

## **Riding, Filming and Posting: Digital Ways to Skateboarding Professional Authenticity in Italy**

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## ABSTRACT

Skaters have always been involved in making their practice visible and recordable to become professional athletes through gaining sponsorship from corporations, meanwhile struggling to keep subcultural recognition within the peer community. New media are providing amateurs and professional skaters with a variety of more accessible digital media-based careers.

In this article, drawing on a qualitative research project carried out in 2014-15, including participant observation, digital ethnography and interviews with skaters in the peripheral skate context of Turin, Northern Italy, we will focus on the ways three profiles of skate-involved professionals (skate-shop managers; sponsored amateurs; and filmmakers) use new media. New media on the one hand facilitate the access to the main sponsorship scheme career; on the other hand, alternative uses of new technologies (e.g., opting for low-quality filming or displaying creative, ground-level tricks) open up new battlegrounds for claiming subcultural authenticity, reshaping distinctions and hierarchies *within* different skate professional careers.

**Keywords:** action sports; skateboarding; professionalization; authenticity; social media

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “action sports”<sup>1</sup> in general, and skateboarding in particular, are witnessing a rapid growth. The celebration of Tony Hawk as one of “the coolest big time athlete[s]” ahead of mainstream mega-sport celebrities is acknowledged by Wheaton (2004) as a watershed in the ongoing process of commercial and governmental incorporation of skateboarding (Lombard 2010, 2016).

Research literature has emphasized the role of media in this mainstreaming of skateboarding: not only the skating niche and specialist media (Thornton 1995; Wheaton and Beal 2003), but also action-sport tv-networks like ESPN X Games (Thorpe and Wheaton 2011), reality tv-shows like ‘Rob & Big’ on Rob Dyrdek’s skate life, videogames like Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater (Finnell 2013), and blockbuster sport movies like ‘Lords of Dogtown’ (Dinces 2011).

Through different uses of media “in the 21st century, skateboarders have risen from the underground to becoming stars [...]” (Finnell 2013, 155) accessing high-profile professional careers between commercialization and mediatization (Wheaton 2010) and providing aspiring ‘pros’ with a role-model. Accordingly, “younger skateboarders demonstrated a more professional approach to the sport and perceive it as an opportunity for a money-making career” (Giannoulakis and Pursglove 2016,130).

In this article we will explore some of these facets within the peripheral skate context of a Northern-Italian city, analyzing how new media inform different kinds of professionalization, that is, how different skate professionals use social media<sup>2</sup>: which ones they adopt (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube), and to convey which contents (e.g. what is represented in photos and videos) and formats (e.g. high definition versus raw video quality).

The article moreover will illustrate how new media, like the old ones, are used by different skate professionals as a channel for producing and distributing subcultural capital (Wheaton and Beal 2003), creating a battleground of authenticity (Beal and

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<sup>1</sup> We use the broader concept of action sports in order to avoid some critical issues around terms such as alternative or extreme. Cf. Laurendeau, Sharara 2008

<sup>2</sup> Zajc (2015, 30) gives this definition of social media: “Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) defined social media as ‘a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content.’ They further identified six different categories of social media: collaborative projects such as Wikipedia, blogs and micro-blogs such as Twitter, content communities such as YouTube, social networking sites such as Facebook, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds”.

Weidman 2003), and thereby reshaping subcultural identities, distinctions and hierarchies, not only between ‘core’ participants and ‘pros’, but also within different professional skate careers.

## **PROFESSIONALIZATION AND MEDIATIZATION OF SKATEBOARDING: A REVIEW**

Skateboarding represents an emblematic example of a lifestyle sport (Wheaton 2013) where subcultural authenticity claims (Beal and Weidman 2003) are strongly intertwined from the very beginning with processes of commercialization, mediatization and sportivization (Donnelly 2008; Lombard 2010, 2016; Dinces 2011; Beal 2013).

Research literature on skateboarding, however, has surprisingly overlooked the outspoken professionalization of the practice: if Beal (1995), in her seminal work, chose deliberately to focus on those skaters adopting an oppositional and resistant identity, therefore distancing themselves from “rats” (professionally-oriented skaters), in the following decades few studies have empirically investigated the pathways to becoming ‘pro’ and the professional experience of skaters (Bastos and Stigger 2009; Snyder 2012), or have explored professional skateboarding’s wider historical change of scenario (Dinces 2011; Finnell 2013).

Professionalization of skateboarding seems to take two routes: the main one is the sponsored athlete involved in official competitive contests (Bastos e Stigger 2009; Dinces 2011; Snyder 2012); then there is a variety of skate-service providers, ranging from skate-shop owners/employees and skate-brand entrepreneurs – marketing skate equipment, apparel, paraphernalia and sportswear – to skate photographers, film-makers and other media professionals (Dupont 2014)<sup>3</sup>.

The reconstruction of the typical social trajectory of professional skate athletes shows how, to start a professional career, amateur skateboarders who are not fully included in the main sponsorship scheme are required to develop and incorporate core dispositions and skills to construct and manage their own images, and to establish and maintain contact with specialist media and entrepreneurs (Bastos and Stigger 2009). The skateboarding context therefore encourages both amateur and professional skateboarders not only to perform their tricks, but also to display them by producing

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<sup>3</sup> The career of formal skate coaching/teaching, differently from what is happening in other lifestyle sports (e.g. parkour, cf. Wheaton 2013; Sterchele and Ferrero Camoletto 2017), is less developed and less legitimated.

and disseminating documentation about their endeavours: as Snyder (2012, 308) synthetically pointed out, "... skateboarding is *more like a movie shoot than a sport*".

Skaters have always been involved in making their practice visible and recordable, thereby producing media representations, from "zines" (Borden 2001; Finnell 2013) to "crew videos" (Dupont 2014) to "sponsor-me tapes" (Jones 2011) or "promotional videos" (Dupont 2014).

Gaining media visibility and sponsorship from corporations is the main viable means to become professionally acknowledged and thus financially independent, but also exposes skaters to the criticism of "selling out" (Wheaton and Beal 2003; Humphreys 2003, in Rinehart and Sydnor 2003), being co-opted from the wider mainstream media and major corporations.

Skateboarders make use of specialist media as channels for producing and distributing subcultural capital, providing information about equipment, techniques, argot, places to skate and the values of the skater community, thereby creating subcultural identities, distinctions and hierarchies (Beal and Weidman 2003; Wheaton and Beal 2003; Beal and Wilson 2004; Dupont 2014).

In his cultural history of skateboarding in the USA, Dinces points out that, starting in the 1970s, some core skateboarders "began to capitalize financially and professionally on their capacity to craft a subcultural mantra that was both 'authentic' and 'marketable' beyond the confines of their original clique" (2011, 1514). This growing marketization and professionalization was conveyed through skateboarding videos (from VHS to digital recording) rather than through magazines and images: "The ability of video producers to condense, edit and manipulate images of skateboarding provides them with considerable power in crafting a cultural identity for the activity" (Dinces 2011, 1516). Similarly to the case of parkour, "videos convey subcultural status and authenticity (Wheaton and Beal, 2003) and signal forms of status and symbolic power crucial to the professionalization of the sport" (Gilchrist and Wheaton 2013, 179).

In the 1990s, the rise to prominence of street skating was mirrored in a change in video production techniques, with the increasing popularity of footage where skaters alternate in filming one another with a camcorder, and of specific raw, hand-held documentary style (Dinces 2011).

After the launch of ESPN's X-Games and the proliferating TV and internet channels devoted to extreme sports, the commodification of skate videos moved forwards,

adopting Hollywood-style digital techniques and effects and ushering in the so-called icon-making process (Thorpe and Wheaton 2011)<sup>4</sup>. As Rinehart pointed out: "... the processes of icon-making and commodification are interdependent. In fact, many of the athletes seek to become commodities, finding lucrative careers through the process" (Rinehart 2003, 30).

Both in their content and style, as in their purpose, their means of display, their audience and their position within the local context, skateboarding photos and videos can contribute to producing and reproducing, as well as challenging, a dominant skate "scopic regime", that is, the way skateboarding is not only seen, but also "how it is produced, who it is produced by, and where it is produced" (Jeffries, Messer and Swords 2016, 58)<sup>5</sup>.

The emergence and diffusion of new media has reshaped the relationships between corporations, action sports participants and audiences (Thorpe 2016). New media, especially video-sharing channels, have had a revolutionary impact upon participant control of visual production and distribution: however, Gilchrist and Wheaton (2013, 173) detail that "... these digital media tools have supplemented rather than replaced 'older' media, and the same conventions in style are replicated", and that "there are important continuities with pre-internet forms of communication and niche media".

Skateboarding, like other lifestyle sports, has been a pioneer in adopting media technologies (Gilchrist & Wheaton 2013): new media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram) are providing amateur and professional skaters with powerful means to promote a digital media-based career (Thorpe 2016; Dumont 2017). By facilitating self-marketing and self-branding activities (Chen 2013), new media seem to blur the boundaries between amateurs, with their sponsor-me videos, and professionals, with their corporation-managed videos. Therefore, differently from 'old media' videos and films, as well as from magazine images, new media production

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<sup>4</sup> The influence of channels like ESPN is not confined to its contents, but concerns also the form of representation: "ESPN has utilized MTV style, quick-cut, choppy, hand-held camera work" (Rinehart 2003, 44).

<sup>5</sup> Jeffries, Messer & Swords (2016) single out three distinct approaches to the dominant *scopic regime* of visualization of skateboarding: the *skate photographer*, focussed on accurately documenting the tricks (trick & shoot), emphasizing the spectacular and reproducing the dominant scopic regime; the *reporter*, stressing lifestyle and subcultural context as their primary subject ('what else is going on') rather than mere tricks, and adopting other media channels like blogs as their main platform; the *analyst*, who adopts critical use of skateboarding as a form of free spatial expression and of resistance to dominant skate visual culture, rooting his practice in DIY culture, lo-fi and almost punk aesthetics and expressing it through several artistic activities (photography, sculpture, painting, music and zines).

seems to depict less exclusively an “elite subcultural stratum” (Dinces 2011, 1516) made up of a minority of highly-skilled skateboarders able to attract sponsors, photographers and cameramen. New media allow different kind of skaters to be actively involved in DIY media production and distribution and to maintain participant control of the profitability of their performance (Beal and Weidman 2003; Encheva, Driessens, Verstraeten 2013)<sup>6</sup>.

At the same time, corporations have not stood idly by: they adopt new marketing strategies by exploiting social media and digital technologies to develop and sustain the connection between their products and action sports. For instance, Red Bull employs the latest digital technologies and media platforms to produce their own events, media, and sporting celebrities (Thorpe 2016).

New media therefore seem to broaden the possible routes towards entrepreneurial activities and professions, thereby facilitating access for skateboarders to a variety of subcultural careers (Bastos and Stigger 2009). While Dupont (2014, 568) identified three main profiles of “core” skateboarders at the intersection between professionalization and mediatization – the riders; the skate nerds, emblematically represented by the skate-shop owner or employee; and the filmers –, new media seem to challenge these distinctions.

In so doing, new media are increasingly blurring the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial media (Thornton’s 1995 distinction between mass, specialist and niche media), as well as between producers and consumers (Thorpe 2016; Dumont 2017). New media reinforce skateboarders’ DIY attitude towards prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Woermann 2012 on freeskiers)<sup>7</sup>. Like pro-climbers, aspiring pro-skaters “are expected to be visible, iconic, attractive, and inspiring to create an appealing image of their job and lifestyle contributing to the production of this glamorous imaginary” (Dumont 2017, 3). Against the background of the abovementioned process of sport iconization, social media provide new opportunities of “athlete branding”, through which individual athletes establish “their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market” (Arai, Ko and Ross 2014, 98).

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<sup>6</sup> On the ambivalences of the participatory dimension of this “convergence culture”, see Jenkins (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Dumont (2015) describes a shift from prosumption (producing for self-consumption) to “co-creation” (increasing participation of consumers in producing and diffusing media content, thus constructing new opportunities of entrepreneurial work in the digital market).

In the following paragraphs we will investigate the intersection of different professional careers and different uses of new media within the Italian skatescape. The analysis will show the multifaceted impact of new media on the professionalization of skateboarding: on the one hand, new media facilitate the reproduction of the dominant skate scopic regime and thereby access to the main sponsorship scheme career; on the other hand, alternative uses of new technologies (for instance, opting for low-quality filming or displaying creative, ground-level tricks) open up new battlegrounds for claiming subcultural authenticity as a 'pro', reshaping distinctions and hierarchies among different skate professional careers.

### **THE CONTEXT: A NORTHERN-ITALIAN CITY**

The Italian skate context may appear a little peripheral and backward compared with the more international skatescape, having its core in North America and being widespread in Australia, Brazil, China (Beal 2013).

Following Pintarelli's (2014) short history of Italian skateboarding, apart from a few pioneers, in this country skateboarding has had its economic and cultural growth since the second half of the 1980s: a symbolic date is 1989, when the Powell-Peralta tour reached Italy, more specifically Versilia, the most developed local skate spot. The first generation of Italian skaters, now in their mid-thirties and forties, came into contact with the practice through the cult movie 'Thrashin' (1986), in which the typical pathway to becoming a pro is described, from winning a contest to gaining big-brand sponsorship: this is still, for Italian practitioners, the aspirational model of skate professionalism.

Despite initial interest in the practice in Italy, the main means of production, distribution and consumption of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995), i.e. niche (like fanzines) and specialist media (like skate magazines and VHS videos), skate shops and skate parks, are lagging behind in development. Some of the first-wave practitioners recalled the difficulties of finding magazines like 'Thrasher' and the need to manufacture skating structures (i.e. ramps, etc.) by themselves (Pintarelli 2014; Marcelli 2015).

As Pintarelli's reconstruction of the Italian skate scene shows, in this country skate market hasn't developed enough to support 'sponsored athletes': earning a living as a skater in Italy means creating other entrepreneurial activities like editing a skate magazine, photo-shooting or filming riders, producing and/or distributing technical

equipment and apparel, thus echoing the multilayered professionalization of climbers (Dumont 2016). The first Italian skate brand, 'Bastard', was founded in 1994, whereas the first Italian skate magazine, 'Wimpy', later '6:00AM', was launched in 1997. Few Italian riders of the first generation gained international sponsorship or acknowledgement: exceptions are the Zattoni brothers and Daniel Cardone, still skating, or Matteo Dinisio, currently working for Share Skateboarding, an independent skateboarding web journal based in Berlin, and Mario Marinelli, founder of the more recent Italian skate-brand El Santo.

### **METHODS: INVESTIGATING DIGITAL AND ORAL STORYTELLING**

Our analysis took into account this national context specificity. We chose to focus on the uses of new and social media made by three kinds of skate careers overlooked in research literature on the professionalization of skateboarding: the owner or manager of a skate shop (the skate nerd in Dupont 2014; see also Penny 2009); the sponsored amateur (AM) outside the "main sponsorship scheme" (Bastos & Stigger 2009); and the skate video-producer (the "filmer" in Dupont 2014; see also Jeffries, Messer & Swords 2016).

The empirical data analysed in this article are part of broader research into the Turin skate landscape<sup>8</sup>, carried out in 2014-2015, entailing participant observation in some relevant skating sites (skate spots and skate parks, mainly Valdo Fusi skate-plaza, piazza Castello, Parco Dora, and some skate shops), digital ethnography on the uses of new and social media by both 30 local skaters (of whom 16 were later interviewed face-to-face) and some commercial and institutional actors of the local skate context<sup>9</sup>. We carried out a thematic analysis on the interviews and new media documents as oral and digital accounts. Both these accounts are used by skaters in order to shape their self-representation and to enact forms of self-branding (Chen 2013; Arai, Ko and Ross 2014). Aiming at exploring the role of new media in the multifaceted professionalization of skateboarding, in this article we focussed more on digital representations.

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<sup>8</sup> Broader research on which the article is partially based was carried out by Davide Marcelli and discussed as his Masters degree dissertation in Public and Political Communication, under Ferrero Camoletto's supervision. Cf. Marcelli 2015.

<sup>9</sup> On the importance of combining 'virtual' and 'real' ethnography to explore the sociocultural life and professional careers of action sports participants, see Dumont 2014 on climbers. On the complexity of "blended ethnography", see Kozinets (2010).

We based our analysis on 5 cases<sup>10</sup>, singled out through a purposive sampling procedure as representatives of the varied forms of skate professionalization in Italy, following Dupont's (2014) typology of core participants: riders, skate nerds and filmers. Starting from skate nerds, we chose the owners of two competing skate shops: Andrea Ladisi, of Street Style Skateboarding (SSS), and Marco Olent of Skateboarding Finest (SF). The selected professional riders were Guido Zanotto, a Street-Style team athlete sponsored by many international and national brands, and Pietro 'Pepe' Tirelli<sup>11</sup>, one of the Pigeons crew connected with Skateboarding Finest and sponsored by more local brands, including the abovementioned El Santo. Finally, as a rider-and-filmer we chose Alberto Della Beffa, working as a video-photo editor and as a skate-artist specialized in recycling decks as handicraft and art works<sup>12</sup>.

Additional empirical material on the 5 cases was collected between September 2016 and February 2017, by carrying out supplementary digital ethnography on which social media have been adopted (mainly Facebook, YouTube, Instagram), and on the way they have been used, as well as on the format and content of visual material (photos and videos).

Our research questions how these three kinds of professionals on the local Italian skate arena variously employ different new media with regard to the dominant *scopic regime* of the visualization of skateboarding (Jeffries, Messer and Swords 2016) and the main sponsorship scheme (Bastos and Stigger 2009). In so doing, they work at building up and maintaining both their subcultural identity and their professional reputation, as well as constructing a relationship with both their local community of practice and their potentially larger audiences.

We chose to explore the imbrication of new media in how our skate professionals shape a specific form of self-branding, so-called "athlete branding". We adapted to our

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<sup>10</sup> All the participants gave us written permission to publish their full names and their interview and social media empirical data, including pictures and videos.

<sup>11</sup> The Pigeons tribe is the professional link between Skateboarding Finest and the two skaters, Pietro Pepe Tirelli and Alberto Della Beffa, who are its founders. More specifically, as we will see, Alberto is the main Pigeons social media manager (YouTube channel in particular).

<sup>12</sup> We opted not to analyse an exclusively and fully professional "skate photographer" (Jeffries, Messer and Swords 2016). For an interesting case, see Pintarelli's interview with Federico Romanello: "I approached photography ... late....My first step was some videos we made with my friends' camcorder when we went snowboarding in the mountains. At that time I was injured ... so, in order not to be completely cut out, I bought a camcorder. Then I realized it could become a profession, so I quit everything and I became an action sports photographer...I started to publish quite regularly ... until I became a fixed collaborator of '6:00AM', the main Italian skateboarding magazine, and then [I became] its editor" (Pintarelli 2014, 54).

analytical purpose Arai, Ko and Ross's (2014) three-dimensional proposal of the MABI (Model of Athlete Brand Image): *athletic performance*, measured through the level of athletic expertise, competition style, the athlete's virtuous behaviour on the field and rivalry management; *attractive appearance*, consisting of physical attractiveness, personal style with symbolic value and sport-body fitness; and *marketable lifestyle*, including more off-field features like the athlete's specific life-story, the ethical message s/he tries to convey to the audience and to society at large, and attitude in relations with fans, sponsors and media.

First we show more in detail how the different uses of social media on the one hand blur the boundaries between the different 'professional core participants' (Dupont 2014) analysed. Secondly, we will reveal how these different uses of media also inform claim on the authenticity of skateboarding (Beal and Weidman 2003), engendering both a polarization of some professional practices (between professional skateboarding as a sport and as an art) and a hybridization of some media and self-branding strategies.

### **SKATING PROFESSIONALISM ITALIAN STYLE**

Despite Italy lagging behind the international skatescape with regard to the local development of a production-distribution market substantial enough to support the main sponsorship scheme of skaters as professional athletes, the three types of skate-involved professionals analysed have proved to be 'digitally skilled'.

We will illustrate how skate-shop owners (skate nerds), sponsored amateurs and skate media producers variously use new media in order to build their 'skate-involved brand image' by articulating differently the abovementioned dimensions of performance, appearance and lifestyle. In analysing our cases, we have investigated not only 'what' is depicted, but also 'how' it is depicted, which is to say the chosen filming style or format (e.g. video quality definition) within the new media adopted.

#### *Skate Nerds*

Turin as a metropolitan city<sup>13</sup> provides its skateboarders with two skate-shops: *Street Style Skateboarding (SSS)* e *Skateboarding Finest (SF)*<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> In 2017 Turin numbers about 880,000 inhabitants, reaching about 1,5 million if we consider the whole metropolitan area.

<sup>14</sup> There are other skate shops in town, less patronized by the skate community.

The first shop was opened in 2008 and is managed by Andrea, 33 years old, who has never ridden a skateboard but has gained access to the local skatescape thanks to his past involvement in action sports as a snowboarder. His acceptance as a skate-shop owner is constantly threatened by the veiled accusation of being an outsider: because of that incongruent status, as we will see, he has to adopt specific media strategies to gain subcultural recognition.

Skateboarding Finest was founded in 2005 and taken over in 2015 by Marco, 29 years old. Unlike Andrea, Marco is a 'seasoned' but still-active skater, whose features recall the typical picture of the 'skate nerd' (Dupont 2014:568) totally committed to the skate subculture and rooted in the local skate community.

Both shops are located near the historical city centre, symbolically represented by Piazza Castello. The skateboarders attending Street Style tend to use the monument devoted to General Duke Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia-Aosta, a flat architectural structure with a flight of steps, as their main skate spot.

As Andrea stated:

*[It's] the most historical spot of all, so we decided to open [the shop] near there so us to keep in touch with the local scene. (Andrea, SSS's owner)*

This outspoken reference to the historical landmark of the Turin skatescape appears as an off-line authentication strategy to gain subcultural capital within the skate community.

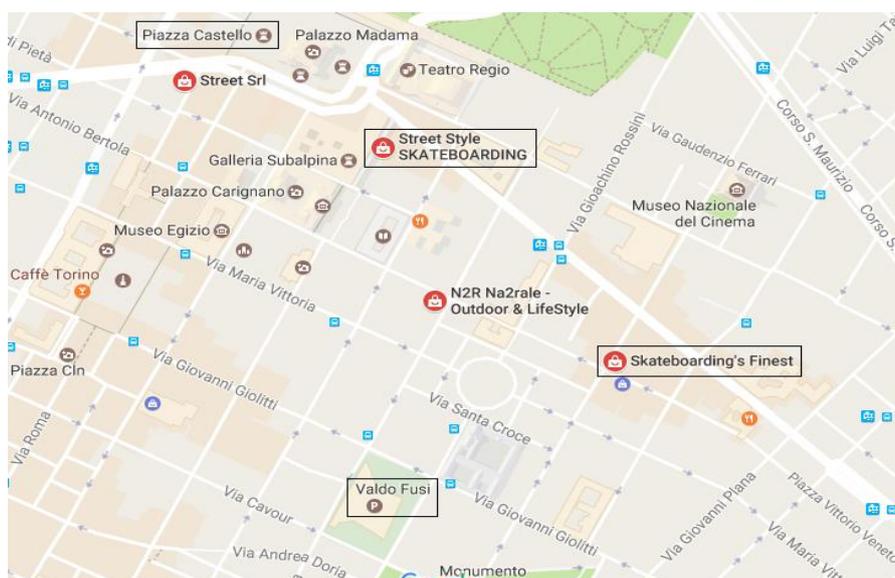


Fig.1 Maps of the investigated skate shops and skate spot locations in Turin. Source: Googlemaps.

On the contrary, Marco doesn't seem to need a strict link with a specific skate spot – due to his strong commitment to the local skatescape – even though those skaters who attend Skateboarding Finest are more likely to ride in Piazzale Valdo Fusi, a skate-plaza opened in 2012 and constituting different concrete tailored structures such as curbs, rails, waves, banks and quarters<sup>15</sup>.

Marco's professional career as a skate-shop owner is emblematic of how skate nerds, "through their positions within local shops ... have the ability to strongly influence the values and attitudes of other skaters" (Dupont 2014: 565). Skate shops can work as sites where subcultural capital is produced, certified and distributed.

After describing the main differences in performing the skate-nerd profession, we shift our attention to a comparative analysis of the new media strategies adopted by the two skate shops. We have focussed on the shop's websites and on their uses of social media. By adapting the three-dimensional model (performance, appearance and lifestyle) of athlete brand image (MABI, cf. Arai, Ko and Ross 2014) to the analysis of the two skate shops, we have interpreted their engagement with plural social media as a media strategy to construct their skate brand image.

Digital ethnography reveals that both skate shops adopt multiple new media: on their websites they provide hyperlinks to the more widespread social media, Twitter (TW), Facebook (FB)<sup>16</sup> and Instagram (IN). With regard to YouTube (YT), surprisingly only Street Style's website explicitly includes a link to a specifically-dedicated YT channel. Despite Street Style's apparently strong, plural digital presence, a more in-depth investigation reveals that the skate shop focusses its skate brand image on FB. Andrea, the owner, posts photos and videos centered on big-brand products (Nike and Vans shoes, Nixon watches, DC hoodies, etc.; see Figure 2), thus constructing its appearance as a professional sport dealer within the so-called main sponsorship scheme. As he explicitly admits:

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<sup>15</sup> Piazzale Valdo Fusi as a skate-plaza project involved the owner of Skateboarding Finest.

<sup>16</sup> Analysis of the two skate shops' FB public pages brings out the importance of subcultural participant control (Beal and Weadman 2003) in the use of social media: both the skate shops, in fact, structured their FB pages with a board where external visitors can upload their posts, meanwhile working as gatekeepers of what is posted on the main timeline. In so doing, they demonstrate the role of skate nerds in defining "the dominant understanding of 'authenticity' and maintain[ing] the dominant understanding of the hierarchy within skateboarding" (Dupont 2014: 565).

*This is the cultural politics of an Italian skate shop. You cannot invest only in trucks or skate-shoes. You can't depend on niche products because in Turin there are so few skaters that you could not live on it! (Andrea, SSS's owner)*

Moreover, posted action videos, on FB as well as the YT dedicated channel<sup>17</sup>, represent a vision of skaters 'always on-field', focussed on "documenting the tricks" in the most accurate and spectacular way (the visual approach Jeffries, Messer and Swords 2016 call "skate photographers"), thereby reproducing a sportivized notion of the skating lifestyle.



Fig. 2 Screenshot of Street Style Facebook profile (accessed on 19 February 2017). Image reproduced with permission.

Skateboarding Finest seems to make a more active and better-informed use of social media. Its FB public page shares on its main timeline different kinds of contents from the other shop.

Marco, the owner, in addition to the main skate brands (Volcom, DC, Emerica, etc.), posts pictures of very selected, niche skate brand products (e.g. Palace, Magenta, SK8Mafia), constructing his shop brand appearance as a dealer of skateboarding authenticity viewed as a subcultural attitude more than a sport. Moreover, the shop brands itself by printing its logo (see Figure 3) on skateboarding decks, thereby customizing them.

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<sup>17</sup> Street Style YouTube channel contains very few (10) videos, and those are not up-to-date.



Fig.3 Screenshot of Skateboarding Finest Facebook profile (accessed on 19 February 2017). Image reproduced with permission.

Skateboarding Finest's FB page also hosts many posts referring to a wider range of 'off-field' activities embodying skate subcultural identity: public events like video premieres, social gatherings in skate spots, music and art exhibitions, even confrontations with the police.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, as we will see later on in our analysis of sponsored amateurs, skaters' videos too are focussed not only on tricks, but on showing 'what else is going on', sketching out a more comprehensive portrait of the skatescape. The key role of videos as the main vehicle nowadays to define and distribute status and authenticity (Borden 2001; Wheaton and Beal, 2003) is expressed by Marco himself:

*I believe [that the best medium of all] is a good video [...], big music and two hundreds tricks or a beautiful downhill. (Marco, SF's owner)*

Emblematic of this approach to the visualization of skateboarding (midway between what Jeffries, Messer and Swords 2016 called "reporters" and "analysts") is the video 'Frames' uploaded on the shop website: as the title itself recalls, some of the skaters hanging around the shop are represented in their practice framed within different urban and social contexts.

Again, this use of social media seems to convey a very different notion of what skateboarding is, more a lifestyle characterized by creativity, aesthetics, personal

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<sup>18</sup> Marco also manages the FB public page of the association Skateboarding Torino, founded by him and another well-known skater in order to act as the main urban skate scene stakeholder in dialogue with institutional bodies. For example, Marco is the spokesperson of the skate community in the steering committee of the annual action sports event "Torino Street Style", sponsored by the local Youth Policies Council.

research and self-expression. Furthermore Marco, by sharing on his shop's website a video produced by a skate crew on their dedicated YouTube channel, seems to take into account the relevance not only of *what* is represented, but also of *how*, *where* and mainly *by whom* the representation is produced (Jeffries, Messer and Swords 2016). As we will see in analysing Alberto, one of its leaders, this crew, with its distinctive style of skating and of representing skate, reinforces Skateboarding Finest's subcultural status within the local community.

Hitherto our analysis has omitted the third dimension of performance: since MABI as an analytic tool had been designed for athlete branding, in its application to skate-shop owners we have focussed on the way shops' websites, in a special section, display their testimonials and their performances.

The outcome seems to subvert our previous interpretation. Street Style's website defines its selected practitioners as a 'family', a term usually having a subcultural connotation, while on the contrary Skateboarding Finest's website uses the label 'team', conventionally connected with the mainstream sport lexicon<sup>19</sup>.

The next step in our analysis, shifting attention to the second kind of skate-involved professionals (sponsored amateurs), will prove that the above superficial reading of this unexpected use of labelling is misleading.

### *The Sponsored Amateurs*

In order to illustrate the different ways semi-professional riders use social media to build up and manage their athlete brand image, we selected two amateurs sponsored by the two previously described shops.

Guido Zanotto, 23 years old, is, in the Italian skatescape, close to the typical internationally-acknowledged "professional skater". In his self-presentation on social media (see Figures 4), he describes his athlete image by tagging his main big-brand sponsors, including the Street Style shop. Thus, Guido epitomizes what Dumont said: "Producing and diffusing new media content have become part of athletes' duties while working as a brand ambassador through sponsorship contracts [...]" (2017, 2)

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<sup>19</sup> The members of Skateboarding Finest's 'team' themselves blur the distinction between the two terms: "Then there are guys who come less often and ask: 'Who is in the Pigeons Family?'. This makes me laugh because it doesn't exist, it's an idea; if I have to think about who is in it, I would not know, because it's everybody and nobody. It's not a team!" (Pepe).



Fig.3 Screenshot of Skateboarding Finest Facebook profile (accessed on 19 February 2017). Image reproduced with permission.

Likewise, in a Facebook post (see Figure 5), Guido seems to mix up different social media languages by listing hashtags and tags recalling brands, keywords and argot expressions.

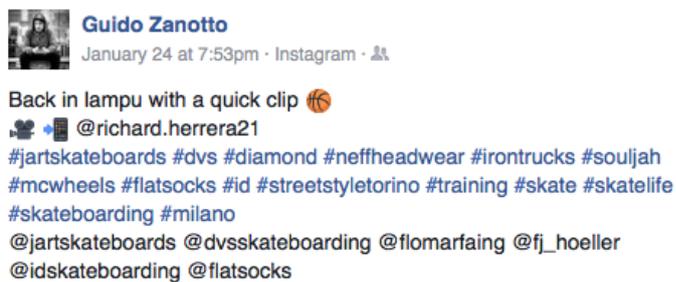


Fig. 5 Screenshot of Guido's Facebook profiles (accessed on 18 February 2017). Image reproduced with permission.

This strategy of managing his appearance is mirrored in how Andrea, Street Style's owner, talks about his "sponsored team":

*I have a real team of guys who kick ass, sponsored by brands....I created this team of riders who skate together, sponsored by DC and DVS. They go on tours, are pictured in magazine posters, do photo-shooting sessions, are well-known, if you go on YouTube you find them. (Andrea, SSS's owner)*

Another component of Guido's appearance is his emphasis on body fitness, making him the classical "beautiful" sporty man (Dumont 2017). This idea of exhibiting the body is also conveyed by his showing off short training or warm-up sessions (jumping rope, stretching) before starting the skate practice.

Looking at Guido's display of his performance, his Facebook and Instagram photos and videos represent 'high-tech' level skate manoeuvres: Guido embodies a more traditional skating style made up of difficult sport moves and neat executions.

The most peculiar feature of Guido's very professionally-oriented use of social media, however, is his being "always on-field". In his Facebook personal profile, for instance, we haven't found any clues hinting at his "off-field" life: he exclusively displays trick videos and photo compositions of skate paraphernalia (e.g. shoes, decks, apparel; see Figure 6) provided by his sponsors.



Fig. 6 Screenshot of Guido's Instagram profiles (accessed on 19 February 2017). Image reproduced with permission.

Thus, Guido seems to embody skateboarding as a way of (earning a) living more than a subcultural lifestyle. This approach is perfectly represented in a video, posted on Facebook (see Figure 7), where he entitles one of his skating sessions 'At the office'.



Fig. 7 Screenshot of Guido's Facebook profiles (accessed on 18 February 2017). Image reproduced with permission.

Notwithstanding his being sponsored by various brands, Pietro Tirelli ('Pepe'), 22 years old, makes very different use of social media in constructing his self-brand image.

The material he published on Facebook and Instagram gives very little visibility to sponsors, with the exception of posts where he is tagged by retailers and brands. On the contrary Pepe designs his appearance, grounding it in a very distinctive personal style, as his Instagram profile clearly witnesses (see Figure 8): the tattoos pictured (on his body as well as on his clients' as a tattooist); the provocative sentences quoted (e.g. 'Kill the old before they kill you', 'Ignorance is bli\$\$'); and some iconoclastic images making fun of popular-culture characters (e.g. 'Harry Popper'). All these features indicate both a resistant identity (Beal 1995) and a professional "damned" figure (Dumont 2017).

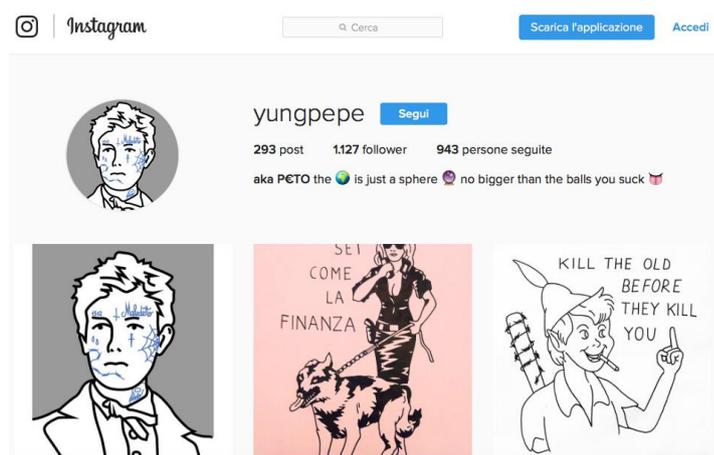


Fig. 8 Screenshot of Pepe's Instagram profile (accessed on 19 February 2017). Image reproduced with permission.

His appearance is reinforced also through an originally remixed clothing style, hybridizing several dressing codes (e.g. white punk knee-socks, colorful gangsta tracksuits, surf-style Hawaiian shirts)<sup>20</sup>.

The social media strategy adopted by Pepe seems to convey an understanding of his skateboarding identity not as a mere athlete, but as a multidimensional lifestyle. The

<sup>20</sup> Borden warns against the marketing incorporation of this creativity: "Try to watch Palace [Skateboarding] videos, because they are so smart. All their marketing strategy entails showing themselves on the streets alongside riders, close to their gangsta style....They make lots of money exploiting this strategy because it's not real local, street skate, it is mainly a very carefully carried-out marketing operation" (interview with Pintarelli 2014, 163).

off-field elements represented, as important as the on-field activities, are manifold: videos and photos display Pepe not only riding his board, but also while he is hanging around with friends, drinking and smoking, moshing during a concert, attending an exhibition, etc.

*It's cool [the possibility to post your own videos] especially for skateboarding because if I kick ass and I am not connected with big companies, I can show off anyway to anybody even if I am not Paul Rodriguez [an internationally acknowledged professional skater]. (Pepe)*

In Pepe's case, the boundary between on-field and off-field becomes more blurred. Pepe's on-field professional image includes not only being a rider but also another engagement on the skate context, his job as a skate-graphics illustrator (see Figure 9), drawing decks and t-shirts distributed by SF.



Fig. 9 Screenshot of Pepe's Instagram profile (accessed on 19 February 2017). Image reproduced with permission.

This creative attitude also characterizes also Pepe's performance as a sponsored rider. Despite his technical proficiency, in his skate videos he enacts a peculiar imaginative skill expressed by aesthetic research for 'never-been-done' manoeuvres, contributing to the continuing advancement of skateboarding (Snyder 2012: 321). The originality of his tricks lies both in Pepe's unconventional use of available structures and in his unorthodox way of retrieving and composing pre-existing, simple, 'old school' moves often ignored by high-skilled riders.

In all three dimensions analysed, Pepe's distinctive feature emerges when he enacts his skate professionalism, stressing the artistic – rather than the traditional sport – aspect. This scenario is emblematic of a process of self-branding management in which specific skate-graphics and a unique riding style merge.

### *The Filmer*

The creative component of skate jobs reaches its fulfillment in the last case, allowing us to focus on the more innovative and skillful form of digital professionalization of skateboarding.

Alberto, 22 years old, is a non-sponsored amateur rider working as a successful skate filmer and video editor. He also simultaneously manages one Instagram profile, one Flickr profile, one YouTube channel ('Pigeons Family/Alberto Della Beffa') and four Facebook pages (one personal profile and three public pages). Finally, he can be interpreted as a skate-artist since he utilizes skate equipment to construct 'recycled board creations'.

Being an intermediate-level rider grants Alberto insider status in the local skate community. His skate brand image is expressed by his multilayered professional activity (Dumont 2016) as a media producer (Facebook 'Alberto Della Beffa photos & videos') and artist ('SBNK', his personal artistic project page) (see Figure 10). Thanks to "his role as the gatekeeper and producer of a major form of communication between the skaters" (Dupont 2014: 569), he establishes his subcultural credentials and proves his authenticity.

Alberto can be positioned between Guido's and Pepe's approaches to skateboarding as a lifestyle. On the one hand, like Guido he is totally skate-committed, thereby always 'on-field'. On the other hand, more like Pepe, his being on-field is not exclusively confined to riding, but embraces several DIY activities by which his subcultural capital can be converted into economic value and professional opportunities.

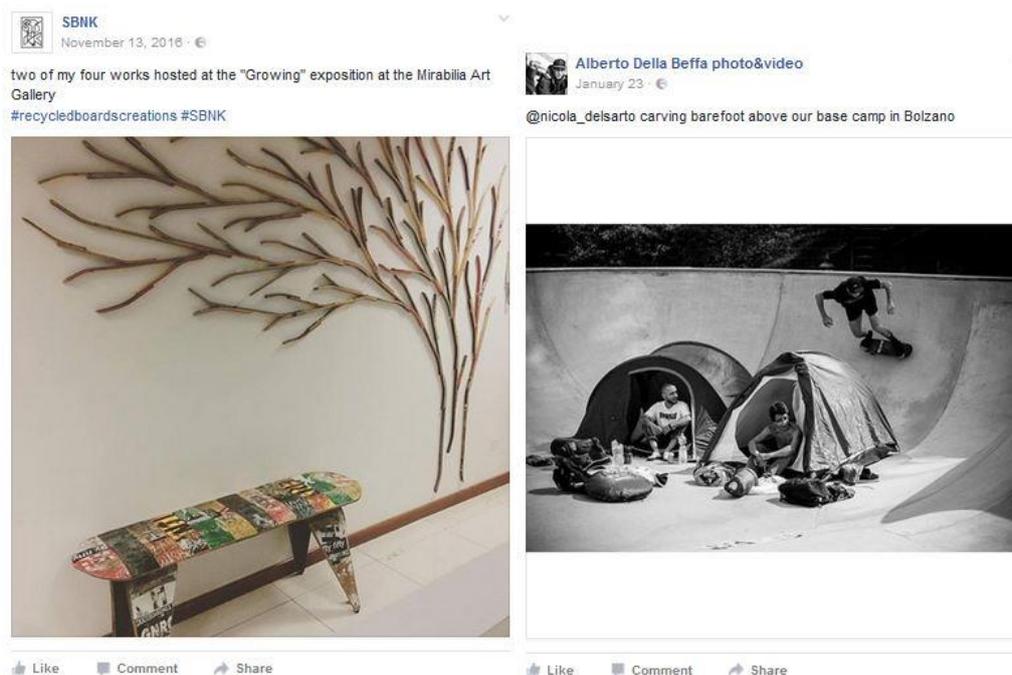


Fig. 10 Screenshots of Alberto's Facebook professional pages (accessed on 24 February 2017). Image reproduced with permission.

A striking difference from the two previous professional riders is that, paradoxically, in the various social media adopted, Alberto seems to be a 'missing presence'. In the majority of the photos and videos posted, what is pictured ranges from other skaters, urban and outdoor landscapes, to (his) skate artworks and everyday life shots. More than managing his appearance, he enacts his disappearance: with few exceptions (where he is the object of representation), his presence occurs in his ways of seeing and framing images.

This personal gaze has become his trademark. The dimension of performance in his skate brand image materializes in his skate filming products in the 'Pigeons Family' YouTube channel<sup>21</sup> and Facebook page. The most distinctive feature is his filmic quality. Alberto values not only 'what' is represented, but also and mainly 'how'. In opposition to the current dominant skate scopic regime, he makes specific stylistic choices: to film 'raw quality' videos (often below 480 pixels), nostalgically recalling the golden age of skateboarding; foregoing the editing process to keep the 'trembling effect' of real-life filming, thus recalling the hand-held camcorder filming style of the 1990s (Dinces 2011); and mimicking, in his editing style, old-fashioned film effects. Alberto states:

<sup>21</sup> Pigeons Family YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/The011sabink>.

*Zero high quality, partly because the HD that I can do, with the technological devices available to me, is not comparable with big brands. We try to return to the 1990s and their simple attitude. That's why we are filming in VX<sup>22</sup> [...] We keep it low-quality. The point is that we are talking about skate, not artwork; we are representing an underground scene, therefore video must reflect that fact. Our creed is different: we don't use drones or spotlights because they are irrelevant to our context.*

This quotation illustrates how low-quality filming (in its reference to the first Sony portable camcorder of the 1990s) is perceived as an antidote against the poisoning of skate visual imagery caused by big brands' commercial videos with their zooming on high-tech spectacular effects. In Alberto's view, the roots of subcultural authenticity are expressed by his efforts to embody, in his professional career as a filmer, keywords like 'attitude', 'underground' and 'creed' in opposition to corporations' technological power exemplified by 'drones' and 'spotlights'. This way of managing his skate brand image resonates with Thornton (1995) when she points out that underground discourses often involve issues of format and aesthetics that work at preserving their rhetorical autonomy and authenticity.

### **CONCLUSION: ITALIAN DIGITAL WAYS TO PROFESSIONAL AUTHENTICITY**

Our analysis illustrated some of the digital strategies by which, in Italy too, skaters are appropriating new media not only to connect better and share information and images with fans and other sport community members, but also to promote a digital media-based career (Thorpe 2016). New media broaden, and hybridize, the available profitable opportunities, thereby facilitating access for skateboarders to a variety of subcultural careers (Bastos and Stigger 2009) and fostering forms of multilayered entrepreneurial activities (Dupont 2015).

We have seen how Italian skate professionals construct their 'skate-involved brand image' by variously articulating their performance, appearance and lifestyle (Arai, Ko and Ross 2014).

The different media strategies adopted reveal a new battleground where subcultural identities, distinctions and hierarchies are reconfigured not only between 'core' participants and 'pros' (Beal 1995, criticized by Donnelly 2008; Dinces 2011; Lombard

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<sup>22</sup> The forementioned VX is a short-lived Digital Video (DV) format released by Sony in 1995 as the predecessor of current HD formats.

2010, 2016), but also among different types of professionals. New media strategies can therefore engender different kinds of professional and subcultural authenticity. We identified two different ways to subcultural authentication, related to different uses of new media.

	<i>Authentication via Sportivization</i>	<i>Authentication via Subcultural Lifestyle</i>
<i>Media content (what is represented?)</i>	Technical skills On-field sport activities Big brands	Original composition of moves 'Off-field' activities life Big and niche brands
<i>Media formats (how it is represented?)</i>	High-quality format High-tech editing	Low-quality format Low-tech editing Old-fashion media effects

Tab.1 Typology of authentication discourses and media strategies (contents and formats)

A first discourse bases authentication on sportivization (cf. Andrea in Street Style and his rider Guido): the content and format of their social media convey a representation of skateboarding as a sport and of professional skaters as sponsored athletes. In videos, photos and social media profiles, they focus on technical skills, on on-field sport total commitment, and on big brands' glowing aura within the main sponsorship scheme. This way of constructing authenticity conforms with the dominant scopic regime of skateboarding, with its "focus on individuals and their tricks", a "genre of images of the individual skateboarder caught mid-trick with sponsors' logos pointed towards the camera lens....The branding of skateboarding and the involvement of massive corporations have mainstreamed what was once seen as something for outsiders" (Jeffries, Messer and Swords 2016, 59-60).

The second discourse embodies a different authenticity claim: skateboarding is presented as a subculture and a lifestyle rather than a sport, and skaters are portrayed as subcultural insiders. We have seen how, in videos, photos and social media profiles, Pepe stresses his personal and 'resistant' style both in his skating practice, where he represents himself performing innovative composition of moves, and in his 'off-field' life, pictured in leisure and creative activities strongly connected with the old myth of the street skater as damned (Dupont 2017) and rebel (Dinces 2011). Alberto's

expertise in media production, characterized by his representation of skateboarding as part of a wider artistic lifestyle, and of skaters as artists, emphasizes the digital side of being a subcultural entrepreneur. His intelligent use of multimedia reveals a critical approach to the dominant visual representation of skateboarding: the aesthetic and stylistic preference for low-quality recording, “crude but mobile documentary style” (Dinces 2011, 1523) and low-tech editing is emblematic of a way of seeing, and doing, skateboarding “rooted in DIY culture, linked to a lo-fi, almost punk aesthetic and expressed in photography, sculpture, painting, music and zines” (Jeffries, Messer and Swords 2016, 68).

The second discourse of media strategies authentication seems to preserve one of the core values of skate subculture (Beal and Weidman 2003): participant control of what (niche brands, subcultural contexts, simple tricks), how (low-quality and low-tech), by whom (a ‘real’ skater shop owner and a crew) and where (multiple new and social media) skateboarding is represented.

This claim for subcultural authenticity, however, cannot escape the dialectic with incorporation in brands’ marketing strategies (Thorpe 2016). In a recent interview, Borden pointed out: “Marketing departments don’t make classical commercial videos any more. Nowadays they produce guerrilla short clips uploaded on YouTube which go viral. Those videos are made as if they were grassroot productions [...] They try to recreate authenticity through a raw format and diffusion media” (interview in Pintarelli 2014, 162).

This means that the way new media are informing relations among corporations, action-sports practitioners, consumers and audiences is therefore reshaping old questions and raising new issues that still need to be fully addressed.

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