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Understanding the Relationship Between Discursive Resources and Risk-Taking Behaviors in Outdoor Adventure Athletes

Mira Ione Cleveland
University of Montana, Missoula

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UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISCURSIVE RESOURCES
AND RISK-TAKING BEHAVIORS IN OUTDOOR ADVENTURE ATHLETES

By

MIRA IONE CLEVELAND

Thesis

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To be reviewed by:

Dr. Greg Larson, Chair
Department of Communication Studies

Dr. Joel Iverson
Department of Communication Studies

Dr. Sarah Halvorson
Department of Geography

Understanding the Relationship Between Discursive Resources and Risk-Taking Behaviors in Outdoor Adventure Athletes

Chairperson: Dr. Greg Larson

This study explores the various discursive resources influencing the identities of outdoor adventure athletes, specifically in regard to risk taking behaviors. The qualitative analysis reported here relied on participants' accounts on how they understood themselves, specifically as outdoor adventure athletes. Interviewees had the opportunity to reflect on their identities when they were asked questions about their experiences in their sports. Discourse was the means to both develop and express understanding of their identities. Results indicate that personal relationships and mountain environments were perceived to have a major influence on both identity and risk taking. These influences emerged through the processes of identity work athletes engaged in while participating in their sports. Ultimately, having an identity as an outdoor adventure athlete potentially means that outdoor adventure athletes are more likely to take risks than others.

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Introduction and Rationale

When asked why anyone would want to climb Everest, George Leigh Mallory (who later died on the mountain) proclaimed, “Because it’s there!” (Ortner, 1997, p. 135). Since Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay’s first known summit of Everest in 1953, over 250 people have died attempting the summit, yet there is no shortage of people willing to sign up and pay the upwards of \$80,000 in fees to make a guided ascent of the peak. The rising popularity of outdoor adventure films and social media accounts glamorize the entire process. For instance, in July 2017, K2, the second highest mountain on earth, boasting a 25% fatality rate for those attempting to summit (The Daily Beast, 2012), was ascended using traditional mountaineering tactics and descended on skis by Andrzej Bargiel. Bargiel’s endeavor was sponsored by Red Bull, and a mini film was made of the excursion which was later posted across the company’s social media accounts, celebrating both the feat and Bargiel’s athletic abilities.

On June 3rd, 2017, rock climber Alex Honnold successfully free-soloed El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, another historic first in the adventure communities. El Capitan is considered to be the largest granite face in the world, and from the base (the floor of Yosemite) to the summit is 3,200 feet of vertical granite. In free-soloing El Capitan, unassisted by ropes, parachute gear, or other tools normally utilized to prevent the climber from falling to his/her death, Honnold revolutionized what is possible in modern climbing. Honnold’s entire climb was shared by his team on social media and filmed and later turned into the 2019 Oscar and BAFTA winning documentary *Free Solo* (Vasarhelyi & Chin, 2018).

Outdoor adventure sports such as mountaineering, rock climbing, backcountry skiing, and ice climbing have seen an increase in participants and popularity in recent

years, due in part to social media posts, and the visibility award winning documentaries such as *Free Solo*, *Meru*, and *The Dawn Wall* bring to the sport. With greater attention being given to those who partake in activities the general public commonly characterizes as “risky” or “foolhardy”, it is beneficial to investigate why people are willing to participate in sports such as rock and ice climbing, high altitude mountaineering, or whitewater rafting.

One potential influencing factor on the risk related decisions made by outdoor adventure athletes is discursive resources. Discursive resources are concepts, phrases, or other linguistic devices that aid in individuals constructing and narrating their identities, and Kuhn (2009) notes that “studies rarely create a nuanced picture of the diverse discourses” (p. 682) people identify with. Researching the various discursive resources that influence the specific behaviors of outdoor adventure athletes’ aids in creating this “nuanced picture” in regards to the discursive resources constructing identities. In the case of outdoor adventure athletes, there are a number of discursive resources aiding in the creation of a “nuanced picture” in regards to what these individuals draw upon when constructing their identities and participating in risk filled activities.

Although identity, risk, and adventure sports have been studied as individual variables (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brymer 2010; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2010; Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003; Mitchell, Crawshaw, Bunton, & Green, 2001; Venette, 2003, 2006, 2008; Stephens & Dailey, 2012; Larson & Pearson, 2012), and while studies exist examining identity and sport, or risk and sport, (Ashforth et al., 1989; Brymer 2010; Fave et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2001; Venette, 2003, 2006, 2008; Stephens et al, 2012), research has overlooked the unique relationship between the intersections of identity negotiation

and risk, specifically how individuals may conceptualize and manage risk-filled activities by drawing upon identity-related discursive resources. Examining the influences that discursive resources have on outdoor adventure athletes' identities and behaviors, including shared values, group memberships, hobbies, and participating in adventure sports, may provide insight into why some people take extreme risks, while others avoid them. Consequently, delving further into understanding the influence an array of discursive resources has on an individual's behaviors and actions, including sharing values, participating in risky behaviors, and developing hobbies will provide richer insight into the relationship between identity and risk taking.

A discursive perspective may provide useful insight into the key processes ongoing in risk taking activities, resulting in an area for research expansion in studies of risk and identity. Studies also overlook the various influences such as personal relationships and physical environments among other resources that shape participant ideals and behaviors. To attempt to bridge this gap, this research will examine the role discursive resources play in identity formation, as the relationship between risk taking and identity may be linked. Finally, this research will investigate the practical consequences of these resources in attempt to minimize future fatalities in these sports.

Researching the influences personal relationships and physical place on identity negotiation and risk taking may provide insight into why outdoor adventure athletes participate in life-threatening activities. This study will explore how discursive resources specifically influence the identities of outdoor adventure athletes. Discursive resources shape their performances of their identity as an athlete, and this array of discourses function as a means to develop and regulate their identities. Through regulating identity

performance and navigation, these resources may influence every part of the experience of an outdoor adventure athlete, from what they wear, to what risks they take in their respective sports, to what they post on social media.

This research will begin with a literature review to help clarify the concepts of identity construction and risk, as well as examining lifestyle sports and how discursive resources may influence the meaning and enactment of risk sensemaking and action. Finally, research questions are posed and methods for answering such questions are proposed.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This study explores how discursive resources influence identity construction and management among adventure athletes, and subsequently, how these identities may contribute to sense making about risk. Additionally, this research seeks to examine how risk and identity intersect in attempt to understand both why outdoor adventure athletes participate in these activities, as well as offer suggestions to potentially minimize future sport related accidents from occurring.

People are influenced by socially regulated ideas about the groups they belong to, beliefs they subscribe to, and acceptable behaviors surrounding the performance of their identities. Identity plays a central role in understanding how individuals comprehend themselves in relationship to others, their place in society, and their morals, values, and beliefs. The concept of identity provides part of the puzzle in understanding why adventure athletes are willing to launch themselves over avalanche prone cliffs on skis, climb up rock faces with and without protection, jump off of fixed surfaces into canyons

with only a parachute attached, or climb to an altitude where the oxygen in the air is reduced by half.

Concepts of Identity. Identity is “the conception of the self reflexively and discursively understood by the self” (Kuhn, 2006, p. 1340), suggesting that identity is rooted within the individual (Larson & Gill, 2017) and that the self is “changing in particular contexts or over time, and yet nonetheless shaped by external and sometimes enduring forces” (Larson & Gill, 2017, p. 9). Individual identities shift with contexts (where or who a person is with will influence how a person understands themselves) and are shaped by broad, overarching, external forces such as Discourses, and other social constructions, and are comprised of individual understandings of reality, social expectations, constructions of behaviors, and social connections.

Larson and Gill (2017) note that the management of multiple identities is an ongoing challenge in navigating identity work. Additionally, Ashforth & Mael (1989) discuss that people have multiple, compartmentalized identities, suggesting that people will behave and understand themselves differently depending on context, location, and situation. The way people act and understand themselves is multi-faceted and is potentially changing dependent upon various circumstances within different settings (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). In making sense of multiple identities, identity can be formed in several different ways depending on the individual’s experiences, including how they place themselves in society, how they understand themselves at work, and how they draw meaning and values from physical locations.

Additionally, Ashcraft (2007) suggests that identity is an “ongoing rhetorical endeavor” that occurs “in response to lived exigencies and material possibilities” (p.10).

Specifically, who or what a person identifies with may function as discursive resources, which assist in shaping their narrative of self. These narratives are influenced through the messages transmitted by the groups, brands, collectives, or other “organizations” individuals foster identification with (Cheney, 1991). Identities, while individually enacted, are partly managed and defined through external forces: organizations, groups, and discourse. In drawing from external sources, people assign meanings and values to their own personal characteristics, working concurrently with external societal pressures, expectations, and definitions.

Discourse and Identity

Discursive resources are everywhere, influencing behaviors, identities, and ideologies, regardless if participants are aware of their existence. Discursive resources are concepts, phrases, or other linguistic devices that “are drawn from practices or texts, designed to affect other practices and texts, explain past or present action, and provide a horizon for future practice” (Kuhn et al, 2008, p. 163), and can include narratives about who or what a person is supposed to be (or how they are supposed to act). Discursive resources influence how people navigate their identities and understand themselves as they fit within larger narratives. Additionally, discursive resources aid in the construction of individual identities. In evaluating the impacts of discursive resources, greater insight can be gained into the importance of the influencing factors in people’s lives. Discourse plays a fundamental role in individual identity formation, negotiation, and understanding, and can be conceptualized as the various resources utilized in creating identities. Tracy (2000) notes that discourses, while all influencing individual identities, are “conflictual and competing” (p. 120) and provide numerous potentials for individual understanding and self-reflection. Discourse both creates and constrains realities, and dominant

Discursive narratives such as how to behave as a certain type of person, are held by those in privileged positions of power. Additionally, these beliefs and practices facilitate the construction of individuals identities and their interpretations of the world around them (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Lessa, 2005).

Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003) explain that discourse is “using language and reasoning in which the phenomenon is constructed rather than revealed or mirrored” (p. 1167) emphasizing the role language plays in constructing realities. Fairhurst & Putnam (2014) found that organizations (including formal organizations as well as communities, groups, or other gatherings of people) are inherently discursive, complex systems that play a critical role in constructing identities, and “discursive resources, as conceived here, are not (merely) statements about selves, but provide evidence of the discourses constituting a subject position” that assist in making a person “who they are” and how to be (Kuhn, 2006, p. 696). For instance, traditional discourses surrounding gender would suggest that women are supposed to act demure, motherly, and caring, and those who perform outside of these bounds are breaking a norm. Burr (1995) discusses: “the discourses that form our identity are intimately tied to the structures and practices that are lived out in society from day to day, and it is in the interest of relatively powerful groups that some discourses and not others receive the stamp of ‘truth’” (p.55). Consequently, people are both influenced by “big D” and “little d” discourse. “Big D” discourse relates to grand narratives and critical stories such as “The American Dream” that influence society, groups, and individuals. While “Big D” discourse functions as a regulating agent, through cultural narratives and expectations, “Little d” discourse constructs realities, such as individual conceptualizations of self, which suggests that communication creates

something (Larson & Gill, 2017). Discourse (“big D”) not only defines and constructs power structures, but also influences and contributes to the social reality of the organization, group, or community itself through talk (“little d” discourse).

Some discursive resources may play a major role in influencing the actions of outdoor adventure athletes through encouraging identity navigation and formation, as well as reinforcing *and* discouraging actions. Kuhn (2006) suggests that individuals may be “(co)-authors of their subjectivity” (p. 683), and that they have the agency to exert control over the discursive resources influencing their identity performances and how they understand themselves within society. However, discursive resources work as a necessary part of identity work, “guiding” perceptions and aiding in influencing behavior (Kuhn, 2006; Larson & Gill, 2017). Discursive resources exist apart from the individual, and these messages influence, construct, and guide identities.

In the same vein as Kuhn’s (2009) research on lawyers and discourse, this research examines the individual as “the self-reflexive node at which a variety of cultural, institutional and organizational discourses meet” (p.682). As a self-reflexive node, the individual has the capacity to evaluate and understand their own person, while also being constrained and influenced by a wide variety of external discourses. Additionally, Tracy and Trethewey (2005) explain that discourses aid in “‘fix[ing]’ identities in particular ways that favor some interests over others and thus constrain alternative truths and subject positions” (p. 184), suggesting that while the individual does exert some agency over their actions and interests, external factors also influence individual interests, and positionalities as a site where a variety of discourses intersect .

Organizations utilize discursive resources (such as flyers, handouts, or newsletters) (Cheney, 1983b) to specifically influence member identification with a group. Whereas identity can be broadly defined as how individuals conceptualize themselves, identification verifies or reaffirms a person's identity. These resources act as a unifying agent between the individual and the group and facilitate identification and compliance. When there is common ground between individuals and a group (such as the climbing community, mountain bikers, etc.), their behaviors and decisions are influenced through these identifications, potentially resulting in identity regulation (Larson & Gill, 2017).

Identity Regulation

Who a person is emerges out of what they identify with. Identity is constructed, reinforced and managed through social elements and expectations as they are understood and internalized by individuals. Identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) is the influence of social practices on "identity construction and reconstruction" (p. 625), suggesting that identities are not merely internally or individually developed, but regulated, mediated, and modified through external sources. Larson & Gill (2017) note that a person's identity "though constituted, influences how you act and what is made available to you" (p.97). Identity can be made available through Discourses influencing power structures, group memberships, collective identities, and other social influences.

Group Influence and Identity. Identities are regulated through a variety of resources such as discourses and organizations (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002), and how these identities are enacted may be regulated through these sources. For outdoor adventure athletes, the groups they identify with (and are members of) may assert identity control, which may make certain discourses more desirable than others for identity work,

and subsequently influence their behaviors. Collective identity, or a person's identification to their respective adventure communities may play a role in influencing behaviors. Similar to organizational control in its ability to guide behaviors and create "rules" or standards of behavior, collective identity is "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (Heath & Isbel, 2017 p.57). Collective identity emphasizes a common group identity and shared practices and discourses over individual preferences, and in the case of adventure communities, collective identity may assist in controlling or facilitating behavior. In the case of collective identity and athletes, members "buying in" to specific identities can be seen through a variety of factors including attitudes and actions, such as what risks athletes will take, how athletes will train, and how athletes understand their identities. These displays of identity may come from the need for a "situated" or "placed" identity (Albert, 2000), or individual's needs to be "part" of something or feel a sense of belonging. To make sense of themselves in a community or organization, or answer questions involving "who am I", people position themselves in a way that helps them fit within the organizations or groups with which they are seeking identification.

Ultimately, cultural and group discourses may influence the behavior of outdoor adventure athletes. Additionally, identity plays a central role in understanding how athletes understand themselves in comparison to other athletes, and conceptualize their morals, values, and beliefs. Lastly, the concept of identity is useful for the present study, as it provides necessary information for understanding why some individuals take risks while others avoid them.

Place Identity

While other potential discursive resources have been discussed, it is necessary to expand on the influence of outdoor environments such as mountains on the identity navigation of outdoor adventure athletes. Through talking about place, individuals situate themselves in the environment, vocalize attachments, and develop their identities in relationship to the place (Proshansky, 1978; 1983; Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2003; Hernandez et al., 2007). People may find attachment in a place because of the qualities of the place, or who they are in that place (Larson & Pearson, 2012), and place may play an important role in risk taking in adventure athletes. Understanding the unique relationship outdoor adventure athletes may have with mountain environments is important for examining how these athletes may utilize mountainous places as discursive resources for their own identity narratives.

Holton (2015) defines place identity as “the product of the relationship between person, place and process” (p.22) suggesting that place identity is multi-dimensional and multifaceted. For the purposes of this research, the specific, unique relationship outdoor adventure athletes have with mountain places will be focused on. In his research, Holton suggests that a sense of place or place identity emerges from the compilation of individuals and location, rather than the location itself constructing the place identity, which offers that place identity is experientially based, rather than being a mere attachment to a location. Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, (1996), reinforce this, noting, “the environment becomes a salient part of identity as opposed to merely setting a context in which identity can be established and developed.” (p.218) Finally, a mountain-based place identity may serve as an influencing factor on individuals actively participating in lifestyle sports such as mountaineering, kayaking, or BASE jumping.

Mountain locations are meaningful to many people and foster many emotions for people experiencing them. Although many physical places hold deep meaning, mountain environments hold an affective bond (Hernandez, 2007) over people. For people who consider mountains to be a salient part of their identity, these identities, per Korpela (2012) are rooted in the experiences, thoughts, and feelings that happen for an individual in a specific place. Memories and experiences of place may assist in identity work, as well as “be a way of retaining positive self-image” (p.447).

Mountains function as markers of identity (Bernbaum, 2006) that are constructed sites of emotion (Silva, 2011) rooted in the ideas and perceptions of those who experience these places. Mountains hold deep meanings, and Chow & Healey (2008) note that mountains can inspire spirituality, tranquility, and feelings of devotion, which result in attachment to that place. These feelings and emotions “manifest on a number of different levels, encompassing tangible and intangible aspects and tacit meanings and assumptions associated with place” (p.21). Bernbaum (2006), notes that mountains are sacred to various groups of people, and often hold deeper meanings than merely a physical location. Mountain places, then, may hold a critical role in identity work, and may influence thoughts, actions, and beliefs (Theodori & Luloff, 2000). Finally, individual conceptions and experiences in place determine thoughts and definitions regarding their identity as a participant in outdoor adventure sports in specific places.

Who a person conceptualizes themselves as may be rooted in individual experiences in a specific location or the components of the physical location itself, and who a person is may also be directly related to *where* they are (Dixon, 2000). Mountains are emotionally constructed sites, places of refuge, and “made up of ideas and

perceptions that exist in the minds of individuals” (Silva, 2011, p. 74). Dixon (2000) notes that location may act as a driving factor for individuals participating in various activities, both due to the social aspects of the location (such as personal relationships) and individual relationships to physical places. Mountains, then, are more than an accomplishment to climb or overcome, and instead may hold deep meaning for those experiencing their environments. Consequently, it is important to investigate both the symbolic (Nepal, 2005; Bernbaum, 2006) and place-related factors influencing outdoor adventure athletes to participate in mountain sports, particularly as existing research has overlooked why individuals prefer, or are drawn to, mountains over other locations (Nepal, 2005).

Lifestyle Sports

Climbing, backcountry skiing, mountaineering, and BASE jumping are all categorized as lifestyle sports. Lifestyle sports can be defined as sports that individuals let become salient to their identities beyond that of a hobby. Additionally, in the case of some full-time rock climbers, Rickly-Boyd (2012) defines a lifestyle sport as a group of “highly dedicated individuals who give up permanent residences for the full-time pursuit of this sport” (p.85). In abandoning permanent residencies for a lifestyle of “dirtbagging” (Rickly-Boyd, 2012), adventure athletes both strongly identify with the sport, and often prioritize wilderness places over traditional homes, which suggests that their loyalties lie with natural environments rather than traditional places of residence. Due to their racial, socioeconomic or other social positionings that allow them to participate in these activities freely, outdoor adventure athletes are “allowed” to be homeless, live in a van, or otherwise “act” like a dirtbagger, rather than be forced into homeless circumstances

due to personal or social constraints. However, for some athletes, extenuating circumstances such as college or jobs may prevent *total* immersion in the sport, but these individuals are still considered participants in lifestyle sports. Subsequently, choice and privilege are a significant aspect of lifestyle sports. Outdoor adventure athletes are provided affordances through their privileges that allow them to enact a specific, “dirtbagger” identity, and Rickly-Boyd (2007; 2012) discusses that lifestyle sports may often transition from hobby sports to be the *lifestyles of the athletes* instead of being a hobby, a pastime, or other leisure activity. Due to this, participants may become fully engrained in their activities, often obtaining sponsorships, or otherwise dedicate the entirety of their lives or work to support or fund their sport.

Professional outdoor adventure athletes are sponsored by companies such as The North Face, Red Bull, Patagonia, and others to fund “expeditions” in the backcountry to not only further the sport, but also provide a means to advertise their brands. These athletes are encouraged to push the limits of their sports in order to satisfy terms of their sponsorships, and subsequently are a step above that of lifestyle athletes. Although recreational athletes lack the financial support that sponsored, “professional” outdoor adventure athletes have, they are still privileged in their ability to participate (able-bodied-ness), afford the sport (socioeconomic status) and race (access to the sport), and for this research, both sponsored and recreational athletes will be interviewed, in order to provide a more accurate sampling of the community of outdoor adventure athletes. Lifestyle sports are inherently performative (Breivik, 2010), and often develop organizational identities, practices, and communities.

Wheaton (2003; 2004; 2007) suggests that lifestyle sports are an important part of the cultures and identities of adventure athletes, and these sports are expressions of specific and intrinsically important social identities of the individuals who participate in them (Breivik, 2010). Adventure sports may be socially subversive due to the blatant avoidance of societal norms surrounding risk, safety, and death by participants, and these sports reimagine what acceptable dangers are in activities (Wheaton, 2004).

Lifestyle sports transform existing notions of sport membership, sport participation, and sport consumption, and how they are portrayed culturally (Breivik, 2010). Aicher, Rice, and Hambrick (2017) examine what motivates individuals to participate in sports, specifically long distance or marathon running. In their research, the authors examine the level of commitment participants from part time, or hobbyists into “full-time participants” (p. 218) finding that “intrinsically motivated individuals engage in activities for the pleasure and satisfaction obtained from their participation, while extrinsically motivated individuals engage in an activity for external rewards or forces” (p.219). Similarly, Lewis (2000) defines adventure sports (specifically, climbing) as intentional acts that reimagine the modern social norms for what a body *should* do, and instead provides embodied agency, and, “in the perceptual world of the sense, the *real* world of the adventure climber is mapped via tactile navigation via a body moving through an environment” (p. 59). The rugged environments associated with extreme sport are inherently important to adventure athletes, potentially due to the influence these locations have on individual identities. Additionally, the enactment of identities constructed through these places may play a fundamental role in adventure athletes still participating in their sports regardless of the associated risks. Different experiences with

physical geography may act as a means of determining what individuals will participate in what risk-taking behaviors. For instance, someone from a mountainous environment may have more experiences or comfort with participating in dangerous ski endeavors in comparison to someone from an ocean environment, who may be comfortable participating in extreme surfing. Finally, places may function as a resource outdoor adventure athletes draw upon when understanding who they are as athletes, as well as influence what risks outdoor adventure athletes participate in.

Risk

“Within the outdoor community it is believed that risk recognition and management are products of experience, manifesting themselves in good judgements” (Collins & Collins, 2011, p. 88)

Definitions of Risk. The concept of risk is understood and defined variously dependent upon the individual’s interpretations of risks, as well as cultural and social constructions of risk. Risk is based on social construct and individual understandings, and consequently may be interpreted differently from group to group as “humans construe reality through a social process of recognition, deliberation, and justification” (Venette, 2003, p. 19). Risk is understood based upon a variety of factors, including the perceptions a person has of the payoffs versus negative repercussions of participating in activities, the potential for a negative event to occur, and whether the risk taking is voluntary or involuntary (Solovic, 1987; Venette, 2003; Venette, 2006). How risk is conceptualized emerges from communicative constructs (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) or how society discusses or conceptualizes risk. Consequently, risk is a construct rather than a defined, concrete entity, and interpretations of risk will vary from group to group. Finally, how

information is controlled or provided to people influences individual interpretations and perceptions of risk.

Risk taking behaviors are influenced by a person's willingness to engage in risk-filled behaviors based upon the perceived rewards. For instance, Venette (2003) notes that "given a moderately low benefit, a risk-tolerant individual is more willing to accept a risk, whereas a risk-averse person would not be willing to do so" (p. 12). Additionally, how dangerous situations or risk-related information is disseminated to the public also assist in shaping social understandings of risk (Tierney, 1999). Finally, those who have experienced and participated in risky activities communicate the risks to the general public, and their stories assist others in determining whether or not they will engage in the same risky behaviors and activities.

Risk and Sport. In the case of adventure athletes, what risk means can vary, as risk is a socially and culturally constructed "phenomenon" with differing understandings ranging from person to person, culture to culture, and even by location (Brymer, 2010; Venette, 2008; Berger et al, 1966; Tierney, 1999). Risky sports can be defined as sports where "one must reckon with the possibility of serious injury or death as a consequence of the activity" (Breivik, 2010, p. 2). In the case of athletic endeavors, risk is also conceptualized in various ways dependent on the individual's perspectives and experiences. People compare new situations to past experiences, and weigh the risks, determine the severity of the circumstances, and evaluate their willingness to participate in the new situation (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer 2003). There is some debate in the academic community regarding what inspires some people to engage in activities constructed as "risky" while others may avoid them (Fave, 2003; Dickson, Tracey, &

Dolnicar, 2004; Llewellyn & Sanchez, 2008; Buckley, 2012; Rickly-Boyd, 2012), but individual agency, reward, and the awareness of the specifics of risks associated with their sports may guide individuals to participate or avoid certain activities. Venette (2003) notes that control is the “level of predictability” and “degree of choice” associated with the risk (p.27). Overall, adventure athletes are engaging in their sport of choice not only because of the thrill or adrenaline from the risks, but also the fulfillment they experience from the sport (or participating in the sport is a salient part of their identity), and finally through their own perceived control over the risks (Brymer, 2010).

Outdoor adventure athletes are *highly* aware of the repercussions of an accident in their sport, and frequently acknowledge these as being an unavoidable piece of their chosen activity. First, participants are aware of the risk, and determine that the benefits of the risk outweigh the dangers (Breivik, 2010; Brymer, 2010) and, there is a voluntary participation in and exposure to risk (Bunn, 2017a,b). Although these risks are somewhat unpredictable in regard to when they may occur and to whom, the generalized risks are often discussed among participants, and steps are often taken to mitigate these disasters from occurring. For those participating in dangerous mountain sports, they are acting under their own agency when they climb Everest, ski down K2, or climb El Capitan, with the opportunity to abandon missions when they choose. While these sports are high consequence (Venette, 2003), and participants can and have died from botched missions, avalanches, falling seracs, crumbling rock, rough waters, and poor weather, the individual’s ability to freely participate is crucial. Slovic (1987) found that the public and potential sport participants tend to view risky activities that are voluntary as more

acceptable than those that are involuntary (such as exposure to second-hand smoke, reckless driving, etc.).

Essentially, to what extent a person has the right to choose whether or not they participate greatly determines their willingness to engage in risky behaviors. The notion of choice, or the ability for athletes to act as agents in their sport participation is critical to understanding risk taking, and participants are confident in their own physical abilities to successfully overcome the risks associated with their sport.

Lastly, reward is a critical aspect associated with risk taking, particularly for adventure athletes. Before athletes engage in skiing in avalanche prone backcountry, free-soloing rock faces, or summiting K2, there is an evaluation of the costs and benefits of the sport. For instance, negative risks can be overcome by considering the positive manageable risks involved with the activity (Breivik, 2010). Similarly, the reward or personal fulfillment from an outdoor experience, such as being in the mountains, successfully completing a difficult climbing route, or attaining a first ascent may overshadow the dangers associated with climbing, mountaineering, or other sports (Palmer, 2002). These rewards are salient to navigating risks as an outdoor athlete, as fulfillment may play a role in facilitating risk taking behaviors.

Overall, while there is a wide variety of literature surrounding sport and risk, from adventure tourism activities focusing on rock and mountain climbing (Dickinson, 2004), to what drives people to rock climb (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Identity and risk taking may be linked through their mutual influences on behavior, and this study seeks to investigate the ways in which identity and risk interact, the potential links they have, and the critical role they may play in determining what chances individuals will take in

dangerous activities as well as offer suggestions to potentially minimize future sport related accidents from occurring.

Research Questions

Outdoor adventure athletes understand their identities in part through drawing upon discursive resources. The array of discourses functions as a means to develop and regulate the identities and performances of outdoor adventure athletes and may influence every part of their experience. While a wide variety of literature exists separately on identity, adventure sports, and place, ranging from adventure tours focusing on rock and mountain climbing (Dickson et al, 2004), to postulating the various reasons people participate in lifestyle sports (Cohen, 2010), an area for research expansion exists in exploring the role discursive resources play in identity navigation and risk taking in adventure athletes participating in extreme sport, which may lend understanding into why some individuals will participate in risk filled activities when others avoid them. While identity, risk, and sport have each been evaluated in individual or in pairs, further study examining how sport related discursive resources influence individual identities, specifically as they pertain to risk taking behaviors should be conducted. Due to the fact that these resources may play a fundamental role in identity formation and navigation, as well as influencing the behaviors of outdoor adventure athletes, there may be practical and theoretical applications emerging from understanding the relationship between an array of discourses (including: social media, professional and personal relationships, branding, place, and sponsorships), and risk-taking behaviors in outdoor adventure athletes. Understanding how discursive resources shaping identity and risk work together in extreme sports is important, as they could potentially play a crucial role in how outdoor adventure athletes understand and manage risks. Based upon the aforementioned gap, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What discursive resources influence the enactment of an outdoor adventure athlete's identity?

RQ2: How does identity work influence risk taking sensemaking and behaviors in outdoor adventure athletes?

Chapter 2: Methods

This study focused on the various factors contributing to individuals participating in outdoor adventure sports, traditionally understood as “risk filled” or “dangerous”. The IRB for this study was an extension of a previous qualitative project, and the interview procedure, study site, and interview questions were modelled after that project. (See Appendix A for IRB materials). To satisfy IRB requirements, a clause was added to the IRB forms that allowed the qualitative project to be expanded upon and additional interviews gathered. This chapter discusses the qualitative methods used for research on outdoor adventure athletes and adventure sport participation in mountain towns in the Western United States. Data was collected through interviews, which allowed the researcher to collect detailed participant accounts on the researched phenomena (Tracy, 2013), and were also beneficial to understanding identity processes.

Data Collection

Participants and Study Site. The participants of this study were recruited from a variety of settings. First, the majority of participants were recruited from the western United States, including Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, and Utah. Participants were recruited from the researcher's social network (such as Facebook and Twitter) using the “snowball” method. Study announcements were also posted in a variety of internet forums, such as *The Mountain Project*. Participants were eligible to participate if they were 18 years of age or older and considered themselves a member of their adventure

sport's community. Adventure sports that qualify for this study included: rock climbing, mountaineering, ice climbing, backcountry skiing, canyoneering, free climbing, BASE jumping, and backcountry snowboarders. Lastly, to qualify, participants needed to be actively participating in their sport (more than five times).

Procedure. In this study, I aimed to investigate the relationship between identity and risk taking. Although there have been several documentaries (*Meru; The Summit; Valley Uprising; Further*) produced on those who participate in outdoor adventure sports (with narratives surrounding identity, risk taking, and adventure sports) these interviews focus on highly acclaimed professional climbers, sponsored by brands such as *The North Face, Black Diamond*, and the like. Because of this, it is beneficial to gather interviews from individuals who may not be “famous” within the adventure sport community, in order to gain a more accurate insight of why the majority of athletes participate in their sports, rather than just those who are funded. Although narratives surrounding risk and identity have been shared previously, understanding what influences the identities and risk-taking behaviors of outdoor adventure athletes can provide further understanding into how people interact with risk. This information can be efficiently obtained through individual interviews.

In interviewing adventure athletes, it was important for responses to be evaluated based upon the individuals underlying standpoints, values, and understandings of their sport, risk, and identity. Because risk is a social construct (Brymer, 2010), participants may have differing understandings and definitions of risk, and I asked participants to explain the risks in their sport and how they understood them. Similarly, what one participant may consider a commonplace, un-noteworthy experience, may be crucial to

another, and I asked participants to describe these mundane situations in detail. These descriptions, which Hymes and Geertz (1973) dubbed “thick descriptions” are best evaluated through qualitative research, specifically in a context that allows for free discussion and follow-up questions.

Interviews are an effective means to obtain individual narratives regarding identity, which Larson and Pepper (2003) discuss as “interview talk” (p. 537). During interviews, people utilize language as a means to make sense of their experiences, reinforcing values that are meaningful to them, while de-emphasizing other details they view as less important. In sharing these details while overlooking others, people construct and reinforce what experiences they view as the most significant in their lives.

Interviews were semi-structured, with some questions being asked in order to guide responses toward the research questions. In using semi-structured interviews, I had ten questions I asked the participants, with follow-up interview questions being modified based off of participant responses to initial questions. Interviews are useful tools to understand identity/ identification processes (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985; Bullis & Tompkins, 1989; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Larson & Pepper 2003) and how people navigate organizational membership and tensions (Tracy, 2004). For the present research, interview narratives aided in elucidating the values, beliefs, and decisions influencing participant’s identities, and aid in understanding the discursive resources that comprise the identity of an outdoor adventure athlete.

As previously discussed, participants were gathered from a variety of sources, with the majority coming from residents living in a western state such as Montana, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, Washington, or Utah. Participants were required to be 18

years or older, and currently participating in an adventure sport of some type (examples given above), and through recruiting outdoor athletes, I obtained a convenience sample consisting of 17 interviews.

Qualified participants were asked to participate in a short (30-60 minute) interview at the location of their choosing. Interviews were conducted in-person, and audio-taped for reference and transcribing. When in-person interviews were not possible (for seven participants), I conducted phone or email interviews. In person and phone interviews followed an interview procedure, beginning with the researcher starting with a “warm up” conversation, which encouraged open detailed responses, followed by my initializing the interviewing session (modified from Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). Participants were given an informed consent form, and the project was explained to answer any questions the participants may have. Next, participants were asked a series of interview questions rooted in the existing research questions of this study. While I guided interviewees to answer research questions, the interview period was semi structured, with participants leading the majority of the discussion. Additionally, I utilized an interview guide in order to prompt candid conversation, and avoid participants offering forced responses. (Tracy, 2013). As I have some previous experience with the outdoor adventure community, the opportunity to interview participants provides the ability to reflexively evaluate my own experiences, as well as provide greater insight into the adventure community. See Appendix B for interview questions and sub questions. Following the completion of the interview, the participant was thanked for her/his involvement, and interviews were transcribed.

In transcribing interviews, aliases were assigned to each participant, and I began initial investigation of themes in my data, specifically relating to identity, discursive resources, and risk taking. These themes were categorized, and these categories were constructed based upon multiple interviews, in order to provide consistent interpretation. For example, the category of “relationships” was marked in interviews with axial codes such as “family”, “friends”, “community”, and “tribe”, and as these words appeared in more interviews, responses were added to the category. After analysis, data was grouped into categories (such as listed above) and then grouped according to themes to answer each research question, followed by an additional round of axial coding where new categories were developed and defined as new themes emerged from subsequent evaluations of the data. Lastly, upon the completion of transcription and analysis, member checks were utilized (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) to ensure that participant experiences were accurately portrayed within the research.

Analysis

After completing interviews and surveys, the researcher transcribed all audio-recorded interviews and collected responses obtained electronically (via email) and read through transcripts to evaluate common themes resulting from interview conversations.

To address the research questions, the researcher used qualitative methods to review the participants’ responses for thematic qualities using open and axial coding (e.g., Tracy, 2006; 2013). Interviews were open coded, or assessed for common themes, and following initial review, axial coded, or where the information gathered during open coding was regrouped, which was used to refine and further define themes. I also manually coded all scratch notes from observations as well as interview data. Coding is useful for interview analysis as it allows the researcher to explore and examine whether

there are relationships between data and theoretical frameworks. Additionally, axial coding assists in finding differences in data and is useful in refining established relationships by merging categories (Tracy, 2013). Once open and axial codes were established, and I created definitions for each theme and provided important exemplars within responses.

In analyzing interview responses, my data centered around the influences of personal relationships, the outdoors, on identity and risk taking. I categorized interview responses into these themes, based off of commonly used terms within interviews, such as *family, friends, or tribe* (for personal relationships), *mountains, places, or fulfillment* (for the outdoors), and *personal direction, self-identification, preparation, competition with self, or accepting risks* (a slew of themes surrounding participants discussing risk). I then organized data according to interview questions while using existing literature to guide analysis. For instance, while interview questions were not asked in the order that the data is presented below, I organized the data in accordance with literature on risk, identity, and sport, in order to provide a more effective picture of the experiences of outdoor athletes. For instance, while participants may have discussed risk and relationships together in responses, in some instances, these responses were broken into two parts in order to better parse out data. This was then reevaluated during further axial coding. During the second round of axial coding, I reexamined interview responses, evaluated category definitions, and adjusted data tables as necessary. For instance, some responses that I initially coded as being separate (specifically: *family* and *relationships*) were grouped together after reevaluation, as there were more similarities between the responses than differences. In conducting two rounds of axial coding, I refined the

potentially broken or overlooked data from open coding (Tracy, 2013), which allowed me to make note of common themes and assisted in reaching data saturation, in which my interview data provided consistent information and reinforced the previously established themes.

Researcher Lens and Credibility

My role as a researcher involved my being immersed in the world of outdoor adventure sports, including participating in sports such as rock and ice climbing, taking mountaineering classes with Colorado Mountain School, and through maintaining relationships with members of the outdoor adventure community. While data were not collected through observations during these instances, my involvement with these groups provided me with a more thorough understanding of the circumstances surrounding outdoor adventure sports. In actively participating in sports such as rock climbing, mountaineering, and ice climbing, I was provided a better understanding of what it means to be an outdoor adventure athlete, as well as understand the various aspects of identity work that go into being an adventure athlete, which added to my interpretative schemata.

Although I did not collect observation data from these experiences, I consider myself to be a full participant in this research, and the ability to experience these sports firsthand, talk with participants in the sport, and understand the nuances between risk taking and identity work provided me credibility and the ability to conduct a rigorous study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Tracy 2013). Additionally, research notes from field experiences were drawn upon as a means to employ member checks. These research notes emerged from my field experiences and did not consist of direct interviews for the purposes of analysis. Instead, they functioned as a way to take note of the responses of other participants in the field in regard to other interview responses, specifically

regarding accuracy, credibility, and ensure these interviews reflected the experiences of other outdoor adventure athletes, and not just a single participant.

Academic credibility is essential to any qualitative study, and credibility is the qualitative equivalent of internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To maintain the credibility of this study, several measures were taken to reinforce accurate data analysis including thick description (accurately and vibrantly recording all of the details in observed situations) in observation notes, and long-term immersion (actively participating in the culture, norms, and experiences of the participants). The combination of long-term immersion in the communities, as well as interview data may be particularly beneficial, as they provided a more accurate snapshot of the experiences of my participants as well as the greater outdoor adventure community. As previously mentioned, this was attained through my actively participating in various adventure sports including skiing, winter mountaineering, backpacking, and hiking, and gathering scratch notes during the process (Tracy, 2013), as well as taking note of the various discursive resources I observed influencing *my own* identity. I utilized my research notes from my own field experiences as a means to employ member checks. Member checks were used as a means to examine whether or not the reported experiences of my participants reflected the general adventure community. In this process I evaluated talked with other adventure athletes about the themes emerging from my research to check the accuracy of my interviews. In using the narratives and conversations of other outdoor adventure athletes, I compared their conversations with that of my interviews. In doing so, I was able to confirm my data accurately represents more than just that of my interviewees. Finally, the methods used in this study were utilized to examine how

discursive resources influence outdoor adventure athletes to participate in risk-filled sports. Ultimately, this process provided a more useful and holistic understanding of the phenomenon's described by my participants.

Chapter 3: Results¹

In beginning this section, it is important to note the interconnectedness between risk, place, and identity. Although within the results, responses are broken into sections of research questions, it is impossible to examine the influences of both place and identity on risk taking behaviors without understanding that each of these variables acts in conjunction with one another, rather than as separate entities. Ultimately, through analysis of participant responses, it can be suggested that outdoor adventure athletes are managing their identities across different situations and circumstances, which are all influenced by physical place. In turn, place and identity both work together to influence how outdoor adventure athletes both conceptualize and interact with risk.

Finally, for the purposes of this research, when talking about outdoor places and environments, these are specifically mountain-based outdoor places. Additionally, while outdoor adventure sports occur in non-mountain environments, such as the desert, the ocean, and arctic, this research interviewed only mountain-based adventure athletes.

Discursive influences on the identities of outdoor adventure athletes (RQ₁)

The two key themes that emerged that functioned in the discursive construction of an outdoor athlete, were personal relationships, and physical locations in the outdoors. With personal relationships, athletes drew upon these interactions as a way to understand

¹ All participant identities have been changed to pseudonyms

what it looks like to be an ideal athlete in their sports, used stories from relationships a way to understand values and meanings associated with their sports, and additionally used these relationships as a way to identify and connect with something larger than themselves. Finally, the outdoors functioned as a discursive resource through providing identification and meaning and provide athletes a way to define themselves specifically identifying as mountain athletes, which in turn contained expectations of behaviors.

Personal Relationships. While many adventure sports are often done as an individual (for instance: Alex Honnold free soloing El Capitan, or the stereotypical “loner dirtbagger”), these sports are truly community based, regardless if a person is participating alone or with a group of people. For instance, even when an athlete is participating in a sport alone, there is always some type of relationship or sport community behind them, inspiring them, supporting them, even if they are not directly participating in the moment with the athlete. For outdoor adventure athletes, the relationships and community surrounding their sports are critical to their own conceptualizations of their identities as well as their participation in risk filled sports.

The connections and identifications garnered from relationships with other athletes in outdoor adventure sports were highly influential for participants developing their identities as athletes. Personal relationships and connections with other outdoor athletes provided participants with definitions of what it meant to be an athlete in their sport and additionally aided in athletes constructing their identities. These relationships are discursive through the identification and connectedness that emerge from these interactions, and athletes constructed their identities on the shared values, ideas, experiences, and sense of belonging fostered through these interactions.

First, personal relationships often acted as an introduction for most participants to the sport, with family members and friends teaching athletes about the sport, as well as providing examples of what it means to be an athlete in the sport. Outdoor adventure athletes drew upon personal relationships as a discursive resource in several ways, including developing their self-concept and as means of identification as an athlete in the sport. Additionally, these relationships often encouraged athletes to grow in their sport as will be described below.

Personal relationships were an important resource for outdoor adventure athletes, providing inspiration, fulfillment, and encouragement to participants. “So... I derive happiness from climbing with old friends, new friends, locally or away, teaching my children and younger generations to climb” (Emily, a climber and backcountry skier). These relationships may influence the development of individual self-understanding and are a primary discursive resource that function as a resource people utilized when developing their self-concepts (Larson & Pearson, 2012). Additionally, outdoor adventure athletes drew upon personal relationships when developing their identity as an athlete, as a way to first, conceptualize what it meant to be an outdoor adventure athlete, second, as a way to understand and express why they love their sport, and finally, these relationships encouraged participants to continue to participate in their sport.

Personal relationships are important to outdoor adventure athletes early on in their life as an athlete and are often how participants found the sport. For instance, the majority of participants noted that they were introduced to their sport by family members, close friends, or a romantic partner, and this helped them understand who they were as an

athlete, as well as provided meaning to the sports. One backcountry skier, Jada, explained:

“[Skiing] was always associated with family. I’ve always grown up doing it. Parents, brother, and we’d always do trips away and it became routine and as we’ve grown up and apart in different geographical areas it’s something, I can do that reminds me of them.”

In being associated with family, Jada’s understanding of being an outdoor adventure athlete was rooted in relationships. For Jada, it was impossible to be an outdoor adventure athlete without these relationships. Jada’s family introduced her to the sport, and while they are no longer close in physical proximity, the memories associated with skiing with her family are present even when her family is not. Consequently, she continues skiing both due to her love of the sport, and the connection it brings her to her family.

Next, personal relationships provided athletes meanings of what it looks like to be an ideal “version” of an athlete in their sport. Through adhering to the values and norms espoused by groups of outdoor athletes, participants found identification and fulfillment through group memberships. Additionally, these communities and relationships provided athletes with vital information about what a “real” or “ideal” outdoor athlete identity looked like. Additionally, these relationships were visible examples of not only how to act as an athlete, but also provided athletes with a guide of how to dress, and even what risks to take or avoid. The groups of athletes that participants associated with developed values and norms, and often held key discourses and stories of how athletes should be. Craig expressed gratitude toward and fulfillment from his climbing cohort, explaining: “to just be in that space with my community (one other person or a big group) makes me

feel so happy”. Finally, Shawn noted: “in climbing I have found my ‘tribe’...a place where I fit in in ways I don’t in other parts of society.” This tribe provided Shawn with community, opportunities to identify himself as a climber and athlete, and the positive emotions he experienced from climbing with his group in turn motivated him to continue climbing. For Craig, Shawn and other participants, the relationships formed inside their sport were often more meaningful for multiple reasons, from understanding their identity as an outdoor athlete, to why they value participating in their sport.

Lastly, whereas personal relationships with other sport participants modeled what it meant to be an outdoor adventure athlete, and encouraged risk taking behaviors, personal relationships with those outside of the sport are completely different. Although for some participants, family members were how they were introduced to their sport, when discussing family and other relationships in their lives, participants noted that often family and friends outside of their sport did not understand the sport and were worried for their safety. Consequently, athletes often withheld details of their specific sport in order to “protect” their close relationships. In doing so, athletes understood the dangers associated with their sport and accepted them but had to “cover up” or “minimize” the risks so their loved ones would not worry. Tom lamented:

“My Mom doesn’t want to see pictures. My Dad thinks it’s too risky. My wife comes out with me now and again but thinks only one of us should take risks at a time. My kids like to play outdoors when we go.”

Additionally, Randy noted:

“Most of my friends also participate in these sports and are very accepting. Some of my friends think climbing is dangerous because their idea of climbing is Alex

Honnold free soloing El Cap, so I explain that most climbers use gear and it is very safe.”

Outdoor athletes were often faced with two options when discussing the risks in their sport to loved ones: hide or otherwise minimize the risks, or take time explaining the risks to an audience who may or may not understand. Finally, family members asked for additional communication from athletes in order to feel more comfortable about their choices. Peter described:

“My dad who is still alive is worried about me. He always wants me to tell him where I'm going, if I'm with somebody, call him when I get back.”

Ultimately, personal relationships provided athletes with a community and group with shared interests, aided in athletes learning how to be athletes, how to act as athletes, when to take or avoid risks. Personal relationships function as a discursive resource as they provide an immediate example for athletes to draw upon as a means to understand themselves in the sport. These relationships both provide narratives containing examples of what it means to be a “good” athlete, as well as provide support and encouragement in risk taking, facilitate the development of athletes in their skillset, and are a source of meaning and fulfillment for participants.

The outdoors. In addition to personal relationships being salient to their identities, participants reported having a unique relationship with outdoor mountain environments, as well as feeling more comfortable taking risks than in other locations. In interviews, participants reported identifying with mountain places, drawing meaning and fulfillment from the experiences, conversations, and relationships fostered in these locations. Mountain environments function as a critical part of identity development in

outdoor adventure athletes through their symbolic value, through the meanings athletes assign them, and through the inherent danger and challenge of the environment.

Mountains are critical in the identities of outdoor adventure athletes as they provide definition, act as a site of conflict, competition, and challenge, and provide fulfillment and meaning. Mountains, then, function as a discursive resource as they work as an important site in the lives of outdoor athletes, aiding in them gaining understanding of who they are as athletes, and how these locations play into their identities.

First, outdoor locations provided definitions for athletes surrounding their identities as athletes. For example, athletes defined themselves as being outdoor athletes, and subsequently behaved in a way fitting with this identity. Athletes discussed the need to protect and preserve physical places, and also discussed how they also drew meanings from these places. In drawing meaning from physical places, participants often defined themselves as an “outdoor person” before that of an adventure athlete, and more importantly, participants made distinctions between being an adventure athlete, and being an *outdoor* adventure athlete. The outdoors is key to the identities of adventure athletes, both in identity development and risk conceptualization. Although some of their sports (climbing or distance running) had an indoor alternative, participants explained that the outdoors was essential to who they were as athletes, indicating that physical place plays a necessary role in developing an identity as an outdoor adventure athlete. Without the outdoors, participants noted that they would not be who they are as an athlete, suggesting that the outdoors are a primary discursive resource that participants draw upon when narrating their identity.

Mountainous environments aid in the development of the identities of outdoor adventure athletes that often induce feelings of meaning, significance, and challenge. Chow & Healey (2008) explained that mountains can inspire spirituality, tranquility, and feelings of devotion, which result in outdoor athletes developing an attachment to that place. In addition, due in part to the positive feelings athletes experience from these places, outdoor athletes were more comfortable with taking risks and pushing their limits, as the positives they gained from the environments outweighed the negatives. These feelings and emotions “manifest on a number of different levels, encompassing tangible and intangible aspects and tacit meanings and assumptions associated with place” (p.21). For instance, Cory discussed: “good locations enhance the enjoyment of climbing. Climbing a particularly remote, difficult to access, classic, beautiful, and/or challenging climb is particularly satisfying.” In this, he notes that the place itself makes the climb significant or more enjoyable than in a gym setting. Locations and spaces provide climbers with a means to define themselves, shapes who they are, and both provide definitions for what it means to be an outdoor adventure athlete, as well as reinforce these identities. Lourena noted:

“I also was very drawn to the places that climbing could take me. I have always enjoyed being outside, and climbing was another activity that allowed me to spend more time outdoors, and in places I would probably not spend a lot of time.”

Due to this, mountain environments are sacred to many people, and often hold deeper meanings than merely a physical location.

The relationship between the outdoors and sport participation seems to be somewhat reciprocal, as when athletes participate in their respective sports, they are allowed more time outside, which in turn motivates them to spend more time in their sport, which Mark reaffirmed as: “part of why I moved to Montana was to have better access and higher quality of skiing, snowboarding, and rock climbing.” The physical place allows for sport participation, which often leads athletes to form salient bonds with the place, which then leads athletes to want to spend time outdoors both for the sake of being outside and the opportunity to participate in their sport, deepening bonds both between athlete and sport and athlete and place. Participants also drew upon their love for the outdoors when considering their sport as a whole. Natalie explained:

“It also feels like a natural [to be in the outdoors] like it’s a good place to be. I think it’s kind of a mix of how hostile the environment can be... and just kind of how out there, you can be but still be so connected.”

Mountain environments are discursively constructed through the conversations, experiences, and stories of athletes and others who frequent the mountains, and hold meaning beyond the physical. There are myths, values, and symbolic meanings associated with the mountains for these people, specifically regarding mountains as a metaphor for challenge and conquering, and in participating in their sports, athletes engage with these myths. Cooper explained:

“skiing is a competition with myself. It just gives me a challenge and I get to prove to myself that I can do these amazing things that I didn’t know I could do before. There’s something about the mountain. It’s such a cleansing activity.

There's something about starting the day skiing and being reborn, just feeling like a new person."

Participants were further influenced by the challenges associated with mountain environments, both from the symbolic and mental challenges as well as physical challenges. In their sports, participants both pushed to overcome their own challenges, as well as "conquer" the wild locations in which they participated in their sports. Abby noted:

"It's kind of just that always wanting to push myself to do something more than I have before. I think that's kind of what's kept pushing me to do it cause there are still days that I let the heights get to me like I'm just like 'what am I doing?'"

Participants often used these environments as a venue to push themselves, test their limits, and grow in their skillsets. In pushing their limits, besting personal records and growing in their abilities, outdoor adventure athletes interacted with mountain risks as a means to better themselves and further perform identities as outdoor athletes. For instance:

"[I climb] for the adrenaline. I'm terrified of heights, and it's a way, I do it as an activity that proves to me that I can do anything. If I can conquer a fear of heights, I can do anything. If I can fall off a rock and be safe but still scared to death, it's still easy peasy."

Additionally,

"I, you know I needed that competitive drive and I kind of find it in myself. So, then I just started you know climbing higher and higher."

Participants frequently noted that some of the most rewarding aspects of their sport were often rooted in their own competition with themselves in mountain environments. In competing with themselves, outdoor adventure athletes reported pushing their own limits within their sports due in part to their need to challenge themselves, rather than to experience adrenaline or other risks.

Additionally, the challenges of their sports were as rewarding as the physical place and the relationships they made through their sport.

“I think I think it has to do with just the challenge. The, um, definitely the fun. The exercise. It's not ya know, just being a gym with a bunch of sweaty people. Feels it's just... how natural It is. Uh, you look cool while you're doing it. I think that's definitely a big part. It makes you feel cool; it makes you feel accomplished, and just makes you feel good.”

In participating in mountain sports, athletes subscribed to the discursive nature of mountain environments, challenging themselves through their sports, pushing to “conquer” the locations, and testing their limits. By doing so outdoor adventure athletes were more willing to push their limits and comfort levels within their sports, specifically for the sake of personal development, competition with themselves, and growing in their abilities as athletes. Consequently, both physical and metaphorical challenges were important for athletes defining who they are.

Finally, mountains are an important site for outdoor athletes as they lend meaning, definition, and understanding to athletes in regard to who they are in their sports. Additionally, the outdoors provides participants motivation to keep participating in their sports. Participants reported feeling connected to the places they skied, rock climbed, or

participated in other sports in, and these connections helped them understand who they were as athletes.

As Robert concluded:

“I do consider myself a mountain athlete and I guess I've come to really admire animals that live in the mountains. My favorite animals are things like wolverines, mountain goats, mountain lions, things that are strong, solitary, live out in the mountains.”

There were specific characteristics of identity that participants associated with the sport, such as being strong and fearless, and in describing these characteristics, participants noted that their conceptualization of risk was different than those who do not participate in the sport

In feeling at home in the outdoors, outdoor adventure athletes may feel “safe”, or “content”, which may afford them the confidence to test their limits in their respective sports. Locations such as mountain environments influence the identities of outdoor adventure athletes. Overall, the outdoors may play a major role in the lives of outdoor adventure athletes. Outdoor environments provided meaning to athletes, from defining what type of athlete they were, to what type of sports they would participate in. Without the outdoors, participants noted that they would not be who they are as an athlete, suggesting that the outdoors are a primary discursive resource that participants draw upon when narrating their identity. As Curtiss concluded, “My sports are very much a part of me. I moved to Montana because of these sports and I can't imagine life without any of them.”

Risk and Identity (RQ2)

The second research question investigated the relationship between identity and risk. Specifically, this question examined how athletes used identity as a sensemaking framework for understanding and participating in risk. One of these important sensemaking terms was understood through participant definition and identification as an athlete. In defining themselves as athletes, participants gained insight in how to act within the constraints of their identities as athletes and understood risk differently than those who did not hold these identities. The identity of an outdoor athlete, which develops through personal relationships and physical places, functions to influence risk taking, providing a framework and process into how athletes prepare for and take actions associated with risk, and as a sensemaking tool when understanding what it means to be an outdoor adventure athlete.

When discussing risk in interviews, it became apparent that risk was often individually constructed and how people understood risk varied from person to person and depended on the individual's experiences (e.g.: Venette, 2008). Additionally, risk was understood based off of individual experiences in places, the circumstances of the person navigating risk (ie: a mother and mountaineer might take different risks than a single woman or a grandfather), and personal relationships. Consequently, based on the person, risk was framed differently, and some participants were more likely to take risks than others.

In responding to interview questions, athletes explained how defining themselves as outdoor athletes, they gained insight into how to act as athletes. The act of defining themselves in turn provided them with a new conceptualization of risk as opposed to others who do not participate in outdoor adventure sports. Consequently, in answering the

second research question, participants further discussed the relationship between identity and behavior.

Identity and Understanding Risk. When an individual identifies as an outdoor adventure athlete, there are certain expectations and behaviors that they must associate with and ascribe to in order to participate as an outdoor athlete. To begin, Clay explained: “in the US today, what you do is a defining characteristic of who you are. Being labeled a climber has some good attributes that I’m ok with representing.” In being labeled as a climber, Clay expressed that there are specific characteristics associated with that identity that he performs, suggesting that there is a defined script associated with acting as an outdoor adventure athlete.

Some of the characteristics ascribed to adventure athletes are associated with their relationship to risk taking. In interviews, athletes suggested that there were specific “guidelines” for being an outdoor adventure athlete. These “guidelines” including how they prepare for risks and how risk is talked about and understood. In identifying as outdoor adventure athletes, participants viewed their sport as part of who they were, and consequently viewed the risks associated with the sport differently than non-participants. Additionally, the social positioning of participants may have influenced their interpretations of risks, however future research should examine this further. In interview responses, participants discussed the benefits of their sports, rather than the risks. For instance, Kelsie noted that “I wouldn’t identify myself without skiing.” Ryan agreed in relation to climbing:

“It has been the center of my life for more has 20 years. It revolved around my reason for travel, my friends and family and my mental and physical state... a lot of my [professional] work has developed from climbing.”

In identifying as outdoor adventure athletes, participants developed a different understanding of risk due to their relationship with risk taking in their respective sports. This is not to suggest that participants would not go out of their way to put themselves in a place of danger. Instead athletes often felt more inclined to participate in risk filled sports as the personal fulfillment and enjoyment outweighed the potentially negative consequences.

In participating in outdoor adventure sports, participants often reported their identities *as* athletes in their sports and the definitions they provided as being critical to their participation. Several participants explained,

“I wouldn’t be who I am without my sport. The risks are worth it because it’s part of who I am.”

Additionally:

“Climbing is a [capital “W” way] Way for me. A lot of people live their lives following a Way, it gives them direction meaning, hope. Climbing is a way to fly, a way to freedom. The risk is the ultimate price, death. but my mother used to tell me all the time, ‘Ships are safe in harbor but that’s not what they were built for.’”

In this discussion, athletes reaffirmed the notion that to be “good” at their sports there is a specific way they must perform that necessitates risk taking. In this performance, athletes are expected to be proficient at their respective sports, but also to take risks. However, in

taking risks, athletes expressed that they would only take risks that they were comfortable with, and only after an extensive process of preparation.

In preparing for risks, athletes trained both physically and mentally. In doing so, athletes prepared for the risks associated with their sports through physical conditioning to reduce the chance of their bodies failing during their sports. Athletes also conceptualized possible risks in order to mentally prepare for the tasks before them. These processes served as a means of sensemaking, specifically regarding risk taking. This process illustrates that risk taking is part of the identity of an outdoor adventure athlete and coming to terms with the risk taking and preparation processes also were part of this process.

For outdoor adventure athletes, identity served as a lens for understanding risks. For participants, their identities as rock climbers, mountaineers, backcountry skiers, or otherwise as athletes in their sport served as a sensemaking tool when determining what risks they would participate in while providing personal justification for engaging in dangerous behaviors. Due to the extreme nature of adventure sports and this process through which athletes authentically *act* the identity of adventure sports participants, certain risks are unavoidable.

Consequently, the identity of an adventure athlete is intertwined with risk taking. As previously shown, when discussing their sports, participants explained that (for themselves) their sport and their identities were one and the same. Participants often considered their sport to be one of the most important parts of their lives, and in responses, participants explained that they would not be who they are as a person without their sport. Additionally, these identities provided benefits to athletes extending beyond

the sports, such as personal fulfillment or satisfaction from being athletes, which in turn further facilitated risk taking in these participants.

Sports provided athletes with relief from other stressors, which in turn motivated athletes to participate more in the activities, which then encouraged risk taking behaviors. Additionally, the freedom from external distractions and stresses provided participants the ability to both process ongoing problems in their lives, as well as being present in the moment of engaging in their sport. James explained:

“When I’m feeling overwhelmed, I like to think that when I can get my body to flow smoothly up a route, to push and pull and balance, my mind will follow suit. I also climb because I like the way it makes my body feel: I’ve built strength and flexibility, and it can be a very good workout.”

Since athletes rooted their identities in their sports, the risks associated were secondary to the benefits of participation. In enacting the identity of an outdoor adventure athlete, participants focused on the physical and mental benefits provided from their sports, subsequently accepting the risks associated with the sport, due to the positive benefits the sport provided them.

“I returned home [from the Army] about a week after 9/11, and had a terrible time finding a job. I had some money save up, a car, so I said to hell with it. I packed up my car and left on an 8-month climbing journey, just living out of my car at the best climbing areas, meeting great people, sharing magical stories, and just plain doing things most others only read about.”

In participating in outdoor sports, athletes found benefits such as meaning and purpose both in their identities as outdoor adventure athletes through participating in their sports.

Subsequently, since athletes rooted their identities in their sports, the risks associated with their sports were secondary to the benefits from their sports.

Finally, relationships with other outdoor athletes served an important role in risk taking behaviors. In being outdoor adventure athletes, there are certain risks participants would take to be an “authentic” climber, backcountry skier, or other participant in their sports. In the definition of self as athlete, participants experienced a sense of control over the risks in their sports. The perceived control was due in part to their training, preparation, and understanding of the risks in their sports, as well as their relationships with other participants in the sports. As previously discussed, athletes make sense of the risks in their sports through their identities as athletes, but they also understand their sport through other examples of athletes in the sport. Sport partners played a critical role in risk taking in outdoor athletes. Not only did partners serve as a support agent in risk taking, they both encouraged and constrained athletes participating in dangerous behaviors.

Collin explained:

“We almost always come to an agreement and we take the conservative route and sometimes it's me being conservative. Sometimes it's the other person. Usually we seem to be on the same wavelength but it's always good to have that discussion.”

Having a trustworthy partner who they could talk to openly about danger and be willing to hold back if necessary, showcases how participants managed and worked within the confinement of potential for risks. As Martha described:

“I also choose my climbing partners very carefully. In skiing and snowboarding, I always have a friend when I'm in the trees or out of bounds at the resort.”

Ultimately, relationships with other athletes served several purposes in the lives of outdoor athletes. First, partners assisted in athletes determining what risks they should or should not take. Secondly, these mutual determinations served as a risk management tool. For outdoor athletes, other participants in the sport served roles as support agents, examples of what it means to be an athlete in the sport and influenced when risks were taken or avoided.

Overall, in answering the second research question, participants revealed the relationship between identity and risk taking. First, having an identity as an outdoor adventure athlete influences an understanding of risk. In being an outdoor athlete, risk is conceptualized in a different way than by those who do not identify as outdoor athletes. Additionally, these identities not only influence how participants understand risk, but also how athletes prepare for and take actions associated with risk. Having an identity as an outdoor adventure athlete serves as a lens for understanding risk, influencing the actions outdoor athletes take, such as buying certain types of gear, preparing and training for their sports. Ultimately, in answering interview questions, participants explained that to be an authentic outdoor athlete, there were certain actions they must take. This suggests that enacting the identity of an outdoor adventure athlete involves the willingness to put oneself at risk and take actions that others might consider dangerous. Consequently, identity and risk taking are intrinsically linked.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the discursive influences facilitating the construction of the identity of an outdoor adventure athlete (RQ₁), as well as to

understand how risk and identity work together (RQ₂). In this section, the research questions are discussed, as well as the theoretical and practical implications of the findings. During interviews, participants explained that there were a variety of factors involved in developing their identity as outdoor adventure athletes, and that there were several motivating factors for why they participated in dangerous sports. When conceptualizing their identities as outdoor adventure athletes, individuals are “subjected to a discursive formation” (Kuhn, 2009, p. 685) that involves an array of discourses including personal relationships and the outdoors.

There are an array of external influences contributing to the identity construction of outdoor adventure athletes, as well as influencing their willingness to take or avoid risks in their respective sports. Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) conceptualized identity work as individuals actively defining who they are as a person. Additionally, Larson & Pearson (2012) noted that identities are neither neat, nor stable, and through identity work people negotiate possibilities for who they are. In the case of outdoor adventure athletes, discursive resources (such as relationships or the natural environment) lead people to enact certain identities (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). In drawing upon discourses surrounding personal relationships, and the outdoors, outdoor adventure athletes worked to define how they understood themselves in relationship to their sport. These discourses have a unique relationship with the identity development of outdoor athletes, as they both serve as a means to draw upon for athlete’s developing sense of self, but also serve as a motivating factor for why they participate in their respective sports. Essentially, who a person understands themselves as, and where they are physically located may work together to influence their comfort level in risk taking.

For outdoor adventure athletes, discursive resources such as personal relationships and the environment held an important role in not only aiding their identity narratives, but also in influencing their risk-taking behaviors. People's social worlds are constituted through discursive actions and interactions with other people, which often results in individuals engaging in identity work to understand themselves in relationship to these people. For mountaineers, rock climbers, backcountry skiers, or other outdoor adventure athletes, the management of identity through the social norms of their groups and personal relationships is especially important. Risk taking, then, may be navigated, influenced, and understood through identity work. Identity work, per Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) "refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revisiting the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (p. 1165). For instance, in cases where athletes take risks, such as participating in routes, practices, or activities that are excessively dangerous, their choices may be influenced through some of the previously mentioned discursive resources.

How people understand themselves, their identities, and their relationships are all constituted through discursive actions and interactions with other people and places. There are numerous discursive influences on outdoor adventure athletes that these individuals draw upon to form their narratives of identity. Additionally, although there are many discourses for people to utilize in identity work, discourses emerging from personal relationships and mountain environments hold more weight on identity construction. In this regard, discursive resources influence identity work, and in the case of outdoor adventure athletes, discursive resources emerging from personal relationships

and the outdoors constrain and influence what the identity of an outdoor adventure athlete looks like.

RQ1: Discursive Resources and Identity Work

Participants discussed several discursive resources they utilize when understanding who they are as an outdoor athlete, but the two that were the most salient for their identity were personal relationships and the outdoors. Branding, clothing, and social media were all means that participants drew upon occasionally when understanding their identity, but personal relationships and physical place were far more widely reported and discussed at length. For the purposes of this discussion, personal relationships and the outdoors will be examined as the primary discursive resources utilized by outdoor adventure athletes in identity work.

Personal Relationships. One contribution of this research is the finding that personal relationships function as discursive resources through the narratives and examples derived from the relationships. Personal relationships functioned as a highly influential discursive resource for outdoor adventure athletes, specifically in conceptualizing, defining, and narrating their identities. These relationships provided athletes with narratives of how to be an athlete, when to take or avoid risks, and provided athletes assistance in constructing their identities through examples, narratives, and conversations. These relationships are inherently discursive through the identification and connectedness athletes derive from the relationships. Additionally, athletes constructed their identities based off of the shared values, ideas, experiences, and sense of belonging fostered through these interactions. Consequently, outdoor athletes' identities are

determined through “adopting a mode of being that subscribes to the values of the climbing community.” (Kiewa, 2002, p. 157)

Personal relationships provided participants with an immediate source of identification and participants often defined themselves by and through these relationships. For instance, McLean (2013) defines narrative identity as “a person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose.” (p. 233) Personal relationships have a unique role as discursive resources for narrating identity, as identity scripts were drawn from conversations with loved ones, partners, fellow participants, and family members during sport participation. Dependent on the relationship-role an athlete was playing, risk was perceived and navigated differently. For instance, when interacting with other athletes, risk was often viewed as a positive and something to be openly communicated, experienced, and sometimes celebrated. In addition, meaning and fulfillment were derived from these close relationships. These scripts include narratives of what it looks like to be an “authentic” outdoor participant, as well as holding implications for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors regarding risk taking. These collaborative relationships, both with other athletes and their activities are negotiated in an ongoing communicative process (Lawrence, Phillips, & Hardy, 1999) and mutually influence one another’s identity as a discursive resource and behavior rather than being a hierarchical relationship through both relational partners influencing one another, instead of one athlete solely impacting the other.

Appearing to be an “authentic” athlete was an underlying factor discussed by many participants, and the script of what an authentic outdoor adventure athlete might

look, what risks are appropriate and inappropriate, and how to behave like an outdoor athlete were derived both from the actual relationships and through conversations within personal relationships. As discourses construct individual positionality (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005; Kuhn, 2006; 2009), the subsequent discourses resulting from personal relationships are highly influential in the lives of adventure sport participants, who draw upon these relational narratives when conceptualizing themselves as outdoor athletes.

It can be suggested that the discourses emerging from personal relationships both encourage and constrain the identity of outdoor adventure athletes and the behaviors in which they engage (Kuhn, 2009). For instance, in RQ₁, ingroup (those who actively participate in their sport) personal relationships aided participants in defining themselves as athletes and provided motivation for athletes to continue participating in their sport. By contrast, outgroup (those who are unfamiliar with the sport) personal relationships were occasionally a hinderance to sport participation.

Personal relationships with individuals who did not understand an athlete's sport were often a hinderance, or otherwise problematic, as these individuals often worried unduly regarding the risks associated with the participants' respective sport, and participants were forced to lie, coverup, or otherwise avoid talking about the risk associated with their sport. As Tracy and Trethewey (2005) noted, "discourses work to 'fix' identities in particular ways that favor some interests over others and thus constrain alternative truths and subject positions." (p. 171) In navigating how risk is discussed around family members, or other outgroup relationships, athletes navigated their identity as a participant in their sport, often constraining information about their sport in order to preserve relationships. O'Sullivan (2000) explains that the extent to which an individual

is ambiguous or unclear surrounding a topic (for instance, the level of risk an outdoor sport poses to the athlete) functions both as a means to regulate self-disclosure to preserve individual privacy, but also serves as a way to facilitate relational intimacy and closeness. Athletes utilize these acts of “self-presentation” (O’Sullivan, 2000, p. 407), to maintain relationships (Lemay, 2013) that may otherwise be damaged or strained as a result of disclosures of risk. Consequently, the nature of personal relationships will influence individuals’ roles as outdoor adventure athletes. For relationships emerging out of shared interests and experiences, outdoor adventure athletes utilized these interactions as resources to aid in their own self-conceptualization as an athlete. Although the majority of outdoor adventure sports hold risks, the sports may be less dangerous than others outside of the sports perceive them to be, which athletes understand. However, in discussing the sports with those who are non-participants, athletes further minimize or withhold information. However, when interacting with close relationship partners who may not understand their sport, outdoor adventure athletes often intentionally withheld information in order to preserve the relationship.

The Outdoors. In addition to personal relationships being salient to their identities, mountains hold an important role in the lives of outdoor athletes. Mountain environments are a critical part of identity development in outdoor adventure athletes through their symbolic value, through the meanings athletes assign them, and through the inherent danger and challenge of the environment. Finally, mountains function as a discursive resource as they aid athletes in gaining understanding of who they are as athletes, and how these locations play into their identities.

The outdoors plays a unique role as a discursive resource and “identity, heritage values, spiritual services, esthetic appreciation of natural and cultivated landscapes, recreation, and tourism are the categories of cultural ecosystem services that are provided by landscapes.” (Knez & Eliasson, 2017, p.1)

The physicality of the resource is unique, as rather than being a defined, verbalized, or otherwise reiterated script to draw upon, the place itself provided a variety of unique meanings for the identity of participants. Additionally, the meanings associated with these environments extended beyond the physical places, and were often paired with the fulfillment drawn from the combination of the place, the people, and the experiences athletes were having in a mountainous environment. Larson & Gill (2017) explain that people live in places that allow them to “be themselves” (p.81), and in the case of outdoor adventure athletes, mountains provide outdoor athletes the opportunity to draw understanding from their experiences, which McLean (2013) defines as being when “the protagonist learns something or gleans a message from an event” (p. 234) and integrates the experience into their identity. Mountains hold the ability to change perspectives, alter identities, and shift attitudes (Bernbaum, 1990). These places are meaningful not only due to the actual physical mountain environment, but also the people and experiences that are a part of these locations. As Dixon et. al (2000) notes, “place-identity might function to underwrite personal identities, render actions or activities intelligible, express tastes and preferences and mediate efforts to change environments.” (p. 28) Consequently, outdoor adventure athletes draw meaning and identity from places, and these mountain environments specifically function as markers of identity (Bernbaum, 2006). In interviews, participants referred to themselves first as an “outdoor person” before other

terms such as adventure athlete, while the term outdoor adventure athlete was favored. Additionally, participants reported that they would not be who they are as an athlete without the outdoors. Knez & Eliasson (2017) note that environments and meaningful places serve as anchors to individual identities, and individual senses of self are situated within these places, and in particular mountain environments hold an affective bond (Hernandez, 2007) over people, and humans assign meaning and significance to those places and draw upon culturally accepted meanings of the locations. In finding significance and meaning from these places, participants were willing to continue going into the wild to participate in their sports and even experience risks.

Additionally, Knez & Eliasson (2017) explained, “natural sites can act as reminders of important experiences and occurrences, by which we uphold and consolidate personal and collective types of identification.” (p. 2) Participants expressed finding meaning and fulfillment from mountain environments, and this in turn influences individual identity work. Additionally, meaning and identity pose a unique relationship in that meaning provides the individual information in how to act and behave, thereby constraining behaviors. For instance, some individuals may be more likely to take risks in a specific setting (such as a mountain area while ice climbing) and less likely to in others (such as speeding on icy roads) because of place setting. Outdoor athletes draw meaning (intrinsically and extrinsically) in both the sense of fulfillment and in the sense of understanding or definition from outdoor environments. The personal ties developed with outdoor environments encompass a range of parameters, from physical to social. (Knez & Eliasson, 2017) Consequently, their risk-taking behaviors and identities as outdoor athletes are influenced by mountain places. Additionally, how outdoor athletes

interpret specific discourses are shaped by their identities, and the meaning of these discourses is influenced by the physical setting and associated contexts and meanings tied to the location. As mountains are inherently meaningful, often sacred, locations, these places function as discursive resources in the lives of outdoor athletes, and additionally may influence their willingness to take or avoid risks. Mountain environments provide athletes with a gathering location for their communities, the ability to participate in their sports, and fulfillment through experiencing physical place.

Lastly, the social positioning of outdoor athletes (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) outside of their sport (race, class, gender, etc.) also influences how meaning will be drawn from places, and in turn, how discourse will be interpreted is dependent on an individual's identity lens (Kuhn 2006; Kuhn 2009; Knez & Eliasson, 2017). For instance, a black woman may have barriers to experience mountain environments (through a lack of access or exposure due to location or financial situation, the outdoor industry is still male-dominant, etc.) and these barriers may influence how she interprets the environment, her identity in mountain places, and risk taking. Similarly, a mother with young children may experience the environment different than a older, male outdoor athlete. Although this study did not directly examine the impacts of social positioning on risk and identity, future studies should expand upon this.

RQ2: Risk and Identity

The second research question investigated why outdoor adventure athletes were willing to take risks and participate in dangerous sports. A primary finding of this study is that athletes participate in their sport because they are passionate about the sport as well as they draw meaning from the sport. For instance, having an identity of being a risk

taker is secondary to other, more salient identities (climber, outdoor person, mother, etc.) and those who participate in the sport are not necessarily passionate about the sport because of the risks. There are discursive influences that may facilitate how individuals conceptualize risks, and influence who will participate in dangerous risks, and in the case of outdoor adventure athletes, these resources were primarily personal direction and self-identification. Mitchell (2001) notes that how people talk about risk, how people take risks, and how people manage risks are all related to identity formation, and in turn, these identities may either constrain or encourage risk taking behaviors, while also being influenced by discursive resources such as personal relationships and the outdoors. In drawing on more communicatively constructed ideologies, athletes understand risks as a part of the sport that is manageable, rather than as a constraint.

Outdoor adventure sports demand total participation and focus from the athlete in order to minimize risks, (Cesi, 1993), and during participation, the athlete's "self, self-awareness, behavior, and context form a unitized singular experience" (p. 11) resulting in a "flow" of constant concentration. In this, Cesi (1993) suggests that the flow derived from risk filled experiences results in the development of a specific identity and conceptualization of risk, and the "manifestation of a person's 'true' self." (p. 11) This suggests that when outdoor adventure athletes report feelings of self-fulfillment and personal-identification, these may emerge from the intense focus experienced during activity participation, such as when participants discussed backcountry skiing or the focus they experienced while rock climbing. When conceptualizing personal-direction as a reason for participating in their sport, outdoor athletes develop a personal narrative that influences their understanding of risk, rooted in the fulfillment and identity derived from

the sport rather than a fear of consequences. Finally, in discussing self-identification, outdoor athletes participate in their respective sports because it is how they understand themselves as a person, and it is “who they are”, and participants often expressed gratitude for their sports roles in their lives.

The Relationship Between Risk and Identity

The final contribution of this research provides is greater understanding into how different identities influence the conceptualization of and influence how people interact with risk. Risk is one component of the identities of an outdoor adventure athlete, who often internalize risks as part of their sport. Additionally, risk offers the opportunity for both identity regulation and identity construction (Mitchell et al, 2001). For the majority of participants, risk was understood as a potential side effect of their sport, rather than at the forefront. Granted, athletes took every precaution to ensure the safety of all participants, but predominantly, risk was a secondary thought. As risk is a social construct (Kuhn, 2006), every person will understand or conceptualize risk differently. In the case of outdoor adventure athletes, if there is a negative experience with risk (for instance, a high fall resulting in broken vertebra), that individual may be more risk averse than someone who has never had a bad experience with risk. However, for participants who reported accidents happening, the majority returned to their sport almost immediately, noting that they valued their sports and the experiences associated with their sports more than the potential negatives.

There are identities that are more likely to take risks than others (Miller, 2008). The willingness of athletes to participate in risky sports may be rooted in values surrounding the risks and rewards of a particular objective (Sellnow, Ulmer, Seeger, & Littlefield, 2009). Values from athletes’ cohort groups surrounding what is positive or

negative, acceptable or unacceptable are drawn upon when they determine their participation in an activity.

Finally, how appropriate the risk taking is within a current situation may impact what risks athletes take. For instance, resources such as personal relationships with other participants in the sport aid in determining what risks will be taken and how. However, since risk is understood by each person based upon their experiences, each potentially dangerous situation will be interpreted differently. Social factors are critical in how people understand risk, and subsequently influence how an individual will perceive or interact with risk. (Plumridge & Chetwynd, 1999).

Ultimately, how people understand themselves is constituted through discursive actions and interactions with other people and places. There are numerous discursive influences on outdoor adventure athletes that these individuals draw upon to form their narratives of identity. Additionally, although there are numerous discourses for people to utilize in identity work, discourses emerging from personal relationships and mountain environments hold more weight on identity construction. In this regard, discursive resources influence identity work, and in the case of outdoor adventure athletes, discursive resources emerging from personal relationships and the outdoors constrain and influence what the identity of an outdoor adventure athlete looks like.

Implications

The results of the present research offer a few theoretical implications surrounding identity and risk literature, as well as its relation to discursive resources and risk-taking activities. In the present analysis, the theoretical and practical implications will be discussed.

Theoretical and Practical Implications. The primary conclusion from this study is that there are a wide variety of discursive resources, specifically involving risk taking that people draw upon when conceptualizing their identities, which furthers the research of Kuhn (2006; 2008), Larson (2012; 2017) and suggests that discourses ultimately impact a person's understanding of self (Ashcraft, 2013; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Risk is a highly individualized construct, rooted in identity work, and how a person interacts with risk often changes situationally. In the case of adventure athletes, what risk means can vary, as risk is a socially and culturally constructed "phenomenon" with differing understandings ranging from person to person, culture to culture, and even by location (Brymer, 2010; Venette, 2008; Berger et al, 1966; Tierney, 1999) and these interpretations are influenced through personal relationships with other athletes. For example, for outdoor athletes, dependent on what identity they are enacting, they may understand, talk about, or otherwise navigate risk differently, dependent on place (home vs. a mountain), relationship partners present (participants vs. nonparticipants), and circumstances (being a mom vs. being a backcountry skier). For instance, outdoor adventure athletes who are parents may navigate risk differently than athletes who are single without families, suggesting that there is nuance within the various identities an individual hold, particularly in risk filled-situations. How people understand risk emerges from communicative constructs (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) especially from other participants and members of the outdoor sporting community. Consequently, risk is a construct rather than a defined, concrete entity, and interpretations of risk will vary from group to group, and even from dyad to dyad, especially in the outdoor adventure community.

These findings are important for reducing disasters within the outdoor adventure community, as reaching an understanding that the conceptualization of risk is highly dynamic has implications for outdoor sports. Outdoor athletes should reflexively evaluate themselves, and examine the intersections of their different identities, and how these intersections and identities both compete and work together in regard to risk management. If athletes can assess their own perceptions of risk, and in what instances they either increase or decrease, potentially dangerous situations can be approached more productively, potentially reducing the possibility of risk.

Finally, how information is controlled or provided to people influences individual interpretations and perceptions of risk, and identity is a useful lens through which to understand risk due to the various ways different identities will interpret risk. Although the potential for risk is present regardless of who is involved in a given situation, how risk is interpreted, understood, and even approached will vary depending on an individual's identities.

Practically, the present study offers a few implications regarding risk taking and outdoor adventure sports. The primary finding of this study is that discursive resources are incredibly influential in the conceptualization of and interaction with risk-filled activities. It is important to consider that athletes are influenced by a wide variety of factors, both in how to be an athlete and in what risks they take. Consequently, given this information, steps can be taken to potentially minimize or otherwise mitigate disasters from happening in future situations. While researchers have investigated identity, discursive resources, and risk individually, the present research investigates how discursive resources work to influence people's willingness to participate in risk taking

behaviors. Additionally, personal relationships and team memberships played a significant role in athletes partaking in risk filled sports, as well as influenced safety measures in risk taking.

Athletes noted that personal relationships were an important influence in their willingness to take or otherwise avoid risks in their sports. The relationships athletes have with leaders in the outdoor community as well as other participants in their sports are important tools in preventing accidents in adventure sports. These relationships are particularly impactful as they not only shape the identities of outdoor athletes, but also influence their conceptualizations of risk as well as their decision making in dangerous situations. Ultimately, through having personal relationships with fellow participants and holding an identity as both an outdoor adventure athlete and a team member influence the decision making of athletes. These results suggest that personal relationships function as a discursive resource, and that the meanings drawn from these relationships work in conjunction with the value ascribed to the relationship partner, and in turn influences a person's behavior. The discourses of outdoor groups and teams may influence the behavior of outdoor adventure athletes. Identity plays an important role in understanding how athletes understand themselves in comparison to other athletes, and conceptualize their morals, values, and beliefs. Consequently, training courses should highlight the influence of place and relationships on the identities of outdoor athletes, and these athletes should be made aware of the importance of relationship skills in risk management, due to the role relationships play in outdoor safety.

Next, athletes consider that who they are is rooted in what they do, where they do it, and who they do it with. In defining their identity in this way, athletes draw upon

various discursive resources from personal relationships and the outdoors in order to negotiate and navigate their participation in risk filled activities. Practically, this suggests that when training and preparing for outdoor sports, adventure athletes should consider and evaluate their own understandings of place, risk, and their sport, and establish what risks they are comfortable with taking before even venturing into the outdoors.

Additionally, the unique relationship athletes developed with mountain environments is important to take into account in regard to mitigating accidents. Physical places hold deep meanings and symbolic values to people, and consequently, place may play a role in influencing the actions of other people, outside of adventure sports. Athletes understood themselves in relationship to their experiences and feelings in mountain environments, and who a person is (or how they conceptualize themselves) may also be directly related to *where* they are (Dixon, 2000). Mountains are emotionally constructed sites, places of refuge, and “made up of ideas and perceptions that exist in the minds of individuals” (Silva, 2011, p. 74), and both assist in the construction of individual identity *and* aid in how a person approaches risk-filled behaviors through the meanings drawn from these locations. These meanings are derived not only from the physical places, but from the people and experiences found within these places. Dixon (2000) notes that these locations may act as a driving factor for individuals participating in various activities, both due to the social aspects of the location (such as personal relationships) and individual relationships to physical places. Mountains, consequently, are more than an accomplishment to climb or overcome, and hold symbolic meanings for athletes. Finally, although mountains may foster deep emotions, competitive drives, and individual challenges, it is important that athletes consider their motivation and drive to

engage in sports in the mountains, and to increase their awareness of the risks within these environments, rather than merely focusing on the “good feelings” or challenges these places provide. In increasing this awareness, future risks may be minimized within adventure sports.

Ultimately, having an identity as an outdoor adventure athlete potentially means that these people are more likely to take risks than others. Thus, ensuring that risk is talked about and managed in a healthy and effective fashion will aid in preventing future accidents.

Limitations and Future Research

This study holds a few limitations, specifically in both the biases of participants *and* my own standpoint as a researcher. First, while the study call invited all mountain based outdoor adventure athletes to participate, the potential exists that individuals who had previously negative experiences associated with outdoor sports would have avoided participating. Additionally, there may be factors such as: individuals who did participate had a positive bias toward the sport, and thus would not say or share negative experiences with the sport. My own biases as both a researcher and a participant in outdoor adventure sports may have influenced some pieces of how data was gathered, interpreted, and discussed. Although efforts were taken to avoid these biases from impacting results, there are inevitably areas within the present study where my own voice comes through in discussing the responses of my participants. Specifically, my age, race, social standing, and own participation in some of these sports may have influenced how data were interpreted, inferred, or otherwise analyzed.

Third, future studies should expand sample size, as well as investigate race, class and gender further. While I had 17 participant interviews, future studies should interview more participants and conduct longer interviews (while participants were given an unlimited amount of time to discuss, interviews averaged approximately thirty to forty-five minutes). Additionally, future studies should take a more intersectional approach in examining how the social positioning of participants, specifically gender, may influence their willingness to take or avoid risks and interview questions should delve further into how these positionings work with or against risk taking behaviors.

Finally, while this study had preliminary findings that personal relationships are highly impactful in influencing participants to engage in risky activities, future research should investigate this further. Specifically, research should examine what roles do meaningful relationships have in influencing individual behaviors, ideologies, and fears. Secondly, this study briefly explored the implications of risk taking and the influences of branding and other forms of media, however this research could be expanded greatly. Ultimately, future studies should further investigate whether a relationship exists between multimedia, advertisements, and other publicly disseminated messages and risk-taking behaviors.

Summary. The qualitative analysis reported here relied on participants' accounts on how they understood themselves, specifically as outdoor adventure athletes. Interviewees had the opportunity to reflect on their identities when they were asked questions about their experiences in their sports. Discourse was the means to both develop and express understanding of their identities. Specifically, personal relationships and mountain environments were perceived to have a major influence on both identity

and risk taking. These influences emerged through the processes of identity work athletes engaged in while participating in their sports.

Appendices

Appendix A IRB Materials.



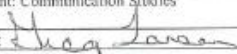
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AMENDMENT REQUEST

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IRB Protocol No.:

81-18

Email this request as a Word document to IRB@umontana.edu, or provide a hardcopy to the IRB office in the Interdisciplinary Science Building, room 104. NOTE: Submission of this form from a University email account constitutes an individual's signature; students submitting electronically **must** copy their faculty supervisors.

Project Title: Why We Climb: Justifying Risk within Adventure Sports	
Principal Investigator: Mira Cleveland	Title: Graduate Student
Signature: Mira Cleveland	
Email address: mira.cleveland@umontana.edu	
Work Phone:	Cell Phone: 4069272133
Department: Communication Studies	
Office location:	
Faculty Supervisor (if student project): Greg Larson	
Department: Communication Studies	
Work Phone: 406 243-4293	
Signature: 	
Email: greg.larson@umontana.edu	

Detail the proposed amendment (protocol, recruitment, confidentiality plan) below and attach any consent/assent/permission forms for IRB-approval (if possible, use Office's "track changes" feature in your attachments):

The only amendment to this study includes slight adjustments to interview questions and the use of data collection for a thesis.

For UM-IRB Use Only

IRB Determination:

Approved by Exempt Review, category # _____

Approved by Expedited Review, category # 7 (see *Note to PI)

Approved by Administrative Review (see *Note to PI)

Full IRB Determination

Approved (see *Note to PI)


Conditional Approval (see attached memo) - IRB Chair/Coordinator Signature/Date: _____

Conditions Met (see *Note to PI)

Resubmit Proposal (see attached memo)

Disapproved (see attached memo)

* Note to PI: Study is approved for one year. Use any attached IRB-approved forms (signed/dated) as "masters" when preparing copies. If continuing beyond the expiration date, a continuation report must be submitted. Notify the IRB if any significant changes or unanticipated events occur. Notify the IRB in writing when the study is terminated

Final Approval by IRB Chair/Manager: 

Date: 8/30/18 Expires: 4/10/2019

Appendix B
Interview Instrument.

RQ1: What discursive resources form outdoor adventure athlete's identity?

1. What adventure sport(s) do you participate in?
 - a. Do you participate recreationally or professionally?
 - b. Do you identify yourself as a (*rock climber, skier, etc.*)?
 - i. How important is this to who you are as a person?
2. Can you tell me about how you learned about your sport?
 - a. Did someone introduce you, or did you find it yourself?
 - i. If someone introduced you, who?
 - ii. If you found it yourself, how did you become interested?
 - b. How did you become a (*rock climber, skier, etc.*)?
 - i. Can you tell me a story about how you progressed to be where you are now with your sport?
 - c. What other athletes do you follow/ what publications/websites/etc do you follow about your sport?
 - i. What is it about them that is meaningful to you?
 - d. Do you follow professional adventure athletes or companies such as Patagonia or The North Face or others on social media?
 - i. If so, who?
 - ii. Do their posts change how you understand your view of your sport or how you participate?

RQ2: What role does identity have in why individuals partake in outdoor adventure sports?

1. What does it mean to be a (*rock climber, skier, etc.*)? (Are there values, community, etc)
 - a. How do you identify fellow members/participants of your sport?
 - b. How do you let others know you participate in your sport?
 - i. Through what you wear? Through what you eat or how you train?
2. How does the place you live support your participating in your sport?
 - a. Do mountains do have a specific meaning to you as an outdoor athlete?
 - b. What's your relationship between mountain environments and your sport and your understanding of yourself?

RQ3: How does the discursive identity of an outdoor adventure athlete influence the construction of risk?

1. How do you talk about risk with other athletes who participate in your sport?
 - a. Can you give me a specific case where you had to negotiate or talk about risk with a climbing partner?

- b. What did that conversation look like?
- 2. How does your identity as an athlete in this sport shape your understanding of risk?
 - a. How does this influence your conversations with climbing partners or other athletes?
- 3. What risks or dangers are associated with your sport?
 - a. Do you take these into account when engaging in your sport?
 - b. Do social media, documentaries, or other publications of professional athletes engaging in dangerous sports influence you to do the same?
- 4. Have you ever had an accident while (*climbing, skiing, mountaineering, etc*) ?
 - a. Can you tell me about it?
 - b. Did the accident impact your view of the sport?
- 5. Do the rewards of your sport outweigh the dangerous aspects?
 - a. What do you consider to be the rewards of your sport?
 - i. Why?

RQ4: How is risk understood through various identities?

- 1. What did you think of the risks of your sport before you started participating?
 - a. What changed your perceptions of the sport?
- 2. What do your family or friends think of your sport?
 - a. Do they have a different understanding of the risks you're taking?
 - b. How do you tell them about the risks you're taking?
 - i. Do you have a family member or friend who worries about the things that you do?
 - ii. If a family member was worried about the risks that you take, how would you explain that to them?
- 3. Does how you view risk in relation to your sport change how you view risk in other activities?
 - a. Are you more likely to take risks that you normally wouldn't because of your sport?

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