

Inequality in action sports: How marketing and media can help foster inclusion

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About the research

Like other outdoor action sports, mountain biking has traditionally been a male-dominated sport. Only 15-25% of participants are women. Women continue to face challenges in feeling part of mountain biking, and in feeling that their participation is equally valued on its own terms. There is a strong role for media and marketing in fostering the sport's culture and its inclusivity.

Mountain biking is mediated through narrow representation in specialist marketing and media channels, plus user-generated social media. Mountain biking was established in the 1990s as an alternative to traditional, rule-bound competitive sports, and offers a means of self-expression and enjoyment with unique mental and physical wellbeing benefits. Despite a general increase in mountain biking popularity in recent decades, it is understood to have a 'male' culture, dominated by a focus on risk, strength, freedom and fraternal bonding.

There has been a strong focus by industry marketers and media on overcoming gender inequality and on fostering greater inclusivity in mountain biking. However, many women remain excluded. There is a need to better understand how women who mountain bike form relationships with the sport, as well as how to open up mountain biking to a more diverse group.

This report makes the following recommendations for industry, public sector organisations and policy:

1. Diversify mediated representation of mountain bikers and mountain biking to foster inclusivity.
2. Connect women mountain bikers through on and offline programmes to create opportunity and raise the visibility of women in the sport.
3. Support women to engage with the mountain biking marketplace.

The report is based on a qualitative research project funded by BA/Leverhulme small grants, exploring how women engage with mountain biking, and how marketing and media shape the culture of mountain biking. The findings will help policymakers, industry and public sector stakeholders understand the role of marketing and media in fostering greater inclusivity in mountain biking and other action sports.

Image courtesy of Sue Fisher



Key findings

- Women are under-represented in media and marketing imagery. There is also under-representation of women from different ethnic backgrounds and ages. Women feel excluded from the mediated culture of the sport due to this under-representation.
- There is an overly narrow representation of mountain biking in media and marketing, dominated by a masculine, risky, high-octane style of engagement. This alienates women seeking to form identities as 'mountain bikers', and further exacerbates imposter syndrome.
- Women seek out and curate social media influencers who better represent their connection with mountain biking. Some contribute to social media with their own stories in an active effort to rebalance the mediated culture of mountain biking and foster inclusivity.
- Women in mountain biking feel excluded from the marketplace, which limits their involvement and engagement with the mainstream culture, which is a consumer culture. They struggle to justify spending money on products and services, they are disinterested in the way product and service offerings are currently promoted, and their engagement with the marketplace is often brokered by male partners and friends when they do need to engage.
- Women mountain bikers recognise the delicate balance the industry faces in promoting women-only products and services. These can mean women feel marginalised from the mainstream sport if the culture of mountain biking continues to feel male-dominated and predominantly serving a masculine target segment.
- 'Transformative marketing' that seeks to empower women and address inequality can feel inauthentic and 'really targeting men' because women's experiences and stories of mountain biking are not seen as authentically represented. Authentic transformative brand marketing can foster strong relationships between brands and women consumers, when women's stories of mountain biking are told in their own terms, when brand marketing supports women's participation in authentic ways through events and sponsorship, and when inspiring women's stories of adventure are shared in a way that appeals to women.
- Women mountain bikers face unique experiences of exclusion because they are socialised into a male-dominated and masculine culture, in which their own experiences and ways of engaging can feel invalidated. Women's engagement with the sport is often brokered by men. This creates pressure and exacerbates feelings of imposter syndrome, fear and anxiety. For example, women's recruitment journeys are often facilitated by men, and their experiences riding in mixed or male-dominated groups can include unpleasant comparisons of competence and bravery. Women's anxieties and fears associated with skill and risk can be heightened through non-supportive participation experiences.
- Women who ride together in groups experience, and help foster, a nurturing, supportive environment, in which women develop friendships, confidence and skills. They can learn at their own speed, enjoying the process of challenge and achievement without feeling unpleasant pressure. Women actively seek other women to ride with, helping forge their connection and retention. Women riding in women-only groups report progressing rapidly and can also open up pathways between different aspects of the sport, e.g. from riding to racing.
- Women are more easily recruited into the sport when groups of women riding together are highly visible. The visibility of women-only groups is often related to online communities and social media promotion, and these are commonly fostered and promoted through the energy and commitment of a single dedicated champion. The promotion and social media visibility of women in mountain biking helps normalise women's participation, present opportunities for involvement, retention and the recruitment of new participants. However, informal groups and online communities can be fragile.



Image courtesy of Barney Marsh

Recommendations for industry

- Industry stakeholders should co-create a marketing and media framework for inclusive mountain biking. Industry marketers, sports writers, brand PR managers and photographers are key stakeholders for cocreating this framework and for its implementation. The framework should be based on rigorous research into the experiences of women mountain bikers. The framework can help support industry marketers and media stakeholders in understanding their role in shaping the inclusivity of the sport.
- User generated content on social media represents an opportunity for women mountain bikers to contribute to the informal, fragmented mediated culture of mountain biking by sharing diverse stories, images and authentic, broader modes of engagement in their own terms. The industry should support women mountain bikers to share their own stories and a more diverse set of images and ideas that can shape the engagement and perceptions of existing and potential participants.
- Brand marketers should be encouraged to develop marketing strategies based on an understanding of how women engage with industry products and services, including an understanding of women's experiences of exclusion from the marketplace. Rigorous research should inform promotions, PR and launch events, actively targeting and involving women. Women should be supported and incentivised to test products and services, and share reviews with other consumers.
- The mountain biking industry should actively support diversity in its workforce. Including more women in media, brand marketing and retail roles will help balance the mediated culture of the sport through a more balanced tone of voice in marketing and promotions, and greater diversity of representation in retail environments and brand sponsorship programmes.
- Authentic transformative marketing principles should be developed and used to foster strong relationships between women mountain bikers and brands, which can help women feel connected to the consumer culture of mountain biking. Understandings of authenticity should be based on rigorous research.
- Women-only products, services and promotional tools can be used to support women's confidence, interest and engagement with the marketplace. However, these tools should be used sensitively, in combination with broader efforts to foster a culture of inclusivity and diversity in mountain biking, to prevent women consumers from feeling annexed from mainstream mountain biking culture.

Recommendations for public sector organisations in off road cycling and outdoor active recreation

- There is an important role for social marketing as well as corporate marketing in transforming the mediated culture of mountain biking. Marketing and media construct powerful stories and images that shape the collective culture of a sport. Non-industry stakeholders such as British Cycling and Forestry England should therefore be supported to recognise their role in balancing the cultural ideals of mountain biking by telling alternative and authentic stories, representing diverse ways of participating and women from diverse backgrounds.
- As part of their social marketing activity, public sector organisations should support women mountain bikers to share their own stories via social media, fostering a more diverse set of images and ideas that can be shared with existing and potential participants. Funding could be made available for training women in writing, reviewing and sharing consumer reviews as well as stories of mountain biking activities, e.g. through social media.
- Online communities play an important role in raising the visibility of women-only mountain biking groups. They are fragile, however, and require dedicated support by multiple volunteers. Funding should be available to train ride champions and volunteers in online promotional and networking activities that can enable online communities to survive, and support the active recruitment and retention of women from diverse backgrounds.
- The visibility of women-only groups of mountain bikers can be improved if they are place-based; i.e. connected with local trail networks. Trail networks should have online communities supporting the recruitment of diverse groups of local women to ride regularly together. The establishment, maintenance and promotion of these networks requires resources that should be made available through funding from public sector organisations, e.g. Forestry England. For example, transport, bike hire, training and coaching, and regular led rides could be offered to increase participation from under-represented groups.
- To ensure the diversity and inclusivity of women-only groups, a strategy of recruiting champions and volunteers from diverse background should be incorporated into their development. Funding should be made available to support the recruitment, training and involvement of women in leading and promoting local, women-only mountain bike groups.

Implications for policy

- Opportunities for women to ride regularly together should be supported through dedicated funding, distributed through organisations such as Sport England and British Cycling. Grant funding should be available to public sector organisations, industry bodies and individual enterprises to support and subsidise women-only mountain biking groups, events and festivals. Grant funding should specifically ensure women from under-represented groups such as lower socio-economic areas are supported to take part.
- Policymakers should fund training for organisations seeking to include women and under-represented groups in mountain biking events, groups and festivals. Training might include outreach, social marketing, community cohesion and community sports development.
- Policymakers should support public sector efforts to raise the visibility of women in mountain biking, and under-represented groups of women in mountain biking. This can be done by providing funding for the development of online and offline groups of women to ride together, supported by a promotional infrastructure that raises the visibility of women in mountain biking.

Methodology

The evidence presented in this report has been drawn from research exploring women's engagement with mountain biking; from the perspectives of women who currently participate and women who do not but have a shared understanding of mountain biking 'culture'.

The methodology underpinning the findings included 19 ethnographic (participant observation) mountain bike rides and interviews with women from Scotland (7), England (6) and Wales (6) by the lead researcher, a woman who mountain bikes.

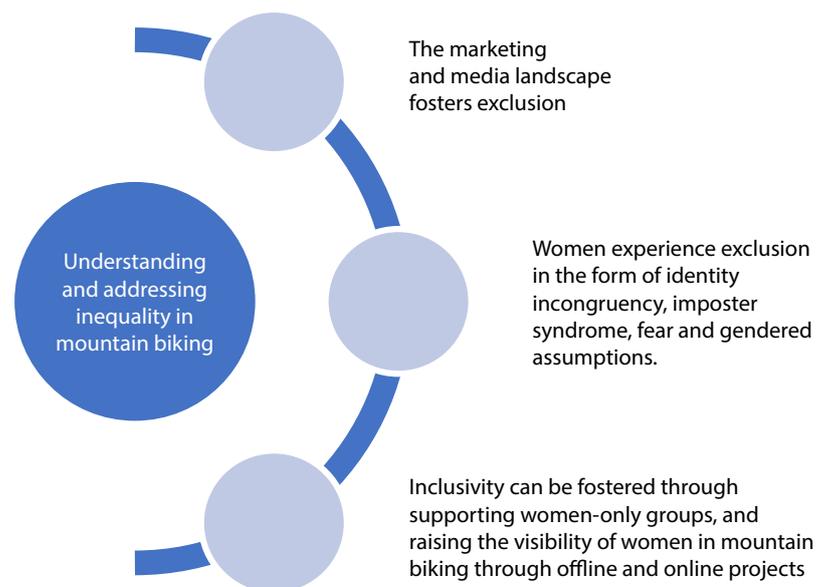
Focus groups were also held with women and teenage girls who do not mountain bike but do cycle.

The project also includes a wide-reaching stakeholder group, including public sector organisations (e.g. British Cycling, Forestry England, and industry marketers from large and smaller mountain bike brands, e.g. Trek, Cotic, Specialized and Giant).

Contact the researchers

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Overview of research findings



Acknowledgements

This project is funded by BA Leverhulme Small Grants.



**BA/Leverhulme Small
Research Grants**