

'Extending the Dream Machine': Understanding Dedicated Participation in Mountain Biking

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Abstract

Mountain biking is one of the most popular adventure sports worldwide, bringing in millions of dollars to economies across the globe and representing a host of different recreational opportunities to the millions who take part. Despite this popularity, a comprehensive examination of the wide range of factors that influence why people enjoy this activity remains elusive.

Dedicated cross-country mountain bikers in Nelson, in New Zealand, and Shrewsbury, in England, were studied to rectify this. Qualitative research, in the form of semi-structured interviews, was used to uncover bikers' feelings, thoughts and desires. These study locations were chosen for their vibrant biking scenes and a range of easily-accessed purpose-built trails and traditional rights-of-way. Criterion and snowball sampling were the techniques used to select experienced and frequent riders to interview.

Bikers' responses were analysed using a pragmatic general inductive approach, where the method is guided by the objectives, and robust results arise directly from the findings, not from preconceptions about the subject. The thesis is punctuated with rich and vivid participant quotes to illustrate the depth of their feelings on this emotive subject.

The research identified a range of factors that influence dedicated riders' participation in mountain biking. These influences can be the push factors that motivate people to ride, and the factors that attract them to their chosen locations, whether physical attributes or less tangible characteristics. Other elements conspire to influence riders, whether they are constraints, such as legal access issues, or social factors, from the peer pressure to perform to the social recognition associated with 'pushing the envelope'.

While many different factors inspire mountain bikers, several motivations are particularly important: the strenuous physical exercise, the escape from everyday routine that biking offers and the chance for social interaction and to share memorable moments. The thrill of fast, flowing trails enables bikers to sometimes experience those special intrinsic rewards, even if a 'flow' experience appears not a motivation in itself but a welcome bonus of riding.

The diversity of settings that can be accessed appears among the most important attractions of mountain biking, but just one of many attributes riders seek in trails. Traditional rights-of-way create a sense of adventure for example, with the attractive scenery that the manipulated settings of the popular purpose-built mountain biking centres can rarely match.

These centres' popularity lies in other characteristics: conflict-free riding, enjoyable singletrack trails and the type of condensed experience that fits into people's time-constrained modern lives. These

traditional and purpose-built trails are perceived as representing different experiences to mountain bikers, however, offering diverse settings and satisfying different motivations.

Riders get to learn about these desirable locations in a number of different ways, whether through the Internet, from guidebooks and magazines, but most importantly through word-of-mouth from their friends.

The broad range of participatory influences, explored through the use of qualitative research, is illustrated in a new conceptual framework, contributing to existing academic knowledge through a focus on mountain biking as a phenomenon of adventure recreation.