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What's in a Name? An Assessment of Degradation of Women in the Name of Climbing Routes

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
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Abstract

Gendered behavior is reinforced at an early age. In media, women are usually portrayed following gender stereotypical behaviors and are often sexualized, meaning that their worth is often determined by their body shape and clothing type and as such women are often wearing revealing clothing, following gender stereotypical behaviors, and portraying unrealistic body proportions (e.g., *Gentlemen's Quarterly Magazine*; Collins, 2011). The representation of women in climbing media is similar to that of the general media. The present study focused on route names within the climbing community and presents a qualitative analysis on the sexism and other derogatory (i.e., overtly sexual) themes present within the names. We found that while a large number of routes had neutral names, approximately 6.6% included derogatory names toward multiple identities. Implications of derogatory names and directions for future research are discussed.

What's in a Name? An Assessment of Degradation of Women in the Name of Climbing Routes

Gendered behavior is reinforced at an early age. In media, women are usually portrayed following gender stereotypical behaviors and are often sexualized, meaning that their worth is often determined by their body shape and clothing type and as such women are often wearing revealing clothing, following gender stereotypical behaviors, and portraying unrealistic body proportions (e.g., *Gentlemen's Quarterly Magazine*; Collins, 2011). The representation of women in climbing media is not too far from the general media. In a study conducted by Warren et al. (2019), experts in the outdoor recreation field said that part of the hidden curriculum in the outdoor industry were gendered role messages (e.g., women cook, support, do group activities and men do technical skills), consistent with gender stereotypes that are seen in Western culture (e.g., women gestate and nurture children, men are fit for the workplace) (Eagly, 2011). These prescribed behaviors have a negative impact on women's ability to feel welcomed in the climbing community, and they also impact women's opportunities to find a job in the outdoor recreation field (Loeffler, 1996). The present study focuses on how routes are named within the climbing community and presents a qualitative analysis on the sexism present within the names. I predict that sexism will be present in the rock route climbing names in the southeast United States.

Gendered Behaviors, Stereotypes, and Bias

There is a socially reinforced distinction in what is expected from women and men in terms of their attitudes and behaviors. Although people of any gender can experience sexism (e.g., non-binary/ gender non-conforming), for the purposes of this study, we are focusing on the gender binary (men/women). The Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development suggests that children are encouraged to follow gender appropriate behaviors and are discouraged from

behaviors that are not in accordance with their gender identities (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Social influences, such as child rearing, encourage men to think independently and women to think relationally (Cross & Madson, 1997). For instance, in a longitudinal study conducted by Adams et al., (1995), findings suggest that parents use emotion language with their preschool daughters more frequently than their sons. These differences in gender socialization in childhood can have repercussions in the future lives of women with regard to their preference for gender roles. For example, in a study done by Coyne et al., (2016) boys and girls who were exposed to highly stereotypical media (e.g., Disney princesses) were more likely to endorse female gender stereotypical behaviors. The authors concluded that there is nothing wrong with expressing gendered behavior, but issues may arise when girls choose to skip activities that will enhance their development of gender non-stereotypical behaviors (e.g., getting dirty).

In Western societies, men and women follow different stereotypical gender behaviors and these gender stereotypes arise from these traditionally rooted beliefs that men and women should behave in accordance to their biological sex (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Thus, gender roles for men and women are often defined as descriptive (what men and women do), but also prescriptive (what men and women *should* do), (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, on average, men are faster, larger, and have more upper body strength in relation to women (Eagly & Wood, 2011). Women gestate and nurture children. Historically, these differences led to the division of labor in society, such that men were considered more fit for the workplace and women were considered a better fit for household labor (Eagly & Wood, 2011).

These gender-normative descriptions of behavior help in making decisions, supply norms, and validate beliefs (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004), all while influencing stereotypes.

Stereotypes are generalizations about a group that are applied directly to a member of that group (Heilman, 2012). One of the key distinctions of stereotypes is they can have negative implications when they are generalized to an entire group of people. Women are particularly affected by gender stereotypes and gender-normative behavior because the behavior that is expected puts them on a lower status in different social spheres.

These negative attitudes toward women are also represented behaviorally through gender bias. Gender bias is defined as the exhibition of discriminatory behaviors, which is characterized by unfair treatment (Sadker & Zittleman, 2005). Usually, these behaviors are subtle and hard to detect, and they affect women and men differently (Sadker & Zittleman, 2005). For instance, when women are in elite leadership positions, they are not considered trustworthy by their men peers, and their position in these types of roles may elicit disapproval (Eagly, 2005). To see if there was a double standard in the workplace, Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick (2004) asked participants to give their impressions of management consultants. The authors considered two variables: biological sex of the professional (male, female) and whether the professional had a child. They found that women were perceived as less competent but warmer if they were mothers, whereas when professional men became fathers, they maintained their perceived competence and also gained warmth (Cuddy, Fiske & Glick 2004). More striking is perhaps the finding that participants perceived mothers as less worthy of being hired, promoted, and trained when compared to professional women that did not have a child (Cuddy & Fiske, 2004). There is a double standard based on gender stereotypes in the workforce and this phenomenon can be explained by the descriptive norms that are assigned to men and women.

In line with gender stereotypes, women are expected to be communal in nature, that is caring, nurturing, friendly, and selfless. Men on the other hand, are expected to be agentic, which

is defined by characteristics such as being more aggressive, assertive, dominant, and competitive (Eagly & Wood, 2011). Communal behavior is considered a gender stereotype that is given to women when they display traits that define them as caring and emotional. On the other hand, displayed agentic behavior is considered a gender stereotype that is given to men when they display traits that portray them as active and decisive (Abele & Diener, 2003). These prescribed traits are disadvantageous to women and men alike. Men are not allowed to reveal their emotions because they may be seen as incompetent, whereas when women display agentic characteristics such as being assertive, dominant, and competitive to get a leadership position at a company, they are perceived as less warm. In fact, when women display these behaviors, they are considered antisocial which diminishes their chances of being hired (Tyler & McCullough, 2009). Therefore, gender stereotypes, and whether a person fits these stereotypes, can greatly impact the way people experience their daily lives and the opportunities that are available to them (such as being successful in one's career).

Language and Society

Heller (2003) suggests that language is also a vehicle to understanding society and culture. Language reflects gender stereotypical behaviors that occur in everyday spaces (St. Pierre, 1999). During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, English grammar established that naming men before women followed a natural order. Men were considered worthier than women (Bodine, 1975), which is evident in famous works of literature where men are named first in the title (e.g., Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*). The preference for referencing men before women in language is still relevant. For instance, Martyna (1980), proposed that the use of the word "he" has been the norm. The "He/Man" approach is denoted as the use of male terms to refer to men specifically and human beings in

general. For example, the word *freshman* is commonly used to refer to first-year students at a university.

Additionally, norm theory proposes that individuals who are considered default (e.g., men) do not need explanations for their actions. However, groups that are not commonly imagined need an explanation for their behaviors (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). For example, in sports such as climbing there is a distinction between the first ascent (the first successful completion of a climbing route) based solely on gender. If a man does a first ascent, then it is just that, a first ascent. However, if a woman does a first ascent of a route, then it is considered a *female* first ascent (FFA). In this example, it is clear that males are considered the norm such that there needs to be a distinction if a woman makes a first ascent.

Furthermore, the language used to describe men usually points out their skills over women. For example, the English language uses words such as assertive, aggressive, forceful, independent and decisive (Tyler & McCullough, 2009) to describe men. In turn, words that point to women's pro-social behavior such as, kind, selfless, sympathetic, helpful, and thoughtful of other's well-being are used (Tyler & McCullough, 2009). Thus, the language we use affects how we view other individuals.

Related to gender roles and gender prescriptive behavior, men are also congratulated for having numerous sexual partners, whereas women are shamed if they have multiple sexual partners (Milhausen & Herold, 1999). Related to the language used to describe them, a content analysis by Lei (2006) found that North American English has 220 words for sexually promiscuous women, but only 20 words for sexually promiscuous men. Overall, women are usually the targets of slang words and men use them the most (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001). As

noted by the examples above, there is an asymmetry in the way words are used to describe men and women in the English language.

The gender binary is deeply rooted in our society although it is currently more subtly than overtly displayed (Swim et al., 1995). Importantly, gender bias is present in the activities in which women and men partake, including leisure activities. In the outdoor recreation field, the typical professional is a white male (Vink, 2015). Based on the literature describing stereotypical man attributes (Eagly & Wood, 2011), we also connect outdoor activities with requiring masculine skills such as, strength, determination, and rivalry. Western societies do not expect women to have these skills; women are expected to be nice, sincere, compliant, and homemakers rather than strong, determined, and athletic (Vink, 2015).

The Outdoor Community

Within the outdoor community, men are often perceived more positively. For instance, in one study, McNeil, Harris and Fondren (2012) coded for the representation of women in advertisements that were used in popular outdoor magazines such as *Outside* and *Backpacker*. They found three major themes: 1) Women display low involvement with outdoor activities (e.g., women were seen posing with gear or clothes instead of actively engaging with the outdoor environment, women were engaged in less demanding physical activities when compared to men, and women were depicted as having less skill over men in outdoor activities. In contrast, in some advertisements, men were depicted as solo adventurers while women were shown in group tours usually being guided by men); 2) Women's involvement with these activities was a way to get away from home or a way to replicate the home in the wilderness (e.g., advertisements for tourism highlighted vacations in the wilderness as a way to get away from to-do lists and other household labor, women were encouraged to buy certain cooking artifacts to replicate meals

conveniently just like at home, and women were encouraged to fulfil their role of being a good mother by investing time in taking their children on outdoor trips); and, 3) Women who were deeply involved with outdoor recreation were special cases and needed to act more feminine (e.g., when women appeared in these advertisements, they were generally wearing feminine colors such as pink or purple, their hair was usually long, or if covered, they were wearing colorful beanies, and they were seen wearing make-up).

The way that women are portrayed in popular outdoor magazines has implications for their quality of life. If women do not see themselves as a part of the outdoor community then they are less likely to gain the physical and mental benefits of being outdoors and they are less likely to have jobs in the outdoor industry (Vink, 2015). In a study by Loeffler (1996) investigating the leadership positions held by women in outdoor programs, they found that the executive staff category had a ratio of 38% women to 62% men—a statistically significant difference. Overall, women are underrepresented in leadership positions in the outdoor field.

Climbing

Climbing can be completed in artificial settings (e.g. climbing gyms) or in natural rock formations and there are a couple of sub disciplines within climbing. Climbing is defined as going up a vertical or angled surface, and it can be done on cliffs, or large boulders (Woollings, McKay & Emery, 2015). When people choose to go up a cliff, they are sport climbing. Usually the routes on these cliffs are about 30 meters high. The climber is attached to a rope and makes their way up connecting the rope to quickdraws, which are attached to permanent bolts that are drilled on the surface of the rock. The rope can also be attached to the top of the cliff allowing the climber to take several safe falls while climbing. This is known as top roping (Woollings, McKay & Emery, 2015). Another popular sub discipline is bouldering, which consists of

climbing large boulders. When climbing boulders, the climber uses padded mats to protect the fall. Bouldering routes are considered to be short and in close proximity to the ground (Woollings, McKay & Emery, 2015).

One area where the lack of female representation is prevalent is within the climbing community and the tradition of naming climbing routes. Each climbing route receives a name and a difficulty level after it has been climbed for the first time. Usually, the person who finishes the route first gets to name it. Later, the route is climbed by others and they agree on the difficulty level proposed by the individual who climbed it first. After everyone agrees, the names of routes are written down and put into a climbing guide. One blog entry of *Rock and Ice* (2014) magazine stated, "Naming climbs is rich with tradition, and every first ascensionist aspires to capture the perfect name for their creations." However, in researching names of various routes, there appears to be a pattern of misogyny.

To the author's knowledge, only two other studies have looked at the degradation of women in the names of climbing routes. The first study was conducted by Loeffler (1996), proposing that fraternal bonding is an explanation for sexual harassment. According to the author, men bond through humorous jokes that can be sexist or racist. An example of this fraternal bonding can be seen in published rock climbing guides (Loeffler, 1996). The author coded four guidebooks published in the late 1980's and looked for names referring to female anatomy, names that degrade women, names about sexual violence, names referring to male anatomy, names that degrade gay people, and names about sex. Loeffler (1996) revealed that the rock climbing route names contained a long list of degrading names that reinforced gender bias and sexual harassment in the outdoor community.

The second study is also qualitative in nature. Wigglesworth (2019) conducted 17 individual, semi-structured interviews and four focus groups of women aged 19-31 to explore women's reactions to sexualized route names. Some of the themes that emerged included: frustration, helplessness, exclusion, internalized sexism, pushback, and intersections. In one of the responses, a woman felt that given her position she would not feel entitled to sexualize a cliff. In her eyes, this conquering of a cliff was equal to the conquering of females. She said, "Whose consent do you have to name this in this way and does conquering require consent?" (Wigglesworth, 2019).

The Present Study

The present study expands upon Loeffler's (1996) study by categorizing the names of climbing routes in popular destinations located in the South Eastern portion of the United States. I contribute to the existing body of literature by looking at bouldering guidebooks that were published from the 90's to present day. Overall, the aim of this study is to contribute to the body of literature in gender studies and outdoor leisure. In recent years, the climbing community has seen the emergence of groups dedicated to ensuring that women and people of color feel welcomed in the climbing community (e.g., Brothers of Climbing, Flash Foxy, Brown Girls Climb). Yearly, these groups host large events that promote diversity and inclusion (e.g., Color the Crag and the Women's Climbing Festival). The present study will contribute to the ongoing movement that is striving to make climbing a more inclusive sport by classifying names of climbing routes that may serve as a barrier to participation for underrepresented communities.

Method

Materials

A total of five guidebooks representing the southeastern United States were coded. These guidebooks were: *Rocktown: A comprehensive bouldering guide* (Kearney & Roper, 2012); *Stone Fort Bouldering* (Wellman, 2015); *Chattbloc: A guidebook to Chattanooga Bouldering* (Gentry, Jenkins & Drumm, 2017); *Horse Pens 40* (Henry, 2016); and *Grayson Highlands Bouldering* (Parlier, 2013).

Procedure

The first method of code development came from directed coding analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) where existing categories were gathered from previous literature (Loefler, 1996) and included: referring to female anatomy, names that degrade women, names about sexual violence, names referring to male anatomy, names that degrade gay people, and names about sex. As the raters coded, they realized additional themes were necessary to best capture the types of route names. Therefore, the raters also utilized conventional content analysis to allow categories and new themes to emerge from the existing data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A total of four categories were added to the codebook (racist, glorifies men, euphemism, and neutral). See Table 1.1 for the full list of themes and definitions.

Two independent raters recorded and coded the names of the climbing routes in each of the five guidebooks. When the raters were coding, they went over every single name and assigned them to one or multiple categories. When the raters questioned the meaning of the name of the route (e.g., euphemism), they referred to the climbing description. If not enough information was provided to determine whether the name was offensive, the raters assigned that route to the “out of context” category. Raters initially coded one guidebook separately prior to comparing codes to ensure they had an interrater reliability of 0.95 and made adjustments as

needed on coding definitions. The raters then independently coded the next four guidebooks and reconvened to discuss interrater agreement. Final interrater agreement was .96.

Results

A total of 2,994 names of routes were analyzed and coded. A total of 93.33% of routes were coded as neutral. For the total number of routes coded as non-neutral ($N = 196$), the routes were categorized as follows: 40.36% were categorized as Degrades Women, 23.41% Refers to Female Anatomy, 21.46% were categorized as out of context, 19.36 % were categorized as Euphemism, 14.86% were categorized as Refers to Male Anatomy, 14.25% were categorized as Names About Sex, 9.15% were categorized as Racist, 5.1% were categorized as Sexual Violence, 5.1% were categorized as other, 2.55% were categorized as Glorifies men, 0.45 % Degrades Gay People. It is important to note that the categories were not exclusive. For example, a route could degrade women and be racist at the same time. A total of 115 routes had multiple codes (3.91 %). Table 1.1 provides full percentages and examples of each of the coded route names.

Discussion

The present study shows that the naming tradition of climbing routes is consistent with the sexualization of women in society (Collins, 2011). As such, names that degrade women may discourage young girls and women from participating in outdoor activities due to the degrading nature of the route names and potential feelings of exclusion. This lack of inclusion hinders their ability to grow with an array of enriching life experiences that contribute to healthy development (Coyne et al., 2016). We also found that names reinforced gender bias and were consistent with the idea that men are agentic, and that women are communal (Eagly & Wood, 2011). For instance, the name Isle of Beautiful Women is used to describe women as having value for their physical beauty. On the other hand the name Dragon Slayer, is used to describe men as powerful,

forceful and decisive (Eagly & Wood, 2011).

We also found negative stereotypes against other identity groups within route names. For instance, in the guidebooks that were coded, we found that names were used to perpetuate stereotypes on short people (e.g., Dwarf Toss), people of color (e.g., Jungle Fever), women, (e.g., Old Maid), and gay people (e.g., Bumboy). When the data are looked at from a quantitative perspective, it may be easy to be dismissive about the subject matter because, compared to the number of neutral route names, these numbers appear to be small. However, it is important to remember that gender bias and modern sexism are discriminatory behaviors that are subtle and hard to detect (Sadker & Zittleman, 2005).

Another interesting point is that a lot of the names that were referring to men were neutral or glorified men (e.g., Jimmy Hendrick's Face, Big Boss Man). On the other hand, names that were referring to women were offensive (e.g., Jenny Crank Diet, Farrah's Fawcett). Additionally, consistent with Braun and Kitzinger (2001) we see that in the rock climbing route naming tradition women are the targets of slang words and men use them the most. Furthermore, Milhausen and Herold (1999) found that men are congratulated for having various sexual partners. On the other hand, women are shamed if they adhere to this type of behavior; they were sexualized, degraded, and objects of comedy in the names of the climbing routes (e.g., Cake Fart, Scandalous Bitches, Isle of Ugly Women). In our findings, we see this reflected in names like Touchin' Panties and Lot Lizard (Prostitutes that frequent truck stops). Consistent with McNiel, Harris and Fondren (2012), men were overall portrayed more positively in the guidebooks that we coded for. An explanation offered by Loeffler (1996), is that men are forming fraternal bonds through humorous jokes. This type of brotherhood is in turn perpetuating stereotypes of racism,

gender bias and excluding women from being in the outdoor recreation field on recreational levels and professional spheres (Vink, 2015).

In recent years, the climbing community has seen various initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion (e.g., walls are meant for climbing, The North Face; R.E.I; Patagonia). However, when derogatory names such as those included in the study are endorsed in the rock climbing community, a barrier is being put up for people whom are the subject of these degrading names. A study done by Grahn and Stigsdotter (2003) found that individuals who spent more time outdoors reported lower levels of stress and burnout. Additionally, individuals who engage in outdoor activities in green, blue and white spaces self-reported a greater sense of well-being (Korpela, 2014). It is important that accessibility and inclusion are a part of the climbing community because participants receive various health and emotional benefits when they are engaging in outdoor activities.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study was limited in that we did not use a random sample when choosing the guidebooks that we analyzed. These came from the southeastern United States this may lead to a lack of external validity. Another limitation is that we only coded for five guidebooks which is not representative of the actual amount of bouldering guidebooks that exist in the United States. In future studies, we recommend a random selection of bouldering guidebooks representing the entire United States.

It would also be beneficial to code for the names of sport climbing routes to see if they have the same oppressive nature, or if that changes across discipline. Additional surveys or interviews conducted similar to Wigglesworth (2019) would provide a deeper insight about how women and people of color react to these names. Another interesting analysis would be running a

chi-square between category and difficulty to see if offensive names correlate with how difficult a route is rated. Investigating if the derogatory-named routes are considered significantly easier or harder than the neutral route names, or in comparison to the names glorifying men, would also signal more information about what characteristics are considered important for climbing.

Conclusion

The present study is an analysis of sexist and derogatory names found in climbing routes in the southeastern United States. The authors found that since Loeffler's (1996) study not a lot has changed. These names continue to be used as a way of fraternal bonding and are reinforcing gender bias. Additionally, these names can be offensive to other pockets of society such as people of color and people in rural areas. While nominally there does not seem to be a large percentage of derogatory route names, the fact that there are derogatory names may be a barrier for others to take advantage and enjoy the emotional and physical benefits of outdoor recreation.

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Table 1.1

Themes, Operational Definitions and Examples

Category	Definition	Percentages out of Total Routes	Percentages Excluding Neutral Routes	Examples
Degrades Women	Hostility and violence toward women. Names that lower the dignity of women.	2.69	40.36	Country Redneck Bitch, These Feel Like your Sister's, Stupid Blonde Girl, Aunt Fanny's Amazing Ass Crack.
Sexual Violence	Any route name that refer to a sexual act that is attempted by a perpetrator in which the victim is unable to consent. These can be facilitated through forced or alcohol/ drug use, nonphysical pressure, intentional sexual touching, or through non-contact acts. SV can also be achieved when a perpetrator forces a victim to be sexually involved with members of a third party (Basile et al., 2014).	0.34	5.1	Slapped Full of Semen, Blue Balls, Donkey Punch, Donkey Show.
Refers to Male Anatomy	Names which refer to male genitalia or other sexualized body parts.	0.99	14.86	Mr. Softy, Mr. Stiffy, Love Stick.
Refers to Female Anatomy	Names which refer to female genitalia or other sexualized body parts (e.g.- breasts and buttocks).	1.56	23.41	Clarien's Cherry, Big Titty Slopers, Beef Curtain, Vagina.
Degrades Gay People	Offensive to members of the LGBTTTQQAAP community.	0.03	0.45	Bumbooy.

Names About Sex	Referring to sexual behaviors.	0.95	14.25	Touchin' Panties, Pearl Necklace, Dirty Sanchez.
Racist	Offensive and perpetuate the unfair treatment of people based on their skin color or other physical characteristics (Nuru-Jeter et al., 2009).	0.61	9.15	Skinheads, Jim Crow, Jungle Fever, Lynch Mob.
Glorifies Men	Placed men on a higher status or gave astonishing qualities to men.	0.17	2.55	Big Man on Campus, Big Boss Man, The Brotherhood.
Euphemism	A play on words- routes which had offensive names, but also referred to a physical aspect of the rock's surface.	1.29	19.36	Golden Shower, Trail of Tiers, Juggalicious.
Other	Offensive to certain cultural pockets or identities that did not fit into the established categories.	0.34	5.1	Dwarf Toss, Fat Boy Tested, Fat Woman.
Out of Context	Appeared to be offensive but not enough context was given to adhere to a category.	1.43	21.46	Stupid Black, Don't Tell my Daddy, Hebrew Hoedown.
Neutral	Does not fall under any of the given categories.	93.33	N/A	

Note: Total *N* for all routes is 2994. Total *N* for non-neutral routes is 197. Note that numbers add up to more than 100% due to some route names falling under multiple categories.