

Climbers' Insights on the Health Benefits of Their Sport: Combining Photovoice and Confessional Tale Genres

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in rock climbing research, little is known about its health benefits from the perspective of climbers themselves. This qualitative study used photovoice, a participatory method where participants selected photographs to reflect on the significance of climbing in their lives. Additionally, a confessional tale was integrated as a reflective postscript, offering insight into the researcher's journey, and highlighting the dilemmas, tensions, and ethical or methodological challenges encountered throughout the process. Virtual and in-person focus groups were conducted, and photographs and narratives from nine rock climbers were analyzed, with pseudonyms used for privacy. Through thematic analysis five key themes emerged: (1) social connection, (2) shared adventure, (3) psychological skill development, (4) emotional regulation, and (5) full-circle moments. The findings support rock climbing's potential as a therapeutic tool for mental health and well-being, warranting further investigation by both practitioners and researchers. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the benefits of rock climbing, emphasizing its potential as a holistic approach that improves mental health, physical well-being, and community engagement.

KEYWORDS: Community, Confessional Tale, Photovoice, Rock Climbing, Well-being

Rock climbing is not merely a physical activity; it is a profound journey of self-discovery, resilience, and connection (Whitaker et al., 2020). This study explores the personal and communal significance of rock climbing through the qualitative methodology of photovoice, a community-based approach that incorporates participant-taken photographs and narratives to deepen understanding of a phenomenon (Hergenrather et al., 2009). The photovoice method is designed to provide a structured, participatory, reflexive, and empowering framework that unfolds in five key phases: (1) recruit participants with an interest in the topic, (2) collaboratively frame an issue to explore, using photos as the medium, co-create a research prompt, and guide participants on how to collect relevant images, (3) participants gather images over a defined period and reflect on the meaning in relation to the research prompt, (4) facilitate group discussions to co-analyze the photos, identify themes, and generate insights, and (5) share findings with a broader community to educate, shift perspectives, and promote change (Wang & Burris, 1997). The photovoice methodology was chosen to elevate participants' voices, enabling them to express their motivations for climbing through images. This approach aims to raise awareness among health professionals about the

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benefits of climbing, particularly its ability to enhance mental, physical, and social well-being (Bozalek et al., 2024; Polo et al., 2020). To deepen this exploration, as suggested by Bowles et al. (2021), the study incorporates a confessional narrative from the researcher, a passionate climber. The narrative offers a reflexive space, examining how the research process was shaped by both the researcher's and participants' voices, supporting, guiding, and sharing the experience, much like the act of belaying². This dual perspective, drawing on similar approaches by Srinivasa Gopalan et al. (2024), combines participant narratives with the researcher's insights, providing a nuanced understanding of both the research process and climbing's impact on participants' well-being.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is grounded in constructivist epistemology, critical theory, and Engel's (1978) Biopsychosocial (BPS) Model of Health, providing a comprehensive framework for exploring rock climbing's impact. Constructivism emphasizes that knowledge is shaped through social interactions and lived experiences (Chandra & Shang, 2017), aligning with the participatory nature of photovoice, which enables climbers to co-construct the meaning of their experiences. Critical theory challenges traditional power structures that impose universal meanings, instead emphasizing the importance of empowering individuals to represent their own narratives (Foucault & Gordan, 1980). Engel's (1978) BPS model highlights the interconnected biological, psychological, and social aspects of health, reflecting climbing's multifaceted benefits, including physical fitness, mental resilience, and social connection. By integrating these theories with the researcher's confessional tale insights, this study moves beyond standardized assessments of climbing's benefits, or those focused only on the sport-specific psychology of rock climbing (Şahin Kıralp & Ummanel, 2023; Mangan, 2025), to instead offer an experience-driven understanding of its role in well-being.

Reason for Selecting Photovoice

The decision to use photovoice stemmed from its unique ability to capture subjective, nuanced experiences that traditional surveys or interviews might overlook. While photovoice was originally designed to amplify marginalized voices (Thais Council et al., 2024; Wang & Burris, 1997), this study uses it to explore rock climbing from the perspective of climbers, focusing on the moments they choose to highlight and the meanings they attribute to the activity. As Burke and Evans (2011) note, participant-selected images can reveal insights that extend beyond verbal expression, making photovoice particularly well-suited for capturing the rich, often ineffable dimensions of climbing.

Like the purpose of grounded theory as described by Finley and Howard (2024), photovoice prioritizes the participants' voices by keeping their words and pictures intact during analysis to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon. The participatory nature of photovoice further ensures that participants' perspectives remain central to the research process, as they actively shape the narrative through their chosen images and reflections. Moreover, Charmaz and Belgrave (2019) explain that the data in qualitative research should serve as a space where participants' voices, especially those who might otherwise be overlooked or marginalized, are centered, allowing for a richer understanding of the social experience or phenomenon under study. While rock climbers are not a marginalized group, their voices have often been left out of conversations that directly impact them; discussions surrounding the social, psychological, and physical health benefits of their sport.

² A belayer manages the rope system from the ground, ensuring the climber's safety.

By centering their experiences, this study portrays a comprehensive understanding of climbing's role in well-being.

Why Use the Confessional Tale Genre?

The confessional tale is a highly personalized, diary-like narrative that accompanies the research process, offering a reflective postscript to traditional methodological discussions (Van Maanen, 2011). This genre provides insight into how the research unfolded, highlighting the dilemmas, tensions, and ethical or methodological challenges encountered along the way (Sparkes, 2002). Written from the researcher's perspective, it emphasizes reflexivity by documenting their thoughts, concerns, and decisions, offering a candid account of the entire research process and personal tensions generated by the study (Douglas & Carless, 2010; Fortune & Mair, 2011). This humanizes the research process by acknowledging the researcher's biases, struggles, positionally, and reflections, often arising from dialogue with peers or critical friends. As Van Maanen (2011) notes, the confessional genre reveals the inevitable messiness and uncertainties of studying human subjects within the context of their personal lives.

In this study, a confessional tale was integrated alongside the climbers photovoice, insights and narratives. As a climber herself, the lead researcher contributed their own reflections throughout the study, offering a parallel narrative to complement the participants' stories. By weaving personal insights into the research process, the confessional tale contextualized methodological choices and revealed the researcher's evolving perspective as both an insider (part of the rock-climbing community) and observer (researcher seeking to understand how participants make meaning from their experiences climbing). This mixing of genres, photo-voice with participants, and confessional with the researcher, enriched the depth of the findings as the researcher and participants co-created the study's narrative and outcomes.

Furthermore, incorporating a confessional tale aligns with Gupta's (2025) assertion that personal anecdotes hold scientific value, particularly when exploring under-researched topics or emerging methodologies. According to Gupta, anecdotal evidence can explain phenomena in ways that statistical research may overlook. Engaging with a single individual can provide nuanced, context-specific insights, uncovering factors that might otherwise go unexamined. In this way, the confessional tale is more than a reflective exercise, it serves as a valuable methodological tool that enriches and strengthens the research's depth and validity.

Overview of Rock Climbing as a Tool for Addressing Mental Health

Depression is the main cause of poor health and disability worldwide (Friedrich, 2017), yet less than half of individuals with mental health concerns in the United States receive treatment (National Institute of Mental Health, 2024), and only half of Canadians experiencing depression get adequate care (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2025). This highlights the urgent need for accessible and engaging interventions. Rock climbing has started to show promise as a therapeutic tool for improving mental health in recent literature (Chen et al., 2025; Jong et al., 2022; Kratzer et al., 2021; Wheatley, 2023; Zwart & Ewart, 2022). Its popularity continues to rise, with indoor climbing participation in the U.S. increasing by 10% in 2018 (Setiawan et al., 2024). This growth is fueled by the expansion of indoor climbing gyms and the increasing appeal of outdoor climbing (Setiawan et al., 2024).

Research on bouldering, a form of climbing that involves ascending short distances without a rope, suggests it supports mental health by reducing depressive symptoms (Kratzer et al., 2021; Luttenberger et al., 2022). Studies also indicate that even a single hour of bouldering can enhance

mindfulness by fostering flow states (Wheatley, 2023). Bouldering also boosts self-efficacy, defined as one's belief in their ability to successfully accomplish a task, which is linked to well-being and sustained physical activity (Kratzer et al., 2021). Additionally, climbing's combination of physical exertion and mental focus has promising therapeutic potential, particularly in mitigating anxiety disorders among adolescents (Gürer et al., 2024).

While much research on climbing's mental health benefits has focused on quantitative measures such as performance and mindfulness (Mangan et al., 2025; Villavicencio et al., 2021; Wheatley et al., 2023), qualitative exploration of its emotional and social impacts—such as identity, perseverance, and community—remains limited. This study aims to build on the work of Meier (2020) and Frühauf et al. (2021), two recent qualitative studies that explore the therapeutic potential of rock climbing. In a phenomenological study, Meier (2020) examined the experiences of nine female climbers with a history of mental illness. The findings support rock climbing's therapeutic value, showing that the sport provides structure, enhances self-efficacy, fosters community support, and cultivates a sense of control, key factors that participants in Meier's study described as contributing to their well-being. A central theme in Meier's work is the sense of control and community support climbers experience, and this study similarly seeks to explore how participants feel empowered and supported through the climbing community, capturing these experiences directly from the participants themselves.

In contrast, Frühauf et al. (2021) explored the potential of therapeutic climbing as an exercise intervention from the perspectives of experts, including physicians, and psychologists. Findings from these experts suggest that therapeutic climbing can complement other treatments of various disorders due to its benefits for social, psychological, and physiological well-being. However, Frühauf et al.'s work prioritized expert perspectives, limiting the understanding of how climbers themselves perceive the therapeutic potential of the sport. Our study's participant-driven qualitative approach aims to offer insights from two climbing communities on the underlying mechanisms behind climbing's therapeutic potential (Elsherif, 2024).

Despite a growing body of research suggesting that rock climbing can be a valuable tool for enhancing mental health, some studies question whether the benefits of the sport outweigh its potential risks (Fijałkowski et al., 2025; Identeg et al., 2024; Mikutta et al., 2024). Identeg et al. (2024) highlight issues such as sleep disturbances and the prevalence of overuse injuries among advanced Swedish climbers. Similarly, Mikutta et al. (2024) raise concerns regarding disordered eating, risk-taking behaviours, and the potential for psychological trauma. Others, however, argue the physical gains justify these risks (Fijałkowski et al., 2025). This study contributes to the debate by directly exploring climbers' perspectives.

Research Questions and Purpose

The central research question guiding the photo collection was: How does rock climbing impact your life, and what factors contribute to its ongoing significance? This question was developed in collaboration with the co-author, who provided critical feedback, and informed by conversations with members of the climbing community. The aim was to capture participants' reflective insights on the role of climbing in their lives. Following discussions with two climbers regarding the photovoice approach, a more focused and participant-driven prompt was adopted: What does rock climbing mean to you? As Wang and Burris (1997) noted, photovoice research prompts should be collaboratively designed with the research community to ensure they address the issues that are most salient to the participants.

The confessional tale component of the study was intended to generate reflexive insights on both the research topic and the research process. The guiding question for this aspect was: How

do participants' photovoice narratives and climbing experiences influence the researcher's understanding of her own climbing journey? A secondary question emerged during the study as the researcher revealed more of her own personal story with rock climbing: How does the researcher's personal experiences with climbing and mental health, in collaborative with participants' insights, inform the co-creation of the study's narrative, data analysis, and interpretation of findings? This reflective process, as Sparkes (2002) suggests, encourages the researcher to engage in a critical analysis of her assumptions and interpretations. It also underscores how the findings challenged and reshaped her understanding, highlighting the role of shared experiences with participants in strengthening the study's methodological approach and enhancing confidence in the conclusions drawn.

Ultimately, this research project aimed to explore the specific mechanisms within climbing that contribute to its interdisciplinary health benefits, as identified in recent studies (Chen et al., 2025; Fijałkowski et al., 2025; Luttenberger et al., 2022; Mangan et al., 2025; Wheatley, 2023). Motivated by both personal experience and academic inquiry, the lead researcher—an experienced climber, coach, and graduate student in kinesiology—designed the study to investigate whether the benefits of climbing outweigh its risks and how these benefits are experienced by participants. This project was conducted as part of a graduate-level qualitative research methods course. The second author, a professor in qualitative methods, provided mentorship and methodological guidance throughout the research process.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. An initial invitation was shared on Instagram with an outdoor climbing group chat from the lead researcher's hometown, Calgary. While 13 individuals initially expressed interest, time constraints led to seven withdrawals, resulting in a virtual Zoom focus group with six participants. A Zoom format was necessary, as some participants were based in Calgary while the researcher was in Victoria.

According to Segal (2024), Zoom interviews can complement face-to-face interviews and offer several advantages, including convenience, ease of use, and greater accessibility. Zoom interviews also eliminate travel requirements for both the interviewer and interviewees, saving time and increasing participation feasibility. Additionally, Zoom facilitates video recording, enhancing data accuracy and analysis. Gray et al. (2020) found that researchers rated the quality of video conference interviews as comparable to in-person interactions. Moreover, some participants reported feeling more comfortable discussing personal topics in a virtual setting. This type of interview can also mitigate power dynamics present in traditional interviews by removing physical presence, shifting the interaction to a transnational, online space—particularly when the interviewer and interviewee are in different parts of the world (Segal, 2024).

Following discussions with the co-author, additional participants were recruited locally to explore whether the mode of communication influenced insights and to incorporate perspectives from another climbing community. Three participants from a local climbing facility, in Victoria, joined an in-person photovoice focus group. Photovoice sessions occurred on the same day, each lasting one hour. The final participant pool included nine individuals ($N = 9$), aged 15 to 30.

Framing the Photo Selection Process

Participants were asked to select five to ten images that best represented the significance of climbing in their lives. They were encouraged to approach this selection in varying ways: by gathering a range of photos, newly captured or pre-existing, and narrowing them down to the most meaningful ones, or by focusing directly on images they already held dear. Following Burke and Evans (2011) photovoice guidelines, no restrictions were placed on image content, empowering participants to authentically capture and convey their personal climbing experiences. This flexible approach accommodated participants' unique perspectives, allowing them to either reflect on a broad array of experiences or highlight deeply personal, cherished moments.

Confessional Tale

The lead author's confessional tale is interwoven throughout the article as a series of italicized reflections with tighter line spacing, initially developed in conversation with the co-author, first as an instructor and later as a collaborator. As the researcher, the lead author shares her personal voice, offering insights into the research experience, the process of investigating rock climbing, and participant engagement. These reflections highlight how meaning is shaped within a subjective sphere, informed by contextualized insights, and bridge the roles of researcher/climber and participant/researcher. Readers are encouraged to engage with these passages alongside the main text to gain a deeper understanding of the findings and their connection to the researcher's personal journey.

Moreover, as Ruby, one of the participants in the zoom group, noted after reading the confessional addition, 'It rounds the article out well and makes it feel holistic, the same way climbing itself is described.' This quote explains how the researcher's reflections, in dialogue with Ruby, contribute to a collaborative interpretation of the findings, enhancing the study's authenticity and emotional resonance. To begin, the lead author below explains her motivation to do this study, setting the stage for the personal connection that inspired an exploration of rock climbing's mental and emotional impacts.

During my final year of undergraduate studies, when my anxiety was at its peak, climbing became a lifeline, grounding me in ways I hadn't anticipated. My anxiety, which began during my undergraduate years, was further complicated after being prescribed medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The medication was intended to help me manage the demands of school, but instead worsened my anxiety, ultimately landing me in the hospital.

Afterward, I was prescribed selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) for a year to regulate my anxiety. While the medication offered some relief, I eventually realized that rock climbing played a more significant role in my healing process. At a time when I felt unsteady and disconnected, climbing demanded my full attention, anchoring me in the present moment. It also rebuilt my confidence in my abilities and capacity to face challenges, providing tangible progress and proof that I could overcome obstacles. Just as importantly, climbing helped me reconnect with others. Trust is central to climbing, whether relying on someone for safety or sharing advice about a tough route. As I regained confidence in myself, I also learned to trust others more deeply, fostering a sense of belonging I hadn't realized I was missing. Now, I no longer take SSRIs to manage my anxiety, but I continue to climb regularly.

Looking back climbing didn't just help me heal, it reshaped my relationships with myself and others. I did this study because I wanted to know if this was the case for other climbers, or just me. Throughout this article, you'll see how participants' experiences often mirrored my own.

Timeline for Data Collection

Data collection spanned three weeks. In week one, participants received an introductory email outlining the study's purpose, consent form, and instructions for submitting photos via Google Slides. They had one week to select and share images reflecting climbing's significance in their lives. Week two involved a focus group discussion, fostering collective reflection and meaning-making as participants engaged with each other's photos and responded to guiding and reflection questions developed by the lead researcher. In the final week, a follow-up email invited feedback on the initial manuscript draft to ensure accurate representation of participants' perspectives. Participants could review subsequent drafts, with Ruby, Quinn, and Lauren providing the most detailed feedback, further refining the study's interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (Approval no. RAIS 25-0009). All participants provided written informed consent prior to their enrollment in the study. Given the personal nature of the photos, maintaining confidentiality, and respecting comfort levels were crucial. To support participants, a safe and supportive environment was fostered. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Participants were also given flexibility in choosing their focus group. One participant from the Calgary based outdoor climbing group who was in Victoria during data collection opted to join the online session, preferring to share their experiences with familiar climbers.

My experiences during this study underscored ethical complexities of recruitment, particularly when engaging close personal connections. For example, a close family member expressed a desire to participate out of love and support for me. However, the anxiety caused by the prospect of participating ultimately led them to decline. This experience left me feeling guilty for inadvertently placing them in such a difficult position and prompted me to critically reflect on whether other participants might feel similarly pressured to take part out of a sense of loyalty to me rather than a genuine desire to share their emotional insights on climbing.

To mitigate these concerns, I emphasized to all potential participants that their involvement was entirely optional, they could withdraw at any time and reassured them that declining would not affect our relationship. Additionally, I remained vigilant throughout the study, actively ensuring that participants' engagement arose from their authentic connection to climbing rather than external pressures. However, three participants got so involved they volunteered to read and offer suggestions on the emerging article, way beyond my expected commitment to the study.

The lead researcher distributed the consent forms digitally via email, accompanied by an introduction to the study outlining its purpose and participants' rights. For the in-person focus group, printed consent forms were provided on request. Key details of the consent form were also reviewed verbally at the beginning of both meetings.

Gathering Images and Facilitating Discussions

The primary data sources for this study were participant-selected photos and transcripts from focus group discussions, where participants presented and interpreted their images. The researcher facilitated these discussions, encouraging personal narratives, shared interpretations, and engagement with others' perspectives. For the virtual focus group, participants uploaded their images to a shared Google Slides presentation prior to the Zoom session, following a process like Spyreli et al. (2024). The in-person group printed and brought their photos to the meeting. These

interactive approaches fostered collective meaning-making, encouraged participant engagement, and prompted shared insights on the climbing community.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured format, beginning with an introduction to the photovoice method and session structure. Participants presented their images in their preferred manner, with discussions encouraged throughout. Most of the session was dedicated to viewing and discussing the images, followed by guiding and reflective questions designed to prompt deeper exploration of the selected pictures' significance and to capture any additional insights participants wished to share. In the in-person session, participants collaboratively organized printed images into thematic categories, which directly contributed to theme development by highlighting patterns and connections they found most meaningful. This participatory approach ensured that the analysis was grounded in their perspectives, making the identified themes more reflective of their lived experiences.

Guiding Questions

To facilitate group discussion the researchers developed the following guiding questions to help participants share their insights on rock climbing. These questions were designed to encourage reflection on emotions and experiences without leading responses, while also prompting shared reflections after hearing their climbing peers' perspectives:

1. What thoughts or emotions surfaced as you chose your pictures?
2. Is there one picture, that you or someone else shared, that resonated with you more than the others? Why does it stand out?
3. What aspects of climbing do you feel are often overlooked or misunderstood by people who don't climb?

Collective Reflection Questions

To conclude the focus group discussions, participants were provided with the following questions to promote collective reflection:

1. Looking back on our conversation today, what stands out to you the most about the role of climbing in your life or within the community?
2. How do you think our stories reflect the broader climbing community? Are there themes that other climbers might relate to as well?
3. Before we finish, is there anything you'd like to express, either about the session, the stories shared, or the community we're part of?

Reflecting on the focus groups, I noticed that the Zoom group was more eager to engage with the questions, likely due to their pre-existing relationships, not just with me as the lead researcher, but also with one another. The dynamics of this online group were shaped by our long-standing friendships, which created a comfortable and enthusiastic environment that fostered open and passionate discussions. Because these participants already had mutual trust and shared experiences, "we might have felt more at ease expressing personal reflections and building on each other's thoughts." Quinn one of the zoom participants noted after reading the article.

In contrast, the in-person group, composed of staff from a local climbing gym whom I had only recently met, offered fresh perspectives but engaged in a more structured dialogue. Without an established foundation of trust, they seemed less inclined to elaborate beyond their initial picture presentations. Additionally, because they were still getting to know one another, the absence of shared history made their interactions feel less natural compared to the Zoom group.

As a result, this session resembled a more formal research setting, seemingly leading to shorter responses and less spontaneous conversation.

I am grateful for the balance between the two groups, as the juxtaposition between them helped me develop well-rounded themes for this article. This contrast reinforced the importance of relationship-building in qualitative research, as trust and familiarity significantly influence the depth of participant engagement.

Managing Challenges to Credibility

The subjective nature of photovoice can pose interpretive challenges; however, accompanying textual explanations allowed participants to clarify their intended meanings, ensuring accurate interpretation by the audience. Many participants preferred providing verbal explanations rather than written descriptions. Despite initial concerns, participants' passion for climbing and strong sense of community ultimately fostered enthusiastic participation.

I noticed that while I asked participants to include brief textual descriptions with their images, instead many preferred to present them verbally, grouped by theme, during our meetings. This approach added depth to their narratives. In retrospect, I'm glad I remained flexible, as both methods, text with photos and thematic grouping, offered unique insights into their experiences.

Data Analysis

The study's data, collected through focus group interviews, were analyzed using a combination of manual coding and NVivo 15 software. An initial manual review of transcripts and photo descriptions was conducted to familiarize the researcher with the data and identify emerging themes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). NVivo, a qualitative research software, was then used to systematically organize and code discussions and themes. While the Zoom transcript was clear, the in-person focus group transcript was less legible, requiring the researcher to review video recordings rather than relying solely on the transcript for accurate analysis.

I observed a stark contrast when analyzing the in-person and virtual Zoom group transcripts. The Zoom transcript was much clearer, likely due to the platform's superior audio quality. Additionally, my greater familiarity with the Zoom participants allowed me to quickly identify emerging themes within the transcripts of their discussions. Analyzing the in-person group's data took longer, not only because of challenges with the transcript quality but also because I was less familiar with the participants, making it harder to grasp their perspectives. This highlights the role of researcher-participant relationships and technology in shaping data analysis.

Thematic analysis grouped similar codes into categories, facilitating a structured exploration of recurring patterns. This process integrated analysis of participants' selected images with their focus group discussions. To enhance reliability, Notebook LM, a Gemini 1.5 Flash AI tool designed for document queries and summaries, was used to generate thematic insights from uploaded sources without drawing on the wider internet. The researcher's manually coded themes, developed through close reading and coding in NVivo, were then compared to those generated by Notebook LM. Areas of similarity between approaches reinforced the validity of key themes, whereas discrepancies encouraged further refinement. For example, Notebook LM identified subtle connections between themes, such as how "Shared Adventure" contributed to emotional resilience. It also helped to refine the research question for the confessional tale based on the researchers' selected insights. This helped ensure that the themes and research questions were both rigorously developed and contextualized within the study.

Guided by constructivist principles, the thematic analysis involved co-construction of meaning through participants' feedback (Chandra & Shang, 2017). To ensure accurate representation, participants reviewed key themes and provided feedback throughout the research process. The photovoice methodology further reinforced this collaborative approach by integrating shared meaning-making between participants and the researcher. In alignment with Hopper et al. (2008)'s criteria for credible and authentic qualitative research, the researcher encouraged participants to review the final report, with six participants providing feedback.

A significant aspect of this study was the collaborative process of co-constructing meaning, which involved six participants acting as readers and reviewers of the manuscript. Quinn, Ruby, and Lauren provided detailed feedback and comments, whereas Athena, Natalia, and Chris emailed to confirm they had read it and found themselves well-represented. Sam, Trevor, and Brett were given the opportunity to review the manuscript but did not provide any feedback. Although this approach aligned with the principles of photovoice methodology, it was personally daunting to share my work with friends in such a vulnerable state. Allowing them to review the first draft, along with subsequent revisions, ensured their perspectives were accurately captured. This process not only reinforced the authenticity of the findings but also embodied the collaborative and intersubjective nature of the research, mirroring the communal and interconnected spirit of rock climbing itself. In hindsight, I am deeply grateful for their involvement, as it enriched the study's outcomes and fostered a more inclusive and shared understanding of the research narrative.

Photovoice Findings

The Significance of Climbing: Key Themes

Ruby defined Rock Climbing as *"a challenge that you can never fully succeed at"*. *Climbing has always felt like a perfect blend of challenge and joy for me. Its difficulty is part of what makes it so rewarding, if it were easy, it wouldn't be as fulfilling. I chose to accentuate Ruby's quote because it captures the heart of climbing and describes why it continues to hold such profound meaning in our lives.*

Thematic analysis identified five key themes that explain climbing's impact on participants well-being: (1) connection through community, (2) shared adventure, (3) psychological skill development (e.g., resilience, mindfulness, trust, self-efficacy), (4) emotional regulation (e.g., escaping negative thoughts while enhancing positive emotions), and (5) full-circle moments. These themes are interconnected, with connection and shared adventure (Themes 1 and 2) leading to the development of psychological skills and emotional regulation (Themes 3 and 4). Ultimately, full-circle moments (Theme 5) occur as climbers seek to give back, recreating for others the same sense of connection, adventure, resilience, and personal growth (Themes 1–4) that climbing once provided them. Climbing thus becomes a challenge you can never succeed at because there is always an opportunity to give back to the community.

Theme 1 (Connection through a community that shares the same passion)

Climbing was described as a means of building relationships and creating a sense of belonging, both within the climbing community and beyond.

The Welcoming Embrace of the Climbing Community No Matter Where You Go.

Participants highlighted the inclusivity of the climbing community, which unites individuals from diverse backgrounds and skill levels. Ruby noted, “We all share the same passion, even if we don’t share the same language,” emphasizing the universal and welcoming nature of climbing. As shown in Figure 1, climbing fostered connections for Ruby during her travels across Europe and North America, illustrating the sport’s global and enduring camaraderie.



Figure 1. These are climbing pictures Ruby took in all the different places that she lived.

A Sense of Belonging. Additionally, Quinn shared that “climbing has brought a lot of amazing people into their life” and that these people “really get me and see me for me,” emphasizing the unique sense of understanding and belonging within the climbing community. This sentiment further supports that climbing is more than just a physical activity—it serves as a space where individuals feel truly seen, valued, and connected to others who share their passion. Figure 2 illustrates this sense of belonging, depicting Quinn climbing outside with these friends.



Figure 2. Through climbing Quinn met some of their dearest friends. They have always been a little bit of an outsider, but they have found their people through climbing.

Theme 2 (Shared Adventure: Unique and novel experiences push you to your limits)

A recurring theme in the discussions was the sense of adventure and novelty climbing provides, especially when shared with others. As Ruby explained, climbing is pervasive because “there’s always a different thing to learn or a different way to push yourself.” and that you can always “find a different way to get involved with the sport and the community”. This constant opportunity for growth keeps the experience engaging, but it’s the shared journey that gives it deeper significance. Participants explained that their most rewarding moments came from

overcoming challenges together, as only fellow climbers truly understand the mental and physical intensity of the sport. Even in seemingly solitary endeavors, such as Chris's experience learning to lead solo climb, he noted the irony of doing so alongside a friend. Furthermore, Natalia reflected on the unique mental challenges of climbing:

"You can never really capture the mental part of climbing. A picture can show your bloody hands and how hard a climb was physically, but nobody really understands when your legs start shaking, and you're trying to clip in, just thinking, "please, just clip in already."

This shared understanding of mental struggles and vulnerability explains the deep connections within the climbing community. Moreover, climbers recognize how the sport strengthens the mind-body connection through the body awareness and focus required to complete a climb. Chris articulated this, addressing common misconceptions about the sport:

"That feeling of being completely zoned in on what you're doing, knowing exactly where every part of your body is, how hard you're pulling on every single hold, and how to keep your tension when climbing something overhung. That's what a lot of people miss when they see climbing as just going up and down. They don't understand how it feels to be on the wall itself. "

It is this shared experience of pushing limits and seeking adventure that unites climbers. The mutual understanding of both the physical and mental challenges inherent in the sport strengthens their bonds, reinforcing the significance of climbing as more than just a physical pursuit but as a collective journey of resilience.

The Power of Multi-Pitches. Participants emphasized the unique, collaborative nature of multi-pitch climbing, where climbers confront challenges together, allowing stronger connections through shared experiences. Chris reflected on the importance of these moments, stating, 'All of our multi-pitch climbs together over the summer had just been fantastic, and it really brought us closer.' Multi-pitch climbing involves climbing a route too long to be completed in a single pitch. Here, one climber (the lead climber) ascends first, setting up protection along the way. After reaching a secure spot, the lead climber belays their partner, who ascends with protection already in place (top-rope climbing). This process is repeated for each pitch, with climbers working in teams of two or three to reach the top. The collaborative nature of multi-pitch climbing demands teamwork, trust, and problem-solving, as each climber plays a crucial role in ensuring the group's safety and success. Thus, multi-pitch climbing strengthens bonds through trust, communication, and teamwork, all of which contribute to the sense of unity among climbers. Figure 3 has a picture of Chris's friend during their barefoot multi-pitch of Plutonian Shores, symbolizing their shared sense of challenge, adventure, and accomplishment.



Figure 3. A photo of Chris's friend on Plutonian Shores. The two friends climbed it barefoot.

Chris took me on my second-ever multi-pitch climb, a journey where teamwork is paramount in reaching the summit. Multi-pitch climbing requires not only physical endurance but also quick problem-solving when things go wrong, and, above all, a deep trust in your climbing partner. However, what I love most about multi-pitch climbing is the added motivation it offers. When I'm climbing solo, it's easy to feel less driven when challenges arise. But with multi-pitch, you're committed because there is another person depending on you to make it to the top. This mutual reliance strengthens your resolve and helps you push through limits you might not otherwise approach. I find it inspiring that Chris and his friend accomplished Plutonian Shores barefoot, such an impressive feat, and I'm in awe of their ability to accomplish it together.

The Power of Nature. Additionally, climbing offers a unique way to connect with the outdoors, deepening the shared sense of adventure. Ruby observed, "It's that connection with the outdoors, being able to have broadly applicable skills and friends who accompany you on all the different outdoor activities you do." These outdoor experiences enrich lives through a shared love of adventure and exploration. This theme is visually represented in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Shared adventure among friends in the Rocky Mountains.

In my experience, outdoor climbing offers the most significant boost to well-being. Not only do you gain the added benefits of being immersed in nature, but the challenge of climbing outdoors often feels more rewarding. It's not just about the climb; it's the whole adventure. Driving out with friends, hiking to the rock face, spending the day together, it's those memories that remind me why I love climbing so much.

Theme 3 (Psychological Skills: Resilience, Trust, Mindfulness, and Self-Efficacy)

Embracing Challenges as Opportunities for Resilience. Participants emphasized how the physical and mental demands of climbing foster continuous self-improvement and resilience, especially when they felt anxious, depressed, or unsure of themselves. Quinn shared how climbing helped her navigate both physical recovery after surgery and emotional challenges following a breakup. She explained, "One thing about climbing is that it has really pushed my limits to see how far I can go physically." She also described how a friend helped her through a difficult breakup by encouraging her to climb outdoors. This friend said, "Let's not worry about it. Let's just focus on climbing some cool stuff." These two examples of how climbing helped Quinn remain resilient after difficult life events are explained in further detail in Figure 5.



Figure 5. The left picture depicts Quinn completing Cardiac Arete four months post- surgery. In the right picture, they climbed their first chimney after a bad breakup.

Cultivating Trust. Climbing emerged as a powerful way to build trust, both in oneself and in others. Natalia reflected on how at times when she has felt isolated or down with nobody to rely on, that climbing has strengthened her ability to trust others, sharing “I just feel like I’ve been able to really trust people more” and trust “in general more,” attributing this growth directly to her climbing experiences. She recounted a pivotal moment where trust in her belay partner, the person managing the rope and ensuring safety, was critical during a near-fall: “My friend caught me from almost decking, as you can see from how close we are together” (see Figure 6). Decking is climber terminology for landing on the ground.



Figure 6. Here is two times Natalia was caught by her friends after taking a big fall.

Mindfulness. Quinn further explained how climbing fosters mindfulness and self-awareness, alleviating the stresses of everyday life, sharing, “Oftentimes my brain is constantly running or worrying, and climbing really brings that mind-body connection for me.” This quote highlights how climbing serves as a grounding activity for Quinn, promoting mental clarity and presence, supporting findings from Wheatley, (2023) and Gürer et al. (2024). Figure 7 illustrates this connection in greater detail.



Figure 7. Quinn shared these images to illustrate how climbing serves as a form of mindfulness.

Self-Efficacy. Chris highlighted the empowering nature of climbing, stating, 'It felt really cool to be able to go out and have a big day climbing that was completely self-sufficient.' This quote reflects the autonomy and self-confidence that climbing fosters, as individuals take ownership of their experiences and select which challenges to tackle. This finding aligns with research by Kratzer et al. (2021) and Meier (2020), both of which demonstrate how climbing enhances self-efficacy: a sense of control over one's abilities and ability to complete tasks.

Conquering Fear. Participants frequently highlighted overcoming fear as a key personal achievement in rock climbing. Lauren shared how she felt "really lost" after the pandemic, retiring from her competitive climbing career and struggling without competitions. Outdoor climbing helped her rediscover herself and overcome the fear of the unknown. She also recounted a climb in Spain she initially deemed impossible, almost destroying her fingers, but ultimately conquered with encouragement and strategy, demonstrating the empowering nature of surpassing perceived limits. See Figure 8 for details.



Figure 8. Pictures of Lauren outdoor climbing in Spain.

Creativity in Climbing. Athena brought up the often-overlooked creative aspect of route setting³, emphasizing that it goes beyond simply placing holds. For many setters, it is a blend of technical challenge and artistic expression, requiring both problem-solving skills and a keen sense of climbing movement and visual aesthetics. Each route teaches new skills, with setters considering not only physical challenges but also movement, flow, safety, and how the climb looks. The example Athena mentioned was a climb that was created by a teenager at the gym. It wasn't a very functional boulder, but Athena described how it demonstrates one of many ways climbing can act as a creative outlet. See Figure 9 for an example of the creativity climbing promotes.

³ A setter, or route setter, creates climbing routes on artificial rock walls. They are responsible for designing challenging yet rewarding routes for indoor climbing walls and competitions.



Figure 9. This photo represents creativity found within climbing through route setting.

Even though I am not a route setter, I think climbing offers me endless opportunities to express creativity by finding my own way to complete a climb set by another person. I especially enjoy sharing my methods with others who might be struggling. Passing on that knowledge not only strengthens community but is also a reminder that climbing is as much about connection and collaboration as it is about individual achievement.

The Value of Falling. Athena emphasized the importance of falling as an essential part of the learning process. In bouldering, repeated falls are not just inevitable but crucial for progress. She described how embracing failure fosters resilience, patience, and problem-solving skills. Rather than viewing falls as setbacks, climbers learn to see them as opportunities for reassessment and adaptation, reflecting the broader lessons of perseverance and growth that climbing instills. In figure 10 there is a screenshot from a video showing Athena attempting the same climb over ten times, falling each time.



Figure 10. This photo symbolizes perseverance. Athena explained, when presenting this picture to their focus group, how climbing teaches individuals that persistence and learning from failure are more important than simply completing the climb.

Theme 4 (Emotional Regulation)

Participants consistently described how climbing served as a powerful tool for emotional regulation, by evoking positive emotions or providing an escape from negative ones. Trevor described this as “an outlet from the very fast-paced world we live in,” emphasizing climbing’s role in stress relief.

Positive Emotions. Feelings of gratitude, pride, admiration, and love were powerfully conveyed through each participant's description of what climbing means to them. Climbing, therefore, provides individuals with a range of positive emotions that enhance their well-being. Participants shared that they “felt so empowered,” and that reaching the top of a climb was “a big triumph.” Additionally, Ruby explained how “it made me feel full of gratitude to go back and start from the very beginning when I first started climbing in 2019, going through all of the photos up to the present, and seeing how my relationship with climbing and the climbing community has evolved over time.”. This reflection highlights how climbing not only nurtures personal growth but also fosters a profound sense of appreciation for the progress made and the community built along the way.

Building Confidence Through Strength. Lauren’s journey of embracing her muscular physique is a great example of how climbing supports emotional regulation and self-acceptance. Once self-conscious about being teased for her muscles, she gradually came to see them as symbols of strength, dedication, and perseverance. Climbing alongside other strong female athletes played a key role in reshaping her perspective, helping her find confidence and emotional stability. Lauren’s story demonstrates how climbing fosters both physical growth and the emotional resilience needed to overcome societal pressures and build confidence. The photos in figure 11 Lauren selected because she loves how strong her shoulders look in them.



Figure 11. These pictures display Lauren’s journey from hating defined muscles to loving them.

Theme 5 (Full Circle Moments): Giving Back to the Community

The concept of Full-Circle Moments emerged as a culmination of the first four themes, capturing the reciprocal nature of the climbing experience. These moments are achieved when individuals, having built their own sense of community and stability, feel ready to give back. Specifically, participants identified times where the knowledge, skills, and support they once received are passed forward, creating a cycle of mentorship and shared growth. Ruby described this experience saying, “Learning through friends, through community, through the people who are in the community who are really keen to share their skills,” was central to her experience, particularly while traveling through Europe. This sentiment reflects the universality of climbing’s communal spirit where a shared passion ensures the sport’s enduring significance.

Teaching and Sharing Knowledge. All the participants expressed fulfillment in teaching new climbers the skills they had once learned themselves. This act of mentorship strengthens bonds within the climbing community and reinforces the value of climbing as a shared journey. Sam described it as “getting the same back as what I got,” emphasizing the joy of seeing others succeed through their guidance. In contrast, participants expressed their appreciation for learning new skills from others, such as multi-pitching, or sport climbing. This is illustrated in Figure 12 below.



Figure 12. This picture captures Ruby’s first-ever outdoor lead climb. She learned how to sport climb outdoors in Moab during a bouldering trip, from friends.

Founding Queer Climbing Nights. Quinn shared their pivotal role in initiating queer climbing nights at the gym, motivated by the company's core value of fostering community. Recognizing the need for a dedicated space for the 2SLGBTQ+ community, they approached their manager with the idea and helped bring it to life. Since the first event, the initiative has grown steadily. Each event has strengthened the sense of belonging and led to the formation of a dedicated team to ensure its continued success. See Figure 13 for an image of the queer climbing night that Quinn helped organized.



Figure 13. This picture is an example of how Quinn gave back to the climbing community through their organization of Queer Climbing Night.

Fostering a Culture of Growth and Community. Sam explained how the climbing culture fosters a cycle of giving back, where shared learning and mentorship strengthen connections and grow the community. This is shown in Figure 14, which shows this participant teaching his friend to photograph climbers and scenery while using a rope system.

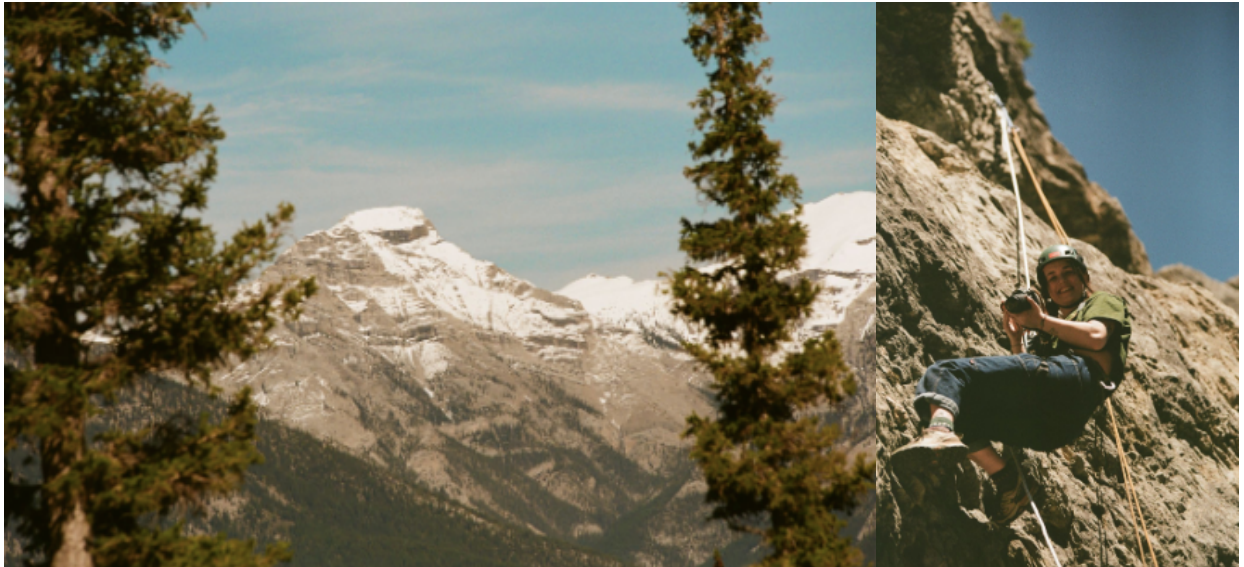


Figure 14. These pictures show Sam giving back to the community by teaching his friend a new skill, how to set themselves up on a rope to take pictures of others while climbing

From Camper to Leader. Athena's journey embodies the essence of Full-Circle Moments where early experiences in climbing evolve into opportunities for leadership and mentorship. She fondly recalls discovering climbing at a summer camp when she was just seven, a pivotal moment that ignited her lifelong passion. A decade later, she returned to those same camps, this time as an instructor, guiding and inspiring the next generation of climbers. Now, as a manager, she continues to foster growth and community within the climbing world. Her progression from camper to leader illustrates the cyclical nature of mentorship in climbing, where giving back becomes an integral part of the journey. See Figure 15 for an image that reflects Athena's enduring connection to the sport.



Figure 15. This picture shows the first wall Athena ever climbed at her childhood summer camp at age seven. Ten years later, she would be running the climbing program there.

From Athlete to Coach. “This is where it comes full circle,” Lauren said as she introduced the photo in Figure 16. Three years ago, she founded a competitive climbing team at the same gym where she started climbing at age ten. For Lauren, sharing her passion with a new generation of climbers was deeply meaningful. Seeing her athletes grow and develop, much like she once did, reinforced her sense of accomplishment and connection to the climbing community. This full-circle moment highlighted both her personal journey and the lasting impact of her mentorship, creating a legacy of growth and inspiration.



Figure 16. This picture showcases the competitive climbing team that Lauren formed at her local climbing gym, an excellent example of a full-circle moment.

Receiving End of a Full Circle Moment. Brett, a successful competitive climber, described experiencing a full-circle moment during a climbing competition when his friend, despite being a competitor, helped him with the beta⁴ for a challenging route. This aspect of climbing is truly unique, as few other sports foster such camaraderie among competitors. In climbing, the challenge is often framed as a personal battle against the climb itself, rather than against other climbers, allowing for shared growth and support even within a competitive environment. As captured in Figure 17, this moment highlights the supportive and collaborative nature of the climbing community, even in competitive contexts.

⁴ Beta refers to tips and strategies for climbing a route, including handholds, body positions, and movement sequences.



Figure 17. This picture captures Brett receiving advice from a friend on how to execute a dynamic move during a climbing competition.

Overall, Full-Circle Moments play a pivotal role in highlighting the benefits of rock climbing, as they illustrate how the sport fosters a cycle of community engagement, mentorship, and continuous challenge, showcasing what makes it truly meaningful to participants.

The theme of full circle moments resonates with me on a personal level. Climbing has not only provided me with a job but also with academic purpose. Through this research I hope to create my own full circle moment, firstly by framing the health benefits of climbing, encouraging readers to take up climbing, and secondly by giving back to the participants, whose shared stories allowed them to reflect on and express gratitude for how climbing has shaped their lives.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore whether the benefits of rock climbing outweigh its potential risks and to identify the specific mechanisms that contribute to climbing's health benefits. Participant reflections were consistent with existing research (Frühauf et al., 2021; Gürer et al., 2024; Luttenberger et al., 2022; Zwart & Hines, 2022), stating that climbing served not only as a therapeutic outlet for managing anxiety and depression but also as a catalyst for community connection. These findings directly contradict prior literature that emphasizes the sport's risks, such as disordered eating, risk-taking behavior, trauma potential, overuse injuries, and sleep disturbances (Identeg et al., 2024; Mikutta et al., 2024). Rather than reinforcing these concerns, this study supports emerging research that highlights climbing's therapeutic potential through increased mindfulness, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and social connection (Chen et al., 2025; Jong et al., 2022; Kratzer et al., 2021; Wheatley, 2023; Zwart & Ewart, 2022; Zwart & Hines, 2022). Consistent with Fijałkowski et al. (2025), this study found that not only do the physical

benefits of climbing outweigh its risks, but the psychological and communal benefits do as well. These findings suggest that health practitioners and clinicians should consider rock climbing as an intervention to support mental, social, and physical well-being.

Most importantly, the findings portrayed climbing as both a personal and collective experience, with Ruby describing it as "a challenge you can never fully succeed at." These results align with Meier's (2020) qualitative research, which similarly highlights the sense of belonging and control fostered through a shared passion for outdoor activities. However, this study extends Meier's (2020) work by introducing "Full-Circle Moments" as a new conceptual framework for understanding climbing's long-term impact. Additionally, the sense of accomplishment and ongoing challenge echoed prior research on outdoor adventure (Lieberman et al., 2023), but this study adds that climbers often seek to "close the loop" by mentoring others. These findings deepen the understanding of climbing's impact by framing it as an ongoing challenge that can never be fully mastered, as climbers continuously discover new ways to give back or develop new skills. Consequently, these "Full Circle Moments" and ongoing challenge may function as the specific mechanisms inherent in rock climbing that led to its varying health benefits. Based on this, support groups centered around rock climbing, particularly outdoor climbing, could be an effective form of group therapy for individuals with health problems.

Interestingly, Santini et al. (2022) found that the mental health benefits of challenging leisure activities may vary depending on the individual. Findings from the study suggest that challenging leisure activities were most effective for individuals who are not employed, not in school, or not feeling challenged at work or school. Findings collectively suggest that while the inherent challenge of climbing may promote mental well-being, its effectiveness likely depends on personal context. Future research should explore how forms of climbing (e.g., bouldering, top rope, lead, outdoor, ice climbing) may benefit individuals differently.

Link to Theoretical Frameworks

The findings of this study align with the Biopsychosocial (BPS) Model, constructivism, and critical theory. The BPS model is reflected in the way climbing enhances physical strength, promotes emotional regulation and resilience, and fosters a strong sense of community (Engel, 1978). From a constructivist perspective, the emphasis on shared experiences and Full-Circle Moments highlights how climbers learn, grow, and redefine their relationship with the sport through collective meaning-making (Chandra & Shang, 2017). Rather than viewing climbing as an individual pursuit, participants framed it as an evolving process shaped by communal learning and mentorship, reinforcing the constructivist notion that knowledge is co-constructed within social contexts. Additionally, Full-Circle Moments offer a counterpoint to barriers to accessibility and inclusivity within the sport by illustrating how mentorship and knowledge-sharing can serve as mechanisms for empowerment. By fostering a culture of reciprocity, climbing communities can actively resist exclusionary norms and promote broader participation, aligning with critical theory's perspective that social structures can be challenged and reshaped through collective action (Foucault & Gordan, 1980).

Strengths and Challenges

A key strength of the study lies in its focus on participants' voices, capturing their experiences with climbing through the photovoice method. This approach provided rich qualitative data and allowed for a nuanced, deeply personal perspective on the sport. The integration of a confessional tale added transparency to the research, offering insight into how the researcher's

mental health journey and relationships with participants influenced the research process and interpretation of findings.

Moreover, structured member checking, as suggested by McKim (2023), further strengthened the study by ensuring that participants had the opportunity to engage with the final draft of the findings. This process reinforced the principle that participants are the true experts of their experiences and allowed them to clarify, refine, or adjust any misrepresentations of their perspectives before publication. By incorporating participants' feedback, the research findings gained greater authenticity and credibility, while also fostering a collaborative approach that respected participants' agency in shaping how their narratives were shared.

Additionally, the strong rapport established between the researcher and participants, particularly during the Zoom group discussions, created a supportive space that encouraged vulnerability. This rapport played a critical role in enriching the authenticity and credibility of the data. However, a potential challenge was the influence of the researcher-participant relationship, which could have led to participation based on perceived obligation or social desirability. Nonetheless, existing research suggests that rapport-building can mitigate such biases (Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

As described by Smith (2018) findings demonstrate naturalistic generalizability, "when the research resonates with the reader's personal engagement in life's affairs or vicarious, often tacit, experiences" (p. 140). The participants' willingness to re-read the research report and authentically engage with the prompt, "What does rock climbing mean to you?", supports the concept of research transferability (Tracy, 2010).

It is important to note that this study focuses on individuals who actively engage in and benefit from rock climbing. It does not capture the experiences of those who may have tried but discontinued climbing or those who did not find the same sense of community. However, for those who embrace this inclusive environment, the findings offer valuable insights into how climbing helps address mental health issues.

I initially worried that my friends might have joined the study out of loyalty to me rather than a genuine interest in the research. However, Quinn, a key friend, who played a role in editing this article, reframed this concern as a strength: suggesting that the existing rapport between researcher and participants created a safe space for sharing sensitive or personal information.

Implications for Future Research

The findings from this study emphasize the importance of building strong rapport with participants in qualitative research to ensure the collection of authentic, in-depth insights. Effective rapport building fosters trust and openness, which are essential for capturing participants' true experiences and perspectives. Future research should prioritize member checking, where participants are given the opportunity to engage with the final manuscript to ensure their views are accurately portrayed (McKim, 2023). This process not only enhances the validity of the findings but also empowers participants by allowing them to contribute to the representation of their own experiences. Finally, conducting research with participants with whom the researcher has an established relationship requires careful attention to research ethics. Simply obtaining informed consent at the outset is not sufficient; ongoing, active consent throughout the research process is critical. To minimize power imbalances, it is essential to engage in consistent collaboration with participants, ensuring they have an active voice in all stages of the research. This ongoing collaboration allows participants to provide input on the direction of the study, and to reaffirm their consent as the research evolves. These strategies are crucial to ethical research practice, particularly in contexts where the researcher and participant have pre-existing relationships.

Conclusion

This study, which investigated the specific mechanism behind the health benefits of rock climbing, offers valuable insights into the sports impact on participants lives. Through image-based discussions, participants reflected on how climbing fosters personal growth and creates "full-circle moments" where giving back enhances the sport's meaning. The inclusion of a confessional tale enriched the findings by providing a personal perspective where the researcher was able to critically examine how their mental health journey shaped the research process and the interpretation of findings. This study also highlighted the critical role of researcher-participant relationships in shaping the research process and outcomes. The methodological approaches utilized in this study, participatory photovoice and confessional tale, contribute to advancing qualitative research by offering new ways to examine personal and collective experiences. This work invites further exploration into the ways in which qualitative methods can be enriched by incorporating reflective, participatory, and interdisciplinary approaches, making it a valuable contribution to the global research community.

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Notes on Contributors

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