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Exploring the personal benefits of surfing: insights from cold-water surfers in Jæren, Norway

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Introduction: Surfing has grown since the 1960s to become a global marine leisure activity. Traditionally, surfing is associated with tropical and temperate climates and a sea, sand, and sun setting. However, surfing's geographical spread now includes polar and sub-polar regions, areas where the cold and sea-conditions provide challenges to human survival.

Methods: This study uses a phenomenological approach to identify and explore the personal benefits gained by experienced surfers in the Jæren region, south of the city of Stavanger in Norway. Data were obtained from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 experienced surfers who surf year-round, but primarily in winter, in extreme conditions. Additional secondary data were derived from written and video material published in online surfing blogs/vlogs and surfers' private video footage.

Results and discussion: Participants gained a wide range of benefits including experiencing strong positive feelings, inclusion, and social cohesion with other members in the surfing subculture, a deep connection to nature, physical and mental health benefits, and an overall enhanced quality of life. While international surf travel was constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic, local surfing was reinforced. This resulted in surfing becoming an opportunity to safely socialize with others outside of one's family, thus increasing the social benefits of the sport. This study presents the first empirical data on the personal benefits of surfing from a non-traditional cold-water surfing nation in Scandinavia.

KEYWORDS

cold-water surfing, benefits, extreme sports, tourism, COVID-19, Jæren beaches, Norway

Introduction

Participation in extreme sports is continuing to grow (Puchan, 2005; Brymer, 2010; Brymer et al., 2020). Extreme sports have become a descriptor for a number of non-traditional and independent adventure sports (Brymer and Schweitzer, 2013a). Terms such as "extreme", "lifestyle" and "action sports" have been used to describe a broad range of predominantly individualized sport activities (Brymer et al., 2009, 2020). As part of this trend, surfing has progressively grown in popularity since the 1950s (Lazarow et al., 2008; Elmahdy et al., 2021).

Cold water surfing may be defined as surfing in waters with temperature below 12 degrees Celsius [Yates, (n.d.)] and sometimes with snow on the ground and below-zero air temperatures. Cold water surfing is an extreme sport with unique demands, challenges and risks including skin irritation and damage, breathing difficulties, joint and muscle immobility and potential hypothermia (Elmahdy et al., 2021).

Many surfers in Norway surf year-round and expose themselves to extreme weather conditions; strong currents, heavy storms and cold water ranging from an average of zero degrees Celsius in winter to 15 degrees Celsius in summer. Because the summer months typically do not produce surf-able swells off the Norwegian coast, most local surfers surf during the colder winter months (Langseth, 2012; Lorange, 2017; Elmahdy et al., 2021).

Traditional theoretical viewpoints on extreme sports participants have speculated that participation is about risk-taking and adrenaline seeking, a channel for irresponsible individuals with an unhealthy connection to fear (Brymer, 2010; Brymer et al., 2020). However, a growing range of research into extreme sports is providing a more enlightened understanding of participants' motivations and lived experience (Brymer and Oades, 2009; Brymer, 2010; Brymer et al., 2020) showing that they generate many beneficial psychological outcomes (Brymer and Schweitzer, 2013a). Extreme sports may promote humility, courage, and positive psychological relationships with the surrounding natural environment (Brymer and Gray, 2009; Brymer et al., 2009, 2020).

This study uses a phenomenological approach to identify and explore the benefits gained by experienced surfers in the Jæren region, south of the city of Stavanger in Norway. Located at about 58 degrees north, Jærstrendene (the beaches of Jæren) faces the rough North Sea and has a total length of about 70 kilometers, interrupted by some granite cliffs and heaps of boulders [Fjord Norway, (n.d.)]. The Jæren coast has been chosen for this study because there has been little research conducted into surfing in Scandinavia and the Jæren coast is known by the Norwegian surfing community for having the best surf spots in Norway. To date, only three other studies have addressed surfing in Norway; Langseth (2012), who explored surfing identity in Norway, Ulkestad and Drogseth (2016), who reported on surfing injuries in the Norwegian Arctic waters and Elmahdy et al. (2021), who examined Norwegian surfers' travel behavior and related experiences.

Literature review

This study was intentionally inductive and exploratory in its approach and, as a consequence, it was not framed or structured through the lens of a specific theory. This literature review seeks to identify potentially relevant theory, models and frameworks so that these can be considered in the light of the exploratory research findings.

The context of extreme sports

Participation rates in extreme sports are outpacing more conventional sports such as golf or volleyball (Brymer, 2010; Elmahdy, 2015; Brymer et al., 2020). It is argued that participation in extreme sports has proved:

...not to be just a “flash in the pan” but a sign of the times in which people are looking for a new way to define their lives and to escape from an increasingly regulated and sanitized way of living (Puchan, 2005, 177).

The term “extreme sport” has been used to characterize activities that are traditionally associated with risk taking,

adrenaline seeking (Brymer, 2010; Elmahdy, 2015; Buckley, 2018; Brymer et al., 2020), pushing boundaries and conquering new frontiers (Kusz, 2004). Surfing, skateboarding, mountain, and snow sports are considered to be examples of such activities (Booth, 2004; Brymer, 2005; Donnelly, 2006). Often portrayed as a subset of “lifestyle sports” (Wheaton, 2004), extreme sports have attracted increasing attention from social scientists and medical researchers who explore the apparent contradiction of people freely choosing to participate in sports where the risk of personal injury appears to be high (e.g., Robinson, 2013; Wheaton, 2013; Gomez and Rao, 2016; Laver et al., 2017).

Personal benefits of recreational sport activities

A benefit is a concept with various definitions. Driver et al. (1991, p. 4) defined the benefit concept as “a change that is viewed to be advantageous—an improvement in condition, or a gain to an individual, a group, to society or an entity”. In sport activities, Wankel and Berger (1991) identified benefits such as personal enjoyment, personal growth including physical and psychological health, social harmony, and social change and skill acquisition. Most individuals get involved in recreational sport activities because of such intrinsic benefits (Wankel and Berger, 1991; Biddle and Mutrie, 2007).

Sports create enjoyment for participants (Biddle and Mutrie, 2007); which is a positive affective state associated with feeling happy, cheerful, and friendly as opposed to sad, irritable, and angry (Wankel and Berger, 1991). Extreme sports provide individuals with positive emotions, such as “feeling high” and an “adrenaline buzz”, distinguished by excitement, and feelings of happiness, using words to describe these experiences such as blissful, magical, feeling alive and energetic. This sense of pleasure often outlives the actual sport activity and can remain for days afterwards (Willig, 2008).

Sports can grant participants a state of being that is very gratifying, which has been described as “flow”. Flow is a state of optimal arousal; experienced when skills are consistent with the demands posed by the task (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The individual is in control of their actions; there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future (Sato, 1992). They fully concentrate on the activity, experience a loss of self-consciousness, become at one with the activity—where action and awareness merge—and participants experience transformation and a weakened awareness of time (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Tse et al., 2021).

Several authors have explored the concept of flow in the context of surfing. For example, Anderson (2022, p. 194) states: “We have seen how surf-riders experience a sense of flow or being able to be wholly mindful of their surf-riding practice and separate themselves from the non-immediate components of their (terrestrialized) assemblage” and he goes onto conclude that “what is clear is that, for many, surfing spaces are transformative of their sense of self.” Further examples include the works of Borne and Ponting (2015), Ford (2015), Morgan and Coutts (2016) and Stranger (2011). What is consistent in these writings is that in the

context of surfing “flow” is an “autotelic” experience; meaning that its outcomes are intrinsically rewarding and grant participants a profound sense of enjoyment (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Tse et al., 2021).

Extreme sports may provide experiences that meet the criteria of flow. Individuals freely engage in the sport, they challenge themselves and test their abilities, and the activities provide them with heightened experiences (Celsi et al., 1993). Individuals express flow experiences by using terms such as “weightlessness”, “floating”, and “flowing” to demonstrate their total immersion in their activities (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). However, flow can have addictive attributes: “The self becomes captive of a certain kind of order and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 62). For example, big wave surfers experienced flow while surfing and gained diverse benefits associated with this experience (Partington et al., 2009). However, some also displayed signs of dependence on surfing that verged on addiction. This can potentially have negative consequences, such as neglecting other important aspects of life and relationships and even undergoing withdrawal symptoms associated with non-participation due to injury or another constraint which curtails participation.

The flow experience may be related to changes in meta-motivational states as discussed in reversal theory. This general psychological framework may be useful when explaining the structures of subjective experiences while offering a theoretical basis from which to understand seemingly paradoxical states and emotional fluctuations (Kerr and Apter, 1991; Hudson et al., 2016) in extreme sports and adventure tourism (Gyimothy and Mykletun, 2004; Houge Mackenzie, 2015). The theory postulates four pairs of meta-motivational states available for the individual to satisfy opposing needs. Of particular relevance for surfing is the pair of telic versus paratelic states. The telic state denotes seriousness, arousal-avoidance, and outcome-orientation, and will be activated when a surfer interprets a situation as challenging or threatening, or when a specific goal should be attained. The paratelic state is different. It characterizes a motivational state of freedom, process orientation, and arousal-seeking playfulness. The surfer will reverse from one of these states to the other, depending partly on the circumstances of the waves, thus attempting to reduce tension in difficult situations and enjoy the interaction with and exploit the forces of the waves when the situation is benign. Such reversals have been reported, for instance by Gyimothy and Mykletun (2004) for arctic winter trekking in Spitzbergen, white-water rafting guides by Houge Mackenzie and Kerr (2014) and mountaineering by Houge Mackenzie (2015).

Health benefits

Active nature-based recreational activities can have positive effects including physiological, psychological, spiritual, and emotional health benefits (Britton and Foley, 2021; Lackey et al., 2021; Usher, 2023). Generally, physical activity promotes physical health (Wankel and Berger, 1991), it improves fitness, prevents unhealthy weight gain, and reduces the risk for disabilities and

chronic diseases (Haskell et al., 2007). Older surfers who have participated in the sport for many years were found to have gained various long-term physiological benefits (Frank et al., 2009; Wheaton, 2019): “Paddling out in the surf, for instance requires aerobic power, anaerobic power, intermittent endurance, and strength and power of the upper body. Riding the waves requires balance, force development, flexibility, reaction time, and coordination of the lower body” (Frank et al., 2009, p. 32). Blue spaces and their uses for recreation have become an area of increasing focus in recent years (Olive and Wheaton, 2021) and surfing is one of the most examined activities. Several authors have examined the health and therapeutic benefits of surfing (e.g., Britton and Foley, 2021; Iisahunter and Stoodley, 2021; Usher, 2023) and have proposed that the demanding nature of surfing (e.g., different coasts, currents, winds, seasons, etc.) which necessitates ongoing adaptability is an important contributory factor to these personal benefits experienced by surfers (Britton and Foley, 2021).

Benefits of connection with nature

Extreme sports are activities that have gained a reputation for being driven by a search for the simultaneous experience of flow and thrill (Brymer, 2010). Research on extreme sports has tended to undervalue the importance of athletes’ connection to nature and portrayed them as individuals who seek to compete against or conquer nature. However, extreme sports athletes have been shown to have a constructive and valued connection to nature (Britton and Foley, 2021). For example, extreme sports participants studied by Brymer and Schweitzer (2013b) described a sense of freedom derived from their total immersion in the natural environment. Extreme sports have been shown to be leisure activities that connect participants with the most extreme forms of nature. “Being in nature at this level transforms the human tendency for anthropocentricity and replaces it with eccentricity and the realization of true courage and humility” (Brymer and Oades, 2009, p. 124).

A wide range of researchers (examples include: Wheaton, 2007; Kil et al., 2014; Wyles et al., 2014; Winter et al., 2019); have suggested that nature-based recreation participants form a deep connection with their surrounding natural environment that leads to an increased awareness and desire to care for the environment which contributes to more ecologically sustainable practices. Surfers have been found to hold environmentally friendly views as reported by Larson et al. (2018). This is reflected in a variety of non-governmental environmental organizations created by surfer-activists such as “Save our Surf” in Hawaii (Walker, 2011), “The Surfrider Foundation” in Southern California, “Surfers Against Sewage” in the UK (Wheaton, 2007), and “Paddle out for your Planet” in France (Falaix et al., 2021). These organizations strive to protect surf breaks, advance the positive qualities of the surfing culture, and preserve biodiversity (Taylor, 2007). Other research, such as that undertaken by Fox et al. (2021), has found that surfing has a connection with increased awareness of the marine environment or “ocean literacy”.

Social benefits

Sports can promote social harmony between groups and can act as a channel for the transmission of knowledge, values, and norms. The distinct values displayed may be those of the predominant society or oppositely those of a differing subgroup (Wankel and Berger, 1991). As an extreme sport, surfing might be at variance with common values of the wider society. Surfers have been shown to take social risks when the waves are good; they cancel appointments, find excuses to skip work, and call off plans with family members and friends (Butts, 2001; Stranger, 2011; Booth, 2020). Moreover, they may abstain from accepting job opportunities to be able to stay close to the ocean (Butts, 2001; Stranger, 2011).

On the other hand, high-risk sport athletes have been shown to experience social bonding which is a benefit on a collective level resembling “communitas” as defined by Turner (1970). Communitas is created by participants’ mutual experience and the sense of belonging an individual gets from a common experience (Celsi, 1992). Communitas is “a social anti-structure that frees participants from their social roles and status and instead engages them in a transcending camaraderie of status equality” (Belk et al., 1989, p. 7). Sport participants’ shared experiences can surpass the routine of everyday life and release them from social statuses and roles constraints, consequently supplying them with a sense of belonging (Celsi et al., 1993).

A sport such as surfing can create a “social fabric” that aids in delineating people and communities. Surfing is capable of bringing people together (Lazarow et al., 2008; Britton and Foley, 2021; Lemarié, 2023; Wheaton and Olive, 2023), connecting generations, and implementing a route for outdoor physical activity (Lazarow et al., 2008). Surfers convey their individuality via their surfing and general behavior on the beach. Therefore, the presence of a well-defined surfing subculture supplies its members with social belonging and a sense of relatedness, which is affiliated with constructive interpersonal relationships (Butts, 2001; Beaumont and Brown, 2018).

In one of only three studies on Norwegian surfers conducted to date, Langseth (2012) examined the social construction of identity amongst these surfers and found that a number of factors contributed to a sense of belonging to this group. In what he termed “symbolic capital” he argues that skills, sub-cultural knowledge, commitment, and local affiliation are all influential. Interestingly, he also found that surfers who do not possess or show this symbolic capital are excluded from the group. This work reveals the other side to the social benefits of sport and its ability to promote inclusion and social connection. Sport can also be excluding of those who do not conform to the expectations and standards of the “in-crowd”. This aspect of surfing has been increasingly explored in the context of “localism” (e.g., Olivier, 2010; Beaumont and Brown, 2016; Usher and Gómez, 2016; Towner and Lemarié, 2020; Elmahdy et al., 2021). Indeed, Elmahdy et al. (2021) found that Norwegian surf tourists experienced localism-related aggression particularly when visiting popular warm-water surf destinations. Nevertheless, the same authors reported that the study’s surf tourists were able to negotiate positive interactions and form bonds with local surfers, which allowed them to reap a variety of social benefits associated with travel.

The study presented here builds on the earlier work by Langseth (2012) and adds to the growing body of literature which explores surfing and its influences at a personal level (for example, see Stranger, 2011; Barbieri and Sotomayor, 2013; Borne, 2017; Portugal et al., 2017; Elmahdy et al., 2021).

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on surfing

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on travel and tourism were multi-faceted and far-reaching. The constraints on movement within and between countries and “lockdowns” of communities and nations for many months had a direct effect on the ability of surfers to travel and participate in surfing activities (Usher, 2022, 2023). In some cases, surfers continued to access local surf-breaks illegally (e.g., in New Zealand) in defiance of local restrictions (Morrison, 2021) and, in the case of international surf-related travel, many surfing destinations received no visitors for extended periods. Consequently, many surfing related businesses ceased operating including businesses which provided support for surf tourism (Usher, 2022) such as accommodation and transportation providers. In the context of travel restrictions, the demand from surfers to continue to pursue their passion and reap the sport-related benefits drove an increase in the engagement in surfing locally (i.e., to surfing breaks where travel across borders was not required) (Dimitrovski et al., 2023).

Methods

This research adopted a phenomenological approach, applying qualitative research techniques to provide an in-depth understanding of the perceived benefits acquired by Norwegian surfers surfing along the Jæren coast in Norway. Phenomenology was chosen for this study because it is a research approach which focuses on exploring how humans experience particular phenomena. It is an exploration of meaning associated with a person’s lived experience and is used “as a means to seek understanding of the lifeworld of human beings” (Donalek, 2004, p. 516).

Phenomenology is particularly suited to exploring meaning in leisure due to the deeply personal nature of such experiences (Howe, 1991; Paley, 2016). These meanings can be life-choice influencing for individuals affecting key decisions such as place of residence, career, friendships, travel, exercise, and diet (Anderson, 2015). Indeed, phenomenology has become widely utilized as a research approach in seeking to better understand surfing and especially its effects on those who participate in it (e.g., Brymer, 2010; Fendt et al., 2014; Wiersma, 2014; Usher, 2023).

For this study, primary data were collected by the first author prior to the COVID-19 pandemic using semi-structured face-to-face individual and group interviews. These were conducted in ways that allowed the surfers to talk at length and share as much information as possible in an unconstrained environment (Seidman, 1991). An interview form guided the conversation to ensure that all preplanned topics were covered, while also allowing other issues to surface spontaneously. Participants were asked a

range of questions; initially how, why and when they started surfing. They were then asked to describe their thoughts and feelings before a surf session, while surfing and after a surf session. Furthermore, specific questions were directed at their perceptions of the benefits of surfing for them personally.

The study utilized responsive interviewing techniques, where the primary researcher adapted to new information and altered directions whenever it was found necessary to get a deeper understanding of unanticipated insights (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Each interview lasted between 40 and 120 min and was held at a location of the surfers' choice to allow them to feel comfortable during the interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded; notes were taken by the primary researcher during interviews and transcriptions of the audio-record were made immediately after each interview. All surfers' identities were kept confidential. Due to the nature and small number of participants in the Jæren region, there was a risk of individual participants being identified in the reporting of this research. All participants were informed orally that steps would be taken to protect their identity from being discovered by others and that confidentiality would be maintained. Therefore, participants' exact age is purposefully not mentioned as it is considered identifying information.

Quotes, anecdotes, and narratives from the interviews were employed as the main data for the study, supplemented by notes and memos made by the primary researcher as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). A research journal was utilized to take handwritten field notes when conducting semi-structured interviews. Notes in the research journal focused primarily on documenting participants' nonverbal communication. This was revealed through their body language and/or facial expressions. Notes included surfers' observed feelings of happiness, joy and relaxation, for example, after a surf session or when speaking about their surfing experiences. Notes also included observed feelings of frustration and sadness, having a closed body language, taking long pauses and/or fidgeting while sharing sad memories (e.g., depression, divorce, etc.). Such research notes are considered an essential element of documentation and analysis in qualitative research (Maharaj, 2016).

The study applied purposive sampling to recruit experienced surfers (defined as regularly surfing for over 10 years) who are members of the Norwegian surfing community and expected to be especially informative. Interviews were conducted between Jan and Mar 2015. The primary researcher was introduced to the first surfer in 2015 through a common friend, from this initial interview a snowball sampling technique was used where interviewees recommended other surfers. Snowball sampling is a subset of purposive sampling and is a "non-random sample in which the researcher begins with one case and then, based on information about interrelationships from that case, identifies other cases and repeats the process again and again" (Neuman, 2011, 267). The final sample for this study comprised of 13 experienced Norwegian surfers (nine males and four females). Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 53 years (average age of 35 years). Due to feasibility and practical constraints, this study

sample is limited to one surf region in Norway, namely, the Jæren region. However, the chosen study location was deliberately selected because it is known for having the best surf spots in Norway. Additionally, due to the researchers' limited data collection time and research budget, the chosen sample consisted of only experienced surfers. This limitation prevented capturing the experiences of novice surfers from their perspective. This is important because skilled surfers may have different activity orientations, preferences, and experiences than novice surfers (Barbieri and Sotomayor, 2013).

Follow-up interviews were conducted in 2022 with three of the most active surfers in the region, asking three open-ended questions: how did the COVID-19 pandemic impact surfing activities on the Jæren beaches; for which subgroups of surfers were impacts observed; and what happened to the annual surfing competitions that used to take place here? These interviews followed the same procedures as the initial interviews but focused on changes during and after COVID-19. The interviews were undertaken by the third author at Bore Beach, one of the most popular surfing beaches in the Jæren area.

The initial pre-Covid data were collected and analyzed by the primary researcher (the first author) and subsequently reviewed by the second and third authors. The data analysis fell into four different phases: preparation, exploration, reduction, and interpretation (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010). The data preparation phase consisted of the transcription of all the interviews. All transcribed data were read carefully, and re-listening of recordings was undertaken by the primary researcher. A manual thematic approach was used to identify, organize, describe, and report themes from the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Themes related to surfers' experiences and perceived benefits were identified in the data exploration phase. These themes and their relationships with one another were considered and utilized in the data reduction phase where common ideas, concepts and perceptions in the data were aggregated (Thomas, 2006). Finally, the data interpretation phase was undertaken, and data were checked across the different sources for both connections and inconsistencies, thus increasing the dependability of the data (Golafshani, 2003).

Authenticity (Neuman, 2011) was increased by building a good rapport with the surfers and spending extended periods of time with them. Following the protocols associated with phenomenological research approaches (Donalek, 2004), the primary researcher was reflexive regarding how they might be influenced by their research subjects and mindful of how this might alter the research's process and outcomes (Smith, 2010). In addition, following Lincoln and Guba (1985) approach, trustworthiness of the data was improved through the regular use of a primary researcher's journal where reflectivity was facilitated by writing notes on the researcher's experiences and engagement with the study participants. Data from the interview transcripts were then discussed with a second experienced qualitative researcher (the third author) and checks of decisions on the allocation of data to themes and their aggregation, reduction and subsequent labeling were made. This process identified six key themes from the data which are outlined in the findings section below.

Findings: the benefits of surfing

Theme 1: experiencing contrasting strong feelings

All surfers in this study affirmed that they experience a range of strong but contrasting feelings before, during and after surfing:

It's almost like the happiest feeling and you know your whole body is so exhausted but your mind and everything is so happy. You stay like that for maybe a couple of days and you're really in a good mood... (P-6, Male).

These strong emotional responses to surfing have been noted by another surfer who identified that her happiness was stimulated by the release of chemicals in the brain:

Yeah, you get the adrenaline cake, and that you can read about the brain. You get this great sensation of happiness and dopamine... It's nice to be there and be filled with a lot of joy. I get filled with happiness there and I can take that home with me (P-13, Female).

Similarly, other surfers described surfing as an activity that provides marvelous sensations and pleasurable feelings:

It's pure pleasure. It's the pleasure of the simple act of riding a wave, it's fantastic. It only lasts a few seconds and imagine all the thinking, focus and energy that goes into those few seconds were we're actually on that little piece of Styrofoam (P-7, Male).

Feelings of excitement and anticipation were also experienced by surfers: "You're really excited and you're looking forward to see the waves. You're like a little kid you know, getting before Christmas, really excited like (woohoo sound) and that gives you like a really boost of happiness I think" (P-6, Male).

Although all participants affirmed that surfing was a source of happiness, they also shared a few contrasting feelings such as surfing being a source of frustration. This happens when surfers do not surf as well as they anticipated: "Usually happy unless it was a crappy surf and you get frustrated, that can be as well, it's either happy or frustration" (P-1, Male). Similarly, another surfer stated that:

It goes together with like the happiest feelings that you have and the most frustrating feelings that you have. Like on a personal level, when I don't manage to do the stuff that I want inside the water, like doing turns and stuff... (P-6, Male).

Theme 2: the "flow" experience

Surfers in the study become deeply immersed in the surfing activity to the extent of getting completely lost in it. They shared that they get the feeling of being in a different world; losing track of time, being "in balance" and feeling as if they are in a trance-like state:

You forget about everything else, not that you forget but you focus so much on what you do. That is a good thing and it's such a different world from sitting in the office to being in the water. The experience from doing it is so special; all in all, it makes you more balanced, I think. Get away from earth, you notice that when you surf and float, more or less weightless out in the sea (P-7, Male).

Surfers interviewed used words such as "addiction" and "obsession" to describe their high level of attachment to surfing. They reported that they get a sense of freedom when out in the ocean: "When I'm surfing, I have no thoughts and I feel free (...) it's pure freedom" (P-4, Male). In addition, they explained how they lose track of time, the absence of extraneous thoughts and being "in the moment" while surfing:

Sometimes I suppose when you think back, when you've had a wave and you've surfed, it happens really fast. But then when you look back at it it's like slow motion, then you can hear, I can anyway hear if I've done like a good turn... (P-11, Female).

Theme 3: social integration and social bonding

The Jæren surf community, with estimates of "a few hundred [surfers]" (P-8, Male), is not large when compared to surf communities in many other countries. Therefore, most surfers in this region know each other well. They meet occasionally during their surf sessions and use social media platforms to communicate and share surf-related information. Social integration and a sense of belonging is an important social aspect of their surf experience. For example, one surfer stated:

I want to talk and share the experience. When I get up to my car I always talk with people if I see them and I go "Yeah, yeah, it was so fun, and you will have so much fun, enjoy". I like to share that passion with other surfers because sharing at home, it's not possible (laughs), and I can get more disappointed. I've experienced that my surfing experience I need to share with other surfers because the other ones don't understand (P-13, Female).

Surfers in Jæren have a sense of belonging not only through their shared passion for surfing, but also due to the inability of non-surfers to understand or connect with the depth and influence of the surfing experience. This exclusivity of understanding (or lack of it from non-surfers) creates a sense of tribalism where surfers seek one another out to share their experiences and this enhances their satisfaction and sense of belonging after a surf session.

In contrast with the social sense of belonging for surfers in Jæren there was a consensus that surfing is an individual sport:

I think we're lucky in Norway with the scene being so small and we know each other really well. We've got a good community and there are a lot of good people in it, but it is an individual sport (P-11, Female).

Surfers are aware that their satisfaction depends on a scarce resource; the waves. The more surfers in the water, the fewer waves they will catch: “Less friends, more waves, that’s the old rule” (P-1, Male). Yet, they all confirmed that they still like to surf with a few friends instead of alone and considered having these close surf friends as one of the benefits of surfing because then they get to share the fun and demonstrate their skills to each other:

Well, it’s a fantastic feeling because maybe I have some good jumps and some good waves, and you talk to the other guys: “Did you see that? Did you see?” It’s just a great feeling to be out and doing what you like best (P-2, Male).

This finding presents another paradox, that surfers find sharing the waves with others adds to their enjoyment, but having more surfers in the water competing for the same waves can result in less waves caught and surfed by each surfer. There appears to be a balance between a surfing session where a small number of friends sharing the surf break adds greatly to the enjoyment of the experience but if the surf break becomes too crowded this can tip the balance to a diminished enjoyment of the surf session. Further, positive feedback on one’s surfing performance strengthens relationships and adds to the athlete’s construction of a self-concept as a competent surfer.

Theme 4: connecting with nature

Surfers in this study perceived nature as a force that could not be subdued. Surfers were conscious of nature’s power over them and sought to be in sync and harmony with the ocean and its waves. A surfer’s response when asked how they feel when they catch a wave and are riding it was:

A king (laughs). You feel like you’re playing with nature, on nature’s terms because you can’t fight the wave, you have to flow with it. You can’t fight it, there is so much power in a wave and there is so much going around. Everything is moving and you have to deal with all the movements. Like you’re going the way it’s going in toward the shore and at the same time it starts breaking in one direction, so you’re moving in all dimensions (P-8, Male).

When speaking about their surfing experiences, surfers did not complain about the freezing cold water or the harsh weather conditions. On the contrary, they expressed that they experienced a sense of a strong, positive connection to nature:

Surfing makes me both connect with and appreciate nature. While you surf, you meet the wildlife in the ocean, and I’ve seen animals close up in their natural environment. I know that I would never meet these animals like this in any other way... makes me feel connected to nature because it also feels like my natural environment, makes you have something in common with the animals in a weird way. You also start caring about nature in a different way, you want nature to last because it’s your playground. Many surfers are very nature friendly. We often arrange beach clean ups, etc. (P-10, Female).

This surfer’s thoughts are an example of the widespread sense of a genuine intimacy with nature and its creatures, a connection that was shared by all the surfers interviewed in this study. Another surfer explained how the surf community attempts to protect the natural environment:

When you get out of the water and you see trash you take it with you, because it’s your playground, you don’t have trash falling around (...). There’s a big movement within the surf environment of keeping the beaches clean. For many years, Surfrider Foundation is taking care of local beaches, we have twice a year “clean the beach days” and every year its tons of tons of trash, we pick up in one day, just to make a little difference (P-1, Male).

A further insight was shared by the surfers with regard to surfing influencing their perspective. More specifically, a consistent theme was that by being frequently present in the ocean, surfers are reminded on a regular basis of how small and insignificant they are compared to the natural environment:

The whole kind of personal situation where you actually are in the water, first thing you feel very humble because you’re in Mother Nature and everything is out of your control. Yeah, I bet all surfers have been saying that the humble feeling of being in something you don’t have any control over (P-6, Male).

Similarly, another surfer expressed how beneficial he felt it is to “not be in control” sometimes, and considered that it is nature’s way of providing him with a balance in his life every now and then:

You feel balanced again, because I mean there are a lot of things, it’s not only riding a wave. Sometimes getting pounded by waves and you know feeling not in control is a nice feeling as well, to be set back to zero position again. That’s it, you’re not always in 100 percent control. Then nature comes and says, “fuck you” (Tch sound: smashed by a wave). Then your ego gets a little readjusted, you’re not that cool (laughs). I think that’s pretty good; everybody should have that once a week, get your ego put back to place and it’s okay. I like that, I need that too. I’m a very active person and sometimes I need a little readjustment, somebody who’s bigger and stronger than me telling me “you’re not big and strong there” (P-1, Male).

The natural environment was regarded by some surfers as a sacred place where they connect with God and learn to be more modest which goes hand in hand with their religious beliefs:

It’s so giving, you know I’m a Christian, so I feel the connection to God it’s really in the water and I feel so humble being out there. So yeah, it’s almost spiritual I think being in the water, being in nature. It’s where we come from, we can’t stay stuck in a concrete jungle (P-6, Male).

For some surfers, the extreme and sometimes dangerous conditions along the Jæren coast also contributed to the sense of connection with the elements of nature:

Yes, that is why we surf during the wintertime (laughs). That is the reason why we really do surf this time, it doesn't matter if it's cold or if it's blowing or if it's raining because we have a sea and we have the waves, and we have the feeling of being there. The feeling is so great that you kind of ignore the circumstances (P-13, Female).

Surfers identified that they were aware of the risks involved, particularly due to the cold:

It's also the temperature of the sea, you can have hypothermia. Yeah, it's hard to be a surfing boy at Jæren... I think it can be really dangerous to surf out there, but you need to know your kind of limits, like be careful (P-3, Male).

However, the ability to deal with the risks associated with surfing in the extreme conditions of the area was also viewed positively:

And sometimes you get this "Oh I survived this shit", that is an amazing feeling, even if it wasn't good looking what you did out there (laughs) but you came out of it and you say "fuck, I could have drowned now", so yeah (P-1, Male).

Theme 5: physical health benefits

All of the surfers interviewed were of the opinion that surfing promoted positive wellbeing and motivated them to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Surfers affirmed that surfing provided a double benefit; they are out having fun in the ocean and exercising at the same time. Surfing was seen as a regular training that keeps them active, fit and healthy. For example, a female surfer stated that it is "a natural way to stay in shape and while other people go to the gym, you just do what you love" (P10, Female). Surfing motivated surfers to take extra care of themselves and of their overall health:

You do start caring about yourself a little bit more like me getting older, health wise. That's also a benefit of being passionate about something which involves physical fitness because you do wanna keep doing what you do. Otherwise, I definitely wouldn't care that much about myself (P-7, Male).

Surfing has also been acknowledged as a main motive for surfers to resist temptations of unhealthy habits such as alcohol consumption:

When I started surfing, I completely quit drinking, because it's Saturdays and Sunday mornings, it's always empty lineup because everybody is out Friday and Saturday, so I can have it (laughs). I go out but not drinking, drive home, sleep good and then in the morning (laughs) (P12, Female).

Theme 6: mental wellbeing

Surfers positively associated mental wellbeing with surfing: "If I should compare it with anything I'd compare it to a really good meditation" a surfer says (P-11, Female). Several surfers admitted that surfing has played an important role in helping them overcome their depression and anxiety. Surfing was described as a type of therapy by several surfers. One of the participants explained how she used surfing to overcome her depression after a divorce and becoming a single parent with two kids at an early age:

It was a hard time for me, to be raising the kids, studying and all this new life situation. So, surfing for me in the start was kind of a lesson to learn in life. It's like you have a fight with the ocean, with the waves coming toward you, with the current. You don't know where to be. You end up everywhere you don't think you would end up in the sea, but you keep on trying. For me, I felt that I was not succeeding so much maybe as a single parent alone and I'm feeling lonesome. I was succeeding in the sea (laughs) and I experienced that "oh, yeah, I did it. I rode this wave". I used the sea as kind of a therapy, and I always felt more rested to get home with the kids after a session (P13, Female).

Similarly, another surfer stated that surfing has been beneficial for him when he was having personal problems: "It was good for me to have surfing when things were bad in my relationship. That's been fantastic; it made me also very happy in a way" (P-7, Male).

Participants reported that surfing enhanced their self-esteem and self-belief. It improved their confidence, self-worth and made them feel good about themselves:

It helps, yeah, I think it makes people better. It makes them feel good about themselves, and what makes you feel good makes you also feel like it's good for your own perception of yourself (P-7, Male).

Another surfer stated that surfing was a unique activity that enhanced their self-esteem and made them feel superior because they were out surfing in all conditions:

I remember when I was younger, you had a lot of self-esteem, because you were doing something unique, and you were part of something special. So, I felt that we were a little bit above the rest and if there was another guy that was, I don't know maybe very good looking and all that, we felt we were looking down on them because we were surfers and we were out there in all conditions, and he was probably just building muscles and you know paying attention to his looks. So, we felt that we were yeah, a little bit up there (P-2, Male).

Surfers also mentioned that surfing made them feel proud of themselves. They felt that they were good representatives of their country which gave them a sense of pride in their community:

It makes me I guess a little proud because the surf sport in Norway has been very small. It's growing really fast and to be like kind of I don't know, being a good ambassador for the sport in Norway, pushing it further and educating people, yeah (P-6, Male).

The effects of COVID-19

The Norwegian COVID-19 restrictions were initiated on March 12, 2020, gradually liberated between July 15 and September 25, 2020, gradually lifted from September 01 to December 15, 2021, and finally lifted on February 12, 2022. Sports arrangements were prohibited from April 07, 2020 to September 1, 2020. The restrictions had only minor net effects on surfing in Jæren. Several reasons contributed to this. As the access to these beaches is open for anyone under the law of common access, most of the surfing is unorganized and an outcome of individual initiatives. As surfing could be undertaken with greater than two meters separation between the participants, thus meeting the inter-individual distance requirements of two meters required by the Norwegian health authorities. In addition, travel to and from the beach could be made in the surfers' own cars.

The composition of surfers changed during the pandemic. Surfers from other countries were not allowed to cross the borders due to the COVID-19 restrictions and were no longer seen on these beaches. However, due to the same restrictions, Norwegian surfers were hindered from going abroad and some of them consequently turned to the Jæren beaches to enjoy their sport. This shift more than compensated for the loss of foreign surfers with regard to local supplies of accommodations, meals, gear, and activities on the beaches and in the waves. Furthermore, many surfers who were forced by their employers to work from home during the pandemic enjoyed more flexibility for short breaks during working hours to visit the beaches when surf conditions were best, thus increasing the number of surfers. The flexibility in moving the “home office” outside one's normal place of residence allowed surfers from other parts of Norway to move their workplace to the beach:

Quite a few surfers from other parts of Norway and who worked from home during the pandemic rented a cabin or flat close to the beaches. Thus, they had only a few meters to the beach and could increase their surfing activities (P-14, male).

However, organized surfing courses for school classes, organized groups, and team building activities for employees in various business organizations were disrupted due to the COVID-19 restrictions, and surf businesses catering for these groups almost ran out of demand for their services:

The activity increased for some groups.... Initially, the organized activities suffered, however, it increased rapidly to pre-COVID levels when restrictions for sport activities were changed, and surfing became one of the few sports that were allowed. Surfing on surfers' own initiative increased as work

organizations' use of “home office” were opened and the surfers were given more flexibility to surf when conditions were optimal for the sport (P-14, male).

The planned Norwegian Surf Championship was held, just before the restrictions were enforced on April 7, 2020, and the Norwegian Surf Cup was held on October 23–25, 2020, and again November 5–7, 2021, in ‘windows’ when the restrictions were temporarily lifted. After the restrictions were finally lifted on February 12, 2022, the Norwegian Surf Cup was again organized on April 1–2, 2022. The number of participants were not influenced by the pandemic:

We were lucky, the restrictions were enforced first time the day after the championship. The next occasion was when the restrictions were modified, and the third championship was after the restrictions were withdrawn. The number of participants was even higher than it used to be, or at least not lower (P-14, male).

As social interactions, gatherings and most sports were restricted by the authorities during the pandemic, surfing became an important window of opportunity for people to meet and interact with one another. Consequently, surfing became a means to meet and interact with others outside one's own family group, increasing the social benefits of the sport during the COVID-19 restriction period in Norway.

Discussion

The personal benefits identified by surfers in this study are consistent with those identified by [Wankel and Berger \(1991\)](#) for sport more generally and build on [Driver et al. \(1991\)](#) research on the benefits of leisure. In addition, findings are consistent with [Usher \(2023\)](#) and [Willig \(2008\)](#) who reported that extreme sports (e.g., surfing) provide participants with many pleasurable feelings. The study's findings also confirm [Diehm and Armatas \(2004\)](#) findings that surfing provides a socially acceptable form of risk-taking. Surfing in Jæren was found to create strong feelings of happiness and joyfulness in participants. Words and expressions such as “fantastic”, “pure pleasure” and “100 percent fun” were used to describe their surfing experiences. These strong emotional responses to surfing have been reported for surfers elsewhere (e.g., Liberia, Portugal, and the UK) ([Roy, 2014](#); [Sotomayor and Barbieri, 2016](#); [Marshall et al., 2020](#); [Usher, 2023](#); [Volkamer, 2023](#)).

The strong feelings of pleasure, freedom, and enjoyment that surfers experienced are consistent with [Ackerman \(2011\)](#) who argues that extreme sports trigger “deep play”. When surfers were out in the ocean, they left all their daily worries and problems behind. Surfing provided them with a serenity of mind for some time; they were in what is known as the “paratelic” state. This is consistent with [Gyimothy and Mykletun \(2004\)](#) and [Kerr and Apter \(1991\)](#) description of individuals experiencing play. Individuals in play create their own small and private worlds which [Kerr and Apter \(1991\)](#) called a “protective frame” or a “psychological safety zone” within which they are temporarily isolated from the outside world and its problems. However, surfers in this study

shared experiences that can also be considered as “telic” episodes. They conveyed how they experienced feelings of frustration when their surfing skills and competencies did not match the challenges they faced during a surf session. This supports Gyimothy and Mykletun (2004) and Kerr and Apter (1991) statements on how individuals experiencing play tend to shift back and forth between the paratelic and telic states of mind at different times during the same play episode.

An important theme to emerge from the interviews was consistent with the characteristics of “flow”, which Csikszentmihalyi (2002) proposed as a psychological state associated with leisure pursuits. More specifically, surfers focused so much on what they were doing during surfing they were completely immersed in the activity to a degree where they lost self-consciousness. They became at one with the activity and felt as if they were in a different world. Participants also lost track of time; they felt that time was altered and passed faster than normal. In accordance with the findings of Celsi (1992) study which investigated the transcendent benefits of high-risk sports and concluded that participants did experience flow, surfers were found to meet the criteria of flow as well. Similarly, other research, such as that undertaken by Anderson (2015) and Wheaton et al. (2017), has found a connection between surfing and experiencing flow. The interviews also revealed what Csikszentmihalyi (2002) argued; that flow may have addictive effects on individuals who experience it. This finding is also consistent with Partington et al. (2009) study on big wave surfers’ addictive tendencies being linked to flow experiences and Cheng and Lu (2015) and Taylor (2007) who identified a relationship between surfing, flow-experience, and personal wellbeing.

Regular participation in physical activity is known to provide individuals with health benefits such as physical fitness, weight management and muscular strength (Wankel and Berger, 1991). The findings of this study show that surfers identify a number of personal physical health benefits from their surfing. Interestingly, they went beyond simply focusing on their physical fitness, but they found that their involvement with surfing motivated them to adopt a healthy lifestyle to be able to continue surfing. For example, they quit or reduced their consumption of alcohol, slept better, woke up earlier and deliberately managed their weight to stay fit. These findings contrast with the image often associated with surfers as being rebels, “party animals”, and individuals with a prevalence of excessive consumption of alcohol and recreational drug use (Kennedy, 2015).

Even though there are exceptions, it is argued that pop culture and societal understanding of surfers have often been abusive (Wentura, 2019). The communist hippie, the deviant who does not understand the concept of “private property,” the psychedelic drug user, and the timewaster who surfs all day and parties by the bonfire all night are a few examples of stereotypes, which are now viewed as merely hasty generalizations (Wentura, 2019). The benefits recognized by participants in this study are, however, more consistent with those of Frank et al. (2009), who showed that surfers consider that surfing improves neuromuscular function and provides them with an enhanced quality of life. In accordance with Usher (2017), “negative public perceptions of surfers and surfing obscure the benefits of surfing and the

positive contributions surfers have made to their communities” (p. 153).

In addition to the physical health benefits identified, the findings of this study suggest a positive relationship between surfing and mental wellbeing which supports previous evidence that sport activity promotes mental health (Wankel and Berger, 1991; Biddle and Mutrie, 2007; Britton and Foley, 2021; Usher, 2023). The findings also support those of Britton and Foley (2021) and lisahunter and Stoodley (2021), confirming that the utilization of water environments known as “blue spaces” for marine recreational activities such as surfing can provide participants with various health and therapeutic benefits. Research by Fox (1999) showed that physical activity associated with sport participation created a more positive mood which is consistent with the findings of this study. Furthermore, the findings of the study support those of Biddle and Mutrie (2007) regarding extreme sports more generally, and affirm that surfing boosts participants’ self-esteem, enhances self-belief and provides feelings of pride through mastering the waves and acquiring and developing surfing skills. However, interestingly, this contrasts with the findings that some participants in this study experienced frustration with their (lack of) abilities and/or the surf conditions.

Findings are consistent with Butts (2001), Beaumont and Brown (2018), and Langseth (2012) study of Norwegian surfers, in that the Jæren surfing subculture engenders a sense of social belonging and relatedness which is associated with positive interpersonal relationships. The findings are also consistent with the work of Lemarié (2023) and Towner and Lemarié (2020), who contended that being a local surfer can instill a sense of belonging and solidarity as well as be a source of honor and distinction. Even though surfing is an individual sport, surfers create what Turner (1970) called “communitas” which Celsi (1992) considered a transcendent benefit gained by participants in high-risk sports. In communitas, surfers in this study shared the burden of the disruption caused by the pandemic and the joy of camaraderie and social belonging while surfing.

Surfers’ connection to the natural environment was shown to benefit both the surfers and the environment through their behavior and support of environmental organizations. Surfers in this study adopted environmentally beneficial practices such as organizing “clean the beach” days, collecting trash from the water and beaches and protecting coastal sand dunes. These findings show that participants’ deep connection to nature had a transformational effect on them. It transformed any tendency for anthropocentricity and replaced it with eccentricity as reported by Brymer and Oades (2009). Indeed, research focusing on emotions and the relationship between humans and the natural environment has revealed that connecting to nature is crucial not only for developing one’s identity but also for forming emotional communities of surfers who may go on to become environmental activists (Falaix et al., 2021). The findings are in accordance with those of Brymer et al. (2009), Brymer et al. (2020), Brymer and Gray (2009), Elmahdy et al. (2021), Taylor (2007) and Usher (2023) who reported that surfing, as a nature-based sport, creates opportunities for surfers to appreciate, unite and positively connect with nature and other living creatures. The interaction with and connection to nature that these surfers have, and the knowledge they acquire, has

potential use in marine management practices (Brewin et al., 2015; Reineman, 2016).

The environment also acted as a facilitator for surfers' deepening their understanding of themselves and their position in the natural world. Furthermore, for some, the environment was seen as a provider of spiritual benefits and a facilitator for a connection to their Christian God. This connection between surfing and spirituality has been recognized (Taylor, 2007; Kerby, 2010; Usher, 2023) but seldom explored. Contrary to the widespread beliefs about extreme sport participants as sportsmen and women who seek to fight against and defeat nature (Breton, 2000), the findings from this study showed that participants perceived nature as a source of power that could not be conquered. Surfers aspired to be in sync and harmony with the ocean and its waves and other living creatures and their awareness of the power of nature over them provided them with strong feelings of humility and modesty.

The COVID-19 pandemic had only minor quantitative impact on surfing activities at the Jæren beaches, however, it led to some changes in these sport activities. Parallel to the surfers studied by Usher (2022), restrictions and hazards related to international travel reduced the patronage of foreign surfers on the Jæren beaches. Likewise, the restrictions on international travel for Norwegian surfers meant they visited the Jæren beaches as they had lost access to beaches in other parts of the world. In addition, restrictions on some employees' presence at their workplaces directed employees to work from home, and this increased their flexibility to temporarily move to Jæren and go surfing when the conditions were at their best. These findings mainly support the conclusions of Mach (2021), arguing that "...surfers represent a crisis-resistant tourist segment" (p. 75). Studying surf tourism in Cape Town, Martín-González et al. (2021) concluded that active sports such as surf tourism and domestic tourism might help short-term tourism recovery. This conclusion is supported by the present study.

On the other hand, as sports arrangements were prohibited during parts of the pandemic, organized surfing activities such as surf classes and team-building activities were abandoned, which prohibited some potential surfers from entering the sport and seriously reduced the income and everyday living for some small companies offering such services. Surf events and championships, however, were only marginally affected because most of the scheduled events occurred either right before the restrictions were placed on sport activities, in "time windows" when the restrictions were lifted, or right after the restrictions were finally removed.

The findings of the study are partly in line with those of Usher (2023), who demonstrated great diversities in surfing activities during the pandemic, depending upon where the surfers were able to practice their sport. Referring to the law of common access, the long beaches at Jæren were never closed for individual surfers, and the sport could be undertaken with more than two meters of distance to other surfers, which was required by the regulations. Thus, in the context of the COVID-19 restrictions, surfers in Norway were able to continue an active engagement in their sport.

A few more studies with a focus on surfers and COVID-19 have been published. Aguiar-Quintana et al. (2022) argued that tourism recovers quickly from crises such as the pandemic, but they

presented no data supporting this contention. The present study showed that there was no need for managed recovery. McParland et al. (2021) and Lima et al. (2021) discussed COVID-19-related potential health challenges for surfers and proposed measures to mitigate their occurrences and effects, however, without presenting empirical findings for surfers. No health issues were reported in the current study.

Conclusions

This study adds to the body of knowledge within the field of leisure and recreation and, more specifically, with regard to the personal benefits that arise from participation in extreme sports. This research presents the first empirical data on the personal benefits of surfing from a non-traditional surfing nation in Scandinavia. Surfing in sub-polar conditions, such as off the coast of Norway in winter, provides challenges that are not present in the more traditional tropical and temperate locales most popular for surfing. Extreme cold, low light and unpredictable weather events combined with a lack of surfing tradition, few other sea-based recreation participants and little marine rescue infrastructure relevant for surfers, means that surfing in Norway might seem nonsensical to most. However, the fact that a dedicated surfing community exists in Norway and that they engage in surfing through the sub-polar winter means that these participants must derive some benefits from these activities, or else why would they freely choose to do them?

The findings of this study provide evidence of these benefits giving a "voice" to Norwegian surfers. An analysis of these shared narratives revealed six important themes which ranged from: strong feelings, flow, social bonding, connecting with nature, health, wellbeing and self-esteem, to quality of life. These themes reveal the rich and complex nature of leisure pursuits such as surfing and emphasize how influential and important people's participation in such activities are. Surfing, for these people, is not a casual or flippant past-time, rather it is a deeply significant activity through which these people define themselves and consider their place in and their relationships with the world and beyond.

While some of the findings of this study are congruent with those reported for other extreme sports participants, they do reveal new insights. The experienced Norwegian surfers interviewed derived a deep sense of connection with nature, with one another and within themselves, both in terms of their own sense of self-worth but also a sense of connection with their spiritual self. The depth and breadth of influence of surfing on these people is remarkable. Further, being an outdoor, individual sport, surfing defied the strong restrictions placed on sports and social interactions during COVID-19, and the social benefits experienced by the surfers were intensified due to limitations on other types of interactions outside of their own family. For those forced to work from home, options for a surf break during working hours led to more flexibility to enjoy the best surfing conditions, regardless of the time of day, and even their ordinary place of residence. A further effect consistent with that observed for other outdoor recreational activities during the pandemic (Hansen et al., 2023), was a re-prioritizing in their lives and a decision to reduce time spent working and increase time spent in outdoor recreational

activities. For some, this has been a deliberate decision to move away from full-time work and to deliberately adopt a lifestyle that has more balance between work and leisure. This phenomenon has been widely reported as a pandemic effect and, in some places, named “The Great Resignation” (Jiskrova, 2022). In other places, such as in neighboring Sweden, the phenomenon of increased participation in outdoor recreation because of the pandemic has been christened the “outdoorification” of recreation (Hedenborg et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic had minor quantitative effect on surfing at the Jæren beaches. This is due to the geographical and socio-cultural context, effects of international travel restrictions, flexibility of hybrid and home-office work for organizational employees, and “time windows” of lower restrictions on sport events. Under these conditions, surfing appeared as an important way for socializing and practicing sport, thus sustaining the benefits that surfers usually gained from surfing while also supporting the tourism industry during the crisis. No health issues related to COVID-19 were reported.

Furthermore, this evidence adds to the growing understanding of surfing as a meaningful and constructive leisure pursuit as opposed to the stereotyping of it as a deviant and anti-social practice. More specifically, it provides evidence that surfing, even in sub-polar regions, is a positive and beneficial human experience which can positively affect participants’ mental and physical health and enhance their overall wellbeing and quality of life. The findings corroborate the developing understanding of the reasons for participating in extreme sports which demonstrate that these pursuits produce a variety of opportunities and benefits for participants.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the respondents were granted anonymity and no sharing of the data from anyone outside the research group is permitted. The data are not available outside the research group. For more information, please contact YE.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because the research did not focus on any sensitive

psychological or physiological health issues, anonymity was granted, and the procedures of the University of Stavanger were followed. No further approval were required in line with the national authorities requirements. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

YE: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. MO: Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. RM: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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