, senior director of Nike SB Footwear, was the boot product manager at Burton Snowboards from 1992 to 1996. During that time, he played an integral role in pushing the performance of female snowboarders forward. Just as female skateboarders skateboard in scaled down versions of male skateboard shoes, female snowboarders used to ride in scaled down versions of male snowboard boots. Eric worked with Burton to develop a snowboard boot from a women's last. With this new boot female snowboarders no longer had to crank their bindings down so tightly to keep their feet in place. In addition, the boot fit the female foot structurally to make riding a snowboard far more comfortable. Eric saw an immediate shift in the level of riding amongst female snowboarders. They were doing bigger airs, spinning more rotations, and riding faster and more aggressively. The physical comfort of a boot that fit was met with the mental confidence of having a gender specific product and as a result athlete performance improved. This development took place during Eric's time at Burton which fell during the six years leading up to the inclusion of women's snowboarding in the 1998 winter Olympics.

The implications will clearly be as impactful regarding women's skateboarding footwear. Product development should take place in the years leading up to the inclusion of a sport in the Olympics. This development will have a prominent impact on the performance of female athletes participating in the sport.

Chapter 6: Implications and Feasibility of Gender Specific Products in Action Sports

Designing a women's skateboarding shoe from a women's last will drive female skateboarder's performance forward. There are too many parallels between running, snowboarding, and skateboarding to deny this assumption. Yet, for this innovation to come to fruition a company must feel that the venture is financially viable to justify the costs for research and development. The company must perform a multitude of steps.

To build a skateboard shoe for women requires a footwear company to make a new tool. Tooling is the most expensive part of building a shoe and consists of a midsole and outsole designed from a specific last. While speaking with Carolyn MacNaughton, I learned that Under Armour identifies this process to cost approximately \$250,000. In addition, the company feels as if it must project to sell approximately 50,000 pairs of shoes to consider the investment. The number of potential females willing to identify with a particular brand makes the financial performance of a female specific skateboarding shoe questionable. However, some redeeming elements of footwear development exist. A company can use the same tooling to develop multiple styles of different shoes because for a lower cost a brand can put a variety of different uppers on a tool without changing the midsole and the outsole. Under Armour uses this to optimize cost structures because it allows for the development of a variety of styles without an additional sunk cost of \$250,000 for new tooling and it allows the economics to begin to look very good. In addition, major brands can use a portfolio approach and benefit from the idiosyncratic nature of a footwear line. For example, if Nike were to develop a skateboarding shoe built from a women's last the returns from other skateboarding shoes such as the Janoski, Blazer and Dunk will help mitigate the necessity to sell 50,000 units of a new product.

The success of skateboard deck manufactures Hoopla and Meow illustrates an additional factor that supports the notion of investing in skateboarding product specifically made for female skateboarders. Meow Skateboards has built one of the most elite team of female skateboarders. Prior to Meow many board companies with teams consisting substantially of males failed to provide support to female skateboarders. In this environment, female skateboarders rarely had the opportunity to release a pro-model skateboard, a rite of passage for professional skateboarders. Lisa Whitaker, founded Meow Skateboards and brought together the top female skateboarders and gave them the support and attention that other companies failed to give. One of these athletes is Lacey Baker, the 2016 Street League Skateboarding Women's World Champion. When Lacey was young and going through a difficult time after losing sponsorship from the major skateboard brand, Element Skateboards, Lisa sponsored her and gave her the necessary support to continue progressing. Lacey explains that during this transition she knew that any other company "would only be flowing me boards for eternity and never give me a paycheck or a pro board or anything... [and thought] if I get on Meow, I can be a part of something that is so important and that's why I made the decision [to ride for Meow.]" Now Lacey is an asset to any skateboard team. She receives offers to skate for other board companies and could likely ride for any board company of her choice with all her recent exposure. However, she remains loyal and chooses to stay with Meow Skateboards because of the relationships she has built with the other riders and because of the support they have given her over the years. Any footwear company that shows support for female skateboarders through the development of a women's skateboarding shoe will experience similar benefits to Meow Skateboards. There are three core first mover advantages.

The first advantage pertains to a team of athletes. Most top female skateboarders will want to join the company that creates a product that allows them to skateboard at a new level. In addition, most top female skateboarders are not in a contract with any footwear companies due to the lack of corporate support for the category. This eliminates all legal problems and will allow the first mover to efficiently assemble the best possible team of professional athletes. Synonymously, the companies that have the financial capacity to develop a women's skateboarding shoe support athletes at a level core skateboard companies will never match. The support will incentivize top athletes to come aboard. Lastly, as women's skateboarding continues to grow in popularity and more companies enter the category, the top athletes will feel a loyalty to the first mover within the category and will be less likely to want to switch teams, especially if the first mover continues to innovate while building products and incentivizing the athletes on the team to perform.

The second advantage pertains to marketing. Campaigns surrounding the release of a women's skateboarding shoe will tell an incredible story. In addition, the product release shows the commitment of the brand to underrepresented demographics within skateboarding. A company will earn media exposure through traditional skateboarding channels, but will also likely appear on non-traditional skateboarding channels. Potential channels include, Vogue, Urban Outfitters and The New York Times all of which have recently published pieces in support of female skateboarders. This will drive non-skateboarders to purchase the product which grows the number of potential buyers and further supports the viability of this initiative. Product development opens the door to a variety of marketing materials including but not limited to informational media, product features, and athlete testimonials. Getting the product in the hands of the aforementioned influencers, Emily Tarnacki, Rachelle Vinberg, and Nina Moran offer an

inexpensive way to expose the product to a wider demographic, add validity to its benefits and encourage more women to try the shoe.

I title the third advantage “The American Girl Doll Effect.” Though Lacey Baker is a world champion skateboarder she still works as a barista at a coffee shop in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Young girls who are fans travel with their parents from all over the east coast to this coffee shop just to meet her and get an autograph. She feels confident that so many young “girls are skating because of Meow Skateboards. They all skate Meow boards. All of us on the team are their idols... they see that everybody on the team is a girl, they pick their favorite and that’s the board that they ride... the younger girls are so important because they’re going to be skating forever.” I remember being seven years old and going to skate shop to pick out my first setup after skating my father’s Logan Earth Ski for a year. I chose a Click deck, with Independent trucks, Darkstar wheels, and I wore Emerica shoes. These brands have a special place in my heart and I admire them and still buy many of them today. The magnitude of impact is far great amongst young girls.

Most eight-year-old affluent girls have an American Girl Doll. They choose a doll to whom they can identify and explore many aspects of the doll’s marketed character. Young girls often read books about the doll, buy clothes to look like the doll and think of the doll as a companion. This experience parallels the experience Lacey described hence the name “The American Girl Doll Effect.” Young girls pick a favorite team rider from the Meow Skateboards team and simply ride her pro model because she is their favorite. I see this experience transcending the skateboard deck category. For example, if Lacey Baker skateboards for Meow Skateboards, and hypothetically for Nike Shoes, and Independent Trucks a young girl named Eva, whose favorite skateboarder is Lacey Baker, may exhibit very similar behavior to an

American Girl Doll fan. Eva will explore many aspects of Lacey Baker's marketed character and as a result will likely have a great propensity to buy a Meow Skateboard, Nike Shoes and Independent trucks. In addition, the nostalgia of these products will likely drive brand loyalty throughout Eva's life.

Women's skateboarding footwear represents the essential next step companies must take to support female skateboarders. Skateboard deck companies have already found success within the category and skateboard deck consumers are predominantly skateboarders. Footwear companies have the unique advantage of consumers outside of the skateboarding segment. The consumers will include female skateboarders, male skateboarders with a narrower foot, sneaker heads, footwear aficionados and regular consumers who simply like the style of skateboarding shoes. The first mover to innovate within the category will have the best opportunity to build a team of top athletes, will benefit from a multitude of marketing opportunities and will earn brand loyalty from countless female skateboarders who are eager to support a product that encourages progression and performance.

Chapter 7: Steps Necessary to Yield Success

I still remember the year when Nike made an active push to get involved in Skateboarding. The skateboarding community met the brand with much opposition and Nike had to work extremely hard to earn acceptance within the category. In a master's thesis titled, *How Did Nike Get the Swoosh into Skateboarding? A Study of Authenticity and Nike Sb*, Brandon Gomez, explains the importance of self-selection, sponsorship, advertising, online presence, video presence, and local presence for Nike.²⁰

²⁰ Gomez, B. (2012). *How Did Nike Get the Swoosh into Skateboarding? A Study of Authenticity and Nike SB* (Unpublished master's thesis). Syracuse University.

Factor	Definition
Self-selection	The notion that “skateboarders are more likely to support those who are most like themselves,” and therefore skateboarding companies should be owned and operated by skateboarders. ²¹
Sponsorship	“The exchange of goods or currency to skateboarders who, in exchange, provide feedback and agree to display that company’s products.” “The funding and support of both local and national skateboard events.” ²²
Advertising	Content that “must appeal to some aspects of skaters consider to be authentic.” ²³
Online presence	This involves the maintenance of a website and social media channels that include “videos and photography of their team riders as a way to promote their product and company.” ²⁴
Video presence	“30 to 60 minute skate videos distributed by skateboarding companies as form of promotion for their company and its team riders.” ²⁵
Local presence	“Most successful skateboard companies avoid selling their products in large chain stores, and instead distribute to local skate shops throughout the country.” ²⁶

Nike SB’s focus on these factors led the skateboarding community to support Nike SB as a core brand. Female skateboarders exist as a subculture within the skateboarding community. Any brand that attempts to build a product specifically for this demographic will likely have to prove authenticity as Nike SB did with the wider skateboarding community. The first mover will need to hire female skateboarders to work for or closely with the company to address the issue of

²¹ Gomez, B. (2012). *How Did Nike Get the Swoosh into Skateboarding? A Study of Authenticity and Nike SB* (Unpublished master's thesis). Syracuse University.

²² Gomez, B. (2012). *How Did Nike Get the Swoosh into Skateboarding? A Study of Authenticity and Nike SB* (Unpublished master's thesis). Syracuse University.

²³ Gomez, B. (2012). *How Did Nike Get the Swoosh into Skateboarding? A Study of Authenticity and Nike SB* (Unpublished master's thesis). Syracuse University.

²⁴ Gomez, B. (2012). *How Did Nike Get the Swoosh into Skateboarding? A Study of Authenticity and Nike SB* (Unpublished master's thesis). Syracuse University.

²⁵ Gomez, B. (2012). *How Did Nike Get the Swoosh into Skateboarding? A Study of Authenticity and Nike SB* (Unpublished master's thesis). Syracuse University.

²⁶ Gomez, B. (2012). *How Did Nike Get the Swoosh into Skateboarding? A Study of Authenticity and Nike SB* (Unpublished master's thesis). Syracuse University.

self-selection. In addition, sponsorship of both professionals and influencers will help yield wider adoption amongst the female skateboarding community. Advertising must focus on skateboarding while also taking advantage of the social causes an initiative of this nature promotes. Social media will be the best friend of the first mover. Influencers have a lot of credibility amongst the female skateboarding community and the first mover must allocate adequate marketing dollars to getting the product in the hands of influencers. In addition, the first mover must put its new team of female athletes in the company skate videos or make a skate video specifically for this team. The most challenging factor is establishing a local presence. Though e-commerce is a viable channel for distribution the product must be sold at traditional skateboard shops. Currently, many skateshops fail to stock smaller sizes of skateboarding shoes that fit a women's foot because they often cannot justify taking on inventory with uncertain sales potential. As a result, many female skateboarders go to purchase new skateboard shoes at a skateshop and are lucky if they can find a pair of shoes in the correct size. These skateboarders fail to have a style or fit choice and simply take what they can get. Despite this inconvenience, I have heard countless anecdotes about women who continue to support their local skateshops and special order the shoes they desire to pick up from the shop later. It is surprising that these shops fail to keep inventory in stock to further encourage brand loyalty and support this underrepresented demographic within the skateboarding community. In response, the first mover must incentive traditional skateshops to take on inventory of the new product to enhance the accessibility and authenticity of the release.

Chapter 8: Disruption of Female Skateboarding Leading up to the Olympics

I have watched in admiration as Nike SB has become one of the most influential and innovative brands not only in action sports, but in sports in general. Slowly but surely the brand has built a team of my favorite skateboarders. This team started with Paul Rodriguez, then grew to include Brian Anderson, later Stefan Janoski, Ben Raybourn, Alex Olsen and Nyjah Houston. With these Athletes, Nike built some of the best products the skateboarding industry has ever seen. Nike has allocated a budget to allow these athletes to live comfortably and excel while doing what they love. Together, the company and the team, has released some of the most influential media in the history of skateboarding. These factors have made Nike SB, a company that many thought would never find success within skateboarding, the most dominant company in the industry.

Over the last two years women's skateboarding has become one of the coolest segments amongst the skateboarding community and the general public. It is a part of premier competition circuits including Street League Skateboarding and the Vans Park Series. Women's skateboarding will debut at the 2020 Summer Olympic in Tokyo. I have read articles about women's skateboarding in The New York Times and seen billboards of my favorite female skateboarders in New York City. The growth of the sport is not a fad, it is a phenomenon and will maintain a prominent place in culture and the skateboarding community. As a result, I hypothesize product development for the female skateboarding demographic will find success if executed strategically and correctly.

From my analysis, I predict this development will take place in the years leading up to the 2020 Summer Olympics in a multitude of stages. First, a major footwear brand will begin to

build a team of diverse female skateboarders with regard to discipline, ability and style. Just how Nike SB found success sponsoring one of the most diverse teams in skateboarding's history a major footwear brand will sponsor females who skate transition, who skate street, who skate competitions and who film video parts. Lacey Baker is arguably the best female street skateboarder alive, and currently does not receive adequate support from Vans. Baker represents the perfect female for a major footwear company to support. In addition, the brand will work closely with this group of athletes to develop the first skateboarding shoe built from a women's last. Initially, this process will instill confidence in the team of athletes and give them support that has not existed in women's skateboarding in years prior. Physically, the product will provide more comfort while skateboarding and will push athlete performance forward. The first mover's product will likely be the shoe worn by skateboarding's top Olympic medal contenders.

In addition, media exposure surrounding the first mover's product will lead to wide spread support amongst the skateboarding community and general public. More skateboarders will want to try the product to verify if it can truly enhance performance. Synonymously, the general female consumer will like the slimmer and aesthetically pleasing silhouette that does not exist with male skateboarding shoes.

The first mover will drive other major footwear brands to explore the category. Competition will demand further investment and will push innovation within the category forward. As more brands develop products, female skateboarders will have more choices in products to use. Overall, female skateboarding will be a viable option for product development. Innovation will go beyond skateboards and footwear and may transcend to include apparel and other accessories. Most importantly the psychological impact will keep more girls riding skateboards. Carolyn MacNaughton feels that too many girls drop out of sports. She claims,

“really and truly a good running bra, can keep girls in sports longer.” For skateboarding she is confident that, “product that fits her, moves for her, deals with some of the problems or issues she needs to face both in footwear and apparel can keep her skating longer.” She said that, anything that keeps young people in sports longer is good for everyone. Whether it is soccer, basketball or skateboarding it mitigates drug use, abuse, teen pregnancy, and self-esteem. The benefit is good for society.

Chapter 9: Post Nike

Upon completing this dissertation, I had the opportunity to travel to Oregon and share my findings with the team at Nike SB. Many of the areas of skateboarding Nike has explored recently align with the areas of my research during the past year. First, I learned that on April 27, 2017 Nike would announce the addition of Lacey Baker to the Nike SB team. Lacey is the second top female professional to skateboard for Nike. In addition, the brand team understands the importance of influencers in illustrating Nike’s commitment to women’s skateboarding. Nike sends shoes to Rachelle Vinberg, and Rachelle skateboard’s in the shoes on her Instagram which generates more support for Nike’s involvement in women’s skateboarding. Nike prioritizes pushing female performance forward. Nikes recent involvement and support for female skateboarding adds an element of validity to this dissertation’s predictions. The growth of female skateboarding and opportunities for product development will prove incredibly exciting to watch.

Chapter 10: Future Research

This paper provides the first academic analysis of women’s skateboarding and product development. It explores trends that drive more women to skateboard and helps to understand

product development opportunities for women skateboarders. The paper lacks data and clear market sizing metrics to support some of the claims. Sizing the market of female skateboarders and tracking purchase behavior will serve as an invaluable addition to many of the predictions made in this paper. In addition, tracking the performance of Nike's female skateboarding involvement can serve as a proxy for other brands. Lastly, interviews with recreational female skateboarders regarding purchase behavior can provide further insight about which products will potentially find success amongst female skateboarders and what products female skateboarders want to see come to market to help drive performance and participation forward.

Acknowledgements

This paper was not possible without the help of my advisor, Professor Adam Alter. Professor Alter made time to guide me along the way during the completion of his new book and a book tour. Thank you to Professor Marti Subrahmanyam, for coordinating this opportunity and my fellow honors program classmates for inspiring me to push my limits on this project. My roommates Casper Messmann and Alex Laitamaki were always there to help and my girlfriend Aurelia Biebuyck played a huge role in conceptualizing this idea and provided endless support. As always, thank you to my family for everything they do and believing in me to finish this project. Lastly, without the support of Martin Buckley and Nike much of the findings in this paper would not exist. I am grateful for everyone.