Questioning policy, youth participation and lifestyle sports

Abstract

Young people have been identified as a key target group for whom participation in sport and physical activity could have important benefits to health and wellbeing and consequently have been the focus of several government policies to increase participation in the UK. Lifestyle sports represent one such strategy for encouraging and sustaining new engagements in sport and physical activity in youth groups, however, there is at present a lack of understanding of the use of these activities within policy contexts. This paper presents findings from a government initiative which sought to increase participation in sport for young people through provision of facilities for mountain biking in a forest in South East England. Findings from qualitative research with 40 young people who participated in mountain biking at the case study location highlight the importance of non-traditional sports as a means to experience the natural environments through forms of consumption which are healthy, active and appeal to their identities. In addition, however, the paper raises questions over the accessibility of schemes for some individuals and social groups, and the ability to incorporate sports which are inherently participant led into state managed schemes. Lifestyle sports such as mountain biking involve distinct forms of participation which present a challenge for policy makers who seek to create and maintain sustainable communities of youth participants.

Key words: lifestyle sports, youth, policy, countryside, physical activity

Introduction

The potential role of sport and physical activity in improving the health and wellbeing of populations has been recognised on a global scale. Physical inactivity is identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2010) as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality. In the UK, national and international white papers are centred on improving health through the promotion of physical activity across the lifespan (Commission of the European Communities, 2007; Department of Health [DH], 2010). These policies engender a commitment to inclusive practices in public engagement and are therefore focussed on improving engagement with physical activity across the population but particularly amongst key target groups. Young people have been highlighted as one of these target groups who are currently under-represented, under participating, or requiring outreach or inclusion initiatives in terms of sport and physical activity.

For young people in particular, lifestyle sports have been recognised by policy makers as an opportunity to encourage and sustain new engagements in sport and physical activity by new user groups (Tomlinson, Ravenscroft, Wheaton & Gilchrist 2005). Government funding has the importance of offering different opportunities to those who do not participate in more traditional, school based or team sports. This paper explores one such initiative which sought to engage young people in physical activity though the provision of facilities for mountain biking funded through the national 'Active England' programme. Evaluation of this initiative stressed the importance of non-traditional sporting activities for attracting hard to reach youth groups (Hall Aitken & Bearhunt, 2009), yet understanding of these activities within sport policy contexts is limited (Gilchrest & Wheaton 2011). This paper focuses on the experience of youth mountain biker to provide insights into some of the complexities of adopting of lifestyle sports as a tool for inclusive practices in delivery of policy for sport and health.

The policy agenda: sport and health

National policies concerning sport and health share synergies across the issue of inclusivity. The recent health white paper 'healthy lives, healthy people', for example, places emphasis on the promotion of healthier lifestyles and behaviour and the reduction of health inequalities (DH, 2010). This vision is dependent in part upon creating a wider culture of physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour across the population, but particularly amongst key target groups (Department for Culture Media & Sport [DCMS] & Strategy Unit, 2002; DH, 2010). A report by Foresight at the Government Office for Science (2007), predicts a growth of 14% in the prevalence of obesity among people under 20 between 2004 and 2025 and young people have been identified as group whose participation in physical activity is also considered low. National statistics report only 24% of children aged 4-15 and 52% of 16-24 year olds met the government recommendations for physical activity in 2008 (Craig, Mindell & Hirani, 2009). It has also been observed that participation in physical activity falls dramatically after leaving school (DCMS & Strategy Unit, 2002; DCMS, 2012).

For young people, regular exercise can contribute to the promotion of healthy weight, enhanced bone and cardio-metabolic health and improved psychological well-being (DH, 2011a) whilst sport activities are also considered to play an important role in addressing youth anti-social behaviour and reducing youth crime (Nicholls, 2007). In addition research has the benefits to physical, psychological and social health associated with visiting the countryside for young people (Bell, Ward Thompson & Travlou, 2003; Bingley & Milligan, 2007, and the links between spending times outdoors and increased levels of physical activity (Henwood, 2001; Bird, 2004).The choices young people make about the spaces and activities they encounter during their leisure time are therefore considered as crucial to the development of healthy lifestyles in youth and can further contribute to the future development of healthy lifestyles and behaviour into adulthood (Thompson, Rehman & Humbert, 2005).

Consequently, young people have been the subject of tailored policy strategies to improve their opportunities to engage in physical activity. Mass participation projects such as 'places, people, play' linked with the legacy commitments of the Olympic and Paralympics Games have sought to harness a '2012 effect' and increase participation in Olympic sports across the population, but place a focus on the development of grassroots participation for young people (see DCMS, 2010). In addition to increasing overall participation in sport for young people, government policy has identified the reduction of youth 'drop out' from sport and physical activity at school leaving age as a key strategic priority through schemes such as 'Sportivate', 'Active England' and Games4life'(DCMS, 2012). The government's Youth Sport Strategy (DCMS, 2012) aims to consistently increase the number of 14-25 year olds in developing sport as a habit for life. New guidelines have also been issued recommending at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day and highlighting the importance of avoiding sedentary behaviours for children and young people (DH, 2011b).

In addition to issues surrounding participation in sport and physical activity, there is also a policy concern that young people are spending less time outdoors during their leisure time than previously, existing in what some refer to as 'an increasingly physically restricted environment' (Riddoch & McKenna, 2005 p. 196). Young people aged between 16 and 24 years are amongst those least likely to visit the countryside (Natural England, 2012) and government policy in relation to the countryside has acknowledged an absence of young people. The recent natural environment white paper cited reconnecting children and young people with the natural environment as a key priority (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2011; also see Louv, 2005; O'Brien & Weldon, 2007).

Policy initiatives have therefore focussed on both promoting active forms of sport and leisure for young people, some of which are also focused on increasing their engagement with the countryside. Many government schemes developed through these policies have focused on providing infrastructure for sport and physical activity based on the premise that access to these facilities is a significant barrier to participation (see Wicker, Breuer & Pawlowski, 2009). Of particular significance in these contexts is the emergence of funding initiatives which target young people through provision of infrastructure for participation in lifestyle sports.

Lifestyle sports and public policy

Lifestyle sports refer to a range of land, air and water based activities such as BMX, mountain biking, skateboarding, snowboarding and surfing and encompass a wide variety of experiences often understood as 'adventurous' 'extreme', or importantly as 'alternative' from dominant or traditional sports (Wheaton, 2004). Whilst dichotomies of 'traditional' versus 'alternative' may oversimplify the complexities of participation in either domain, commentators have argued that lifestyle sports embody a more playful approach to the participation experience than that offered by traditional sports. Lifestyle sports are considered to adopt a more relaxed approach to leisure, an emphasis on 'grass roots' participation', the privileging of individuality over a team orientation and participant rather than institutional control (Rinehart, 2002; Beal & Weidman, 2003; Tomlinson et al., 2005; Edensor & Richards, 2007; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011).The alternative ethos characterising these sports, and the different types of participation experiences they involve, can therefore offer important options for policy makers who are practicing inclusivity, with potential for attracting new participants to sport and physical activity amongst those whose engagement with conventional sporting forms may be weak.

Lifestyle sports report the highest rates of participation amongst children and young people under 25 years (Mintel, 2005) and hold important connections with youth culture which could enable young people to participate in different ways than may be available through 'traditional' school or club led sports. Gilchrist and Wheaton (2011) highlight the inability of traditional sports to meet government targets on participation in relation to hard to reach groups and the possibilities lifestyle sports offer for expanding participation in groups such as young people, particularly those traditionally associated with low participation such as young women and young people from socially disadvantaged groups. Lifestyle sports are also often performed in natural and outdoor environments. These activities are therefore particularly significant in relation to government targets to encourage healthier lifestyle choices in youth, and for those policies specifically targeting 'hard to reach' groups or seeking to encourage young people's engagement with the natural environment.

Lifestyle sports and youth cultures share synergies in their performance and consumption (Edensor & Richards, 2007; Thorpe, 2004) with both theorised as self generated forms of leisure in which participants are active in the construction of culture and identity (Crouch & Tomlinson, 1994; Wheaton, 2004). Young people consume leisure as part of wider lifestyle projects; their experiences acting as a platform and a social context upon which young people can shape their lifestyles and identities. Similarly, for lifestyle sport participants, the sport or leisure experience can provide symbolic meaning, enabling participants to tailor their identities in line with other cultural preferences such as art, music and fashion resulting in distinctive lifestyles which transcend sport alone (Wheaton, 2004; 2010). Leisure practice is therefore expressive of identity. The collection of tastes, styles and aesthetic signs associated with the activity allow individuals to develop and express a meaningful identity and maintain social distinction between themselves and others. Tomlinson et al. (2005 p.34) have argued that this link to identity and lifestyle and the appeal of different forms of

participation than provided through 'traditional' sports, could see lifestyle sports playing an important role in the physical activity agenda for young people:

> '...given the continuing decline in curriculum physical activity at school and the often limited availability of non-school sports activities, regular participation in lifestyle sports between the ages of 15 and 24 could be highly significant in terms of government targets'

Whilst the opportunities lifestyle sports could offer for policies which seek to engage young people in physical activity have received some attention, Tomlinson et al. (2005) suggest that further consideration is needed to examine how institutionalised forms of provision for lifestyle sports are really received by participants (also see Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011). Lifestyle sport theorists have documented a range of critical issues which could present complex challenges surrounding their compatibility with public policies which are seeking to promote inclusivity in access to sport which require further consideration. For example, the resistance of lifestyle sporting groups to authority (e.g. Coates et al., 2010), mainstream sport (e.g. Rinehart, 2002), and processes of commercialisation (e.g. Wheaton, 2005; Edwards & Corte, 2010) have received considerable attention in the literature as issues which increasingly permeate the lifestyle sportscape. These processes complicate their position as the default alternative to traditional or conventional sports which has been heralded as important for policymakers. Some have argued that processes of commercialisation have lowered the threshold for participation in these sports providing safer, more convenient, and sometimes cheaper forms of access, particularly for new participants, for example through 'indoorisation' of sports such as snowboarding and rock climbing (Salome & van Bottenburg, 2012). Others, however, have documented the opposition of insiders within the lifestyle sport community to the influx of new participants resulting from commercialisation and increased media interest where contestation between participants can occur (Wheaton, 2005; Edensor & Richards, 2007; Waitt, 2008)

Lifestyle sport groups have been exposed as tribal in nature (e.g. Wheaton, 2004a; Edensor & Richards, 2007), and in some cases as distinct and even insular social worlds (Crosset & Beal, 1997). Ingham & Mcdonald (2003 p.19) have argued, within certain sporting cultures, ''community' suggests both an appeal to the included, but equally an unspoken understanding of just who is *not* a part of our 'community''. Integration of new users therefore presents a key challenge for policies seeking to increase participation amongst non user groups. Roberts (2011) suggests we need to be cautious about claims that leisure activities such as lifestyle sports can acts as basic identities for individuals, citing inequalities in access to the opportunities to build a preferred leisure identity. Whilst for young people, these activities may retain more significance, he argues that leisure can only ever introduce temporary embellishments to our core identities which are rooted in our occupations, ethnicities, sex and family roles which may prevent participation more for some social groups than others.

There are undoubtedly important links between lifestyle sports and youth culture which could have significant implications across policy agendas, particularly for those which share a commitment to increasing young people's participation in physically active forms of leisure. Yet despite significant critical debates within the literature surrounding the nature of participation, there is currently little consideration of the way in which lifestyle sports that are delivered and managed by policy are actually experienced by actors in this form. This paper responds to these debates especially over access and inclusion through consideration of some of the key issues surrounding state funded and managed policy initiatives to engage target groups and achieve the utilisation of facilities at a case study location.

Inclusivity and lifestyle sports: the research context

In 2005, the Forestry Commission received funding form the national 'Active England' campaign to redevelop five forest sites focused on enhancing health and wellbeing of key target groups whose participation is under-represented in sport (O'Brien & Morris, 2009). These target groups were identified under the agenda of social inclusion as people on low incomes, people with disabilities, women and girls, people from black and ethnic minority groups, people over 45 years of age and young people under 16 years of age. Utilising Active England funding, Bedgebury Forest in South East England was redeveloped from a working timber forest to a sport and leisure destination orientated towards encouraging active lifestyles for target groups which included facilities for mountain biking aimed at encouraging access and use by young people.

Mountain biking which is often performed in woodlands and upland forests, is considered to achieve many positive benefits associated with performing sport in natural environments such as socialisation, confidence building, as well as benefits to mental and physical health and wellbeing (EKOS Ltd & Tourism Resource Company, 2007; Burr, Taylor Durey, Ivey & Warburton, 2012; King and Church, 2013). Facilities at the case study location included a family cycle trail of 10km and a more challenging 13km forest single-track for cross country mountain biking, which is focused on endurance and performed on 'hardtail' mountain bikes which have front suspension but no rear suspension. It also included a freeride area aimed particularly towards young people by providing more risky cycling terrain for 'dirtjump' and' freeride' forms of mountain biking, and a place for participants to congregate away from the other family centred areas of the forest. Additional opportunities to facilitate participation by young people included regular youth coaching, youth racing events and an on-site cycle club. During the period of investment, visitor numbers rose from just under 51,000 in 2005/6 to just over 273,000 in 2007/8 (O'Brien & Morris, 2009), although data on young people under 16 years was not collected.

This paper draws upon the findings of empirical research conducted with 40 young people who took part in off road cycling at Bedgebury in 2008. The research contributed to a wider programme of monitoring and evaluation of the Bedgebury project's objectives to increase physical activity levels in green spaces for target groups. The specific aim of the research was to explore lifestyle and identity formation of young people who visit countryside spaces for leisure (King & Church, 2013). Ethnographic techniques were employed to obtain an understanding of these worlds as it is experienced by those who actually live in them (Crang & Cook, 2007). Any young people who visited this location for off road cycling were therefore included in the sample accommodating a wide variety of 'youth' experiences rather than narrowing to become representative of pre identified target groups. Participants of the study aged between 13 and 25 years old, of whom ten per cent were female and therefore the sample includes some of the groups targeted by the Active England policy objectives for inclusivity in outdoors and health.

Recruitment of the participants was achieved primarily through direct contact with the local mountain biking community within the forest, through online forums, at local meetings, at specific events and performed secondarily through snowballing. The majority of participants lived within a 15 mile radius of the main case study location, many in nearby towns or cities but nearly half also lived in villages or rural areas. All participants identified themselves as 'mountain bikers' with the exception of two BMX participants. Nevertheless mountain biking participation is not homogenous and participants further identified themselves as dirt jump, downhill, freeride or cross country mountain bikers according to their own participation preferences and the differentiated lifestyles and identities attached to these sub-disciplines.

Research methods

The methodology was formed evoking Wolcott's (1999 p.46) 'ethnographic mindset' by privileging the 'experiencing, enquiring and examining' processes of research. It was a central methodological concern 'to keep the socialities of cycling in the context of their inherent mobility as far as possible' Spinney (2006 p.716) and therefore a mix of methods was employed in different combinations according to the participants style of engagement, levels of skill, previous experience, and choice of mountain biking discipline. All participants took part in some form of mobile element and a static interview.

The mobile elements of the methodology followed Kusenbach's (2003) ethnographic principles of go-alongs, where fieldworkers join individual informants on their 'natural' outings, exploring their stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment. Mobile methods included a mobile interview or a mobile observation. Mobile interviews were performed with cross country mountain bikers where the researcher accompanied participants on a route they had chosen within the forest and discussions were recorded. In one case three participants chose to cycle without the researcher and in this instance recordings took the form of unsolicited mobile diaries which documented self-reflective participant narratives and the interactions between participants as they travelled. Mobile observations were designed for young people who chose to perform dirt-jump, downhill, bmx or 'freeride' and were conducted in the freeride area of the case study location. Participants of these disciplines performed high speed, highly skilled forms of mobility interspersed with periods of rest where participants would congregate to watch others, swap techniques and socialise in a sequence of events referred to by participants as 'sessioning'. The researcher visited the space and observed this practice alongside the participant but did not always move with them. This did not restrict the respondent from movement, nor preclude the researcher from being involved in the 'session'.

All respondents also took part in semi structured interviews, which were performed at the case study site, but in spaces chosen by participants. Participants were also offered the choice of group or individual interviews. Group interviews were appropriate for some young people may feel more confident to talk as part of a group with their friends, often maintaining the social context of the mountain biking experience. Others preferred the privacy of an individual interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2010) and this was also accommodated.

The community of mountain biking was played out at the case study location but also in local and virtual spaces beyond and participants drew upon these experiences in their accounts. These included local fields and woodlands, areas of derelict land, as well as some urban sites such as skate parks, car parks and pedestrianised high streets, as well as online social media spaces. Participants invited the researcher to join a local online forum for mountain bikers and this provided an additional thread of research. The forum provided a space to discuss issues relating to local spaces such as trail conditions and access issues, or other lifestyle issues surrounding equipment, riding techniques or to post photographs and videos. Fourteen participants gave permission for their posts to be discussed during interviews and included in the research.

This assemblage of qualitative methods produced interview transcripts, field diaries with observation notes and post ride reflections, and forum transcripts. The data generated via each method was analysed through a process of thematic analysis following an inductive approach as outlined by Boyatztis (1998). Codes were built up through an iterative process of categorising data into meaningful analytical units, upon which the relationships between themes and codes were explored. All participants chose a pseudonym to represent them in the research.

Lifestyle sports, space and ownership

Theorisations of lifestyles sports have recognised that the distinctive relationship between participants and the spaces in which they locate their activities can be heavily influenced by the formal or informal control of that space and the interactions with other user groups. Access to lifestyle sporting spaces can be constrained by tribal animosity and conflict both within and between recreational user groups, as well as by official sanctions and policing (e.g. Henio, 2000; Edensor & Richards, 2007; Bogardus, 2012). These issues are especially pertinent for young people who, independently, are constructed as problematic users of public space and subjected to surveillance, exclusion or restrictions in their use of public areas as social venues (Hil & Bessant, 1999; Valentine, 2004; Macdonald and Shildrick, 2007; Brown, 2013). They are also relevant for performing lifestyle sports as both Borden (2001) & Eubanks Owens (2002), for example, explored the marginalisation of youth skateboarders from urban public space in the US, arguing the sport has been effectively criminalised by laws prohibiting participation in public space. Thus for many youth lifestyle sport participants, marginal, grassroots, or 'found' spaces afford the best opportunity to exercise some autonomy over space, away from the gaze of others or conflicts with other user groups (Borden, 2001; Rinehart & Grenfall, 2002; Eubanks Owens, 2002).

In part, the rural nature of the Bedgebury case study site provided mountain biking participants with what Shields (1991) terms a space upon the margin, enabling participants to perform identities, negotiate social relationships and exercise empowerment more freely than in urban sites they visited. The presence of other users was considered to be minimal and intervention from rangers and management staff to be low.

Damien (18) :   'It's just like quiet and you do what you wanna do and there's no-one telling you what to do, there's no-one for miles around. It's much more freer sort of thing...that's part of the reason we're in the woods though...is to get away from other people'

Minty (17) :   'Skate parks are one of those places which I would go to if there was no one else there, because you get people there that…. people who just stand there and do nothing they just watch, you think you're just getting rated, and you just think I'm not having fun really I'm just trying not to fall off, I'm not trying anything new cos I don't want to look like an idiot'

As in urban areas, however, the countryside has also been theorised as a contested leisure space, particularly for young people who are themselves subject to socio-spatial processes of exclusion and marginalisation (Bell et al., 2003; Leyshon, 2011), and when new recreational groups make claims to these environments (Church & Ravenscroft, 2007). As a sport performed largely in the countryside, mountain biking itself has been described in terms of 'controversy and discord' (Hollenhorst, Schuett, Olson & Chavez, 1995 p.41) and mountain bikers have earned a reputation as irresponsible users of the countryside (Chavez, 1997; Ruff & Mellors, 1993; Dougill & Stroh, 2001). These debates are reflected in the accounts of participants in this research.

Forum Extract :   'It's kind of boring that in society bikers are the bad people who are told off wherever they ride. I'm getting tired of it...We are not allowed to ride on our local commons, but horses can. Why? Because we cause more erosion (?) Apparently we can ride on the road instead. Err no thanks...It seems that everyone in public is prepared to treat us like we are in the

way and being a nuisance doing our own thing. Perhaps we better take up hiking instead?'

The case study location provided a solution to some of these issues by allowing sanctioned access to countryside spaces for mountain bikers. The forest itself has demarcated trails which prioritised mountain bikers over other users. It was considered to foster a supportive atmosphere towards beginner participants and provided youth specific spaces such as the designated 'freeride area' where young people were able to congregate in groups without the fear of being removed.

Robin (15) :   'It's a designated space you don't have to worry about ooh I shouldn't be riding here'

Harry (16) :   'Everyone's very friendly here'

The sense of ownership drawn formed through the collective occupation of particular leisure spaces is recognised as an important and valuable process invested with meaning for young people (Robinson 2009). For youth mountain bikers a sense of ownership over the leisure environment was recognised as hugely important in maintaining a connection with the lifestyle. Participants often expressed enthusiasm for becoming involved in the design, construction and decision making processes at both state managed and privately accessed cycling spaces, as an assertion of ownership, with some identifying themselves as 'the locals'. At one end of the spectrum the locals were a group of mountain bikers those who visited a space more regularly than others, at the extreme, they were a group of riders who represented the core values of mountain biking culture, policing the space as overseers of 'their' territory. In either case, and in keeping with extensive discussions surrounding localism in surfing (Lanagan, 2003; Waitt, 2008; Waitt and Frazer, 2012; Olivier, 2010), the locals were considered a powerful group, and respondents discussed behaving in appropriate, respectful ways towards these individuals.

Chimp (24) :   'A local is someone who probably rides there every day or tries to make an effort to go there as often as they can and they maintain it, go up there and build new lines and that….like at the trails, if the locals are there you should always make an effort to say hello, you say alright just be courteous really….even if you don't know them'

As locals, being involved in building and shaping of jumps and trails was hugely important, however, at the case study location, it was not permitted for youth mountain bikers to alter cycle trails independently. Youth participants were invited to take part in the development and maintenance of the forest spaces on 'dig days' organised through the local cycle club and there was some encouragement for young people to liaise with forest management over the development of new facilities. Nevertheless some participants did report feeling marginalised from decision making processes in the management of facilities and indicated that there was a lack of youth representation and involvement.

Researcher :   'So do you think you get a say in what happens here?'

Nichols (16) :   'Um not as much as I'd like, just put it like that'

Forum Extract :   'The main problem is the freeriders[1] have always been in the minority'

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[1] Freeriders were largely a 'youth' mountain biking group whose activities were concentrated in the freeride area which included dirt jumps and raised wooden features as opposed to standard trails.

Whilst there was a desire to be involved in some cases, such as for the locals, the nature of this involvement was nuanced and not universally embraced. Lifestyle sport participants are often characterised by their resistance to authority, external regulation, and in some cases, to mainstream society. Rinehart (2007), for example, claims participants assert identities of the out of bounds 'outsider' as a form of opposition to normative society and normative ways of 'doing' sport. The respondents in this study valued mountain biking for its onus on participant made rules and the absence of 'adult' intervention or regulation in the ways in which they participated. Despite the perception of a general distance between forest managers and youth user groups, many participants rejected formalising their involvement through club membership or organised 'dig days' because it did not fit with their own style of participation.

Researcher :   'Do you belong to any clubs or anything?'

Sarah (24) :   'No. I've thought about it but it seems like it would be deadly serious cross country-ers, it doesn't seem very approachable, it means organisation and I have a bit more of a relaxed attitude to riding my bike'

Participants such as Sarah continued to seek marginal or 'found' spaces (Borden, 2001), referred to within this study as 'secret spots'[2] which were unsanctioned, but enabled them to design trails, build jumps and without intervention from management, albeit, frequently on a temporary basis. Despite sometimes involving trespassing on private land or paying for access, these sites offered young people more challenging terrain, less negotiation with authorities and more of an 'involved' experience than at the state managed site.

Jimmy (18):   'I used to have my own downhill track where I was more involved in it, you know working with the woods, cutting up bits of wood, shaping the environment'

These findings raise important considerations for policy driven provision for lifestyle sports which seek to be inclusive to youth groups. Whilst participation at the case study site was not heavily overseen by managers, some of these more formal mechanisms for inclusion appeared to challenge the sense of irreverence which characterises young people's interest in participating in these activities. The case study area clearly provided a preferred alternative to some of the other leisure spaces young people encountered, particularly those which are heavily populated such as skate parks. Nevertheless in this case, the deeper sense of ownership and involvement was limited by a lack of provision for related activities such as building and designing jumps and trails independently.

Negotiating ethos, etiquette and identity

It is argued that lifestyle sport communities place central importance on the individual expression of identity and the social relationships formed between participants who share the same cultural values, attitudes and ethos (Wheaton, 2010). For the participants in the Bedgebury case study the meaning of mountain biking extends beyond performance of the sport, for example, being a mountain biker meant being part of a mountain biking community with much of the activity taking part collectively through 'sessioning', building or riding trails together. In comparison to team

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[2] Secret spots were often situated on private land and designed and built by the youth mountain biking community. These spaces were often removed by landowners or other users once found.

orientated or mainstream sports, a mountain biking lifestyle was considered more accessible and inclusive for young people.

James (17) :   'If you can pedal then you're part of the community'

Minty (17) :   'I don't like mainstream sports, I don't like it, I find it...god this is one of those subjects I could talk for ages, like my brothers are in a hockey team, roller hockey, and they like try it all the time, they're always doing it, but there are people in the team that are better than them and they never get to play and it's just not my idea of fun, like I can go out on my bike and ride when I want and whatever, how I want'

On the one hand, mountain biking offered young people a different value system to that of mainstream sports where crucially the approval of one's peers as opposed to that of an adult or external organisation was the measure of prestige (Midol, 1993). Acceptance by this community was, however, by no means assured.

Members of the Bedgebury youth mountain biking community are linked through the sharing of sporting knowledges, codes and rituals. Inclusion in the community was dependent upon the correct interpretation and expression of these, referred to as 'etiquette'. For example, at the case study site young people described what they termed an 'etiquette' to entering the sport associated with the ways in which cycling equipment was acquired, used and displayed. The extracts below describe an emphasis on buying and displaying expensive equipment as examples of poor etiquette (also see Wheaton, 2003)

Pete (22) :   '...they like to buy their way in to the sport rather than starting where everybody else starts with a rubbish bike, breaking it, upgrading it and getting in that way and they don't know the etiquette of being there'

Forum Extract :   'Something a lot of our local spots seem to suffer from are riders who are more interested in talking about your bike/their bike etc and how great they are rather than riding....probably because mummy and daddy have spent a lot of money on someone's rig'

Etiquette extended most significantly to the appropriateness of practice in space, notably towards the expression of skill and sharing of space. In the excerpt below, the respondent identifies what he terms a 'trail etiquette' in relation to the sharing of space within the freeride area.

Chimp (24) :   '..it's this kid, I don't like him because he hasn't got any trail etiquette or anything, just shows up doesn't talk to anyone just pulls out really big tricks just to show off and then blows out the landings...like if you are trying to do a trick over a jump and you keep messing it up the worst you can do is like snaking it'

Here, the participant described how 'snaking[3]' involved an inappropriate display of skill and overly competitive attitude. Demonstrating an understanding of the etiquette and ethos and performing this in appropriate ways was crucial for some participants in order to be able to fully participate in the lifestyle. Etiquette worked to identify what MacRae (2004) has referred to as 'typical constructs' within the leisure community; that is those who share similar knowledge, attitudes and behaviour

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[3] Snaking is an issue over the sharing of space and involves stealing another rider's line and performing the same trick, or cutting in as another rider is 'dropping in' for a jump.

which symbolises both who they are and who they are not. In this case, however, etiquette was as much a tool for social identification and evoking belonging, as it was for differentiation and exclusivity. Within youth mountain biking communities there was some opposition to sharing spaces with particular groups and individuals who did not demonstrate etiquette in the sharing of space. Etiquette operated beyond the rules outlined by forest managers, and in some cases served to exclude individuals from full involvement in the mountain biking community some of which may have been those which policies and funding streams were working to include.

Exclusionary politics in managed space

Youth mountain biking lifestyles associated with the case study site were typified by a multitude of consumption practices, attitudes and values but also according to traditional markers such as gender, age and social class. Lifestyle sports have been identified as an 'active battleground' for cultural significance and therefore not immune to issues such as social class, race and gender, however, whilst gender has received considerable attention (e.g. Waitt, 2008; Atencio, Beal and Wilson, 2009; Wheaton, 2009; Huybers-Withers &Livingstone, 2010) research has tended to focus on the lives of the white and the culturally affluent (Henio, 2000). Key writers in youth studies have also asserted that class is frequently ignored despite evidence to suggest that older traditional social divisions clearly underpin some of the cultural hierarchies associated with youth leisure lifestyles (MacRae, 2004; Macdonald & Shildrick, 2007; Roberts, 2011). At the case study locations three groups who were specifically identified within policy as target groups were women and girls, people on low incomes and young people under 16 years of age. Each of these groups was subject to marginalisation by the core community of mountain bikers.

In line with Huybers Withers and Livingstone (2010) mountain biking is a gendered lifestyle sport experience affecting the nature of participation for young women. For example women's experiences of mountain biking were often negotiated through the construction of risk and competition as traditionally masculine or as 'too muddy for girls' [Chimp, 24].

Hank (25) :   'It's pretty boring if you don't think you're gonna come off at some point, hurt yourself, especially if you're male'

Sharpshooter (21) :   'Well it's a bit of a macho sport really isn't it….you think oh you can't do that, I can do it better, quicker, stronger, faster'

There were often contradictions in these readings with many expressing support for female mountain biking, but similar to the findings of Waitts' (2008) research on surfing, this support could still be marred by sexist undertones where women's legitimacy is based on the potential to fulfil heterosexual desires.

Minty (17) :   'I'll just get a girl who likes riding. That's what I'm trying to do with the one I've got now…I'm working on it'

Some young women described feeling marginalised from the community preferring to cycle on their own or to distance themselves from their male counterparts for fear of being judged. One woman in particular felt scared of 'doing the wrong thing' and breaching the complicated etiquette involved in accessing these spaces.

Anne-Marie (19) :   'If people watch me, I feel a bit self-conscious and get more scared. I don't like people watching me and I don't want to be the one holding everyone else up'

Whilst in theory women were welcomed into the community, the experience for women often depended upon being accepted as 'one of the lads' [Sarah, 24].

More overt exclusionary attitudes were directed towards young people from nearby socially rented housing. Youth mountain biking lifestyles were clearly affected by social divisions and participants stigmatised young people who didn't mountain bike 'because they can't afford it' [Minty, 17]. At the case study site the presence of these young people was often discussed, with participants adopting derogatory terms such as 'pikeys' or 'chavs'

Kona Owner (15) :   'You know [location a] and [location b]? There's a pikey estate round there, you know a council estate, and they all come from over there....they're rubbish and I'm not kidding there was this kid and he was 9, or 8 and he had a fag in his mouth. They come to [location c] as well, they follow us'

Damien (18):   'They're pikeys ….they just wanna wreck stuff'

These young people did not always visit mountain biking spaces to take part in sport and were not considered to be part of the community. They did not adhere to the social conduct and etiquette, sometimes adopting more confrontational behaviour such as smoking, drinking or damaging trails and participants described feeling threatened by their presence. In some cases, participants described efforts to exclude these groups from involvement in the community, or from accessing cycle spaces altogether.

Minty (17) :   'I want to be an instructor. I like to help people I'd rather not rate them but help. I rate people if they're really chavvy though, I just won't go near them'

James (17) :   'You just have to make sure the people who are undesirable don't come back again

Fear over gangs, 'loitering youths' and practices such as drink and drug use, particularly in urban fringe woodlands is well documented (Bell et al., 2003; Ward Thompson, Travlou & Roe, 2006), yet there is little written about the fear surrounding the interactions between young people from different socio economic backgrounds who share leisure spaces. People from low income groups were identified as a key target group at the case study site, however, their use of the forest did not secure them access to the core lifestyle sport community.

Younger mountain bikers were another group targeted specifically by the funding at the case study location and who were also subjected to internal exclusionary politics by the locals and other actors inside the core. These individuals aged under 16 were frequently considered problematic in their performance of the sport because of poor etiquette such as littering, making noise, altering pre-existing routes and damaging facilities.

Boris (16) :   'Generally older riders do have that right mindset'

Nichols (18):   'The kids just don't understand it yet'

Sarah (24) :   'I tend to think little kids don't really appreciate the woodland and don't really care about the forest, unlike the older people who realise if you start to trash the place there isn't going to be anywhere to ride'

Therefore, underlying some of these discussions was the feeling that poor etiquette may result in the entire community being expelled from the space. Under this premise both younger riders and young people from socially rented housing, were identified as 'risky' by core mountain bikers because their behaviour could result in conflict with other users or with forest managers, and because of their failure to interpret the norms surrounding etiquette . Crucially, therefore, the very nature of these internal policies and practices within lifestyle sporting groups can result in the exclusion or marginalisation of 'hard to reach' groups which government initiatives are specifically aiming to engage.

Conclusion

Lifestyle sports can make an important contribution to agendas which aim to promote the role of physical activity for young people. For Wheaton (2010) even in commercialised or institutionalised forms, the main emphasis of these sporting cultures is on active participation in the sport, a crucial point for policies seeking to leverage increased participation physical activity. Equally, their relevance and application can extend to recreation and access policies which seek to (re)engage young people with the countryside. Young people are most likely to cite a lack of interest as a main barrier to participation in leisure activities in the natural environment (Natural England, 2012) yet this research has demonstrated the value young people place on these areas as settings for the performance of mountain biking. Through lifestyle sports, young people can experience natural environments through forms of consumption which are healthy and active, but also symbolic and expressive of identity. Nevertheless the findings from this research into young people and mountain biking raise questions over the efficacy of such a model for increasing and sustaining participation in physical activity for all young people, particularly for those within traditionally hard to reach groups.

Belonging is central to the experience of lifestyle sports, to both other members of the community and to the spaces within which their lifestyles are situated. In this research at the Bedgebury case study site, however, different participants were either empowered or excluded through their relationships with other members of the lifestyle. Young people's access to leisure space involves the negotiation of various power relations, but for some the sense of exclusion created by these negotiations was a significant influence on their experience of mountain biking and the spaces provided by a policy initiative. Youth mountain bikers displayed territorial behaviour, distinguishing between insiders and outsiders in cycle spaces by employing etiquette. Etiquette was dependent upon the ability to demonstrate the correct social attributes and the performance of the appropriate social conduct yet these rules were not fixed but nuanced and fluid constructs, individually interpreted and reinterpreted by participants. This led to exclusionary practices directed at women, riders under 16 and young people living in socially rented housing. The findings demonstrate the fractious nature of lifestyle sporting groups which are dependent upon the (re)negotiation and (re)presentations of the self, of authenticity and of the rules. By their nature these individualised sports are not intended for mass consumption but for the culturally affluent and adept. Whilst these sports may offer different opportunities for identity performance than some other sports, structural

factors such as social, cultural and economic barriers continue to influence engagement for some (Roberts, 2011).

These findings for youth mountain bikers demonstrate the ways in which the culture and ethos of the sporting community can affect the desire and ability of some young people to engage practically with a leisure space or activity as part of a state funded scheme. The state management of lifestyle sport spaces and activities present a challenge to the participant led norms which are prevalent within these 'alternative' sporting cultures. The rejection of authority is considered an integral part of the performance of some aspects of lifestyle sport identities, the narrative of disenfranchisement itself may be crucial to their own performativities. Yet government managed sites required participants to negotiate with external authorities to participate in some of the activities such as jump and trail building which were integral to their involvement in the sport. In this case young people often chose to find other locations within the wider countryside to perform these activities on their own terms, despite the risks of them 'being found out'. Whilst the role of lifestyle sports for increasing youth activity in countryside spaces may be no less significant, the lack of opportunity for a full range of lifestyle activities at state managed locations could see more experienced users migrate to other sites and limit the integration of new participants within the lifestyle sport community. This further adds to exclusions based on class, gender and age that were apparent in this study. In order to generate new engagements with physical activity through lifestyle sports and to avoid a later 'drop out', policy initiatives will need to incorporate measures that enable new user groups to utilise facilities and integrate their performances alongside those of more established participants.

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Acknowledgements

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