Gatekeepers and Godfathers
An intersectional analysis of the impact of personal social networks on snowboarding progression

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to discover what impact, if any, personal social networks have on an individual’s snowboarding skill progression, and whether any differences emerge based on gender, class, race, or age. Interviews with 10 demographically diverse snowboarders in Washington State, USA, were conducted and analyzed. The study revealed that personal social networks are highly important to snowboarding skill progression, with nine progression benefits noted. It was also found that the type of relationship was important, with the roles of gatekeepers, “godfathers,” and crews as the most critical for progression. Lastly, respondents indicated a variety of methods to access social networks, including social media, events, organizations, industry employment and through existing social networks. To further analyze the findings, an intersectional feminist reading of Castells networking theory was applied, with investigations into gender, race, class, and age patterns. The analysis revealed two overlapping values systems, one based on snowboarding ability and commitment, and one based on alignment of demographics with those who are most valued in the snowboarding world--mainly young, white, middle class men. The research closes with potential solution ideas to improve equitability and inclusion, which can be applied from the grassroots level to large-scale implementation.

Keywords
Snowboarding; intersectionality; feminism; social networks; action sports; extreme sports; Castells; networking theory
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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction  

2. An introduction to snowboarding  
   2.1 A brief history of snowboarding  
   2.2 Snowboarding as a subculture  
      2.2.1 The New Leisure movement and resistance to institutionalization  
      2.2.2 Subcultures within a subculture  
   2.3 Introduction to snowboarding progression  

3. A theoretical introduction  
   3.1 Intersectional complexity in snowboarding  
      3.1.1 Gender  
      3.1.2 Race  
      3.1.3 Age  
      3.1.4 Class  
      3.1.5 Theorizing intersectionality  
   3.2 The Networked snowboarder  
      3.2.1 Family  
      3.2.2 Friends  
      3.2.3 Female-only events  
      3.2.4 Organizations and Clubs  
      3.2.5 Teams and crews  
      3.2.6 Theorizing networking  

4. Research Project Design  
   4.1 Research questions  
   4.2 Theoretical frameworks  
   4.3 Methodological Considerations: an intracategorical approach  
   4.4 Method and Materials  
      4.4.1 Semi-structured interviews  
      4.4.2 Selection of and access to respondents  
      4.4.3 Interview process  
      4.4.5 Other materials  
   4.5 Ethical Concerns  
   4.6 The reflexive researcher
4.7 Limitations

5. Results

5.1 How are interpersonal relationships linked to snowboarding progression?

5.2 Are there correlations between the composition of a snowboarder’s personal network and their progression?

5.2.1 Gatekeepers

5.2.2 “Godfathers”

5.2.3 Crews

5.3 How do snowboarders access personal networks that may help them progress?

6. Discussion

6.1 An intersectional analysis of how interpersonal relationships are linked to snowboarding progression

6.2 An intersectional analysis of social network composition in snowboarding

6.3 An intersectional analysis of access to social networks

6.4 A macro level analysis

7. Envisioning solutions

8. Conclusion

Reference list

Appendix A: Interview Questions
1. Introduction

While strapping a plank of wood to your feet and sliding sideways down a snowy mountain may at first glance seem to be a strange way to spend a day, snowboarding is a pastime that has provided immeasurable joy to millions of people. It is also a way to increase both physical health (mobility, cardio, strength) and mental health (stress relief, happiness, social bonding) (Thorpe 2012). Unlike its sister sport, skiing, snowboarding is the only snow sport that was developed solely for enjoyment, rather than for transportation or a practical need (Heino 2000).

As a sport, it is relatively unstructured. As compared to say, basketball, the location involves potentially dangerous and constantly changing terrain, rather than a highly controlled environment such as a basketball court. Generally speaking, there are no easily accessible clubs or leagues, and you usually cannot learn it in school. All of this means that personal social networks are integral to accessing many of the components needed to participate and progress in the sport. Yet, surprisingly, almost no research has been conducted investigating social networks in snowboarding. Equally as shocking, there is nearly a complete lack of intersectional research on the sport.

In this study, ten interviews were conducted to better understand how social networks are connected to snowboarding progression, how individuals access those networks, and whether the composition of networks plays a role. Built into these queries, and throughout the research process itself, is the underlying question--does gender, race, age, or class have an impact? The aim of this study is to begin to fill the two knowledge gaps mentioned above, as well as to provide a practical piece of research that can be used to push the sport in a positive, more inclusive, direction.
Before we begin, any research related to outdoor activities in the United States must begin with acknowledgment that they are taking place on stolen land. I would like to start by recognizing the original inhabitants of Washington State, where my research is focused--specifically in what is now called the Cascade Mountain range, which runs North/South through the middle of the state. The land that snowboarders now enjoy was taken through acts of genocide during the colonization of what is now the United States.

While some local Native Americans survive to this day, huge numbers were killed during colonization. Currently, Washington State is home to 29 federally recognized tribes. However, the federal government refuses to recognize all tribes, and others (such as Colville) are comprised of multiple tribes (Washington Indian Gaming Association 2018). I would especially like to recognize those that are closest to the ski resorts mentioned in this document, including: Snoqualmie, Muckleshoot, Tulalip, Stillaguamish, Sauk-Suiattle, Upper Skagit, and Nooksack. This list is not exhaustive, as some tribes continue the fight for land rights and federal recognition today, including the Snohomish tribe, on whose land I grew up (Snohomish Tribe of Indians 2018, Dailey 2018). Also, many tribes utilized the mountains both for their abundant resources, as well as for trade routes between the East and West sides of what is now the State of Washington. Further, additional tribes have been lost to genocide that are not recognized in the list.

Over the next few pages, I will provide an introduction to the sport of snowboarding, followed by a review of previous research and a summary of the research project itself, including the methodology and theoretical background to be used. Next, the results and analysis sections are presented, closing with a brief ideation of solutions and conclusion.
2. An introduction to snowboarding

2.1 A brief history of snowboarding

The idea of snowboarding was first conceived as a combination of skiing and surfing. In 1964, an American man called Sherman Poppen invented what he called the “snurfer” “when he bolted two skis together and added a rope for stability” (Thorpe, 2011, p. 21). From this rudimentary design, enthusiasts (mostly young men) based in the state of California, Washington, Utah, and Vermont began designing variations of what would become the snowboard (Thorpe 2011, p. 21). Some of these designs would evolve into the first snowboard companies, several of which still exist today.

At first, snowboarders found that ski resorts were hostile to their inclusion. They were often banned from using the lifts and routinely kicked out. This was in part due to the questionable equipment when the sport was young. But it was also because of the “hedonistic” culture that had developed with the sport. This culture was closely linked to the perception of class relations. While skiing was seen as a upper-class sport, snowboarding’s culture may be considered more closely linked to skateboarding--instead of a symbol of wealth, it was meant to signify freedom, youth, and recklessness (Heino 2000). This culture went beyond the obvious distinctions of sports gear, but also influenced clothing choices, music, and slang.

The sport spread throughout the country, and internationally, reaching a new level of recognition with the advent of formal events. The first recorded event occurred in 1981 at resort called Suicide Six in Vermont (Thorpe 2005). Events emerged across the U.S. and Canada, as well as in Japan and throughout Europe. By 1998, the inauguration of the X-games and the inclusion of snowboarding in the winter Olympics were sure signs that the sport was now mainstream. In the U.S., Washington State emerged as a snowboarding hub, with ski resorts willing to share their terrain and embrace snowboarding culture. As Stevens Pass, the Washington ski resort that seven
of the ten interviewees noted as their primary mountain, reported: “at most areas in the 1980s, snowboarding—if it was allowed at all—was seen as blasphemy by traditionalist skiers. Stevens was one of few exceptions,” with the formal admittance of boarders beginning in 1987 (Stevens Pass 2012, p. 61).

Since the peak of snowboarding popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the sport has declined in participation somewhat. According to the most recent (2016) data collected by Snowsports Industries America (SIA), total estimated snowboarders in the United States lies at just over 7.5 million, down from a peak of 8.1 million in 2007-2008 (p. 8). Of those, only 19%, or 1.4 million were considered “core” snowboarders, meaning they go 9 or more times per season. This dropped dramatically from 25% the previous season. It is clear then, that the number of committed snowboarders in the United States is quite small overall, at approximately 0.44% of the population. When compared to skiing and other snowsports, ski resorts report that the percentage of visitors who snowboard lies at 26%, down from 2007/8 peak of 32.4% (SIA 2016).

2.2 Snowboarding as a subculture

2.2.1 The New Leisure movement and resistance to institutionalization

When snowboarding first emerged, it was intentionally meant to be an alternative to skiing, which was perceived as upper class and stuffy (Thorpe 2005). Literature commonly identifies the sport’s origins as a subculture, fiercely differentiating itself from skiing (Thorpe 2005, 2009, Thorp & Rinehart 2010, Steen 2008, Sisjord 2009, Sisjord 2013, Willmott & Collins 2015, etc). Subcultures are defined as “subgroups in society who shared activities, beliefs and values that served to distinguish them from the wider class culture” (Coates, Clayton & Cubmersone 2010, p. 1082).

One major aspect of the subculture identity is resistance to institutionalization and commercialization, or “selling out.” This aligns with what is called the “new leisure movement,”
or a type of leisure centered on alternative, unstructured sports, that emerged in the 1980s. As defined by Sisjord (2009), the new leisure movement values “anti-competition, cooperation and self-expression, characterized by experimenting with activities that require motor skills, creativity or risk taking, with emphasis on fun and personal growth” (Sisjord 2009, p. 1300). This is in stark contrast to more structured sports that focus on rules and regulations.

Especially when the sport was young, snowboarders often associated themselves with other cultural symbols that glorified an anti-establishment mindset. Punk and hip hop music could (and still can) be heard blasting from headsets and car radios; snowboarders that received injuries and kept riding were treated as heroes; drugs and alcohol were not a rare sight both on the slopes and during notorious parties (Heino 2000, Thorpe 2011).

Yet, as the sport grew, contests were developed, and snowboard gear began being made en masse, a tension arose from the original culture of the sport and the new commercialization and institutionalization. There was no consensus on how this shift should be handled. The most infamous example of these counter-culture values occurred during the aforementioned inclusion of snowboarding in the 1998 winter Olympics. Widely recognized as the most talented half pipe boarder of the time, Terje Håkonsen refused to participate, bemoaning that the Olympics represented the death of the spirit of snowboarding (Thorpe 2001, p. 26). However, over time, most snowboarders have accepted the mainstreaming of the sport. After all, without it, most would not have access to the gear, knowledge, and networks necessary to participate: “in order to maintain longevity, snowboarding had to become somewhat compliant to dominant organizations” (Coates et al 2010, p. 1088).

2.2.2 Subcultures within a subculture

Not everyone has had equal access to snowboarding. Women and girls have historically been marginalized (Thorpe 2011, Laurendeau & Sharara 2008, Sisjord 2013, etc), and though it is less documented, people of color, low-income people, and others have also been marginalized (Thorpe 2018, Watson 2018, Carter-Francique & Flowers 2013). Researchers have theorized this
is in part due to a dark aspect of the sport’s origin: as backlash to the inclusion of women and people of color in institutionalized sports (Thorpe 2018). Title IX, a federal law of the United States, was enacted in 1972 after a fierce political battle, and “prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity” (U.S. Department of Justice 2015). Indeed, Thorpe (2018) explains that the origin of alternative sports aligns with “increasing female participation [that] challenged organized sports...as an exclusive male bastion” (Thorpe 2018, p 699). Researchers have made similar comparisons with regards to race (Sisjord 2009).

Yet, core snowboarding has included, or at least tolerated, some inclusion from other groups. In fact, unlike surfing and skateboarding, women were included in early snowboarding competitions. In addition, even though the sports were male dominated, they were not exclusively male like many established sports were for dozens, if not hundreds, of years before women were permitted to participate (Thorpe 2018). However, it is undeniable that the sport has a history of white, middle/upper class male dominance that continues to this day.

Often, marginalized individuals have carved out their own space in order to participate despite pushback from the core culture. For example, one tool to manage hostility is to create women-only events, films, and “crews” (loosely organized small groups of snowboarding friends). Some even see this resistance as maintaining the true essence of the sport. One all-female crew, called “Too Hard,” features city riding, where the women ride their boards on railings, walls, staircases, and other features in an urban setting. They are known for filming their grisly injuries, excessive drinking, and heavy hip hop soundtracks, all while snowboarding at an extremely high level. Some have called Too Hard “the most punk thing happening in snowboarding,” (Hendricks 2015) a nod to the pre-sellout culture.

2.3 Introduction to snowboarding progression

Being an individual sport, and a relatively unstructured one, there is no direct path that dictates snowboarding progression. Despite this, here I will summarize some progression basics that may help with generally understanding how one moves through the sport.
Moving from beginner to expert level: It is common for individuals to first learn snowboarding at a ski resort, often through lessons, or taught by a friend. Beginners learn how to use the equipment, how to get on and off a chairlift, how to turn and stop. They also learn how to “read” a mountain and choose a line\(^1\), including official ski runs, which are coded by difficulty level: green circle for beginners, blue square for intermediate, black diamond for advanced, and double black diamond for expert. Once a snowboarder has learned the basics, they progress to the “blue square” intermediate runs, which involve steeper slopes, higher speeds, and more obstacles such as trees and rocks. Finally, a snowboarder reaches the advanced and expert level, where they master challenging features such as small cliffs, drops, and dense forests, and possibly jumps and tricks.

Specialization: Some snowboarders choose to gain expertise in one or more specialized types of riding. Each type has different skill sets, as well as behavior, gear, and slang norms. Examples are park riding (jumps, rails, and tricks), big mountain / freeriding (cliffs, powder, and high-risk terrain), and backcountry (outside of ski resorts), among others (Sisjord 2013, p. 510). At this stage, some begin to compete, and also invest in learning highly specific knowledge. For example, backcountry snowboarders gain avalanche knowledge and rescue training. In comparison, freestyle snowboarders become experts in the physics of movement.

Sponsored and Professional: Very few snowboarders reach sponsorship, and even fewer become professional. The meaning of sponsorship varies, ranging from simply receiving a free snowboard to having all-expense paid trips and receiving payment for marketing. For the purposes of this paper, “professional” means an individual earns enough money through snowboarding to be able to snowboard full-time, without a traditional form of employment.

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\(^1\) A “line” means a specific route down the mountain. Learning to “read” a mountain and pick a line is a specific skill set required for snowboarding progression. More advanced riders are able to access lines with more difficult terrain and obstacles.
**Understanding progression:** For this study, I draw from the work of Wilmott & Collins (2015), who describe progression in alternative sports as a *biopsychosocial* phenomenon. This means it is a combination of physical, mental, and social components. Alternative sports progression is unique for a number of reasons. One is the high risk of injury, caused both by the variable and constantly changing terrain, as well as the natural and human made obstacles such as cliffs, trees, and jumps. A second consideration for alternative sports concerns the fact that they are individual rather than team oriented. Yet this does not mean that social connection plays no part: “It was historically down to the athlete *encouraged by his or her peers* to decide to take the next risk and push for that next trick” (p. 1252, emphasis mine). Additionally, due to the unstructured nature of the sport, several theorists have argued that peer *validation* is of particular importance for motivation and progression in snowboarding (Sisjord 2009, Thorpe 2011).

3. **A theoretical introduction**

3.1 **Intersectional complexity in snowboarding**

The term intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, as a part of the Black feminist movement in the United States. As McCall (2005) describes, it “arose out of a critique of gender-based and race-based research for failing to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection—ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations” (p. 1780). While the focus began with race and gender, it rapidly expanded to investigate other “intersections” of identity including but not limited to class, age, parenthood, ability, sexual orientation, and more. Though centered in gender studies, intersectionality has impacted research in a variety of academic fields. While there is no single definition, it has been defined as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall 2005, p. 1771) and the “theorization of the relationship between different forms of social inequality” (Walby 2007, p. 450).
Intersectionality is not just an academic topic; it is also inherently political. Watson and Scraton (2013) define its *purpose* as “to deconstruct these categories and universalisms to more fully explain contradictory, dynamic manifestations of power” (p. 37). In the field of leisure studies, while several researchers have noted the need to take an intersectional approach (Thorpe 2018), few have done so. A few existing examples are a study on lesbian surfers (Roy & Caudwell 2014), and another on snowboarding and motherhood (Spowart, Hughson & Shaw 2008). Below we will briefly discuss the existing research on the social identities to be examined in this study: gender, race, age, and class.

3.1.1 Gender

Feminist researchers have explored the various levels of awareness of inequality in snowboarding, as well as different approaches to managing it. Broadly speaking, theorists have identified management techniques that align with three main feminist philosophies: liberal, radical, and poststructural.

One category, called “reproductive agency” by Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) takes a “liberal feminist” approach. These coping mechanisms were based in an individualistic approach, where women simply had to work harder within the male-dominated norms to be accepted (Thorpe 2005). Most theorists concluded that this approach was not ideal for long-term improvements to gender equity. As Laurendeau & Sharara (2008, p. 27-28) explain:

> As a result, problems stemming from macro-level social, economic, and political conditions become framed as individual concerns. This has the effect of depoliticizing the issue…[because] If women are making inroads into sport without challenging assumptions and structures that privilege men over women and particular kinds of men over others, then the transformative potential of their entrance is limited at best.

An alternative is called a “resistant” (Laurendeau & Sharara 2008) approach, which aligns with radical feminist philosophy. It rejects the status quo, and provides alternative ways to “do”
snowboarding. Solutions focus on the creation of women-only groups, as alternative spaces where women can re-create the sport in the way they prefer. Yet, Thorpe cautions against the potential consequences this can have, stating that “in reality separatist endeavours actually let the big brother structures avoid social responsibility” (Thorpe 2005, p. 94).

Third is a poststructural feminist approach. Aligned with this approach, several theorists (Rønbeck & Vikander 2011, Sisjord 2009, 2012, 2013, Thorpe 2011, 2018) have drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, adapting his concepts of habitus, field, and capital to analyze power relations within snowboarding. A core argument is that female action sports participants are “subtly performing their agency through their active participation,” rather than refusing to participate (Thorpe 2018, p. 705).

In addition to the three feminist approaches outlined above, several themes in the existing literature include management of outsider status (Laurendeau & Sharara 2008; Thorpe 2005), representation (Angelini, Billings & MacArthur 2013), power dynamics (Coates, Clayton & Humberstone 2010; Sisjord 2013), competitions (Sisjord 2013), and gendered attitudes towards risk (Ruedl et al 2011).

**Problematicizing gender studies in snowboarding**

The majority of literature on gender and snowboarding treat gender as an issue of representation--most did not address mobility, leadership and power at different levels of sport and industry participation. As we well know from the study of gender in the business world, overall participation is not an accurate indicator, as women, people of color, and others are more likely to be over-represented in lower ranking positions, and underrepresented in higher-ranking positions (Acker 2012). As two indigenous scholars put it: “mere equality for women with men measured in numerical targets simply combines the prevailing institutional logic with liberal feminist interests, but is insufficient to foster human thriving or achieve universal inclusiveness espoused in democratically-oriented nations” (Verbox Klemm & Humphries 2012, p 511-512).
Further, most gender and snowboarding literature treat women as a unified category of people, centering white, middle class cisgender women. This actively harms those who do not fit this demographic by erasing their unique experiences (Mohanty 1984). The need to take an intersectional approach is also critical from a practical standpoint, as the demographics of action sports are changing, and “increasingly attracting female participants from varying age groups, sexualities, abilities and levels of commitment, and from different cultures and ethnicities” (Thorpe 2018, p. 701). Likewise, the inclusion of men in feminist snowboarding research would yield unique insights, both in comparison to women’s experiences, as well as to gain an understanding of the view of the “dominant” discourse on less powerful groups within the sport.

By the numbers, Snowsports Industries America (SIA) reported in 2016 that snowboarding was 62% male and 38% female overall, with female participation dropping to just 26% in the core category. SIA did not collect data on genderqueer, transgender, or gender non-binary individuals.

3.1.2 Race

To date, almost no research has been done on race and ethnicity and snowboarding. Yet, it is undeniable that this plays a role in the sport’s culture and networking. In a recent publication, Authors Carter-Francique and Flowers (2013) describe several manners in which "dominant ideologies and cultural hierarchies in society are often reaffirmed in the sporting context” (p. 83). For one, white children have been shown to enter sports at a younger age, which gives them an advantage and influences their performance. Additionally, people of color are significantly less likely to hold leadership positions in sport, which serves as an indicator that racialized power dynamics exist. Even in basketball, a sport with high numbers of Black athletes, coaching and management is mainly white (pp. 80-81). Thus, this complicates the oft-cited excuse for homogenous leadership that candidates are simply chosen from the “best” athletes, as though sport is somehow immune to the social hierarchies that pervade our society. The authors theorize that “othered” groups encounter barriers to obtaining leadership positions, including “structural barriers (e.g. access to formal and informal networks)” (pp. 83), which is particularly relevant to this paper.
With regards to snowboarding in particular, two minor points have emerged in the literature. First, while discussing how alternative sports that developed in the 1980s were “disproportionately created by young white males,” Sisjord (2009, p. 1301) builds on the aforementioned point of alternative sports emerging as backlash, referring to Messner’s 2002 book on gender in sports:

Messner explains this development as a reaction towards the growing number of black athletes in many traditional sports, such as basketball and baseball, particularly in the USA. In the context of race and class relations African-American boys are predominantly located in a narrow range of sports, while white middle-class boys have resources to a much wider range of sports opportunities and choices. According to Messner the myth of black physical superiority, which is played out most publicly in key men’s sports, has led some young white males to find their niche in alternative sports that enable them to express, perform and embody white athletic masculinities.

Secondly, in her 2011 book, Thorpe mentions race in regards to media representation. While some professional snowboarders and media outlets have capitalized on “the novelty of being a racial ‘other’ in the predominantly white snowboarding culture” (p. 90), the majority of snowboarders of color remain excluded from the videos, articles, and other media that are core to snowboarding culture. Unlike their white counterparts, they “are often expected to justify their inclusion to predominantly white audiences” (p. 90). In snowboarding, media coverage is both important for representation, and also because it is a key aspect of receiving sponsorships (Mervin Manufacturing 2018).

It is also of note that while some research has been conducted on indigenous people and sports, no research has been conducted, as far as I am aware, on indigenous participation in snowboarding in the United States. As mentioned in the introduction, this is a glaring omission, as all snowsports in the United States take place on land that previously belonged to indigenous
peoples. In Canada, an organization called “First Nations Snowboard Team” was created for indigenous youth. In recent years, it has added a branch in Washington State, in collaboration with the Tulalip Tribe (Briones 2013). Studying this program and other indigenous participation trends is a much-needed area of future research.

Statistically, SIA reports that participation of people of color (which they call “ethnic” snowboarders) has increased, shifting from 67% white in 2011/2012 to 60% white in 2015/2016 (SIA 2016). However, the report failed to break down this data specifically by race, nor did it cross-analyze this data with gender, age, income, or other demographics, which is problematic.

3.1.3 Age

Likely due to the short history of the sport, very little research on snowboarding and age has been produced. Currently, we are at a pivotal moment in the sport’s history when many of the first “generation” of professional snowboarders (reached peak in the 1980s) have retired, and the second “generation” (reached peak in the 1990s and early 2000s) will soon reach retirement phase (Thorpe 2005).

However, it has been noted that age does play a role specifically with regards to snowboarding skill progression. A 2011 study on the impact of peers in top level competitive cross country skiing noted two key points related to age. First, that most top level athletes began training during childhood. Second, that the influence of both siblings and friends of a similar age were key in progression. In another study, Thorpe (2018) noted a distinctly different attitude towards gender equality in younger female snowboarders, who she says “are either oblivious to, or refuse to see and respond to, ongoing and new forms of structural inequality and marginalization” (p. 713). In a different study, Thorpe (2011) noted that perceptions of masculinity change as male snowboarders age. Lastly, a study on risk and helmet use found age to be a factor in risky behavior, with those under 25 years old being higher risk takers (Ruedl et al 2011). Yet overall, few sociological studies of snowboarding engage with age.
Statistically, SIA reports the following age demographics for snowboarding:

Notably, there is a peak in participation at age 25-34, which nearly halves in the 35-44 age group. Interestingly, females are more likely to participate in the 6-12, 18-24, and 25-34 age groups, but not the 13-17 age group (SIA 2016, p. 25). However, this cross-analyzed data is not divided by “core” vs “non-core,” meaning a snowboarder could have gone just one day and been counted as a participant.

3.1.4 Class

Snowboarding has a complicated relationship with class. On the one hand, the origin of the sport has cultural links to rejection of the idea of upper class culture; on the other hand, it remains an expensive sport. For example, Heino (2000) argues that the baggy clothes that snowboarders have favored, especially in the 1990s, was not just due to hip hop influence, but also to directly
contradict the skin-tight, neon outerwear that skiers favored as a symbol of wealth (p. 178). Ironically, explained Heino, was that “the snowboarders paid just as much for their grunge/hip-hop/gangsta look as the skiers paid for their outfits” (p. 178). In other words, while snowboarders wanted the appearance of rejecting upper class values, in reality they too were subject to the same costs of an expensive sport.

Statistically, today 43% of snowboarders have a bachelor degree or higher, and 56% report a household income of $75,000 or higher (compared to 66% of skiers). When compared by gender, male snowboarders earned slightly more. However, data was only collected by household, rather than by individual, which does not give clear indications of whether someone’s personal income affected their snowboarding. Also, female snowboarders are more educated than male snowboarders, yet they reported a lower household income (Snowsports Industries America 2016).

3.1.5 Theorizing intersectionality

Theoretically and philosophically, intersectionality is grounded in gender studies, with a particularly strong affinity with poststructural feminism. This approach developed in the 1970s during a unique historical moment, when postmodern and poststructural ideas were developing in philosophy, at the same time that feminist of color began denouncing the use of the homogenous category of “woman” being used by white feminists as an all-encompassing label. As a result, “the validity of modern analytical categories” was rejected in many academic fields (McCall 2005, p. 1776).

While this study does have a foundation of a variety of poststructuralist feminism, I do not subscribe completely to all its tenants. I will also draw somewhat from liberal feminism, with “gender as a fundamental organizing principle,” (Alvesson & Billing 2009, p. 28) though without claiming that gender is wholly binary. Also, unlike fully poststructural feminism, which rejects social categorization and relies heavily on individual experiences (McCall 2005), I believe that social categorization is useful for analysis, as I will elaborate on in the methodology section. I
also do not reject ideas from radical feminism, which focus on women-only spaces, and opting out of male-dominated value systems. Indeed, I believe that each type of feminism offers something of value and to choose between them is not necessary. In agreement with Thorpe (2011), “I believe there is merit in strategically juxtaposing a selection of conceptual perspectives from commensurate paradigms in order to construct a better and more multi-dimensional representation of the social, cultural, political, gendered, practiced, lived, and interacting body” (p. 13). For this study, I will supplement feminist theory with relevant components of theory related to the other social categories being examined, including race, age, and class.

3.2 The Networked snowboarder

Snowboarding is an individual, not a team sport. Yet, social networks are integral to participation, as mentioned in the introduction, both due to its unstructured nature and the dangerous terrain which often necessitates participating in groups of two or more. Additionally, the psychological aspects of progression are linked to validation and support by others, with numerous studies noting the benefits of teammates, friends, and others (Rønbeck & Vikander 2011, Wilmott & Collins 2015). Lastly, peer recognition and interaction is viewed as a key part of the snowboarding identity. As Sisjord (2009) explains, “snowboarding may be more demanding with regard to self-positioning than traditional organized sports characterized by a higher degree of organization and gender segregation. Peer socialization is a central part of the snowboarders’ development” (p. 1304). Below, we will briefly outline the existing literature on personal relationships in snowboarding.

3.2.1 Family

Family, particularly siblings, is an integral part of accessing snowboarding. In a study on women’s networks at a snowboard camp in Norway, Sisjord (2012) found that one interview participant accessed her most important snowboarding networks through her brother. Likewise, in a study on elite cross country ski athletes in Norway and the United States, Rønbeck and Vikander (2011) found that 68% of American skiers surveyed had siblings that also cross
country skied. Surprisingly, almost no research on the impact of parents in snowboarding has been conducted.

3.2.2 Friends

Several studies acknowledge the important roles of friends. In the aforementioned cross country ski study, Rønbeck and Vikander (2011) found that the participation of friends was strongly correlated with athlete development. Studies also noted that the recognition from non-skiing friends was an important factor. Likewise, in research on women snowboarders in Norway, Sisjord (2013) discovered that “friendship and belongingess” was a core reason why women participated in the sport to begin with (p. 514). One interview participant in the study explained the value of having female friends in particular (p. 519):

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.

3.2.3 Female-only events

Literature on gender in snowboarding often points to female-only events as a potential solution for building networks and providing safe spaces for women and girls to snowboard. Sisjord (2013) describes the qualities of women-only competitions as inclusive, low-pressure, not too serious, and as a way for women to gain “social capital” to help them move up in status in the snowboarding world, by taking and publishing photos and videos of their snowboarding. Thorpe (2005) describes these types of events as emerging as a reaction to hostility towards women in the sport. However, she does caution that they can even prevent positive change in wider snowboarding culture, by providing an “out” for other snowboarding events from working to become more inclusive.
3.2.4 Organizations and Clubs

While snowboarding clubs do not widely exist in the United States, they have been used successfully in Norway, albeit with some tensions between the bureaucratic requirements of the clubs and the culture of snowboarding (Steen Johnson 2008). However, loosely organized action sports organizations do exist in the U.S., often in the form of a nonprofit that puts on events. In Washington State, two such organizations exist: “SheJumps” and “Sisters in Action Sports.” Additionally, two groups exist to benefit low income and “at risk” youth, called “The Service Board” and “The Chill Foundation.”

3.2.5 Teams and crews

Likewise, while few formal snowboard teams exist (apart from perhaps Olympic teams and very rare collegiate teams), “crews,” or informal groups of close friends who snowboard together, are not uncommon. A 2013 study on long-distance runners, cross country skiers, mountain bikers, and wrestlers revealed interesting insights. Despite each of these sports being individual in nature, they often trained and organized in teams. The findings showed that “teammates were a primary source of motivation, social facilitation, social comparisons, and teamwork” (Evans et al 2012, p. 448). The researchers also emphasized the importance of groups in developing personal identity, including the innate need for group membership and acceptance (p. 459).

3.2.6 Theorizing networking

In large part due to its cultural history, snowboarding has always relied on a loose, informal network system, resisting a top-down approach in favor of localized networks (Steen-Johnsen 2008, Anderson 1999, Thorpe 2011). How can this hazy, complicated networking be analyzed? Both Sisjord (2012) and Steen-Johnsen (2008) draw from Manuel Castells’ network theory for analysis, which I will also utilize.

Manuel Castells is a Spanish sociologist best known for his macro-level theories on social networks. Castells defines a network as “a set of interconnected nodes” that “do not have one
center but are characterized by binary logic (inclusion/exclusion) and decentralized structures and decision-making patterns” (Anttiroiko 2015, p. 7). His view of networks is particularly relevant to snowboarding, because it describes networks as somewhat unstructured and fluid, growing and shrinking organically, depending on shifting values within the network. For example, Steen-Johnsen (2008) describes how when snowboarding events became more widespread, “a global event culture developed…. which integrated the best snowboarders, event organizers, media people, photographers and snowboard producers. This group was not organized in any formal sense, but represented a quite identifiable network that took the lead in the development of the sport” (p. 344).

Core to Castells’ theory is the concept of the network society, or “the social structures of the Information Age, which is dominated by decentralised networks rather than bureaucratic and hierarchical institutions” (University of Sydney 2016). Castells argues that this society emerged hand in hand with capitalism, as we transitioned from the industrial age, where the transfer of goods was most valued, to the information age, where the transfer of knowledge and information is most valued.

Castells’ theory is best applied at the macro level, as it analyzes large-scale trends and power dynamics. It does not deeply analyze social interactions at the micro level (Anttiroiko 2015). His work has also been criticized for overemphasizing the effects of both the internet, as well as the economic sphere (University of Sydney 2016, Anttiroiko 2015). Nevertheless, I believe it provides useful tools to analyze social networks in this setting. I will particularly draw from his concepts of power.

There are four forms of power in the network society according to Castells. First is “networking power,” which essentially determines who is allowed in the network. This aligns with his concept of the inclusion/exclusion binary. Second is “network power,” which dictates the rules to participate in the network. Third is “networked power,” which is related to the internal hierarchy of actors within the network. Last is “network-making power,” which is “the power to program
specific networks according to the interests and values of the programmers, and the power to
switch different networks following the strategic alliances between the dominant actors of
various networks” (Castells 2011, p. 773).

In order to transfer power, Castells describes two roles: the programmers and the switchers.
Programmers are capable of building the networks and setting and changing the values and rules,
so to speak. Switchers have “the ability to connect and ensure the cooperation of different
networks by sharing common goals and combining resources while fending off competition from
other networks by setting up strategic cooperation” (Castells 2011, p. 776). Castells makes it
clear that these are rarely individual people, but are nodes or networks themselves. Lastly, the
goals and guiding ethics are unique to each network.

4. Research Project Design

When designing the research project, I focused on the goal of intersectional research as
articulated by Watson (2018): to “help us gather and garner data that captures lived complexity
to give voice, to expose inequalities and to demonstrate how inter-categorical thinking can
inform meaningful analysis of multiple interrelationships” (p. 320). Therefore, I focused on
building intersectionality into each step of my research process, from selecting the research
goals, to choosing the theoretical background and methodological framing, to defining the
method and analyzing the findings.

4.1 Research questions

Overlapping each of these is the intersectional question: what impact, if any, does gender, race,
age, and class have?

1. How are interpersonal relationships linked to snowboarding progression?
2. Are there any correlations between the composition of a snowboarder’s personal network
   and their progression?
3. How do snowboarders access personal networks that may help them progress?

4.2 Theoretical frameworks

As outlined in the theory section (3), my analysis will be based in intersectional feminist theory. For guidance on the application of this theory, I looked to researchers Watson and Scraton, who have written extensively on intersectionality in leisure studies. In a 2012 article, rather than an additive approach to intersectionality, where one “oppression” is simply added to another, they describe how complexity theory acts as “an emerging approach or framework that helps us make sense of multiple, interlocking inequalities by moving beyond the polarities of modernism and postmodernism” (Watson & Scraton, p. 38). I will aim to take this approach by utilizing an intracategorical methodology, which I will elaborate on in the next section. This aligns with my collaboration of liberal, radical, and postmodern feminisms.

Secondly, I will draw from Castells’ network theory to analyze personal social networks, as outlined in the previous section. Rather than adopting a straightforward reading of his theory, I will overlap it with an intersectional feminist approach, drawing from existing research on snowboarding to enrich, supplement, and increase the relevancy of Castells’ ideas.

4.3 Methodological Considerations: an intracategorical approach

As Alvesson & Billing (2009) explain when discussing research in gender studies, “methodologically, gender relations and dynamics must be seen as a particularly difficult subject area. Often, the most significant issues are hidden and elusive” (p. 10). This is even more true when it comes to intersectionality. Many ethical questions come into play, and managing complexity can be a concern. To avoid these potential pitfalls, scholar Leslie McCall (2005) has offered three potential intersectional methodological approaches: anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical. In this study, I will utilize an “intracategorical” approach.
The anticategorical approach is most closely linked to poststructural feminism. It embraces a philosophical approach that rejects, to varying degrees, social categorization. Instead, it argues that not only is reality too complex for categories, but that categorization actually creates and reinforces inequalities. On the other end of the spectrum is the intercategorical approach, which uses clear-cut categories to “document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (McCall 2005 p. 1773). This can become highly complex, very quickly, as each social category must be analyzed across each other social category.

The last approach lies conceptually between the first two and is called intracategorical, where “the primary subject of analysis was typically either a single social group at a neglected point of intersection of multiple master categories or a particular social setting or ideological construction, or both” (McCall 2005, p. 1780). Rather than studying a specific “intersection,” such as women of color, I will instead take McCall’s second intracategorical approach, by basing my research on a highly specific setting: social networks in the Pacific Northwest snowboarding world. This approach allows more freedom to include multiple social identities, while still providing space for the unique ways individuals navigate their own paths. In a practical sense, McCall (p. 1787) describes the process like this:

The intracategorical approach begins with a unified intersectional core—a single social group, event, or concept—and works its way outward to analytically unravel one by one the influences of gender, race, class, and so on.

In my case, the “concept” is the impact of social networks on snowboarding progression in Washington State, USA, and the categories which I aim to “unravel” will be gender, race, class, and age.
4.4 Method and Materials

4.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

I chose to use the format of a semi-structured interview. This is a popular method in feminist scholarship because of the “potential to bring forth the lived experiences and voices of groups that have traditionally been excluded from the knowledge production process” (Linabary & Hamel 2017, p. 98). It allows the participants to speak in their own voice, with fewer constraints than say, a survey. It is also a top choice of method for intersectional feminism in particular, as it allows for more complexity to arise and does not rely on strict categorization.

4.4.2 Selection of and access to respondents

In order to remove additional variables, I designated several requirements for interviewee selection: they had to both live and snowboard in Washington State, USA, and they had to be at an intermediate or above snowboarding level--but not professional (as defined previously). Participants with minor sponsorships (ex: receive free snowboards or outerwear from snowboard companies) were accepted.

To source interviewees outside of my immediate friend group, I utilized social media by posting an image asking for interview participants, alongside a short description of the study in three online locations. Two were facebook groups: a roughly 3,000 member group called “Stevens Pass Snowboarders” (inclusive of all genders, but mostly men) and a 30,000+ group called “Pacific Northwest Outdoor Women” (100% female-identified and genderqueer people). Lastly, I posted on my personal instagram account, “tagging” many local ski resorts and using hashtags so that the post would be viewed by more people.

In order to sign up to participate, individuals were required to complete a form in which I asked for name, local ski resort, age, gender, race or ethnicity, highest level of education, and email address. Most questions were fill-in-the-blank style, to avoid placing people in categories in
which they did not identify. Determining class was a particularly difficult exercise, due to the highly sensitive nature of class in the United States as a highly capitalistic culture. In the end, I decided to use level of education as an imperfect measure of class. I would also include questions during the interview about whether cost had impacted their access to the sport. This was inspired in part by Watson’s 2018 article on researching intersectionally in leisure studies, where she states that “educational qualifications, previous (paid) work experience, type of housing, level of disposable income and access to private transport are some useful indicators” of class (p. 323).

To my surprise, within one day, 38 individuals signed up to participate! I had not expected so many people to be willing to volunteer an hour of their time. From the 38, I invited 13 people to participate, with a goal that 10 would follow through. I selected a range of ages, genders, classes, and races. While most studies I have found on the topic of gender and snowboarding included mainly white women as their research participants, I wanted to have a variety of individuals in order to compare and contrast findings.

4.4.3 Interview process

After the 13 participants were selected, they were sent a consent form further explaining the study, including an explanation that their participation was completely voluntary as well as anonymous, and how the interview recordings would be used. They were also asked to sign up for a phone interview time. In total, 10 participants completed the interviews.

Interviews were *semi-structured* in that participants were asked mostly the same questions. Questions varied slightly depending on whether participants gave long or short answers. Less talkative participants were asked follow-up questions. When interviewing more talkative participants, I occasionally had to skip questions to ensure we did not run too far over the 45-60 minute time range.
I built interview questions around two main themes: personal social networks in snowboarding, and snowboarding progression. Within these two themes, I brought in intersectional elements, asking about the four chosen social categories for the study: race, gender, age, and class. However, I did not focus exclusively on those four categories. I also asked many general questions about their snowboarding experience, with the aim to analyze responses based on the gender, race, age, and class of the participants. To view the interview questions, please see Appendix A.

4.4.5 Other materials

In addition to interview transcripts, I have drawn upon two other types of empirical sources. First is existing academic snowboarding literature on topics related to gender, age, race, class, progression, social networks, and more. Also, I will utilize some non-academic sources as further evidence of snowboarding culture, including websites, articles, and social media.

4.5 Ethical Concerns

All research raises ethical concerns. In this study, one particular ethical concern stands out: how to explain the study to potential research participants without excluding those who would be averse to feminism. In the United States in particular, “feminism” is a loaded word, bearing the weight of stereotypes, misconceptions, and discrimination. In the end, I opted to not use any gender-related words in the image calling for interviewees, but I did include a subtitle and additional text that explained this was part of a gender studies program.

A second concern was ensuring that participants understood completely how the interview recordings would be used. To resolve this, I wrote a succinct consent form, and asked all participants to read and sign before the interview.

A third concern relates to the theoretical side of the study: whether and how to center gender. Of course, being a thesis for a gender studies program, gender must be a large component. At the same time, feminist researchers run the risk of what Alvesson and Billing (2009) call gender
“over-sensitivity,” or “tendency in some research, as well as everyday life, to see gender as relevant and decisive everywhere, to emphasize the gender dimension consistently without fully considering other important aspects and dimensions” (p. 11-12). To resolve this, and to align the study with my methodological goals outlined earlier, I opted to include men as well as women, in addition to intentionally including a variety of ages, races, and classes.

This begs the question of categorization, a final ethical concern. It was my original intent to include genderqueer, transgender and non-binary individuals in the study, in order to prevent the continuation of the gender binary, which actively harms those who do not identify as either women or men. Two genderqueer individuals expressed interest in participating, but were unable to follow through due to scheduling constraints. Therefore, the study will only include cisgendered women and men.

4.6 The reflexive researcher

Reflexivity is a highly valued tool in intersectional feminist research. It acknowledges that no research can be truly objective, and accounts for subjectivity by providing details about the researcher’s background. As Watson (2018) explains, it also forces the researcher to consider the motivation for the research, and how the research could impact participants.

Therefore, I will position myself here, and have also attempted to retain reflexivity throughout the research process. I am a 30 year old, white, middle class woman who lives in Seattle, Washington, USA, and has snowboarded for approximately 15 years. I have worked at two ski resorts, snowboard at an advanced level, and have participated in 3 snowboarding competitions. I have an undergraduate Political Science degree, with minors in Women and Gender Studies, Spanish, and Entrepreneurial Leadership.
4.7 Limitations

A notable limitation in this study was the inability to include all aspects of social categories. With gender as a central category, the analysis will also include class, race, and age. Other categories, such as sexual orientation and ability would also have been highly insightful to include. However, as Watson (2018) articulate: “thinking intersectionally is not about trying to cover everything and one way it can inform our research practice is to recognize that there is a continuum of different types of projects” (p. 324).

Sample size is another limitation. Ten interviews are not fully representative of the snowboarding community in Washington State, USA. However, the interviews do include a good demographic representation, as noted in the results section.

5. Results

In total, 10 people participated in interviews, ranging from 37-85 minutes. Participants included 6 women and 4 men. Of those, 7 were white and 3 were people of color (Black, mixed race but identifies as Black, and Native American). Social class ranged from low income to upper middle class. Age ranged from 19-54. Location also varied across three ski resorts within Washington State.
5.1 *How* are interpersonal relationships linked to snowboarding progression?

During the interviews, I asked a series of questions relating to each individual’s snowboarding experience, their approach to and experience with progression, and their relationships with those they snowboard with. I also asked about their perceptions of gender, age, class and race in the sport. Throughout the interviews, nine patterns emerged linking snowboarding progression to personal networks.

First, the most obvious connection, and one cited by all ten respondents was *companionship* or simply having someone to snowboard with. While one individual did indicate a preference to ride alone occasionally, all described camaraderie as integral to their snowboarding experience to some extent. When asked what friends could do to support his progression, one respondent replied simply “just going with me.” Another stated “just offering to practice with me.” Like any sport, progression in snowboarding requires time and practice, and many participants indicated they were more likely to snowboard if they had someone with them.

One of the strongest indicated benefits of social networks was *increased fun and joy*. All ten participants cited fun as a main reason to snowboard, and nine of those linked that fun in part to being with others. One participant, who snowboards around 100 days per season, explained that even on days when he didn’t really feel like snowboarding, “I’m going to go do it, even if I don’t necessarily want to go, [because] I know it’s going to be that much more fun with them [my friends].” Another, when asked to describe one of his favorite riding friends, said “I love riding with her because it’s always so fun...she wants to just play, and smile, and have a good time.”

**Emotional support, encouragement and motivation** was a third benefit cited by 100% of respondents. This was especially important for the female participants. For some, it was receiving praise and compliments. For others, it was bringing high energy, excitement, and
encouragement or as one respondent put it “all kinds of stokage.”\(^2\) Support also took the form of informal competition or peer pressure. One man described how riding with his friends pushed him to try new tricks: “Oh my god he just did a handplant?\(^3\) Now I’m gonna have to do a handplant and tweak\(^4\) it, make it a little better than what you did.” For those who had “crews” (informal groups of riding friends), “sessions” played a big role in motivation. Sessions are a few hours or a day at the ski resort, where the crew rides together, pushing and encouraging each other as a group, and provide “instantaneous motivation” as one person described. Several respondents also explained how meeting and snowboarding with professional snowboarders as a major source of inspiration and motivation. Two women discussed how meeting female professionals in particular was integral to their snowboarding progression.

Another benefit of social networks was the **accumulation of physical knowledge**, which is specific information about how one moves one’s body while snowboarding in order to reach a higher skill level. This benefit appeared to be of equal *importance* across class, gender, age, and racial lines, with the main *distribution* differentiator being those who had industry access or not.

Generally for those with industry access, it was acquired through trained snowboarding instructors, both formally and informally. When one respondent described riding with his friends who are snowboard instructors like him, he explained that they all have “movement analysis” skills and training: “so we can look at each others’ body mechanics and explain why we’re not doing what we need to be doing.” Another (female) instructor described how she would have debrief sessions in the bar after riding with instructor friends, where they would deconstruct specifics for improvement.

For those without access to instructors, physical knowledge was acquired through friends, particularly friends with a higher skill level. Preferred techniques were to follow and watch more

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\(^2\) “Stoke” is slang for a specific emotion that combines excitement and extreme positivity, a type of highly energized joy. Thus, “stokage” is a playful variation of the word stoke.

\(^3\) A handplant is a trick where the snowboarder puts one hand down and lifts the rest of their body into the air, similar to a popular breakdance move. It is most commonly used in the half-pipe or on small features

\(^4\) To “tweak” a trick means to make it unique; to add your personal style.
advanced riders, and to ask for specific advice. One respondent described how when riding with more advanced friends, he would “mimic their riding style and follow their lines.”

**Terrain access** was another noted benefit, which was especially important for women. Venturing to new places, particularly those that are “off-piste” (not smoothed by a grooming machine) elevates risk. Natural features such as cliffs, drops, and streams are often unmarked. Pockets of air that collect under the branches of trees and are hidden by snow layered on top, known as “tree wells,” can be deadly traps. To explore new areas of the mountain often requires riding with an informal guide (someone familiar with the terrain) in order to safely navigate these potential dangers. One participant described how her brother would help her access new terrain: “we would start at the top, and would be like, okay we’re gonna go down to this tree, and then I’ll wait for you there.” Those who had worked at ski resorts or who otherwise had industry connections had the best terrain access. One male respondent who works as a snowboard instructor described how he not only had terrain access, but also had advanced avalanche and snow conditions access, due to being friends with ski patrollers and weather forecasters: “Through those people I’ve been able to get that backcountry knowledge... it allows you this wealth of knowledge if you’re willing to pick up on it.” This gave him the ability to access much more terrain than if he hadn’t known those particular people. All six women cited their networks as being key for terrain access, while only two of the four men did. Additionally, for most respondents, the people providing terrain access were more likely to be men, though two cited mixed-gender groups of friends.

Another benefit was **equipment knowledge**, indicated by several participants as integral to their snowboarding. Three described how they hadn’t realized they were riding underperforming equipment (board, boots, bindings) until someone with more equipment knowledge helped them realize this. Then, receiving properly-sized and higher quality gear significantly impacted their

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5 A “line” means a specific route down the mountain. Learning to “read” a mountain and pick a line is a specific skill set required for snowboarding progression. More advanced riders are able to access lines with more difficult terrain and obstacles.
snowboarding ability. As one respondent described “I grew confident by wearing the right gear. Helmet, goggles for the right time of day. It just made the world of difference.”

Parallel to this benefit was **access to cheap or free gear**, which two of four men, and two of the six women reported. This not only made the sport more accessible financially, it also allowed them to progress by acquiring more advanced equipment. Again, industry access was a key differentiator. As one respondent explained: “there’s not a lot of opportunity for people who aren’t in the industry to demo a lot of product.” Gear was particularly important for the female respondents, four of whom described frustration with the lack of high performing women’s gear as a barrier holding their riding back. In fact, two women had exclusively ridden men’s gear, due to women’s gear being too beginner-level. Further, all three people of color indicated intentionally providing extra gear to friends and family who couldn’t afford their own.

**Fear management** was another strong trend that linked snowboard progression to personal networks. With most extreme sports, snowboarding often involves some level of fear, particularly during progression, when one is attempting more difficult maneuvers (Sisjord 2009, 2013). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the psychology of fear in sports, it is worth noting that six of the ten respondents discussed how fear management relates to social networks. Generally speaking, social networks provided advice on how to safely manage fear without disregarding it. One woman described a former boyfriend: “He was an extreme skier, and he was the first person that really took away my fear. I think with him I was fearless. I think it was because the praise that he gave me. He would rave and rave that he’d never seen a girl snowboard like me before.” Another respondent described how having access to instructor training helped identify his fears and learn “how to really conquer them.” A third described how receiving advice from a professional female snowboarder taught her that “if you’re scared of something when you’re snowboarding, don’t let that fear overcome you. Use it in a positive way.”
Logistical support, particularly transportation, was a seemingly mundane, but highly important aspect of snowboarding progression. If you can’t get to the ski resort, you can’t snowboard. Four respondents discussed how their social networks were important in accessing transportation. Class was the biggest differentiator here, with two who identified as working class describing how for several years they relied solely on their social networks for transportation because they could not afford a vehicle.

5.2 Are there correlations between the composition of a snowboarder’s personal network and their progression?

When analyzing the interview transcripts, three types of relationships emerged connecting snowboard progression to the type of person in a snowboarder’s personal network. I’ll call these three relationships gatekeepers, godfathers, and crews. These took different forms for each person, and not every respondent had access to all three types. However, there were no respondents that did not have at least one of these three relationship types.

While gatekeepers, godfathers, and crews were the strongest patterns, they were not the only type of relationships described as important. For some, simple friendships and “riding buddy” relationships were also integral to progression. When discussing snowboarding friends more broadly, women, older riders, and people of color reported more difficulty finding such friends when compared to men, younger riders, and white people. It is also noteworthy that on average interview participants of both genders were significantly more likely to have had male riding friends.

5.2.1 Gatekeepers

I asked participants how they first learned to snowboard, and with whom. Though hypothetically, one could learn the sport entirely on one’s own, or by purchasing lessons, all ten interviewees cited at least one person being integral for their introduction to the sport, which I will call “gatekeepers.” The exact role the “gatekeeper” played varied, but it generally hinged on four progression benefits: motivation, companionship, physical knowledge, and logistics (such as
transportation or financial assistance). Statistically, it is significant that 80% of gatekeepers were reported as male.

For eight participants, men and boys were critical for their integration into the sport. For three of these, fathers played a large role: for two it was their own father, for one it was the father of a friend from a wealthier family. As this particular participant explained, without his friend’s father, he never would have learned: “social interactions basically have been the only way I would have been involved in skiing and snowboarding. I never had the opportunity or the money or the family to do it.” It’s also noteworthy that age played a factor with parental involvement. All three that cited fathers were under 30. On the other hand, four of the women and one of the men interviewed explained how they are introducing kids to the sport, so it may be the case that parents (including mothers) will increasingly serve as gatekeepers. Of the other five who experienced male “gatekeepers,” one indicated a brother, another a boyfriend, one had a group of male friends from college, and two had groups that were centered on a boyfriend and his friends.

Two respondents reported female “gatekeepers,” both of whom were sisters. Interestingly, in both cases the respondents learned with the gatekeeper. In comparison, most (but not all) of those with male gatekeepers described the gatekeeper as being more advanced, or as already having access to the sport. Those with female gatekeepers described the relationship as a peer relationship.

Several of the women interviewed indicated that they would have liked to learn with female friends, but they didn’t know any: “There weren’t any girls back then doing it, so I learned from a group of guys. Spent a lot of time in the terrain park at first, just hanging out with the guys, I was the only girl in there.” This respondent described how she was aware that she didn’t see any other girls, so she intentionally “started encouraging more girls to get in the terrain park.”

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6 Inspired by skateboarding, a terrain park is part of the ski resort intentionally groomed to create human-made obstacles out of snow, such as jumps, as well as out of metal, plastic and other materials, such as rails (meant to be ridden by sliding one’s snowboard across it, like a skateboarder would slide their skateboard down a railing).
5.2.2 “Godfathers”

One male participant, when asked who had been most helpful to his snowboarding progression, described one friend in particular:

I consider him the godfather of snowboarding for me. He has a size 15 shoe, the way he rides it’s really easy to see his movement, it’s really good, he’s a big guy. I would say him because when we go, we have a good time, he’s got a really good attitude about everything, he’s just fun to ride with.

Nine of ten respondents cited at least one friend, colleague, or family member playing a similar mentorship role in their snowboarding career; someone who “unlocked” snowboarding progression. In all but one case, this was not the same person/s as the “gatekeeper.” Instead, respondents usually encountered a “godfather” figure later on in their snowboarding journey,
once they had progressed somewhat. They were usually, but not always, male, which is why I chose the gendered noun “godfather.”

Godfathers were often the key to unlocking many of the benefits mentioned in the first research question. A single person could have a major impact on a snowboarder’s progression. As one respondent described: “she showed me a whole different side of the mountain, a whole different riding style, and that gear really matters.” In other words, the respondent is describing how the “godmother” in this case unlocked three progression keys: terrain access, physical knowledge, and gear knowledge. This particular respondent would go on to describe how this mentor provided transportation, fun, and companionship, for a total of six progression keys.

There were several traits that emerged as important for godfather/mentor figures. One is that the godfather was generally the more advanced rider, in order to provide guidance and instruction: “I like to ride with people that are better than me. Try to keep up, try and push myself.” Another important trait was trust: “I think it helps because he’s my brother, where I don’t know I would have gotten that even if I had taken a lesson, just because the comfort level might not have been there.” Lastly, positivity was mentioned multiple times as a key trait.

Three respondents were fortunate enough to have many such figures throughout their snowboarding experience. Unsurprisingly, these were the three respondents who also had the most industry access. Two (one male, one female) have worked extensively in the industry as instructors, and one had early access to professionals and industry experts from a young age, including links to sponsorship and professional snowboarders.

5.2.3 Crews

Riders occasionally organize themselves into loose groups of friends at somewhat similar skill levels, unofficially called “crews.” Whereas godfather/mentor figures are usually of a more advanced skill level, crews share more of a peer relationship.
Sometimes crews give themselves names, and have logos or particular fashion or attitude styles that become their trademark. Some also make videos and other media together, such as the all-female “Too Hard” crew known for their skateboarding-inspired city riding, or the Oregon-based “Shorts and Shades” crew, notorious for barely landing extreme, high-energy stunts. Anecdotally (as no research exists on the topic that I know of), crews may form based on preferred riding type (park, backcountry, etc), age, gender, or attitude towards the sport.

Both snowboarding ability and commitment were important for crews’ composition. Commitment was usually demonstrated simply by regularly spending large amounts of time on the sport, but also showing a dedication to the sport and lifestyle above other potential priorities. For example, when asked what tended to cause bonding in crews, responses usually referred to shared experiences beyond simply spending a day snowboarding together, such as going on trips together, or spending the weekend camped out in the parking lot in order to be the first in line for fresh snow. Crews were most likely to form with high-level participants, who are seeking others willing to devote high amounts of time, energy, and resources to the sport. One interviewee described some of the benefits of being part of a crew:

> We’re all such hard core snowboarders that we just constantly push each other to go harder and faster. Make each other get out of bed even if we’re hungover, drag him up to the mountain.

He also described benefits such as sharing gear and transportation costs. Another respondent spoke of motivation, terrain access, and fear management as key benefits. A third respondent linked crews to accessing resources such as sponsorship and snowboarding with professional snowboarders.

Of the ten interview participants, four indicated current crew membership, and one had previously been part of a crew. All four that indicated current membership of crews had been involved at least somewhat in the snowboarding industry. One identified that his industry access
also gave him access to the crews: “As an instructor, you’re put around people who are at the mountain on a regular basis.” When asked to describe his crew, he explained that they were all industry insiders, working for snowboard shops or snowboard gear manufacturers, or sponsored and professional snowboarders. Most were also men. When asked about how their skill level compared to his, he answered:

They’re a lot better than me. They’re the ones that give me something to push for and [to understand] where the limitations actually are. Seeing all these people in the Xgames and the Olympics or whatnot, when a kid sees what is possible, it’s no longer a question of what’s possible, it’s whether or not they can do it themselves.

Most respondents with crews indicated the gendered nature of crews. When asked about the impact of gender on snowboarding relationships, a different male respondent described how his initial crew would approach the subject: “back in the day it was pretty much no girls allowed unless it was my sister or someone could vouch like yeah she can rip.” Another described how her crew was mostly men, and that it was unofficially led by one man in particular. It appears the patterns of “gatekeepers” and “godfathers” may in fact be repeated at the crew level as well, though more research would be needed to confirm this.

The third industry insider, a woman, had an entirely different type of crew. While she had reported quite a few “godfather” figures throughout her snowboarding journey, her current snowboard friends are of a different sort: “the people I ride with most are all under the age of twelve.” Instead of being in a crew of peers, she is currently leading a crew of young skiers and boarders, most of whom are girls. Even though this “crew” might not have the same effect on her own progression, she explained, the immense joy it brought her was of equal value: “they do some hoopin’ and hollerin’ and laughing and sassing. And it is a blast.”

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7 In snowboarding slang, to “rip” means to snowboard at an advanced level.
Two others, both women, indicated a desire to be a part of a crew, but not knowing how to
access or build one. As one woman put it: “I’d love to just have a crew of girls that I could be
like ‘hey, going up today’ and three of them show up, because that would be really cool.”

5.3 How do snowboarders access personal networks that may help them progress?

Throughout the interviews, participants were asked about how they met their snowboarding
friends. In this section, we will investigate not just when they first accessed snowboarding (when
the ‘gatekeeper’ relationship was of particular importance), but how they have tended to build
their snowboarding network throughout the time that they have participated in the sport.

Once again, the strongest patterns for access to snowboarding networks emerged based on which
interviewees had the most access to the snowboarding industry. The three that were most
involved in the industry tended to build relationships through shared training, by having mutual
connections and simply due to the higher likelihood of being on the mountain at the same time.
The networks they were able to access were also more closely linked to progression, including
the ability to snowboard with trained instructors, professionals, and specialists: “mostly I rode a
lot and I rode a lot with really good riders. And if you don’t want to get ditched, you best keep
up.”

For those with less industry connections, a few trends emerged for how they tended to meet new
snowboarding friends including events, organizations, and social media.

Interviewees were asked whether they attended events, and whether they met any riding friends
at the events. A gendered pattern emerged, with more women than men citing that events were
useful for meeting new snowboarding friends. Women particularly seemed to find benefits in
attending female-centric events. When asked why, one respondent simply replied “because I
want to find more women to do these things with.” Two women referred to meeting professional
women snowboarders at events as particularly influential for their snowboarding. One felt
especially inspired that the professional female snowboarders she met were the same age as her. Men seemed less interested in events, utilizing them simply for their entertainment value, or avoiding them altogether, in order to avoid crowds. One Black respondent described a desire to participate in snowboarding events for people of color, though none exist so far.

Thee of six women had also utilized local women-centric organizations (SheJumps and Sisters in Action Sports) as a way to meet other female boarders. These organizations provided several ways to connect with others, including through volunteering, events, and social media, all centered around what could be considered a radical feminist philosophy. This had the added benefit of connecting women to those of various ages, including kids.

A different gendered pattern emerged with social media as an access point. Two male respondents regularly use a local snowboarding facebook group to arrange transportation and make new snowboarding friends. Women were also interested in using social media, but several voiced hesitation at mixed-gender groups, for both physical safety:

> When I’m seeking out new groups of people, I feel safer with groups that mainly include people that identify as female. I just feel like it’s a better and more supportive environment, and I also feel safer meeting strangers.

As well as emotional safety:

> All of a sudden everyone has access to everyone else’s opinions on the mountains … as opposed to a couple guys mouthing off on the chairlift, now we all get to see what they’re thinking [on social media].

However, three of six women interviewed used women-centric social media sites (mainly facebook) extensively to meet snowboarding friends, and described it as a very positive experience. Several also used mixed-gender snowboarding-related social media, with one woman
describing it as an integral part of her snowboarding networking. Age also played a role, with two women in their 40s describing themselves as “too old” for certain types of social media. Yet the oldest respondent, age 54, used a website called “Meetup” extensively to find friends after a four-year snowboarding hiatus.

Other access methods were discussed to a lesser degree, including going with colleagues (non snowboard industry work) and through classmates, friends from other hobbies, and significant others.

6. Discussion

To begin the analysis, I remind the reader again of the goal of intersectional research, as defined by Watson (2018), which is to give voice to “lived complexity” as well as “to expose inequalities” (p. 320). To do this, I will utilize McCall's *intracategorical* approach to apply an intersectional feminist reading of Castells’ network theory as outlined in the literature review. In agreement with Watson, my goal is not to strictly *categorize* experiences, “rather it is to *contextualize* those experiences” (p. 329, emphasis mine). As noted earlier, I would have liked to include genderqueer/non-binary and transgender respondents, but was not able to do so because of time constraints. Therefore, I continue to use the cisgender, binary categories of male/female, though I do not presume that these are the only ways gender exists.

6.1 An intersectional analysis of *how* interpersonal relationships are linked to snowboarding progression

Overall, the vital importance of social networks was demonstrated by the high number of benefits cited. For many, social networks were the only way that respondents accessed keys to progression. While all respondents indicated a positive correlation between social networks and progression, differences emerged in the *importance* of certain benefits that social networks brought, as well as in the *distribution* of benefits.
One trend that stood out was the gender difference in the benefit of “emotional support, encouragement, and motivation.” Women cited this benefit roughly three times more than men. Based on past research related to gender and snowboarding, it is reasonable to suggest that this is linked to the fact that “in the public imagination, snowboarding has traditionally been viewed as an activity best suited to young, white, hedonistic, rebellious males” (Thorpe 2011, p. 169). This means that it is easier for those who fit that description to say “yes, this sport is for me.” It would be naive to think that individuals are exempt from absorbing cultural messages about who belongs in a certain domain. I argue, then, that support, encouragement, and motivation is particularly important to women to overcome the potentially internalized cultural message that the sport is “best suited for” men.

This is likewise related to Castells’ concept of networked power, which describes an internal hierarchy within networks. We can deduce that those lower on the hierarchy would find this type of support and motivation more important, as those higher up on the hierarchy by default would receive more validation from the culture that celebrates their participation.

The same could be said for race. While the three participants of color had differing opinions on the treatment of non-white snowboarders, one identified the mental barriers faced by the Black community in particular:

And when I talk to them [Black people] about going snowboarding, for them it just seems so foreign, like that’s just not something we would do, we don’t do that. I think Black communities especially, there’s certain sports that they do, there’s basketball, but when you start getting into outdoors stuff, it’s always considered a white people’s sport. Which is frustrating because it’s a lot of fun.

Relatedly, three women cited that being able to meet, and learn from, professional female snowboarders was a particularly strong source of motivation. One woman described going to an
event where she had the chance to interact with several female professionals: “it was such an awesome experience to just meet these pro riders I never thought I’d meet. They kind of influenced me to really get into the backcountry and not just dream about it for years.” Another described how meeting a female professional was a key source of motivation which helped her overcome fear.

Age was also linked to the importance of certain benefits. Several respondents described how progression keys such as the accumulation of physical knowledge grew less important, while fun and companionship became more important with age. As one respondent described, he changed from a “no girls allowed” crew of sponsored and professional riders to “everybody on the mountain is my friend” attitude as he aged. The importance of protecting his body increased with age, and he felt less motivated to take risky physical moves that riding at the sponsored level requires. Another cited priority shifts due to an increased awareness of financial responsibility that came with age. This aligns with Thorpe’s 2011 research on masculinity in snowboarding, and how as male snowboarders age, they tend to “abandon fratriarchal groups and adopt a more individualistic approach” (p. 184). If this pattern does indeed occur, and some men tend to become more aware of, and potentially reject, snowboarding’s gendered hierarchies (networked power) as they age, it could lend insight into potential solutions, particularly for those in gatekeeper, godfather, or crew roles.

The strongly gendered patterns of the benefit of gear knowledge also merits analysis. While it appears that this was more important to the female respondents across the board, gear knowledge was more likely to be distributed to those with industry access of both genders. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze gendered snowboard gear, generally speaking, gender-specific equipment does make a difference in performance, as boards are designed for three main body factors: feet size, body weight, and height. Designs also differ based on ability, with beginner boards tending to be softer and more forgiving and advanced boards tending to be stiffer, providing stability for advanced riding (but less forgiving of mistakes). Women’s boards are often made disproportionately soft, which can prevent a snowboarder from riding at an
advanced level. So, advanced female riders are often forced to choose between men’s boards that are too wide (with less responsiveness) or women’s boards that are too soft (with less stability). As one respondent explained: “When I first started snowboarding, there wasn’t any ladies gear to speak of that I know of. And when they started coming out with ladies boards they were for little tiny ladies. And I’m not a little tiny lady. I’m not a big lady, but I’m strong.”

The benefit of access to free or cheap gear showed a similar pattern, but with regards to class. It was of most importance to those of lower income, but was exclusively distributed to those with industry access. Two respondents in fact capitalized on this, intentionally utilizing industry access for free gear.

These two examples also correspond with Castells’ networked power, with the snowboarding industry catering to those higher up on the social hierarchy by making higher performing men’s gear, and by pricing equipment such that low-income individuals cannot afford to purchase it. Overall, networked power appeared to be most apparent when analyzing the “how” aspect of snowboarding social networks and progression.

6.2 An intersectional analysis of social network composition in snowboarding

As discussed in the findings section, the “who” patterns were highly gendered. Roughly 80% of both gatekeepers and godfathers were male. For both female and male respondents, crews were also more likely to be composed of mostly men, with one exception. As the most important types of relationships in snowboarding, the significance of these highly gendered patterns cannot be overstated. I argue that in Castells’ terms, these relationships play the roles of “switchers,” providing key connections between relationships and “nodes”. In this case, they didn’t just provide access to networks themselves, but they also provided access to network benefits required for progression. For crews, this aligns with Willmott and Collins (2015) study on snowsports progression, which demonstrated that peer influence was a key ingredient for an athlete to push themself to achieve more difficult goals.
This may correlated with what’s known as “similarity-to-self bias,” meaning we’re more likely to get along with and feel affinity to those who are similar to us in gender, race, age, life experience, and other ways (Carmona, Iyer & Reckers 2014). Therefore if “switchers” are 80% male, this means that though often (but not always) unintentional, it is more difficult for women to become network insiders. One of the male respondents articulated this when asked about whether he thought gender played a role in snowboarding networks:

It’s definitely easier for men to get into the sport, because there are so many guys who do the sport, there’s so many guys that are supportive...that’s just something I’ve noticed for women getting into the sport. If they don’t have that network of friends or people to help them into, it’s easy for them to not necessarily immerse themselves into it.

6.3 An intersectional analysis of access to social networks

When analyzing the question of access to snowboarding networks, two trends emerged that demonstrated divisions on gender and race lines in particular: physical appearance norms, and safety and comfort. Surprisingly, age and class seemed to have less of an impact in these two trends.

When asked for their perceptions of what, if any, impact race and gender have on snowboarding networks and relationships, most respondents answered along the same lines: “it shouldn’t matter.” Yet, most were also at least somewhat aware that it still does. Both Sisjord (2009) and Thorpe (2011) argue that the accumulation of two types of social “capital” determine a snowboarders place in an informal hierarchy: snowboarding ability and conformity to certain types of masculinity and femininity. Men were praised for displaying an aggressive, heterosexual, somewhat reckless version of masculinity. Women, on the other hand, walked a fine line between a very narrow definition of accepted femininity and the athletic ability which was seen as masculine.
Carter-Francique & Flowers (2013) expand this idea, discussing how race adds another layer, with Black women’s bodies in particular being criticized more often for crossing the line to “too masculine.” As an example, consider the hugely popular Snowboarder.com website, which recently published two lists (one male, one female) of the “10 hottest” snowboarders competing in the 2018 Olympics (Scott 2017). 100% of those listed were white. This is somewhat shocking, given that some of the highest ranked snowboarders at the Olympics, including gold medal winner Chloe Kim, are not white.

This affects recognition, which is linked to Castells’ insider/outsider binary, as visibility of network participants is part of how “insiders” are defined. Given this, it is reasonable to hypothesize that it is more difficult to access the industry and gain recognition if you do not conform to a certain type of femininity or masculinity. As Thorpe (2011) describes in a chapter on snowboarding media, “the widespread practice of foregrounding heterosexually attractive women tends to symbolically erase women who appear lesbian, bisexual, ‘queer’, or ‘unfeminine’” (p. 92). While this paper does not address sexual orientation, it is noteworthy that one respondent stated outright that snowboarding “doesn’t seem like a gay sport.” I would add to Thorpe’s description that the industry also erases women who appear non-white, particularly those who appear Black, as well as those who are approximately 30 or older.

Race is a complicated issue in snowboarding, and one that does not just affect women. As Critical Race Theory describes, “the purpose of racial and ethnic categorization was established to affirm the high value placed on whiteness, and as a result, justify limited opportunities, access, and protection to those who are not white” (Carter-Francique & Flowers 2013, pp.75). While few today would openly state that snowboarding is intentionally white, nearly all interviewees were aware that racial discrepancies exist. Some justified it as a class issue, others discussed the white origins of the sport.
I argue that the racial hierarchies present in snowboarding culture also impacts social networks. As mentioned earlier, Carter-Francique & Flowers (2013) found that “othered” groups in sports experience barriers obtaining leadership positions, including “structural barriers (e.g. access to formal and informal networks)” (pp. 83). The authors found these barriers were underlined by othered stereotypes that permeated the sports culture. The pervasiveness of these stereotypes cannot be overestimated. This also emerged in the responses of the two Black interviewees. One explained having to prove that he was actually a snowboarder, because “people didn’t think I snowboarded...I had really long hair, I had long locs, and I didn’t look like a snowboarder.” For women of color, this amplifies. For example, a 2016 article on YoBeat!, a popular Snowboard media website, listed the top 10 Black professional snowboarders. Not a single one was a woman.

When asked for their perception on the potential of having snowboarding events for people of color, each of the three respondents of color gave different opinions. One was very enthusiastic, one was indifferent, and one was uncomfortable with the idea, stating “I’d rather be seen as a snowboarder first.” In contrast, for women-only events, all six women responded positively to the idea, some having already utilized such events in the past. This brings us to our second main theme: safety and comfort.

As discussed in the findings section, in addition to the meeting other female snowboarders, women sought out female-only groups and events in part because they felt safer. My results are in line with previous findings that the snowboarding industry normalizes the harassment and degradation of women (Thorpe 2011, Sisjord 2009). I argue that this aligns with Castells’ concept of network power, or “the standards required to coordinate social interactions in the networks” (Castells 2011, p. 773). In other words, snowboarding networks pressure participants to conform to the standard of the degradation of women.

Thorpe (2011) characterizes much of social bonding in snowboarding as a “fratriarchy”, and that this “fosters male domination in at least three ways: it brings young men together, keeps young
men together, and often works to put women down or to exclude them” p. (183). She also cites research demonstrating that humiliating and objectifying women is used as a bonding mechanism for fratriarchies. This can be seen in snowboarding media, and even on snowboard equipment, which is often adorned with naked or suggestively posed women, or simply sexualized female body parts. A rather crude example of this was the “butt snorkeler” bindings which were released last year and feature a sexualized image of a woman’s behind. The description of the bindings on the company website reinforces the idea that men snowboard, and women exist in the snowboard world to be sexualized: “Butt Snorkeler has always been (and will always be) about having fun, not give a f*ck and the love of great buns. Ladies, keep inspiring us... Fellas, keep snorkeling…” (Union Bindings 2018).

When looking at networks, this culture has the potential to affect every aspect of interactions, from carpooling to the mountain to chatting on social media. For example, one female respondent cited discomfort riding with men who were married: “that was a weird line to navigate because almost never would their wives participate in these sports. So that sometimes got awkward.” Another told a story about how she had met a male friend for snowboarding only to later realize he was actually just interested in sex. Two men also recognized the increased risk these behaviour and value norms cause for women. One acknowledged that men try to use social media snowboarding sites for sex: “It’s not about sex it’s about riding... [some guys] miss the point of a group like this, a social media group. To meet up and ride. Not to meet up and bang.” Another male respondent, who had relied on carpooling for many years, voiced his frustration that women were subject to harassment when it came to transportation:

If it was a guy asking for rides all the time, a guy would understand that the guy isn’t wanting anything more than just a ride. For women I think it’s just kind of that unspoken thing, that this plays into it...It just sucks that you’re subjected to that.

8 “Snorkeling” here is a play on words. It refers both to snowboarding in extremely deep powder snow, where the snow flies over your head. It also refers to a sexual act.
In fact, many of the respondents voiced both concerns about the treatment of women, and described different ways of coping with it. This is part of what Castells’ calls “counterpower,” which functions to enact “the interests and values of those in subordinate positions in the social organization” (Castells 2011, p. 773-774). Counterpower has the ability to change the social norms of networks. One counterpower response was to participate in women-only spaces, which is aligned with the philosophy of radical feminism. In comparison, others chose to ignore the social rules (network power), and make their own way through the risk, which could be considered a liberal feminist approach. Others found small ways to resist it throughout their daily experiences, such as calling people out on social media, which is a more post-structuralist approach. Though feminism was the most obvious form of counterpower, subtle negotiations of race, class, and age were also mentioned throughout the interviews.

6.4 A macro level analysis

Unexpectedly, the strongest differentiator in the impact of personal networks on snowboarding progression was the degree of access to the snowboarding industry. Five of the participants had at least some access, ranging from having worked in a snowboard shop temporarily, to being sponsored, to being full-time ski resort employees for many years. In comparison, five participants had no industry access. Industry access, and the corresponding access to relationships which were linked to snowboard progression, serves as a good case study for some of the macro level trends at play which were revealed in the interview data.

Access to, and experience in, the snowboarding industry is not gender-neutral (Angelini, Billings & MacArthur 2013, Coates, Clayton & Humberstone 2010, Laurendeau & Sharara 2008, Thorpe, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2018, Sisjord 2013, etc.). In this study, while 50% of both genders had some industry access, I would argue that this is unusual, as anecdotally I have observed significantly more industry positions being held by men. Putting that aside, in my findings, large gender differences emerged in participants experience in the industry. Both men involved in the industry cited almost completely positive experiences. When asked if they had ever been harassed, offended, or had a negative experience riding with someone, both replied they had not. For the
three women, it was a different story. They had all experienced either some form of harassment (ex: being shouted at during trainings, being approached for sex) and/or having their snowboarding ability devalued (ex: being broken up with because a boyfriend was threatened by her high level of snowboarding).

Limited research also indicates hierarchical aspects of race, class, and age (Carter-Francique & Flowers 2013, Sisjord 2009, Anderson 1999). My findings show that while four in seven white respondents had at least some industry access, only one of three people of color did. It is also noteworthy that neither Black participant had industry access. This aligns with the previously mentioned research on the low number of Black leaders and managers in basketball (Carter-Francique & Flowers 2013). While class played a factor, it seemed to be of less importance once one was already in the industry. In fact, using the industry to reduce financial barriers was cited by two individuals. Age also played a factor, with most respondents decreasing their industry involvement in their 30s or early 40s. Reason cited included shifting priorities, and the desire to be more careful with their bodies.

Given these findings, what could this imply about power structures in social networks? As Castells (2011) puts it: “power is multidimensional, and it is constructed around multidimensional networks programmed in each domain of human activity according to the interests and values of empowered actors” (p. 774). I argue that the findings demonstrate two overlapping and interrelating value systems that guide the development of, and access to, snowboarding social networks. One is snowboarding ability, which goes hand in hand with a time commitment to the sport and lifestyle. In her 2011 book on snowboarding, Thorpe draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital, habitus, and field to describe how different forms of “capital” mediate social hierarchies within snowboarding. She argues that rather than social identities such as gender being the main differentiator in hierarchies, there is instead a “division between core and noncore boarders with the former demonstrating a commitment to the activity itself and thereby bearing an ‘authentic’ cultural identity” (p. 151). My findings of industry access align with Thorpe’s claim that core vs non-core boarders is a key differentiator.
However, my findings would contradict Thorpe’s additional argument that “the embodied practices of snowboarders suggest that an individual’s initial capital is gender-neutral, being... based on their ability, commitment to the activity, and lifestyle” (p. 153). Instead, I argue that the second, overlapping value system is based on demographic alignment with those most valued in snowboarding culture: white, male professional snowboarders. Indeed, Thorpe herself even acknowledges in a chapter on masculinity and snowboarding that professional male snowboarders have “the most power to define the latest snowboarding tastes and styles” (Thorpe 2011, p. 179). While gender and race appeared to be highly influential, class and age had a slightly smaller influence.

In Castells’ terminology (2011), we would call such people with the power to determine and change these value systems “programmers.” This was evident when participants were asked who they would most like to snowboard with one day. Four of the ten respondents cited at least one of the “original” superstars of snowboarding: Travis Rice, Terje Håkonsen, and Jeremy Jones—all white male professional snowboarders. The responses of the other six participants varied, ranging from personal relationships to female professionals. It is also arguable that industry leaders are “programmers.” While exact statistics do not exist, a recent article (Tilton 2017) found just four snowboarding companies that were headed by women, three of which were founded within the past four years by women. In comparison, dozens of male-run companies exist. Sisjord (2009) also acknowledges the roles of programmers at the local level, with those most respected within a local snowboarding community: “the ‘core’ – which normally means males – commonly enjoy a great deal of respect, not only because their high volume of subculture capital, but also from their role in defining and creating it” (p. 1305).

Castells’ second type of power holder, “switcher,” is also of particular importance for this theme. Switchers have the ability to create and capitalize upon relationships between and within networks. An example of a ‘switcher’ in snowboarding networks are snowboard company representatives, who travel to ski resorts and allow snowboarders to try new products, making
the connection between the company and the consumer. They are also a key part of the process of snowboarder sponsorship, as they are most often at the ski resorts, mingling with aspiring snowboarders. Anecdotally, I have almost never seen female representatives. In this study, I argue that gatekeepers, godfathers, and crews serve as switchers. They provide access to, and between, key snowboarding networks that allow one to participate. The leaders of social organizations, such as the women’s organization SheJumps could also be considered switchers.

During the interviews, respondents appeared most willing to openly acknowledge the first value system, that skill level and commitment were contributors to accessing networks. As for the demographically-based hierarchy, there were varying levels of awareness and desire to improve it. Some were actively looking for ways to create a more inclusive community, while others preferred to avoid thinking about it. As one white male respondent explained when asked about whether he thought race had any impact on snowboarding communities: “I get away from it on the mountain. If someone starts to bring up politics, religion, I jet. I don’t want to hear it.”

Preference to focus on the social hierarchy as defined by snowboarding ability may be linked to the high value of the idea of meritocracy in American society. Just as we like to believe in the “American Dream”—that anyone who works hard enough can achieve success in life—perhaps we also would like to believe that dream extends to snowboarding, and to building relationships in the snowboarding community. However, my findings show a more complicated picture. While time, effort and resource investment is certainly important, not everyone received the same “return on investment,” so to speak. Women, people of color, those of lower class, and to a lesser degree, older individuals, face more barriers when it comes to accessing and gaining the benefits from social networks in snowboarding.

The unstructured nature of snowboarding networks offers both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, it is not easy to pinpoint discrimination and inequities. Social hierarchies are not always obvious on the surface, which can make it hard to identify and improve. As Sisjord (2009) exemplifies: “the masculine domination combined with the informal structure of the sport
makes female snowboarders less visible than males” (p. 1312). On the other hand, the flexible nature of snowboarding networks also means that the internal hierarchies and network rules are not always mandatory. Indeed, women, people of color, and those of different ages and classes were not completely shut out, and were still able gain significant value and enjoyment from snowboarding.

7. Envisioning solutions

Given everything this research has revealed, it offers exciting opportunities to ideate ways to create more equitable social networks. One obvious way would be to increase the diversity of gatekeepers, godfathers, and crews. This could be encouraged through programming, events, or training targeted at women, genderqueer individuals, people of color, and those of various ages and classes. Though not included in this study, differently abled individuals as well as the LGBTQ community would also be a good addition. Alternatively, working with men, who already hold many of those “switcher” positions, to actively invite more diverse participants into their networks is another option. Given the voiced safety and comfort risks, this would need to be accompanied by training or rules to ensure everyone is safe.

When considering the “programmer” positions of power, this would require an industry commitment to actively hire and promote more diverse participants in all areas of the industry--manufacturing, retail, at ski resorts, and as sponsored athletes. It would also mean increased media coverage of “nontraditional” snowboarders.

A third idea would be to consider the noted benefits of social networks and envision how those could be delivered without reliance on access to those networks. For example, hosting “get to know your mountain” events could provide terrain access. Meet and greets, or even coaching, with professional female snowboarders could be a link to the benefits of motivation and physical knowledge. Equipment tutorials could provide knowledge about selecting the correct gear.
The exciting part of these preliminary ideas is that they are all possible on both the small, local scale, and could be run through grassroots volunteers, as well as on a large scale industry level. What happens next is up to us. As one female respondent stated to me at the end of her interview:

All I can say to women [and others] in sports… don’t let them get you down, keep going, setting your own personal goals and achieve it. Because the inequality shouldn’t stop you from dreaming, right? From setting goals and trying to achieve it. But I think things are changing Marty, I really do. For the better.

8. Conclusion

Interviews with ten demographically diverse snowboarders based in Washington State, USA revealed that personal social networks are highly important to snowboarding progression. Nine progression benefits to snowboarding networks were discovered, including companionship; increased fun and joy; emotional support, encouragement and motivation; accumulation of physical knowledge; terrain access; equipment knowledge; access to free or cheap equipment; fear management; and logistical support. It was also found that the type of relationship was important, with the roles of gatekeepers, “godfathers,” and crews as the most critical for progression. Lastly, respondents indicated a variety of methods to access social networks, including social media, events, organizations, industry employment and through existing social networks.

When analyzing the data through an intersectional reading of Castells’ network theory of power, results demonstrated two overlapping values systems, one based on snowboarding ability and commitment, and one based on alignment of demographics with those who are most valued in the snowboarding world--mainly young, white, middle class men. It was found that these value systems influenced internal hierarchies of the social networks, rules about how to participate, and delineations for insider/outsider status. Of particular importance was the finding that the roles of
“switcher” and “programmer”, who have the unique ability to transfer power in networks according to Castells’ theory, were roughly 80% male.

Both men and women respondents acknowledged the increased risk and effort that women and girls face when navigating social networks in snowboarding. Awareness and acknowledgement of potential race, class and age barriers occured to a lesser degree. Different approaches to mitigate those barriers were voiced by participants, with a variety of radical, liberal, and poststructural feminist underpinnings.

Practically, I hope this work is used by the snowboarding industry, including ski resorts, equipment manufacturers, organizations, industry associations, and individuals. I have aimed to present the findings in a way that they can be utilized by both academics and non-academics. It is my aim that those throughout the industry may find this research helpful in furthering efforts to make the sport more inclusive at every level.

Theoretically, while previous research has focused on awareness and perceptions of inequality in participation, this is the first to bring an intersectional approach that is built on network theory. By highlighting several key relationship types, as well as how those relationships are accessed, it offers an important contribution for the potential of making the sport of snowboarding more inclusive. It also describes how those in non-dominant social groups still find many ways to participate in, progress, and find immense joy in the sport of snowboarding.


Thorpe, H, 2005, ‘Jibbing the Gender Order: Females in the Snowboarding Culture’, *Sport in Society*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 76-100, DOI: 10.1080/1743043052000316632


The University of Sydney 2016, Castells and the Network Society, 12 April, viewed 19 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLF5J8Y5zyg>.


Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself with your name, age, gender, and race or ethnicity
2. Where are you from?
3. What do you do for work?
4. How did you learn to snowboard?
   a. Who did you ride with?
5. Summarize your snowboarding experience from when you learned until now.
6. How would you describe your snowboarding now?
7. Thinking back over the years since you’ve learned to board, describe any key seasons or moments where your snowboarding really progressed?
8. Can you describe seasons or moments where you felt you were NOT progressing?
9. Have you ever set any specific progression goals? If so, what was that process like for you?
10. Have you ever considered competing or sponsorship? Why or why not?
11. Have you ever reached a point where you couldn’t access what you needed to progress?
12. Have you ever had any injuries or accidents that affected your riding (whether physical or mental)? If so what was that like for you?
   a. Did you receive support or encouragement from people you ride with?
13. Thinking of the people you ride most with now, what is their relationship to you?
   a. How does their level compare to yours? Do they compete?
14. Does anyone you’ve ridden with through the years come to mind as being particularly good for progression?
15. Did anyone ever make you feel offended, unsafe, or harassed, or hold your riding back in another way?
16. Do you more often ride with women or men?
17. When thinking about your current and past riding friends what kind of things have caused bonding?
18. When thinking about your current and past riding friends what kinds of things have caused tension or conflict?
19. When your riding friends are being supportive, what kinds of things do they do or say that are useful for your progression?
20. How, if at all, has cost impacted who rides with you?
21. Have any big life changes in your life or your riding buddies life affected snowboarding?
22. Have you ever gone to any snowboard-related events (not competitions)?
   a. At the ski resort?
   b. At other locations?
23. Which, if any, snowboarding-related social media GROUPS do you use?
24. Do you use other types of social media to connect with other boarders?
25. What impact do you think gender has on snowboarding network building?
26. What impact do you think race has on snowboarding network building?
27. Stevens Pass and other resorts recently started doing PRIDE weekend and women’s days. What is your opinion on events for certain populations like that?
28. Who would you LOVE to ride with in a dream world? This can be a real person, or an ideal riding buddy.
29. If you could wave a magic wand and change anything about ski resorts, or the snowboarding industry overall to improve your snowboarding community, what would you change?