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Affective ride experiences on mountain bike terrain

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ABSTRACT

An important and relevant issue for contemporary tourism, sport and recreation planners is how to further develop trails and mountain bike areas that are in keeping with the demands of proficient mountain bike riders. In this article, we offer an overview of the affective experiences ensuant with mountain biking over a range of common ride obstacles and terrain. By adopting a post-modern sub-cultural approach, our analysis reveals the link between rider affect and different components on mountain bike tracks. In doing so, our paper brings together the voices of dedicated and experienced mountain bike riders in New Zealand.

The research follows a qualitative phenomenological methodology to explore trail components and affective experiences. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, datum has been gathered from 12 reputable mountain biker riders. As a highly experienced rider, the lead researcher's reflexivity is entwined in the research process and acts as a point of reference for many of the findings. This research increases knowledge in regard to ride experience, and the key components that help define the sport of mountain biking. The findings highlight how the strongest ride affects are brought about by the accumulation of experiences on various obstacles found on entire tracks. However, the affects can also be examined individually with examples such as jumps, drops, or fast sections. We also found that the obstacles on tracks that caused the greatest affect were those that were awkward, difficult, technical, fast, or overwhelmingly induced states of flow.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Research defining trail components and obstacles offers resource managers important qualitative information for designing, building and maintaining new mountain bike parks:

- Provides insight into how mountain bikers choose their ride locations and mountain bike parks.
- Provides a qualitative overview for track designers and builders in regard to what trail formations are most desired by dedicated mountain bikers.

Bike parks, trail networks, and individual trail managers may use these insights for the benefit of trail planning and site selection when considering terrain, gradient, elevation, drainage and overall rider satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Mountain biking is a popular sport in New Zealand (Pickering, Rossi, & Barros, 2011) that continues to innovatively fragment into new and exciting sub-disciplines. Downhill mountain biking is one such form of cycling (Burr, Drury, Ivey, & Warburton, 2012) and is the focus on this academic article. It is an increasingly popular recreational pursuit not commonly investigated in academia. In the context of this study, the track components and obstacles are discussed through the participants' micro-level affective experiences of their mountain biking bodies. As conceptualised by Evers (2006): "Affects are how bodies feel and what motivates us" (p. 230). The term *affect* is used in many different areas of society and is understood through various different meanings. The most common definition of affect refers to the way that something creates an affect, influence or change in something else. Affective reactions involve fairly simple forms of cognition, and reveal preferences in regard to states (Hardy, Hall, & Alexander, 2001).

Affect in this research is viewed as a primary biological sensation that acts on the body. As stated by Booth (2013), many

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scholars assume affect and emotion is the same thing, whereas our view is that affect precedes emotion, where affect is the biological, and is lived out by mountain bikers in the moment-to-moment and immediate interactions. In keeping with Booth's (2013) statement, "affect refers to 'primary', 'non conscious' experiences felt at the level of the body; emotion indicates a more psychological and interpretive experience" (p. 9). Nonetheless, it is well appreciated that affective data are difficult to obtain, this research uses terrain features to draw links between certain features on a trail and the rider sensations that are gained. While affects occur moment to moment, the overall mountain bike affect can be accumulative, where one part of a trail influences the affects that can be felt on the next section. Therefore, affects are immediate, however they also appear to be dynamic and accumulative. Furthermore, affects are reliant on sensual assemblages between the terrain, the bike and rider, making satisfactory affects difficult to obtain and in addition are continually evolving.

The purpose of this study is to provide a sustained commentary of mountain bike affect for dedicated riders on different track terrain and obstacles. The definitions, affects, and interpretations of dedicated downhill mountain bike riders are important when exploring how mountain bike tracks can be better designed. In this sense, the track preferences that are identified should help track designers, developers and bike park managers to develop mountain bike infrastructure. Therefore, this paper will contribute to reducing the gap in the literature concerning trail preferences for mountain biking.

The research is positioned with a postmodern perspective of the social, psychological and physiological dynamics within mountain biking. The multiple realities of postmodernism include the plurality of options and motivations of participants and the valuing of individualism (Uriely, 2005). Downhill mountain biking provides the participants with an avenue for escaping convention, and exploring their limits as each manages a range of dangerous trail obstacles. As each rider navigates the trail and their location within the subculture, they are able to develop their own practice, while demonstrating to others their place within the mountain bike hierarchy. These facets lead to the negotiation of the riders' subjective meanings to determine individual understanding and to project social distinction through media outlets (Beedie, 2007). Like Lyng's (2005) edgework, adventure activities like mountain bike riding are undertaken as an escape and contrast to everyday life, where trail features such as jumps, drops and ruts provide a form of escapism. Resistance to dominant recreation paradigms of biking can be observed through the development of shifting subcultures that challenge current practice and promote innovation and ownership (Hagen, 2013). In addition, innovation and mutation occur constantly within biking practice and are reflected in the development of track features and responses.

2. Literature review

There is a dearth of information detailing mountain bike track components, obstacles and affective experiences. To contextualise the study, the writers explore the development of the sport of downhill mountain biking as a transmogrification of mountain biking. To background the affective experience in outdoor recreation, the review considers affect in a range of allied action sports.

2.1. Mountain biking

The breadth of cycling is embraced by Union Cyclist International (UCI) which is the governing body for cycling and who organise world cup and world championship events. The UCI represents the interests of more than 170 National Federations, five Continental Confederations, 1200 professional riders, 600,000 licensed riders, millions of cycle enthusiasts who train on a regular basis and more than a billion bicycle users (Union Cyclist International, 2012). Mountain biking is one of the popular and recognised forms of cycling that in itself has many sub-disciplines with distinct characteristics and different cultural patterns (Hurst & Atkins, 2006; Hurst et al., 2013). These include downhill, cross-country, four cross, free-ride, single-speed, short track cross-country, enduro, super-D and ultra-marathon. Each inurement attracts a collective of individuals who show obvious and distinct subcultural attributes.

Different forms of mountain biking require different obstacles and environments. Activities take place on private land, public land, sponsored venues and abandoned places. Spaces may or may not be supervised and are often off-limits. While participation is common in daylight hours, there are dedicated riders who use night-lights to nocturnally navigate the tracks, trails and jump parks. Distinctions between forms of riding are often fluid, and many riders participate in various forms of the activity. For example, riders may navigate a cross-country track on their way to riding dirt jumps or trails. Atencio, Beal, and Wilson (2009) found that skateboarders often crossed codes, enjoying many forms of skating. In their research, they "…take into account the fluidity of these social fields and the ongoing negotiation of symbolic capital" (Atencio et al., 2009, p. 6).

As mountain biking became the sport of choice during the 1990s, bike manufacturers such as Giant, Trek and GT became the bikes of choice. Bikes built in the United States of America were the most desired, and those built in Japan were the product of choice for poseurs (Easom, 2003). "The mountain bike was exclusive, and this is what the consumer wanted" (Easom, 2003, p. 200). Due to the fragmentation of different mountain bike disciplines, riders are able to choose between the cycling modes they partake in. In addition, riders often adopt stereotypical traits that resemble their level of ability, level of authenticity, or commitment. The bicycle became a means of gaining social differentiation and identity. Along with this fetish, came fashion items, specific componentry, off-road vehicles and other aesthetic signifiers to ensure distinction as well as affective preference. Many ride for pure pleasure, transport and fun, but mountain biking is renowned for punters or poseurs who don't know what to do with the technology. The media plays a role in this, by continually shaping the messages to suit their readership (McGillivray & Frew, 2004). However, there is no doubt that the essence of efficient transport and affective joys, over almost any terrain are one of the key draw cards for mountain bike users.

2.2. Downhill mountain biking

Downhill mountain biking is a popular sport that is participated in down hills and mountains in many countries throughout the world. The time-trial event is held on steep, rough and uneven terrain featuring jumps, drops, rocks and other technical obstacles. The tracks are marked with tape along each side and are typically four to six minutes long. The technical tracks wind their way through forests, mountaintops and high tussock ski-fields. Riders must choose their ride line down the track continuously judging where to ride by analysing the safest line verses the fastest line.

Downhill mountain bike racing is not an Olympic sport, however there is an annual world championship and a world cup series. International races are governed by the UCI, and national sporting bodies also organise competitions. Racers attend events and practice for one to two days on the track prior to race day. Practice often involves walking the track to look for fast lines, and then riding the track three to seven times per day. The riders are

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