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Rock Climbing Culture in Austin, TX

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Rock Climbing Culture in Austin, TX

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by

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The sport of rock climbing has seen a boom over the last two decades. Interestingly, this boom has not been due to the extreme commercialization of the sport, but by the increasing availability of indoor climbing venues that allow individuals to foster the skills that allow them to eventually climb outdoors. While the demographics of climbers can vary by region, in Austin, Texas climbers tend to be middle class, male, and white. Throughout my research on the climbing culture in Austin I seek to discover what features of the sport lend themselves to appealing to such a particular demographic, and through ethnographic methods, in-depth interviews, and participant observation, I gain insight on their motivations. Additionally, climbing offers a peculiar mixture of pain, injury, and potential for serious injury, yet climbers see is as a “stress reliever.” Throughout this thesis, I seek to discover how climbers manage this apparent contradiction, and what their participation in the sport can tell us about other aspects of their social existence.

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INTRODUCTION

Eva was overwhelmed. It was her first time rock climbing, and she was at an indoor gym with a few friends who were avid rock climbers. Ascending the wall, she noticed that there was a breadth of places for her to grip as she worked her way up, and there were just as many places for her to place her feet. Instinctively she reached for the closest one that seemed easy to grasp, but her fellow climbers quickly reprimanded her. “No, you can’t use that one!”

“Why can’t I use that one?” she fired back. “There are like 800 of them! What’s the point if I can’t use them?” She was confused, but her friends told her that she could not use those holds because they were on a different route.

Eva did not particularly enjoy this adventure into climbing, but another friend convinced her to try outdoor climbing. On top rope with her friend belaying, he said, “You can use whatever holds you want to get there, I’m not going to tell you no. However you want to do it.”

She tried this style of climbing and enjoyed it much more since she was able to be freer in her movements and do whatever she felt she needed to do to get to the top. Eva remembers the moment fondly: “It finally clicked with me and I was like, ‘Oh, this is really fun.’ And that’s the whole point of the gym, to teach you how to do harder moves. It’s all for training and it’s supposed to make you better.”

Hearing my interviewee describe her first time going to the gym makes me think of the impressions I had my first few time there. Summit Rock Climbing Gym reminds me of a huge warehouse, with high ceilings, rafters, and usually no

air conditioning. The floors are covered with a thick protective padding, and it is common to hear the dull thud of climbers tumbling down onto it. There isn't much in the gym except for the tall climbing walls lining the perimeter of the facility, though there are sometimes thick ropes hanging down from the rafters to the floor in case someone was in the mood for a different kind of climb that day. A large speaker booms music throughout the gym, usually (and fittingly) rock songs. The plastic, padded floors are forever covered with a thin film of the white chalk that climbers put on their hands before climbing a route, and on busy days it seems as though there is a cloud of it hanging over the gym. Although not flashy, Summit is typically packed to capacity at night with climbers eagerly waiting their turn to try new routes. And just as Eva did, I quickly learned that the goal of rock climbing is not simply to climb and get to the top, but to challenge yourself in a very particular way.

Eva's story caused me to reflect on a similar event that I had experienced while outdoor climbing early on in my fieldwork. After each of the three of us had tried the climb at least once, my group and I were still struggling with a particular section of a climb. Another climber, with a group about 50 feet away from us, walked over, and after explaining that he had successfully done this particular route before, asked if we'd like some beta, or advice about how to complete it. Gratefully accepting, we listened as he talked us through the proper way to approach the climb, pointing and gesturing toward the wall as he did. When he described how he had gotten past the area that was giving us trouble, one of my climbing partners exclaimed, "Ah! We had been doing it like this," and then

proceeded to depict how we were approaching it. The visiting climber said, "Well, technically you can tackle it that way. But if you want it to be a true 5.11 you should do it my way. Doing it your way downgrades it to about a 5.10." I was struck by the fact that the visiting climber did not only aim to reach the top of the wall by following a general path, but he chose to take a specific path that made the ascent as difficult as possible. This goes against how we typically organize our lives, following the path of least resistance.

Scientific advances throughout history have usually sought to make life easier. Generations have built on the ideas and innovations of those in the past to consistently create better technology that helps us do more work with less effort. There are more than a few easier and less dangerous ways to simply get from the bottom of a rock wall to the top without having to climb it. But climbers choose to actively seek out the added risk and challenge. Even in a gym setting, they do not use any available hold to get to the top; only particular holds can be used on a route.

Why do they approach climbing this way? What can climbing tell us about other aspects of life? And why does a very particular demographic inhabit Summit Rock Climbing Gym? Between January and August 2014 I spent time at Summit learning the craft and talking to climbers in order to find answers to these questions. What I discovered is that in order to understand climbing, we first need to understand how individuals fit into the climbing culture and how the activity fits into their lives outside the gym. The challenges they pursue on the rock wall provide a unique sense of satisfaction, which matters to them a great deal.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CLIMBING

Originally a relatively fringe sport, rock climbing has seen a surge in participation over the last quarter century. Much of this boom can be attributed to the exponential increase of indoor climbing gyms in the Unites States since the late 1980s. Indoor gyms typically allow climbers to experience two styles of climbing: bouldering and sport climbing. Bouldering involves climbing rocks unroped and very low to the ground, while in sport climbing a roped climber uses preattached, fixed bolts on the wall to climb higher while still having protection from falls (Burbach 2004). Climbing falls under the umbrella of "lifestyle sports," which also includes activities such as surfing, skateboarding, adventure racing and windsurfing. I spent nine months with climbers in Austin, Texas, beginning as a novice in the climbing gym and eventually transitioning to outdoor sport climbing.

General public perception of climbing and other lifestyle sports may be that those who engage in them are adrenaline junkies who are constantly searching for the next high, a new thrill. According to Wheaton (2007), lifestyle sports do indeed embrace risk and danger, although these activities are typically not violent. Other terms used to refer to these activities include 'extreme sports,' 'risk sports,' and 'alternative sports' (Robinson 2008); although all of these can be used somewhat interchangeably, I chose 'lifestyle sport' because it implies that the activity is more than just a pastime or a game. Throughout my research studying climbers and learning to participate in their passion, it became apparent to me that rock climbing was indeed a part of their lifestyles, not just an

occasional hobby. Climbers often identified themselves primarily as climbers before anything else, and they committed enormous amounts of time and energy to it. Many people I encountered made significant changes and adaptations in their everyday lives to accommodate climbing. Climbing was truly a lifestyle to them in that for many, climbing was not only an activity, but also the primary aspect of their lives that they shaped everything else around.

I too had a narrow idea of what a rock climber was when I first ventured into the culture. Having no prior exposure to climbing, I assumed that the typical climber would be hyper-intense and hungry for nonstop adventure. What I discovered was quite the contrary.

While mountaineering in the Alps took off in the 18th century, modern sport climbing is the result of centuries of technological innovation and adaptation to local topography. The birth of mountaineering, commonly identified as the first ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786, took 25 years to complete due to repeated failures (Frison-Roche and Jouty 1996). Only after trial and error using newly developed ropes, axes, and other equipment were the first climbers able to reach the summit. In this instance, the goal was more practical: to get to the top of the mountain. Today, we can use modern technology such as cable transport devices or helicopters to get to the summit, but many people still choose to use equipment not all that different from what the first ascenders of Mont Blanc used. For serious climbers, it’s not just getting there, but *how* you get there.

The seeds of mountain climbing culture had been planted at Mont Blanc, and over the years different styles of climbing became apparent. There is evidence

that Americans were bouldering as early as the 1910s, but the modern characteristic of dynamic, gymnastic-style bouldering techniques didn't become popular until the 1950s (Gill ____). The first sport climber were French climbers who began pre-placing protective gear on their big wall routes in the late 1970s, and a decade later the practice had become common in the United States as well (Perkins 2005).

In 1987, an event occurred that would be the tinder for climbing's nationwide explosion in the coming years: the opening of the first American indoor climbing gym. Vertical Club climbing gym in Seattle was the first of its kind in the nation, a facility that brought the open-air activity of climbing into a gym setting, where climbers could work on their craft at night or in any weather conditions (Burbach 2004). The additional benefits of indoor climbing were numerous: while many of the best areas for climbing are remote, climbing gyms gave urban and suburban residents exposure to the sport. They also allowed climbers to refine their skills in a more controlled environment before taking their talents to the outdoors, where there may be more risk of danger.

My first exposure to climbing was in a climbing gym in the mold of Vertical Club. A friend of mine invited me to Summit Rock Climbing Gym in Austin during the summer of 2013, and I left the gym two hours later surprised at how different the experience was than what I had envisioned. Having a very superficial understanding of what climbing was, I never fathomed how difficult gym climbing would be. It looks simple enough, just a wall with a bunch of different holds on it. Watching others climb, so many of them made it look

effortless that I figured a relatively athletic person like myself would have no problem doing it. But after grasping the process of climbing and understanding that I had to follow a certain route to get to the top of the wall, I realized how challenging and physically taxing it was. The people I observed who made climbing look so graceful had probably honed their skills for years prior to that day. I didn't return to the gym for months, partially deterred by the extreme soreness that I felt the day after my first climb, but when I returned in January of the next year I began to develop two simple research questions in mind: what kind of people climb in Austin, and what factors cause them to continue climbing over the years?

RESEARCH METHODS AND SETTING

Summit Rock Climbing Gym presents many opportunities for beginners and avid climbers alike, whether they prefer bouldering or sport climbing. Bouldering involves climbing relatively close to the ground, usually never going much higher than 20 feet off the ground. Because of the short distance from the ground, this style does not use a rope for protection from falls, instead relying on the heavily padded floors of the gym to ease the force of an unexpected plummet. Being the shortest length of all the climbing styles, bouldering routes often involve many difficult moves in a condensed area.

By contrast, sport climbing routes are much longer than bouldering routes. In this style, the climber wears a harness with a rope attached to it and utilizes protective gear bolted to the wall to prevent injuries due to falling. Sport climbing also requires a belayer, a person who manages the rope and keeps it from moving in the event of a fall by the climber (Burbach 2004). The belayer holds the rope tight in case of a fall, preventing the climber from tumbling all the way to the ground. While the sport climbing routes at Summit were never much higher than 40 feet, typical outdoor sport routes in Austin range from about 50-60 feet. As opposed to bouldering, the toughest areas of a sport climb can be more spread out due to its greater length, giving the climber more areas to rest than they would have on a bouldering route[1].

Initially, to establish a sport route a climber must *lead climb*. When lead climbing, the rope attached to the climber's harness trails to the belayer below. As they ascend, the climber clips their rope to the protective bolts on the wall, which

are usually located at approximately 10-foot intervals (or at any particularly difficult area of the climb where extra protection may be necessary). Since the climber spends a significant amount of time climbing above their last protective clip, lead falls can be unpredictable, and the climber "must be prepared for longer falls…a leader who falls from a point above the last clipped bolt travels the distance to that bolt and then that distance again…[lead climbs] involve longer airtime that ends with a sudden jerk as the rope pulls taut" (Burbach 2004).

However, this style of climbing is necessary to establish a *top rope* for the route. Once the lead climber reaches the top of a route, they attach the rope to the last protective gear in the wall. Since the final bolt is above the climber, they can let go of the wall and will only hang there as long as the belayer holds the rope tight. As the belayer gradually feeds the rope, the climber is slowly lowered to the ground; now a top rope as been established. With both ends on the ground, the entire length of the rope travels up to the top of the route and back down again. This allows the next climber to venture up the wall with much more security, since if they let go of the wall they will simply hang as long as the belayer holds the rope firm.

Summit offers both bouldering and sport climbing[2]. While most areas in the gym are designated for one or the other, it is possible to boulder on a sport climbing wall, although the climber is not allowed to go higher than a certain point without a belayer, rope, and harness.

Employees of the gym were responsible for creating new routes once a week or so. They would usually change the routes on one small section of the wall

at a time, moving on to a different area of the wall the next time they changed routes. Using this method, every six to eight weeks the entire gym was outfitted with brand new routes.

Each route is given a grade reflecting its difficulty. For bouldering routes, grades are displayed as a “V” followed by a number. A V0 route is the easiest. V1s are a little more difficult than V0s, V2s are more difficult than V1s, and so on. The system is open-ended, since theoretically one can always find a tougher route than the most difficult one ever discovered. At Summit, the hardest route I ever encountered was a V9.

Sport routes are classified differently. Like bouldering classifications, the sport climbing system is also open-ended. However, they are referred to with a “5” followed by a decimal and a number. For instance, the easiest sport routes that I encountered in Summit were 5.5. Outdoors, most routes were no easier than 5.7s. Grades on sport routes can be further subdivided within a particular grade. For instance, a 5.12a is slightly easier than a 5.12b, and that route would be slightly easier than a 5.12c.

Even though people create all routes, outdoors they are constrained by the natural formation of the rock. Climbers decide what constitutes a good climbing route based on the features of the rock, and over time that process becomes normalized and the “correct” way to get to the end of the route is established. Route setters in the gym attempt to recreate the experience of outdoor climbing in an indoor setting. While it can never be exactly the same, the route setters at

Summit positioned holds in ways that force the climber to move their bodies in a similar manner to how they would move on an outdoor wall.

I conducted an ethnographic study of Austin's rock climbing culture over a nine-month period at Summit, where I met other climbers and began honing my own skills. I began as a complete novice, having only climbed once before in my life (and only for about two hours). In the very beginning I ventured there alone a couple of times a week, only bouldering, getting my body acclimated to the unique physical toll that climbing produces. I had never pursued an activity quite like it, and the first few weeks left muscles burning in places that I had never felt before.

About a month into my study I began taking a weekly class offered by at Summit that aimed to give beginning climbers an introduction to the sport and teach them fundamental climbing skills. Including this class, I began going to the gym four or five times every week, spending hours there and working on the most basic movements to build a strong foundation of climbing technique. While the class touched on sport climbing very briefly, the main focus was forming technique through bouldering. Through these classes and my increased presence at Summit, I formed new relationships and found a consistent group of people to climb with.

After four weeks, I progressed on to a more advanced class that moved beyond bouldering and taught the essentials of sport climbing. This class was held twice as often, as the skills required for safe and effective sport climbing are more in-depth and nuanced. During this time I was able to establish a general group of

fellow climbers to go to the gym with on a consistent basis, and I perceived both my knowledge and climbing proficiency improving weekly. Upon completion of the second class, our instructors took us to an outdoor climbing venue outside of the city to put our newly learned skills to use on real rocks.

Following the completion of both classes, I now had a very clear group of four or five climbers that I would climb with at the gyms about three times weekly. In addition to this, we began expanding our activities to more outdoor areas, and after a while we were making weekly Saturday trips to Austin's limestone cliffs. At Summit we did a combination of sport climbing and bouldering, since both were readily available. We occasionally bouldered outdoors as well, but we mostly sport climbed on these weekend trips since there was no shortage of bolted routes on the rock.

The ethnographic method of studying rock climbers gave me a unique perspective and allowed me to have a much deeper understanding of climbers and their motivations. Although I received a multitude of valuable information during my interviews, being able to learn how to climb alongside them and then apply these techniques both indoors and outdoors was far more valuable for me. Interviews, no matter how in-depth they are, take place in controlled environments far away from the activity that I was studying. Being at Summit or out on the cliffs of Austin gave me the opportunity to see and feel the activity of climbing instead of only having climbers tell me about it. I saw with my own eyes the way they interacted with each other, and many of the bodily cues they gave off told me more about how they felt than they would ever express verbally. Even

more important was the experience that I was able to share with them. When climbers mentioned the pain in their hands and fingers after a tough day of climbing, I could relate because I had felt the same pain while trying to type my field notes after class at Summit. When climbers spoke of the bumps, bruises, and aches they felt all over their bodies after the first time they climbed, I could sympathize because I remember the mornings I could hardly get out of bed the first few weeks I climbed. And when they expressed the fear and anxiety that was always present, even after they had become experienced climbers, I sympathized because to this day I feel the same emotions when I climb.

Loic Wacquant similarly studied boxers in urban Chicago in *Body and Soul* (2004). Wacquant argues in favor of *carnal sociology*, which "seeks to situate itself not outside or above practice but at its 'point of production'" and "requires that we immerse ourselves as deeply and as durably as possible into the cosmos of examination" (2005). In line with this philosophy, climbing within the culture I was studying allowed me to obtain a more total understanding of climbers and their motivations. Utilizing an ethnographic method also allowed me to experience maximum embodiment and embededness in the community. Being embodied entails trying as much as possible to become like those being studied. In the process of writing, it was extremely helpful to be able to draw on my own experiences to supplement the experiences expressed by my interviewees. By being a part of the culture, not just asking about it, my understanding of the climbing community is more comprehensive. Embededness involves spending as much time as possible at the research site. With interviews, my exposure to

climbers would've been limited to the few hours when they agreed to talk to me about their experiences. By doing ethnographic research I had the opportunity to learn with other climbers and spend extended periods of time with them. These experiences greatly enlightened me in regards to the reasons behind why climbers choose to climb, and continue engaging in the activity for so long.

Studying this sport was a unique experience for me because of the complete lack of competitive vibes I felt from the community. In his research on leisure pursuits, Stebbins (2007), writing about the social rewards associated with leisure activities, comments on feelings of group accomplishment, which he calls a "group effort in accomplishing a serious leisure project" that includes "senses of helping, being needed, and being altruistic." When climbing with a group, I often felt like we were not playing a sport, but, as Stebbins says, accomplishing a project. We usually tried the same routes and pushed each other to try harder to complete them, and it didn't quite feel like a success unless everyone completed it. While there are certainly pleasant contests among friends, the climbing gym does not have a distinct competitive aura, and most climbers I encountered had no interest in formal competition at all. Climbing has been characterized as an activity that allows participants to learn at their own pace, instead of fostering he aggressive and overly competitive environments often associated with more traditional sports (Robinson 2008). This is a characteristic of many lifestyle sports, and competition tends to enter the realm more when the activity is commercialized, such as skateboarding in ESPN's annual X Games (Wheaton 2013).

Throughout my fieldwork I kept detailed fieldnotes of my climbing experiences. I also conducted in-depth interviews with six of the climbers I met along the way. The climbers included a wide range of skill levels and integration, from the more recreational ones who climbed a couple of times a week to avid climbers whose lives more or less revolve around it. I interviewed two females and four males, ranging in age from early twenties to mid thirties. The interviews were semi-structured, and while I asked general questions to each person about their climbing experiences, I allowed the interviewee to elaborate and spend the most time on the topics that they deemed essential. The rationale behind this is that I wanted to get to the true essence of what climbing meant to each individual instead of boxing them into rigid themes from my interview guide.

Initial Research Question and General Themes

When I first began my research I wanted to know two things: what kind of people climb in Austin, and what factors cause them to continue climbing over the years? Throughout the ethnographic process I was able to answer my first research question quite clearly on my own. However, the answer to the second question evaded me. Although I enjoyed climbing, I had trouble finding the same passion within myself that I saw in other climbers. In general, we had been climbing the same amount of time, yet most others were much more enamored with it than I was. I had observed other people climb in the gym or outdoors for the first time and immediately become hooked. I did not share this same automatic obsession, and through my interviews I sought to discover the innermost motivations about why climbers continue to climb.

The one thing that I found most interesting was climbing's unique mixture of pain, risk, fear, and potential for injury. While other sports certainly have aspects of one or all of these factors, each climber I encountered mentioned these while simultaneously professing their absolute love for the sport. I found it interesting that many climbers embraced climbing not just as a habit but also as a lifestyle, even with these seemingly negative factors constantly present. This relationship is similar to how professional wrestlers navigate the physical pain and injury inherent to the sport while still finding meaning in their actions (Smith 2008). I delved into these topics in general conversation and especially in my interviews.

Pain is a consistent characteristic of climbing. Even an intermediate route will usually be painful for a climber, especially the hands and forearms. Closely tied to this pain is the potential for injury. The most common climbing injuries are to the fingers, but there is also potential for more severe and debilitating injuries due to awkward or especially hard falls.

No matter how much protective equipment there is, climbing always carries with it considerable risk. Bouldering, especially outdoors, requires short but powerful and dynamic movements that can lead to equally powerful and dynamic crashes. And while sport climbing is one of the safer forms of large wall climbing, leading routes can be particularly risky when attempting a difficult move when the climber is well above their last bolt. Encompassing all of these factors are the emotions of climbing, and in my experiences and through my interviews I discovered that an individual climber could feel a magnificent

spectrum of emotions on a single climb. By digging deeper into these themes, I was able to come closer to finding an answer to not only who climbs, but also why they continue climbing and shape so much of their lives around it.

LEARNING THE ROPES

Not all individuals are equally prone to participating in sports or leisure activities. The idea behind the *recreational activity adoption process* is that "opportunity, knowledge, favorable social milieu, and receptiveness must occur for sport participation to exist" (Sleap 1998). Athletes must be receptive to participating in their sport of choice in order to be successful, but factors such as opportunity, knowledge, and favorable social milieu often exist outside of the control of the individual, especially children and teens. Climbing participation requires a unique mixture of these distinctive components.

Even though the climbing gym eventually turned into a research site for me, most climbers cited similar initial introductions to the sport: through social networks. I first went to Summit with a friend who climbed, and the majority of people I talked to throughout my research echoed comparable experiences. As one climber I interviewed explained: "A friend of mine who lived with me was real into outdoor stuff, and one day she convinced me to go climbing." Another interviewee noted: "I started climbing because I was dating a guy who was really into climbing, and I had just set up my roommate with a guy who was a climber." These types of responses were typical for most of climbers I encountered.

This feature of the climbing community is most likely what leads to its homogeneity. In my fieldwork, one of the clearest distinctions I observed was that in Austin it is a primarily white, middle class, and male sport. This was expected, as lifestyle sports in general tend to be predominantly white and middle class in nature (Robinson 2008). In my estimation, 75-80% of climbers were male and

roughly the same proportion of climbers was white. Summit did not engage is mass advertising around the city, and climbing is not a mainstream sport that gets the same amount of media attention on par with football, basketball, and baseball. Given these facts, it makes sense that most climbers are brought into the community through preexisting social connections, and social groups tend to be racially, socioeconomically, and educationally homogeneous. Voluntary organizational groups never recruit a random sample of people (Popielarz and McPherson 1995), and as one interviewee noted: "It's kind of a word-of-mouth thing. The climbing community here…is pretty close knit. Word-of-mouth is an effective way to spread news."

Those I met who were not introduced to climbing by friends usually stated that they either lived near an outdoor climbing area or frequented those places for other reasons. For example, one interviewee who is an avid mountain biker revealed that his first interaction with the sport was when he stumbled upon a group of climbers near one of his favorite biking trails. Intrigued, he signed up for instructional classes. Another climber relocated to Colorado when he was a child, and as he recalls:

> I remember when we first went to Garden of the Gods and there were people rock climbing, and it was the first time I'd seen people climbing on actual rocks. And I was just like "Oh my god, I want to do that! It looks so fun!" So I'd sneak off…I would find little areas that looked like I could climb and I would boulder there. I didn't know what I was doing, I'd just climb.

Having easy access to these spaces was also a common way to become interested in the sport. In their research, Williams and Donnely (1985) discuss how due to their remoteness, access to proper outdoor climbing spots is limited to

those who have access to them. While the climbers quoted above were not introduced to the sport through friendship networks, they came across avid climbers based on the geographical areas that they frequented.

Universal characteristics such as ethnicity and socioeconomic background are extremely important in making new friends and acquaintances (Blau 1994), so it makes sense that people tend to associate more with individuals who share those characteristics. According to Popielarz and McPherson (1995), homogeneity in communities where membership is voluntary is maintained through a process in which members that are typical of the association stay in the group longer, while atypical members are more likely to leave the group at a higher rate. The result of these processes is a community that stays remarkably uniform over time. If white, middle class men make up the majority of Austin's climbing community now, it will likely remain so for the foreseeable future.

Money Matters

Aside from social capital, there is also a heavy economic investment associated with climbing. As one interviewee noted: "I wanted to [keep climbing at the gym], but first of all it's expensive. My apartment is expensive too, so I had a little bit of a budget." Participation in lifestyle sports not only requires an individual to have leisure time, but also access to the proper funds and specialized equipment needed (Robinson 2008). One can conceivably learn to boulder with no equipment at all, but that requires that the individual either live close to a viable bouldering location or have access to transportation that will take them there. Having access to a climbing gym is a much easier way to become ingrained

into the sport, yet this requires the aforementioned monetary component. Monthly membership to Summit is $65, while shoe rental is $5 per day. I purchased my own personal climbing shoes instead, and while the cheapest pair can be had for about $90 the average pair is roughly $120. My chalk and chalk bag added another $50 to my expenses. The equipment required to sport climb is an additional cost: the cheapest harness, rope, carabiner (clip that attaches the rope to the harness), and set of quickdraws (used to clip into the bolts on lead climbs) add up to another $300.

Since I wanted to learn proper form and technique from trained instructors as well as meet other beginning climbers, I took classes at Summit designed to provide these things for those new to the sport. While these are not absolutely necessary for bouldering, it is almost impossible (and dangerous) to learn the intricacies of sport climbing without instruction or access to a social network of established climbers. The total cost of the instructional courses I took was $320.

Within the first two months of getting a membership at Summit, I had spent well over $1000 on climbing. The initial cost is immense, but after acquiring the necessary equipment and training a climber only has to pay for a gym membership (if they choose to continue indoor climbing) and any equipment that needs to be replaced. However, it is easy to see how this colossal basic cost of entry can deter those without the necessary monetary means from becoming acclimated with the sport. This disproportionately removes ethnic minorities and those from lower socioeconomic strata from the potential pool of new climbers, especially those in urban areas who do not have easy access to outdoor climbing

venues. Likewise, Sleap (1998) found that the most common constraint affecting participation in leisure sport participation was financial. Interestingly, one fact I observed throughout my fieldwork was that although the residential areas surrounding Summit are heavily lower- and working class, no one I met at the gym actually lived in that area.

Once again, having social connections with those who already have the knowledge and equipment necessary can ease these costs. For example, ropes and quickdraws can easily be shared, reducing the cost that each climber has to put forth. Also, knowing individuals with extensive sport climbing experience can potentially eliminate the need for instructional classes. However, it is clearly evident that either the proper economic or social capital is needed to smoothly enter the realm of climbing. Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004) make the distinction between "hard infrastructure" and "soft infrastructure" in relation to subcultures. Hard infrastructure refers to the physical environment, such as the gym or a natural outdoor climbing area. Soft infrastructure refers to more affective dimensions of a culture, such as social networks, connections, and human interactions. Individuals who are ethnic minorities or of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to be economically or geographically separated from the hard infrastructure, while those separated from the soft infrastructure may never even become aware of the subculture's existence. These social advantages help to reproduce the demographic homogeneity of the climbing community.

THE CLIMBING COMMUNITY

Having established some of the factors that bring certain people into the climbing community, we can explore how climbers relate to and interact with each other. Whether at the gym or outdoors, when I asked to climbers about the community everyone had positive things to say. One interviewee stated, "Climbers tend to be pretty chill, nice people. They're really easygoing, they like to hang out with other people. They're really encouraging. So for the most part it's a good community." Said another climber, "People seem really laid back and positive at the gym. Maybe it's because they're doing something that they really enjoy. It's been impressive…. What I've noticed is that the better the climber, the more humble they are." Others often echoed the same ideas, noting that they had made many new friends through climbing. Some even suggest that it's easier to make friends climbing than in other settings in every day life. Two different interviewees weighted in:

> I find it difficult to talk to people at clubs or bars. But rock climbing, it's always been easy to meet people. The hardest thing about meeting people is breaking the ice and finding common ground. But when you're climbing, you're already on the same route, on the same wall. It makes it so much easier because you have that thing in common.
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> Those [climbing partners] were some of my favorite people. Without climbing I probably wouldn't have been friends with them otherwise. But they were really supportive, like a family…. It was just so much fun.

Robinson (2008) makes similar connections in her study of rock climbers in the UK, both in the close-knit feel of the community and the ease of making friends. She comments, "The notion of a 'sporting community' is one that includes friendship and collectivity through shared experiences and practices….

Though it tends to attract those with a strong sense of individualism, this clearly does not rule out the importance of a collective or community ethos." Sure enough, many interviewees noted that while they perhaps enjoyed team sports as kids, they either were not very good at them or excelled in individual sports more. A common theme was that individual sports allowed them to be "as good as they wanted to be" and to push themselves as hard as they wanted to. However, climbing (and lifestyle sports in general) is a unique individual sport because it can be devoid of actual competition with others. One interviewee stated, "In some ways it's not a sport…you're not competing against anyone else." Climbing allows athletes to participate in an individual sport while still feeling tremendous community with others. As another interviewee stated, "It is a community sport, and definitely a partner sport if you're sport climbing, but it's also very individual. You can make yourself better or worse on your own, so I like that aspect of it."

I witnessed this many times at Summit during my time there. Some climbers I encountered had much more experience than me, but were completely comfortable topping out at V3 and V4 routes. While they probably could've easily attempted more difficult routes and completed them with a little practice, they found their comfort zone in routes of that difficulty and were content to stay there. However, most climbers I encountered were more concerned with advancement. After becoming competent in V2 routes, the majority of climbers are itching to jump to V3 routes. It was common for climbers to only do routes

below their grade of ability when they were warming up or cooling down after a climbing session.

While I enjoyed progressing to tougher routes, I found that I was more content with stagnating at my current ability than most other climbers I came into contact with. Bouldering at Summit, I was always more fond of routes that involved an overhanging section of the wall. These routes typically have larger holds since the difficulty lies in the position of the body instead of intricate hand placement. I had no problem hanging in odd positions as long as the holds were large enough for me to grab, but even a route on the flattest wall was problematic for me if the holds were too small. I had difficulty building up my hand and finger strength to a level equal to some of the stronger people I climbed with, so I would rather do routes that did not put such stress on those areas. In that way, I was not as motivated by progressing to more challenging grades as most other climbers were.

The "need for achievement" theory states that athletes have an inherent desire to achieve success and avoid failure (Tod, Thatcher and Rahman 2010). Personality differences influence how athletes relate to this desire. High achievers are more driven by the drive for success, while low achievers are more motivated to avoid failure. As a result, high achievers are more likely to seek situation where there is a degree of challenge, while low achievers seek situations that are either easily achieved or incredibly difficult. Easier situations offer almost certain success, while incredible difficult situations offer almost certain failure. However, that failure is justified to the athlete given the high difficulty of the task.

Those climbers who are concerned with advancement to more difficult routes most likely fit the profile of high achievers. They didn't set unbelievably high standards for themselves, but still chose to challenge themselves enough to steadily get better and gradually progress to higher grades. While not always, I tended to be a lower achiever, content with doing tasks that were more easily completed. Given the lifestyle nature of climbing, it is not surprising that many of the participants are high achievers. Since climbing is such a large part of their lives and not just a sporadic recreational activity, they do not climb simply for the sake of climbing and completing easy tasks. Recalling that climbers tend to seek a certain type of experience when they climb, incrementally pushing oneself to advancement helps to add to that experience. Consistently doing easy routes erases some of the elements of fear, pain, and anxiety that most climbers embrace; consistently doing extremely difficult routes would take away the pleasure derived from completing the task at hand. In order to achieve the middle ground, it is more beneficial for climbers to adopt the high achiever mentality. Through this mindset, climbers can push themselves individually while still deriving strong senses of community from those they climb with.

This community is especially strong among groups that sport climb together. While on the wall, the safely of the climber is literally in the hands of the belayer. Mitchell Jr. (1983) writes about the extreme in companionship that forms when technical climbing, while Robinson (2008) comments on the "extreme trust" that is built between climbers who climb together often. When asked if the potential danger of climbing ever made him second-guess his

participation in the activity, another interviewee responded, “No, but I think that’s because I know who my climbing partners are…. One thing I like about my group is that we’re always doing our [equipment] checks. One person checks, two people check, sometimes even a third person is in there just looking. I like that part a lot, it makes me feel safe.” He then recounted a story about a careless climbing guide he encountered who missed a key safety check and was about to send someone up the wall before a third party noticed the mistake. In many ways the sport is organized around danger, and the shared experiences of climbing together, taking similar falls, and belaying for each other builds a strong community among climbers. The personal safety of climbers is at stake each time they decide to try a sport route, and the intensity of this reality forges extremely tight bonds.

I always felt a heightened sense of camaraderie with my belayer after coming down from an especially fierce climb. In these cases, I had just pushed myself to my physical maximum; this exertion, while having my belayer protect me by managing the rope and simultaneously guiding me by shouting advice did wonders for strengthening relationships. In some ways it was a circular process: doing many climbs with a certain belayer builds trust between the two. The more I climbed with the same group of climbers, the more confident I was in trying dynamic or risky movements, since I felt safe with those particular people managing my rope. Trust is quickly established between individuals in sport climbing groups, and this is contributes to the tight-knit and intimate community feeling that climbers rave about when it embraces them.

Messner (1990) found similar results in his study of male former athletes, concluding that sports provide an important, yet overlooked, latent function. Many of his research subjects found that even as children, sports provided one of the only settings where they could safely express intimacy with other males. Engaging in athletics with others promoted the kind of camaraderie that allowed them to form strong bonds with other males in a way that might be stigmatized outside of that venue. In order to be successful, they had to "construct relationships with others." While Messner focused on team sports, the interpersonal aspects of climbing parallel the benefits that his research subjects derived from athletics as young men.

Breaking Through Barriers

I noticed that over time the climbing community of Summit eventually embraced my presence, and after becoming more acquainted with climbers and learning the ropes of the sport, I felt more comfortable and confident being there. I hardly ever felt a competitive vibe from anyone, and more often than not other climbers were friendly in offering tips and advice on certain routes. Outdoors, I encountered a number of times where other climbing groups offered their rope to a nearby, completely unfamiliar group so that they wouldn't have to lead climb the route themselves. However, when I initially began going to the gym alone at the beginning of my research, I found that sparking conversation with other climbers was often difficult. As both a person of color and an unfamiliar face, perhaps I was not ingrained enough in the community to warrant a warmer reception. It was not until I began taking classes there that I felt the same

collectivity that many climbers rave about. A few interviewees expressed this same sense of alienation, especially those who came to the gym on their own, women, and ethnic minorities. One person of color discussed their view of the ethnic diversity in climbing.

> I don't like how few brown people there are [who climb]. There's a lack of diversity, a huge lack of diversity. It's way more diverse in California. Maybe it's because of the city, I don't know. But I went to California recently and it was a lot more diverse…. It's just something that I notice. It's not an issue anymore. The only issue is when I come in sometimes and the workers don't know me and they act like I don't know what I'm doing. Those things happen. But when I'm finally climbing, no, I've never felt like anyone has been like 'What are you doing around here?' Once I'm finally in. I think having your own shoes helps. Your own chalk, your own harness. It gives you clout amongst the climbers.

In general, I have noticed the same trend in my own experience climbing. While I never felt as though any fellow climber treated me differently based on my skin color, I did have one strange encounter with an employee one night at Summit. Walking in alone, there was no employee at the front desk. I checked in and proceeded to begin climbing. About ten minutes into my climb an employee sought me out and asked if I had signed in. Confused, I nodded yes. The employee quickly said that they were just checking to make sure, and then went back into the employees' office. Despite the fact that the gym was full that night and a few people had checked in after me, the employee did not question anyone else. While this might not have been an action particularly motivated by racist feelings, it is undeniable that being the only black person in a gym of 60 or more climbers made me stand out more. Especially as a beginner, being a person of color makes me very conspicuous, perhaps as someone that "doesn't belong."

While some women I have talked to since I began climbing have insisted that there is a greater gender balance in other regions of the country, in Austin the vast majority of climbers I encountered were men. Summit actually offers climbing workshops especially for women and taught by only female climbing instructors. It is difficult to imagine there being a need for a similar workshop only for men. The women that I interviewed shared some unique experiences of being a minority in the sport. One female climber revealed:

> Yeah, it's a pretty guy-popular sport. One of my friends wrote a blog on 'women in climbing' and their experiences, and I guess a lot of women have had really negative experiences climbing. Guys either discounting what they've done or not really being psyched on women climbing. But I've always had really positive experiences with guys…. But I think it's hard in general for a community of women because we're told by society to compete with other women. It's all a competition. That's something that I struggle with a lot.

Especially with the small number of women associated with the sport in this area, women may feel pressured to compete with other women instead of encouraging them. Dilley and Scranton (2010) assert that the females in their study sometimes met opposition through challenging traditional gender norms by climbing, along with being more muscular. While my female interviewees did not bring up these specific issues, they expressed similar scenarios where they were seen as outsiders. Another female climber, who is also an ethnic minority, spoke about her experiences at the gym in our interview:

> People who hadn't seen me there would assume that it was my first couple of times in the gym and that I needed help. They would say something like 'Try a harder one' or 'You can do that one,' and I'm like 'I know.' It's a little difficult to make friends when you're climbing here. I think that people make a difference, because there are a lot of white guys that climb, and not a lot of women.

In her study, Robinson (2008) also found that female climbers were often given unwanted advice from other climbers, more so than male climbers. While Wheaton (2000) notes that some lifestyle sports, such as windsurfing, tend to be more accepting of women than other lifestyle sports, it seems as though the climbing community still has issues with gender norms and perceptions.

Similar experiences of social isolation were recalled from interviewees who had discovered climbing without having established friendship networks in the climbing community. One mentioned, "I climbed once or twice and then I had to stop for a while, but that first time I felt out of place. Just because I didn't know the etiquette." Another stated very concisely, "I felt so awkward going by myself." While some of these climbers eventually grew more comfortable with the climbing scene, others never did, and in some cases stopped climbing altogether for long periods. These sentiments from climbers reinforces the notion that while climbing is technically an individual sport, there are strong social aspects to it. Revisiting the ideas of Popielarz and McPherson (1995), members of a community who are atypical are much more likely to leave the group. This helps explain the lack of women, ethnic minorities, and climbers without preexisting connections to the community. While the social capital associated with climbing is not imperative for feeling comfortable within the culture, those who had climbers within their friendship groups prior to taking up the hobby themselves were far less likely to express these feelings of social alienation.

WHY DO CLIMBERS CLIMB?

Although there was always some overlap, when I talked to climbers about why they continue to climb I got a wide variety of responses. Stebbins (2007), writing on the concept of "serious leisure," defines it as the "systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling in nature for the participant to find a career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience." Rock climbing certainly falls into this category, especially those who pursue it without planning on attempting to become sponsored, professional climbers. Stebbins writes that for an individual to pursue a serious leisure activity, the costs must seem insignificant in comparison to the potential rewards. When I talked to climbers about the rewards of climbing, their replies were diverse and multifaceted.

A common response from climbers I encountered was that the sport offers them unique challenges. One interviewee commented, "I enjoy the challenge. I enjoy that in a sense it's like a video game where there's just levels and levels, and once you beat a level there's another one. I like that because it's something to do, something to work toward." Another climber elaborated on a similar idea:

> I really like climbing because of the puzzle. It's hard. And it's you and your teammate, but when you're [sport] climbing it's all you up there. And it's what you decide to do. You can try something new, you can go for it, or if you're not feeling that great you can do something else. It's pretty cool…. The puzzle, the challenge part of it is tough. And I like that everyone does their own thing on the wall. Same route, same everything, but there's 50 ways to go up. It's pretty cool, just to watch and learn. You find out that you can do moves you had no idea you could do.

For the climbers I encountered, the trial of making it from the ground to the top of the wall is what kept them coming back. Even the same route can offer different challenges depending on how the climber approaches it. While climbing outdoors with my group, there were times (after we felt we were experienced enough) when we ascended the same route multiple times in one day, challenging ourselves to follow a more difficult path each successive time or to complete the route more quickly. Comparable to video game levels, climbing offers continuously advancing challenges, and even the same route can offer different trials depending on how and when it is approached. A gamer would quickly become bored with a game that offers no challenge; climbers are stimulated by the multitude of ways to challenge themselves even with a relatively small selection of climbing venues to choose from.

While there are certainly similarities to climbing and varying levels in video games, the biggest difference is that there is no real danger in progressing through video games, while there is true consequence in attempting a route that is over the head of the climber. Recalling the need for achievement theory (Tod, Thatcher and Rahman 2010), low achievers tend to seek situations that are easily achieved or incredibly difficult. While there is not the same sense of thrill in doing easy routes, the consequence of doing extremely difficult routes can be physical harm. A climber climbing well above their grade of ability will certainly take significantly more falls than a climber who steadily progresses. From a safety standpoint, climbing self-selects higher achievers because their orientation toward the activity lends itself to more emotional stimulation and less physical harm.

Successful climbers are those who gradually build on their skillsets and utilize those abilities to tackle harder obstacles.

"The Gym is My Happy Place."

In his research, Stebbins (2007) outlines the qualities of serious leisure. One of the qualities presented by Stebbins is "significant personal effort using specially acquired knowledge, training, experience, and/or skill." In embracing the challenges of rock climbing, climbers are forced to use their very specialized knowledge, training, experience, and skill to progress through different routes and tackle higher grades.

Coupled with the challenges of rock climbing is the personal feeling of achievement when a goal is completed. Unlike team sports, where the ultimate goal is collective victory, and even some other individual sports, where there is another athlete to be defeated, the "opponent" in climbing is always the wall. Another quality of serious leisure outlined by Stebbins is "the need to persevere – conquering adversity and sticking to it through thick and thin." Climbers I talked to often cited this as the most fulfilling aspect of climbing. As one climber put it:

> A couple of times I went to this outdoor climbing wall and it's ridiculously high. It's kind of a competition wall. And the best part is when you're working on a route, indoor or outdoor, and not being able to do it, not being able to reach or not having the strength to reach the next one, and then finally being able to do it on maybe the third or fourth day.

Other interviewees were more concise, saying things like, "After a good day of climbing, I just feel so accomplished," and, "I just enjoy doing it. When I complete something that I haven't been able to before it's just really, really validating. I feel elated." This climber went on to describe the satisfaction of

perseverance in more detail, bringing up a moment when we spent hours at the gym trying to figure out one particular route. He felt a massive sense of pride even though he did not complete the route at all that night:

> That day we were working on it, I finally figured it out but by that time I was at the point where I'd try the whole route and get to the last couple of moves, but my hands would literally give out on me. So that to me is really validating, when I know I'm not quitting. I'm pushing myself so hard that my body is quitting on me no matter what my mind tells me to do. And I need that, I feed off of that, I love the feeling of knowing that I just gave something my all. My total all, everything I have. There's something about that, something that I have to have. It's like a drug. I love it.

Even climbing the same route outdoors at different times of the day or in different seasons can present its own specific obstacles. For instance, when climbing early one morning my climbing group attempted a route that we had already done the previous weekend. However, this morning was particularly humid, and this route had very smooth holds. Completing this climb when the wall was slippery provided an increased challenge even though we knew the best way to get to the top of the wall. These scenarios allow climbers to maintain a sense of achievement while climbing the same or similar routes in succession.

Stebbins (2007) notes that some of the personal rewards from serious leisure are self-actualization (developing skills, abilities, and knowledge) and self-expression (expressing the aforementioned skills, abilities, and knowledge). Through climbing, individuals can progress and climb higher graded routes, seeing their knowledge grow and applying newfound skills to routes that require greater ability. Many climbers I encountered built semi-obsessive relationships with certain routes, repetitively trying to complete it for days or even weeks. I

even saw this sentiment build in myself, as there were some bouldering routes at the gym that I tried to conquer relentlessly. We even joked with each other about having a “nemesis,” a route that we just could not finish no matter how much we tried. As one interviewee stated, “I want to get better and I want to complete all of the routes. There’s one at the gym that I’ve been dreaming about. It’s like I constantly think about it.” Another climber even quit their job because it was interfering with their climbing. She explained:

> Climbing is one of the most important things for me. It’s changed my whole outlook on life. Before it was more like, ‘I want to go to school, get a degree, then get a job, and then get a higher paying job so I can have a house,’ you know? The whole ‘American Dream.’ But once I started climbing I was like ‘Oh my gosh, I want to go to Spain, I want to go to Italy, I want to go deep water soloing in Thailand! I want to go on a road trip, I want to climb in California and Colorado!’ I wanted to *go* to these places…. It was okay when I had an internship. But once it became my full time 8-5 I would still try to climb, but it was exhausting. I would try to go on the weekends but it would rain every time, while it was beautiful during the week. And eventually I was like, ‘I hate this, I quit.’ All of my friends were getting married and I’m like ‘I just want to travel, I don’t really care.’ I wanted to spend all of my holidays climbing back when I was working full time. My boyfriend and I would schedule all of our trips that way. We recently purchased a camper van that we’re remodeling so we can go on road trips in it. Climbing has essentially changed my whole life.

Participation of this magnitude is not uncommon for certain leisure sports. Klein (1993), exploring the bodybuilding subculture in California, found that many of the weightlifters he studied, even those without realistic prospects of a professional bodybuilding career, became somewhat obsessed with the activity. Some would go to the gym both before and after going to their jobs, and sometimes on their lunch breaks as well. Others never held down consistent jobs because they chose to structure their lives around their workout regimens instead.

Some of the bodybuilders' friends saw them as being possessed by it. Additionally, in her study Robinson (2008) found that their non-climbing friends and family members also often see climbers as being overly passionate about the sport, to the point where it sometimes caused family conflicts.

Non-sport activities can also preoccupy individuals to the point of obsession. Studies of the Extreme Metal music and goth scenes have similar conclusions (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). Many members of the Metal scenes in the UK, Sweden, and Israel indicated that they become so ingrained in the lifestyle that it is sometimes difficult to juggle regular life and Metal life simultaneously. Stability is often accomplished by having to withdraw from other aspects of life outside of Metal. The British goth scene is strikingly similar, with many participants communicating that they "eat, sleep, and breathe" goth. Members of this scene go to great lengths to ensure that goth activities dominate their lives.

Hang Loose and Relax

While drastic measures such as quitting one's job to climb, like the previous interviewee's quote indicated, was not common in the climbers I encountered, I saw several indications that structuring many aspects of their lives around climbing was typical. For instance, some climbers sought jobs at Summit so they could work while still having ready access to climbing, while others only chose outside jobs with weekend availability so they could climb outdoors. One interviewee described the types of occupations that were compatible with the climbing lifestyle:

> There are a lot of climbers who are programmers, they work remotely so they can climb a lot. It's also really popular with real estate agents because they can have their own schedule. I know a couple of teachers too, with summers and weekends off. Then there are a lot of online entrepreneurs trying to do this stuff on the road. You'll also see a lot of firefighters and paramedics. With their schedule, they work 24 on and 48 off, so they have tons of time during the week. It kind of depends on when they discovered climbing. If they liked climbing back in high school or college when they were deciding their careers, they totally picked something that will let them live out of a van. If not, they're like "Hmm, how can I manipulate my job to allow me to do what I want to do?"

Part of the appeal that makes climbers want to dedicate so much of their lives to the activity is that it acts as a stress reliever for them. While all sports require the participant to maintain their whole focus on the activity at hand, this is essential in lifestyle sports not only for the success of the team or individual, as in some more traditional sports, but for safety reasons. Not being focused during a basketball game, for example, can lead to a player missing an open pass or losing track of how much time is left on the shot clock; losing focus in climbing can have more serious implications. Clipping improperly, tying the rope to the harness incorrectly, or belaying badly can potentially lead to the death of a climber. The intense focus required actually helps climbers block out any distractions that are occurring in their everyday lives.

However, there is a layer of irony to the widespread claim that climbing helps relieve stress. Why relieve stress by undertaking a physically painful and strenuous activity that can elicit fear and anxiety in its participants? Aren't those things adding stressors to life? Wouldn't reading a book or taking a walk be more relaxing?

This concept leads to the types of occupations that are favorable for climbers, and also to a further examination of the socioeconomic characteristics of the climbing community. While there are a few exceptions, the majority of the occupations that allow people to be able to climb regularly, and also the careers that give individuals enough cultural capital to engage in lifestyle sports in general, tend to not be particularly physically strenuous. In daily life, these individuals do not need to engage in many activities that are taxing on their bodies. Their occupations probably require a great deal of cognitive labor, but the corporeal strain that they experience climbing is unmatched in their work lives. None of the climbers I encountered throughout my fieldwork were construction workers, day laborers, or any similar job that is structured almost completely on physicality. In this way, the strain that comes from climbing can indeed be a stress reliever because it is a unique kind of exertion relative to what they normally experience. Individuals who have these non-physical jobs can embrace the taxing nature of climbing more easily because they can leave their "blood, sweat, and tears" at the climbing wall when they go about their normal lives. People who have more laborious careers do not have that same luxury, so for them stress relief might be doing something *without* a physically draining aspect.

One of my interviewees stated, "When I climb, it's mine, all for me. I don't mean that to sound selfish, but it's my release, my meditation," while another climber stated that climbing "is relaxing when I'm stressed out." This feeling of focus and escapism is probably best exhibited by a story I was told by a climber at Summit, who explained that when he first started climbing he used it as

a release when he'd have arguments with his girlfriend. For him, climbing was an activity that he could engage with wholly, both mentally and physically, to help him when he was experiencing an emotionally distressful event.

The idea of sport as an emotional release is common. Klein (1993) found that bodybuilders often see their time lifting weights as an oasis from the stressors of everyday life, and Bogardus (2012) writes that lifestyle sports in general offer an "expressive escape," giving the participant not just a mental but also a physical break from monotony or their routine burdens. This is especially true in outdoor sport climbing, where participants have to physically remove themselves from the bustle of the city. Since the best climbing areas are often remote, the climber can even escape environmental reminders of daily troubles. Lewis (2000) comments that through their sport, climbers are able to escape the mundane. This is not only applicable to climbing, as most lifestyle sports take place outdoors without fixed boundaries (Robinson 2008). This geographic disconnect, coupled with the extreme focus required during climbing, can indeed help a climber temporarily break away from the constraints of everyday life.

Climbing Through the Years

Although most of the climbers I encountered in my fieldwork were relatively young (not many people were older than 40), one benefit of the sport is that it is very doable to climb effectively at a much older age than is possible in most mainstream sports. In general, adults decrease their sport participation as they age (McPherson 1986). This is not always due to declining physical abilities, as factors including starting a family and a serious career often take priority. By

the time most adults reach the age where they might have more time to engage in sports, such as post-retirement or when children have left the home, their physical abilities have declined to the point where certain sports endeavors are not possible. However, climbing is an activity that can be pursued by older adults at a high level. As one interviewee concisely stated, “I think I can be a lifelong climber. I want to climb for the rest of my life, because it’s an easy way to feel like you’re a part of a community.”

I heard stories of accomplished climbers still going strong in their seventies, and the first time I went outdoor climbing I witnessed a trio of men in their sixties doing quite difficult routes. Climbers often commented that this was one of the advantages of climbing, and something that appealed to them greatly. While popular perception of some lifestyle sports may be that they are reserved for adrenaline-fueled teenagers, in reality many of them offer a great amount of athletic longevity. One interviewee spoke on this idea at length:

> I hope I can stay injury free, but one thing I like about it is I’ve seen a lot of old people at the gym. Older people who are climbing really well and are in good shape. That’s one thing I like about it, it’s something that I can do and achieve with for a long time. It makes me happy to think that I can be climbing 20 years from now and be the best at climbing at that point that I ever was, as opposed to ‘Oh, the best shape of my life was when I was in college.’ Not that I’m worried about being in shape, I want to be healthy. I want to live, I want to squeeze every ounce of juice out of this orange that I call life.

Another climber reflected on the experiences of being a climber for a number of years:

> My body has changed. Physically, I’m a lot weaker than I was in college. Not a lot, but I’m weaker than I was as an undergrad. But I’ve learned, it’s like muscle memory. How to move my body a lot better. So I’m actually a much better climber now than I was when I was in college.

One interviewee recalled that the majority of people in their usual climbing group were older men, and that it was actually a better experience because of it:

> Climbing with them I felt really safe. Most of them were retired, and even if they worked, rock climbing was where they'd hang out with their old friends. They had all the ropes and they would go to different places on the weekends. That was their thing. And I felt really safe with the older guys, they were like my dad's or my grandparents' age. They would help us, make sure all of our ropes were okay, and teach us too. I felt a lot more comfortable with them than if I would've been with some guys my age showing off or something like that.

There is an interesting dynamic here: the pursuit of a risky activity and its relationship with the need to feel safe. The risky aspect of climbing adds an element of exhilaration to the experience, yet every climber wants to feel a certain degree of comfort and safety from their equipment, their belayer, and their climbing environment. This reiterates the fact that climbing is not only about getting to the top of the route, but also *how* one gets there. Doing routes that are too easy does not provide the same experience as doing one that pushes the climber to the brink of their ability, so climbers must approach their routes in a very particular way, being selective in what they do as well as doing it in a specific manner. Using any hold on the wall in the gym or not following the normalized path on an outdoor route subdues the delight of climbing, while doing a route that is overwhelming or that makes the climber too fearful saps the enjoyment from the endeavor. Part of the reason why climbers pursue the activity because of the thrilling risk involved, but an element of safety is required to ensure that the experience is not *too* risky. This middle ground between

endangerment and complete safety is where climbers find their meditative comfort zone.

The Great Outdoors

The final common theme regarding the rewards of climbing is the fact that outdoor climbing allows individuals to experience nature. The beautiful settings that climbers interact with have been known to inspire an almost religious experience within them (Mitchell Jr. 1983). Climbers can feel an almost possessive feeling toward their favorite climbing areas (Williams and Donnely 1985), and this has even led to conflicts between traditional and sport climbers who frequent the same mountains (Bogardus 2012). While no one admitted to hating climbing in the gym, most climbers raved about the wonders of being away from the commotion of the city while engaging in their favorite pastime. Most of my interviewees had a lot to say about the outdoor aspect of climbing and why they preferred it to climbing indoors. One elaborated on the fact that the indoor environment feels too artificial:

> I prefer climbing outdoors, for sure. Easily. When I'm inside I know that those holds were placed there by someone. They don't feel real. There are difficult ones for sure, stuff I can't climb. But you just grab onto one and you know it's plastic. There's no dirt or dust on it. It smells like a gym, it doesn't smell like outside. And there's music playing, you can't hear the birds chirping. I've always loved being outdoors, hiking and camping. I love the mountains and mountain biking. And climbing fits right in there on my trips. Climbing halfway up a mountain, camping, and then climbing the rest? That's perfect for me.

Another climber spoke about his experiences as a child and how it relates to his current interest in climbing.

> I was a really climby kind of kid, I'd climb door jams and trees and whatever I could find. I was always outside, always running around.

> Seeing pictures of majestic mountains with this tiny little person climbing in the middle of this vast expanse just really, really appealed to me. I thought it was beautiful and it looked fun, and I wanted to do it. One of my childhood friends lived near a huge gorge, and we would go back there and climb, and see eagles and foxes and all kinds of crazy wildlife. It was awesome, I loved it. When I lived in Chicago, I hated feeling claustrophobic during the winter months. But here you can be outdoors year round. I just like being outside, backpacking and stuff. The longer I can be out, away from civilization, the better. Not that I hate civilization, but I love being out there more. If you're climbing outside that means that you're probably in a place that's beautiful. It's natural. I remember being like four years old, and when people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up I'd say Tarzan. I wanted to swing on vines through the jungle and sleep outside with no tent.

One climber commented on the unique scenery where their climbing group would go on the weekends, saying, "The area is like 60% mountains. And the sights that we got to see were beautiful. It was the best scenery. And it was so fun, it was really great." While I did encounter climbers who had no desire to ever climb outside, for most climbers going outdoors offered a feeling of freedom and connectedness to nature that they could never get at Summit. Some had been exposed to outdoor activities as children and had grown up loving the open-air environment, while others embraced it after becoming climbers. I personally fall into the latter category. Never much of an outdoorsy person, I had limited experience with activities such as camping and hiking. However, my first experience outdoor climbing took place at quite a remote location. From where I lived t took about an hour to drive to the park, and once at the park we had to hike through the forest for about 20 minutes to get to the climbing wall. The scenery was gorgeous, especially for me since I had never really been in such a secluded location. While climbing, there was a spectacular view from the top of the climbing wall, overlooking miles of hills and forest. Even in my subsequent

climbing trips that took place closer to the city, I learned to appreciate and embrace the feeling of solitude and the splendor of the physical environment, relatively unaltered by people.

The discussion of the magnificence of outdoor climbing often led to conversations about how people approached indoor and outdoor climbing differently. Most of the people I encountered were avid enough to have outdoor climbing gear, although that was not always the case. One climber told me of his initial years bouldering at the gym, where he never even considered buying a harness and rope to learn sport climbing. However, most climbers used the gym as a place to hone their skills and perfect moves that they would later use outdoors. Many saw the rigidity of indoor climbing routes as being too restricting. For example, one climber emphasized that outdoor climbing involves much more freedom:

> The thing I like about climbing outside is that I can put my hands and my feet anywhere I want to go. It's more about just getting up there. Not to say I don't like doing a bouldering problem or sport routes at the gym, but the way I look at those is that it's training me mentally and physically on techniques that will make me better at outdoor climbing when I have to be creative on my own.

There is technically no "wrong" way to climb either outdoors or indoors, but most of the time climbers will plan out a particular way to get to the top. This plan will usually consist of putting each hand and foot in a specific place for the duration of their time on the wall. It is very common, especially in climbing gyms, to see people staring at the wall and moving their arms, seemingly grabbing invisible holds, and visualizing how they will approach the climb once they're on the wall. Often an indoor route, especially very difficult ones, can only be

completed by using a certain hand or foot on a certain hold. Reaching for a hold with the left hand when it is meant for the right may seem okay at first, but most routes are designed in such a way that one or two moves later the climber will be in a near-impossible position; whether one is has their left or right hand on a hold determines how the rest of their body is positioned, which influences how their weight is distributed, and an uneven weight distribution while climbing can pull a climber off the wall very easily if, for example, they are reaching to the right with their left hand. Route setters generally construct routes with specific body positions in mind for the climber when they're on the wall.

Outdoor routes are very different since people do not construct them. Some individual did do that route and completed it in a certain way, but that technique used to get to the top of the wall was restrained by the existing topography of the wall. In my experiences, there is much more freedom regarding where a climber can place their hands and feet. There are still areas where it is much more beneficial to use one hand instead of the other, for instance, but since indoor routes are consciously calculated by route setters there tends to be a more direct technique that must be employed to make it to the top. This is more restricting, but can also be helpful because by mastering certain techniques indoors, a climber has that specific ability in their skillset if ever they need to do that move outdoors. While the climber in the previous quote emphasized the training aspect of indoor climbing, another interviewee explained how he approaches indoor and outdoor climbing in fundamentally different ways:

> It's nice being outside, but indoors feels safer. There's padding everywhere. Especially when you're doing outdoor, you have to deal with

> falling a lot more. And with real rock outdoors you're searching around. It's not so obvious what the path should be. You're doing a little more thinking.

This sentiment might have been my most significant discovery of all the experiences I had doing the physical activity of climbing. Initially, I had no idea that I would ever climb outdoors. I had been bouldering at Summit for a couple of months when I was presented with the opportunity to learn lead climbing, and only then did I even consider the idea. By the time I went for my first outdoor climbing trip, I had a lot of experience, but it was all gym climbing. When I attempted my first routes outdoors I felt like it was a complete 180-degree turn from what I was used to. I had grown accustomed to simply following color-coded routes all the way to the top of the wall. There is certainly a definite path to be followed outdoors, but there are infinitely more ways to interact with the wall, both with the hands and the feet. I was almost frozen on the wall because of the sheer number of possibilities of how to approach the climb. It cannot be overstated enough how direct gym climbing can be, so going to the other end of the spectrum outdoors was almost an overload for my brain. It's something that I never completely got used to, even after many more outdoor climbing trips.

There are even different ways to approach outdoor climbs, depending on the structure of the route. The climber quoted previously who uses the gym for training purposes explained the difference in the climbing they experienced the first time they went to Kentucky:

> The climbing style is a lot different. Everything at the Red River Gorge is really tall, so it's all about endurance and it's really pumpy. But everything here is short, so all of the grades are really sustained and they're way more powerful. When I left the Gorge I think I was doing 11a.

> And when I came back here and tried an 11a I was like, "Oh, why is this so difficult?"

For this climber, coming back to Austin to climb outdoors was a shock because an 11a grade in Austin requires such a different approach than in Kentucky. There, the difficulty in the route is the endurance it requires; routes in Austin tend to have more difficult moves compacted into a shorter distance. Approaching Summit as a training ground to perfect certain techniques helped this climber to progress faster when climbing the more compact outdoor routes in Austin.

THE SPECTRUM OF EMOTIONS

A theme I was eager to explore during my interviews was the relationship between positive and negative emotions present in individuals as they climb. Beyond the obvious physical aspect of climbing, it is a deeply emotional endeavor as well. Sociologists such as Hochschild (1983) argue that emotions are not only innate reflexes, but have a deeply social and subjective component. During my fieldwork climbers often mentioned that when climbing they felt happy and free, but in the next breath they spoke of times when they had been gripped by fear or anxiety. There were even attitudes that a bad day of climbing filled with failure could be one of the most disheartening feelings they experience in everyday life. Having these seemingly contradictory emotions present in the same activity caused me to wonder why climbers did not choose an activity with a lower probability of negative sensations. What I discovered was that recognizing the social component of emotion is key to understanding how climbers juggle deep emotional discomfort and feelings of gratification. The challenge of climbing provides a social environment where individuals can manage and embrace both.

Conquering the Crux

In my interviews, I asked climbers first about the negative sensations that they experienced while climbing. The first and most common theme was that of fear. One climber concisely stated, “Top roping still freaks me out sometimes, because you’re way up there.” Other climbers elaborated more:

> Yeah, the first time [I climbed] was scary. Even now, it’s still scary. But the first time for sure. I still get anxious, I’d say outdoors more than indoors. Inside, it’s there, but not a lot. Outside, I still get anxious every time.

In this case, the climber drew two distinctions: indoor climbing vs. outdoor climbing and the first time climbing vs. successive times. Most climbers shared his notion that indoor climbing is not as scary as being outdoors. I felt safer simply because in the case of a fall at Summit, I was guaranteed to land on the padded floor, while on the hard dirt outside there were usually rocks and branches covering the ground. One of the very first sport climbing classes I took at Summit ended in me taking a fall of about 20 feet all the way to the ground. There was a miscommunication between my belayer and I; he gave too much slack in the rope while I simultaneously hung on to the wall for too long. In retrospect, this confusion is not surprising since we were both beginners and were not familiar with the dynamics of sport climbing. When I let go of the wall because I was ready to be lowered to the ground, the result was me plunging from the top of the wall all the way to the floor and landing with a thud.

As novice climbers, both my belayer and I were quite startled by the event. But besides the shock of falling and the accompanying embarrassment, there was not much pain involved at all. After a couple of minutes I had no ill effects from the experience. I actually spent more time making sure that everyone was not worried about me than I did worrying about myself. One positive result of this event was that from that day on, that particular climber (who became a friend and frequent climbing partner) and I always double checked our equipment and made sure to communicate better with our belayers when climbing. But I am also thankful that the experience happened in the friendly confines of the gym; taking a fall from the top of an outdoor route would have likely been much more painful,

probably resulting in a significant injury. Even if I had not landed on a rock or branch, falling onto the solid ground instead of plushy padding would have been quite devastating. Knowing this, there is a greater sense of security when climbing indoors. Although no on wants to fall, doing so in Summit was preferable to doing so outdoors.

The majority of climbers become more comfortable dealing with heights after they gain experience climbing. The very first time I went to Summit I began to feel nervous after only a few moves, even though when I looked down I was only about five feet off of the ground. The sensation of being the wall without having my feel planted firmly on the ground was new for me, but as I gained experience I grew comfortable being higher up on the wall. When trying new moves or routes, there was typically a sense of anxiety since the action was more unfamiliar. This reaction was more muted in the gym; when climbing outdoors my senses were much more heightened whether I had done a route before or not; however, I was always much more nervous on a first ascent. I would often have to stop and reapply chalk to my hands multiple times on the route because my palms were so sweaty. In an odd twist, sometimes climbing *too* well for an extended period can lead a climber to be more fearful of a fall since they have not taken a fall in so long. One interviewee explained their experience with this feeling:

> I hit a plateau and it was like I wasn't motivated and had a fear of failure. I got used to not falling, so then I got scared of falling. I stopped pushing myself because I didn't want to fall. I psyched myself out for basically a whole year. And I didn't try hard, I was just comfortable climbing 5.10s and 5.11s.

This individual's experiences portray the fact that even veterans of the sport have incidents where fear affects their climbing. While this is an example of fear consuming a climber prior to their climb, I witnessed many people throughout my fieldwork get this feeling in the middle of climbs. On every route there is at least one *crux*, or most arduous part of the route. The crux can take many forms: it can be a condensed area with one or more very difficult moves, very tricky holds, a place where the climber's body is positioned awkwardly, or any other difficult circumstance.

Even though the vast majority will try to strategize their gameplan before even beginning a climb, sometimes the crux cannot be fully deciphered until the climber is actually there. A crux that appears near the very end of a 50-foot route is quite difficult to figure out from ground level. Even while on the wall, sometimes the proper plan of action is not clear. For instance, during one particular outdoor climb with my group, I reached a point where it seemed as though the end of the route was impossible because there was apparently nothing to grab on to. After furiously feeling around the wall for a few minutes, my legs were beginning to weaken from having to support the whole weight of my body for so long. Since I was lead climbing, I was prepared to fall and swing into the wall if my muscles gave out, but this was still an anxiety-inducing moment for me. After much effort I discovered that here was a small part of the rock on my left that could only be utilized by gripping it underhand, which allowed me to move my feet to a better position and finish the climb. This subtle feature in the rock was difficult to see from my vantage point, but it was necessary to complete

the route. Most of the times I witnessed climbers reach a point where fear or anxiety crept up on them was when they hit an unexpected or rigorous obstacle, usually the crux. Panic, which arises when an immediate task is perceived as being at or above the limit of one's ability (Mitchell Jr. 1983), is common in these situations. One interviewee spoke about their experiences with this particular occurrence:

> I think a perfect example of that is getting halfway up the rock when you're determined. You've said to yourself, 'Okay, I'm going to climb this rock.' And then you get halfway up and it's like, 'Damn, now this is getting scary. But now I have no choice. I have to either climb really well and get to the top or I have to down climb, in which case if I down climb and I get off of this rock without making it to the top I just let myself down.' I do it because I told myself that I was going to do it.

Here, the climber encounters a scary moment in the process, and internally they might want to quit. But realizing the progress that has been made, the climber pushes through this feeling and attempts to go on. A separate interviewee echoed this sentiment, saying, "Sometimes when I couldn't reach a hold or if it was really slick, I'd be *so scared*. I literally couldn't do it. But I knew I had to put forth the effort."

This climber was experiencing the negative aspects of arousal during this climb. Arousal, "a continuum of excitation ranging from a comatose state to one of intense excitement" (Tod, Thatcher and Rahman 2010), is present in almost any athletic endeavor. When an athlete experiences arousal, the individual interacts with this energizing mechanism to engage in extreme and vigorous activity. One theory of arousal and performance, drive theory, states that when arousal increases, the athlete will exhibit a *dominant response*, which is the

"display [of] well-learned or practiced behaviors." Arousal can manifest both mentally (e.g. anxiety) and physically (e.g. increased heart rate and respiration). The dominant response of more expert athletes is more likely to be the correct response, despite these mental and physical manifestations.

The mark of being a good climber, one able to push through negative emotions in order to obtain positive ones, is the ability to exhibit the proper dominant response. By being able to control one's body under pressure enough to progress up the wall, climbers put themselves in a position to experience the positive rewards of climbing. The best climbers I encountered were those who could somehow manage their arousal. Some were able to maintain arousal, some channeled it into other, more positive emotions, and others used it as fuel.

I found that I often lacked the proper dominant response to the mental aspects of arousal. For example, when I hit a rough spot or the crux of a climb I would freeze. This may seem like a safe thing to do, during a climb it can actually be quite detrimental to progressing through the route. Every second spent on the wall requires energy, and clinging onto the wall is almost as tiring as climbing it. During my classes at Summit, I was taught that if I ever reached a spot where I needed to stop during a climb, the most energy-efficient technique is to hang from the wall with the arms extended and my feet firmly planted in a secure spot. This way, the force of the climber's body weight is more evenly distributed, and the arms will not tire as quickly. However, a typical reaction for climbers in this situation, especially beginners, is to cling to the wall as tightly as possible, holding the body close to the rock. While this may feel more secure, it actually

tires the arms very quickly because the muscles are working to support more of the climber's weight.

The proper dominant response to stopping on the wall is to hang more loosely. I had trouble with this, and my first response was usually to grip the wall tightly; having my muscles engaged so forcefully, even though I was not actually moving anywhere, only burned me out more rapidly. Even though I knew that this was the worst possible technique, when confronted with mental arousal my dominant response was to revert to my impulses and forget my training. Other climbers felt the same negative emotions that I did, but many were able to manage them in ways that did not affect their climbing. I was not able to embrace the psychological aspect of climbing in the same way that better climbers could. By allowing negative emotions to influence me more, I was not able to complete climbs as effectively, which limited my access to the same positive emotions that are associated with finishing routes. Viewing climbing as a sort of cost-benefit analysis, the process was not as beneficial for me because I experienced more negative emotions than positive ones.

An interesting finding throughout my interviews was that for many climbers, the negative emotions they felt were almost necessary for the happiness that they got from climbing. An interviewee described the rollercoaster of emotional states that they faced while trying a certain route:

> It's definitely frustrating at times. When you've got a certain route dialed in and you know exactly where to go, and for some reason your body is just like, 'Not today!' And you're left wondering why it's so hard, even when you're so positive. It can be disappointing. It can also be disheartening and depressing when you do everything the professionals do and you're still not getting it. It's so easy to compare yourself to others

> and let that get you down. But once you finally send something that you have been working on for a very long time it's super, super encouraging. It's usually surprising when you make that move that you've been trying to make. And for a second you're like, "[gasps] What do I do now? Okay, don't lose it. Keep it together."

For this particular climber, a bad climbing session provoked anger and disappointment, which is consistent with what a huge majority of climbers told me. Indeed, climbers risk their self-esteem, at least in the short term, by trying and failing to complete a demanding route (West and Allin 2010). I can sympathize, as one of the most frustrating feelings for me was climbing a route inconsistently. Slipping up on a part of the wall that I knew I should easily be able to do became a trademark of mine. But in many ways, fighting through anger and disappointment on a bad climbing day (or fear and anxiety on a strenuous climbing day) is what made the end result of climbing worth the trouble.

Every climber I encountered stated that at some point they felt negative emotions while climbing, but many saw the sensation of happiness they felt after a climb as being even stronger because of it. Trying a new and difficult route can be scary, but pushing past that fear makes the resulting feeling of accomplishment that much more profound. While there are a variety of emotions associated with any sport, the peaks and valleys of climbing seem to be greater. The peaks are what keep climbers coming back to the sport, and they're willing to endure the valleys to get there. Thrills, or "sharply exciting events and occasions that stand out in the minds of those who pursue serious leisure" (Stebbins 2007), act as motivation for the participant to continue the activity. Again viewing climbing as a cost-benefit analysis, although there will be negative aspects of the activity, the

end result (completing the task at hand) is worth the trouble. An interviewee detailed this relationship:

> There was this one hold on a route that was a little too far, and I literally had to jump [to reach it]. And it was really scary, but finally gaining the strength and courage to jump, or to go out of your comfort zone, is really the best part. Because I'm so scared that if I think I'm going to fall I just go back down. And when you finally do it it's like, 'Wow.' That's the best part.

Exploring how climbers interact with emotions is key to understanding why they pursue the activity in the first place. We should not think of positive and negative emotions separately, but as two aspects of a singular emotional process. Successful climbers are those whose dominant responses allow them to complete difficult routes, therefore giving them access to feelings of enjoyment and accomplishment that accompany the achievement of climbs.

"IF IT HURTS, YOU'RE DOING IT RIGHT."

Summarized previously are the many aspects of the climbing community that I was able to observe during my fieldwork. Through these observations and interviews, I have found strong patters in who enters and stays in the climbing community, what aspects of climbing they enjoy, and the emotions climbers experience while climbing. However, the answer to one question still remained vague throughout my research: why do climbers continue to pursue this particular activity, given the combination of pain and potential injury and danger associated with it?

As outlined earlier, there is not one particular personality type that is drawn to climbing. While there are demographic patterns present, I did not find a community full of thrill-seeking daredevils as I expected. Regardless of gender, class, and race, I encountered people with a wide variety of personality types and temperaments. So how do these people with a broad range of dispositions all develop a similar approach to an activity that educes fear and anxiety in its participants? An activity in which pain is integral, and that carries with it the possibility of serious injury or death? And why do they even want to pursue an activity that makes them feel this way?

In Search of Pain

While I have already explored the emotions that athletes associate with climbing, the issue of pain has not been thoroughly explored. It's almost impossible to climb effectively without experiencing pain. It was evident the first time I climbed, and this element remained present each subsequent time. Having

participated in more traditional sports before, such as football, track and field, basketball, and golf, I was aware that participating in sports can often be painful and will almost assuredly leave the athlete fatigued after it is over. But climbing offered a different approach to pain, in that a route that is at the upper limit of a climber's ability is designed to push them to the brink of their pain and fatigue threshold.

In this regard, pain is intrinsic to the activity of climbing. In other sports, pain is often experienced in the practice and training that takes place in preparation for the competition; while pain is also present during the competition itself, it is not necessarily central to the sport. In climbing, the only way to progress in skill and ability is to continually push oneself to complete higher graded routes. As one interviewee stated, "The only way to get better at climbing is to climb." And indeed, since routes vary greatly depending on grade, nothing prepares a climber for that challenge more effectively than actually climbing.

When attempting tougher routes the elements of the wall change dramatically. Indoors, holds will become smaller, sometimes to the point where the climber can only hang on with one or two fingers. Footholds become shallower, where the climber may only be supporting themselves with a toe or one side of their heel. Holds are also spaced further apart, testing the climber's strength and ability to continually hold themselves up while in awkward positions. Outdoors, highly graded routes share these same characteristics. On some sections of the wall it may be easier to find a foothold, but the rest of the wall may be completely smooth with no viable places to grab with the hands. When lead

climbing, climbers must support themselves on the wall with only one hand while the other manages the rope and quickdraws. As routes become more difficult and holds become smaller and smoother, this challenge becomes more potent.

The mental and physical manifestations of arousal can be detrimental to a climber's progress, but the ever-present aspect of pain amplifies these difficulties. Part of the experience of climbing is the ability to overcome this blend of dynamics, and those who cannot accomplish this will be unsuccessful climbers. Climbing helped me to push past pain thresholds that I never thought I would, but I often still struggled with that particular aspect of the sport. I often commented that some of my climbing partners could "muscle through" routes better than I could, meaning that even when their hands were raw and their muscles were burning they still climbed effectively. There are two limits of pain: the low threshold and the upper threshold (Lang 1999). The low pain threshold is "the moment of a response to a pain stimulus," while the upper threshold is "when absolute tolerance to the painful stimulus is achieved." Reaching the upper threshold during a climb will result in the climber falling from the wall. However, each climber has differing pain thresholds. Those who can tolerate pain longer and therefore raise their upper threshold are the ones who can more easily "muscle through" routes. Pain is both physical and emotional (Bendelow and Williams 1995), so some climbers are better equipped mentally to climb through pain that others would not be able to endure.

Pleasure or Agony?

Most of the climbers I encountered throughout my fieldwork embraced pain readily, and at times almost welcomed it. Similar to negative emotions, I discovered that pain involves a deeply social and subjective component. Since I assumed that pain would always be undesirable, I sought to explore this theme further. One of my interviewees did a good job of summarizing the ideas that most climbers relayed to me:

> I really like that soreness, feeling tired…. I like to climb really hard when I climb. If I'm not climbing hard I kind of feel like nothing happened, like it's kind of a waste. So I climb really hard then have a rest day. I'll take a two day rest if I climb really, really hard and I'm still sore.

In a different tone than was echoed regarding negative emotions, this climber enjoyed the pain and soreness of climbing. For them, it was an indication that they had done something meaningful. Perhaps differently from fear or anxiety, pain is something that lingers long after the climb is over. The body eventually gets used to the exertion of climbing, but even after I had been doing it for months I would still feel the effects of a hard climb the next day. Fear disappears at the conclusion of a climb; the climber is securely at the top of the route and is protected by the rope and the belayer. At this point the climber has probably forgotten or moved on from any negative emotions experienced throughout the climb. But pain lingers, not just at that moment but also in the hours (and perhaps days) that follow. Another interviewee shared the a similar view:

> [My first time at Summit] I climbed for like an hour and a half, and my forearms were swollen like crazy and I couldn't even pull the door handle on my car. And I thought to myself, 'This is *great*.' I went home and I was

> just ecstatic. And since then I've just been going crazy about it. I'm not the kind of person who can go to the gym and take it easy. I need to be on the verge of passing out before I leave the gym for me to feel like I did something. I don't want to call it self-loathing, but it's like a test for me. How much can I endure? I love that physical exhaustion. It hurts, but I wake up the next day and it's the best kind of pain. It feels good.

Judging by what my interviewees stated and what I observed in the field, it seems that my initial assumption was wrong. Instead of associating pain and with negative emotions, climbers are actually more likely to associate pain with their feeling of accomplishment. Pain is the physical equivalent of feeling accomplished, and it reminds the climber that indeed, they did accomplish something extremely physically taxing.

Climbers' orientation to pain also aligns closely with the idea of climbing as a stress reliever. As discussed earlier, the fact that climbing is a heavily middle and upper-middle class activity is reflected by the non-physically laborious careers that climbers tend to have, allowing them to find relaxation in it more easily. These jobs also lack aspects that would lead directly to physical pain, so climbers are similarly able to embrace bodily discomfort in a way that individuals with more labor-intensive jobs might not be able to.

S&M and Climbing

Rock climbing is not the only place where people actively seek out pain. Initially it may seem like a completely off-base comparison, but there are strong parallels between the pain of climbing and research that has been done on individuals who participate in sado-masochism (S&M). Sexual sado-masochism broadly involves the use of "mild pain, restraint, bondage and discipline, and humiliation for sexual arousal" (Donnelly and Fraser 1998). Specifically,

masochism often involves the arousal caused by being the recipient of pain during sexual activity.

In their study of S&M participants, Taylor and Ussher (2001) detailed components that the individuals considered essential in their definition of S&M. One of the main components expressed by all participants was that "for it to be S&M, any behavior must occur within a sexual context or in such a way as to be sexually arousing." Participants in the study made it clear that while they enjoyed pain in a sexual setting, like everyone else they hated pain in the everyday context, such as going to the dentist or burning their hand on a kettle. They would not enjoy the same pain they feel in S&M in a different setting since it would be separated from the situation they have defined as sexually arousing.

Rock climbers view their experiences similarly. When pushing the limits of one's ability, pain and negative emotions are inherent to the sport. However, this is not an indication that climbers enjoy pain or are naturally thrill seekers who constantly seek any type of carnal stimulation. On the contrary, most climbers that I encountered had very relaxed dispositions much more often than not. But in the context of climbing, even the most laid-back person can embrace pain and fear, turning the entirety of the experience into a positive. Experiencing these aspects of climbing can be pleasurable in certain contexts; similarly, "for someone to continue participating in S&M, he or she must define these experiences as sexually pleasurable, or at least potentially satisfying" (Weinberg 1987). Climbers do not simply enjoy the seemingly negative feelings of fear and anxiety that come along with climbing. Instead, within the context of climbing, they approach these

feelings differently than they would in other situations. Those feelings are embraced and possibly even enjoyed while on the climbing wall; those same fearful and anxious sentiments in an everyday setting would not induce the same enjoyment; on the contrary, they would be cause feelings of discomfort.

Labeling theory, originally conceived to help explain deviance, states that no action is inherently deviant; a social group must define the action as deviant for it to be so (Becker 1963). Similarly, S&M participants must define the context of their actions. Taking place in a sexual setting, pain can actually be pleasurable. Outside of an erotic context pain is just as uncomfortable for them as it would be to anyone else. Climbers embrace a parallel mindset when they encounter pain or negative emotions during a climb. Since the situation has already been defined as one that is comfortable, stress relieving, and enjoyable, climbers interact with pain in such a way that it can be embraced, more so that in everyday life.

Injury (or Worse)

Injury differs from pain in that it is more objective; while the interpretation of the severity pain from the same source may vary by the individual, injury refers to “a breakdown in the structure of the body” (Howe 2001). Sports in general often include the potential for injury. Activities such as hockey, American football, and rugby involve frequent and violent collisions, and broken bones, torn ligaments, and concussions are common. Even sports that revolve less around collisions, such as baseball and basketball, include their fair share of these. Climbing is no different, and since those most at risk are the ones with the most ability and dedication to climbing (Wright, Royle, and Marshall

2001), the people I encountered at Summit had had their fair share of aches and pains. Almost every climber I met had sustained at least one small injury, and my interviewees were no different. One recalled, "I took a couple of really hard falls on vertical and injured my ankles. Didn't quite sprain, but they were totally messed up," while another explained, "I took a few months off because my fingers started swelling up from climbing. I was climbing too much." Indeed, since sport climbs involve more dynamic movements, there is incredible stress on the fingers that is only exacerbated by repetitive strain and overuse (Paige, Fiore, and Houston 1998).

I also fell victim to a few minor injuries during my time as a climber. Once, while bouldering at Summit, I took a long fall after unexpectedly slipping from an overhung section of the wall. I was almost at the top of the route, so the fall was quite far. Since it was unexpected, I was not prepared to land properly and I landed on one foot, which is the improper technique. Landing this way can lead to a twisted knee, which is exactly what happened to me. The injury wasn't serious, but I could not climb for a few days and even doing regular activities like walking semi-long distances or taking the stairs was a struggle. The continuous pain went away after about a week, but in the months following the fall my knee would flare up every ten days or so and I would feel occasional sharp pains.

My most painful series of injuries occurred on an outdoor lead climb. I was on a difficult climb, and unable to negotiate the crux, I attempted to climb around it. This led to me being about six feet above my last clip, but also about five feet to the left of it. I understood that this was a precarious position, but I felt

that it gave me my best chance of success. I ended up slipping from the wall, and since I was so far to the left of my last clip I swung like a pendulum as I fell. Swinging to the right, I grabbed the rope and braced for the incoming impact. My body rotated as I swung, and my right shoulder slammed into the rock. My right knee also banged into a jutting portion of the wall and both of my ankles sustained a few scratches, but the real damage was to my upper body. As I was lowered to the ground, my shoulder began to bleed a little from the cuts I sustained, but it was minor in comparison to the internal pain shooting through the entire area. Even immediately following the climb I could no longer lift my right arm above my shoulder, and in the week following the fall I was in near-constant pain. Luckily I did not climb again until the next weekend, and by then the pain was more manageable.

Perhaps my most visible injury happened a short while before this, after I had just learned to lead climb. Near the middle of the wall at Summit and well above my last clip, I took a fall of about seven feet. After completing the route, I was lowered to the ground and felt like the left side of my neck was bleeding. I put my hand to the area to check, and while the area felt sensitive there was no blood. I went to the bathroom to look at it, and staring in the mirror I noticed that had an enormous, horizontal rope burn running the length of my neck. Returning to the climbing area, I showed my fellow climbers, and to my surprise they all reacted in an extremely positive way. The common sentiment was that I was a "real climber" now, and some even congratulated me on the injury. While it was not a particularly painful injury, I was struck by these responses. I think part of

this was due to the fact that the burn looked much more painful than it actually felt, coupled with the fact that many climbers have been burned before. But others as saw it as a sort of rite of passage, a physical indication that I was "climbing hard." Indeed, one interviewee spoke about the calluses on their hands due to climbing, saying, "I love my calluses for some reason. When I tear my hands that's my battle scar. I love tearing my hands. Well I don't love it, but I think it's cool when you tape your hands and keep going anyway."

The way climbers relate to relatively minor injuries is similar to how they relate to pain. Pain is a physical manifestation of the hard work that goes into a route, and it is a way for the climber to feel like they have accomplished something beyond the emotional high of completing a route. Injuries, as long as they are fairly minor, can offer the same satisfaction. Even though my shoulder was in great pain after my outdoor lead fall, I still took quite a bit of satisfaction in having cuts and scratches to show for it. In my mind, no climber would ever sustain something like that from only doing low-grade, easy routes. My rope burn was similar, but much more visible, to the point where it became a sort of conversation starter when people would ask me how it happened.

Only one of my interviewees had sustained an injury that required medical attention beyond ice packs or athletic tape. This climber, while on top rope, had stretched to reach the above hold that was almost too far to grasp. After clutching it, the climber's feet slipped from their holds, and all of their downward force pulled on one finger that had worked into a crack on the wall. As the interviewee put it, "I heard a snap, it was audible." A ligament had ruptured, and they were

out of climbing for months afterward. Indeed, the most common injury site for climbers is the hand, specifically the fingers (Paige, Fiore, and Houston 1998). Typically, even the most serious climbing injuries are those that only keep a climber away from the sport for weeks or months at a time, and I never encountered anyone who knew of a climber who suffered a career ending or near fatal climbing accident.

Few mainstream sports have recently experienced the death of a player on the field of play as a direct result of the game. Early on, football and baseball players in the United States died during games, but governing organizations such as the NFL, MLB, and NCAA have changed rules over the years to ensure player safety. While there are legislating bodies for some lifestyle sports, these activities are generally undertaken by individuals without any connections to these agencies or any other official ruling body. Even recreational football and basketball leagues often have some type of small but formal organization; activities such as climbing are pursued mostly by amateurs, on their own and using their own equipment.

While never having resulted in mass deaths, some lifestyle sports do present more risk than others. More mainstream sports can cause extensive long-term damage to the body, although there are few modern cases of sudden deaths on the playing field due to an on-field action. While current and ongoing research seems to support the hypothesis that NFL players are more likely to develop chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) than the general public (Frontline 2014), CTE is a condition that still presents itself in the broader population, albeit at lower levels. Some lifestyle sports, however, can directly lead to the death of its

participants. For instance, big wave surfers can easily drown given certain conditions, and there are even instances of surfers dying while trying to save fellow surfers who are drowning (The Guardian 2014).

Overall, climbing deaths are rare, with Yosemite National Park in California, one of the most popular climbing areas in the world, experiencing an average of 2.5 deaths annually (National Park Service 2014). Despite this, each form of climbing, especially outdoor climbing that takes place on big walls presents the potential for serious injury or death. While permanent climbing gear is usually well maintained by parks and outdoor organizations, bolts in the wall can potentially become loose or fail. On top rope this can be fatal; while leading a route, a bolt that becomes loose can result in either a dramatic and harsh fall or the climber tumbling all the way to the ground below. A climber's own personal gear can also fail. Harnesses, ropes, carabiners, and quickdraws are almost always reliable and function as planned, but the possibility of failure, however slim, is always conceivable.

Probably the most likely scenario is human error. Tying knots inadequately, putting on a harness improperly, clipping into bolts incorrectly, or belaying poorly can lead to disaster. Even in a ferocious sport like boxing, an independent party checks the athletes' gear before the bout begins. In climbing, it's left up to the individuals themselves to maintain their equipment properly. While climbing deaths are rare, the potential is present more so than in many other sports and activities. Even experienced climbers have fallen victim to gear failures and human errors (Sy 2009; Portland Press Herald 2014; Warren 2014).

The climbers I encountered throughout my research were very aware of the dangers involved in their sport. As one interviewee stated, “The fact that you could die, I’m not going to lie, it’s there. I read two weeks ago that people died climbing, you know?” Despite this possibility, climbers continue to embrace the sport and push themselves further, even embracing the dangerous aspect specifically. As another interviewee stated, “I like climbing outside because it’s more dangerous. There’s nothing like it, it’s way better. Maybe it’s because there’s a ‘your life is at risk’ kind of aspect to the sport.” Indeed, while there is always risk involved in some lifestyle sports, most participants are not willing to take more than a manageable risk, since increasing risk leads to a decreased feeling of leisure due to fear (Stebbins 2007). Most of the climbers I encountered approached their climbs with a cost-benefit attitude: while they are willing to take a few risks on the wall, they never intentionally did anything so risky that it endangered them. The rewards to be gained from trying something extremely dangerous are not worth the potential hazards involved. Although climbers are willing to take measured risks, the risk involved in climbing is a “controlled risk” (West and Allin 2010). For instance, Bogardus (2012) found that regarding sport climbing, a common sentiment among traditional climbers is that the sport routes are bad because they “dumb down” the route to the bolter’s acceptable level of risk. Seeing sport climbers as lazy, cowardly, and selfish, they often seek to make it harder, not easier for themselves. One climber in her study is even quoted as saying, “It’s an adventure but not if you’re scared to break a leg.” But even following this mindset, traditional climbers still use different forms of protective

gear and rarely suffer fatal injuries from their sport. These particular traditional climbers may be willing to break a leg while climbing, but they still take enough protective measures to ensure that they will not die from climbing.

This controlled risk involves all of the aspects of climbing designed to protect people: ropes, harnesses, carabiners, bolts in the wall, specific ways of tying knots, established techniques for belaying, and a host of others. Taken in entirety, these help illustrate why exactly climbers approach the activity the way they do.

I have explored what kinds of favorable social milieu leads to the main demographic of rock climbers being middle class and suburban. But it is not enough to define how this pattern is reproduced. I wanted to know why this particular group keeps climbing throughout the years. Why do they *need* to climb?

CONCLUSIONS

In the simplest form, climbing should seemingly be about getting to the top of a rock wall. But among serious climbers, this is not the case. They climb, but only in very specific ways. If it were only about getting to the top of the wall, we would use ladders, build stairs, or simply find an easier route and hike there. Instead, these particular groups of people decide to use possibly the most physically difficult method of accomplishing the task. The activity that rock climbers participate in isn't practical; it is not about getting to the top of the wall at all. For them, climbing is not only the action of getting from the ground to the peak: it is about the experience. Not just *having* an experience, but creating a *certain type* of experience.

Climbers, especially middle class suburban climbers, need this particular experience. Climbing gives them a chance to embark in something that they rarely get to do. We currently live in a society of increasing structure, regulation, and technological advancement. Through the generations we have had to exert less and less physical effort to acquire food, shelter, and protect ourselves. Rock climbing gives middle class, suburban individuals, those who occupy generally comfortable spaces of our society, an environment in which they can experience pain and flirt with danger.

Even if sport climbing seems like something very natural and primal, it is still extremely controlled. It sometimes does not *feel* that way on the wall, but without an equipment failure or tremendous human error the climber is almost guaranteed to reach the ground safely. Yet that feeling is key to the experience;

climbers create an environment in which they can do something that feels primal and dangerous while knowing that the risk of death is actually very slim. For the typical suburban, middle class individual, this level of pain and feeling of risk is almost completely absent from their home lives. So they seek to create a setting where these things can be felt without a substantial chance of actual danger. While climbing, especially outdoors, does present the risk of death, the average climber will never experience anything more severe than a broken bone or achy joints.

While it might seem strange that a group with substantial economic, social, and cultural capital would voluntarily take part in an activity that presents the strong possibility of fear, anxiety, pain, and injury, it is not all that strange when we consider the social space that they occupy. In daily life, we can be quite functional and productive without ever having to embrace these seemingly undesirable entities. But when we are almost completely separated from these particular negative aspects of life, we sometimes long for their reacquisition because they make us feel more "alive." Rock climbing gives these particular individuals a place to embrace the aspects of their lives that they do not, or no longer, have a change to enjoy.

Notes:

[1]Although I participated in both bouldering and sport climbing, the experiences I refer to throughout the narrative are in reference to outdoor sport climbing unless otherwise noted.

[2]While there are other methods, most notable traditional climbing, the only techniques practiced at Summit (and the main methods used by the climbers I encountered both at Summit and outdoors) were sport climbing and bouldering.

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