Skateboard, BMX freestyle, and sport climbing communities' responses to their sports' inclusion in the Olympic Games

Gillian Renfree, Dean Cueson & Colin Wood

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Skateboard, BMX freestyle, and sport climbing communities' responses to their sports' inclusion in the Olympic Games

Gillian Renfree ⓘ, Dean Cueson and Colin Wood ⓘ

School of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

ABSTRACT

Research aim: This study seeks to identify responses to Olympic inclusion from within the skateboarding, BMX freestyle and sport climbing communities, through the lens of Organisational Identity Theory.

Research methods: Using Organisational Identity Theory, this study identifies commonalities from three action sports communities through 21 responses to an online survey and nine semi-structured interviews.

Results and findings: The study finds themes of freedom, openness of opportunity, distinctiveness, rebelliousness, and distrust of media are central to the identity of each sport. The study highlights concern about organisational sell-out and decisions being made without respect to tradition. Furthermore, participants felt the sport's identity challenged by an increased focus on competition.

Implications: The study recommends that shared attributes of organisational identity might form the basis for collaboration between action sports communities when working with large organisational structures such as the International Olympic Committee.

Introduction

Action sports differ from more mainstream sports. Whilst the term, action sports, is debated (Wheaton, 2013), it has gained currency in recent years over other terms such as extreme, alternative or lifestyle sports. Batuev and Robinson (2019a) suggest that action sports are characterised by high risk, unconventional rules or techniques and can be considered counter-cultural. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has included action sports in their programmes since the introduction of snowboard half-pipe in 1998, and the IOC has recently reconfirmed their commitment to action sports by adding skateboarding, BMX freestyle and sport climbing to the programme for the 2020 and 2024 Games (Chappell, 2019; IOC, 2017a, 2017b; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2019). Whilst Schwier (2019) notes that there is genuine pleasure amongst those involved in action sports at the expectation of increased recognition, support and funding, there is also apprehension that becoming part of the Olympic programme will lead to the co-option of their sports by international organisations, governments and commercial organisations, and that the actions sports might lose their independence and the carefree ethos that

---

reflects their counter-cultural origins (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011, p. 2019).

Action sports do not exist in a vacuum. Wheaton (2004) sees action sports as embedded in communities with unique values reflecting their history, identity, characteristics, and development patterns. Whilst these communities differ, Batuev and Robinson (2019a); Blanchard (2018); Clarke (2016), Honea (2013) and Thorpe and Wheaton (2011) suggest that many individuals within action sport communities are highly averse to being governed by organisations that do not appreciate their culture and values. Consequently, Thorpe and Wheaton (2011) suggest that action sport communities have concerns about their sports being included in the Olympics. Thus, whilst the forthcoming inclusion of skateboarding, BMX freestyle, and sport climbing to the Olympic programme will bring attention to these sports, it seems likely to increase tensions within the communities themselves.

Thorpe and Wheaton (2019) identify that action sports tend to lack a strong organisation and regulatory bodies that characterise most competitive sports. They argue that the lack of a legitimate sporting federation eases the process of inclusion within the IOC programme regardless of whether the sports were ready to adopt new norms of nationalism and competitiveness. However, from a community perspective, they suggest that the lack of organisational identity and governance structures within these sport communities can make them more vulnerable to co-option.

Batuev and Robinson (2019a) identify that governance within action sports varies widely but tends to be institutionalised to a limited degree, to include network arrangements between sports, and is often legitimised by the culture of grassroots sports rather than by regulatory control. Consequently, governance is often loosely organised, concerned more with facilitating the development of the sport than in regulating competition.

Without strong organisational and regulatory governance it is difficult to consider action sports as functioning as independent organisations or bodies, rather they can be conceptualised as communities that are characterised by their organisational identity rather than their structure. Albert and Whetten's (1985) Organisational Identity Theory suggests that organisational identity is a reflection of individual identities constructed on certain shared attributes of identity. They conceptualise organisational identity as a composite, tripartite formulation of central, enduring, and distinctive attributes. Thus, a person may self-identify as a skateboarder but will only be considered as part of the skateboard community if they skateboard (the central attribute), if they recognise or embody the traditions of skateboarding (the enduring attribute) and if they see themselves as different to people who do not skateboard (the distinctive attribute). Renfree and Kohe (2019) suggest that even at a local level these attributes inform the organisational identity and structure of the sport and are the basis of the legitimacy of its leadership. By contrast, Martin et al. (2011) argue that organisation and community should be considered through variables such as values, history, culture, characteristics, status, and reputation. This approach considers membership of a community through the sharing of values, and the process of joining as enculturation. However, Albert and Whetten's ideas of Organisational Identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985) exclude the concept of enculturation, suggesting that the process of identity development arises from the mutual recognition of those aspects of identity that have "stood the test of time". Thus, the organisational identity of an action sport becomes an analogue of individual identities constructed on certain shared attributes of identity. As such, it recognises that members of a community are not identical and that their identification with a community is based on the values and qualities they share with others in their sport. This approach

allows consideration of action sports through the lens of communities (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Renfree & Kohe, 2019) and allows investigation of how the central, enduring and distinctive attributes of organisational identity of such communities might be affected by changes that are aligned to competitiveness and inclusion with mainstream sports.

This study focuses on three action sports to explore similarities in the central, enduring, and distinctive attributes of their identities. It considers how the forthcoming inclusion of skateboarding, BMX freestyle, and sport climbing in the Olympic programme challenges the attributes of organisational identity and explores the resultant tensions within the action sports communities.

Olympic inclusion as a challenge to the organisational identities of action sports communities

Giannoulakis (2016) suggests that alongside the growth in participation, there has been increased attention from mainstream sports companies and media corporations seeking to capitalise on the "fun, free, do it yourself" image of action sports. Jones and Greer (2012) and Haakonsen (2014) explore the consequences of this attention following the inclusion of snowboarding in the Winter Olympic programme. Whilst Jones and Greer (2012) identified positive impacts such as an increase in participation and the raised profile of individual athletes, Haakonsen (2014) expressed reservations that the IOC had sought to take advantage of the commercial value of snowboarding and had also tried to change the sport's cultural image to suit their own agenda. Similar reservations are identified by Honea (2013), who found some positivity about Olympic inclusion amongst BMX riders but noted passionate concerns about the attempt to recharacterise BMX from an oppositional subculture into mainstream popular culture. Honea (2013) suggests that this

transformation might destroy the "essence" of the sport – its free, no-rules, raw values. Both Haakonsen (2014) and Honea (2013) acknowledge the diversity of views within the snowboarding and BMX communities. Indeed, they both note that participants were cautious, balancing misgivings against positive expectations that their sports would be viewed by new audiences. Although governance, control and identity continue to be divisive issues and because of the diversity of views about Olympic inclusion, there has been no one single "community" voice or perspective (Deschenes, 2013; Haakonsen, 2014; Larsen, 2011). Indeed, it has been argued by Thorpe and Wheaton (2011) that the new contemporary action sport participant seems to be more accepting of inclusion in the Olympic programme. In part, this may be due to the perceived financial stability that Olympic inclusion could bring to athletes who have managed to attain celebrity status and the prospect of large sponsorship deals (Jones & Greer, 2012) or possible gains such as global exposure or facility development (Honea, 2013; Thrasher, 2016).

There is limited research on the climbing community's attitudes to Olympic inclusion. Batuev and Robinson (2019b) explore the evolution of the governance of sport climbing, it's split from other forms of climbing in 2007 and its subsequent pursuit of Olympic recognition. Within this they identify how unequal power relationships with the IOC, and the bureaucratisation of governance has led to an emphasis on regulatory legitimacy over concern for cultural values, resulting in a range of power struggles within climbing. Blanchard (2018) interviewed 15 influential American professional climbers on their attitudes to the inclusion of sport climbing in the Olympics. As with Batuev and Robinson (2019b), Blanchard (2018) found tensions between cultural values and economic interest. Positive responses alluded to increased exposure and funding for athletes, whilst those expressing concerns considered the impact of increased exposure on natural resources,

which could undermine the values of outdoor climbing and its conservation ethics. Parry (2018) argues that climbing would benefit from Olympic exposure, but emphasised concerns related to participant education, industry coping with exposure, a boost in participation levels, as well as the UK Sport funding system. In contrast, Regel (2018) suggests that the Olympics needs climbing to boost its' image, more than climbing needs the Olympics. Thus, climbers' perceptions seem more positive than BMX and skateboarding and align more with the mainly enthusiastic youth perceptions regarding action sports about the inclusion of action sports (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2016).

Bryant and Sappenfield (2008); Honea (2013) and Pearson (2017a) suggest that BMX freestyle stakeholders tend to be more negative than others from the BMX race community. They note concerns with not losing the core values of their sport, concerns that individual athletes will reap all the rewards, and dissatisfaction that only one discipline from their sport was being added to the Olympic programme. However, there are some positive aspects of Olympic inclusion related to its potential impact on sectoral growth, attracting more children to riding BMX and greater opportunities for athlete development.

Thorpe and Dumont (2018) provide a very different view of the institutionalisation of action sports. They focus on the rapid professionalisation of elite action sports and significant transformation of the work practices of competitors. They note the emergence of new systems of support for athletes (agents, trainers, physios, etc.), the rise of neo-liberal, entrepreneurial, self-branding approaches to sport and the intersection between sport, the digital economy and entertainment for elite athletes. They suggest that inclusion in the Olympics represents increased opportunities for professional advancement through the selective adoption of practices common in mainstream international sports. Thus, for Thorpe and Dumont (2018), the institutional changes

reflect the power relationships between the athletes, the sponsors, the governing body of the sport, the national Olympic committees, and the IOC. Thus, the literature suggests that both the power issues within elite sport and the negotiation of cultural differences (both lifestyle and gendered) between competitive and traditional forms of action sports, influence the institutionalisation of an action sport as much as the external process of normalisation to the IOC processes.

Overall, the literature provides evidence of positive, negative and cautious responses to Olympic inclusion across all three action sports but suggests that there is a significant difference between people who are already engaged with competitive or commercialised aspects of the action sport, and those that are engaged in a non-competitive, life-style manner. However, across all levels of engagement, the literature suggests that Olympic inclusion represents a shift towards competitive values and that a likely consequence of this will be more regulation and less freedom. Therefore, in response to the literature, this study seeks to identify responses to Olympic inclusion from within the skateboarding, BMX freestyle and sport climbing communities, through the lens of organisational identity theory.

Method

This exploratory study focusses on those who are part of the rapid professionalisation of action sports and whose livelihoods will be affected through their inclusion in the Olympic Games. As this population is disaggregated and hard to reach, the study used a mixed methods approach to provide triangulation of methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Firstly, an on-line survey with action sport participants was conducted; followed by semi-structured interviews with industry workers and professional athletes in each action sport. Finally, an analysis of areas of divergence and convergence were investigated

to establish areas of commonality between the sports cultures. The study received ethical approval from the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HASSREC) at the University of Worcester.

Research tools and participants

The online survey

The study used a self-designed online survey consisting of three demographic questions followed by six open-ended questions. Using a similar approach to Renfree and Kohe (2019), the questions were derived from Organisational Identity Theory (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and were framed to gather personal and extensive responses from action sport participants. The survey questions sought a personal response about the introduction of action sports into the Olympics and encouraged the expression of feelings, emotions, and opinions. The survey was trialled with three individuals who have experience and knowledge of action sports and amendments were made prior to use. The survey was placed on activity-specific social media sites and closed forums. The convenience sampling approach addressed issues of a hard-to-reach population but limited the generalisability of the findings. However, approach reflects similar studies (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2016, p. 2018) and the ubiquity of social media usage in the target communities.

Online survey participants

There were twenty-one individual responses to the online survey. Eleven participants aged between 22 and 34 and ten participants aged between 35 and 70 from a variety of locations in Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Australasia. No data was collected on gender, ethnicity, or social group. The respondents self-identified their skill levels from amateur to professional. Whilst some evidence of length of involvement is apparent within the data, they were not specifically asked about this. Respondents to the survey are identified as skateboarder A, BMX freestyler B or sport climber C.

Semi-structured interviews

The study included semi-structured interviews with individuals selected for their professional involvement in each action sport. All interviews were conducted either online or in-person. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was digitally recorded with additional written notes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interviews predominantly used open-ended questions to provide opportunities for the participants to express themselves at length (Galletta, 2013). The interview questions were derived from the analysis of the responses to the on-line survey.

Semi-structured interview participants

Interview data were collected from nine individuals, three each from skateboarding, BMX freestyle and sport climbing. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants that represented their communities and to ensure relevant, credible, valuable, and rich data (Valerio et al., 2016). Following ethical approval, participants were approached through personal contacts and all interview participants received the study information and gave informed consent prior to data collection. All participants had a professional involvement in their action sport and the study included brand and team managers, professional athletes, coaches, and advisors. To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, they are identified in the findings using pseudonyms: Bolt, Flash and Dyno from climbing; Ollie, Kickflip and Nollie from skateboarding; and Superman, Truckdriver and Toboggan from BMX freestyle.

Data analysis

The responses from both the on-line survey (n = 21) and the interviews (n = 9) were downloaded, transcribed verbatim and prepared for

thematic analysis. A deductive approach was utilised as Albert and Whetten`s (1985) three organisational identity attributes provided a structure to analyse all the qualitative data gathered. To accommodate the attributes of central, distinctive, and enduring dimensions axial coding was employed to structure the themes derived from the survey and the interviews. The thematic analysis followed five key steps, these were: (1) group and organise data by action sport; (2) group and organise data by question; (3) identify specific segments of information, e.g. positives, negatives, values; (4) blend segments into themes, e.g. media, gender equality, sponsorship and (5) reduce and order themes within the three attributes of organisational identity.

The approach identified the responses of each action sports community to their sports' inclusion in the Olympic Games, identified commonalities and then sought to relate the commonalities to the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of organisational identity. The use of verbatim excerpts seeks to present the authentic voices of the participants action and to convey the diversity of opinions within the sports communities.

Findings

This section presents the commonalities between the action sports communities as a basis for recognising shared experiences and establishes a basis for decision-making activities with organisations such as the IOC. The findings are presented in line with the theoretical structure (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Thus, the findings are presented within sections that relate to the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of the organisational identity of the action sports. This allows similarities and differences to be identified and provides a framework for isolating areas of commonality where the joint working of action sport communities might bring advantages to their respective sports. Indeed, as

Batuev and Robinson (2019a) suggest, governance structures have been attempted in sports such as skateboarding and snowboarding previously but did not solely understand, or arguably care, about other disciplines or communities.

Central attributes of organisational identity

This section considered responses to the inclusion in the Olympic programme that related to the Central attributes of each action sport's organisational identity and identified commonalities between them. According to Albert and Whetten (1985), the centrality attribute means that statements should include features that are particularly essential and important. The resulting themes identified two commonalities across the three action sports: *loss of freedom* and *increased opportunity*.

Loss of freedom

Two factors emerged within the theme of a *loss of freedom*. These were a feeling of trepidation toward Olympic inclusion, and concern about the possible impact on the rules and regulations of the action sport – specifically in relation to competition formats, creativity, and fairness.

According to BMX freestyler B "riders will be having to adhere to judging criteria, affecting (their) style/tricks". This aligns to the sentiments of Kickflip, who states that "new skaters will grow up thinking the Olympic rules are the rules of skateboarding … but skateboarding has no rules". The idea that increased rules and regulations negatively affects athletes' freedom to be creative and self-expressive were common in the data. These potentially confirm Thorpe and Wheaton`s (2011) suggestions that action sport participants do not want to be governed by rules and regulations, as their participation is based on values that enhance creative expression. However, sport

climber E presents a slightly different view of the rules stating that the "rules have been changed [to] a parkour type style, [which] could be more visual in the Olympics. This does not show the world 'true' climbing". Again, although not directly related to creativity, there is an agreement that rules are being introduced (or changed) to suit the Olympic programme rather than the central value of "freedom". However, the climber is also suggesting that such rule changes could alter public perceptions as the Olympic competition would not necessarily showcase what the sport represents to its community. Two respondents suggest they have no intention of amending or changing their participation due to Olympic inclusion. Ollie stated that skaters had "been skating for … years; [and] will carry on doing the same that [they] have been doing for all these years with or without the Olympics", and from Superman who argues that, "if it's not your thing, there is no reason to change anything you've been doing. It's possible to pick and choose". These participants seem to accept that IOC inclusion could start a new branch of their sports focussed on rules rather than the freedom to be creative but see little impact on their "freedom" or on their sport.

Although not shared by all three communities, participants from skateboarding and BMX freestyle emphasised "fun" as a core value that their communities hold. They felt that the centrality of fun would not change by being included within the Olympic programme. This resonates Blanchard (2018); Clarke (2016); Pearson (2017a, 2017b); Thorpe (2017); Thorpe and Dumont (2018); Thorpe and Wheaton (2011, 2017); Thrasher (2016) and Wheaton and Thorpe (2016) who have established that action sports are based around notions of fun and freedom. However, this position may be influenced by the limited scope of the Olympic inclusion, involving a single sub-discipline of their sport. Interestingly, no comments related to "fun" came from the sport climbing

participants, but this could be due to a differing definition of fun or perhaps reflecting the conscientiousness that arises from a focus on safety.

Despite the difference between the responses of the sport climbing participants and those of the other two sports, it was clear that concern about a loss of freedom from rules was apparent in the responses of members of all three action sport communities.

Increased opportunity

Commonalities in the responses to the inclusion in the Olympic programme that related to the Central attribute were also identified around *increased opportunity*. These are related to evolution, progress, and an openness to change. Across all three sports, participants suggested that additional finance would provide athletes with more opportunities to ride, skate or climb professionally. Skateboarder A stated, "athletes will be able to gain better sponsorship deals", BMX freestyler F suggested that there would be more "opportunities for all types of riders, in TV work/sponsorship/social media partnerships". In addition, Dyno explored how this might have knock on impacts "athletes [can] become role models for the younger generation, which can ensure work is generated for them so they [too] can be financially stable". Furthermore, the participants also noted that increased revenue could incentivise athletes to work toward Olympic success and that this could promote the sport to a global audience. The widespread optimism about the impact of financial investment and the importance of direct and indirect funding for their respective sports is also found in Blanchard (2018); Pearson (2017b) and Thrasher (2016) where elite athletes expressed their positivity toward Olympic inclusion enabling them to "live their dreams".

There were also commonalities with regards to how change might be handled once global audiences were aware of their respective

sports. Although optimistic for the future, concerns were raised about the fairness of potential approaches to distributing athlete or sport funding from governing bodies/ federations. Sport climber B noted "select athletes will be supported financially" or skateboarder B who stated that athlete funding would "only [be] for a select amount". These comments identify cross-community concerns about the potential unfairness of the distribution of financial rewards, and concerns that any frameworks would reflect the interests of the IOC and the small minority of people within the sports who have Olympic potential. This is evident from Nollie that "some people will make a killing from the Olympics". He suggests that the approach to the financial issues facing the sport and its organisation have either not yet been considered or that the communication channels that work within action sports are not providing the information from a strategic level.

Whilst *loss of freedom* and *increased opportunity* are distinct in the data and literature, there is considerable crossover, with participants from all action sports tending to be optimistic whilst recognising a trade-off between the two. However, beneath the positivity, responses within both themes suggest that Olympic inclusion may act as a challenge to the central attribute of each sport – unregulated participation based on passion rather than financial gain.

Distinct attributes of organisational identity

According to Albert and Whetten (1985), distinct identity attributes include organisational ideology, philosophies, and culture. These are aspects of identity that help the action sports community to define and describe itself. Wheaton and Thorpe (2018) considered the individuality of different action sports communities and suggested they have distinct and

separate identities. Whilst accepting the distinctiveness of these identities, this section seeks to identify commonalities in the responses to Olympic inclusion that relate to the distinct attributes of each action sports. The themes identified relate to *uniqueness* and to *equality of opportunity*.

Uniqueness

There were several commonalities about how Olympic inclusion might impact how their unique sport is represented to others. The most common view was that mainstream media could boost exposure and participation levels. This view of media reflects a positive (but marginalised) experience of media, which is predominantly based on GoPro footage, YouTube videos and specialist media channels. Thorpe (2017) highlights the fact that the rise and influence of media channels have provided action sport participants (predominantly aged 18–30) an opportunity to express their skills, sport and culture to their own community and outside world. This is supported by comments such as those from Dyno, who stated that "younger individuals may become motivated, therefore increasing the popularity/ participation of the sport". This corresponds with the findings of Blanchard (2018); Pearson (2017a, 2017b) and Thrasher (2016). However, for the most part, these action sports have not experienced the gaze of the mainstream media that Olympic inclusion could bring. This is recognised by BMX freestyler B who said that the "number of people reached through the Olympics will be insane" and from Ollie who said that inclusion within the "Olympic movement is a fantastic opportunity, for hosting countries with regards to extra revenue that the tourism brings".

Some participants showed uncertainty about how their sports may be depicted, showing acceptance that mainstream media will highlight its uniqueness through the contrast with other sports within the Olympic programme. Toboggan suggested that it would be

"good for the sport with extra TV coverage with new audiences … . encourage people [to] pick … up BMX bikes, becoming part of the scene" with skateboarder D agreeing that the increased attention would "increase growth to new geographical markets" by highlighting the central values of freedom and fun alongside the key values of embracing equality.

Despite differing identities, the participants from all action sports shared a sense that increased media exposure would reinforce the distinctive aspects of identity rather than weaken them. However, although the three action sports share common opinions with regards to how they embrace media, this is balanced with a positive appraisal of rebellion and independent nature. The tension came through very clearly especially in relation to media and external viewpoints. The internal view of their sport as unique emerges as a distinct attribute of action sports and clearly influences all areas related to identity. This uniqueness justifies rebellion and independence. Counterintuitively, this results in positivity that Olympic inclusion will not succeed in changing the identity. Indeed, there was a feeling throughout most responses that the unique and exclusive nature of their respective sports will spark interest within the extensive audience, resulting in positive secondary effects such as participation and financial investment. This is exemplified by a Flash, who sees that funding will lead, "younger individuals [to] become motivated, therefore increase[es] the popularity [and] participation of the sport". It is notable that the desire for substantial investment in action sports has been discussed within the industry for some time. Pioneers such as Tony Hawk (2018) have long advocated for increased exposure and funding, and this is also found in work by Blanchard (2018); Pearson (2017a, 2017b); Thorpe and Dumont (2018) and Thrasher (2016). Thus, the responses may reflect the widespread discussion that the unique (and exclusive)

aspects of identity can be strengthened through exposure and funding.

Equality of opportunity

Several participants identified Olympic inclusion as an opportunity for current and future athletes to gain intrinsic benefits such as pride and personal success, in addition to the more obvious extrinsic benefits such as finance, fame, and career sustainability. The intrinsic benefits were related to success and feelings of pride due to representing their nation. In this, participants were not referring to themselves but to the benefits that could be provided to all aspects of their sport. For instance, BMX freestyler F stated that inclusion on the Olympic programme would " … bring out the very best of riders' mentality and athletically, so the sport will evolve rapidly" with a skateboarder B agreeing by arguing that it would "give some skaters a sense of achievement being a part of a national team".

Three participants saw increased opportunities through improved gender equality. Skateboarder C suggested that the Olympics represents "the equalisation of male and female participants on the highest level". Gender equality in sport has become a strategic priority to the IOC, which initiated a project to ensure gender equality is targeted and recognised across all Olympic sports (IOC, 2017c). This impact of Olympic inclusion on the equality of participation is recognised by several participants. As Superman states:

> we see more and more female riders at BMX Freestyle events. UCI World Cups in France had five riders in 2016, nine in 2017 and thirty-one in 2018 etc … that is a positive affect itself, and the Olympics can increase this further.

This is supported by Ollie, who also argues that "female skateboarders [would] receive the same amount of support from sporting bodies which [would] allow them to afford to choose skateboarding as a career". Wheaton and

Thorpe (2018) also found that members of the skateboard community saw Olympic inclusion as a driver for women to gain achieve equality within the sport.

Thus, the responses to questions on Olympic inclusion suggest that two distinct attributes of action sports (*Uniqueness* and *Equality of Opportunity*) are common across the three sports, and that some respondents anticipate that Olympic inclusion will provide an opportunity for collaborative working and enhancing sustainable development of the action sport and gender equity in competitive participation.

Enduring attributes of organisational identity

The final section focuses on themes related to the enduring nature of organisational identity within skateboarding, BMX freestyle and sport climbing. Two themes are identified within the data: *Governance* and *Protective values*. Albert and Whetten (1985) suggest that organisational change will be a difficult process due to the impact of Olympic inclusion. It is, perhaps, likely that the most difficult changes in identity are those related to the enduring attributes as these relate to the long-established traditions and structures of the sport.

Governance

Participants discussed how Olympic inclusion might give the responsibility for determining the future of their sports to newcomers or unqualified individuals. BMX freestyler F argues that "poor management [and] unqualified people [would be] working for governing bodies". There were two main concerns. Firstly, that corporate and public organisations might latch onto action sports for financial gain. Secondly, that those who work within the industry but do not necessarily participate, may "sell out" to gain power within the new organisations that might be developed to facilitate Olympic inclusion. These points are raised by skateboarder A and sport climber A who both

stated that there was "unnecessary business trying to take advantage of the community [and our] culture" and that "non-climbing companies [were] just being involved with climbing for financial gain". These quotations indicate how the anticipated changes are conceived as running counter to the organisational traditions of the sports. Whilst these quotations are cautionary, BMX freestyler D highlights the limitations of the current peripherality of her action sport. She identifies a lack of interest from her home country stating that "[they] have been focused on other sports for decades, it is time for [my country] to show interest to BMX, and its national BMX athletes". Other participants such as skateboarder B go further stating that there just needs to be more "organisation of international and national governance".

The data also shows concerns about the quality of staff within their countries governing bodies or federations. These are described as "unqualified" by one participant, but more commonly as outsiders. In particular there seems to be a real distrust that exists about how their sports are managed, for instance, BMX freestyler B argues that there are "management issues … with unqualified employers in governing bodies trying to manage the BMX freestyle sector". Action sports communities not wanting outsiders governing their sports has been highlighted in research by Batuev and Robinson (2019a); Pearson (2017a) and Thorpe and Wheaton (2011).

The findings provide clear evidence of concern about the future governance of their sports and worries that the decision-makers may lack understanding of the core values of their sports. This led to concerns that federations might be too ready to conform to IOC rules, with consequences for the disciplines within each sport. Participants point out that the pioneers or sporting icons of their respective sports were not being involved or employed in those decisions. In addition, participants recognised that all countries should manage

sports differently, but note that this appears to have led to a disjointed approach to new sports. For instance, BMX freestyler D argues that "a legend of the sport in [my country] has been a great example of an athlete in the past, and now helping the government in getting a BMX programme together. Things are moving in the right direction". Across all three action sports, participants suggested that utilising ex-professional athletes within management roles would reduce their uneasiness about governance within the action sports community. Batuev and Robinson (2019a) suggest that the existing forms of governance in sport climbing reflect recreational values and thus is poorly configured to provide governance for competitive sport climbing. The concerns about poor and uneven governance were discussed by Pearson (2017a, 2017b) and Thrasher`s (2016) industry articles about skateboarding and BMX freestyle communities, who suggest that the communities do not feel that they have sufficient control over their sports adaptation to Olympic stature.

There was consensus about the perceived inequality of relationships between the IOC and national governing bodies.. Similarly, Batuev and Robinson (2019a) suggest that the IOC have their own financial interests at heart and are utilising action sport cultures as a tool to achieve their objectives. Skateboarder A refers to the IOC as " … culture vultures" implying that they only cared for the benefits and rewards to be gained from adding alternative or action sports to the Olympic programme. This sentiment was raised by both BMX freestyler I who suggests that the IOC were "not really, target[ing] a younger audience so let's use BMX, skateboarding, climbing" and Sport Climber A who was sceptical of the IOC involvement suggesting that they could "cut … climbing from their future events, if it doesn't meet viewing expectations". There were also cautious concerns with regards to how the IOC and National bodies or Federations work together to regulate their sports, Truckdriver argues

that "the Olympics has split BMX freestyle into different camps or factions, the governing body the IBMXFF has been ignored and pushed to the side so that the UCI can claim ownership of the sport" and from Flash who states that "the IFSC decided on a quick deal instead of negotiating with the committee for a better offer for all". Haakonsen (2014) and Hoffman (2018) also find that communities feelings that they are not being listened too and that decisions that do not necessarily reflect their needs. Historic governance concerns are noted in Batuev and Robinson (2019a) and Thorpe and Wheaton`s (2019) work which highlights power struggles within the respective sport`s federations when working with the IOC on their inclusion.

The data suggests that all participants from all three communities share concerns about governance: that the IOC is pursuing an agenda; that relations between the IOC and governing bodies are not harmonious and that there is a level of distrust from the action sport community towards how they are governed.

Protective values

Participants showed a protective approach towards their sport. They were particularly protective over their sports being changed, or being forgotten over time, due to Olympic inclusion. Bolt said, "if the Olympics wants to promote climbing, they also need to promote the ethics of outdoor climbing to protect the rock, otherwise what's the point in climbing?" and from BMX freestyler H who stated that "BMX [would be] wrongly misinterpreted, let`s hope it doesn't lose its core values". Participants repeatedly raised the importance of the values and ethics of their respective sport. They described how closely they held their values and were resistant to anyone trying to alter those beliefs. Similar to studies by Blanchard (2018); Pearson (2017b); Thrasher; (2016) and Wheaton and Thorpe (2018), they were concerned about their sports being misinterpreted

by the media. Specifically, within climbing, the emphasis of etiquette and areas related to participant education, facility usage guidelines and sustainability of facilities were raised. Flash indicated the probable influence of misinterpretation and the increase of participation from Olympic inclusion could have "one major effect [which would be] the sustainability of outdoor Crags. … the foot traffic to crags across the world will greatly increase".

However, one of the most common and distinct attributes of protection was that many participants demonstrated little to no interest in the actual Olympic inclusion. This might explain why they were protective about their sports, and perhaps reflects the central attribute of freedom to think and be themselves, and how they should live and create within their sport. Bolt argues that "my point of view comes from a climber who climbs outdoors, instead of being a "Plastic Puller" who only climbs at indoor centres". Indeed, most participants appeared to have a nonchalant attitude characterised by "let's see what happens". Kickflip stated that "it's only every 4 years and it won't make that much difference (to others in community)" or Truckdriver commented that only "time will tell if the Olympics is a positive or negative influence on BMX freestyle". Whilst the nonchalant comments may seem important and distinctive to these action sports; when questioned they were protective of how their sport will be governed, and how the media and the Olympics will showcase the action sports.

Commonalities of organisational identity

This study considers attitudes to Olympic inclusion within the skateboarding, BMX freestyle and sport climbing communities, and uses the lens of organisational identity to explore commonalities. Thus, the research sought to find common ground between the action sports communities and determine the

elements of identity that are central, distinct, and enduring. Identification of these shared elements could form a basis for collaboration to improve internal and external decision-making, improve management processes, and develop effective systems of governance within the pressured environment of being within the Olympic programme.

Overall, the participants showed little interest in the Olympics, but demonstrated a cautiously optimistic attitude to the impact of their action sports being included in future Olympic Games. The emergent themes showed strong similarities across all three sports about the opportunities provided by Olympic inclusion for increasing equality of opportunity, encouraging the development of their sports and their athletes, and increased media exposure. In addition, some participants saw the debate over Olympic inclusion as an opportunity to create a more effective communication model for decision-making to protect their sporting values, creative values, and their ethics. Although these had been previously identified in Blanchard (2018); Clarke (2016); Honea (2013); Parry (2018); Pearson (2017a, 2017b) and Thrasher (2016) this study suggests there is considerable convergence around a more common standpoint. Although the respondents provide responses to Olympic inclusion that are contextually located in their engagement with their action sport, the existence of significant commonality in the responses across the actions sports suggests that the same issues and tensions exist in all three action sports communities. This insight potentially decreases the sense of isolation and lack of agency felt by action sports communities. The common aspects may allow communities to draw on aspects of shared identity with other action sports, allowing lessons to be shared and thus providing greater agency.. Real benefits could include: the development of appropriate approaches to athlete development;

greater control over the media representation of the sport; increased opportunities for youth participation and gender equity; and as a vehicle for the inclusion of under-represented perspectives within the policy forums of world sports.

Finally, the responses show broad agreement about the areas that require further work. These relate to the ongoing need to empower governing bodies and federations to respond to or resist the challenges to the culture of their action sports. It is possible that, by working together, each community could protect their individual core values and cultures.

Conclusion

This research was conducted before the original date for Tokyo 2020 and captured perceptions, concerns, and aspirations for the development of their sports at this pivotal moment. All the participants knew of the inclusion of their sports in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, and all were able to articulate their personal hopes and concerns for their own sport. The study found a surprisingly balanced discussion within each action sport with participants articulating benefits and risks to their sport and community. However, it also found considerable apprehension around changes to the identity and structure of their sports and that Olympic inclusion might create or exacerbate power conflicts within the sports and external bodies. Whilst there was a broad acknowledgment that action sport communities are self-governed (through formal structures and organisational representation as well as by informal accord on practices, values, history, and culture), few participants felt they had much control over the direction of their sports. Most expressed limited faith in the ability of governing bodies and federations to resist the institutional demands of the Olympic organisation. Similarly, many were concerned that increased media exposure

might seek to reinforce stereotypes that exaggerate some aspects of the sport to the detriment of others.

Despite the concerns over power relations related to governance, control, and identity the study identified core attributes for each action sport community and those that are held in common. This highlighted the commonality of experience and raises the possibility that action sports can learn from each other or work collaboratively to ensure that the identities of their sports are not distorted or lost in the process of inclusion. Thus, a shared organisational identity could provide greater agency and allow a stronger response to external pressure. This study supports the findings of Wheaton and Thorpe (2018), that action sport communities' values are crucial to their identity and that communities are cautious about changes that do not align with them. However, the research finds that such values are similar between skateboarding, BMX freestyle and sport climbing, and that the similarities provide a basis for collaboration so that the voices and interests of action sports can be represented at all levels. This challenges previous studies that suggested that power issues within action sports and the negotiation of cultural differences between competitive and/or traditional forms of action sports were likely to influence the institutionalisation of an action sport. Contrary to this, this study finds considerable commonality within action sports on a range of different values and traditions.

Finally, it seems likely that action sport communities and their institutions will continue to evolve after Olympic inclusion and that cultural tensions within the community will lead to new forms of identity. Further research might monitor whether the concerns identified before Olympic inclusion were justified and how the organisational identities alter over time. Of particular interest will be the impact of the increased power and entrepreneurialism of elite athletes, and the

tensions between sponsors, national Olympic committees, and the IOC. Indeed, it would be interesting to monitor how Olympic involvement supports diversity and equality within action sports and whether such changes become embedded within the values and organisational identities of action sports communities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Gillian Renfree ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9560-2498
Colin Wood ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9154-5804

References

Albert, S., & Whetten, D. A. (1985). Organizational identity. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (pp. 263–295). JAI Press.

Batuev, M., & Robinson, L. (2019a). International governance of action sports: An organisational legitimacy perspective. In M. Winand & C. Anagnostopoulos (Eds.), *Research handbook on sport governance* (pp. 168–184). Edward Elgar.

Batuev, M., & Robinson, L. (2019b). Organizational evolution and the olympic games: The case of sport climbing. *Sport in Society*, *22*(10), 1674–1690. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1440998

Blanchard, B. (2018, February 13). Olympic climbing survey: 15 pro climbers weigh in. *Climbing*. https://www.climbing.com/news/olympic-climbing-survey-15-pro-climbers-weigh-in/

Bryant, C. C., & Sappenfield, M. (2008, July 7). For extreme sports fans, Olympics adds jumping cyclists. *The Christian Science Monitor*. https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2008/0707/p01s01-wogn.html

Chappell, B. (2019, February 22). *Breakdancing in the Olympics? Paris 2024 organizers say, 'Oui, Garçon!'*. npr, https://www.npr.org/2019/02/22/697009844/breakdancing-in-the-olympics-paris-2024-organizers-say-oui-garcon?t=1553087849275

Clarke, J. (2016, August 2). To surfers and skaters, Olympics aren't cool. *The Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/to-surfers-and-skaters-olympics-arent-cool-1470178411

Deschenes, N. (2013). The Olympic issue: Terje Haakonsen interview. *Snowboard magazine*. https://snowboardmag.com/stories/the-olympic-issue-terje-haakonsen-interview

Galletta, A. (2013). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication. Vol. 18*. NYU press.

Giannoulakis, C. (2016). The "authenticitude" battle in action sports: A case-based industry perspective. *Sport Management Review*, *19*(2), 171–182. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2015.05.004

Haakonsen, T. (2014, January 30). Terje Haakonsen: Why I still hate the Olympics. *Whitelines*. https://whitelines.com/archive/features/debate/terje-haakonsen-why-i-still-hate-the-olympics.html#FDSGAruZm4gFVXdg.97

Hawk, T. (2018, October 9). Thoughts on Olympic Skateboarding. *Medium*. https://medium.com/s/story/skateboarding-will-be-in-the-olympics-in-less-than-two-years-4bdcb8734061

Hoffman, M. (2018, March 7). An open letter from Mat Hoffman. *IBMXFF International BMX Freestyle Federation*. https://ibmxff.org/an-open-letter-from-mat-hoffman/0/

Honea, J. C. (2013). Beyond the alternative vs. Mainstream dichotomy: Olympic BMX and the future of action sports. *Journal of Popular Culture (Boston)*, *46*(6), 1253–1275. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12087

IOC. (2017a). *BMX freestyle will bring a "fresh look" to the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020*. https://www.olympic.org/news/bmx-freestyle-will-bring-a-fresh-look-to-the-olympic-games-tokyo-2020

IOC. (2017b). *Olympic agenda 2020: Half-time status*. https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/IOC/Who-We-Are/IOC-Sessions/Session-Lima-2017/OLYMPIC-AGENDA-2020-Half-time-status-report-September-2017.pdf#_ga=2.253596096.895332247.1548354111-509030889.1545898177338

IOC. (2017c). *IOC gender equality review report*. https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/News/2018/03/IOC-Gender-Equality-Report-March-2018.pdf#_ga=2.37398304.1023949384.1565868475-1181430400.1565610361

Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, *33*(7), 14–26. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033007014

Jones, A., & Greer, J. (2012). Go "heavy" or go home: An examination of audience attitudes and their relationship to gender cues in the 2010 olympic snowboarding coverage. *Mass Communication and Society*, *15*(4), 598–621. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2012.674171

Larsen, M. (2011, February 17). Terje Haakonsen introduces Snowboarding 180 Olympic charter. ESPN. https://www.espn.com/action/snowboarding/news/story?id=6132338

Martin, K. D., Johnson, J. L., & French, J. J. (2011). Institutional pressures and marketing ethics initiatives: The focal role of organizational identity. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *39*(4), 574–591. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0246-x

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Parry, D. (2018, February 5). Opinion: Could the Olympics damage climbing? *The Project Magazine*. https://www.theprojectmagazine.com/features/2018/1/29/the-olympic-question

Pearson, R. (2017a, June 27). Industry perspective: Freestyle BMX in the Olympics. *Ride UK BMX*. https://rideukbmx.com/news/industry-perspective-freestyle-bmx-olympics.html

Pearson, R. (2017b, June 19). Olympic BMX freestyle park: Pro BMX riders react. *Ride UK BMX*. https://rideukbmx.com/news/olympic-bmx-freestyle-park-pro-bmx-riders-react.html

Regel, N. (2018, April 1). Climbing Is Going Olympic: What does that mean for the sport? https://www.ispo.com/en/trends/climbing-going-olympic-what-does-mean-sport

Renfree, G., & Kohe, G. Z. (2019). Running the club for love: Challenges for identity, accountability and governance relationships. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, *16*(3), 210–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2019.1623987

Schwier, J. (2019). Skateboarding between subculture and olympic games. In V. Kilberth & J. Schwier (Eds.), *Skateboarding between subculture and the olympics: A youth culture under pressure from commercialization and sportification* (pp. 15–34). Transcript.

Thorpe, H. (2017). Action sports, social media, and new technologies: Towards a research agenda. *Communication and Sport*, *5*(5), 554–578. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479516638125

Thorpe, H., & Dumont, G. (2018). The professionalization of action sports: Mapping trends and future directions. *Sport in Society*, *22*(10), 1639–1654. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1440715

Thorpe, H., & Wheaton, B. (2011). 'Generation X games', action sports and the Olympic movement: Understanding the cultural politics of incorporation. *Sociology*, *45*(5), 830–847. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511413427

Thorpe, H., & Wheaton, B. (2017). Youth perceptions of the Olympic games: Attitudes towards action sports at the Yog and Olympic games. Final report for the IOC Olympic Studies Centre.

Thorpe, H., & Wheaton, B. (2019). The olympic games agenda, 2020 and action sports: The promise, politics and performance of organisational change. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, *11*(3), 465–483. https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2019.1569548

Thrasher. (2016, December 20). Skating in the Olympics: The skaters' perspective. *Thrasher magazine*. https://www.thrashermagazine.com/articles/skateboarding-in-the-olympics/

Valerio, M. A., Rodriguez, N., Winkler, P., Lopez, J., Dennison, M., Liang, Y., & Turner, B. J. (2016). Comparing two sampling methods to engage hard-to-reach communities in research priority setting. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *16*(1), 146. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-016-0242-z

Wheaton, B. (2004). Introduction: Mapping the lifestyle sport-scape. In B. Wheaton (Ed.), *Understanding lifestyle sport* (pp. 13–40). Routledge.

Wheaton, B. (2013). *The cultural politics of lifestyle sport*. Routledge.

Wheaton, B., & Thorpe, H. (2016). *Youth perceptions of the Olympic Games: Attitudes towards action sports at the YOG and olympic games*. University of Waikato.

Wheaton, B., & Thorpe, H. (2018). Action sports, the olympic games, and the opportunities and challenges for gender equity: The cases of surfing and skateboarding. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *42*(5), 315–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723518781230