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How extreme is the extreme? On the multifaceted identity construction in extreme sports

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This paper analyses the versatile forms of identity constituted and pursued among people engaged in extreme sports. We tend to assume that these sports are very individualistic and that those taking part in them are probably countercultural romantics going against the mainstream. However, engaging in these lifestyles also brings forth a sense of collective identity (in slang, fashion, music, etc.) and an accelerated commercialism. The main focus of this paper is to explore the tension emerging as a result of the dialogical relationship between pursuing distinct identity trough engaging in extreme sports and the consumerist and hence, collective aspect of these sports. The paper analyses the different identities represented in action/extreme sport movies on the one hand, the identities that the people who consume these movies and representations associate with the other, and finally, the identity of people engaged in these sports. This brings forth a triangulation of relations; the mainstream, commercialized depiction of extreme sports, the counterculture that it tries to portray, and the identities shaped through the unique experiences of those engaged in these sports.

Key-words: *extreme sports, commodification, commercialization, identity, counterculture.*

1. Theoretical background of the study

The theoretical background of this work is rooted in several cultural anthropology studies. One of the working frameworks is the so called anthropology of experience, formulated by Victor Turner. This anthropology has been a "rebellion against structural-functional orthodoxy, with its closed static model of social systems (Babcock 1984, 462). As Bruner points out, Turner found the inspiration for this kind of anthropology in Wilhelm Dilthey and the concept of an experience, that is, of what has been "lived through" (1985, 5). Bruner further goes on to say that "an experience is more personal, as it refers to an active self, to a human being who not only engages in but shapes an action". The difficulty of experience as he notes is that it is limited to the self, that is, to our own lives. We only have the capacity to experience our own life, and the things received by our own consciousness. This phenomenological understanding of experience will serve as a framework to detect the intimate, albeit not easy to articulate experiences of people engaged in extreme

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sports, often related to some countercultural romanticism, which aims at breaking away with materialism, and the recent commodification and commercialism of these sports. Additional anthropological works will further serve as the theoretical background to this study and the countercultural motivation behind the participation in such sports. The work of Beal focuses on the resistance in skateboarding, but also notices that the sport has become penetrated by "rats", that is, those who have given themselves into the corporate bureaucratic side of it and plastered their belonging with corporate logos (1995, 225). Mcsorley's comprehensive study of the prominent use of helmetcam footage and visual grammar in both wars and in extreme sports, thus causing drastic changes in the ways in which events and people are being perceived, transformed, commodified, while war has become somatic as it involves the "embodied experiences of soldiering" is also taken into great consideration (2012, 48). Additionally, this paper looks at the complexity of representation of a supposedly nonconformist identity (in the recent production of outdoor movies) through a commodified action sports industry that is thriving and clearly permeating global popular culture (Rinehart and Sydnor 2003). Finally, Sherry B. Ortner's *Life and Death on Mt. Everest* (1999) where she explores, the changing of culture among the Sherpa in the Himalayas under the huge influx of climbers to Everest from all over the world and the commercialization of climbing and climbers who originally strived to transcend the vulgarity and materialism of modernity, together with Clifford Geert's concept of the "deep play" will serve as a unifying framework of analysis, out of which conclusions will be drawn.

2. Methodology and parameters of the study

The methodology used for this research is qualitative analysis. The paper analyses several aspects of the presentation of identity of those participating in extreme sports in a recent freeride[2] skiing movie *Valhalla,* combining it with a set of structured interviews with 10 people (6 male, 4 females) all engaged in extreme sports (freeride skiing and snowboarding, high-altitude mountaineering, downhill mount biking, surfing, and rock climbing) were both females and males were aged between 27-40. Of all the participants in the study, only one participant is married, while the others are either single or are in a relationship with someone who is also practicing at least on alternative form of sporting. All the interviewees actively participate in the above-mentioned list of alternative sports at least once per week. The purpose of combining the interviews with the movie analysis is to detect the different forms of

[2] Freeride skiing/ snowboarding also known as freeriding is a style of skiing and snowboarding, performed on un-groom terrain and off-piste, far away from the ski resort. The challenges and risks involved are much higher, including avalanche danger. Freeriding is also referred to as "backcountry", "off-piste", "big mountain" or "extreme" riding.

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identity constituted through the representation of these sports on the one hand and the actual involvement in them on the other. This should help draw the map of the emerging complex identities created and transformed through commodification, consumerism, popular culture, and the desire for non-conformist, distinct identity ironically often constituted or drenched in conformity.

One of the main backgrounds to this research is the question Crum poses in his work *Appearing Extreme: Dampening Reflexivity, Postmodern Identity, and Electronic Colonialism in Action Sports Film* – "how do snowboard films present their audience with a stable and consumable identity that, once consumed, reinforces the audience's sense of participation and authenticity?" (2010, 36). While the mainstreamization and commodification of action/extreme sports is hard to deny, this text also explores the desire for authenticity of experience of those engaging in these sports outside the corporeal/institutional realm. The interview transcripts reveal that many of those engaged in this type of lifestyle have preserved the critical awareness towards the commercialism of extreme sports and the commodified images portrayed in the advertisements and movies dealing with these sports. Hence, some of the research questions addressed are the following:

- What is the importance of lifestyle for those engaged in extreme sports?
- How important is the "authenticity" of the sport for those engaged in it?
- Do alternative sports refuse or embrace commercialism?
- Can those engaged in alternative sports preserve critical awareness of its growing commercialism?

3. Power struggles: Risk taking, the counterculture and the popularization of the extreme

3.1. Risk taking or playing it safe?

Various theoretical studies interpret the participation in extreme sports as a risk-taking endeavor (Baker and Simon, 2002; Laurendeau, 2012; Robinson, 2004). These studies mainly focus on the need and desire of the participants in extreme sports to feel that one's life is at risk, the adrenaline rush being the prime motivation behind the action. Yet, some of these explanations behind these studies do not necessarily correspond with the participants' lived experience (Brymer, 2005; Brymer and Oades, 2009; Weber, 2001). Through a phenomenological study and a set of interviews with people engaged in extreme sports, Brymer lays out the conclusion that the participants of extreme sports interviewed for the study "do not consider that they undertake the activity for risks or danger" (2010, 11). In other words, many of them exercise and take all possible percussions to minimize the risk. As Lyn Hill, a famous climber stated:

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> Extreme to me means doing something that is dangerous and risky. And that was never my motivation as a climber. The reason I climb is more about learning about myself as well as the sense of partnership with my climbing partners within the natural environment. It has nothing to do with how dangerous it is. (Hill cited in Brymer, 2010, 11).

The problem however occurs when the proliferation of these sports as a result of the media, leads to the rise of commercial operators of climbing, mountaineering, canyonning, who as Palmer notices, sell their packages as entirely free of risk (2009, 327). This brings forward the tension between the rhetoric of guaranteed safety of the commercial operators whose aim is to sell, thus offering an unforgettable experience where you will taste the distinct identity and lifestyle that extreme sports offer on the one hand, and the narratives of those really engaged in the sports on the other. As noted previously by Brymer, those engaged in these activities on a more regular basis are aware of the risks they entail, but try to boil the risk to a minimum.

Geertz's notion of "deep play" borrowed from Jeremy Bentham can prove as a useful concept in deciphering this tension. According to Bentham, deep play is that action when the stakes are so high that it makes no sense for anyone to engage in the play since the small amount of what you stand to win is outweighed by the size of what you stand to lose. Geertz uses this concept through much of his work, but employs it exceptionally well in his essay *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* published in 1973 as part of the book *Interpretation of cultures*. The essay is clearly one of the greatest manifestations of Geertz's understanding of culture as text and performativity. The Balinese cock fight is threaded with the masks of tragedy and comedy, and is open only to those men, who have a certain social status and money to become part of the *deep play*. The concept of deep play that Geertz engages here is meant to show that the fight is not so much about the money, as it is a symbol of moral importance. What is really being gambled with are respect, status, and reputation of the Balinese man. The cockfight is merely a scenography, through which Bali and its people manifest itself. The cockfight really puts at stake the eternal themes of life, death, masculinity, anger, pride, loss, happiness, hence making it a deep play where what you stand to win is threatened by the size of what you can actually lose in the society. Applying Geertz's concept of deep play Palmer wonders what we can make from an adventure in which no one survives, that is, when death emerges from the depth of the deep play (2009, 333). Palmer's critique of the comercialisation of extreme sporting goes even further, addressing the emergence of 'adventure saga' and the Hollywood movies portraying great tragedies and other risks involved in extreme sports. Palmer therefore urges us to see that even the mountaineers discourses prevalent in mountaineering literature that Ortner discusses (1997, 139) and which talk about the mountaineer's desire for bonding with nature, finding peace far away from the hustle of cities, as well as discovering and understanding the inner self, are actually a product of predominantly upper class

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Western travelers involved in some of the tragedies she discusses, which then become the subject of a new burgeoning literary and media genre. Books such as Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* (1997), and movies including *Perfect Storm, Vertical Limit,* and *Himalaya* represent extremity in very particular ways, involving the struggle of Man against the elements, creating the 'extreme action hero', thus distinguishing him/herself from the crowd (Palmer 209, 333). Although Palmer's text should be read with the utmost respect for her sharp critique on the commercialism of risk, personal experience texts dismiss her previous insistence on the utterly Western production of 'action saga'. In his lively and sharp discussion of personal experiences ranging from poker, through climbing to flying airplanes, Alvarez argues that "however deep the play was, it was still a play, and pleasure doesn't necessarily cease when things go wrong (2012, 465). Reminiscing a cold night out with a companion, he points to the gain of satisfaction for having climbed a difficult route in difficult conditions coupled with the risk of possibly losing their toes, fingers and even lives. Risk activities are to Alvarez the deep play with never ceasing pleasure. While by no means dismissing both the commercialism of risk in extreme sports, which gave rise to the new hero who stands out of the crowd, and the authentic accounts of those engaged in the sports, this urge to engage oneself in sports, which carry a greater amount of risk might also find it's explanation in what Laviolette points out to, namely that the "modern societies are obsessed with controlling risk" (2007, 1). As Laviolette notices "since the 1980s, a range of daring 'alternative sports' has become increasingly popular" (1). These sports range from cliff-jumping, ice-climbing, freeride skiing/snowboarding, kite-surfing, underwater cave-diving, white-water canoeing and many others. Other authors have also stressed our common inclination to consider hazardous activity as breaking a barrier to the realization of human potential (Barley 1988, Williams et al. 1992). The psychological identification of those engaging in extreme sports also connects with the work by Midol and Broyer (1995), and Bale (1994), who assert that the (mainly American) desire for risky behavior is connected to the cultural value of rugged individualism. Further, the independent nature of participation introduces a type of sporting that is postmodern, as are the characteristics of the lifestyle depicted by the individual athlete.

3.2. The Institutionalization of Action

Another interesting aspect of alternative sports in addition to the risk involved is that in the beginning these sports were to a great extent pursued noncompetitively, and are usually carried out by an individual or a very small group. The popularization of these sports has led to the launching of X Games, an annual sport event focusing on extreme sports, broadcasted by ESPN. The first X Games event was held in 1995 in Newport, Rhode Island. Soon after, in 1997, the inaugural winter X Games were launched, gathering a body of young people dedicated to these sports that brought

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the competitive character in this realm, but also contributing to a great popularization of these sports and lifestyles. The fact that the interest in traditional sports has been eroding in the past years parallel with the proliferation of extreme sports and X Games and coupled with the desire to attract the youth to participate in sports has pushed the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to put various efforts to appeal to younger audiences. These include such practices as the incorporation of a range of youth-driven action sports into the Olympic programme (i.e. windsurfing [1984], mountain biking [1996], snowboarding [1998], BMX [2000]) (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). However, the authors are cautious in noticing that the marriage between 'alternative' action sports and the Olympics is not straightforward. Reflecting action sports' counter-cultural heritage, many participants continue to view these activities as alternative *lifestyles* rather than as *sports* (Wheaton, 2004). The value system revolving around those sports is often considered incompatible with the hierarchical structure of the Olympics. The reason why the IOS has put efforts in order to appeal more to the younger audiences is yet another confirmation of the point that it is predominantly the market-driven inspiration behind incorporating these sports in the official sport events and narratives. This in turn, produces a complex set of power struggles between the official sport bodies, the sport cultures, people engaged in the sports, the ordinary viewer, and the media. The authors give an interesting example of this collision, pointing to a response in the newspaper headlines proclaiming that 'skateboarding could make its Olympic debut at the 2012 London Games'. To this post, thousands of skateboarders responded by signing an online petition addressed to the IOC president entitled 'No Skateboarding in the Olympics' (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011, 831). This, according to the authors was a way of underscoring that 'Skateboarding is not a sport' or at least not the kind of sport, which belongs to the official sporting bodies, narratives, and sporting normativity. It is instead, a counterculture, and a life style that cannot be locked within the frames and rules of the IOC.

Similar tensions come in the form of the Winter Olympics versus the famous X Games, which as Bruce Weber (2005) points out were originally supposed to be a kind of subversive Olympics. As he sharply observers "A celebration of daredevilry, the Games were conceived by a fledgling television executive in the mid-1990's as a showcase for young athletes involved in individual sports outside the mainstream". Yet, even in this instance a conflation of subversion, counterculture, and commercialization took place. As he further notices, a new identity among the youth culture proliferated with what once was supposed to be subversive counterculture. They have ironically joined two insurmountable differences, namely becoming a franchise, a brand name for that which emerged firstly as a sporting subculture. The popularization of the Games through television has also set new styles of fashion among the young population and new ways of spending recreational time. Weber therefore reiterates the fact that extremes sports have become big business, yet to many spectators and people new to the sports, the level of athletic ability required to

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compete in these sports comes as a surprise. As Weber notices, "once derided as a tribe of pot-smoking slackers, many of the athletes here are now of the world-class, year-round-training variety, men and women who compete on professional circuits around the world and are supported by commercial sponsors". The question emerging from this is whether the compartmentalization of extreme sports within institutionalized competitive frame (be it Olympics or X Games) is necessarily detrimental for the authenticity and subcultural dimension of these sports. However, posing such a question would be oversimplification of the tensions between the mainstream and counterculture. Interpreting counterculture as a struggle against hegemonic structures often suffers from romanticism, simplification and unnecessary overpolitization of sports. The institutionalization and commercialization of alternative forms of leisure and sport was also mainly negatively interpreted as a process detrimental to the authenticity and resistance taken as inherent to the alternative sports. Rightfully then, Thorpe and Wheaton call on a post-subcultural theorizing, which seeks "to understand and explain the complex, shifting, and nuanced politics and power relations involved in the commercialization of youth cultures before, during, and after the group becomes incorporated into the mainstream" (2012, 834). It is along those lines that this paper also engages with both a study of representation of action sports and interviews with people participating in them, showing that the realm of the cultures surrounding action sports cannot be unified, because the cultures revolving around them are in a constant state of flux as are the sports, their cultural status, and economic power at a given time.

We will now turn towards analyzing the increasing popularity of extreme sports which became recognized by the mainstream business, and the way the extreme sport stage is developing to become more appealing for the wider public. The best marker of this shift is the proliferation of the extreme sports film industry. Once a low budget industry, nowadays they have the ability to produce blockbuster movies having sponsors like Rad Bull and others. The real athletes gain the aura of a film star, and the production of the movies is using all sorts of special effects. Some of the examples for this "Hollywood" influence in the realm of extreme sports are the movies like "Valhalla" by Sweet Grass production; "Into the mind" by Sherpa Cinema; "Autana" by Posing Production and others. Heath and Potter's (2004) offer a detailed analysis of the processes through which a counterculture becomes a consumer culture. Their work provides a reference for how the commodification of identities as those of the hippie, punk, and, in the case of Nirvana, grunge culture serve to delineate the consumers from the original subversive ideology that was inherent to the movement's origins. The similar pattern seems to be repeating in the extreme sports as well.

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3.3. Valhalla and the search for bottomless freedom

Building on the discussion above, about the countercultural aspects of action sports, which comes into tension with their over-popularization, institutionalization, and commercialization, we will look into several features of the representations of the lonesome, drifting individual, dedicated to freeride skiing, who has nothing to lose, but everything to gain by leaving the social, mainstream world as we know it. This paper is grounded on the assumption (based on my personal experience as a mountaineer, climber, and freeride snowboarder, as well as on the interviews I conducted) that the quest for freedom, the ultimate experience freed of all the social norms and categories, coupled with the adventure, the adrenaline, and the feeling of engaging in something distinguishable from the *norm* is often, though not always, the principal inspirational force of those engaged in such sports. Similar accounts have been witnessed by Ortner in her long fieldwork on the life of the Sherpa community and the impact that mountaineering had on them. She notices that climbers or "sahibs," as the Sherpas call them often use the narrative of being countercultural romantics, seeking to transcend the vulgarity and materialism of modernity through the rigor and beauty of mountaineering. Such alleged spirituality and romanticism is easily destructed by the ambiguous treatment of Sherpas by these Western climbers, which as Ortner notices, range from kindness to cruelty, from cultural sensitivity to mockery. However, this picture of the individual set to test the long forgotten beauties of nature and the sensation that ultimate freedom gives you is often employed and then transformed through the movie industry. Similarly to Crum's (2010) analysis of the snowboarding movie *Black Winter,* we want to see how the rebellious, subversive, or counterculture values, which belong to the sphere of free-ride skiing, involving the ultimate search for freedom away from the crowded ski centers, and the perfect line to draw in the untouched snow, are transformed through television. To this end, we look into the signs and symbols and the kind of identities, served to the audience through the above-mentioned movie *Valhalla*.

Valhalla is a movie made by Sweet Grass Production in 2014. On their web site, the following is giving as a description of the core idea of the movie. This movie "is the tale of one man's search to rediscover the freedom of his youth. Feeling the distant heat of its fire still burning in the mountains of the frozen north, he goes in search of those tending the flame—the untamed, the wild, and the outcast dwelling on the fringe."[3] Two main categories are constructed in trying to detect the identities that this film constructs. The first category is lifestyle, the second one is

[3] More info can be found at:
http://www.sweetgrass-productions.com/product/movies/valhalla-blu-ray-and-sd-combo/

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environment. The former will be the narration of the movie (mainly that of the supposed lonesome freerider) in association with the freerider identity presentation, while the latter will look into the environment picked for this movie and try to see the connection between the identity that is being presented and "sold" to the viewers. Let us begin with the category of lifestyle that this movie portrays. The opening text of the movie, reads as following: "Find Your Freedom" making a clear association with the search for freedom outside the constraints of the controlling society. The movie is divided into chapters, the first one being entitled Birth, connoting some sort of a return back to the primal state of being a human, back to the innocence of being a child. Inspirational text follows from the narrator and the main actor in the movie joined by images of a child looking at the first snow. The narrator says that he remembers "the eyes of youth, everything a mystery, brilliance and awe born in the heart of every breath, a world alive on the edge of an ever curling wave[…]. I remember a **bottomless freedom.**" The search of freedom is the crux of this movie, yet what follows immediately after the narration are scenes of endless powder snow and beautiful scenes joined by hippie music and images of all the greatest brand names of ski and snowboard equipment, including the child who's looking with bright blue eyes in the falling snowflakes dressed in a Patagonia jacket. Soon after, our main hero is waking up alone at the Grand Canyon wandering what happened to people's joy and freedom. He even points out that he had no real plans or money, only a direction towards the snow and the mountains. It will be interesting to note that, albeit a fictional story with real skiers acting in it, the irony of "selling" the identity of a carefree and brave individual penniless freerider coupled with scenes where he is taken to the most amazing places by a helicopter cannot lightly be dismissed. In his old Folkswagen Beatle car even more ironically so, he has a split-board attached on the roof, a piece of equipment that costs approximately 1000 EU.

Finally, he arrives at a place that he calls Valhalla. In the Norse mythology, those who die in combat travel to Valhalla upon death carried on the wings of angels. Here, the narrator tells us, were the people who lost their battle with society or were cast aside as they could not catch up with the norms of modern society. The scene that follow are care free backcountry skiing and snowboarding, in environment untouched by ski resorts or other people, but here again, the names of the brands of equipment keep flashing out at the back side of the skis/snowboards. The beautiful girl the main character meets has the most wondrous lifestyle driven by instinct. Her father as she says in her narrative, taught her to play with strangers and not be afraid of the unknown, haul at the moon, and that the only difference between us and them are a couple of hairs, that we all bleed the same blood." The sensations of the viewers are heightened with the next scenes which involve completely naked skiers, going down the slopes, both showing the absolute freedom, innocence, and the original state of people, but at the same time, it is about selling a

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product in the most obvious, almost vulgar, way driven by the marketing trick that nudity sells. Finally, the ghosts arrive and take winter away from Valhalla, so our hero goes back on the road. Ironically again, he uses up the last savings to go to Alaska and cruises the mountains in a jet. Finally, he concludes, "freedom never left life only changed its form." The movie ends with the main character and the savage, hauling girl having a child, thus bringing rebirth to this endless battle for absolute freedom against the norms of society.

The appearance and lifestyle in this film are analyzed so as to show how the film's cinematographers reinforce the nonconformist, individualistic identity, thus saying out loud that these are some of the key characteristics, which represent the core values of the sport to the audience. As mentioned earlier, several scholars (Humphreys 2001; Howe 1998) noted that these individualistic, nonconformist aspects were inherent to the early days of sports like skateboarding and surfing. However, they also point that these values are now collapsing in the face of the industry controlled by multinational corporations and organizations that have, in a Foucauldian terminology, sanitized the sport. Yet, as Crum rightly wonders, the questions, that is, the anomaly, lies "in the continuation of using the original core values for marketing purposes, giving rise to a genre that seemingly subverts the mainstream while coalescing with it" (2010, 44). The category of environment has already been brought into the picture, through the discussion of the places shown in the movie, the core of it being the secluded Valhalla, a place that does not exist on a map, but that gathers all those brave enough to turn their back on the society and prescribed norms they wished not to follow.

Such representations of renegade warrior in movies is complicated with the fact that nowadays we have a blur line between a celebrity and the everyday person (Crum, Slater 2007), and more people create their identity by consumption of some type of mediated identity. The industry has very well understood this, and today we have a variety of products dedicated to anyone who has even the remotest desire for an adventure desire. The industry developed the concept of a mini camera for recording your adventures. One of the most famous camera products is even interestingly called GoPro (while the models range from Hero1, 2, 3, 3+ and black edition), indicating that you can become a professional, a hero, and take professional recordings of you. Mcsorley interestingly observes that "helmetcam footage is now a prominent feature in the television broadcasting of sports such as motor racing and downhill skiing, and has also been particularly important in the emergence and commercialization of new 'extreme sports' that have formed around particular risky recreational activities such as BASE jumping, ice climbing and kitesurfing" (2012, 49).

The associated development of cheap and powerful software to replicate and manipulate footage, and the emergence of social networking and video file-sharing

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Internet sites such as YouTube, has also been crucial to the development of new forms of circulation, editing and audience interaction with helmetcam footage (Mcsorley 2012, 49).

Mcsorley discusses the far reaching effects of helmetcams mounted on to soldiers' helmets nowadays, thus contributing to the emergence of new 'somatic war', and idiom through which war can easily be re-enacted, as well as ethnically transformed. At the level of extreme sports in whose realm the use of helmetcams first originated, Ferrell et al. argue that the documentation of jumps via helmetcams, and the circulation of the footage served multiple purposes. It allowed jumpers to negotiate status and accrue subcultural capital; to earn money, exposure and wider legitimation for their activity when their videos got re-presented in mainstream television programmes; and, crucially, it allowed them to elongate the meaning of their fundamentally 'ephemeral moments of edgework and adrenalin' (Ferrell et al. 2001, 196). Although, as Mcsorley points out, jumpers were sometimes ambivalent in their endorsement of this documentation, arguing that it is the reality, and the feeling of aliveness that defied any representation and was key to the appeal of their activity, Ferrell et al. argue that such recording was central to the meaning and constitution of their subcultural practice: 'mediated dynamics saturate the BASE jumping process, from planning and execution to aftermath and audience' (2001, 195).

4. Freedom seekers for real?

Finally, we now turn to the interviews and personal narratives of people engaged in several extreme sports outside the above-discussed institutional frameworks, ranging from rock climbers,, backcountry/free-ride skiers, downhill mount bikers, high altitude mountaineers and surfers. Although the responses are highly versatile, one continuous pattern about the search for freedom, the connection with the inner self and nature, away from the conformity of society dominates the discourse. The analysis of their responses was carried out through a qualitative methodology with the open coding methods. Certain important parts of their sentences were marked with regards to the problems analyzed, and the first line of codes were set. To each of the first level of codes we have attached a relevant notion as in the case with the second line of codes, thus emphasizing the essence of each unit of the text.

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Table 1. An example of putting related concepts into categories – en example of putting the concepts into categories depending on the level of abstraction

I Level	II Level	III Level
my parents took me skiing/took me to the mountains…(3) my boyfriend/girlfriend inspired me and told me wonderful stories about climbing…(2) we started climbing with a friend since we were kids…(1) a good friend introduced me to climbing and to the climbing clubs… (2)	the influence of parents and friends in the selection of sports	Influences from the surrounding environment
I was inspired by a movie/a book… (3)	Influence of the media	
Being close to the mountains/the love of mountains… (8)	Influence of growing in a mountainous environment	

The sources for personal motivation to participate in these sports, among the participants in this study was mainly a result of love towards the nature, and some kind of romantic search for freedom. ("*The beauty of nature and the beauty to be among the mountains…" (3); "The nature, the open skies" (3); "the freedom inspired me" (3).)* Being asked *about what part of engaging oneself in a particular sport is most fulfilling*, I predominantly gained answers claiming that every single aspect of it is joyful, from the preparation to go to a place and ski, surf, or climb, through the careful selection of equipment to the actual participation in the act. Two respondents were thrilled by the thin line between falling or staying on the rock, and the challenge to engage in such a lifestyle where you feel the risk and danger for your physical safety. These responses confirm Geertz's notion of the "deep play" and decipher the personal accounts, such as the one provided by Alvares, that is, that the motivation for participation in these sports is often beyond the calculations of the possible risk. Rather, the pleasure of challenging ourselves and pushing our limits is what leads some of these people to engage in these sports.

Interestingly, most of the informants think that these sports are not necessarily for the individualist kind of people as they do involve a certain culture, fashion, discourse, and a circle of friends that goes beyond sheer solitude. Yet, two of the respondents firmly believe that these sports are unique in both the mental strength and physical stamina needed to perform them. Hence, not everyone can participate in them unless you have a set of values different from the mainstream. An inspiring response came from one of the participants in the study who argued that although

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extreme/action/adventure sports are ideal for the individualistic kinds of people who want to break loose from the crowd and daily patterns, the media and movie industry is promoting these sports more and more in a different, commodified manner. Hence, as my informant pointed out, "societies and communities have great benefit from this popular adaptation of extreme sports, as it brings and introduces these beautiful sports closer to the larger population." Similarly to Crum's point "the desirability of this alternative form of sporting provides an opportunity for consumer culture to increase the activity's popularity through consumption, based on identification and participation" (2010, 35). An article on the internet on the Summitpost website states that "instead of shunning and discouraging extreme athletes, we should celebrate them for their differences and do what we can to support them as they climb higher, go faster and push the limits of human endurance and athleticism." The author draws an analogy to T.S. Elliot who once said, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go." Hence, he calls on public support for the extreme athletes so they can expand our boundaries and contribute to our diverse and evolving society. He pushes his argument so as to even warn against the risks of not providing sufficient conditions for these athletes. The author goes on to conclude that "by curbing their passions and limiting access to activities some consider too dangerous, we may be inviting even greater risk in the form of addictions, crime and health problems the end result of which is a heavy burden for society to bear".[4]

5. Concluding remarks

This paper looked into several issues surrounding extreme sports, their representation in the media, and the people who participate in them outside the institutional or sponsorship framework. A number of tensions and power struggles have been detected that run across these sports, which led us to conclude together with Thorpe and Wheaton (2011) that the realm of cultures surrounding action sports cannot be unified, because the cultures revolving around them are in a constant state of flux as are the sports, their cultural status, and economic power at a given time. Consequently, the way they will institutionalize, commodify, or become commercialized will vary. Amidst the commodification and mainstreaming of the extreme sports noted earlier, Crum calls upon a critical awareness on the part of the society as to when and where the potentially dangerous commodified identity is present. While it is more difficult to expect from the regular TV viewer and member of society to remain critical of the mainstreaming of something she/he is not

[4] The article can be accessed on line at:
http://www.summitpost.org/living-on-the-edge-extreme-sports-and-their-role-in-society/214107#chapter_1

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personally engaged in, this capacity should not be denied among the sport enthusiast themselves. According to the interviews I conducted, as romantic as the participants may have sounded, I was thrilled to see that the love of nature, the feeling of freedom, and the inner dialogue with oneself, forms the driving force and the axes of inspiration for engaging oneself in these sports. Being asked about the irreconcilable difference between the nonconformist identity these sports entail and the financial constraints that participating in them often involves, all of them replied that the desire to participate in these sports and feel the above-mentioned sensations is the prime motivational force behind it all. One of my informants probably gave the best conclusion to the dynamic set of relations and blurred boundaries that emerge between the quest for freedom and its commercialization, the individualistic aspect of engaging in alternative sports and the institutional frameworks which they are often embrace for various reasons, by sending me the following photo and reiterating that "it is the bravery to exit the comfort zone that matters. Finances will follow one way or the other".



Figure 1. Fred Beckey is 88 years old. He started climbing at 13 and never stopped.*[5]

*To belay means to hold the rope of the partner who is climbing safely, by extracting friction force on the rope, thus reducing the possible fall to a minimum.

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