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## **Women's snowboarding – some experiences and perceptions of competition**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on female snowboarders' experiences with, and perceptions of, snowboard competitions. The article is based on a study conducted at an international women's snowboard camp. The purpose of the camp was to discuss strategies for promoting females' participation in the snowboard organizations and in snowboard competition. Interviews were held with eight participants aged 18–31 years. Most of the participants had been previously involved in competition. Their experience had been both negative and positive. Most of the participants perceived snowboard facilities (Big Air and Half-pipe) as being too large for females and a possible constraint on participation. Moreover, the study's findings reveal ideas concerning alternative competition formats as well as arguments for "women-only" sessions as a feasible way to reach more female snowboarders, to provide skill enhancement, and to increase participation in the competitions. The findings are discussed in light of the development of snowboarding and Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

**KEY WORDS:** Snowboarding, the new leisure movement, snowboarding facilities, competition formats, women-only sessions, Bourdieu

## Introduction

Snowboarding is a relatively new sport that emerged as a counterculture to traditional sport that was considered to be bureaucratic and paternalistic with a strong emphasis on competition (Donnelly, 1993). Snowboarding has however undergone major changes in respect to organization, competitions, commercialization, and professionalization. The development reflects mainstreaming of snowboarding in terms of consumer capitalism (Humphrey, 1997, 2003), sportification, and snowboarding as entertainment. Sportification is a concept used to describe the development of games from a pastime into a sport. It may be here defined as a process of rationalization, and achievement-orientation with an emphasis on competitiveness (Goksøyr, 1996).<sup>1</sup> In terms of entertainment, snowboard competitions and the production of magazines, films and videos have expanded enormously (Burton, 2003; Howe, 1998; Humphreys, 2003; Rinehart, 2000). Snowboarding is featured by change and innovation in cultural expressions, equipment, riding styles – and competitions – which is the topic of this article.

Snowboarding originated as a men's sport and it remains heavily dominated by males as revealed in scholarly research. Anderson's study (1999) focuses on the social practices used by male snowboarders to construct masculinities relating to clothing styles, risk-taking, violence and aggression (referring to fights in the lift lines). Young (2004) highlights gender differences in the experience of young women and men in skateboarding and snowboarding with particular attention to motivation, networks and the overall socialization process in the two sports. Sisjord (2009) discusses a variety of gender relations in terms of females versus males as well as different types of femininities among female snowboarders. Thorpe (2005) focuses on females' positions and opportunities in snowboarding, painting contrasting pictures of female snowboarders – one of social progress, the other of social constraint. Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) have examined skydiving and snowboarding, exploring the construction of gender and the strategies that women employ to carve out spaces for themselves in these sporting contexts.

By and large, previous research has predominantly examined informal snowboarding. The present study focuses on organized snowboarding with particular attention to female snowboarders' perceptions of competitions. The study was conducted at an international snowboard camp for women, which was part of a broader project supported by EU Youth Program. The women's group in the Norwegian Snowboard Federation (NSBF), called Powder Puff Girls (PPGirls), had invited other European countries to collaborate in the promotion of women's snowboarding generally, in competition, and network building for future collaboration<sup>2</sup>.

In the invitation to the camp it was stated that there is a 'common understanding that girls are in need of girl-specific initiatives to increase involvement in snowboarding. For example, we should develop new competition formats for girls only and look into the possibility of adapting existing concepts for increased participation' (NSBF, 2006, p. 1).<sup>3</sup> Since the intention of the camp was to discuss future development of women's snowboarding, I found it interesting to examine the participants' individual comprehension of the issue. More specifically, the article addresses the participants' perceptions of snowboard competitions, their ideas of 'new competition formats', and viewpoints of how to get more females involved in competition.

As an introduction to the study I briefly sketch historical and cultural aspects of snowboarding as a background for understanding the females' position and agency in the snowboarding community – which may be understood as a field. Field, along with habitus, and capital are the central organizing concepts in Bourdieu's theory of practice, which are considered useful tools in exploring the field of snowboarding and the participants' experiences and preferences.

### **Snowboarding – from 'alternative sport' to the Olympic Games**

According to Bourdieu (1978), the appearance of a new sport or a new way of practicing an already established sport results in a restructuring of the space of sporting practices and a redefinition of the meaning attached to the various practices. The emergence of snowboarding was predominantly influenced by the 'board sports' surfing and skateboarding. However, its relation to skiing should not be overlooked (Heino, 2000).

The Snurfer (shortened term of Snow-surfer) is usually considered the breakthrough of snowboarding because it was the first snowboard-like piece that became commercially available (Gutman & Frederick, 2004). It was created by Sherman Poppen (Michigan, USA) first as a toy for his daughter. After improvements, Poppen licensed the concept to Brunswick Bowling in 1966. As it became popular in the 1970s Poppen arranged contests for Snurfer enthusiasts (Howe, 1998) and soon, others found interest in this industry. Two names are of particular importance, Jake Burton and Tom Sims, not solely for technical innovations but also for their impact on the snowboard culture and riding styles, as well as the development of contests.

Snowboarding, along with other 'alternative' or 'lifestyle' sports (Rinehart, 2000; Wheaton, 2004), emerged with the cooperative new leisure movement in the 1960s. Central to this movement is artistic sensibility in terms of innovation, freedom of action and expression. Adherents to this philosophy reacted against the overarching conformity and stifling nature of society; the counterculture inspired individuals to see themselves as original works of art and to be true to ones' self (Humphrey, 2003). Sports associated with the new leisure movement are characterized by creativity, acquisition of motor skills, or risk taking, with emphasis on fun and personal growth (Donnelly, 1988).<sup>4</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s the punk movement further influenced the artistic sensibility of the new leisure movement. The punks emphasized personal honesty and integrity, and retained the countercultural critique of late capitalism, mass communication and mass consumption. Their politics and philosophies were best explored and articulated through the tenets of art (Humphrey, 2003). The influence from punk and skateboarding impacted significantly on the development of snowboarding in the early 1990s with its increasingly urban, aggressive attitude and clothing style, which also reflects the Hip-hop image (Howe, 1998). 'The new school' of snowboarding is featured by skateboarding-based maneuvers and riding style typified by jibbing (utilizing obstacles, jumping and doing tricks at low speed) and extremely baggy clothes (Reichenfeld & Bruechert, 1995).

According to Howe (1998), contests galvanized snowboarders into a larger, national community in the USA in the early 1980s that gave snowboarding a center – a sense of legitimacy. The sport spread rapidly to other continents and throughout the 1990s contests and organizational bodies developed. In 1990 the International Snowboard Federation (ISF) was founded by 'riders for riders' with the aim of bringing the world's best snowboarders together to test their skills in an environment

which embraced competitiveness, but stressed the idea of having fun. The ISF set the standards for snowboard competitions and that contributed to the development of the sport becoming an Olympic discipline in 1998 (Ward, 2002). To the dismay of ISF supporters, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recognized Federation International de Ski (FIS) as the sport's official governing body (Humphrey, 2003). This occurrence led to a split among snowboarders, some apparently accepting it. However, most snowboarders 'ignored the Olympic squabble' (p. 411). The ISF, which replaced by World Snowboard Federation (WSF) in 2002, continued to develop contests world wide, much of this in conjunction with national snowboard associations, commercial organizers and media companies (Gutman & Frederick, 2004; Rinehart, 2000).

For many years females who snowboarded were not taken seriously in the market place or the media. Not until the mid-1990s were snowboard gender-specific boards and equipment manufactured. In snowboarding films, the few females participating had to ride the same terrain as the males and they were regarded as equals, something which female participants regretted (Howe, 1998). In the early Half-pipe competitions, there was no separate women's division; the few woman participants competed in the same events as the men. This remained the situation until the late 1980s when a separate division for females in the sport's various disciplines was established (Gutman & Frederick, 2004).<sup>5</sup>

Snowboarding today covers a variety of disciplines. Snowboarding off-piste and backcountry snowboarding take place in terrain outside ski resort boundaries (Reichenfeld & Bruechert, 1995). Freestyle includes a number of styles, giving riders a choice of tricks to pursue, and the versatility to pursue them. Many snowboard areas have all-terrain parks set up for this type of riding, containing Half-pipe slopes or a park with different obstacles allowing the participants to choose how they want to ride (Gutman & Frederick, 2004). In terms of competitions, disciplines vary between different organizers. FIS competitions (i.e. Olympic Games, World Cups, and Continental Cup) cover Half-pipe and Big Air (FIS, 2007/08). WSF competitions additionally provide free-style snowboarding and snowboard-cross, both depending on manufactured obstacles as part of the course (International Judges Commission, 2003).

### **Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus**

In analytical terms, a field is defined as a network of objective relations between positions. These positions are 'objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present or potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital)' (Bourdieu & Waquant, 2002, p. 97). To explain internal field dynamics, Bourdieu makes an analogy with games: it follows rules or regularities that are not explicit and codified.

Central to the dynamics of fields are *stakes* which, for the most part, are the product of the competition between players. Players are taken in by the game and they oppose each other to the extent that they concur in their belief in the game and its stakes. In every field, Bourdieu suggests, a struggle exists between the newcomer who tries to break through the entry barrier, and the dominant agent who strives to defend the monopoly and keep out competition. The dominant agent's interest lies in conserving what is produced in the field, and in so doing conserve themselves (Bourdieu, 1993a).

The analogy of games also includes trump cards, which are master cards whose force varies depending on the game and the field. Some cards are valid across various fields. These are fundamental species of *capital*, ‘but their relative value as trump cards is determined by each field and even by the successive states of the same field’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002, p. 98). Bourdieu identifies various forms of capital. *Economic* capital relates to economy and material resources, while *cultural* capital exists in three forms – embodied, objectified, or institutionalized. *Social* capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, reflecting a network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. *Symbolic* capital is the form that the former species of capital takes when it is grasped through perceptions that recognize the specific logic of its possession and accumulation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002).

Bourdieu (1978) also employs the term *physical* capital, predominantly in relation to social class and embodied practices, which he associates with habitus, lifestyle choices and sporting practices. For Bourdieu (1984) *habitus* is a mediating construct impacting the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification. The habitus is internalized and converted into dispositions that generate meaning-giving perceptions and practices. Hence, the agents’ different positions in the social space produce different habitus and consequently different judgements of taste.

Bourdieu’s conceptualization has been successfully used in scholarly research on sports, a few studies suffice to illustrate this. Wacquant’s (1992) study of a ghetto gym in Chicago sheds light on how boxing was linked to the living conditions and further, the social production of the pugilist habitus as embodied practical reason that suggests the need of placing the socialized lived body at the centre of the analysis. Thorpe (2004) examines embodied snowboarders by analysing cultural tastes and styles of dress, language and bodily deportment. She highlights the way snowboarders earn symbolic capital through demonstration of commitment, physical prowess and risk taking. The analysis conceptualizes the body as a possessor of power, a form of status, and a bearer of symbolic value and a specific form of physical capital. Kay and Laberge (2004) use the conceptions of symbolic power and field in order to explain adventure racing as a social process and symbolic system that legitimizes masculine domination. The study reveals that naturalization of women’s difference/weakness and the privileging of physical toughness as the dominant capital in the field, serve to legitimate masculine domination. Although, women develop strategies to accumulate different forms of symbolic capital they nevertheless are complicit in their own subordination.

### **Site and methods**

The International Women’s Snowboard Camp was held at a summer ski resort in Southern Norway for one week in June of 2006. The camp attracted 20 female snowboarders from five European countries: Finland (5), Italy (1), Latvia (2), Norway (11) and Sweden (1). Additionally ‘the crew’ consisted of snowboard instructors and workshop leaders, all females.

As a researcher in the field of gender and sport, I was invited to the camp to hold a talk on gender and snowboarding as an introduction to the workshops. During the camp, I followed the snowboarders in the activities and conducted qualitative interviews with eight participants. I did not make systematic field notes, yet

observations and personal contact with the participants were useful as a background for the interviews.

The interviewees were recruited in a plenary session. I presented the study and invited a maximum of two delegates from each country to participate. The delegates from Italy, Latvia and Sweden all consented to participate. The first two participants from Finland and Norway who approached me were included.<sup>6</sup>

The age of the interviewees varied from 18 to 31. Five had been snowboarding for six or seven years two had more than ten years' experience, one had snowboarded for two years. Four were educated instructors of whom two were certified judges. With one exception, the interviewees were involved with organized snowboarding in relation to the national snowboard association or a commercial organizer.

The interviews were held in a cabin at the camping place where the participants stayed. The research themes were based on the two main questions of the study;(1) the participants' overall perceptions of competitions and (2) women's networking in snowboarding<sup>7</sup>. The interview was semi-structured and covered a variety of issues including experiences from different snowboarding contexts (informal, and competitions) with particular attention to gender issues; the participants' former experiences from competitions, perceptions of the development of snowboarding with reference to style and competition formats; questions related to promoting female snowboarding in general and in competitions; and the participants' association with informal groups of snowboarders and snowboard organizations.

Interviews were held in English, except for the Norwegians and the Swedish participant. The interviews lasted on average one hour; they were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were coded with the main categories and associated sub-categories (Strauss, 1996) utilizing the MaxQda program and cross-case analyzed (Patton, 1990) in order to compare each issue across the sample of interviewees.

In terms of ethical considerations, the study proposal was guided by the Data Protection Official for Research.<sup>8</sup> Interviewees were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and they consented to the researcher's possible use of quotations from the interviews<sup>9</sup>.

## **Results and discussions**

According to the first issue addressed in the article – the participants' perceptions of snowboard competitions – the data analysis revealed various dimensions reflecting viewpoints of competition as well as its significance seen in relation to their snowboarding habitus and preferences. As a general impression, competitions play a minor role in the interviewees' personal involvement in snowboarding, yet several revealed qualified opinions of the issue. Most of this was connected to positive and negative experiences and to snowboarding facilities. Many of them questioned the celebration of accomplishments as facilitated by progressively more large-sized Half-pipes and jumps, which reflects the development of snowboarding in terms of social practice and capital valued in the field (Bourdieu, 1984).

Results from the first issue of the study are presented in two sections. The first discusses the interviewees' experiences and perceptions of snowboard competitions; the second focuses on snowboarding facilities. Thereafter results of the other issues raised in the study are presented, namely ideas for new competition formats, and viewpoints of how to get more females involved in competition. The latter was

discussed with regard to increasing females' involvement in both recreational snowboarding and competitions predominantly in relation to female-only sessions.

### *Experiences from snowboard competitions*

The interviewees' narratives reveal significant variations relative to their positive and negative experiences in terms of personal outcome, different levels of competition, and the organization of contests. Furthermore, some of the interviewees related competition to the meaning of snowboarding in their life as both leisure and lifestyle. Two of the interviewees had not participated in snowboard competition whereas six had competed from local events to international contests.

The two participants without competition experience gave similar as well as contrasting explanations. One of these was employed by a commercial organizer and involved with organizing contests at national and international levels. To the question why she did not participate herself, she answered: 'I am only at a medium level. I don't think I am good enough.' It could be assumed that she evaluated her own qualifications in relation to the contests she organized, which were part of professional snowboarding and the World Snowboard Tour. The other participant also admitted to limited snowboarding skills. However, her main argument against competition was associated with the counterculture aspect of snowboarding noting that snowboard can be an activity contrasting 'the performance society' explaining why:

It's a lot of fun. It's about play and enjoyment, and the alternative lifestyle that attracted me. To live a little on the outside of society, making one's own rules, not being pushed around that much. I think a lot of people today feel pressure from various sides, that you feel a need to distance yourself and do your own things. And the board sports are probably a channel for that, a taste of that.

A common feature of the two interviewees is that competing in snowboarding is not a part of their habitus however it generates meaning-giving perceptions and practices (Bourdieu, 1984). The contest organizer evaluated her skills in relation to required accomplishment in the field whereas the other emphasized snowboarding as an escape from 'the performance society' and 'making one's own rules', which reflects two strands of the development of the sport. The first voice apparently supports professionalization and commercialization of snowboarding while the other's taste and preference is associated with countercultural beliefs and the anarchistic punk element in the new leisure movement (Humphrey, 2003).

The other six interviewees' experiences reflect different positions in the snowboarding field. Four had enjoyed competition whereas two expressed negative experiences. Among the positive voices, one had aspired to a professional career and participated in several international contests. However, due to injuries combined with the uncertainty of making snowboarding a living, she gave priority to education. She recalled that competitions might be challenging, adding that she liked to test herself against others and to achieve to the best of her ability. Another was involved in competition at the national and international levels:

Well, some small international competitions and the Finnish Championship, but it is just a side-thing to do, it's more that all the other things matter. But it is fun to go to competitions just to see friends and also to compare events I go to with events I organize, and get ideas – it's both riding and organizing stuff, so you kind of combine it.

This snowboarder was frequently in charge of organizing contests and her motivation appears more related to meeting people and picking up ideas than to personal success. The statement reflects characteristics of snowboarding as a 'new' sport in two ways. First, the social aspect of contests is analogous to the origin of snowboarding where competition was downplayed while socializing at the slopes and 'having fun' was the ultimate goal (Burton, 2003; Howe, 1998; Ward, 2002). The second aspect relates to snowboarding as an emerging sport characterized by flexibility in the organization of contests as indicated in the expressions 'compare events' and 'get ideas'.

The remaining two had only been involved in competitions arranged by the snowboard club in which both were members. One said: 'Well, we do some competitions in the snowboard club, I really enjoy it, but it is mostly for fun.' Their narratives further uncovered that 'competition is a minor thing' and that 'other things count more than competition.'

In contrast to the positive statements, two interviewees expressed discomfort with competition in terms of the mental strain. This is a well known phenomenon across sport disciplines relative to both gender and age, and which has been widely explored by sport psychologists (e.g. Crocker, Hoar, McDonough, Kowalski & Niefer, 2004; Goyen & Anshel, 1998; Kristiansen, Roberts & Abrahamsen 2008). One of the interviewees said: 'I don't like it, because I stress so much and I don't like the feeling. I don't like to associate that feeling with snowboarding.' The other elaborated on the stress condition she felt while competing in Big Jump:

To stand and wait for my turn stresses me if I consider trying a three-sixty [a 360 degree full-twist], but if I do so, will then the next guy take a five-forty [a one and a half twist]? Should I then extend myself even more? It's not very cool to evaluate people around you, how they might run. So I got very nervous, and I felt the atmosphere a bit depressing while waiting for a jump, because everyone was concerned with their own things, what kind of tricks they should perform.

Apparently, the feeling of stress was associated with the athletic performance in jumps where creativity and physical ability are essentials of the participants' physical and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1978). The atmosphere she described may be understood in terms of the dynamic in the field and the participants' beliefs in the game and its stakes (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002) where accomplishment seems to be of major importance. Enrollment for the competition should in itself indicate belief in *illusio* where the players are taken in by the game and oppose one another. According to Bourdieu (1998), to be caught up in and by the game inherently impacts which games are important to the individuals – and interesting because 'they have been imposed and introduced to your mind, in your body, in a form called a feel for the game.' (p. 77). However, it seems reasonable to suggest that the interviewees' aspirations differed from other competitors she had met in contests and which was elaborated in other parts of the narrative describing discrepancies between herself and co-riders' attitudes towards the contest. In several ways she explained that it got too serious and competitive, which may be interpreted as that her investment in the game differed from the others and consequently in her 'feel for the game'.

In summary, the results reveal that competition appears to be a minor part of the participants' snowboarding habitus. For the three women still competing, 'it's just a side thing to do' or 'other things count more than competition.'

The interviewee who had aspired to a professional career explained that the essence in snowboarding for her was: 'It's sort of a lifestyle, friends everywhere; you do things together because you love it.' The quotation relates to scholarly research on lifestyle sports by emphasizing time, dedication and commitment to the sport (e.g. Wheaton, 2004). Other interviewees similarly emphasized friendship and belongingness as well as the physical and mental meanings of the sport milieu, as illustrated here: 'It's about accomplishment, that you can succeed. The feeling of 'flow' gets so strong. You forget everything around you, you become one with the board. I think that's what it's about, and competition completely destroys that feeling.'

The quotation illustrates the bodily feeling that seems to produce a state of mind in which athletes become intensively focused in the present moment. This is elaborated by several scholars (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Fletcher, 2008). Stebbins introduces the term 'serious leisure' to describe various dimensions of leisure pursuit, among those: fulfilling one's human potential, expressing one's skills, having cherished experiences, and how participants may get so wrapped up in a certain activity that they temporarily forget about worrisome cares plaguing them in other parts of their lives (Stebbins, 2001).

Another significant aspect of serious leisure is the steady pursuit of an activity that people find so substantial, interesting and fulfilling that they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience. (Stebbins, 2007). With regard to the present case, competition appears to be a single dimension of participation relying on a far wider sphere of surroundings that are capable of fulfilling one's human potential, in an appreciated, social context.

### ***Snowboard facilities – getting bigger and higher***

In the discussion of females' possible constraints to participation in competitions several of the interviewees held the size of Half-pipes and Big Jumps as a possible hindrance. As one said: 'Nowadays, the problem is the size. Everything is becoming so big, it's really tough. It may become too tough for females to participate.' The issue was furthermore discussed with reference to risk of injuries as one explained: 'Girls are more concerned about the consequences' indicating that females are more apt to shy away from trying when the jumps get too big. The finding is comparably reported in other studies where fear of injury and unwillingness to take risk serve as a limitation to women's involvement in snowboarding (Laurendeau and Sharara, 2008; Young, 2004).

Another argument against the high jumps concerns females' ability to demonstrate snowboarding skills while performing on terrains too difficult to for their physical abilities: 'On average, boys are taller and stronger and the jumps are made for the tough guys. No wonder girls find it difficult.' The statement indicates that females fall short on physical capital, referring to bodily expressions recognized as possessing value in social fields based on power, status and distinctive symbolic forms (Shilling, 1993). The size of facilities was similarly discussed in a study by Sisjord (2009), with reference to Half-pipe. Participants in that study regretted that males' merits became a 'standard for evaluation'. They explained that females are not able to reach the height of the males, to fly up in the air over the edge, which makes the tricks more spectacular and more valued. Consequently, the participants felt that

the females' accomplishments were devalued since they were compared with the males' performances.

A few of the interviewees commented on the changes that have taken place over the last years in snowboarding as illustrated with reference to Half-pipes:

At first when I competed, the pipes were 3.5 meters or so. That was fun. Now, I think super-pipes are about 5 to 6 meters. We also tried some of those, but then it is really important that the pipes are in good shape. It's far easier to ride a well-shaped pipe. But, anyway I think they are getting way too high when considering participation by females.

The quotation that stems from the participant who had considered a professional career conveys some interesting evaluations. First, her positive experiences with lower pipe walls – 'that was fun'. Whether 'fun' also associates to a Super-pipe is not clear in the quotation. However, she questions the development towards higher pipe walls which gives rise to concern in terms of women's participation. In the end it is worth noticing an increase in height of Half-pipe walls which, according to Gutman and Frederick (2004), has been doubled in recent years.

The increase in size of facilities corresponds to the requirements of professionalization which Bourdieu (1993b) explains in terms of supply and demand in the sport market. The case of supply relates to a particular definition of sporting practice and entertainment. Meeting a demand requires considering the expectations, interests and values the agents bring into the field, with the "actual practices and entertainments evolving as a result of the permanent confrontation and adjustment between the two" (p. 127). In this process, it is important to note the strong relations existing between professional snowboarders, commercial organizers, product manufacturers and media (Rinehart, 2000).

As part of the discussion of facilities, some interviewees suggested differentiation in size, particularly in relation to jumps. One argued: 'Smaller jumps would be fine, and important in order to make progress. It's also a way to progress for those who want to make the really big jumps.' Those educated instructors paid the most attention to the topic which may be understood in terms of habitus reflecting emphasis of skill enhancement, as well as cultural capital and education directed towards learning and progress making.

The two interviewees who used to participate in contests organized by the snowboard club took a different position: 'The girls have smaller jumps. You can, of course, choose the biggest one if you like, but almost nobody chooses it; we choose the small one.' The statement assumedly relates to practice because 'if there is a competition there is always a kick-up for girls and one for the guys.' Furthermore, their narratives indicated a socially conservative gender order where males appear to behave chivalrously towards the females, something which the interviewees apparently appreciate. This was also exemplified in relation to competitions:

They build the kickers, one big one and we ask for a smaller one because we are not going to jump at the big one. And they ask "how big do you want it?"  
And they build it like that.

The men's consideration and helpfulness towards female riders was elaborated in a very positive manner by phrases like 'they are very kind' and 'they don't forget us' which may reflect female submissive manipulation. Alternatively, descriptions may be interpreted in terms of masculine domination and symbolic violence that operates to naturalize the social order, based upon notions of the physical superiority of men over women. According to Bourdieu (2001), the result of this process is seen as

‘somatization of the social relations of domination’ (p. 21) because both men and women come to embody and perceive them as natural and self-evident.<sup>10</sup>

### *New competition formats for females?*

It should be noted that the interviews were held before the participants had discussed competition formats in the workshop. Hence, the interviewees’ perspectives reflect individual ideas and comprehensions of the topic. The analysis of the results reveals two significant aspects, namely alternative forms of organization and snowboarding styles. One of those featuring ‘conventional’ competitions as a stressful event was obviously enthusiastic about alternative ways of organization:

Sometimes it would be nice, but it really depends on how the events are being organized. This spring I participated in a contest. We did not have any particular run, like now you have to start and go. We just rode the pipe like for two hours and the judges just watched us, you didn’t really think that you were in a competition. That was relaxing.

Interestingly, her previous description of competition in terms of mental strain had expressively changed to ‘that was relaxing’. To be evaluated over a certain time span had assumedly replaced the feeling of stress (in conventional competitions) with calmness, because ‘you have more than one or two opportunities to show your skills’, as she further explained. Another argument she held was for the elimination of ‘every eye on you’, a stressor she had felt in former competitions. Correspondingly, findings from the Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) study revealed that women snowboarders did not like to be watched in the terrain park (informal snowboarding, not competition), nor did they feel that they had the requisite skills to snowboard in parks.

The contest the interviewee referred to is assumedly a ‘jam’ – a contest format where the participants ride for a certain amount of time, usually one or two hours. Evaluations are based on the two best runs or overall riding performance during the window of time (International Judges Commission, 2003). Among the perceived advantages of this particular format is that competitors have many opportunities to perform well, and the riders may try new tricks ‘without losing everything with a ball’ (p. 5). The latter aspect corresponds well with the interviewee’s statement above.

Except for this participant no-one else had been involved with alternative forms of competition. However, some interesting ideas came through. One suggested peer evaluation where individual progress during a contest should be appraised instead of ranking based on the best performances. Others argued for events where two or more should ride together, because ‘then you don’t feel that pressure. It gives a kind of mental support riding together with someone’. Another advocated team riding in order to attract more females:

In order to get more females involved in competitions, I think one should ride as a group, not just one alone against the others. One should battle a bit, as a team. I think that’s a good idea, just perfect.

Another dimension revealed in the interviews refers to snowboarding style. A few regretted the ever-expanding, spectacular tricks while advocating for ‘old school’ snowboarding. ‘Old school’ was not explicitly defined. However, some indications were given. One said: ‘Quite simple basic tricks that they started with, like when they first started snowboarding.’ Another explained: ‘Old school is a bit different than the

style nowadays in snowboarding. Old school was more like tweaking.’ Yet another emphasized females’ advantage in ‘old school’ style:

Things are now getting so high when doing the tricks and so, they are doing thousand degrees of rotations [triple twist]. But we also see kind of old school tricks coming back, those high and clean hundred and eighty instead of all those silly turnings. And I think the girls probably can be very good at just that, that we take up the old school tricks, and show that it’s as cool to do old school tricks as to do the high tricks.

Her dissatisfaction with high tricks and ‘silly turnings’, assumedly refers to the influence of the skateboarding culture and an ever increasing number of spectacular tricks (Gutman & Frederick, 2004). The argument for high and clean tricks with fewer rotations, along with the former quotation ‘old school was more like tweaking’ indicate preferences to practice snowboarding with different bodily expressions. The suggestion to resume old-school tricks indicates a change in the symbolic value of physical capital. As such, turning back to the ‘old school’ may be interpreted as a break with doxa which according to Bourdieu (1993a) refers to a situation where the world of traditions is experienced as a ‘natural world’ and taken for granted, which in the present case reflects development of valued accomplishment. The latter also relates to interviewees’ perceptions of snowboarding facilities presented above.

### ***Benefits of ‘women-only sessions’***

The growing rates of females’ involvement in snowboarding may be understood in the light of women’s pro-active agency in the culture, particularly after the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, snowboarding became increasingly male-dominated and the styles of participation that privileged the male body became popular, including ‘big air’ competitions (Thorpe, 2006). Only a woman considered to be ‘one of the guys’ in terms of attitude and dedication was accepted in many of the male-dominated contexts (Anderson, 1999; Thorpe, 2005). As a reaction to this, women undertook collective agencies by developing women-only camps, producing women-only films, and the camaraderie among top snowboarders helped create a unified front in this male-dominated culture (Thorpe, 2006).

When discussing benefits of separate sessions, expressions appeared like ‘having a space on one’s own’ and ‘otherwise, there are not many places where you can acquire skills.’ Such statements commonly referred to mixed-gender contexts where females tend to be marginalized and often withdraw when ‘the males take the stage’, as expressed here:

I think that sessions for girls are very important, because you can argue your brains out, that girls should be tough and drop in with the boys, but it’s hard. The threshold is much lower when you can ‘board’ with other girls. I think girls are more accepting of less skilled people than boys. It’s probably just something in the girls’ heads, but I think the threshold is lower and the potential is greater for girls to improve when they feel that the climate is supportive.

The statement reveals some interesting perspectives on barriers towards ‘drop in with the boys’, which may be interpreted in terms of inferiority where females experience lower acceptance from male counterparts. Simultaneously, the interviewee relates this as probably being ‘just something in the girls’ heads’, which also associates with Bourdieu’s concept of *symbolic violence*. This concept explains how the dominated adopts the cognitive instruments of the dominant ‘when the schemes she applies in

order to perceive and appreciate herself, or to perceive and appreciate the dominant [...] are the product of the – thereby naturalized – embodiment of the classifications of which her social being is the product’ (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 35). A similar perspective was revealed in the Laurendeau & Sharara (2008) study where it was reported that some women snowboarders believe that their participation is trivialized because male riders do not take them seriously.

Others emphasized the necessity of a supportive climate and the females’ need for ‘pushing each other’. Those arguments emerged in different ways, like ‘that’s important – I think most girls want to improve, to do better, but they need to feel confident with the group.’ As such, the feeling of self-reliance and trust in other people is decisive, as one argued: ‘You know, girls need to hear expressions like ‘yes, you made it’ or ‘you are really capable, they need this little extra, because girls are fairly self-critical.’ Some of them spoke more specifically about ‘pushing’ and skill enhancement in relation to the technical requirements as this quotation illustrates:

Commonly, the girls develop best when pushing each other. It’s kind of “if she does a back-flip I will do a back-flip, and if she enters a rail I will also do it”, it’s always like that. But girls need pushing each other all the time by those being equally good, because you have to overcome mental barriers all the time, “if she is going on a box or a new rail, always to dare a bit more”. But when you come to the pipe, you must also master the technique; it’s about both being daring and developing technique.

In various ways the interviewees point to the social rewards, which is another aspect of Stebbins’ concept of serious leisure. One such reward comes from meeting people, making new friends, and taking part in the affairs of the group. A second social reward is felt when the group accomplishes something significant (Stebbins, 2001), like the peer riders’ positive feed-back as revealed in the statements above.

Other narratives cover variations in women’s separate sessions, informal and organized. One of them describes a session like this:

We call it sessions. Like the first day we get training for everybody, the pro-riders or the better riders coach those less experienced, and the second day they get coaching as well, but then we also have photo-sessions for the better riders, so we get coverage in the magazines. And then on the last day we have a competition. This year we had a team competition for girls because we wanted to create more team spirit among the girls, it’s easier for them to enter the contest as a group, not as an individual because there is less pressure on the girls that way. But in a way, we don’t want it to get too serious; it’s mostly about finding a way to have fun, and competing is not the reason why they started snowboarding.

The quotation conveys some interesting aspects of snowboarding, which somehow summarizes the major findings in this article. First and foremost it reflects involvement and accomplishment. Assumedly, everyone is welcome to participate irrespective of their level of performance since the pro-riders coach the less-experienced. Furthermore, the interviewee advocates team competitions in order to ‘create more team spirit’ and lighten the ‘pressure on the girls that way’. Moreover, she downplays the element of competition: it should not be too serious.

Another aspect of the quotation points to the commercialization of snowboarding, including professional riders and photo-sessions. This increases the options for publicity in the snowboard media which plays a crucial role in this sport

(Howe, 1998; Humphrey, 2003; Rinehart, 2000, 2005; Wheaton, 2004). A vital aspect of the session is also related to enhancement of the participants' social capital, reflecting the network of more or less institutional relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu, 1984).

### **Concluding remarks**

The purpose of the article was to explore women snowboarders' perceptions of snowboard competition as well as their ideas of alternative formats and promoting females' participation. The interviewees' narratives reflect the constitution of the field of snowboarding endowed with its own logic, stakes and rules (Bourdieu, 1978), encompassing the females' position in general terms and in relation to contests.

Ideologically, strands from the 'new leisure movement' and counterculture appear in the participants' overall notions of competitions as emphasized in expressions like: 'it should not be too serious' and 'it's mainly a way to have fun'. Simultaneously, several of the interviewees revealed attitudes influenced by the sportification that has impacted recent years' snowboarding, as in discussions of how to promote women's participation in contests. The interviewees' perceptions may nevertheless be understood in the light of their involvement in organized snowboarding where competition is a central part of the activity.

The majority of the interviewees had been involved with competitions from a local to an international level. Most of them expressed positive experiences whereas two were more reserved in their assessment partly resulting from the mental strain of competitions. Snowboarding facilities appeared significant in discussions of females' participation in contests, where several regretted the development towards bigger jumps and the higher walls of the Half-pipes, supposedly a constraint to females' participation. Only two of the participants revealed another perspective, as their experiences related to gender differentiation of facilities. The results however reveal that the participants, on a personal level, put little emphasis on competition. Their involvement in snowboarding can be better understood in terms of 'serious leisure' and lifestyle.

Discussions of alternative formats of competitions suggested team riding as well as alternative criteria of evaluation in terms of riding styles and symbolic capital valued in the field, including resumption of old school tricks. In order to increase females' participation, 'women-only' sessions were given prominence as a way to attract more participants as well as skill enhancement.

As a closing comment, the limitations of the study in terms of generalization should be noted. Since the sample is relatively small it is imperative not to generalize perceptions of competitions among woman snowboarders. The points of view revealed in the study are however interesting since they stem from participants at a gathering organized for the purpose of discussing the future development of women's snowboarding. Nevertheless, the study may serve as a modest contribution to an unexplored field of research, and shed light upon female snowboarders' experiences and comprehensions of competitions as well as ideas for changes. Results from the study may also have practical implications in promoting female snowboarding as a base of further discussion and implementation of specific arrangements for females in terms of contests as well as their overall agency in the field of snowboarding.

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<sup>1</sup> Elias and Dunning (1986) use the term sportization when discussing sport/physical activities in relation to the civilizing process. Guttman's (1978) characteristics of modern sport give relevant insight in rules, regulations, standardizations etc.

<sup>2</sup> An article on networking was formerly published... (The title, journal and name of author will be added if the present article is acceptance for publication). See note 7.

<sup>3</sup> The term "girls" is directly translated from the Norwegian use of the word which covers a wider age span than 'girls' in English (Norwegian 'girls' may also refer to young adults). The term 'girl' may appear in quotations from Norwegian participants as well as other (non-English) participants employing the term in the interview.

<sup>4</sup> Snowboarding can also be traced to the 'whiz sports' movement in France in the 1970-80s, which according to Midol & Broyer (1995) constitutes new sport forms, very different from the official one promoted by sport institutions. The whiz sport culture was championed by avant-garde groups that challenged 'the existing order through which French society has defined itself for the last two centuries.' (p. 210)

<sup>5</sup> Gender-specific equipment is an evidence of females' inroad into snowboarding and which was welcomed by female riders. The boards for women were shorter, lighter, and narrower, with more flex and clothing was designed to fit better for females than the 'super-huge' designed for males (Howe, 1998). The inclusion of gender-specific competitions may be understood as a part of the sportification process, where fairness in judgment is a predominant aspect, also resulting in sex-separated classes.

<sup>6</sup> Due to bias distribution of participants representing the different countries the number of interviewees from Finland and Norway was limited in order to equalize the other countries. This was mainly because of another part of the study exploring organizational links in the home country and collaboration across national border, where it was imperative to include delegates from each country represented at the camp-

<sup>7</sup> Reference revealed if the present article is accepted for publication.

<sup>8</sup> The Data Protection Official for Research evaluates proposals from scholars at Norwegian universities, university colleges and several hospitals and research institutes. The proposal covers a plan for data collection, including interview guide and a description of the sample (particularly age is important with regard to parent's consent for participation which was not needed here) etc.

<sup>9</sup> A draft of a formerly published article on 'networking' was sent to the interviewees for comments since much of the data revealed home country which made the interviewees easier identifiable. The interviewees expressed that they did not need to read through a draft of another article.

<sup>10</sup> As part of the EU supported project a workshop was held the year before the camp was arranged. Delegates from several European snowboard organizations, males and females, took part in the workshop. During the discussion of promoting females' involvement, a few delegates explained that men facilitated lower sized jumps in order to encourage women's participation. The current statement may be an example of that.

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