

## **Examining Mountaineering as an Outdoor Leisure Activity: A Qualitative Study\***

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### **Abstract**

*Mountaineering, which has become very popular recently, is an outdoor leisure activity that includes risk, difficulties, and struggle as well as a pleasant time. It can be a tough leisure activity as mountains can be quite dangerous due to avalanches, rock falls, or extremely low temperatures. Given these challenges, this study examined why people participate in mountaineering activities. Data were collected by interviewing 12 regular mountaineers and analyzed using the MAXQDA 2020 qualitative data analysis program to create category and coding trees. The findings show that mountaineers participate in mountaineering activities for reasons such as getting away from their daily lives, meeting new people, socializing, gaining, and sharing experiences, being in nature, freedom, and escape. Participants said that mountaineering also positively affects effect on people's their psychological well-being. These findings make important contribution to the leisure, outdoor leisure activities, and mountaineering literature.*

**Keywords:** *Mountaineering, mountaineers, leisure activity, well-being*

## 1. Introduction

Mountaineering involves climbing rocky, icy, or snowy mountain slopes to reach a summit (Hartemann & Hauptman, 2005). While some mountains can be accessed by hiking, climbers often follow routes that require specialist equipment, such as crampons, ropes, and ice axes (Jackman et al., 2020). Mountaineering not only involves climbing or hiking to the top of a mountain; it also includes many other activities, such as camping, coping with difficulties, and adapting to harsh weather conditions. Mountaineers who climb high peaks can find themselves in some of the world's most dangerous environments, such as crevasses, avalanches, rock and ice falls, oxygen depletion, low temperatures, and extreme weather conditions (Allen-Collinson et al., 2019; Jackman et al., 2020). Yet, although mountaineering is risky and can be frightening, it also contributes to the participants' well-being (Crockett et al., 2020; Faullant et al., 2011).

People who participate in mountaineering activities are described synonymously as mountain climbers, alpinists, or mountaineers (Crust, 2020). The words 'mountaineers' and 'mountaineering' were used consistently in this paper. Apollo (2017) defines mountaineering as hiking, trekking, and climbing activities in high mountains while Beedie and Hudson (2003) associate it with difficulty, high risk, self-confidence, independence, and remote locations. Definitions of mountains also vary. Some researchers suggest they are mountains taller than 8,000 meters (Allen-Collinson et al., 2019) whereas others suggest 5,000 meters and above (Moore et al., 2001). Such places are among the most dangerous for the human body. Diseases such as headaches, fatigue, nausea, hypothermia, acute mountain sickness, and pulmonary edema cause severe difficulties during mountaineering activities (Allen-Collinson et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2001).

While mountaineering remains a dangerous and risky leisure activity (Chen et al., 2017), it was more so in the past due to inadequate equipment and technology (Wickens et al., 2015). An experienced mountaineer can minimize the danger by predicting risks from information gathered from previous activities and acquired personal knowledge and skills. Mountaineering experience gives a sense of agency and control, which provides an implicit safety framework for estimating risk (Groves & Varley, 2020). According to Crust (2020), mountaineers have higher extroversion and conscientiousness, and lower neuroticism than individuals who do low-risk activities. It is also very important for mountaineers to have weather-reading skills for survival because weather conditions are one of the most important risk factors in high-altitude mountaineering (Allen-Collinson et al., 2019). Mountaineering performance depends on various social, economic, and psychological factors, as well as the weather conditions and the load that the mountaineer must carry (Apollo, 2017).

People can participate in mountaineering activities for various reasons, which can differ between experienced and inexperienced individuals (Ewert, 1985). Inexperienced individuals participate to know themselves, escape, and socialize whereas experienced mountaineers participate for catharsis, personal challenge, decision making, and locus of control (Ewert, 1985). Apart from the climbers themselves, Apollo (2017) emphasizes that the features, attractiveness, and ease of access to the climbed mountain are important factors. According to Evert (1994), mountaineering is practiced to help others, establish new friendships, improve climbing skills, gain self-control, get to know oneself, and get away from normal life. Similarly, Jackman et al. (2020) reported that mountaineers are motivated by testing their own skills, integrating with other mountaineers, enjoying the natural environment, sharing the excitement of the activity, and experiencing the risk itself. Finally, Ekici et al. (2011) found that people are attracted to mountaineering activities are for entertainment, psychological well-being, a desire to be happy, and for socialization.

Apart from the mountaineers themselves, mountaineering can benefit the regions where such activities are carried out. For example, increasing mountaineering activities in rural areas helps their development (Sun & Watanabe, 2021) and can replace declining agricultural activity (Apollo & Andreychouk, 2020). Thus, local governments in developing countries should support and encourage mountaineering

activities. In short, mountaineering is an important leisure activity for both individuals and rural areas (Apollo & Rettinger, 2019).

The mountaineering literature focuses on the risks and challenges encountered at high altitudes (Allen-Collinson et al., 2019; Hartemann & Hauptman, 2005; Jackman et al., 2020) whereas there are few studies on why mountaineers do these activities and why they endure the difficulties of mountaineering (Apollo, 2017; Ewert, 1985; Ewert, 1994; Jackman et al., 2020). Moreover, these findings do not fully reveal the reasons why people participate in mountaineering activities. Accordingly, the present study used a qualitative research design to try to uncover these deeper reasons. While this study focuses on mountaineering, its findings are also relevant to other leisure activities.

## 2. Methodology

This exploratory study used qualitative research methods. Firstly, the literature was examined to develop the following research questions (Allen-Collinson et al., 2019; Apollo, 2017; Ewert, 1985; Ewert, 1994; Hartemann & Hauptman, 2005; Jackman et al., 2020):

1. How does an individual develop a passion for mountaineering?
2. What do individuals participate in mountaineering activities?

Secondly, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed to examine the feelings and thoughts of active participants in mountaineering activities. The first participant was identified through purposeful sampling (Hemmington, 1999) while subsequent participants were identified by snowball sampling. Drawing on the reliability model of (Guba, 1981), several techniques were used to ensure validity and reliability. For snowball sampling, each participant was asked to provide contact information for two different people. To ensure consent, the mountaineer interviewed first determined that their friends were willing to participate in the study before the researcher communicated with them. During the interviews, it was ensured that the participants answers were correct (Shenton, 2004).

The interviews lasted 15-20 minutes. All participants live in Turkey, so the interviews were conducted in Turkish, and the answers were translated into English with assistance from experts in English-Turkish translations. Besides, data were collected from 12 people actively engaged in mountaineering between October 15, 2019 and December 10, 2019. The interviews were stopped when the responses started to be repeated, indicating that the saturation point had been reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym. The demographic information of the participants is shown in Table 1. Five were women and seven were men while the age range was 23-50 years (average 34). Most had participated in mountaineering activities for five years or more, and the vast majority had participated in the last two months. The participants represented a wide range of occupations.

**Table 1.** Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Mountaineering experience (years)	Time since last mountaineering activity	Interview length (minutes)
P1	Male	33	Teacher	7	1 month ago	16
P2	Male	41	Teacher	20	6 months ago	19
P3	Female	35	Designer	4	2 week ago	19
P4	Male	32	Trainer	16	1 week ago	15
P5	Female	25	Trainer	6	1 week ago	18
P6	Female	48	Hospital Manager	12	2 months ago	15
P7	Male	50	Official	5	1 week ago	20
P8	Male	32	Engineer	7	6 months ago	20
P9	Male	26	Technician	5	1 month ago	15
P10	Male	30	Teacher	13	1 month ago	15
P11	Female	23	Student	4	1 month ago	16
P12	Female	34	Social worker	4	2 months ago	15

Qualitative content analysis of the collected data was performed using the MAXQDA 20 qualitative data analysis program. All interviews were converted into text format. Table 2 shows an example of the content analysis process.

**Table 2.** The Example of Content Analysis Process

Category	Sub-Category	Quotation
Origin of the passion	Effect of mountaineering groups	I had a passion for mountaineering before, but thanks to the mountaineering group at the university, I started doing it regularly (P5, aged 25, Female, 6 years' experience)
Reason for participating in mountaineering	Getting away from city life	I go to the mountains to rid myself of the burden and pollution of city life and to purify myself (P10, aged 30, Male, 13 years' experience).

Content analysis was first made by the author before an expert academic was asked to assist by analyzing four interviews. Categories and sub-categories were determined by combining the two content analyses. It is recommended to continue content analysis until 90% agreement is achieved between the coders (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, similar categories and sub-categories were included in the study based on open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To facilitate in understanding this analysis, the participants' answers are presented in the findings section below.

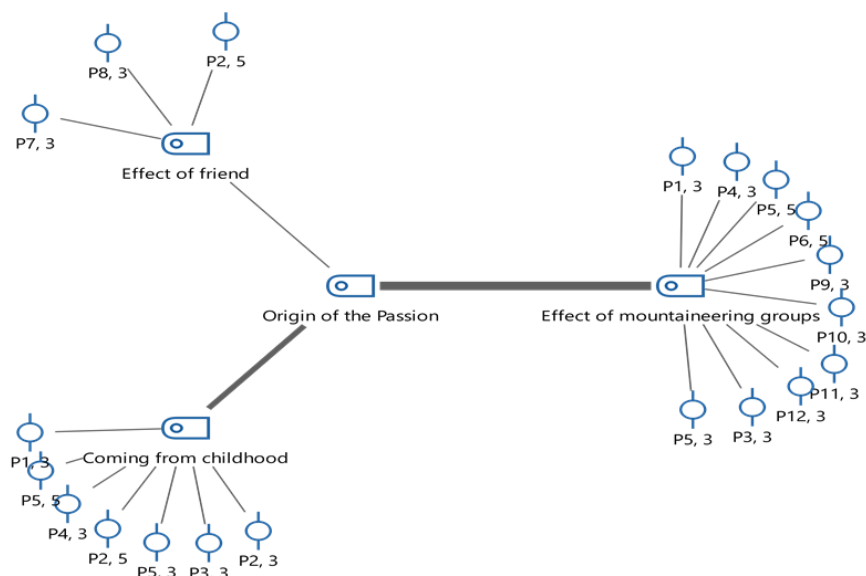
### 3. Results

The qualitative content analysis revealed two categories and 18 sub-categories. The first category emerging in the study is the origin of the passion (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Sub-categories of The Origin of The Passion

Category	Sub-Categories	N	%
Origin of the passion	Effect of mountaineering groups	10	50.00
	Coming from childhood	7	35.00
	Effect of friends	3	15.00
	<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Three factors were identified regarding the origin of the participants' passion for mountaineering. The biggest influence was mountaineering groups while another important factor was connection with nature since childhood. The third factor was peer influence.



**Figure 1.** Code-sub-code Model for Origins of The Passion

Figure 1 shows the code-sub-code model of the distribution of the sub-categories for the origins of the passion for mountaineering. The thickness of the lines indicates the frequency of each subcategory in the content analysis. For this reason, it was revealed that mountaineering groups were the most effective in the origin of the mountaineering passion of the participants.

Some examples of the effect of mountaineering groups are as follows:

*After I started my profession, I came across a few groups related to mountaineering. Meeting with groups enabled me to continue this activity further. (P1, aged 33, Male, 7 years' experience)*

*I lived in the city for a very long time. I did not want to stay away from natural areas. Later, I attended one of the mountaineering club activities and participated in more mountaineering activities with it. (P3, aged 35, Female, 4 years' experience)*

*When I started college, I saw the mountaineering community. It caught my attention, I signed up, and then we started to summit a mountain. (P11, aged 23, Female, 4 years' experience)*

According to Figure 1, the second most frequently mentioned issue, which is effective in the origin of the passion of the participants, is the initiation of passion in childhood. Some examples of starting from childhood are as follows.

*I loved nature since I was little. We started to go to the forested areas around us with our friend groups from the age of 10. (P1, aged 33, Male, 7 years experienced)*

*As a child, I always had an interest in nature. (P4, aged 32, Male, 16 years experienced)*

*It started in my childhood. I was always going to the mountains with my father. I have been doing nature walks since my childhood. (P5, aged 25, Female, 6 years experienced)*

According to Figure 1, the last issue that is effective in the origin of the passion of the participants is the friend effect of passion. Some examples of the effect of friends are as follows:

*I went to mountaineering training on the recommendation of a friend. I continued after the training. (P2, aged 41, Male, 20 years' experience)*

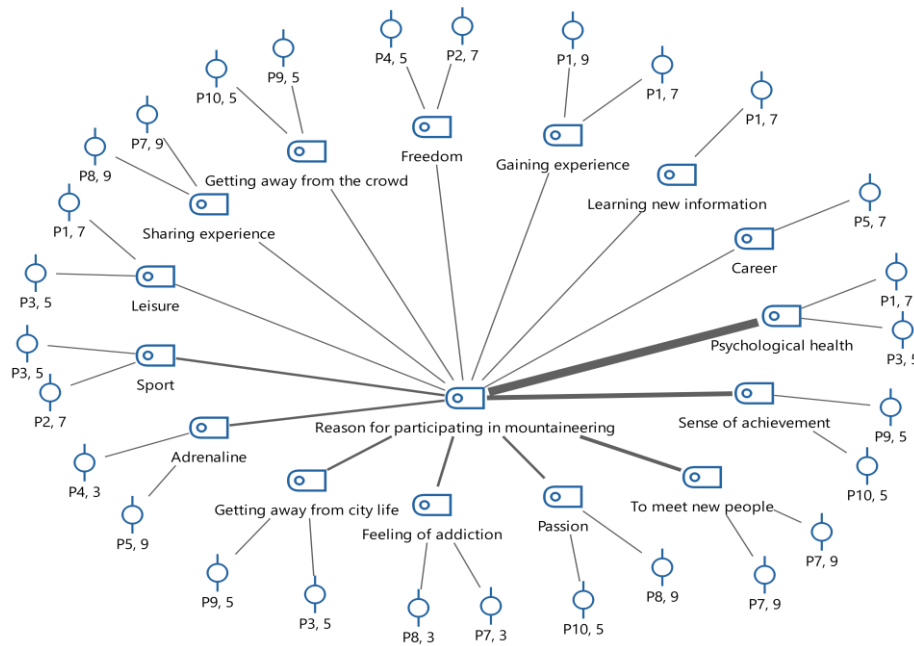
*First, it started with a simple hike on the recommendation of friends. After that, mountaineering continued to develop for me. (P7, aged 50, Male, 5 years' experience)*

The second category that emerged in the study is the reasons for participating in mountaineering activities (Table 4). The most frequently coded sub-category was psychological health, followed by a sense of achievement, meeting new people, and passion.

**Table 4.** Sub-categories of The Reason for Participating in Mountaineering

Category	Sub-Categories	N	%
Reason for participating in mountaineering	Psychological health	13	21.67
	Sense of achievement	7	11.67
	To meet new people	6	10.00
	Passion	5	8.33
	Feeling of addiction	4	6.67
	Getting away from city life	4	6.67
	Sport	4	6.67
	Adrenaline	4	6.67
	Leisure	3	5.00
	Getting away from the crowd	2	3.33
	Gaining experience	2	3.33
	Sharing experience	2	3.33
	Freedom	2	3.33
	Learning new information	1	1.67
	Career	1	1.67
<b>Total</b>		<b>60</b>	<b>100.00</b>

A sense of achievement, meeting new people, and passion are other important factors for people to participate in mountaineering activities. Other reasons for participating in mountaineering activities included getting away from city life, sports, adrenaline, and leisure.



**Figure 2.** Code-sub-code Model for The Reason for Participating in Mountaineering

Figure 2 shows the code-sub-code model of the distribution of the sub-categories for the reason for participating in mountaineering activities. Some examples of the psychological health benefits are as follows:

*I am happy in the mountain. I feel more vigorous. (P1, aged 33, Male, 7 years' experience)*

*I feel more comfortable in the mountain, I feel happier. (P5, aged 25, Female, 6 years' experience)*

*We put the stress of the week aside with the activity we do on the mountain. We start our busy schedule by storing energy. (P8, aged 32, Male, 7 years' experience)*

According to Figure 2, the second factor that is given importance by mountaineers to participate in mountaineering activities and is the most coded in content analysis is sense of achievement. Some examples of the sense of achievement are as follows:

*The feeling of the high mountain satisfies the feeling of the pleasure of achieving, not the ego of the human being. I have goals. What are they? to climb the highest mountain in all of Turkey, to succeed in it. (P2, aged 41, Male, 20 years' experience)*

*I love nature and mountains; I like to push my own limits. Like every human being, I have my limits, but I like to exceed these limits and succeed (P10, aged 30, Male, 13 years' experience)*

*You are not satisfied, you want more after a certain period, do you want to climb higher and more difficult conditions. Starting from certain levels, I started to climb big mountains. (P11, aged 23, Female, 4 years' experience)*

Another important reason why people participate in mountaineering activities according to code-sub-code model is meeting new people and socializing. Some examples of meeting new people are as follows:

*I had friends from many fields, I shared information with them, I met different professions. This also made my life easier. (P1, aged 33, Male, 7 years' experience)*

*You build relationships with beautiful people. It is also a socializing area. (P7, aged 50, Male, 5 years' experience)*

*It is also a socializing area. (P8, aged 32, Male, 7 years' experience)*

People can also participate in mountaineering activities for sports. In this regard, the mountaineers state that they both have a good time and sports. Some examples of sport benefits are as follows:

*I also do sports. (P1, aged 33, Male, 7 years' experience)*

*I am testing my physical strength. (P2, aged 41, Male, 20 years' experience)*

*I feel much better physically too. (P3, aged 35, Female, 4 years' experience)*

Example responses for the other sub-categories are as follows:

*Some people like fishing, some like cycling, every person has a different hobby. Mountaineering is also a hobby and passion for me. (P10, aged 30, Male, 13 years' experience). (passion)*

*Mountaineering created a feeling of addiction, even if I want to quit, I can't. (P6, aged 48, Female, 12 years' experience). (feeling of addiction)*

*You are completely away from the stress of city life, your phone is not working, it feels like a world to which I belong. (P9, aged 26, Male, 5 years' experience). (getting away from city life)*

*It's a risky sport, after all, and the adrenaline draws me to the mountains. (P4, aged 32, Male, 16 years' experience) (adrenalin)*

*I do mountaineering to evaluate my leisure time. (P1, aged 33, Male, 7 years' experience) (leisure)*

*There are no city crowds in the mountains; you can be in touch with nature. (P9, aged 26, Male, 5 years' experience). (getting away from the crowd)*

*I gain new experiences about the environment and nature (P1, aged 33, Male, 7 years' experience) (gaining experience)*

*We share our experiences with each other in the mountains. We also help each other. (P7, aged 50, Male, 5 years' experience) (sharing experience)*

*I feel comfort in the mountains, I feel freedom. (P4, aged 32, Male, 16 years' experience) (freedom)*

*I learn a lot of new information about mountaineering, climbing, and camping from my friends. (P5, aged 25, Female, 6 years' experience) (learning new information)*

*Since I believe that I will do this sport for many years, I also do it to make a career in mountaineering in the future. (P5, aged 25, Female, 6 years' experience) (career)*

Lastly, the responses were compared by gender using the MAXQDA program (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Comparison of The Reasons for Participating in Mountaineering Activities By Gender

Sub-Categories	Gender=Male	Gender=Female	Total
Psychological health	9	4	13
Sense of achievement	4	3	7
To meet new people	6	0	6
Passion	3	2	5
Feeling of addiction	3	1	4
Getting away from city life	3	1	4
Sport	2	2	4
Adrenaline	2	2	4
Leisure	2	1	3
Getting away from the crowd	2	0	2
Gaining experience	2	0	2
Sharing experience	2	0	2
Freedom	2	0	2
Learning new information	1	0	1
Career	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>61</b>

Table 5 shows that male participants attached more importance than females to factors like meeting new people, psychological health, getting away from the crowd, and gaining experience. Notably, no female participant mentioned meeting new people as a reason for mountaineering.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study makes an important contribution to the outdoor leisure activities and mountaineering literature. Although previous studies have examined participation in mountaineering activities, they did not provide wide-ranging results. In contrast, the present study reveals the feelings and thoughts of mountaineering participants from a wide-ranging perspective. In addition, the findings can help mountain regions, local governments, and activity groups to understand the wishes and expectations of mountaineers, based on the feelings and thoughts of the study's participants.

The interviews showed that the participant mountaineers first started their activities with trekking because mountaineering itself requires high endurance and experience (Chen et al., 2017; Crust, 2020; Groves & Varley, 2020; Wickens et al., 2015). By gaining experience from low-altitude mountain trekking before beginning high altitude mountaineering, they reduced the risks from the latter activity. Since mountaineering is risky, safety is critical so it is important to learn the activity with a mountaineering group, which can provide equipment that a new mountaineer lacks, and ensure safety and reduce risk.

The present study differs from other studies on this point. While previous studies showed that safety is important in mountaineering activities (Chen et al., 2017; Crockett et al., 2020; Jackman et al., 2020), this study revealed that mountaineers join groups to reduce risk. According to Groves and Varley (2020), the uncertain conditions of a winter mountain environment mean that achieving goals requires skilled action and learned strategies to make good decisions and avoid harm. These learned strategies are acquired through good training (Groves & Varley, 2020). Therefore, mountaineering leaders and groups should receive detailed safety training. In addition, there should be greater use of new high-tech products that can reduce mountaineering risks (Wickens, 2015).

The interviews revealed that in the passion for mountaineering began in childhood. Spending more time in nature in their childhood made them yearn for nature as adults, which they satisfy through mountaineering activities. This is a new finding in the literature. The participants also said that friends encouraged them to participate in mountaineering activities. Previous studies also suggested that close friends play an important role in participating in mountaineering activities (Ekici et al., 2011; Ewert, 1994; Jackman et al., 2020). The participants in the present study mentioned that they developed a feeling of addiction and that they do these activities with a passion.

The findings show that mountaineering is an important leisure activity and that mountaineers participate to obtain various benefits, particularly getting away from city life, socializing, summiting new mountains, learning new information, sports, getting away from the crowd, being in touch with nature, adrenaline, and freedom. Notably, reaching the summit of a new mountain, learning new information, and experiencing freedom are different reasons to those identified in previous studies. The most important benefit for the participants was psychological health. The participants said that mountaineering helps them to be peaceful, comfortable, and happy, escape the stress of daily life, and store energy after the activity. Another reason for almost all the male participants was meeting new people during mountaineering activities. They also think that it provides an opportunity to widen their social environment since mountaineers come from all walks of life. This agrees with previous studies like Crockett et al. (2020) and Ekici et al. (2011), which concluded that socialization and social environment play an important role in participation in mountaineering activities.

Another important reason was to escape from city noise and crowds and overcome the stress of city life. Crockett et al. (2020) reached a similar conclusion and found that there is a contrast between



mountaineering activity and modern lifestyles. They concluded that mountaineering is good for people's psychological health whereas modern life disconnects people from nature, such as mountains.

According to Jackman et al. (2020), pushing one's limits is an essential motivation for mountaineering. Similarly, in the participants in the present study said they do mountaineering activities to push and test their own physical limits. In contrast to previous studies, however, the participants aimed to climb a mountain at their upper limit. Participants of the study always state that their goal is to climb higher mountains, which indicates that a sense of achievement is one of the important reasons for participation in mountaineering. They who climbed a 4,000-meter peak then want to climb to 5,000 meters. Furthermore, once they have climbed all the local mountains, they want to climb mountains abroad. An important benefit for mountaineers is gaining experience from their activities to make the next trip safer. Finally, experienced mountaineers want to pass on their knowledge from previous activities to less experienced mountaineers.

The present study focused on the reasons for mountaineering as a leisure time activity. The reasons were similar to those in previous studies, which revealed that mountaineers participate for escape, happiness, excitement, personal testing, the features and attractiveness of mountains, getting away from normal life, sports, helping others, improving climbing skills, and knowing themselves (Apollo, 2017; Ekici et al., 2011; Ewert, 1985; Ewert, 1994; Jackman et al. 2020). However, in addition to these results, the participants in the present study mentioned several new factors, such as the effect of mountaineering groups and friends, mountaineering as a passion that started in childhood, the sense of achievement, addiction to mountaineering, the passion for adrenaline, and making a career from mountaineering.

As in every study, this study also has some limitations. First, only gender differences were compared. Previous studies show that more men than women participate in mountaineering activities (Huey et al., 2020; Moraldo, 2020; Roche, 2013). Although this study attempted to provide gender balance, there were more male participants. It is therefore recommended to conduct further studies to investigate why women participate in mountaineering less than men.

Second, data were collected from 12 mountaineers from Turkey, so the findings reflect the thoughts and views of Turkish mountaineers specifically. In addition, some categories and sub-categories were expressed by only one participant. Future studies should therefore include more participants from different countries. Such studies could also focus on cultural differences between mountaineers from different countries.

Given that obesity rates have increased globally in recent years, people should be encouraged to engage in physical activities. All indoor or outdoor activities should be prioritized and supported by local governments, including mountaineering. Further studies should examine the relationships between people's health and participation in these activities.

In recent years, mountaineering has become a tourism product, with mountaineers traveling to the highest mountains of many countries. Similarly, the participants in the present study visit countries to see and climb the mountains for touristic purposes. Future studies should investigate such visits in more detail.

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**Conflict of Interest:** There is no conflict of interest or gain in the article.

**Contribution Rate of Researchers:** The study was prepared with the contribution of a single author. Contribution rates: 1. Author = 100%.

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