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# Professional adventure tourists: Producing and selling stories of 'authentic' identity

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## Abstract

The ability to experience distinctive adventure appears limited today in comparison to the accounts of past exploring heroes. Even with these perceived limitations, there is continued growth in remote adventure tours. Guided by a Bourdieusian lens, this article examines the negotiation of authenticity, distinction and identity in the websites and blogs of companies and tourists during the 2010 spring Mt Everest climbing season. The interpretation suggests company blogs offer tourists an experience framed in mountaineering myth. The mountaineering guides' capital derived from skill, experience and decision making ability make this experience possible. The tourists' blogs offer authentically, recognisable environments, practices, and emotions disguising their limited mountaineering abilities. Tourist's existential stories seek to transcend and appropriate mountaineering capital. For the females in this study, tour experience has supported careers based on mountaineering adventurer social identities. The companies' tourism products facilitate the professional adventure tourist's role model claims to 'authentic' adventurer identities.

## Keywords

adventure tourism, Bourdieu, mountaineering field, Mt Everest, symbolic capital

## Introduction

The capacity to travel for recreation or pleasure originally provided a symbolic distinction indicating wealth in resources and time. A level of wealth remains a requirement today, and travel is predominantly a positive feature in an individual's social status. There is, however, little symbolic distinction in being a tourist (Week, 2012). Distinction

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for a tourist comes from unique contexts and differentiating experiences, socially recognised as legitimate and authentic. Such recognition historically came from the accounts of adventuring heroes. The legacy and myths of these past adventure accounts provide a framework of legitimacy for today's packaged adventure tourists (Kane and Tucker, 2004; Laing and Crouch, 2009, 2011). The pervasiveness of myth in the understandings associated with the term adventure has led to the suggestion that 'consumer expectations equate the buying of the packaged adventure with the experiencing of authenticity' (Humberstone, 2009: 6).

To date, adventure tourism research has predominantly focused on conceptual frameworks, typologies, risk management issues and client motivations (Buckley, 2000, 2006, 2010; Hall, 1992; Kane, 2010; Pomfret, 2006, 2010; Spennemann, 2007; Sung et al., 1997; Swarbrooke et al., 2003). While there is no universal adventure tourism definition, openness to challenge, physical involvement in the uncertainties of dynamic activities and a natural context are common characteristics. Critical theorising of adventure tourism has been limited, but scholars in the outdoor education field are challenging the nominal perspectives of adventure (Brown, 2009; Kane, 2011; Zink, 2010). Even considering these critiques, two historically enduring features of both adventure and tourism narratives are the newness of the experience and the otherness of the geo/cultural context (Nash, 1996; Stagl, 1995; Zweig, 1974). Remote and climatically extreme areas, such as the polar regions, oceans and high-altitude mountains, remain contexts that can facilitate newness and otherness. Although polar tourism is rapidly increasing and underwater ocean exploration is a frontier adventure, there is a long-standing adventure tourism industry focused on mountains and mountaineering (Beedie and Hudson, 2003; Johnston and Edwards, 1994).

Publicly alluring accounts of distant first ascents and danger stimulated the development of mountaineering adventure tourism and brought technical advances leading to a 'relative alleviation of physical threat' (Johnston and Edwards, 1994: 463). For pinnacle sites, such as Mt Everest, this has led to a dramatic increase in mountaineering tourist numbers over the last 25 years (Jurgalski, 2010; Salisbury and Hurley, 2007). For adventure tourism 'Everest has become a "truly global iconography" taking up "a huge mental space" in the public imagination' (Frohlick, 2003: 256).

The relative newness and otherness of Nepal authenticates and lends legitimacy to this public imagination. Limited travel to Nepal only commenced in the 1950s, with many early foreign visitors being mountaineers. Their accounts perpetuated the romanticised heroic journey myths of mountaineering adventurers, emphasising empire, colonialism and a dominant White masculinity (Bayers, 2003; Beedie, 2007; Beedie and Hudson, 2003; Isserman and Weaver, 2008). This mythology remains dominant in the global imagination of Mt Everest tourism, but research has suggested alternative and complex perspectives (Bayers, 2003; Bott, 2009; Frohlick, 2003; Ortner, 1999). The mountaineering adventurer myth implies an independent, technically skilled individual, with years of mountaineering experience and excellent decision-making ability (Beedie, 2007; Beedie and Hudson, 2003; Zweig, 1974). However, increasingly the global imagination of Mt Everest mountaineering includes as an 'accepted mode of ascent ... paying to be guided to the summit' (Beedie and Hudson, 2003: 635).

A motivation for inexperienced tourists to undertake guided adventures is the perceived control of danger and uncertainty that guides provide (Pomfret, 2010). The

adventure tour also provides the potential to create differentiating stories of active lifestyles and leisure identities relationally benchmarked and authenticated by the guides' status (Fletcher, 2010; Kane and Zink, 2004; McGillivray and Frew, 2007; Pomfret, 2010). Investigating symbolic capital in a single case study at the 'soft, or mass, end of the adventure market', McGillivray and Frew (2007) suggested that 'both producers and consumers stage a theatrical performance which produces a visual representation of authentic experience transferable to a virtual witnessing audience' (p. 74). In the Mt Everest context, Berger and Greenspan (2008) have further suggested that technology allows tourist 'to cross category boundaries' in identity representation. 'Symbolically, at the Everest summit, the Sherpa {guide} and the western climber {tourist} both carry a devoted, determined, and unified "mountaineer" identity' (p. 110). Empirical research with Sherpa suggests little evidence of any unified identity and may be more an existential desire of Western tourist to colonise the 'other' (Bott, 2009; Frohlick, 2003). Tourists' stories can traverse the core mountaineering myths, but tourists and guides appear to have divergent motives and emotions (Burke et al., 2010; Gordon, 2006; Tumbat, 2011).

The mountaineering mythologies that continue to frame both guides' and tourists' experiences of Mt Everest suggest mountaineer lifestyle and identity based on skill and experience. Bourdieu's (1987/1990) conceptualisation of social space suggests that mountaineering guides have these skills and they have a dominant status or 'symbolic capital'.

Symbolic capital enables forms of domination which imply dependence on those who can be dominated by it, since it only exists through the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others, and can only be perpetuated so long as it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence. (Bourdieu, 1997/2000: 166)

The mountaineering guides depend on tourists so they can practically display their capital. Adventure tourists seeking a mountaineering adventurer identity must obtain belief that they have symbolic capital. Their blogs provide the avenue to obtaining this belief, not from the mountaineers who guide them but from the broader society, the virtual audience (McGillivray and Frew, 2007). Their re-storied experiences of guided adventure tourism highlight mountaineering myths, otherness, unique distinction and recognisable authenticity.

### *Tourism authenticity*

Authenticity in relation to tourism is a contested and ambiguous concept. Authenticity's initial theoretical application was as a tool in explaining tourists' motivations and experience (MacCannell, 1973). The conceptual value has been continually appraised and critiqued, leading MacCannell (2008) to suggest that '[t]oday I might be smarter in my choice of words' (p. 337). Reisinger and Steiner's (2006: 66) review of authenticity even suggests terms such as 'genuine, actual, accurate, real and true' as potential replacements. Given this ambiguity, authenticity remains a popular promotional and social tourism descriptor. Conceptual reviews have highlighted authenticity's explanatory value

through three main theoretical perspectives: objective, constructionist and post-modern existential authenticity (Lau, 2010; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Wang, 1999). These three perspectives of authenticity provide an explanatory avenue to examine how mountaineering mythology and the dominant guides' capital allow tourists to produce mountaineering adventurer identity stories. The companies' Mt Everest product and the tourists' experience portrayed in websites and blogs provide a social context to explore the negotiation of the distinction, symbolic capital and identity.

### *The study*

A selection of websites and weblogs – (blogs) of mountain guiding companies and tourists, plus general statistics – provides the data for this research of Mt Everest adventure tourism. Guiding the research strategy, which draws data from the 2010 spring climbing season, are the conceptual thinking tools of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1987/1990, 1994/1998). His processes of repeated questioning of individual and social perspectives reveal the abstract and objective relations of the social world (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Central to this study is how the tourists negotiate the constraints of guided tourism and freedom of adventure to produce their identity stories. A description of website/blog research and Bourdieu, plus an outline of the research process, follow the initially précis of Mt Everest's history including the three prominent mythologised phrases framing the later discussion section.

## **Mt Everest mountaineering – the past in the present**

Peak XV, known to the Tibetans as Chomolungma or Qomolungma – [goddess mother] – gained the distinction as the highest point on earth and the name Mt Everest in 1856 (Keay, 2000). In the previous year, 1855, the 'first sporting ascent in the Himalaya' was undertaken (Isserman and Weaver, 2008: 17). These events corresponded with the infancy and development of mountaineering and the guiding profession in Europe, with many noted first ascents by aristocrat tourist climbers guided by professional local mountain guides. The Himalayas quickly became a mountaineering destination, but Mt Everest was inaccessible up till the 1920s. Through this decade, the story of one mountaineer, 'Mallory of Everest', became indelibly associated with the mountain (Isserman and Weaver, 2008: 87). The height George Mallory achieved on his fatal 1924 attempt is unknown, but he produced the famous mountaineering motive and Everest associated phrase – 'Because it's there'. Unfortunately the nationalistic jingoism and heroic status focused on Mallory created a myth, which overshadowed Edward Norton's 1924 success of actually climbing to 28,126 ft. Which is just short of the summit; a level not repeated till 1953.

In the interval, the French, Germans, Italians, Americans, New Zealanders and Japanese had significant success on Himalayan peaks with the Swiss climbing to around 28,000 on Mt Everest in 1952 (Isserman and Weaver, 2008). These expeditions included leading mountaineers and professional guides, not the aristocrats of the 1850s/1860s era, although issues of social class did exclude some skilled mountaineers from participating in expeditions (Isserman and Weaver, 2008). The British 1953 Mt Everest expedition,

again steeped in nationalistic pride, provided the first successful summiteers, New Zealander, Edmund Hillary, and Tibetan born, Indian resident, Sherpa, Tenzing Norgay. Neither fitted into the heroic British image due to culture, social class, education and etiquette, with Hillary famously announcing their success with the colloquialism: 'We knocked the bastard off'. The Hillary and Tenzing Everest mythology was cemented in the success of being first to the summit.

Only a few of the subsequent summit ascents and firsts by mountaineers, such as Junko Tabei (first women), Lydia Bradey (first woman with no supplementary oxygen (NSO)), Peter Habeler and Reinhold Messner (first males with NSO; the latter first solo also with NSO), have had similar mountaineering or social significance. The first globally promoted guided climb of Mt Everest was in 1985 by American businessman Dick Bass, stimulating the growth of this adventure tourism product. By 1996, satellite communication and the Internet allowed near instant global coverage of tourists attempting to climb Mt Everest. When an unexpected storm hit in May that year, this technology also chronicled the tourists' and guides' struggle to survive. Replays of a dying guide's satellite-phone conversations, descriptive accounts and speculative analysis featured within hours on global mainstream media (Elmes and Frame, 2008). A surviving tourist, accomplished mountaineer and magazine writer, Jon Krakauer (1997) wrote the most successful account about this event, titled – *Into Thin Air*. The mythology encompassed in this tragic account is arguably now the socially legitimised narrative of Mt Everest mountaineering (Beedie and Hudson, 2003).

Up until 1996, there had been close to 750 successful climbs of Mt Everest, yet by 2012, this number will exceed 5000, with 400–500 summits a year now the norm (Jurgalski, 2010). Demand for Mt Everest mountaineering tourism since 1996 has quadrupled with at least 25 companies active in the 2010 spring season and over 100 tourists guided on the South Col/Southeast Ridge route (Everest, 2010). The communication technology, new in 1996, is widespread now with websites and blogs as the primary data source of this article.

## Website/blog research and Bourdieu

The growth of Mt Everest mountaineering tourism has paralleled the use of the Internet as a tourism information-sharing, communication and marketing tool. For mountain guiding companies, with small client numbers drawn from all over the globe, websites are a critical communication portal. The Mt Everest tourists have also increasingly used the Internet to raise their profiles and enhance sponsorship potential through personal websites and diary blogs of their experience. Banyai and Glover's (2012) review of travel blog research methods suggests that the most popular approaches are quantitative content analysis and qualitative narrative analysis. The application of quantitative measures is often used to assess marketing effectiveness for tourism destinations (Law et al., 2010; Pan et al., 2007; Schmallegger and Carson, 2008). The qualitative methods, used in this study, focus on interpreting the tourists' experience, and particularly the creation of meaning and identity in their re-storied experience.

As Hookway (2008) discusses, there is no agreed consensus on blog-based research approaches and standards. Although the public domain blogs are copyright covered,

there is provision for use of material for research. In following this “fair dealing” notion, the limited quoted extracts are clearly cited. Berger and Greenspan (2008: 94) suggest value in the unsolicited blogs of experience describing ‘insights, worries, and joys as they occurred and were experienced’. A value is seen in the immediacy of expedition blogs when contrasted to the traditional mountaineering and tourism accounts compiled on returning home. Tempering this immediacy value is Gomm’s (2004) notion that ‘writers are usually striving in the very act of writing to make sense of their own lives in a way which offers them the most congenial justification for living them as they did [or are]’ (p. 271). As the blogs are not anonymous, they are also ‘concerned with the art of self-representation, impression management, and potential self-promotion’ (Enoch and Grossman, 2010; Hookway, 2008: 96; Schmallegger and Carson, 2008). Banyai and Glover (2012) also discuss research that highlights the influences and limitations on tourists in creating meaning and identity in their blogs due to already-established identities and dominant social narratives (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2008).

The integration of past, present and future, is critical in Bourdieu’s (1979/1984) conceptualisation of social interaction, inter-generational knowledge and identity. For tourists’ re-storied experience and identity claims to be recognised, they must align to the authorised contexts, practices, understandings, narratives, heroes and myths of the mountaineering field. Bourdieu’s (1987/1990, 1994/1998) concept of field is of a matrix of objective relations between positions within a social space/practice. These positions are ‘objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present or potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital)’ (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992: 97). In fields, with the mountaineering field, a sub-field of the adventure field, the dominant individuals, those with distinction, in this case mountaineering guides, tend to conserve the established order and their ‘authentic’ valued skills, and consequently their capital.

For Bourdieu (1987/1990), practice of distinction in a field is like a game where ‘nothing is simultaneously freer and more constrained as the actions of a good player’ (p. 63). Players with distinction exhibit a symbolic mastery of the practice, a dominant capital in relation to other players ‘requir[ing] time and capacities which ... cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy’ (Bourdieu, 1979/1984: 281). Tourists are dominated by the guides’ capital but are also seeking to be guided to the summit of Mt Everest. A mountain summit is ‘endowed with the greatest distinctive power’ (Bourdieu, 1979/1984: 281). The distinction and capital Mt Everest tourists seek in their blogs is the social recognition and belief in their mountaineering adventurer identity claims. This challenges the mountaineering guides’ dominance but not necessarily in the mountaineering field, where tourists have minimal practically demonstrable skills or capital. The tourist’s seek recognition in a wider social field where details of practical skill are less influential than the symbolic capital they link to prominent mountaineering myths and unique distinction. In this wider social field, ‘what creates the power of the words’ in tourist’s blogs ‘is the belief in the legitimacy of the words and of those who utter them’ (Bourdieu, 1982/1991: 170).

The three prominent Mt Everest mountaineering phrases mentioned in the previous section structure this article’s discussion. For the guiding companies, the mountaineering

myths authenticate their dominant position and also frame the tourism product they offer. For tourists, the myths; the company images, status and service and their lived experience provide the potential to produce stories of mountaineering adventurer identity. The companies' and tourists' websites and blogs require continual questioning of how and why they reference and appeal to the dominant legitimacies and myths (Bourdieu, 1982/1991; Kerby, 1991).

## Research process

The study started with a web search for companies offering guided climbs of Mt Everest, leading to the 'Everest 2010 Climbing Season' website (Everest, 2010). This provided links to 13 established, English language guiding company websites, with 5 selected after further analysis: Dream Guides International (DGI), Rainer Mountain International (RMI), Alpine Ascents International (AAI), Adventure Consultants International (ACI) and Himalayan Experience International (HEI). These websites had a mix of company size, summit success rates and years of experience guiding Mt Everest (between 2 and 20 years). All five were Western-based companies with American, English, New Zealand, Japanese and Nepali guides. Between them, they had 37 tourist clients, 26 males and 11 females, predominantly from the United States, although including tourists from 12 different countries. Four of the five companies profiled their clients, or as they termed them 'members'. The remaining tourists had web profiles, easily searched with reference to their names and Mt Everest. Of the 20 plus tourist blogs linked to 'Everest 2010 Climbing Season', an English woman (Bonita Norris (BN)), 2 American women (Wendy Bonker (WB) and Alison Levine (AL)) and 2 American men (Victor Vescovo (VV) and Leif Whitaker (LW)) frequently updated their blogs in late March and early April. In late April, one of the female American tourists terminated her climbing attempt. Realising there may be more terminations, I added to my data set the most comprehensive of the other tourists' blogs I had initially reviewed, and still occasionally read. This was of a Finnish woman, Carina Raiha (CR). The style and language of these six were representative of other tourists' blogs, but not of the tourists' gender mix, which remains male dominated.

The initial analysis of the five guiding companies' websites collected written data on company profile and history, guide profiles, information on Mt Everest, expedition schedule and past summit list/success rates. There was similar use of dramatic mountain pictures and video climbing footage across all the websites. Several also had descriptions and pictures of past Mt Everest eras. In late March 2010, I archived the texts from these websites for later word and phrase analysis, coding of themes and comparison of meanings. From early April, both the company blogs and the tourist blogs were visited daily, new entries were read and all texts were archived. My daily readings were stimulating and voyeuristically addictive, with potential interpretations and ideas electronically noted.

I commenced the focused analysis a month after the end of the climbing season in July, with an entire reading of archived website data, and company and tourist blogs, ranging in length from 6000 to 50,000 words. This analysis questioned how context, practice and emotions were recognised and negotiated in anticipated and presented

stories of experience. The strong influence of socially dominant mountaineering and adventure narratives was apparent in reading of companies' and tourists' blogs (Banyai and Glover, 2012). Bourdieu's (1982/1991: 105) field concept supports this influence as tourists seek to draw on the 'symbolic efficacy' of past mountaineering accounts and myths, which have 'established the structure of this world'. The repeated questioning of the data continued till late 2011. The tourists' websites were again examined to provide some time perspective in relation to the adventure tourist experience.

Reflecting the prominent themes, the discussion is presented in reference to the three phrases introduced in the previous section, 'Because it's there', 'We knocked the bastard off' and '*Into thin air*'. The mythology associated with these phrases influence mountaineering and adventure tourism understandings. The company websites preserve the established value of practical skills and the mountaineering mythology to produce an image of potential touristic freedom for the adventurous expedition 'members'. The tourists' blogs transcend the objective, socially constructed and existential understandings of authentic mountaineering, adventure and tourism experience. They negotiate reality and myth in their production of re-storied experience, seeking symbolic capital and legitimacy for claims of mountaineering adventurer identity.

### **'Because it's there'**

Mt Everest is the guiding companies' premier expedition product, and often the final mountain in tourists' multi-year endeavours to climb the highest point on the seven continents. The height, remoteness and inhospitable environment provide an objective authenticity (Lau, 2010). The distinctive power of Mt Everest, derived from this objective context, also draws on 'the historical work of succeeding generations' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 139). This socially constructed authenticity is a product of the understandings developed from past climbing expedition accounts. This social understanding and global status of Mt Everest allowed the companies to offer 'quite simply an experience beyond description' (RMI, 2010). Reference is made to Tenzing and Hillary summiting as 'one of the greatest achievements in Mountaineering' (AAI, 2010). This phrasing allows prospective clients 'to read between the lines, by re-enacting in the mode of practice (in most cases unconsciously) the linguistic associations and substitutions initially set up by the producer' (Bourdieu, 1982/1991: 158). In effect, allowing tourists to imagine and re-story their experience in relation to dominant mythologised accounts. The company websites facilitate their future clients' freedom to envision and construct authentically framed existential stories of experience (Frohlick, 2003, 2005; Kane and Tucker, 2004; Kay and Laberge, 2003). This freedom requires stories traverse the three theorised perspectives of authenticity prominent in tourism (Lau, 2010; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Wang, 1999). A freedom that can be read in company statements such as 'It is truly an emotional moment standing on top of the world after all the time, effort and preparation that it takes to get there' (DGI, 2010).

Emotional experience has been an authenticating theme in the stories of adventure and mountaineering historically. Gordon (2006) suggests that this theme expresses 'a search for transcendence that is, though ultimately impossible, structured upon principles

of hierarchy and domination' (p. 13). Novelty and difficulty are the dominating features, with those 'who stick their necks out the farthest and return alive ... at the top of this discursive hierarchy' (Gordon, 2006: 12). The emotional purity of a tourist's existential experience potentially transcends the paradoxical impurity of advanced technology, financial cost and their guided roles. The emotional environment in extended company – tourist service relationships on Mt Everest expeditions, appears to be co-managed (Tumbat, 2011). Guides model controlled emotions and provide support, while tourists 'engage in emotion work to convince a guide that they are physically able to climb' (Tumbat, 2011: 199).

The mythologised emotional motive for mountaineering, captured in Mallory's 'Because it's there' phrase, focuses on the individual's relationship to the mountain. For each of the tourists in this study, it was a challenge and goal relationship linked to their personal and professional identity. For most, it is a short-term and novel relationship, with three having made previous attempts on Mt Everest to complete their seven summits, while all but one of the others had only started climbing in the last few years. Their limited mountaineering experience, gained predominantly on guided trips, suggests a motivation and emotional focus on goal success, not a 'pure' emotional connection to mountaineering or adventure practice. Their anticipated experience was casually referred to as a 'brave step' (CR, 2010), or 'crazy idea' (BN, 2010). They disguise their guided context, yet symbolically linked themselves to the mountaineering guides' status, with one implying mountaineering capital in being 'team captain' (AL, 2010/2011) of a past guided expedition (Kane, 2011; Laing and Crouch, 2009, 2011; Pomfret, 2010).

This symbolic alignment obscured their tourist reality of restrictions and controls determined by the mountain guides. By transcending the tourist-guide positions in their blogs, the tourists in this study produced, symbolically at least, a distinct and sellable mountaineer adventurer identity story (Berger and Greenspan, 2008; Gordon, 2006). The words in their blogs emphasise experience of pure emotions and participating in heroically brave decisive actions. They suffer hardship, show determination and promote a role model social benefit but ignore their lack of technical or decision-making mountaineering skill (Beedie and Hudson, 2003; Gyimothy and Mykletun, 2004; Kane, 2011; Zweig, 1974). The anticipated 'intensity and suffering that lies high up there' (VV, 2010: March 29) and the 'days of pain' (AL, 2010: April 23) described in blogs had not been prepared for by time mountaineering but by socially recognisable 'suffering in the gym' (VV, 2010: March 25). The shared negative descriptions of mountaineering's early morning starts, boredom, global communication problems, food and body hygiene issues contrast to the stoic, even enthusiastic emphasis, on environmental hardships of the 'authentic' mountaineering myths.

The descriptions suggest a tourist role of playing at past mythical adventure and deriving authenticity from links to social constructs and objective contexts (Gyimothy and Mykletun, 2004; Kane and Tucker, 2004; Laing and Crouch, 2009, 2011). Any potential distinction will refer to the objective goal of summit success, enhanced by any variety of a unique first. Their blog stories strived to present a believable uniqueness of an experience recognised, by those outside the mountaineering field, through the myths of 'because it's there' motivations and heroic success.

## 'Knocking the bastard off'

Over 3000 individuals have stood on the top of the world, but only two, Hillary and Tenzing, have the distinction, mountaineering and global capital, of being first. For the tourists and guiding companies, the goal of reaching the summit is both uncertain and also not a guarantee of social recognition, status or continued operation. The guiding companies promote aspects of their success with qualified statements in having 'nearly twice the success rate of any other American company' (AAI, 2010) or 'the most successful British guide on Everest' (DGI, 2010). With only 50% of the climbing tourists historically making the summit, companies cannot guarantee summit success. The guides status and experience is central in differentiating company's customer service. 'Our guiding staff add a tangible degree of safety, expertise and guidance – the support they provide will make the difference between a difficult trip and a safe and enjoyable one' (ACI, 2010). The guarantee the companies give is for tourists to be included in the expeditions 'unique team approach' (AAI, 2010), and in this the culture and myth of Mt Everest mountaineering. Contradicting this is the description of tourists as 'members', not climbers or mountaineers, indicating a status-differentiated and hierarchical position below the mountaineering guides. In Bourdieu's (1982/1991) conceptualisation of fields, titles indicate a cultural position, so the title 'legitimizes distinctions by forcing all other cultures (designated as sub-cultures) to define themselves by their distance from the dominant culture' (p. 167). The mountaineer title conserves the established order with skill, experience and decision-making practice as the dominant capital. Although the 'member' title indicates a lower position than climber or mountaineer, it does allow tourists to differentiate a mountaineering position and identity claim. They are relationally connected to the mountaineering guides' capital, while also benefiting practically from the guides skills in keeping them safe and increasing their potential of success (Pomfret, 2010).

With no summit success guaranteed, however, tourists' blogs emphasises their guides' status, suggesting that they have 'the best and most experienced guide and Sherpa team on the mountain' (VV, 2010, 18 April). Distinction is also claimed in just 'being there'. 'If I didn't reach the summit, the journey there has been remarkable, even more important than the goal itself' (CR, 2010, 30 March). For the one tourist who did not summit her 'amazing journey' discovering a 'new life' was compared to a Shackleton-like 'triumph over enormous odds' (WB, 2010, 24 April). Her few weeks on a guided adventure tour to Camp Two on Mt Everest in reality has limited similarity to Shackleton's months of struggle to survive in Antarctica 100 years earlier, but the comparison does existentially suggest a symbolic distinction.

Bourdieu (1982/1991) proposes that all practices can 'function as a *distinctive sign* and, when the difference is recognized, legitimate and approved, as a *sign of distinction*' (p. 237). A tourist, with minimal mountaineering skill, guided to the summit of Mt Everest may now be a sign of mountaineering distinction, at least in the public imagination (Beedie and Hudson, 2003; Frohlick, 2003). A unique first or record in the adventure tourist's summit success only enhances this image of distinction in their guided 'performance of adventure' (Laing and Crouch, 2009: 134; Zweig, 1974). The value and goal of summit success remained central with a guide suggesting that it 'opened new doors for me' (HEI,

2010) and a tourist imagining the ‘opportunities that will come with the summit’ (LW, 2010, 20 May). The value in the journey expressed by one tourist did not diminish the goal to ‘become the first Finnish woman on [the top of] Mt Everest’ (CR, 2010, 30 March). So when summit success did come, any unique distinctions were expressed. ‘Along with the fantastic members of the Dream Guides team, I managed to summit Mt Everest. In doing so, I am proud to be the new holder of a British record: Youngest British Female’ (BN, 2010, 17 May). As getting to Camp Two, not the summit, could be a Shackleton-like triumph, the understating of ‘along with’ can disguise the reality that a team of Sherpa guides had to rescue this mountain tourist from just below the summit.

The objective ‘because it’s there’ authenticity in geographic context is socially recognisable, but Hillary’s and Tenzing’s unrepeatable first requires tourist to claim their unique summit distinction framed in a similar casual style.

Tagging the top marked my completion of the ‘Seven Summits’ (climbing the highest peak on each continent) and one of my teammates told me that I am the 1<sup>st</sup> American woman to achieve what is known as the ‘Grand Slam’ (I thought this was a breakfast at Denny’s???? But apparently the Adventure Grand Slam refers to climbing the Seven Summits and also skiing to both the North and South Poles). (AL, 2010, 28 May)

It is unlikely this ‘Grand Slam’ goal was not well known, as the tourist’s websites suggested that she is a professional motivational/leadership speaker marketed on her ‘adventurer/mountaineer’ identity (AL, 2010). The adventure tourist stories of unique mountaineering identity are self-promotional, impression management productions and not simple descriptions of fact (Hookway, 2008; Kerby, 1991). The reality of the facilitated adventure tourist experience, being tethered to a line and following behind mountain guides when told, is transcended in the tourist existential claims of successful and distinctive mountaineering adventurer identity. Post-summit, in their re-storied experience, they are not expedition ‘members’, guided by skilled mountaineers, but free, unique, decisive adventurers, controlling success and challenging death.

### **‘Into thin air’**

The omnipresent potential for death themed through guiding company websites, contradicts the suggestion that commercial suppliers have erased risk and danger in their selling of adventure tourism experience (Palmer, 2004). Their language does not dwell on death, they positively emphasise safety, but like summit success, there is no guarantee of safety. The socially constructed mythology of Mt Everest is grounded in a climbing history that has highlighted danger and death. The 1996 ‘into thin air’ adventure tourism tragedy infuses guiding company’s danger/safety management phrasing and tourists’ expectations of their mountaineering experience. Two company reference the 1996 tragedy suggesting that ‘without communication, things can go awfully wrong’ (HEI, 2010) and that ‘about everything ... has changed now, in how we now operate on Everest’ (ACI, 2010). As the majority of the climbing route has fixed safety ropes, limiting potential for falls, companies highlight the research on deaths through fatigue, on or shortly after the summit, and their innovative acclimatisation plans to reduce time travelling through the

Kumbu Icefall (AAI, 2010; HEI, 2010). The reality of these two potential dangers and dynamic weather conditions are ongoing features on company blogs.

Mirroring the company websites, tourists' blogs repeatedly refer to the effects of altitude on their health, and more dramatically describe threatening trips through the Kumbu Icefall and the anticipated summit 'death zone'. Their reactions to memorials of dead climbers are varied but even in the more light-hearted responses 'I don't want to be honoured in this neck of the woods' (AL, 2010, 13 April), they acknowledge the 'very visible and chilling reminder of where we're going and what the stakes are' (VV, 2010, 9 April). The reminders of death link to the discursive hierarchy in mountaineering narratives, where returning alive from the farthest dangers has significant distinction (Gordon, 2006). The tourists have limited control of decisions or safety so 'while we are relaxing in our tents or outside enjoying the sunshine, it is hard to think about the real challenges' (CR, 2010, 10 April). They are frustrated with the reality of high-altitude mountaineering in the length of the acclimatisation process, the time focused on practising mountaineering skills and waiting for weather conditions. The apparent disinterest in mountaineering skills, training and ensuring their own safety indicates their touristic freedom. They can imagine an emotional purity in 'because it's there' motives while paying for the service that will facilitate their summit goal success. They story their experience as decisive, professional and adventurous, but they cannot disguise that they are in an 'environmental bubble' supplied by the guiding companies (Cohen, 1972: 166). Bourdieu (1979/1984) suggests that historically mountaineering 'offers for the minimum economic cost the maximum distinction, distance, height, spiritual elevation, through the sense of simultaneously mastering one's own body and a nature inaccessible to the many' (p. 219). This did, however, involve learning the skills and gaining mountaineering experience, a process transcended by the tourist economic power. Their 'navigation' of the icefall and 'climb' to the summit must wait for Sherpa guides to 'figure out the safest route to cross' and secure 'the route to the summit' (CR, 2010, 10 and 30 April).

The summit 'death zone' often features in anticipation of summit day success, but their lack of mountaineering experience is evident in tourist-type admission of having, 'no clue how long this will take. 12-15 hours perhaps??? 18??' (AL, 2010, 16 May). The potential reality of death in mountaineering is blurred by the 'into thin air' mythology, where there is an 'unspoken agreement on the mountain to pretend' (Krakauer, 1997: 107). This pretence is that safety management can prevent adventure tourist deaths, a human control of nature that 'trivialise[s] the experience of life in harsh physical environments' (Elmes and Frame, 2008: 235; Humberstone, 2009). A pretence also influenced by a myth, as although historically Sherpa guides have been the majority to die climbing Mt Everest, most deaths are now of adventure tourists (Jurgalski, 2010; Salisbury and Hurley, 2007). Death is an authentic potential on Mt Everest, yet tourists display their inexperience through frustration with the guides caution related to weather conditions. The co-management of emotions and need for pretence often related to the limited skill of the tourists and guides ability to manage a safe experience (Tumbat, 2011). The emotional work of one tourist considering the potential for death was to 'assure yourself, you will be different. You have to believe it or you wouldn't continue' (VV, 2010, 28 May).

Assisting the tourist pretence is the protective service bubble provided by guides even in the harsh environment of the South Col as this description of personal clothing and equipment describes:

I stood like a knight of the Middle Ages, preparing for battle as Thapkee [Sherpa mountain guide] put on my climbing harness, crampons, and pack for me ... Within a half hour, I was fully equipped and prepared to go up ... Perhaps the funniest moment of the day occurred when I motioned to Thapkee and let him know that before we set out, I absolutely had to relieve my bladder ...

Shocking the hell out of me, he lunged at my groin and began to furiously look for the various zips and fasteners that led to my biological relief system, as it were. At first I tried to resist his efforts, thinking I could take care of it myself, but he was adamant. He was going to help me go quickly and I had no say in the matter ... We were in the Death Zone and everything was a serious matter. (VV, 2010, 1 June)

There is some humour in this account, but it also indicates the limited mountaineering ability of one of the more experienced tourists, on his second Mt Everest attempt, and last climb of the seven highest continental summits. The understatement of the 'youngest British female', mentioned at the end of the previous section, relates to her rescue from the South Summit, similar to a previous rescue on her practice high-altitude guided climb. Her re-storied experience repeats the critical safety issues the company websites promote, but as with the pretence of all tourists, her minimal skill and experience are not considered a contributing factor.

The descent started smoothly, we got stuck behind some climbers literally sleeping on the path. People felt like they had done the job and now could rest- we were very aware that safety and relaxation only comes when you are back safely at Camp 4. The Hillary Step was busy – it was my turn to descend a short rock step. I did the normal – clipped in, took hold of the rope, and as best as I could – walked down the section of ice and rock. This is where my crampon must have slipped. (BN, 2010, 21 May)

Two teams of mountain guides re-ascended to affect a rescue that extended their days work to over 28 hours. It could be assumed that the tourist and mainly Sherpa guides were not sharing similar emotions or unified identities at this point (Berger and Greenspan, 2008). In the concluding remark of her description of this rescue, the tourist maintains the 'into thin air' safety management pretence. 'I knew if I just let them [guides] do the job we would all be home safe' (BN, 2010, 21 May). On Mt Everest expeditions, and less objectively hazardous adventure tourism experiences, both companies and tourists co-manage, imagine and perpetuate the pretence and myths of danger, safety, success and distinction associated with an adventure (Elmes and Frame, 2008; Fletcher, 2010; Kane, 2011).

As well as getting home safe, the guides' capital, in skill and experience, had guided five of the six tourists successfully on to the summit of Mt Everest. The exclusive prestige in height and the global image of Mt. Everest, although gained in haste and by proxy of a guided experience, affords the scope to re-story experience infused with mountaineering's symbolic capital. The tourists can produce stories that differentiate, legitimise and authenticate their claims to socially imaged identities as mountaineering adventurers.

## Conclusion

Acknowledging the concerns associated with blog-based research and that tourist bloggers, especially sponsored ones, are seeking to portray a public image, the data source does provide access to unsolicited accounts of lived experience and portrayals of identity. McGillivray and Frew (2007) found the symbolic capital gained by tourists in short-term mass adventure activities was of an 'ephemeral quality', yet could enable an 'infinite re-telling (and selling) of a tale' by tourists and companies (pp. 73–74). The use of technology for Berger and Greenspan (2008) enables Mt Everest adventure tourists to produce multiple identities, as climbers, Westerners and professionals, that in summit success symbolically unify with the 'authentic' mountaineering Sherpa guides (Berger and Greenspan, 2008). The tourists' performance of adventure within the Mt Everest mythology seeks to transcend their tourism context, affording production of purified identity stories displaying heroic values and emotions (Gordon, 2006; Laing and Crouch, 2009). The expedition tourist 'members', however, gain definition, and are directed and dominated by the mountaineering guides' capital (Kane and Zink, 2004; Pomfret, 2010). Mt Everest provides objective authenticity in context and constructed authenticity through accounts of previous expeditions, while their claims of unique distinction proffer an existential authenticity (Lau, 2010; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Wang, 1999). The recognition and legitimacy of authenticity in their experience, produced stories and claims of identity remain a process of social negotiation.

Bourdieu's theorising of distinction in a field suggests that legitimacy requires recognition of those with the dominant capital and status, in this case mountaineering guides. Five of the six tourists claimed unique mountaineering adventure 'first' or 'records',<sup>1</sup> yet none have received honours or even recognition from their mountaineering national organisations or publications. The guides do, however, facilitate the tourists experience of globally distinctive mountaineering and in doing this demonstrate their practice-based capital in mountaineering skill. The tourists' experience of Mt Everest mountaineering has allowed the four female tourists to subsequently gain additional sponsorship for new guided adventure tours to mountain and polar regions. They have gained a level of social distinction, based on their identity claims, fronting advertising campaigns, one publishing a book about her Mt Everest climb and two having extensive motivational and leadership public speaking careers. The male tourists have considerable lower levels of recognised social distinction, one presenting Mt Everest as a major highlight in an ongoing mountaineering career and the other a completed example of success in a business-focused website.

One potential explanation for the male–female contrast is that the female adventure tourists have more space to differentiate themselves in relation to the mountaineering/adventure mythology, dominated by White masculinity (Bayers, 2003; Frohlick, 2003; Isserman and Weaver, 2008; Ortner, 1999). The tourists' blog stories fulfil the mountaineering mythology potential guiding company's websites present of differentiated, life and identity changing experience. Being females in this male-dominated field is a unique differentiating feature for these four women. The female tourists were the most successful in gaining social recognition for their re-storied experience of determination; leadership; success and motivational, role model professionalism. The freedom for female, or

male, adventure tourists is to have an 'authentic' experience, facilitated, valued and framed in relation to mountaineering myth and guides capital, while obscuring the guided and controlled tourism context.

A potential reason why the tourism context has not limited the social recognition, significant for the women but still acknowledged for the male tourists, may be the dominant position of tourism in the Western world. Urry (1995) suggests that tourism is coming to 'take over and organise much contemporary social and cultural experience' (p. 148). In negotiated social understandings, the tourists' 'unique mode of appropriation' in gaining distinctive mountaineering experience have outflanked and displaced the dominant position of mountaineers' practical demonstrations of capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984: 281). The role model example these adventure tourists offer is that economic capital can facilitate recognisable representations of the 'authentic' practical mountaineering capital in believable symbolic form. A similar economic power understood by one tourist from past tourism experience: 'I had learned long ago that there are few flight problems that can't be solved with the right phone numbers and a willingness to part with some cash' (VV, 2010, 6 June).

These professional adventure tourists not only transcend but also conserve mountaineering adventure mythology. Their stories perpetuate the emotional purity in the 'because it's there' motivational disinterest of an individual with a relationship with a mountain. Contrasting this, they are focused on the social exclusivity and any unique distinction in 'knocking the bastard off' success. They also continue mountaineering myth in the 'into thin air' pretence of human management and control of remote, dangerous environments. The transcendence is gaining mountaineering adventure identity and symbolic capital through social belief in re-storied experiences that equally display minimal mountaineering skill, experience or adventure freedom. In collaboration with the adventure tour companies, the tourists in this study, especially the females, provide role model examples of how to be professional adventure tourists, producing and selling 'authentic' identity stories.

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## Note

1. BN – 'Youngest British Women recorded', CR – 'first Finnish women', AL – 'first American women "grand slam"', LW – 'son of First American ascent' and WB – Height record for Multiple Sclerosis (MS) sufferer'.

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## Biography

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