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## Virtually Invincible: The Impact of Social Media Presentation on Rock Climbing

Lilly Posner

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VIRTUALLY INVINCIBLE: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENTATION ON  
ROCK CLIMBING

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

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## **Abstract**

Rock climbing, a distinguished and culturally relevant ‘extreme’ sport, has experienced a remarkable increase in popularity and media attention. Sparse research has been conducted on the impact of social media presentation and how it may inspire athletes to intensify risks. This element introduces a paradox in the evolving nature of extreme sports that warrants a deeper examination; Can the authenticity of a private, individualized sport be retained in a social space dedicated to public spectacle? By method of documentary and inspired by a descriptive phenomenological approach, this research explores the meanings, motivations and risk-perceptions of rock climbers to discover if the presence of a camera and the digital presentation of spectacular climbing achievements have propelled a significant shift in the relationship practitioners have with their sport.

This non-traditional thesis is divided into four segments; a literature review, phenomenology as an objective approach, documentary as a creative thesis method and a conclusion revealing the findings of the documentary. In-depth interviews conducted with rock climbers of different ethnicities, genders, generations and levels of expertise along with scholars from the fields of sports psychology, sociology and anthropology contributed to a comprehensive conversation about the impact media has had on the sport. Climbers acknowledge and embrace that the digital presentation of climbing has become a legitimate and necessary feature in the culture of climbing and are mostly welcoming of how media inspires climbers to push boundaries and has directly impacted the democratization of the sport. While some find an ease in sharing the joy of their experiences, others find it unnatural, but necessary, transcending the burdensome minutia and negativity with the aspects of media they do enjoy.

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To my father who has always encouraged me to follow my bliss, to my mother who reminds me that bliss is never far from home and to my loving husband – my partner in the journey.

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## Introduction

Rock climbing, a distinguished and culturally relevant ‘extreme’ sport, has experienced a remarkable increase in popularity and media attention. Today, film festivals, YouTube, personal blogs and social media applications display the thrilling experience of extreme rock climbing, transforming a once private athletic feat into a daring spectacle. Exemplifying this trend, ‘Free Solo’, the highly acclaimed, academy award winning documentary chronicling Alex Honnold’s death-defying ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, garnered numerous awards and catapulted Honnold into fame (Jimmy Chin, 2018).

Ethical questions surrounded the filming of Honnold, as he scaled the 7,569’ mountain peak without the assistance of ropes or any other supportive equipment. The film crew grappled with how their presence may alter the dynamics of Honnold’s climb and potentially compromise the safety of the climber. Considering the gravity of the climb, the film crew struggled with the possibility of filming his death. About halfway through the film, an essential question is raised during an interaction between Honnold and Peter Croft, one of the most elite solo climbers in the world; Can the presence of cameras pollute the mindset of the climber?

Peter: I get asked man, people are like, we want to film you, film you up there. I’m not interested, not even slightly. For me, it was so incredibly important to be doing it for the right reasons.

Alex: I mean, I think I’m still doing everything for the right reasons, and I’m still totally stoked, but I feel like for the outside observer, you know, they’d be like, oh, he’s got a movie crew, like, clearly that’s the wrong reasons.

Peter: The worst thing about having a film crew is if it changes your mindset (Jimmy Chin, 2018).

Rock climbing has been thoroughly studied by researchers in the field of sports psychology and sociology (Robinson, 2008)(Willig, 2008)(Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Researchers have

analyzed a range of important factors including; gender, socioeconomics, sensation-seeking behavior, social status and identity formation (Robinson, 2008). However, sparse research has been conducted on the impact of a new phenomenon in climbing; social media presentation. This element introduces a paradox in the evolving nature of extreme sports that warrants a deeper examination; Can the authenticity of a private, individualized sport be retained in a social space dedicated to public spectacle? Rather than attempting to identify a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ reason for engagement with the sport, it would be valuable to understand the meanings and motivations behind rock climbing and whether those have significantly shifted as a result of the presence of a camera.

Extreme athletes are constantly pushing their boundaries in an effort to remain relevant in their sport. Today, outdoor adventurers are equipped with digital gadgets and hi-tech camera equipment along with ropes and carabiners. The convenience of durable, high resolution, mobile cameras along with the desire to share experiences on social media has propelled both professional athletes and enthusiasts to post their performances on the internet. This practice is evident in the athletic achievements of adventurers like Colin O’Brady, who utilized Instagram to document his record-breaking solo trek across Antarctica in real-time (Skolnick, 2018). It is arguable that this practice has fundamentally transformed extreme sports, constructing a new dynamic, inclusive of exhibition and sheer passion.

Conceivably, the presentation of these spectacular feats on the internet may inspire people to participate in high-risk outdoor adventure sports, or to intensify risks in an effort to showcase an impressive extreme identity. Elite athletes have been sponsored by corporations such as The North Face, who exhibit their jaw-dropping videography on the Reel Rock Film Tour website while lesser known photographer / adventurers manage to attract thousands of social media



followers to their compelling Instagram pages. These practitioners offer a glimpse of the thrilling vantage points sports practitioners enjoy in the most spectacular places in the world.

Although the presentation of these exciting outdoor adventures serves to cultivate a healthy appreciation of the environment while expanding our understanding of the range of human potential, it has also resulted in tragic consequences, as in the recent death of a man identified as TEDZU, who livestreamed his fatal fall off a cliff on Mt. Fuji (*Man Seen Falling While Livestreaming Climb up Mt. Fuji on YouTube*, 2019). His is just one example in the rise of extreme ‘selfie’ deaths, highlighting the exigencies necessitating a cultural dialogue about the influence of social media engagement on risk-assessment (Lamba et al., 2016).

Perhaps a way to understand the relationship rock climbers have with their sport is through an inner lens, so to speak. Joseph Campbell once said, “If you do follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are—if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time (“Sacrifice and Bliss,” 1988).

Campbell’s 1949 work *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* weaves together mythological stories that delineate the hero-myth. The adventure of the protagonist reflects the spiritual expedition of the contemporary extreme athlete. The hero’s journey offers a blueprint of the rite of passage, encompassed in three phases: departure, initiation, and return; each phase echoing the psychic journey of the extreme rock climber. The producer of Campbell’s television special *Power of Myth*, Joan Konner, interprets Campbell’s message as a call to honor the inner self, emphasizing in *The New York Review of Books*:

The impositions of our culture, have caused us to lose touch with our inner selves and our own inner sense of being that directs us toward those things that are most meaningful in our lives (Gill et al., 1989).

Documentary filmmaking relies on the successful presentation of a hero's journey. When effective, a symbiotic relationship is formed between the inner life of a subject and the external expression of that life, communicating a compelling message for a diverse audience. For example, through the camera lens of prodigious documentarian Ken Burns, we gain a nuanced understanding of complex historical events and gut-wrenching wars as he carefully guides us through emotionally charged interviews, archival images and recordings (Ken Burns, 2017). Burns echoes the weight of documentary filmmaking in the opening narration of his *MasterClass*:

We tell stories to keep the wolf from the door. The wolf being the sheer panic of our inevitable mortality. But stories bestow immortality and then what happens? What happens... (Burns, *MasterClass*, 2019)

The documentarian is endowed with the ultimate responsibility of crafting an absorbing story that truthfully reflects a subject's lived experience. Filming in-depth, semi-structured interviews reveals facial expressions, gestures and reflective moments, communicating emotions which may contrast with the spoken word. Successful incorporation of writing, video editing, narration, sound design and music serve to enhance the tension and evoke an emotional connection with the subject to an audience.

By method of documentary, I intend to research the motivations and risk-perceptions of rock climbers, to discover if social media performance has propelled a significant shift in the relationship practitioners have with their sport. The visual juxtaposition of the virtual representation of the rock-climber and the rock-climber in a more private, reflective moment, may reveal the truth in a way the written word cannot. Extreme rock climbers of different ethnicities, genders and levels of expertise will be interviewed as well as scholars from the fields

of sports psychology, sociology and anthropology, to achieve a robust understanding of the sport and its cultural evolution.

The virtual presentation of extreme rock climbing will be explored holistically, with regard to the spiritual, psychological, physical and the social drive to climb. Implications this phenomenon has on identity formation, the impact of media on extreme sport participation and risk perception will also be explored. Broader implications regarding the commodification of extreme sports and society's ability to assess and manage risk will be addressed.

Grounded by Husserlian philosophy, the phenomenological method is a qualitative research procedure that employs scientific as well as philosophical constructs. The aim of phenomenology is to produce a description of a phenomenon of everyday experience, in order to understand its essential structure (Giorgi, 1997). A descriptive phenomenological approach will be utilized to design a balance of descriptive, contrasting and structural interview questions and to distill the essence of these interview responses. These distillations will result in a fundamental structure statement that will be revealed in the film. The resulting film will offer a cinematic phenomenological exploration into the significance of the virtual presentation of extreme sports.

This thesis is divided into four segments; a literature review, phenomenology as an objective approach, documentary as a creative thesis method and a conclusion. The literature review will delve into all the research gathered to better understand key concepts and background: Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, risk perception, identity formation in the context of high-risk sports and rock climbing, the impact of commercialization and commodification on rock-climbing, the impact of new technology on rock-climbing and the impact of social media presentation on rock-climbing. The descriptive phenomenological approach section will explain the background of phenomenology, suggested approaches by respected phenomenologists, and an explanation of

Colaizzi's approach which will be utilized in the production of the documentary. The documentary method section will describe a treatment that includes: an overview of the pre-production / production / post-production timeline, and sample interview questions. This section will also include summaries of interview subjects and a rough design outline of the resulting film. Finally, the conclusion will discuss the findings included in the documentary.

## **Literature Review**

### **The hero's journey**

Joseph Campbell, a prolific writer of mythology and stalwart professor at Sarah Lawrence, became a significantly influential figure in American literary and cultural history. The threads of his most notable work, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, released in 1949, can be discovered in every facet of pop culture. This sweeping and engrossing study of the hero myth was Campbell's first single-authored work (Ellwood, 1999, p. 143). The protagonist, having ventured forth to a strange, divine world, returns home to discover that the divine world had been there all along, if only one had had the eyes to see it (Segal, 2002, p. 618). Campbell explains:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth = a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell, 2008, p. 23).

Altogether, Campbell's hero's journey contains seventeen distinct stages:

(1) Separation or Departure, is composed of five stages: "the call to adventure", "refusal of the call", "supernatural aid", "the crossing of the first threshold", and "the belly of the whale". (2) Initiation, is composed of six stages: "the road of trials", "the meeting with the goddess", "woman as temptress", "atonement with the father", "apotheosis", and "the ultimate boon". (3) The Return, is composed of six stages: "refusal of the return", "the magic

flight”, “rescue from without”, “the crossing of the return threshold”, “master of two worlds”, and “freedom to live” (Campbell, 2008, pp. 28–29).

Dr. Benjamin Nakanishi notes that most myths do not contain all 17 stages: some myths may contain only a few of the stages, others might contain many of the stages, and the stages may be presented in a different order. If myths are understood as metaphors, the mythological images found within myths have the potential to provide powerful experiences for its audience (Nakanishi, 2011, p. 12). Grounded in Jungian psychology, Campbell delineated an archetypal pattern of maturation and self-discovery, stressing the importance of considering the metaphors and not extracting a literal interpretation.

The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero’s passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale. Therefore it is formulated in the broadest terms. The individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general human formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls (Campbell, 2008, p. 101).

The spiritual journey of the extreme sports athlete may resonate with the Campbell’s monomyth. Indeed, “Following your bliss,” echoes the fearless individualistic ambitions of those who choose to engage in transformative high-risk experiences. Extreme rock-climbers must overcome significant challenges to reach the top of a mountain, rendering the achievement momentous and meaningful. Perhaps the act of documenting a climb on the internet is a way to consecrate the location of the climber’s hero’s journey. Campbell states that wherever a hero has been born, has wrought, or has passed back into the void, the place is marked and sanctified (Campbell, 2008, p. 35).

### **Extreme sports**

The term ‘extreme sports’ should be clearly defined for the purposes of this study. Dr. Belinda Wheaton lists several alternative monikers for extreme sports including; ‘whiz’,

‘alternative’, ‘action-sports’, ‘postmodern’, ‘lifestyle’, ‘panic sport’, ‘postmodern’, ‘post-industrial’ and ‘new’ sports (Wheaton, 2004). Heike Puchan includes ‘adventure’ sports as an alternative label for ‘extreme’ sports, emphasizing risk as a definitive factor involved in these activities and acknowledging the British Mountaineering Council’s caution of personal injury or death. For the purposes of this study, the risk of death is accepted as a distinguishing feature of rock climbing as an extreme sport.

### **Risk perception**

Risk perception is subjective. While the risk averse may view practitioners as adrenalin junkies, questioning their sanity and dismissing high-risk sports as reckless – high-risk sports practitioners, (who may view investing in the stock market or consuming a cheeseburger to be risky) may consider extreme sports life affirming activities that expand the realm of human potential.

Carla Willig questions the assumptions that psychological health is commensurate with maintaining physical safety, and that risking one’s health and physical safety is necessarily a sign of psychopathology (Willig, 2008, p.1). In accordance with her suggestions for researching high-risk behavior, this study will seek truthful meanings and motivations from participants. Willig maintains that involvement in extreme sport can be understood as a dynamic process of motive evolution and risk acculturation leading to the formation of a high-risk identity. In this way, extreme sport can be understood as a meaningful and purposeful activity, albeit an unusual one (Willig, 2008, p.9).

Exploring skydiving in terms of “high-risk leisure consumption,” Celsi, Rose and Leigh (Celsi et al., 1993) posit that high-risk behaviors are a result of converging internal and external factors. At a macro level, influences resulting from societal and cultural complexities, media

enculturation, and technological change create a context that is more or less conducive to a behavior. (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993, p.3). Dickson, Chapman and Hurrell delineate risk-perception into three modes of thought, asking: what do we consider risky, what is the appeal, and what are the real risks? They submit that people's perceptions of risk are informed through various channels beginning with individuals and proceeding through organizations, industries, media, and eventually, the government (Dickson et al., 2000, p. 7).

### **What influences our perception?**

Dickson, Chapman and Hurrell consider the public perception of risk as reactionary, based on 'public outrage' towards perceived hazards. They note five influences relevant to outdoor risks:

- (1) Voluntariness – the choice individuals have to accept or reject the risk; do participants and instructors have the knowledge, skills and opportunity to make choices for themselves?
- (2) Control – the level of prevention and mitigation that is in the hand of the individual. What information and skills have they been given to enable them to have appropriate control over their risk?
- (3) Fairness – are people exposed to greater risks without the potential for greater benefits. Is there a less risky way to achieve the same outcomes expected from the activity?
- (4) Process – relates to the public's perception of the organization involved, were they trustworthy, caring or arrogant?
- (5) Familiarity – people are more familiar with football than rock climbing and thus accept the risks more readily (Dickson et al., 2000, p. 2).

### **Why do we take risks?**

In an effort to understand high-risk behavior, researchers have considered biological as well as psychological factors. In their discussion, Dickson, Chapman and Hurrell consider a genetic predisposition to 'novelty seeking' and 'harm avoidance.' Novelty seeking means "the desire to seek out new experiences or thrills" and harm avoidance "which makes people anxious, fearful and shy" (Hamer and Copeland, 1998, p.11; Dickson et al., 2000, p. 3).

‘Novelty seeking’ also referenced as ‘sensation seeking’ is examined when researching adolescent brain development. Daniel Romer of the Annenberg Public Policy Center links sensation seeking to an increase in the release of dopamine to the ventral striatum, noting that researchers have identified this as a biological universal in mammals that appears to encourage the adolescent animal to leave the family and to venture forth with peers to explore new territory and select mates (Romer, 2010, p. 5). Romer correlates decision making to the risk vs reward paradigm where enjoyable activities are usually viewed with a lower risk value than those that are safer, but not as enjoyable. Hence, we prefer to drive cars rather than take trains even though, all else constant, trains are far safer than cars (Romer, 2010, p. 7).

Sensation-seeking behavior, a feature of high-risk sports such as rock climbing, has traditionally been represented negatively, but phenomenologists and social scientists have reason to believe engaging in extreme sports provides healthful benefits, affording significant emotional, social and psychological rewards. Heike Puchan of the Stirling Media Research Institute describes several motivational factors for participating in adventure sports:

The views, the beautiful and wild surroundings, the sense of physical achievement when the climber gets to the top of a hill or a rout, the friendship and camaraderie between people who go climbing together. An additional factor for many is the exhilaration of applying their skills in a potentially hostile and dangerous environment. Overcoming a challenge and dealing with risk are firm parts of the climbing psyche (Puchan, 2005, p. 172).

### **Commercialization of extreme sports**

It could be argued that a pre-condition for entering an extreme sport is an inherent desire to engage in sensation-seeking outdoor experiences (Willig, 2008, p. 6). However, some practitioners may be motivated by external factors that defy the reward for natural thrill-seekers. Researchers have attributed commodification and commercialization to the appeal of high-risk sports. Puchan notes that many writers have suggested that “new challenges” are directly related



to adventure sports permeating a consumerist culture that demands instant gratification and where “risk is largely removed through insurance” (Puchan, 2005, p.172).

Dr. Catherine Palmer, of the school of social sciences at the University of Tasmania, calls attention to the commercial packaging of extreme sports and outdoor adventure experiences for an unskilled tourist market and the unfortunate consequences that result from inexperienced enthusiasts participating in extreme and risky activities. Questioning the “conceptual collapse” between risk and mainstream, she states that this mediated normalization of risk taking is particularly problematic in that it gives the impression that nothing goes wrong in extreme sports (Palmer, 2002, p. 326). Puchan echoes Palmer’s concerns, fusing the mainstream acceptance of commercialism in extreme sports with anyone seeking a healthy outdoor lifestyle. Puchan suggests that the demographics of participants are “opening up” as a response to advertisements promoting mountaineering as a fitness trend in magazines such as *Men’s Health* (Puchan, 2005, p.173). Puchan associates these changes with corporations engaging in the commodification and commercialization of extreme sports by selling apparel, nutritional products and athletic equipment that appeal to a public interested in designing an extreme lifestyle regardless of their skillset. Along with increasing sales of merchandise and instruction, Puchan shows that convenient access to outdoor adventures is in greater demand.

### **Impact of technology on extreme sports participation**

For many, the enjoyment of outdoor adventures is incomplete without sharing photographs and video of an outstanding experience. Today, it is possible for outdoor adventurers to record and present video and photography in the most difficult to reach environments thanks to advancements in camera technology, editing software and internet streaming services:

Combined with user friendly desktop editing software and an ever-growing menu of Internet websites capable of streaming user-generated HD content, high-definition digital single-lens

reflex (HD/SLR) video cameras like the Canon 5D Mark III and extremely light, small, portable HD action cameras like the GoPro Hero have for many people rendered leisurely outdoor trips into refined audiovisual productions whose logic and esthetic are driven by the desire to not only have a pleasurable time but also entertain distant viewers (Vannini & Stewart, 2017, p.150).

The affordability, portability and user-friendly features of today's high-definition (HD) mobile video cameras have empowered outdoor adventurers to record compelling, high quality images like never before. Forbes claims that GoPro sales have more than doubled every year since the first camera's debut in 2004, asserting that in 2012 the company sold 2.3 million cameras and grossed \$521 million ("The Mad Billionaire Behind GoPro: The World's Hottest Camera Company," 2013).

The impact of high definition (HD) mobile video cameras into extreme sports has inspired researchers to understand the way people relate to their environment through a lens. Phillip Vannini and Lindsay Stewart (2017) entertain the idea of a "GoPro Gaze," distinguishing between the contrasting qualities of a more technically as well as conceptually sophisticated moving image captured by dedicated practitioners, and a more immediate and disposable "tourist gaze." They claim that 'serious leisure practitioners' take pride in providing high quality videos.

Richard Chalfen delineates three objectives of wearable, point of view (POV) GoPro action cameras:

(1) to record 'exciting' even unexpected scenes of action and locations seldom, if ever, seen, to offer new, fresh, original and memorable perspectives; (2) to record what the camera user sees while undertaking a particular unusual, difficult and dangerous activity; and (3) to record what the camera user actually looks like or how the camera user appears while actually participating in such a particularly unusual, difficult and dangerous activity, in short, often 'extreme' sports (Chalfen, 2014, p. 2).

## **Impact of social media on extreme identity formation**

In the most recently measured period, 77 percent of Americans were reported to have a social media profile. According to estimates, the number of worldwide social media users reached 2.82 billion and is expected to grow to some 2.96 billion by 2020 (*Social Media Usage Worldwide*, 2019). In a study conducted in early 2018, the Pew Research Center found that 68% of U.S. adults use Facebook, 35% use Instagram, and 24% report using Twitter (Tate, 2018, p. 1). Respectively, American participation in outdoor activities has increased significantly. According to the Outdoor Foundation's 2017 Outdoor Recreation Participation Report, notable outdoor sports with substantial boosts include; hiking, whitewater kayaking, running, triathlon and rock climbing (*2017 Outdoor Participation Report*, 2017).

Surging popularity in outdoor sports complements a similar increase in visitation to national parks and recreation centers. National Park Service reports that 4.5 million people visited Zion in 2017, a spike of approximately 1.7 million, nearly doubling the visitation since 2013 (*Zion National Park Visitors 2018*, 2019). Concurrently, summits of Mount Everest have seen a sharp and steady rise together with a chilling increase in death count. Undeterred by the grave risks marked by disasters of 1996, 2013 and 2015 which resulted in massive fatalities; shocking photography of the mountain during peak climbing season in 2019 revealed an unsustainable swarm of mountaineers, hooked together on enormous lines, determined to traverse the famed Hillary step and stand on top of the highest peak on earth (Niall, 2019).

Coinciding with the introduction of the GoPro in 2004, the launch of YouTube has provided a widely popular streaming platform for extreme sports enthusiasts to share videos of their adventures with the public. Subsequently, Instagram emerged in the social mediascape. Rewarding users for posting interesting digital photography by receiving followers and 'likes,'

Instagram garnered tens of millions of users each year after its launch in 2008. It has recently disabled the feature allowing followers to view the number of likes associated with a post, providing features that reveal those analytics to users privately.

Digital forms of documenting adventure sports via social media applications have given rise to the formation of virtual identities. In their study examining location-based identity performance on social media, Raz Schwartz and Germaine R. Halegoua noted:

Digital expressions of the spatial self are becoming increasingly embedded in our spatial practices and the social production of space. As millions of people use these tools to annotate their physical locations and instantly share them with various social groups such as “friends” and “followers,” the spatial self is becoming a prominent part of our daily life. However, the spatial self is not merely a byproduct of mobile social media use, nor is it simply an aggregation of geocoded data. The spatial self refers to intentional socio-cultural practices of self-presentation that result in dynamic, curated, sometimes idealized performances of who a user is, based on where they go (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1647).

These performances manifest as daring selfies, live-streams and videos capable of generating hundreds and thousands of ‘likes,’ in some cases elevating the performer to the status of a social media influencer. Social media influencers are often rewarded with book sales and corporate sponsorship. Vannini and Stewart remark that practitioners draw ego-boosting approval from peers (e.g. through numbers of video views or ‘likes’ on websites) and paid-work opportunities ensuing from their video production (Vannini & Stewart, 2017, p. 151).

Sadly, dangerous selfies have also been attributed to over 127 deaths since 2014 (Lamba et al., 2016). Concerned over casualties related to extreme selfies, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University analyzed ‘selfie-related casualties.’ Their study determined the most common reason of selfie death was height related. These involve mostly young white males falling off buildings or mountains while trying to take dangerous selfies (Lamba et al., 2016).

In her research on male identity and extreme rock climbing, Victoria Robinson suggests that commercialization of extreme sports may not have a coercive effect on elite rock-climbing practitioners. Emphasizing the rigorous and time-consuming training these athletes undergo to achieve a difficult climb, her interviews reveal that the elite athlete's identity is valued in terms of how they view themselves as well as how the rest of the climbing community, and outside world, saw them (Robinson, 2008, p.53) and was not reducible to a marketing ploy to aggrandize the extreme sports participants for the sake of their public image, and hence profitability (Robinson, 2008, p.52). It seems as though climbers may be embracing the rewards afforded by commercialization because they serve to facilitate their adventurous lifestyles.

### **Approach – Descriptive Phenomenology**

#### **Background**

Husserlian phenomenology has been understood as “eidetic or descriptive,” utilizing individuals as the means by which the “structure” and “essence” of a phenomenon can be described. The idea being, if the appearance of essential structures can be described, then it is possible to arrive at certainty or ultimate truth (Solomon & Higgins, 1996; Saunders, 2003, p. 293). A simple way to contemplate a phenomenological approach is by considering the difference between chronological time and embodied time as expressed by Einstein: Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour and it seems like a minute. That's relativity (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374).

Introducing his criteria for descriptive phenomenology, Amedeo Giorgi warns that phenomenology is difficult to comprehend according to traditional modes of scientific thought (Giorgi, 1997). Giorgi suggests the following terms are required to sufficiently understand the phenomenological method:

(1) Consciousness refers to the awareness of the system, "embodied-self-world-others," all of which (and aspects and parts of which) are intuitable, that is, presentable; and precisely as they are presented, without addition or deletion, that is the strict meaning of phenomenon. (2) Phenomenon within phenomenology always means that whatever is given, or present itself, is understood precisely as it presents itself to the consciousness of the person entertaining the awareness. (3) Intentionality means that an act of consciousness is always directed to an object that transcends it. (4) Phenomenology is concerned with the phenomena that are given to experiencing individuals, because nothing is possible if one does not take consciousness into account, but all of the givens must be understood in their given modalities, as phenomena, that is, not as real existents. Within phenomenology this is possible because one is concerned with the objects of intuition to which consciousness is necessarily directed, and these objects do not have to have the characteristic of being "real." Even when they are experienced as "real," that characteristic is bracketed, and they are analyzed in their phenomenal status (Giorgi, 1997).

According to Giorgi, for research to be considered genuinely phenomenological, it will encompass three steps:

- The phenomenological reduction
- Description
- Search for essences.

Giorgi explains that phenomenological research must satisfy a scientific criterion to more accurately gain a true understanding of the phenomena being studied and achieve a qualification considered to be "most valid" (Giorgi, 1997). Scientific knowledge possesses the following features as delineated by Giorgi:

- **Systematic** – an ordered relationship unites segments of knowledge regulated by concepts, meanings and/or laws.
- **Methodical** – a method that is recognized and accessible to researchers.
- **General** - the knowledge has broad applications.
- **Critical** – outcomes are critically reviewed by a community of researchers and scholars.

## Phenomenological approach

Paul Colaizzi (1978) offers a thorough analytical process in seven distinctive steps resulting in a succinct but comprehensive description of the observed phenomenon. This description is ultimately validated by the participants. The method depends upon rich first-person accounts of experience; these may come from face-to-face interviews, but can also be obtained in multiple other ways; written narratives, blogs, research diaries, online interviews and so on (Morrow et al., 2015) Colaizzi's seven steps are delineated in *The Psychologist*, August 2015:

- (1) Familiarization – The researcher familiarizes him or herself with the data, by reading through all the participant accounts several times.
- (2) Identifying significant statements – The researcher identifies all statements in the accounts that are of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.
- (3) Formulating meanings – The researcher identifies meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from a careful consideration of the significant statements. The researcher must reflexively “bracket” his or her pre-suppositions to stick closely to the phenomenon as experienced (though Colaizzi recognizes that complete bracketing is never possible).
- (4) Clustering themes – The researcher clusters the identified meanings into themes that are common across all accounts. Again, bracketing of pre-suppositions is crucial, especially to avoid any potential influence of existing theory.
- (5) Developing an exhaustive description – The researcher writes a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced at step 4.
- (6) Producing the fundamental structure – The researcher condenses the exhaustive description down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon.
- (7) Seeking verification of the fundamental structure – The researcher returns the fundamental structure statement to all participants (or sometimes a sub-sample in larger studies) to ask whether it captures their experience. He or she may go back and modify earlier steps in the analysis in the light of this feedback (Brooks et al., 2015, p. 3).

Carolyn Saunders employed Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenology to formulate her thesis on spirituality in nursing. Saunders advises novices of the phenomenological method to document their thoughts and feelings in a reflexive journal. She states, my own subjectivity became an

analytic tool and was built into the research not only becoming a source of data, but additionally, the use of self as a tool assisted me to empathize and build relationships with study participants (Saunders, 2003, p. 296). Saunders suggests that the novice employ the following methods that promote the scientific criterion for phenomenological research outlined by Giorgi in an auditable decision trail. This includes,

- Journaling presuppositions and judgments.
- Extended time analyzing data.
- Incorporating feedback from participants.
- Including participants statements verbatim.
- Regular analysis and debriefing from committee members.
- Data transparency.
- Ensuring technical accuracy in recording (Saunders, 2003, p. 294).



## **Method – Documentary**

### **Treatment**

‘Virtually Invincible’ will be a short documentary chronicling the influence of social media presentation on extreme adventure sports. The film will include significant statements extracted from in-depth interviews conducted with extreme sports practitioners. Those statements will undergo a phenomenological reduction according to principles outlined by Amedeo Giorgi. Descriptive phenomenological method will be utilized to construct a fundamental structure statement that will be revealed in the film.

The documentary will also include a multidisciplinary approach, seeking relevant statements from experts in the research community of sports psychology, sociology and anthropology. Implications related to the commodification of adventure sports and the clouding of risk assessment within the context of identity formation on social media platforms will be explored.

Interview questions and distilled statements will be cross-checked by the academic committee. In an effort to reduce any imposed judgments regarding the appeal of rock climbing, a reflexive journal will be incorporated to bracket the thoughts of the researcher / interviewer throughout production and will be weaved into the fabric of the film.

Music and powerful images will enhance the statements expressed by interview subjects. Use of infographics offering an elegant visual expression of data will be used minimally and selectively. The completed film will combine the effective application of media acquired by the sports practitioners interviewed in the film with media from the public domain and high-quality HD video produced for the purposes of this film.

Interviews may be conducted in convenient locations. These locations may include but are not limited to UNLV television production studios, subject's personal offices, outdoor rock-climbing sites, indoor rock-climbing sites. Some interviews may be recorded using Skype.

- All media will adhere to copyright and fair use laws.
- Participants in the film will not be asked or encouraged to perform any extreme performances for the production of this film.
- Production of the film will be conducted with the use of UNLV production equipment. Most of the production should only require one or two student crew members to facilitate optimal operation of filming equipment.
- All crew will be determined on an as needed basis.
- Transcriptions will be required for all interviews and must be conducted by a professional transcription service or a reliable software application.
- Editing will be the sole responsibility of the researcher.
- The distribution and acquisition of consent forms for locations and interviews will adhere to university and professional legal standards.
- The film production and editing will follow the AFI Documentary Film Festival's short film submission guidelines. The completed film will be submitted to the AFI Documentary Film Festival in November of 2020 as well as other distinguished festivals that may include Sundance, Ann Arbor, Telluride, Tribeca and the Los Angeles Film Festival.

## **Timeline**

November of 2019:

- Prospectus Meeting
- Gather archival footage/images and other relevant media from public domain.
- Reach out to potential interview subjects
- Design interview questions

December 2019:

- Schedule interviews
- Begin filming
- Continue gathering archival footage/images and other relevant media from public domain.

January 2020

- Continue filming
- Continue gathering archival footage/images and other relevant media from public domain.

February 2020

- Complete filming
- Begin Post-Production/Editing
- Continue gathering archival footage/images and other relevant media from public domain.

March 2020

- Complete Rough Cut

April 2020

- Complete Final Cut
- Complete written materials
- Submit completed thesis

## Film Outline

| <b>Film Section</b>                     | <b>Content</b>   | <b>Approximate Length</b> |
|---|--|---------------------------|
| Introduction                            | Introduce the topic of extreme rock climbing.<br>Introduce thesis question.<br>Introduce main interview subjects and academic experts.                           | 5 minutes                 |
| Lived Experience of Interview Subject 1 | Explore the meanings and motivations of interview subject one, incorporating all relevant media acquired (social media, photographs, broll, interview, etc...)   | 10 minutes                |
| Lived Experience of Interview Subject 2 | Explore the meanings and motivations of interview subject two, incorporating all relevant media acquired (social media, photographs, broll, interview, etc...)   | 10 minutes                |
| Lived Experience of Interview Subject 3 | Explore the meanings and motivations of interview subject three, incorporating all relevant media acquired (social media, photographs, broll, interview, etc...) | 10 minutes                |
| Conclusion                              | Reveal essential structure statement<br>Final statements from interview subjects / academic experts.   | 5 minutes                 |

## Sample Interview Questions

- How would you describe the journey of an extreme climb?
- How does the activity of climbing relate to your identity?
- Would you describe extreme climbing as a lifestyle sport? If so why?
- How do life course changes influence how you conceive of and practice the sport of rock climbing?
- How does increasing commercialization of rock-climbing affect your everyday sporting experiences and agency?
- How do sporting risks connect to the digital presentation of your performances?
- Has watching digital media encouraged you to do something you did not have the experience to do?

**Additional questions will be asked based on responses.**

## **Climbers**

The film explores the lived experiences of several media shapers in the climbing world as well as those climbers who casually engage with social media:

**Climber A** is an outgoing, charismatic climbing photographer who expresses her love of climbing as a communal experience she enjoys. Her photography depicts common climbers and the multi-racial/gender/age composition of the majority of climbers. She has received accolades for her work by many notable figures in the climbing community and conversely has also been the subject of some negative social media threads. She does not allow any negativity to derail her pursuits and continues to photograph and present the sport she loves.

**Climber B** is an offwidth (crack) climber / photographer and artist in Moab, Utah. Her business exhibits her photography and video projects of elite climbers as well as common climbers. Her talents as well as her love of art and the outdoors has translated into thousands of Instagram followers and has introduced her to women who seek her mentorship. She often posted uncut videos of her climbs to prove her accomplishments, however, she has recently become less concerned with public perception. She balances her enjoyment of climbing with her enjoyment of photography and expressing the stories of other climbers through her art.

**Climber C** is an accomplished professional elite climber who has appeared in hundreds of video projects. His love of the sport as a physical and mental challenge is matched by his love for travel and community. Media has supported his lifestyle and he believes it has dramatically impacted the way people pursue the sport and altered the landscape of its community. He expresses his concern that filming climbs has become necessitated by the professional aspect of the sport and that this has possibly undermined an honor code in the rock-climbing community.

**Climber D** is an accomplished first ascensionist professional traditional climber who specializes in offwidth climbing. She expresses a complex relationship with media where her enjoyment of sharing her experiences often conflicts with her enjoyment of the experience. Although she values sharing through social media and films, she finds the professional requirements of the job distracting from her climbing pursuits. She has also been the subject of negative social media threads which have negatively impacted her enjoyment of the sport. She expresses that the presentation of climbing by the media influences climbers to pursue more dramatic and dangerous climbs.

**Climber E** is a professional adventure sport photographer and climber. His photographs have appeared in numerous magazines and he often works with elite climbers. His love for climbing and travel along with his passion for photography has taken him to some of the most awe-inspiring locations on earth. He is careful in his experiences, balancing his enjoyment of being in the moment with capturing moments on camera. He believes that the act of photographing impacts the enjoyment of the moment in a fundamental way, but also believes that when the photographer and the climber trust each other, the climber is able to retain a private experience.

**Climber F** is a climbing instructor. As a teenager, he was sponsored in the dangerous sport of motocross. After his friend was killed in a motocross accident, he abandoned the sport and eventually began climbing to lose weight. He would often free solo on his own with reckless abandon. He rarely engages on social media, however, he has been influenced by videos he has seen especially those of Dean Potter, a self-described “free base” climber (free soloing and BASE jumping). Climber F has never BASE jumped but may try it someday if the opportunity presented itself. He no longer free-solos and is frustrated by his isolation from the climbing

community. He acknowledges that perhaps his alienation is related to his disdain for social media.

**Climber G** is a climber in the Las Vegas community who has been climbing since the 1970's. His interest in climbing began as a thrill seeking adolescent but developed and evolved into a meaningful activity that provides catharsis and community. He regularly climbs with an online meetup group composed of older climbers and practices at the climbing gym.

**Climber H** is a competitive climber who has competed on the national and local level and regularly practices at the climbing gym. He is a passionate climber who enjoys pushing himself and finds inspiration from videos he has seen online. He acknowledges that those videos elevate the “hype” of a climb, which makes them feel intimidating. He has a complicated relationship with social media because it fosters a culture of comparison online that detracts from the purity of the passion.

**Climber I** is a junior competitive climber who has recently competed with the U.S. team. He balances his practices with gym climbing and outdoor climbing and has developed a strong social media presence, often posting his climbs to prove they happened. His goal is to become a world-class climber.

**Climber J** is an avid climber and the co-owner of an online climbing guide. She has also created an online magazine dedicated to the authentic presentation of climbing as experienced by common climbers as well as elite climbers. She expresses her passion for climbing and the democratization of the sport.



## **Experts**

Experts in the field of sports psychology, sociology and anthropology expanded the conversation into a broader understanding of climbing as an extreme sport, the historical relationship between athletes and media and the implications on society.

**Expert A** is a professor and sports researcher who considers the term “extreme sports” to be a media creation. Her research supports the idea that the term “extreme” is simply a label and what she believes is important is how the practitioners enjoy the sport. She suggests that risk is not a primary component in the enjoyment of extreme sports.

**Expert B** is a professor who has written numerous journals about the subject of adventure sports and risk. His phenomenological research into extreme sports found that extreme athletes are not simply thrill-seekers, but rather, they are very careful sports practitioners who enjoy the outdoors and pushing the boundaries of the human experience.

**Expert C** is a professor and sociologist who adds insight into the issues of identity in the sport of climbing based on her research. She remarks on the importance of the element of risk in rock climbing that distinguishes it from other extreme sports.

**Expert D** is a professor of anthropology who discusses the historical relationship of media and sports perhaps dating back to cave paintings. His perspective attempts to reconcile the need for filming achievements and the societal call for validation.

## Conclusion

I began this project with the intention to discover how media has impacted an individualized “extreme” sport. The initial interviews I conducted at Red Rock Climbing Center opened the door to a rabbit hole I was more than willing to walk through. Climbers of all generations, genders, skill sets and experiences courageously revealed their relationships with social media, the media they find inspirational, the positive as well as the negative aspects of media and how it has transformed their culture and their sport.

The intention to journal my experiences in accordance with the descriptive phenomenological method served me well as I began my journey into the world of climbing. I was able to bracket my feelings and experiences so I could separate my research efforts from my efforts in learning to climb and my immersion into climbing culture. Eventually, the production of the film became my journal. During post-production the act of editing statements made by the climbers I interviewed mirrored the phenomenological process of distilling the essence of those statements and synthesizing them into a larger structural statement – resulting in the film itself as a whole.

Different perspectives and points of view contributed to a comprehensive conversation about a deep and lasting relationship with rock climbing and reconciling the impact media has had on the sport. Climbers expressed what the sport means to them, dovetailing into how people feel differently in terms of its promotion online and in film. The presentation of media is an area of conflict that both professional and amateur climbers alike have widely varying opinions. Perhaps the main source of conflict is whether or not documenting ones climbing experience supports or undermines the purity of rock climbing. The film also examines whether or not promotion on social media has led to unjustifiably dangerous climbs.

Many climbers acknowledge and embrace that the digital presentation of climbing has become a legitimate and necessary part of the sport. Mostly, climbers are welcoming of how media has directly impacted the democratization of the sport, opening new avenues for many who may have believed climbing to be inaccessible and inspiring elite practitioners to push the boundaries of their sport. The climbing community as a whole has seen a significant increase in popularity and climbing is now recognized on the world stage as an Olympic Sport. Today, more elite climbers enjoy luxury affordances and sponsorships that were not available in the past. Some find an ease in sharing the joy of their experiences while others find it unnatural, but necessary, transcending the burdensome minutia and negativity with the aspects of media they do enjoy.

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