

Studying Extreme Sports

Beyond the Core Participants

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A trend among many examples of subcultural research on alternative sports, especially extreme sports, is to adopt certain theoretical and methodological approaches that have, to an extent, limited the research findings. The particular limitation I identify and discuss here is the failure to include, in these analyses, a whole range of subcultural participation and participants that exist beyond the forms of authentic participation and the core members that have constituted the primary focus of studies of extreme sports. Within this literature, assumptions are often made but not acknowledged and, specifically, assumptions about the history of subcultures that are drawn from a number of theoretical traditions, but particularly from the Birmingham School (a group of researchers working in or around the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies during the 1970s). The Birmingham School, broadly conceived (and overly generalized), did the following: (a) addressed subcultures—British, spectacular, working-class, male subcultures—as problem-solving formations and concentrated on issues of resistance or opposition and style; (b) assumed a separation from commercial processes and homogeneity; (c) and reinforced masculine connotations of subculture.

Because of the ways in which research has been done on extreme sports—often valuable ethnographic research of relatively small groups of core participants and some media analysis of subcultural (niche) media—the position of core participants has been privileged, and it is the mode of participation that has come to be understood as authentic. Authentic participation (one example of this is Wheaton's [2000] “just doing it” in windsurfing subcultures) has been contrasted with the devalued and much-maligned—by the core participants, and, ultimately, by the researchers as well—positions of wannabes, posers, and nonparticipants. Yet the periphery has been there as long as the subcultures, and their relationships to the extreme sports world are determined, defined, or developed in almost exclusively commercial ways; that is, the sports and activities are purchased or, more accurately, consumed. This is not to suggest, however, that the participation of core subcultural members is not largely determined by consumption, because it certainly is. Specifically, it is the consumption of the right products (goods and media) that contribute, in large part, to the development of participant identities through the accumulation of subcultural capital (Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Real or authentic subcultural identities are closely tied to knowing what products to buy and not buy, whereas, at the same time, the

consumption of products—the wrong products or consumption in the wrong ways—is often an identifying feature of more peripheral participants or of nonparticipants (or “posers,” as defined by the core members) and a rationale for dismissing or excluding them (or worse). Although they are often not recognized as such, commercial processes and goods (in addition to styles of participation) are crucial to participation in most subcultures, and at the same time, association with commercial processes and goods is used to identify inauthentic participants and to make claims about the transformation or popularization (or demise) of the subculture.

Authenticity, in the literature on alternative sport subcultures, has referred almost exclusively to what is considered authentic participation by the core members who have been the focus of most studies. As a result, researchers have valued “authenticity” (in much the same ways as the participants they speak to), and forms of participation that are labeled *inauthentic* (including different definitions of authenticity) are devalued and often ignored. Unfortunately, there has been little, if any, critical engagement with the concept of authenticity—particularly the fact that authenticity is a relative and dynamic concept and not something homogeneously accepted and perpetuated by all members of a subculture. And too often, the focus has been on what constitutes authenticity within a subculture, without (explicitly) recognizing the many ways in which discourses of authenticity are used strategically by self-identified core members to identify and marginalize other participants as not authentic and not worthy of participation and to aggrandize and legitimize themselves. As Thornton (1995) reminds us, borrowing from Bourdieu, this positing of “us against them,” in which *us* is imbued with particular cultural values related to what it means to be a member of the subculture and *them* is a denigrated, devalued group requiring little consideration, is a type of classification that certainly tells us more about the people engaged in it than about any true differences between core subcultural participants and the people they define as other. A key and often neglected issue with respect to discussions of authenticity is the continuous struggle over its definition and who gets to define it.

Within snowboarding subcultures, discussions of authenticity have centered on the activity’s rapid growth in popularity in the early 1990s and the accompanying conceptions of and concerns about commercialization and incorporation. Humphreys (2003) suggests that snowboarding, like surfing and skateboarding, emerged from the new leisure movement imbued with an individualistic, anticompetitive, and anti-capitalist ethos; the suggestion is, then, that snowboarding once existed as an activity that was “underground and unsullied by commercialism” (p. 424), and the implicit assumption is that the culture of snowboarding was experienced and understood in the same ways by all participants. Snowboarding, however, is a relatively new sport, created in the early 1970s by borrowing heavily from the existing practices and cultures of surfing and skateboarding—activities in existence with varying degrees of popularity for several decades. Unlike the surfers and skateboarders whose styles, fashions, moves, and philosophies they adopted (elements that I would suggest were not uniform among skateboarding and surfing subcultures), snowboarders have, from the sport’s invention, been middle-class and upper-middle-class youth who can

afford to buy snowboards, snowboarding gear, lift passes, and transportation to resorts.

Related to the development of snowboarding, there may certainly have existed a generational conflict as youth tried to differentiate themselves from their parents and their parents' sport; skiing (which during the 1980s had become a popular leisure activity among the middle and upper middle classes and which had adopted a style replete with spandex and other body-hugging materials in fluorescent colors). Such attempts at distinction, for those who snowboarded to be different from their parents, were played out on the very same hills and in the same resorts that were dominated by skiers at the time. These were very public, rather than underground, displays—intended for skiers as well as for each other. Snowboarders adopted styles (of clothing and music) and behaviors (in addition to their snowboards) that demonstrated their disdain for and differences from skiers and, perhaps more important, which allied these privileged youth with other groups of youth living much more difficult lives (economically, at the least). To this end, snowboarders took on grunge and hip-hop styles (baggy jeans, plaid shirts, attitude) that contrasted sharply with the style of skiing (Heino, 2000), in part because these styles came from youth who did not spend a lot of time at ski resorts.

Is it possible to suggest that snowboarding was never *alternative*—a term often used but not often defined. And if it was, can snowboarding be considered alternative today? Attempting to answer this question reveals how impossible the alternative-mainstream dichotomy is and how limiting it can be when trying to do contextual and critical cultural analysis. That is, what do we learn by applying the label *alternative* to a cultural practice; and importantly, when we do, what implicit assumptions do we make about those cultural practices that are not alternative, often labeled *mainstream*. An alternative-mainstream (and core-periphery) dichotomy has been adopted, relatively uncritically within the literature on extreme sport subcultures, as a simplistic juxtaposition of alternative practices—that is, the (innovative, resistant) practices of authentic participants—with the popular (and bland) practices of the mainstream (where mainstream is conceived as an undifferentiated mass of uninteresting people). Alternative and mainstream are made to stand at opposite ends of a continuum, along which we can plot the progress (or demise) of a subculture as a result of processes of incorporation and commodification; the mainstreaming processes that are believed to prey on alternative, particularly youth, subcultural practices and styles.

Despite the role of commercial processes—including buying and selling equipment and styles—in the development of extreme sport subcultures, these processes have been consistently associated with the mainstream end of the dichotomy and with hurrying subcultures along the continuum. There is little value in suggesting that all snowboarders—relating to snowboarding as an activity and/or a culture—experience (either in the past or today) snowboarding in the same way, because there are many different motivations and opportunities for becoming involved and just as many meanings attributed to that involvement. However, it is precisely these assumptions—that

snowboarding is free of commercial processes and that snowboarding subculture is homogeneous—that have been made by certain participants (who have defined themselves as the authentic participants) and adopted by researchers who have contributed to the application of the alternative-mainstream dichotomy to the study of snowboarding. When it is impossible to define a cultural practice, such as snowboarding, as existing entirely on one side of the dichotomy or the other, the usefulness of that distinction is called into question, and the real difficulties (contradictions) inherent in speaking and writing through the alternative-mainstream dichotomy are highlighted.

The reading Jake Burton's (2003) account of snowboarding, as the practitioner voice in Rinehart and Sydnor's *To the Extreme*, further problematizes ideas about snowboarding as alternative or mainstream. Burton is often recognized as the inventor of contemporary snowboarding, and in this piece, he consistently emphasizes the combination of the fun of snowboarding as a sport and the seriousness of snowboarding as a business. He makes abstract references to the mainstream—as being initially resistant to snowboarding and requiring “solid education, professionalism, and persistence” (p. 404) to be convinced of the integrity of snowboarding. With respect to snowboarding today, Burton laments the negative consequences that accompany encroachment into snowboarding manufacturing and sponsorship by companies “with no tradition in or ownership of snowboarding” (p. 406). Ultimately, Burton's appeals to pursuing the success of snowboarding (its continued development as a sport and a business), but only “within the context of respect for traditions and history” (p. 406), seem to indicate an elitism or exclusivity that he explicitly states is not part of snowboarding. And although Burton seems committed to having as many people involved in snowboarding as possible (and along the way selling as many snowboards as possible), he also suggests that only certain people (and companies) can truly understand the nature and spirit of snowboarding. Burton, as owner of one of the most popular and profitable manufacturers of snowboards and snowboarding gear (40% of the international market), mobilizes the discourses of authenticity and cultural integrity to preserve his own business interests by identifying who can and who cannot legitimately do business in the snowboarding market.

Jake Burton, despite the extensive control he exerts in the snowboarding industry, is not representative of snowboarding culture or of snowboarders, but this example reminds us that no one person (or small group of people) can be. Furthermore, the long tradition of studying subcultures as removed from commercial processes, a tradition that has been adopted within much of the research on alternative sport subcultures, has meant that Burton's (and others) seemingly contradictory motivations to promote their cultural (and often leisurely) interests simultaneously with their economic and business interests have not been addressed. That is, there has been little recognition of the opportunities for snowboarders (and other extreme sports participants) to be both participants and entrepreneurs in their supposedly alternative cultural practices. This is especially interesting when it is claimed that the cultural practice in question is defined in part by its rejection of commercialism.

Angela McRobbie (1997) offers a potential explanation for the absence of attention to buying and selling in the processes of subcultural creation and recreation. She suggests, "the act of buying and the processes of looking and choosing still remain relatively unexamined in the field of cultural analysis. . . . One reason for this is that shopping has been considered a feminine activity" (pp. 191-192). Shopping is also often considered to be a private activity—in direct contradiction of the focus in subcultural studies on boys and collective or public activities. McRobbie alludes here to a broader trend in subcultural studies: an assumption of feminization associated with the idea that incorporating processes result in the movement of subcultures from their valued position as alternative practices and meanings to being mainstream, depoliticized, and less interesting forms of mass culture. In 1975, McRobbie and Garber (1997) pointed out that "within the repertoire of subcultural representations . . . girls and women have always been located nearer to the point of consumerism than to the 'ritual of resistance'" (p. 116). And this certainly seems to be the case in snowboarding, as any glance through a snowboarding magazine would attest; however, it is not only representations produced from within extreme sport subcultures that have perpetuated this belief. Often, researchers have reified this idea about the connections between feminization and incorporation by failing to engage the masculine connotations of subculture. That is, authentic subcultural participation is consistently defined in ways associated with masculinity. Anderson (1999) identified several social practices used by predominantly young, white, middle-class, male snowboarders to "make the practice of riding a board down a mountain into something that conveys their masculine status" (p. 60). By constructing the activity of snowboarding (and snowboarding culture) as masculine, (some) male snowboarders offer another example of the way that discourses of "authenticity" are used to exclude certain groups of people—in this case, girls and women—and to ensure that their participation is labeled *inauthentic*. As Anderson (1999) suggests, this commitment to dominant ideas about gender (and gender relations) is another reason to question snowboarding's alternative status.

Ultimately, in much of the research on alternative sport subcultures, the focus on core subcultural members and their definitions of *authenticity* and the assumption of homogeneity (in practices, values, motivations, philosophies, etc.) among participants in extreme sport subcultures, has contributed to the absence of any analysis of other types of participation and nonparticipation (and to the denigration of these positions based on the views of the core participants who are being studied). Even though these groups, with their own particular relationships to snowboarding (and other extreme sports), are missing, conclusions have been drawn about all snowboarders; and this has serious implications for understanding extreme sports in the contemporary moment. Posers and wannabes (the groups missing from the literature) are crucial to understanding the development of extreme sports from the early 1990s (when much of the research was undertaken) through today. Without researching these groups, we cannot understand the contemporary moment and the existence and popularity of,

among others, the X-Games, snowboarding at the Olympics, snowboarders in Campbell's soup commercials, and snowboarding video games.

As researchers interested in alternative sport subcultures, we need to stop relying (as we have, almost exclusively) on ethnographic studies of core members and on their forms of subcultural media as the foundation of our studies. We need to find ways to include those participants who have been marginalized and ignored by both the core members who are the focus of the research and by the researchers. To this end, we might consider the current popularity of video games featuring extreme sports. It is clearly not only core skateboarders, snowboarders, motocross riders, and additional others who are buying and playing them: So who are these extreme sports consumers? To core members, they may be the wannabes, but in their own definitions, these participants may view themselves (and their relationships to extreme sport subcultures) as extreme sports video game aficionados who are more interested in doing fantastic tricks as riders in the games than actually going out and trying to do the tricks on a board or a bike (and for many, video games might be the most accessible form of these activities). Right now, we have not really formulated ways of understanding or theorizing this participation beyond simplistic notions of the alternativity and creativity or mainstreaming and incorporation of subcultures. I propose that to more fully understand extreme sports subcultures in the contemporary moment, we must develop approaches that allow us to account for these many different kinds of participation and for their varied influences on the construction and reconstruction of these cultures.

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