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“Super stoked girls” - a discourse analysis of girls’ participation in freeride skiing

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a selection of Norwegian girls’ accounts of backcountry, freeride skiing and mountain biking to better understand how they form and are formed by cultural identity standards. The study is conducted by using the precepts of discourse analysis, which have language and social communication as the central component of the social world. The girls’ narratives occupy an ambiguous space that attempts to bridge the gap between their own and other people’s perceptions of their identity, gender expression and experience in outdoor adventure sports. *Being a skier* functions as an anchoring point in their identity formation, binding together incredible experiences out in nature and the recurrent fear of failure. The joy, desire and feeling of freedom in the mountain are challenged by an intense pressure to perform. These ambivalent, sometimes even contradictory experiences are a prominent element of the narrative material produced and analysed in the article.

KEYWORDS

Adventure sports;
backcountry; freeride skiing;
outdoor life; gender;
discourse

Introduction

In this article, we conduct an analysis of the culture surrounding mainly backcountry and freeride skiing, but also mountain biking, a group of modern outdoor sports known collectively as mountaineering and adventure sports. Significantly, these sports have traditionally and historically been male dominated. Our goal is to investigate and analyse what a selection of young women tells us during interviews, and look for patterns, similarities, and contrasts to deepen the understanding of adventure sports by depicting another side of the story: The perspective of the female. Our focus then, is on the interplay between gender, identity, and adventure sports.

Even though outdoor activities are considered a central part of Norwegian social and cultural life, there has been only limited research on the topic from a sociological perspective, and questions related to gender have been largely ignored (Humberstone & Pedersen, 2001). Due to the lack of research on construction of gender in outdoor sports, Humberstone and Pedersen called in 2001 for a problematization of the way that the male-dominated culture defines standards in the field. However, despite indications that women’s participation in adventure sports is increasingly a topic of research, according to Klein and Weaving (2015) there is still very little literature investigating gender construction in adventure sports, which remain male-dominated. Klein and Weaving (2015) argues that freeride skiing as a subculture consider factors that influence questions concerning gender constructions and the general understanding of the relationship between humans and nature within the sport. Gender construction and perception is a product of the ways that power

relationships are formed and (re)produced in modern society, and it varies in different contexts according to which attributes are considered most attractive or beneficial within that context (Beames, Mackie, & Atencio, 2019).

These challenges were the jumping-off point for this article. It means that we contextualize freeride and backcountry skiing specifically and adventure/mountaineering sports in general, as a socially constructed phenomenon in a state of continuous evolution. Following such perspectives, we use discourse analysis to uncover the norms and accepted truths that shape the world of adventure sports and the experience of girls who participate in those activities. We do not however consider these young women as passively constructed by norms and power structures but are interested in how the girl's contribution to identify formation through language and practice. This position led us to the following research questions:

How do a selection of young women talk about their experiences of participation in adventure sports like freeride skiing, and how do these experiences incorporate, (re)produce or diverge from the established norms in the world of adventure activities?

Outdoor sports in Norwegian culture

As already stated, Norway is the geographical context for this article, and according to Tordsson (2003) it is impossible to understand Norwegian outdoor sports without understanding the sociocultural context that surrounds the outdoor sports. Macro-level structures shape circumstances and events on a micro-level (Neumann, 2002), and mountaineering sports should be understood in the context of the current times. On an individual, or micro-level, there is a widespread preoccupation with self-realization and social competition in our culture, which may indicate a reduction in the significance of macro-level traditions and institutions for everyday life. One of the hallmarks of the postmodern individual society is the ability that allows people to construct a personal narrative in which they can 'choose' an identity through reflexive action. Modern society has embraced an individualistic ideology that can be liberating, but at the same time can contribute to rootlessness and upheaval, materialism, excessive competition, and social unrest. In contrast to this somewhat bleak appraisal of our society, Tordsson (2003) depicts nature as an arena where it is possible to realize an alternative identity. An encounter with the natural world is inherently a primal experience and gives a person the freedom to be *simply human*. Nature is thus a context in which a person can experience freedom, self-control, and the immediate results of their own actions, which in turn can make a person feel a strong, direct connection to their surroundings (Tordsson, 2006).

Norwegian outdoor sports have their historical origin as practical skills in village communities where hunting, fishing and berry picking were central elements of the domestic economy, as well as in more romantic ideas of nature as a spiritual and aesthetic domain (Øian, 2014). Humberstone and Pedersen (2001) show the ways in which the outdoor traditions in UK and Norway have been influenced both by the Romantic movements, by nationalistic ideology and the British male aristocracy. During the struggle for cultural and political independence in the late 18th century, the pursuit of something uniquely *Norwegian* arose, where skiing became an iconic national pastime. The sport was common among village people and was bound up in the national folklore with historic and legendary heroic episodes (Goksøyr, 2013). Fridtjof Nansen's skiing expedition to the North Pole was financed by the state because of the prestige it brought to the nation. Roald Amundsen's race to the South Pole was a Norwegian triumph, and polar adventures were accorded a place in the national conversation. *Skiing* became such a popular pastime that it came to be considered a central part of the Norwegian national identity. Indeed, there are few, if any other countries where skiing is such a universal element of the cultural identity (Goksøyr, 2013). Today, Norwegians are the foremost consumers of ski- and sports equipment in the world and mountaineering sports are criticized for being excessively consumer-oriented, a departure from the traditionally anti-consumerist culture of outdoor sports (Bischoff & Odden, 2002; Karoliussen,

2017). The current formation and forming of identity constructions in outdoor activities still take place within this cultural and historical context, which has also been clearly dominated by certain power structures.

Previous research on girls' participation

Knowledge about women's position and participation in outdoor sports and gender theory both play a role in the analysis of our material that open women's potential and limitation to identity formation within a freeride skiing context. Men and masculinity played a central role in the origins of outdoor sports—their heroes and icons are mostly male. The language used in both research and everyday conversation to describe the sports are defined by and focused on men and the male experience and it is almost exclusively men who have been given the chance to speak and write about their practice (Humberstone, 2000; Stoddart, 2011). Gurholt (1999) problematizes the tendency of researchers in the field to base their work on an implicitly masculine worldview, only to present it as universal and allow the cultural limitations of their theories and interpretations to go unmentioned and unnoticed. This trend is an example of why highlighting the experiences, knowledge, wishes and desires of girls are so valuable from a gender and equality perspective. The development and establishment of backcountry/freeride skiing and adventure sports in modern society has led to a corresponding increase in women's participation in these. Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) studied women participating in activities such as skydiving, snowboarding and skateboarding and discovered that although the women were welcomed to the sports by men, they were also marginalized and sexualized, and that these sports perpetuate a hegemonic masculinity by organizing competitions and activities under conditions that favour the male participants. Klein and Weaving (2015) made a similar discovery in their study of backcountry skiing culture: women were made to feel welcome, but on men's terms. The mountains were considered a 'masculine space' in which men could express their ethos and their willingness to take risks, a trait that is considered less attractive for women than it is for men. According to Sisjord's (2009) results for her study about girls and snowboarding; girls are constantly reminded that they are in a male-dominated arena. Women who participate in this type of milieu are expected to be 'one of the boys'.

In a Norwegian study of snowboard culture, Christensen (2001) found no basis for claiming that the girls submitted to the male-dominated environment, but that the snowboard culture was a contrast to the 'general world', to typical 'girl cultures' and functioned as a place to get an outlet for both boredom and frustration. Christensen (2001, p. 165) points out that the girls thrived among the boys, as they liked to be demanded and the 'not so careful- attitudes' that ruled, and that they were respected for their strength and integrity. At the same time, the girls were also concerned about not 'ski like a girl', in the sense of being humble, and disliked being put in stalls as sweet and harmless. Thus, these girls maintain that going hard belongs to boys, and that humility and slow belong to being a girl. Expressions as 'go like a girl' only makes sense by being compared to something and shows that the practice is male-defined. Others have opposed this: Golden (1991) as an active skier in the nineties, writes that she was repeatedly told that she 'skied like a man', something she refused, and she introduced "Ski like a Woman—tough, strong, indomitable». Sisjord (2009) also concludes with that those girls who speak out loud and take place in these arenas are more aware of attitudes and values related to how the activities are formed and what has value within the cultures, and these girls has opportunities to counterforce the masculine structures of snowboarding. Stoddart (2011) finds that participants' experiences of outdoor sports are discursively mediated through a range of media like websites, sport-specific magazines and advertisements, newspaper articles, and videos. The media's portrayal of women is significant for the worldviews people have associated with the ways of being associated with 'women'. Negotiations on gender and gendered language show here that what women take up as their language might differ from

being characterised from 'outside' (by men), as we will come back to in our analyses of women's language in their freeriding context.

Despite the assessment of the imbalance of power in the world of outdoor sports, freeriding is known for its 'no rules—do your own thing' approach, differentiating it from most traditional sports, which tend to be regulated by rules and norms (Christensen, 2001). This liberated attitude has made it easier for both women and those men who support feminist and progressive principles to 'undo gender' in their sport, creating subcultures in which women are also free to 'do their own thing' (Klein & Weaving, 2015). The growing numbers of female backcountry skiers have successfully destabilized historical male dominance in mountaineering sports by developing a more gender-equal profile anchored in feminist principles of equal opportunity for men and women (Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008). Stoddart (2011) concluded that outdoor sports like skiing are embodied practices that join participants, gear, and non-human nature in the context of material locations. The research also shows, however, that women who participate in these activities have pushed back against male dominance and contributed to a reconceptualization of the sports that would allow women to participate on an equal footing with men (Klein & Weaving, 2015). Gurholt (1999) wrote about the use of the term *natural* in the context of outdoor sports, and she argues that it represents a social construct—the word *natural* indicates something that must be learned. This concept is a bridge to the discourse analytical perspective in outdoor sports; what are the natural ways of behaving and being for these young women?

Theoretical and methodical framework

Discourse analysis has both roots and applications in several different philosophical, sociological, and linguistic traditions. In this paper we are using it as a lens through which to view both the form of language and the ways it is used to create meaning in different contexts, for example social institutions such as school, workplaces, or in outdoor sports. One of the foremost theorists of discourse analysis is Michel Foucault. A key characteristic of Foucault's model of power is that power flows in multiple directions 'from below' as well as 'from above' (Stoddart, 2011). We believe that the people who participate in mountaineering sports are the ones who define its properties and parameters by describing their practice, and that the act of communication functions to legitimize specific patterns in outdoor sports. To this end, we take a discourse theoretical approach that puts language and its uses at the centre of our study. We asked girls how they perform and experience these activities, with a special interest in the process of identity construction. We investigate how identity and subjectification are evolving, potentially contradictory processes and are inspired by Søndergaard's research on gender and identity. Her mission has been to organize and develop a theoretical position for the analysis of complex processes that describe how subjectivity, gender, power, and institutions are shaped, maintained and modified. We can follow her example to learn about how people in mountaineering sports understand and assemble their identities by legitimizing, appropriating and occasionally adapting the relevant constituent parts. Beames et al. (2019) also identified six concepts to assist understanding identity formation related to adventure sports; being social, personal, and multiple whiles being stable yet malleable, and how identity is related to specific symbols and language.

As already stated in the introduction, our approach is based on the social constructivist idea that the way people understand and categorize the world is a product of the history and culture that are shaped and perpetuated via interaction between people and discourse consists of and is expressed by forms of practice and actions, including the act of speech or communication. When language is understood as the material used to construct the social world, then the use of language and communication as discourse can be considered the object of analysis (Neumann, 2002). Thus, from a discourse perspective, our informants' spoken narratives are the object of our analysis.

Methodology

One of the most important preconditions for an analysis of limited discourses is a certain amount of general knowledge of the culture in which the discourse occurs. This is known as cultural competence, and it can prepare the researchers for eventualities that may occur and help them to interpret participants' actions and their motivation (Neumann, 2002). The interview is a social situation that affects the type of research material that is produced. A qualitative research interview conducted with a discourse methodology is one that recognizes the role of the interviewer in contributing to the narrative that is created. Søndergaard (2000) describes interaction dynamics as an 'embodied' transmission of perspectives in which bodily, emotional and cognitive experiences are bound together in an integrated whole as the interviewer attempts to understand what their subject is communicating. We hope to discover how meaning is produced in the social world that the interview subjects inhabit. This kind of analytical methodology allows the researcher to analyse the language that the subject encounters, appropriates and uses to form their own identity and understand and relate to the world. The perspective also indicate that the researcher should be able to identify the language form discourses that might disagree or contradict each other. However, this is a challenge that the first author was aware of since she was part of the free skiing community the informants belong to.

When the project was ethically approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The first author started the recruitment of informants through the 'snowball' method. It was based on information about the group of girls that participated in the mountaineering sports, and they were selected by personal contact. The selection criteria were to be an active skier—backcountry, freeriding and off-piste at ski resorts—in addition to rock climbing and/or mountain biking during the warmer months. We received tips about a couple of students from the college's lecturers in alpine skiing and climbing. Some of the girls were caught up through their profiles in social media and others were asked to participate based on their position in the freeride community. Participation in more mountaineering/adventure sports than just skiing was an inclusion criterion for the study subjects, as it indicated that mountaineering was an important part of their lifestyle, not a hobby that they put aside when the snow melts. The participants varied from having been dedicated to outdoor life and skiing all their lives to only having started backcountry skiing/biking as college students. They therefore represent a cross section of mountaineering practitioners and can be characterized as a strategic selection (Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2005). Before agreement to participate they received information about the project and the ethical standards that researchers are bound to follow, including securing anonymity and confidentiality for the participants. When six girls had agreed to participate in an interview, we decided it was sufficient to conduct the study. We gave the girls pseudonyms in line with ethical standards and use the following name: Mina, Vilde, Nora, Ida, Sara, and Kaia. Some of them are students, others have permanent jobs. They are aged between 20 and 30 years. Before conducting the interview, we worked with an interview guide that was open to get narratives and personal experience. The first author conducted all the interviews, and the interviews took place at the university. The interviews lasted around 60 minutes and was transcribed by the first author and read by all three authors in the process with the analyses. The data material consists of transcribed audio files, and the first author also used own field notes and observations as contextualization of the interview themes.

The specific work with the material consisted of closely reading the interviews, marking relevant sections, preparing themes, and making overviews of the quotations as more patterns and connections in the material emerged. The analyses thus include what the subject communicated verbally and were also seen in the light of what action possibilities the discourse seemed to offer the subjects in their search for 'being someone' in the formation of identity. The narrative is thus perceived as a product of what is created in the meeting between people, the interviewee and the interviewer. Through the narrated stories, we gained first-hand knowledge of their subjective understanding of «being a skier», at the same time as the stories brought us closer to the girls' feelings and experiences

formed in a specific cultural context. Like Sisjord (2009) we understand freeride skiing and adventure sports within a flexible and informal context where the participants control the activity: they are the experts. We wish to emphasize that we see the findings and the validity of them as an attempt to understand and shed light on some of the processes that affect girls' identity formation and negotiations of gender when they participate in modern outdoor sports, in particular backcountry skiing.

Findings and discussion

As stated in the theory, we understand social processes as the engines that build and sustain different worldviews, and social interactions are sites upon which to construct common truths. In this study, we search for these common truths in the form of patterns and repetitions in the statements given during the interviews. We present some of these statements in a narrative form, and our analysis is based on the patterns of meaning that emerged within these narratives. We have chosen to present selections from the girls' statements that are rich in shared meaning as blocks of freestanding text, and we place some of their words and expressions in *'italics'* to accentuate their patterns of speech. The analysis is structured into three sections, each represented by something one or more of the girls said during their interview:

- (1)) They're badass, they're hardcore and they're girls
- (2)) Super Stoked
- (3)) Being a skier—I don't know who I'd be otherwise

Each of these three sections presents one of the major patterns that arose during the interviews and is followed by a theoretical exposition of its thematic significance. We will now present the results of our analysis of the thought processes, actions and behaviours that our informants expressed during their interviews.

They're badass, they're hardcore and they're girls

In a village in the west of Norway, surrounded by fjords and mountains, where the largest glacier in continental Europe and its orographic effect blesses the landscape with endless powder snow, we met Vilde. She has been skiing and mountain biking for a decade, and this is how she began the story of her meeting with the skiing and biking community: *'It was totally male dominated. And really like, uh, I felt really insignificant. At least as far as the skiing community was concerned. There weren't any girls biking in the beginning either. It was just me and the boys'*. Vilde's information about the male majority is told without any blame for the situation at that time. However, she has witnessed a change. An increasing number of girls took part in both backcountry skiing and mountain biking. She felt that the community now was much more open than it had been, *'a little more chill'*. Our informant Mina described her own first encounter with an awesome outdoor sports culture centred on freeride activities: *'I remember when I first got here, I had no idea what was going on, but damn, it was awesome! I want to be a part of this! There was a whole world of people who just did this stuff all the time!'*. Mina sought to be a part of this community that was dedicated to the activities she was passionate about, and when she says *'I just like, right away, found a ton of role models, and it was like 'she's so cool, and she's so cool, and she's so freaking talented'*, it's clear that the culture had evolved, and that the community was no longer as male-dominated as it had been when Vilde first arrived on the scene. What Mina is describing is how girls who started skiing and biking early became role models for other girls and were able to reconceptualize what had been an entirely masculine discourse. The result, as Kaia put it, is *a natural development*—girls become an important part of the culture by *'inspiring each other and showing each other what's possible'*.

The informants' narratives paint a picture of the typical skier, and Mina's description of girl skiers is a good example: *'They're badass, they're hardcore, they're not scared. Some of them do really hardcore backflips, they're crazy! I feel like it's the badass, fearless girls who are really the leaders of the community'*. Another of our informants, Ida, says that girls who ski, bike and climb are *'maybe a little more like tomboys, if I can put it that way. A little bit more laidback about like ... the rest of life, haha, clothes and makeup and all that'*. She is not the only one who thinks of the girls in mountaineering sports as 'tomboys.' According to Mina, these girls' clothing style is a symbol of their identity and their belonging to the community of mountaineers.

There are very few of us who change our style when we go to school. Like, I use my ski backpack as a school bag. It's also really rare that I take off all my ski clothes, like baggy jeans and sweaters and dress like a babe. (...) I feel like there's a kind of masculinity [in the way we dress]. (Mina)

When the girls' performance is compared with the boys', it is apparent that the boys are considered 'the best,' and that their abilities rate higher than the girls' in the general hierarchy of mountaineering sports. The negotiation of identity is ongoing, and ambiguous and the girls look at each other with admiration and joy. However, they are aware of that the girls can *'play the girl card'*, in that expectations are lower for them than they are for boys. They give example, that if a girl *'does a hardcore backflip'*, she gets more cred than a boy does for performing the same trick.

Even though the girls are aware of the masculine connotations of their lifestyle, some of them resist being called or calling each other 'tomboys' or other characterising comments. Kaia says that even though she used to think that *'acting badass was macho'*, and that she didn't like it, she realized that: *'there's no reason girls can't tell to complete a climbing route or enjoy riding really steep slopes. Like, girls can do that stuff too. It's just that we never used to get the chance before. And then people think it's masculine'*. Kaia is problematizing the idea that being badass is something men do, pointing to that the category is equality relevant for all genders. At the same time, she dislikes the word 'tomboy', which is often connected to the sort of comment that she says girls who push themselves hard hear all too often: *'Wow, shit, you're good for a girl!'* This kind of backhanded praise speaks volumes about the assumptions of masculinity that underlie performance in the mountaineering sports. Equally telling is Kaia's assertion that girls who participate in these sports are more like 'the boys' than the 'babes'. Our informant Sara told us that it was not an 'either/or situation', but that being out with the girls meant going hard as well as stopping to enjoy the scenery: *'we'll ride halfway down, then stop and giggle and talk about all kinds of stuff for a few minutes, and then we keep going on steep'*. She keeps on with telling:

Like, when you go seven girls in a row and are going to jump the same jumps and do the same trick, you are really nervous. But you just have to keep up because you want to be as good as the other girls. But that may mean that we push each other and get better then, and that's also a goal. (Sara)

Here Sara describes an ambiguous situation where she gets nervous, while overcoming the nervousness by pushing herself to step out of the comfort zone and understand that in this game it is necessary to develop together with the girls and improve. Her description suggests that by sticking together, the girls can create a good atmosphere, a relaxed tone, and a feeling of community. Riding with the girls functions as a safe arena. At the same time, it is important to keep up and go hard which indicate breaking the safety and comfort zone.

Theoretical analysis

Our interviews revealed the underlying masculinity that runs through the mountaineering sports, but they also showed some of the ways that they are changing to become a less gendered discourse. Talking about the girls as 'tomboys' or describing their clothing as masculine indicates that the

laidback style and behaviour associated with skiing belongs more to men than to women. Calling the girls 'tomboys' also indicates that they are being distinguished from women who would be ascribed more traditionally feminine characteristics, such as the expression of vulnerability or fear. At the same time, wearing clothes normally worn by the opposite sex, function to disrupt dominant gender-based identity categories (Beames et al., 2019). Our informants' narratives offer insight into how these styles and behaviours are created, and they illuminate the conditions in which the girls are creating their identities (Bondevik & Rustad, 2006; Søndergaard, 2003). Ways of being and doing mountaineering sports are created, passed on and revised through interactions between the participants in the sports as part of a natural exchange in which commonalities support a harmony between the players and supports a feeling of 'us' (Beames et al., 2019). Choices about clothes and equipment are experienced as personal ones, even though buying the 'right' gear is a virtual prerequisite for belonging in the group, indicating the significant invisible power of the discourse (Søndergaard, 2003). For example, identifying oneself via a clothing style functions as an 'intersection' (Bjerrum Nielsen, 2006) at which one option is rejected and another chosen: in this case, the girls use their style choices to reject being 'babes' and instead identified socially as badass skiers.

Cool female role models are promoted as central players in the development of a more gender equal discourse and indicates that certain individuals enjoy greater social significance than others, which from a Foucauldian perspective shows how knowledge and power are expressed in a discursive arena (Neumann, 2002). By interacting with those who are considered the 'cool' people, our informants reveal they learn to read and interpret those situations, opinions and behaviours that traditionally have been available to the elite, but that in current times are available to them as well (Tordsson, 2003). The role models can be seen as active subjects (Søndergaard, 2000), with the power to transform the discourse, by power to enact social construction. To ski hard is also 'girlish'. By celebrating attributes such as *badass*, *laidback* and *hardcore* in combination with more traditionally feminine characteristics like giggling and chatting, and distancing themselves from descriptors like *tomboy*, the girls are able to expand the patterns of behaviour that are available to them in these sports. They do not leave the giggling and chatting behind them to include themselves or be included in the masculine power structure, they occupy new achievements in identity formation by including their 'own' ways of being as vital gender discourse.

Super stoked

'Totally stoked people!' is Mina's spontaneous description of the people in the mountain sports culture. *Getting out there* is the first step, the next is being seen, which maintains improves the girls' performance, according to Ida, saying that *'they go harder if someone's watching'*. Being seen out there, stoked, is a confirmation of their social identity. Sara says: *'It gives you cred to ski all the time and get seen on the mountain. Come early and go home late. Get stoked'*. Being stoked is about devotion and joy, but also a craving to do as much, to go as far as you can. As Mina says: *'you have to be really dedicated to keep up. Because here people are dedicated, and skiing is number one. Otherwise, you'll be a number two'*. To be dedicated is expressed as an important value, indicating that the community lionizes the people who are out pushing themselves to perform on the slopes as much as possible. Being 'number two', corresponds to not being stoked and represents a defeat. The collective opinion is that they're getting out there skiing hard even if they're exhausted and their legs are *like jelly*, like Kaia tells: *'I can push myself for days. I just put school and rest aside for a while, when the [snow] conditions are right'*. Here the values of pushing oneself if the condition are good, shows a normative perception that skiing has a higher priority than doing schoolwork.

Being able to do as they choose gives the girls a lot of freedom in their sport, but it can also lead to the feeling that they have to be out when the conditions are right. In Nora's words, *'you feel like you have to do it all the time, just because you can'*. This statement describes an internalization of the certainty that you'll be a failure if you don't make the most of every chance you get. Other informants

described experiencing ‘*pressure to be out on the mountains*’. Statements such as *it feels so crappy, and I feel like a failure if I see everyone else is out there and I’m not*, underscore the powerful nature of these feelings. These attitudes help shape the type of behaviour that is associated with ‘being somebody,’ as Sara describes:

When you don’t know anybody, everyone seems so self-confident and fit, a lot of them are really environmentally conscious and engaged and active at work and in their free time. There’s a lot of girls who gets a lot done. And then they’re also good at skiing and they’re out there skiing five days a week. So, then I think, they’re some pretty badass women, who can do all that. (Sara)

This statement shows how Sara perceives and understands what other girls can accomplish, where being able to *get a lot done*—and not just skiing—is a significant part of being an important person. Words that the informants use about women in outdoor sports are *self-confident, badass, fit, cool and nature lovers*. A skier is someone *who’s daring, not afraid, hardcore, maybe a bit of a thrill seeker, fearless and a little bit crazy*. Skiing, climbing and mountain biking with other fearless girls can be inspiring and give you faith in yourself, but it can also have a negative side. Sara describes the competitiveness that drives them, the inner voice that says *“if she can handle that run, then I can and should do it too!” You’re comparing yourself to others all the time. And I don’t really feel especially good, because so many of them are so insanely skilled*. She is describing a strong tendency to compare her own abilities to those of the other girls; this is one of the most important measuring tools in the pursuit of ‘being somebody’. The pressure is high due to Sara’s summary: *‘You have to get everything right. Clothes, gear, ability, everything.’*

Theoretical analysis

The patterns in the statements shared above show some of the ways that skiers’ enthusiasm shapes their shared culture. ‘Being stoked’ corresponds to enthusiasm, excitement, and a deep involvement in the activity, and it is tied to positive feelings and fellowship within the group. Descriptions of people as *totally stoked* and *really dedicated* utilize a rhetorical style in which the adverbs heighten the intensity of the adjectives. This appears to be a speech pattern that has slipped into the discourse in a way that everyone seems to understand, and which serves to emphasize the nature of being an athlete in adventure sports. The participants create an intersubjective space with their shared language patterns and behaviours, which helps them to relate to each other’s experiences (Tordsson, 2003). The examples given above show how speech patterns shape the definition of appropriate action and practise in a discourse. Being ‘super stoked’ manifests itself here as an attribute of the social identity of being a skier, in which being a person who is considered ‘stoked’ is a part of the positioning and subjectification process of becoming somebody in the community. Participants’ reproduction of behaviour is assured via subjectification processes like mimicry—*creating yourself* by mirroring the culture that surrounds you (Skårderud, 2013). A skier’s ability to express herself in an acceptable way that has already been legitimized, and to experience those expressions as individual ones, arrived at through personal choice, shows the role of the discourse in the construction of identity (Søndergaard, 2003).

The process of self-realization can and often does include ambivalent encounters with opposing discourses (Skårderud, 2013), and the feeling of being stoked is not static—it is a progression towards getting pumped up or coming down. Our interviews showed that the girls’ deep involvement in their outdoor activities takes place in a minefield of contradictory impulses and expectations that often lead to feelings of guilt or inadequacy. Their ambivalence is manifested in the ongoing negotiation between bodily signals that they are exhausted, in pain, not so stoked, and the social expectation to show up and participate and to perform. Whoever is most stoked, most enthusiastic, and has the greatest capacity to take advantage of every opportunity to get out and go skiing, those are the ones who reach the top of their sport, they are ‘the ones who count’. From a macro perspective, getting out to the mountains has more social value in a Norwegian cultural context

than spending time inside. This preference is anchored in public health research and Norwegian healthcare politics, and it is a part of the 'Norwegian character' (Tordsson, 2003). This cultural context is undoubtedly an important factor in legitimizing and reproducing the idea that going skiing can or should be more important than doing schoolwork.

Being a skier—I don't know who I'd be otherwise

We have already laid out some of the potentially problematic aspects of the culture surrounding mountaineering sports: high pressure, ambivalence, and anxiety—but at the same time, it was clear from our interviews that the activity was an essential part of the girls' wellbeing. Being a skier, a climber or a cyclist is a part of who they are, like Mina points out:

It's part of my identity, such a big part of my daily life and what I do. And it's the most important, because it's what I love the most. Everyone who spends a lot of their time skiing wants to be identified with it. (...) You carry your (skier) identity with you everywhere. You're proud of it, it's cool, and I'm so into skiing that I'm always going to be identified with that world. Being a skier even when you're not on skis. (Mina)

To live a daily life without this activity becomes difficult to imagine. As Nora says, *'It's like, no joke, it's a part of who we are'*. Such a large part, in fact, that Sara says: *'I don't know who I'd be otherwise!'*. Identifying with skiing in this way is a contrast to the behaviour of *other people*, who's not *in*. Conversations about identity reflected this distinction between 'us' and 'them', like Sara says: *'But, I mean, we study outdoor sports [in university], we're "extreme". We're not normal people in a way, we're really not'*. Identity construction is not just about separating the world into 'us' and 'them', it is about how one represents the oneself, as 'one of us'. Vilde describes an episode in which she posted pictures of herself on social media and was unprepared for the way in which they were received. She was confronted with responses like *'Who the fuck are you? Is skiing the only thing you ever do; don't you have any other life?!'*. Even though skiing is a central part of Vilde's identity, she felt uncomfortable being reduced to 'just a skier'. She explained that *'Not everyone asks how you're doing, they just want to know where you've been skiing that day, or what you've done. Can you do a backflip, can you do a 360, just that kind of question'*. Strong identification with the activities can become problematic when other aspects of their identity are ignored.

Feeling pressured to constantly perform at a high level can have negative consequences; athletes run the risk of sustaining an injury on their bikes or in the ski slopes. This is precisely what happened to Kaia, who had planned to spend her whole winter skiing:

It was just so awful. And I had a total identity crisis, because it was just like 'aagh,' you don't have anything you . . . I mean it's just such a big part of who you are. And that's really a good thing. But I don't know, maybe it can go too far (. . .). It was really hard. Really heavy, you know. So, I had to go for Plan B, which didn't actually exist. (Kaia)

Skiing was such a crucial and important part of Kaia's everyday life that she couldn't conceive of a realistic alternative to being a skier. For Vilde it would also be completely *unnatural* to stop skiing, and she explained why, saying *'It's about identity again. That I would be robbed . . . I think I'd have to, it's a cliché but I'd have to find myself all over again, because it's such a big part of me.'* Her statement shows the intimacy of Vilde's relationship to skiing, the way it permeates her entire being. Being forced to live without skiing feels to her like being robbed, having a part of herself stolen from her. Mina tried to put into words the feeling of what makes skiing so important to her:

It gives me such a high when I'm going down a perfect steep slope through deep powder and the sun is shining down. Then I don't know whether to cry or laugh or scream with pleasure. It's like infinite pleasure. All of it really, you just get into that flow, you're just flying down the mountain when the flow is so right. Then you look up and there's the craziest sunrise, or you're out with your friends in beautiful nature. (Mina)

The interplay between skiing and the surrounding nature stirs up strong feelings in the girls from our study. They describe feelings of flow and infinite pleasure; the words they use show the hold that skiing has on them. Being *in* the activity is about the *feeling of freedom* the girls get, and the pleasure

of mastering a challenging, high speed sport. *'It's just crazy fun, you get so stoked and high on life! You just think, like, "wow!"'* (Ida). Vilde describes her feeling of being totally present when she is skiing, when everything works smoothly, and she is able to hit exactly the lines she aims for or the drops that she has planned: *'It's like nothing else means anything. Nothing except that you did it, just the way you thought you would (. . .). It's a little bit like, you just don't give a shit about anything else. You're just right there at that moment. It's a really good feeling'*. Vilde's description is reminiscent of the flow that Mina described, Nora expressed a similar feeling even more succinctly: *"I mean—can it get any better?"*.

Theoretical analysis

As the girls have spoken about in their interviews, one of the hallmarks of modern society is the necessity of considering alternative options during the process of constructing one's identity (Giddens, 1991). By selecting certain types of activities, clothes, accessories and body types, they present who they are, identified with reference to recognizable icons and role models and in contrast to 'the others' (Horgen, 2018). This type of limitation, in the 'unlimited world' that outdoor sports culture inhabits, is a method for constructing a personal identity by distinguishing oneself from the other (Skårderud, 2013). They are constantly afraid of missing out on what the others are doing. Not only that, but they are also, in Madsen's (2018) words, *afraid of missing out on themselves*. At the same time, the material has a lot to tell us about the social connections between the girls and their peers, including the ways that they, and especially the 'role models' in the community, can evolve their practices by reflecting on and revising old ones and opening for new practices. Are the practices of the community a good enough reflection of who they are, and how they relate to their sport?

The girls' arguments are that nothing can compare with the infinite pleasure of flow on the mountain, which transcends any discursive parameters. Being a skier is something they are *proud of*—it is what they live for. Those moments of transcendence give them a sense of meaning that goes beyond the broadly accepted or discussed significance of skiing as an outdoor sport. Research on outdoor sports by Gurholt (1999) and Horgen (2018) indicates that being associated with outdoor sports is a positive legitimizing influence on a person's life that confers social capital and status on the level of personal as well as national identity discourse. However, the girls in this study's descriptions of flow and endless pleasure exist in another dimension from considerations about social status.

Summation of results

The analysis of the material, confirm that participation in mountaineering sports gives girls multi-dimensional experiences, touching on each of the categories of experience that Bischoff (2000) and Beames et al. (2019) defines as personal, social and cultural values. The personal and cultural is apparent in the ways that skiing and the community around it contributes to the girls' identity construction, expressed through speech and action. The analysis of the interviews also highlights that the mountaineering sports, which have historically been almost entirely male dominated, are undergoing a deep change. The material shows that the girls are concerned with the patterns traditionally associated with the categories 'man' and 'woman', and that, due to a scarcity of female role models in a historically male sport, they use terms like 'tomboy' and 'playing the girl card' to describe their situation. However, as the number of research literature with female participants in mountaineering sports increases, it becomes less and less necessary for women to negotiate a place for themselves by 'becoming one of the boys.'

As Klein and Weaving (2015) have shown, liberating outdoor sports from male dominance will require girls to create their own cultures. Like in Stoddards' (2011) study, the girls construct the social meaning of both gender and place through their engagement in these discursively mediated, embodied modes of interaction with sportscapes. Stoddart (2011) concludes that skiing constitutes

and take place within, a 'gender-environment nexuses'. Our study shows that girl skiers are engaged in precisely this paradigm-shifting labour. They are forming a culture where 'ride like a girl' isn't an insult but an appreciated value created in an active role in shaping their identity and influencing the sport and their community. Negotiating gender do not indicate that these girls 'lose their femininity', since they dress and behave to define and form their femininity as they go along. Like Laurendeau and Sharara (2008), we find that outdoor sports allow women to participate on their own terms. 'Their own terms' are continuously negotiated with positions and roles within the cultural practice. The findings shows that if a girl can do a backflip, it gives her credibility and increased status, from both boys and girls. In other words, neither the backflip nor the girl loses their value when the two meets. On the contrary, girls who do backflips are badass role models.

An important finding is also that when we take in these *extremely active* girls in the context of the high-performance expectations prevalent in modern society, we gain insight into an interesting ambiguity. In our material it is apparent that being a ski-girl is a lifestyle choice; the girls statements show that the development of their skiing practice is intensely personal, and that it serves as an anchor for their identity. Some of these girls have discovered a way to free themselves from social expectations that being a woman means being concerned with appearances and beauty, education, and traditions. As an alternative they are engaged in the construction of identities in which femininity is an ongoing negotiation, a work in progress. On one hand, excellence in the mountaineering sports makes a person into a 'somebody', and grants them acceptance as a legitimate participant in the field and then different from 'the others'. On the other hand, it is hard if persons only define their identity within these cultural standards. Several of the girls say that they feel they are being pulled in different directions, involved, and implicated in contradictory discourses. Like Beames et al. (2019) writes: they must be stable yet malleable. They experience ambivalence and when they listen to their bodies, they discover an ambiguity between 'to go easy' or 'get stoked and go hard'. In this sense, the material illustrates what Skårderud (2013) calls a 'minefield', in which the girls must navigate a middle way between their desire for the freedom that skiing can offer on the one hand, and the need, on the other hand, to be recognized as a fully rounded human being, not 'just a skier'.

Knowledge about such phenomena is important for understanding internal and cultural values embedded in achieving excellence in the adventure sports. The expectations in the outdoor sports are in some ways like those in other segments of society, such as school, the workplace or sports: individuality and competition are also identifiable parts of the adventure sports. Despite Tordsson's argument that outdoor sports can function as an antidote to modern society's consumerist and individualistic tendencies, our analysis indicates that these characteristics are in fact present in, and are an inescapable part of the structure of modern outdoor sports. At the same time, outdoor sports have historically been an arena for the development of desirable character traits, and honour is accrued by those who achieve excellence. In this sense, the competitiveness and individualism that are present in outdoor sports can be seen as simultaneously rooted in historical practice and symptomatic of the times we are living in—in other words, they are changing and evolving.

To the end

Taking part in a world of outdoor activities are existentially important as we have shown based on the analyses of the emotional language that gives the phenomenon of identity construction in outdoor sports meaning and value. Our findings are in line with Foucault's concept of subjectivity-formation; that people can actively negotiate and even challenge prevailing social contexts and norms to create more desirable ways of being (Beames et al., 2019). The girls' narratives show a collective movement that sees participation in adventure sports has become *natural* for women. Their descriptions of their lives and passions amount to a radical expansion of what is traditionally considered feminine activity and identity. Little (2002) description for the women she interviewed is like our results. The negotiation processes undergo and incorporate both the traditional masculine

qualities of challenge, uncertainty, and danger, and also it entails learning, newness and the exploration of risk in its social and esteem-based elements. We have illuminated that identity formation through adventure is ambiguous; it is a challenge with physical forces, a heroic quest, or action oriented toward conquest. Yet it is also a journey, a discovery, and an exploration of the self, others and the world /culture.

With this article we want to create curiosity about these practices, and we give the participations a responsibility to acquire knowledge about discourses, and to understand that one's own ways of behaving are woven into different premises that are often silent or taken for granted. Like Sisjord (2009) we agree that reflection on one's own practice is fundamental if one wants changes in terms and conditions in the sport. The girls who participated in our study are shaping modern outdoor sports to their own needs and in their own way, searching for balance during an ambiguous, unstable process of identity construction between extremes of exhaustion and euphoria. As role models, they have power to constitute, legitimize or change the terms of the discourse. For them, participation in outdoor sports satisfies an existential desire for meaningful experience, as we have shown through analysis of the language, they use to give their activity significance and value. The girls' descriptions of skiing evoke a spontaneous feeling of being alive and in the moment, where being fully immersed in their activity and the natural world begs the question 'Can it get any better than this?.'

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