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**Media, Mountain Culture and the Identity Politics of Risk Recreation:
A Media Discourse Analysis of Snowmobiling Avalanche Deaths in Western Canada**

by

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Abstract

Avalanche accidents involving backcountry snowmobilers are on the rise in Canada (CAC, 2012a). The 2008-09 and 2009-10 winter seasons were marked by two devastating accidents near Sparwood and Revelstoke, British Columbia, that resulted in multiple fatalities and garnered widespread media coverage. Using a cross-case comparison, this study provides a media discourse analysis (Sampert & Trimble, 2010) of selected newspapers' coverage of the two avalanches. More specifically, it examines how the media depicted "risk" and "liability" in their framing of the snowmobiling accidents and how these representations, in turn, intersected with social and regional identity. The findings suggest that social and regional identity discourses operated to construct diverging depictions of "risk" and "liability" in the media's sense-making of the two avalanches. The produced effects included undermining accident prevention efforts, homogenizing diverse and hybridized identities and reproducing risk and gender ideologies that positioned men as naturally risk-seeking while further marginalizing women/femininity in backcountry mountain settings and adventure recreation contexts.

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Introduction

Public perceptions regarding the utility of rural Canadian landscapes are changing (Whitson, 2001). Traditionally valued for their ability to support a variety of agricultural and natural resource industries, rural landscapes are increasingly being re-envisioned and valued for their “recreation resources” (p. 146). According to Whitson, this is particularly true in Western Canada; consequently, many rural areas are looking to outdoor recreation as a source of economic development and regional identity. Mountain-based communities have been particularly active in promoting their outdoor recreation resources. While the National Parks have long been a destination for outdoor recreation experiences in Western Canada, mountain communities with historic connections to resource extraction (e.g. Canmore, Alberta), argues Whitson, are also becoming increasingly involved in promoting outdoor, adventure recreation. Suggestively, this trend can be glimpsed in many other rural mountain communities. Towns such as Hinton and Grande Cache in Alberta or Sparwood and Revelstoke in British Columbia (BC) are additional examples of mountain communities with strong ties to resource extraction that are actively involved in promoting their outdoor recreation resources.

Representations of outdoor recreation and mountain culture are often romanticized in tourism literature and popular media. For example, Tourism BC describes the southeastern region of the province as follows: “alpine villages, pristine lakes, hot springs, hiking and biking trails and the best powder on the continent – this is the Kootenay Rockies” (Tourism BC, n.d.a). However, despite these idyllic representations, outdoor, adventure recreation has also become embroiled in public debates regarding land use and access, environmental concerns, public safety and/or risk management—particularly following well-publicized events resulting in serious injury or loss of life in the outdoors. For example, recent avalanche

deaths in BC have garnered prolific media attention and sparked numerous public debates regarding the safety and ethics of backcountry mountain recreation.

From 1997 to 2007, fourteen avalanche fatalities occurred per year on average in Canada, with the majority of events involving outdoor recreationalists in the mountainous backcountry regions of BC (Jameison, Hegeli, & Gauthier, 2010). According to the Canadian Avalanche Centre [CAC] (2012a), snowmobiling has recently surpassed backcountry skiing as the activity that results in the greatest number of annual avalanche fatalities. The 2008-09 winter season, in particular, was an exceptionally tragic year. Eleven separate avalanche incidents resulted in the deaths of nineteen snowmobilers in the BC backcountry (BC Coroners Service, 2009; CAC, 2011b); one incident alone killed eight men from Sparwood, BC. The events of the 2008-09 winter season were discussed at length by provincial legislators (e.g., BC Coroners Service, 2009), outdoor recreation communities (e.g., Kelly, 2009a, 2009b), as well as local and national news media sources (e.g., Cryderman & Myers, 2008; Hunter, 2008b). However, despite this increased attention, the following winter season (2009-10) resulted in seven snowmobiling avalanche fatalities in BC (CAC, 2011b; “Searchers Recover Body,” 2010), including one incident involving over two-hundred participants at an unsanctioned event¹ near Revelstoke. In these two consecutive winter seasons, twenty-six men died in avalanches while operating snowmobiles in the BC backcountry (CAC, 2011b).

“Risk” is a social construct that occupies a position of ambivalence in many sporting discourses (Donnelly, 2004); outdoor, adventure recreation is one such example. For instance,

¹ An informal snowmobiling event known as the “Big Iron Shootout” has taken place in a backcountry area near Revelstoke, BC, for the past several years. Though it is has grown in size, attracting hundreds of participants from across Western Canada, the event has no formal organizing body and is not endorsed by the City of Revelstoke or any local snowmobile organizations.

risk is commonly masculinized and valued as an integral part of many outdoor, adventure activities, yet it may also become a topic of debate when things go wrong. People who take risks in sport, Donnelly argues, may be admired one minute and criticized the next. As such, the particular contexts in which risk is deemed socially acceptable in outdoor recreation are highly variable and often contested based on perceptions about who has the right to use outdoor spaces and for what purpose. As Braun (2003) has argued, not all subject positions equally fit the ideological frames of risk culture. In the context of outdoor, adventure recreation, for example, engaging in “risky” behaviour is less socially acceptable and often results in greater moral scrutiny for women (e.g. see Chisholm, 2008; Frohlick, 2006; Laurendeau, 2004; Lupton, 1999a; Projansky, 1998; White & Young, 2007), racialized minorities (e.g. see Baldwin, 2009; Braun, 2003) and “foreigners” (Davidson, 2008). Thus, while white, “local” men are most often positioned as the appropriate subjects of risk recreation, participants not fitting this profile are marked as “Other” and therefore inferior. Based on this existing body of research, it is apparent that representations of risk recreation are tied to complex power relations and identity politics.² In spite of this, snowmobiling practices and discourses have yet to be critically examined in the outdoor recreation or sport sociology literatures.

² For the purposes of my project, the term “identity politics” is used interchangeably with “the politics of identity,” and understands identities to be strategic, contingent and discursively produced. As Weedon (1999) has remarked, “it is important to recognize the nature and limitations of essentialist foundations within identity politics” (p. 129). She offers that poststructural theorists reject essentialized notions of group identity, but acknowledges that there are “strategic needs for identity politics, defined by shared forms of oppression and political objectives [as opposed to shared identities]” (p. 129).

Research Questions

Recent snowmobile-related avalanche deaths in Western Canada have received a vast amount of media coverage and prompted considerable public dialogue regarding risk and mountain culture. According to Kellner (1995), “media culture intersects with political and social struggles and helps shape everyday life, influencing how people think and behave, how they see themselves and other people and how they construct their identities” (p. 2). Critical analysis of media representations offered a means to examine the politics of identity surrounding backcountry snowmobiling practices in Western Canada. My study specifically focused on two snowmobiling avalanche fatalities in the BC backcountry, one that occurred near Sparwood and the other near Revelstoke. It examined how discourses of “risk” were intertwined with social and regional identities in media reports of these snowmobiling avalanches, as well as the produced effects of these relationships. Social identity, in this sense, referred to constructions of gendered, raced and classed subject positions. Accordingly, my analysis was guided by the following research questions: 1) how were “risk” and “liability” socially constructed in news media coverage of the Sparwood and Revelstoke avalanche incidents; and 2) how did these representations intersect with discourses of gender and other forms of social and regional identities? To capture the complexity of social identity and power relations that these questions raised, this project drew on critical cultural studies (Kellner, 1995) and feminist poststructural theory (Weedon, 1987) to analyze how gender, class and race were positioned in media representations of snowmobiling avalanche deaths in Western Canada. This project thus aimed to contribute to the larger study of the politics of place and identity in Western Canadian mountain communities and outdoor, adventure recreation practices.

Literature Review

This research drew on a diverse set of scholarly literatures that I have organized into three main sections reflecting the most significant concepts in my study: identity, place and risk. In the first section, I reviewed the literature concerned with collective identity and the politics of identity in the context of outdoor, adventure recreation in North America. This included a discussion of the ways in which adventure, wilderness and mountain landscapes have been mobilized in the construction of various regional and national identities. In the second section, *Place*, I explored the politics of place surrounding outdoor, adventure recreation activities. Here, I incorporated perspectives from cultural geography, anthropology and sociology to suggest new ways of conceptualizing place and sense of place in outdoor recreation research. I then moved on to a consideration of the risk literature. In this section, I overviewed the diverse ways that risk has been conceived across different scholarly and professional disciplines, and provided a summary of the research connecting risk to various forms of social identity (e.g., gender, class, race). I concluded the literature review by highlighting the current gaps in the scholarly literature as they relate specifically to my project.

Identity

Collective Identity. This research was informed by scholarly literature that examines the role of outdoor recreation practices and landscapes in constructing, mediating or contesting various notions of collective identity. Specifically, cultural attachments to wilderness and alpine landscapes and expressions of collective identity in mountain communities were areas of particular significance. The political implications of these expressions of identity were also central to my research.

In exploring the representations and discourses surrounding backcountry snowmobiling, my research examined expressions of “community” and “collective identity” within media texts reporting on snowmobiling avalanche accidents in Western Canada. But what exactly is meant by the term identity? For my purposes, identity, whether individual or collective, is always negotiated and contingent. As Jenson (1999) argues, identities are not innate characteristics of a particular individual or group; rather, they are social constructions that gain meaning and recognition through practices and political struggles. They are also relational. “Identity has two distinguishable and competing functions: to set us apart from others, on the one hand, and to allow us to form social bonds...on the other hand” (Fierlbeck, 1996, p. 19). By taking up identity as contingent and relational, my work questioned the very nature of “publics” as constructed through representations of community and collective identity in Western Canadian mountain locales.

Recently, scholars have begun to examine the evolution of the term “public” as a means of shared social identification in modern European and North American societies (i.e. see “Making publics,” n.d.; Warner, 2002). This work has raised important questions about the development of social formations based on the premise of voluntary membership and some form of shared identification. It asks us to consider who exactly constitutes a particular “public” and what processes (e.g. media or other cultural forms) have allowed people in modern societies to come together in this way. Such questions were relevant to the collective identities and expressions of community explored in my research, as they interrogated whose identities form (and whose necessarily do not) the basis upon which the collective “public” identity is constructed and articulated in particular representations of mountain communities and outdoor, adventure recreation.

In light of these understandings of identity and publics, “community” and “collective identity” were examined as dominant expressions of social and regional identity constructed, in part, through news media texts and municipal/provincial government websites. By focusing on dominant articulations of community identity, I do not suggest that institutionalized expressions of collective identity are meaningful for everyone; nor do I suggest that they should be privileged over marginalized identifications that may contest or subvert these articulations of community identity. Rather, I recognize that multiple and competing forms of identity exist in any location, and expressions of community are always socially constructed and unstable. Dominant and institutionalized expressions of identity—including representations that link communities to particular recreation practices—rely on the purposeful exclusion and rejection of other forms of identification; this, in turn, points to the inherently political nature of collective identity. Thus, my work queried such expressions of unity, recognizing that they offered one of many variations of cultural identity and thus warranted critical examination.

Outdoor Recreation and the Politics of Identity. Research on rural spaces and the social, political and cultural implications of outdoor recreational discourses has yet to be thoroughly explored in a Canadian context. While some attention has been given to the socio-political and economic effects of the growing tourism industry in Western Canada, little work has examined the politics of identity surrounding contemporary representations and discourses of Rocky Mountain culture and outdoor, adventure recreation. Whitson (2001), for example, has discussed the class politics that result when recreation and tourism development surpasses resource extraction as the primary source of economic prosperity in rural mountain communities. Using Canmore, Alberta as an example, Whitson suggests that prolific gentrification and displacement of working class residents often accompanies tourism development in rural, resource dependent

communities. This research highlights the structural inequalities resulting from tourism development, but does not specifically examine the cultural representations or social discourses surrounding outdoor recreation and regional identity in rural communities; however, its relevance lies in its discussion of the centrality of Western Canadian landscapes in the national imaginary and the political nature of outdoor recreation practices.

Recent research in sport sociology has looked at the material effects of the connections between sport and national identity. Adams (2006) and King (2008), for example, suggest that, in Canada and the United States, national identity is deeply connected to competitive sport. Focusing on hockey and Canadian national identity, Adams suggests that this connection most often validates white, masculine, heterosexual identities and thus marginalizes other subjectivities in a variety of ways, which often directly affect their ability to access important resources such as facilities, funding and media attention. Historical perspectives have also explored these politics by examining the role of early twentieth century mountaineering in the construction of a Canadian national identity (e.g., Robinson, 2005). However, contemporary outdoor recreation discourses (e.g., backcountry snowmobiling) have received considerable less scrutiny than historical ones (such as mountaineering), which are more often criticized for being sexist, racist, or classist by contemporary cultural standards. Numerous rural Canadian communities, for example, have attempted to forge collective identities around outdoor adventure and snowmobiling practices (e.g., Revelstoke, BC),³ yet these politics have, hitherto, not been critically examined in the scholarly research.

³ For example, Tourism BC (n.d.b), promotes Revelstoke's adventurous outdoor lifestyle: "Strap on skis, get on a snowmobile, go for a hike...or breathe in the beauty of some remarkable national and provincial parks – Revelstoke appeals to the active and adventurous, and its 'open' sign hangs year-round" (Tourism BC, n.d.b).

Scholarly debates concerning identity politics, diversity and citizenship in Canada commonly occur within sociology, cultural anthropology and political science (e.g., Banting, Courchene, & Seidle, 2007a; Mackey, 1999; Mawani, 2007). Despite Canadian identity often being forged through wilderness landscapes and outdoor recreation practices, recreation, leisure and tourism scholars have been relatively silent regarding these debates. Thus, my research aimed to further the study of Canadian identity politics in contemporary leisure studies and outdoor recreation research and argued that such critical work is both timely and necessary. Though identity politics research within Canadian outdoor recreation and leisure studies is sparse, relevant scholarly examinations exist elsewhere. For instance, a number of researchers have discussed the socio-political issues surrounding representations of Canadian wilderness, its connection to colonial ideology and the oppression of Aboriginal peoples (e.g., Baldwin, 2009; Braun, 1997; Furniss, 1999; Mackey, 1999). Working from a standpoint of critical whiteness studies, Baldwin (2009), a cultural geographer, develops the argument that Canada's boreal forest is a white "ethnoscape" and that wilderness conservation is infused with racialized thinking and colonial ideologies (see also Braun, 1997). In short, Baldwin argues that Canadian wilderness conservation initiatives (such as the *Boreal Rendezvous*)⁴ are often implicitly involved in the preservation of white identity. This is supported, in part, by active attempts to include First Nations' in conservation initiatives, thereby attempting to distance white subjects from colonial spatial practices. However, as Baldwin argues, this is problematic in that white privilege is rarely acknowledged in conservation discourses. Baldwin's analysis of colonial discourses in the *Boreal Rendezvous* project is particularly relevant because of the way in which

⁴ The *Boreal Rendezvous* consisted of canoe trips on the South Nahanni and Athabasca rivers by Justin Trudeau and David Suzuki respectively. The trips were documented in the 2003 film, *Canada's Amazon: A Boreal Forest Journey*, and focused on environmental threats to Canadian Boreal forest eco-systems (Baldwin, 2009).

outdoor recreation (specifically canoeing) was central to that project. Additionally, his analysis gestures to Braun's (2003) discussion of white identity and adventure recreation, to show how whiteness is engrained into adventure recreation (in addition to conservation) practices and discourses where it partially gains its privileged position by refusing any direct reference to its whiteness. Considering the increasing cultural diversity of rural communities (Butler Flora & Flora, 2008), this type of critical work is important for understanding how identity politics and power relations may operate through wilderness and outdoor recreation discourses that often purport principles of inclusivity.

In addition to research that sees wilderness/nature as a performative space of whiteness (Baldwin, 2009; Braun, 2003), some critical consideration has been given to the gender and class politics involved in adventure tourism and outdoor recreation practices. According to Whitson (1990), sport is an important site for the performance of masculinity—particularly in post-industrial societies that exhibit “a decline in the social currency attached to other ways of demonstrating physical prowess (e.g., physical labour or combat)” (p. 19). Exploring a similar theme, Brandth & Haugen (2005) conclude that both economic and gender relations are affected when rural resource communities move toward a tourism-based economy. Specifically, they focus on representations of masculinity in the context of the forestry industry, maintaining that advances in technology have challenged rural men to find new ways of expressing their masculinity. In the 1970s, dominant representations of masculinity in the forestry industry depicted men in wilderness settings conquering nature using simple tools (e.g., an axe or saw). In the next decade, depictions revolved around men mastering machines and technology: “their bodies are less marked by hard work and years of toil outdoors. Rather, the strength of their bodies is mediated by machinery. Machinery is seen as an extension of their bodies, expressing a

macho image of the forest worker” (p. 17). Contemporary representations of rural men in logging communities, however, have been further affected by increasing tourism development. Personalized images of loggers have all but vanished as growing emphasis on economic diversification has resulted in the proliferation of outdoor recreation opportunities.

Brandth & Haugen (2005) argue that tourism brings urban lifestyles to rural resource communities, often challenging the dominant models of masculinity in the community. In particular, rural masculinities become part of a tourism product. As guides and hosts of adventure tourism experiences, rural men are expected to portray a certain amount of expertise in the wilderness (in both action and appearance), yet at the same time exhibit care, compassion and effective communication skills with guests. Such service industry expectations, they argue, are in conflict with traditional ways of embodying masculinity in the primary sector. Although little attention is given to femininity or women’s experiences in the community, Brandth & Haugen’s study addresses important considerations regarding the social construction of masculinity in rural resource communities; in particular, their discussion considers how masculinity is intertwined with economic factors, such as advancements in technology and increased reliance on tourism and outdoor recreation. Their work also highlights the tension between economic necessity and tradition that accompanies these changes in rural resource communities. Such issues were relevant to my examination of how outdoor recreation discourses intersected with gender and social/regional identities in Western Canadian mountain communities, particularly because Sparwood and Revelstoke, BC, have similar resource-based economies with emerging tourism/outdoor recreation sectors. Moreover, as Brandth and Haugen suggest, economic structures have an influence on the ways in which masculinity(ies) are constructed (and contested) in rural communities, including in representations of outdoor, adventure recreation.

Thus, the questions I posed regarding snowmobiling and gender (particularly masculinity) in Sparwood and Revelstoke helped to bring a further level of understanding to this area of inquiry.

Although no research has specifically examined the gender politics surrounding snowmobiling practices, a number of scholars have considered how gender politics operate in rock climbing and mountaineering literature and discourse (e.g., Chisholm, 2008; Frohlick, 1999-2000, 2006; Rak, 2007; Robinson, 2005; Robinson, 2008). These literatures provided important findings that informed my research, as they emphasized the political nature of adventure recreation discourses, as well as the complex interplay between risk and gender—a topic explored further in a subsequent section of this literature review.

Rak's (2007) examination of the "bodily politics" of mountaineering narratives highlights the need for critical research on gender and outdoor adventure recreation. Through an analysis of mountaineering literature and expedition narratives, Rak suggests that mountaineering is deeply rooted in a culture of masculinity that continues to be steeped in sexism, often obscuring the achievements of women while simultaneously celebrating homogenized and simplistic representations of heroic masculinity (see also Frohlick, 1999-2000, 2006; Chisholm, 2008). Such simplified constructions of masculinity fail to acknowledge masculinities as prolific and culturally contextual with a dynamic hierarchical structure intersecting with other axes of social diversity, including class, race and sexual orientation (Connell, 2005). Furthermore, Rak argues that mountaineering is a deeply political act; while gender politics are rarely discussed openly in mountaineering narratives, "the uses and representations of the body in wilderness environments are always politicized and always involve issues about power, knowledge, and pleasure (or pain)" (p.111). Similarly, my research explored the ways the media's representations of snowmobiling accidents involved highly politicized gender politics. Rak's research is critical of

romantic sporting discourses that position mountaineering as something that transcends politics. The “bodily politics” prevalent in mountaineering narratives are “a politics that makes its meaning gendered by what it does *not* say about manliness, and by what—in contrast—it shows about how to be a real man or (much less often) a real woman in physically and emotionally trying conditions” (p. 116). Therefore, Rak’s research on high altitude mountaineering supports the assertion that gender politics operate through outdoor recreation texts and discourses, and that understanding these politics requires researchers to engage in a critical consideration of the discursive silences that surround sporting narratives.

Wilderness, Adventure and National Identities. In addition to the abovementioned research that critically examines particular recreation, conservation and tourism practices, another body of research has explored the politics of collective identity by looking at the role of wilderness and outdoor adventure in the production of national identities. Various scholars have noted the prevalence of wilderness and outdoor adventure as signifiers for national identity in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada (e.g., Bishop, 1996; Cloke & Perkins, 2002; Mackey, 1999; Robinson, 2005). Bishop (1996), for example, has considered the symbolic role of the “outback” and four-wheel drive vehicles in constructing Australian identity in the national imaginary, arguing that “four-wheel drive culture encompasses both a literal mobility and fantasy relationship between urban and sub-urban regions and those of the great outdoors, especially wilderness” (p. 257). Cloke and Perkins (2002) explored the relationship between adventure recreation and national identity in their study of the commodification of adventure in the New Zealand tourism industry. Here, the marketing of New Zealand as “adrenaline country” is an example of how tourist meanings become attached to place and how cultural identity is partially constructed through place promotion and consumption. Cloke and Perkins argue that the

concept of “adventure” in New Zealand has become a signifier for the nation. Similarly, scholars have argued that both historic and contemporary narratives of regional and national identity often portray Western Canada as the ultimate wilderness playground (e.g. see Furniss, 1999; Mackey, 1999; Robinson, 2005).

Canadians are frequently portrayed as having an inherent love for the outdoors that stems from a natural attachment to the rugged Canadian landscape. For example, in a popular commercial which aired during the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, Molson Canadian executives displayed images of rivers, forests, mountains and outdoor recreation activities while asking viewers: “when you think about Canadians, you might ask yourself, ‘why are we the way we are?’ Well the answer is lying right under our feet—literally. The fact is it’s this land that shapes us” (Molson Canadian, 2010). This attachment to wilderness landscapes is presented as a natural, inescapable and embodied experience—as if Canadians cannot *help* but get outdoors and climb mountains; the land compels them to do so. Within this cultural narrative, affection for the great outdoors is conceived within the national imaginary as imperative to a collective Canadian identity. This construction of place and *Canadianness* suggests that collective identities (whether local, regional, or national) are influenced primarily by the physical, material landscapes in which they are situated. However, such paradigms fail to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of both landscape (Bender, 1993; Cosgrove, 1998) and collective identity (Fierlbeck, 1996; Jenson, 1999) thereby naturalizing this representation of Canadian identity as inevitable and enduring. Additionally, these representations of Canadian identity portray this attachment to wilderness and outdoor recreation as culturally universal and apolitical; however, it is difficult to ignore the gendered, classed and racialized politics that permeate these discourses of collective identity. By homogenizing Canadian identity and linking it to outdoor recreation practices

historically dominated by white, middle-class, urban men, such representations privilege white, male, middle-class subject positions and neglect to acknowledge the plural and hybridized identities of many Canadians. Such representations also obscure Canada's colonial history by celebrating constructions of "wilderness" and "nature" that rely on the erasure of Aboriginal people from rural Canadian landscapes. Thus, as Baldwin (2009) maintains, "the politics of nature are always tethered to those of gender, class, race or ethnic identity and by extension, social power" (p. 428). Therefore, collective identities hinging upon representations of outdoor recreation, wilderness and mountain culture are similarly bound up with the politics of identity.

Nations, according to Anderson (1991), are the product of a culturally constructed, imagined political community. He coined the term "imagined community" to refer to ways in which people perceive themselves to be part of a larger social group with political sovereignty, shared symbolism and cultural values. Nations, in this sense, "do not emerge spontaneously from some primordial source, but are shared fictions created and maintained through media, education, cultural products, and government programs" (Mackey, 2000, p. 125). The cultural myths that sustain Canadian nationalism are many, and wilderness landscape is one area with enduring significance in discourses of Canadian identity.

Canada has a long history of deploying wilderness imagery in nationalist projects—a claim supported by research in various academic disciplines (i.e. see Berger, 1966; Kauffmann & Zimmer, 1998; Mackey, 1999, 2000; Mawani, 2007; Nasgaard, 1984). The connections between wilderness and representations of Canadian identity manifest in diverse cultural sites such as art, literature, tourism promotion, consumer products and government policy and programs. Since confederation, the Canadian government has enacted numerous initiatives intended to establish a cohesive national identity; these projects have often referenced nature and wilderness landscapes

as central to the nation's character (Kauffmann & Zimmer, 1998; Mackey, 1999; Mawani, 2007). For example, shortly following confederation, the first official nationalist movement, *Canada First*, aimed to cultivate a sense of Canadian identity while maintaining ties to the British Empire. The movement was based on the idea that Canada was a "Britain of the north" (Berger, 1966, p. 4), whose character was derived from its cold climate and rugged landscape (Kauffmann & Zimmer, 1998; Mackey, 1999; Mawani, 2007). As Mawani (2007) contends, allusions to the climate and geography of Canada also served to distinguish it from the United States, which was constructed as morally corrupt with racial conflicts stemming from the warmer climate and more hospitable landscape which was "sure to attract physically lazy and morally lax immigrants from southern Europe and other tropical global regions" (p. 719). Mawani's (2007) work serves to highlight the deeply rooted connections between nature, wilderness and national identity in Canada—both anecdotally and in government policy.

Early Canadian nationalism was "tied to the idea of transforming 'wilderness' into 'civilisation'" (Mackey, 1999, p. 17). Thus, westward expansion and European settlement in areas previously deemed "wild" and "untamed," were central to the romantic frontier ideals of civilizing the western landscape. Western Canadian frontier nationalism was also prevalent in outdoor recreation discourses around the first part of the twentieth century. For example, Robinson (2005) notes that early alpine sport and mountaineering in Western Canada reinforced notions of a "frontier ideal that posited Canada as wilderness space invigorated with a youthful pioneering spirit" (p. 416). Through the growing popularity of mountaineering and the formation of the Alpine Club of Canada, Rocky Mountain landscapes also became strongly linked to Canadian nationalism. Western frontier mythology was sustained, in part, by the circulation of narratives in which white, Canadian men heroically asserted their dominance and masculinity

through mountain conquest and first ascents in the Canadian Rockies. Thus, it is important to note the racialized and gendered connotations of these early mountaineering and nationalist discourses. As Mackey (1999) and Robinson (2005) allude to, these constructions of Canadian national identity were intricately connected to both whiteness and masculinity. In particular, they celebrated white masculinity as central to the essence of national identity, thereby marginalizing other forms of identification and citizenship.

Connections between national identity and Canada's physical geography and climate are common in Canada—both historically and in contemporary narratives. Mackey's (1999) study of Canadian cultural politics notes that nationalist mythologies commonly position the nation as if embodied in the landscape. As such, dominant representations of Canadian cultural identity are naturalized as inherently attached to a specific geographic context. Specifically, Mackey draws examples from Canadian artists (e.g., the Group of Seven) and writers (e.g., Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye) to argue that the representation of Canada as a cold, northern wilderness is one of the most enduring symbols of national identity. The significance of wilderness in Canada was gained largely through its prolific presence in art and literature. Following Handler (1991), Mackey notes that artistic and literary representations are important sites of (national) identity construction because of the idea that “a nation must ‘have’ its own art and possess its own culture in order to be considered a true nation” (p. 41). Additionally, Mackey maintains that representations of Canadian landscape are inscribed with assumptions about gender and race that “sometimes exclude and sometimes appropriate the cultural symbols and points of view of marginalized populations, without creating genuine respect and equality” (Mackey, 2000, p. 125). What is problematic about these representations is that they position Canada as if its collective identity is primarily determined by physical geography and climate, without

acknowledging the social processes, exclusionary practices and ideological aspects through which this version of Canadian identity comes to be forged. In particular, Mackey (1999; 2000) argues that the selective appropriation or exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from representations of Canadian landscape and national identity is especially problematic.

In their examination of landscape and national identity in Switzerland and Canada, Kauffmann and Zimmer (1998) note that little attention has been given to the manner in which natural environments gain significance within particular constructions of nationhood. Consequently, they postulate two processes by which national identities come to be closely associated with geography. In the first process, which they call the “nationalisation of nature,” historical myths, memories and values are projected onto the landscape and the nation’s distinctive character is subsequently seen to be reflected in a particular landscape. The second process, a form of geographic determinism they refer to as the “naturalisation of the nation,” involves the assumption that specific landscapes are themselves capable of determining national identity. Here, it is the geographic, material and “natural” features of the land, rather than the social and cultural forces, which give meaning to the nation. Kauffmann and Zimmer refer to this process as “ideological ethnogenesis” (p. 487), meaning that this process involves culturally constructed myths of a homogenous Canadian culture, which earns its distinctiveness from its geo-climatic context. As such, I would argue that a more appropriate term might be “geographical ethnogenesis,” as all ethnogenesis is inherently ideological (A. Palmer, personal communication, December, 2010). Kauffmann and Zimmer argue that this second approach has dominated the discourses of national identity in Canada—a claim evidenced in the narrative of place constructed in the Molson Canadian commercial discussed earlier.

A number of scholars (e.g., see Kauffmann and Zimmer, 1998; Macnaghten & Urry, 1998; Stokowski, 2002) have suggested that a nature-culture dichotomy permeates discussions of wilderness, “natural” environments and the collective attachments people have to such places. As Macnaghten and Urry (1998) argue, positioning nature as a “real” entity that is distinct and separate from socio-cultural processes is highly problematic, as it fails to recognize not only the social dimensions of nature, but also that “there is no singular ‘nature’ as such, only a diversity of contested natures” (p. 1). Macnaghten and Urry contend that the historical development of the nature-culture dichotomy is strongly associated with nineteenth century European exploration and settlement of Western North America. During this time, “nature” was constructed as something hostile that needed to be tamed and controlled; human progress and modernization could be achieved and measured through nature’s domination. This argument is concurrent with the aforementioned views of Mackey (1999) and Robinson (2005) regarding representations of nature and wilderness in frontier nationalist discourses in Western Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s. Macnaghten and Urry (1998) assert that “the ‘social’ dimensions of nature have been significantly under-examined” (p. 4). Though a number of researchers in anthropology and cultural geography have explored the social and cultural dimensions of “nature” and place (e.g., see Baldwin, 2009; Basso, 1996; Braun, 2003; Cosgrove, 1998; Hickcox, 2007; Kahn, 1996), I would argue that this has not been sufficiently theorized in the outdoor recreation literature, and a nature-culture dichotomy remains prevalent in outdoor recreation discourses; this, in turn, is problematic as it fails to address the complex socio-historical processes and discourses which have constructed the “natural” environments (nature) in which outdoor recreation activities (culture) takes place. Dichotomizing nature and culture, in the context of outdoor recreation, perpetuates the logic that particular landscapes, such as

mountains, naturally embody specific characteristic (such as “wildness” and “risk”), failing to recognize that social discourses have imbued these landscapes with such qualities and that these constructions serve very particular socio-political purposes (such as regulating who should use these spaces and for what purposes). My research contributed to the outdoor recreation literature by problematizing the nature-culture dichotomy in the context of alpine environments and snowmobiling practices. Specifically, I suggested that dichotomised understandings of nature and culture do not adequately explain how mountain environments are often constructed as “risky,” “natural” and “wild” landscapes, where particular social identities and practices are celebrated, while others are marginalized.

Mountain Landscapes & Regional Identities. As noted herein, much research has discussed the relationship between wilderness and Canadian national identity; significantly less attention has been given to the role of mountain geographies and landscapes in constructing collective notions of place and identity in local/regional contexts. There are, however, some notable exceptions to this that are worth mentioning. In particular, some research has examined the role of mountains and mountain-based recreation in constructing, mediating and/or contesting local community identity. These studies are directly relevant to my research on the Sparwood and Revelstoke avalanche incidents, as they investigate how mountain geographies have been woven into narratives of community identity resulting in profoundly political consequences and inequitable relations of power in rural mountain communities.

Mountains play a highly affective role in many communities around the world; however, they do not carry meaning on their own, but acquire meaning, through discourse, in particular cultural and historical contexts (Mitchell, 1983). Thus, geography alone cannot account for the complex and diverse ways in which wilderness and mountain places are socially constructed as

shared sources of identification that are seen as intrinsically meaningful for individuals or communities. According to Blake (1999), mountain landscapes can be thought of as “peaks of identity,” or symbolic landscapes that reflect cultural ideals and collective (community) identities. In a regionalized study of the San Juan Mountains in Colorado, Blake (1999), a cultural geographer, explores the depth and diversity of community identifications with local mountain peaks. Recognizing that the significance of particular mountains is associated with varying ideas, practices and social histories (such as mining, Ute and Navajo culture, recreation activity, spirituality and homeland), Blake contends that mountain landscapes form a cornerstone of collective identity in mountain communities. To study the meanings of various mountain peaks in communities in the San Juan mountains, Blake documents the (mountain) names, icons, symbols, etc., that are appropriated and institutionalized by the community in the form of signage, government and corporate logos, advertisements, art and folklore. He argues that such uses of mountain symbolism create a bond between people and their environment due, in part, to their consistent visibility. However, though he recognizes that mountains carry different meanings for different groups and that government and commercial interests dominate the use of mountain symbols, Blake does not sufficiently problematize the power relations surrounding these representations. He suggests that visible representations are indicative of a shared, stable, collective identity, and he fails to explore the dynamic and contested meanings of place. The San Juan Mountains are perceived by many to be a recreation playground; outdoor pursuits dominate much of the land use in the region. In this regard, the municipal government and commercial sector readily appropriate this mountain symbolism for the purpose of tourism development. Communities in the San Juan Mountains, Blake argues, are part of the “New West,” a tourist destination that serves as a site of national mythmaking because it is seen to reflect fundamental

American (national) values. Here, Blake seems to be referring to a collective nostalgia for Western frontier landscapes and narratives. However, he does not elaborate on what these fundamental American values are or how regional identifications in the San Juan Mountains specifically relate to the production of American national identity.

Furniss (1999), a social anthropologist, outlines the continued presence of western frontier mythology in rural Western Canadian communities, specifically in the Cariboo-Chilcotin region of British Columbia. According to Furniss, Western frontier mythology is characterized by widespread representations that construct the region as a “wild” western landscape, where wilderness is untamed and the histories of European settlers are celebrated; images of cowboys, cattle and the gold rush are prevalent in this context. She argues that frontier myths dominate representations of community identity in the Cariboo-Chilcotin region and that these representations are indicative of the neo-colonial practices that continue to marginalize Aboriginal people in the region. Drawing on her ethnographic fieldwork with First Nations peoples in Williams Lake, BC, Furniss offers a strong critique of the dominance of the “frontier complex” in public settings (e.g., in the promotion of regional heritage tourism). She argues that Euro-Canadians attempt to control definitions of public identity in the community (often successfully) as they have continually taken action to counter Aboriginal groups’ efforts to contest dominant expressions of regional identity. For example, in the 1980’s, a traditional Aboriginal trade route was named the Alexander Mackenzie Heritage Trail after a Euro-Canadian fur-trader and explorer despite intense scrutiny and objection from the Aboriginal community and its advocates, who claimed such an act would erase aboriginal history and celebrate colonization. This decision, along with others of similar consequence, portrays the dominant community identity as strongly attached to wilderness, mountain landscapes and

frontier mythology. Such representations support colonial ideologies, which deny the value of Aboriginal histories and celebrate the “discovery” and settlement of a resource rich landscape by non-Aboriginals. These representations of community identity are, in turn, recognized as having strong political consequences that perpetuate an ongoing colonial legacy in Western Canada.

The connection between mountain landscapes and community identity has also been explored by geographers such as Hickcox (2007). In a study of the symbolic value of conservation landscapes in Boulder, Colorado, Hickcox uses ethnographic fieldwork to examine how formations of community are connected to ideas about the “natural” landscape in Boulder. The abundant mountain parks and nature reserves surrounding the city have become symbolic of what Hickcox refers to as Boulder’s “ideological landscape” (p. 240), a place where complex social histories and inequalities are erased through representations that validate the inherent wisdom of conservation initiatives in the community. Hickcox argues that discourses of civic and regional identity in Boulder systematically conceal the class and racial privileges on which the city was built, and she is critical of representations that portray Boulder as a healthy, “outdoorsy,” and “green” city valuing conservation and open spaces:

This view seems to suggest that social actions are determined by the physical landscape itself. Such passive agency given to the hills, cliffs, animals, and plants greenwashes the social aspects of the landscape. The greenwashing creates a space for the classist and racist assumptions to reside unnoticed or unquestioned. Yet, they persist and can be glimpsed occasionally in policy justifications and in everyday conversation. (p. 239)

In her analysis, Hickcox problematizes these attachments to place by suggesting that such collective identities serve to uphold dominant social relations and thus have profound material consequences in the community.

Based on this research, along with other studies that have troubled the “natural” connection between wilderness landscapes and collective identity (e.g., Mackey, 1999; Mawani, 2007), it is apparent that cultural attachments to wilderness, mountain and conservation landscapes carry important political consequences, which are often obscured through narratives of a harmonious collective identity. Previous research indicates that political implications of alleged collective attachments to these landscapes may include spatial and social exclusion, the homogenization of diverse and hybridized identities and the erasure of complex social histories (gender, race, class, etc.) (see Hickcox, 2007; Furniss, 1999; Mackey, 1999; McAvoy, 2002). In such narratives of collective identity, identities become homogenized, essentialized, naturalized and portrayed as uncomplicated within a discourse of cultural unity.

Place

Place-Making and Place Attachment. Within recreation and leisure studies research, place and “sense of place”⁵ are often theorized from social-psychological perspectives that examine individuals’ cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to particular settings (Stokowski, 2002). As indicated by Stokowski, the socio-cultural and political dimensions of place and “senses of place” have not been sufficiently theorized in the existing outdoor recreation literature; accordingly, my consideration of place drew on literatures from various academic disciplines, including anthropology, cultural geography and sociology. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach was used to examine outdoor recreation and the various ways in which places were socially constructed through “embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistance” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997b, p. 6).

⁵ The phrase “sense of place” is most often ascribed with positive values and refers to the process by which an individual develops personalized “feelings of attachment to a particular setting based on a combination of use, attentiveness, and emotion” (Stokowski, 2002, p. 368).

Place attachment takes many different forms, and a diverse set of collective identities may be associated with any one place (Blake, 1999; Furniss, 1999). As Gupta and Ferguson (1997a, 1997b) have argued, place making is not just about constructing communities of similarity; it is also about exclusion, otherness and the construction of difference. “Place making,” in their view, consists of social, discursive and historical processes, as well as embodied practices in which understandings of community, region and place are formed and lived (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997b). By emphasizing the contested nature of places and place associated discourse, they suggest that anthropology and cultural studies can be used together to better understand cultural constructions of place. Who has the power to make places of spaces? Who contests these constructions of place? And, what is at stake regarding representations and contestations of place? Such questions, Gupta and Ferguson (1997a) argue, are important considerations for research that concerns “the meaningful association of people and places” (p. 40). Thus, these questions were also central to my research, as they enabled me to explore how collective identities were constructed around mountain landscapes and outdoor recreation activities, with particular attention to the power relations that surround place making practices.

Rodman (2003) has problematized the study of place in anthropology by arguing that the meaning of place often seems to go without saying and is thus left unquestioned. This is problematic because associations of people, place and culture are socially and historically contextual; they are complex social constructions rather than naturalized “facts” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997b). Similarly, Basso (1996) reminds us that “familiar places are experienced as inherently meaningful, their significance and value being found to reside in (and, it may seem, to emanate from) the form and arrangement of their observable characteristics” (p. 55). He is critical of cultural anthropological research that fails to give sufficient consideration to how

people make meaning of places; places, he maintains, “consist of what gets made of them” (p. 56). The job of a researcher, therefore, is to examine how people express and construct places and to question what these acts involve and what they aim to achieve. Accordingly, my research sought to challenge and disrupt naturalized meanings attached Western Canadian mountain landscapes and questions how these places are constructed and reproduced through social practices (e.g., snowmobiling) and discourses (e.g., media representations).

A further consideration for place-based research concerns the role of discourse in place-making practices. A number of recent studies have begun to address the role of discourse in constructing place and collective identity (i.e. Furniss, 1999; Hickcox, 2007; Low, 2007), but few of these have specifically considered outdoor recreation practices. As previously noted, Hickcox’s (2007) examination of Boulder, Colorado, gives primacy to the role of discourse in the construction of place and regional identity, and, in doing so, she suggests the need to examine the political consequences of place attachment through the analysis of social discourses. For her purposes, social discourses about the local landscape can be glimpsed in government policy rhetoric, media and everyday conversations of the public. Low (2007) also argues that examinations of place should consider the role of language and discourse to show how places become classed, racialized, gendered and so forth. In examining place-associated discourse, however, researchers should also reflect upon what is left unsaid about a place. For example, Kahn (1996) reminds us “places are complex constructions of social histories, personal and interpersonal experiences, and selective memory” (p. 167). Therefore, it is important to consider what is forgotten or unsaid about a place in addition to the selective memories that are commonly articulated in dominant narratives of place. These considerations may facilitate deeper

understanding of place as well as an appreciation for the ideological complexities in which particular constructions of place are situated.

In order to understand the power relations and politics of place surrounding recreation practices, researchers in leisure studies must conceptualise new understandings of “sense of place” (Stokowski, 2002). The term “sense of place,” according to Stokowski, is most often used to refer to “an individual’s ability to develop feelings of attachment to particular settings based on combinations of use, attentiveness, and emotion” (p. 368). However, Stokowski argues that we must understand places as more than geographic sites; instead, research needs to examine the social relations and practices that make places meaningful in particular kinds of ways, thereby giving consideration to the power relations that support particular practices and constructions of place. As she goes on to argue, although individuals can develop a personal sense of place, much of what people do, know, or feel about places is mediated by others—through collective, social constructions of place. Therefore, while sense of place does hold importance for particular individuals, it is only through examining the collective constructions of place, and place associated discourse, that social and cultural power relations can be made manifest. It is here that Stokowski calls for greater research concerning leisure and the politics of place.

Recreation/Leisure and the Politics of Place. The existing research connecting leisure and the politics of place has traditionally looked at “managerial concerns” such as issues of access, exclusion and equity at particular recreation sites (Stokowski, 2002). Though these are important issues that warrant examination, such studies tend to theorize place as apolitical geographic locations or backdrops for social action (Stoddart, 2010). As such, Stokowski argues

that new, postmodern⁶ explorations of place are needed to examine the politics of place by interrogating the symbolic value of places (which may exist in material or virtual spaces), as well as asking how places are discursively constructed, represented and reproduced across a society. As previously mentioned, some scholars in anthropology and cultural geography have taken up place in this way—however, outdoor recreation and leisure studies research still has much room for development in this area. Therefore, my research contributed to this development by examining the social construction and symbolic value of mountain spaces in media representations of snowmobiling avalanche deaths in BC.

Stoddart's (2010) work begins to explore these issues by looking at how backcountry skiing practices simultaneously produce both gender and "nature." Stoddart argues that skiing landscapes, such as backcountry mountain terrain, are masculinized "sportscares,"⁷ where "participants construct the social meaning of both gender and place through their engagement in these discursively mediated, embodied modes of interaction" (p. 112). Through media analysis and participant interviews, Stoddart maintains that backcountry mountain environments are often constructed as masculine and risky sportscares, where women are not excluded, but are marginalized in comparison to men in that "male expertise and leadership often mediates their backcountry experience" (p. 118). While Stoddard briefly touches on the role of snowmobiles and technology in enabling hegemonic constructions of masculinity in backcountry mountain environments, he does not elaborate on the processes through which this occurs. Although the

⁶ Stokowski (2002) uses the term "postmodern" to refer to recent critical approaches that reject positivistic notions of "place" as concrete, physical settings or "sites." Rather, postmodern theories of place also acknowledge sites that are not physically present (e.g., cyber or imaginary places), and they introduce questions about the representational politics and power relations associated with particular conceptions of place.

⁷ "Sportscape" is a term used by Bale (1994) to reflect the importance of space and location in sporting contexts. According to Bale, sportscares function as physical spaces for embodied performances of masculinity and femininity.

particular focus is not snowmobiling culture, Stoddart's interviews with backcountry skiers support the idea that discourses of risk and adventure recreation (both skiing and snowmobiling) are highly gendered. My work contributed to this by critically unpacking the intricacies of this relationship within the context of backcountry snowmobiling.

Risk

Theorizing Risk. The concept of "risk" is currently conceived of quite differently across the various academic disciplines that examine its significance. Theoretical understandings of risk range from strong realist to strong relativist ontologies. For example, realist perspectives—common in the technical and natural sciences—position risks as objective realities (Lupton, 1999a). In other words, real dangers exist in the world and their probability and consequences can be calculated and measured. At the other end of the ontological spectrum, and more common in the social sciences, are relativist perspectives on risk. These approaches tend to explore how understandings of risk are socially constructed by questioning the "the social and cultural contexts in which risk is understood and negotiated" (Lupton, 1999a, p. 24).

Socio-cultural theories of risk are not monolithic, and varying perspectives have developed within this area (e.g., see Lupton, 1999a; 1999b). These approaches range from weak to strong versions of social constructionist (relativist) positions. Generally speaking, all of these approaches share an interest in the social and symbolic meanings of risk. They posit risk as "an increasingly pervasive concept of human existence...a central aspect of human subjectivity... [that] is associated with notions of choice, responsibility and blame" (Lupton, 1999a, p. 25).

In her discussion of socio-cultural perspectives on risk, Lupton (1999a; 1999b) highlights three main theoretical traditions through which risk has been examined: cultural/symbolic approaches based on the work of Mary Douglas (1992); risk society and reflexive modernization

approaches based on the works of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens (e.g. see Beck, 1999; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994); and governmentality approaches based on the work of Michel Foucault (1991). Alternatively, Lupton (1999a) suggests that theoretical approaches to risk can also be loosely categorized in four areas that describe “more discrete epistemological and methodological positions taken up within socio-cultural investigations into risk” (p. 25). These perspectives include structuralist (both functional and critical accounts), poststructuralist, phenomenological and hermeneutic and psychoanalytic models. For my project, I employed a poststructuralist approach to risk and thus, focus my discussion on this tradition.

Poststructural perspectives on risk occupy a strong social constructionist position and build on Foucauldian philosophies (e.g., Foucault, 1991) that “emphasize the importance of identifying the discourses that participate in the construction of notions of realities, meanings and understandings” (Lupton, 1999a, p. 26). In this view, social meanings and identities are understood as culturally constructed, fluid and contextual rather than natural and stable; “risks” are not viewed as static, objective dangers, but as social constructions that come into being through discourse. Thus, from a poststructuralist perspective, any object or phenomenon can come to be defined as a risk/hazard within a particular social and historical context. Knowledge about risk, therefore, is “bound to the sociocultural contexts in which this knowledge is generated,” and this knowledge is never “value-free” (p. 29). What is important, for poststructuralists, is the process by which a particular phenomenon comes to be defined as a risk, how these meanings are struggled over in the public arena, the types of subjectivity that are constructed through risk discourses and the socio-political consequences that are attached to these discourses.

By interrogating the processes through which risks are socially constructed, gain symbolic meaning and result in material consequences, socio-cultural analyses and poststructural theory can be used to deepen understandings of how conceptions of risk are implicated in power relations. Accordingly, my project investigated how risk discourses were deployed within media representations of backcountry snowmobiling avalanche accidents. In particular, it explored the ways that risk has been attached to (and used to support or marginalize) particular forms of regional and social identities while questioning the social and political consequences of these relationships. Thus, it discussed how risk discourses were implicated in social power relations and offered a poststructural analysis of the role the news media played in sustaining and/or challenging ideas about risk and outdoor, adventure recreation in Western Canada.

Health Promotion, Risk Management and Social Psychological Perspectives. Previous scholarship concerning risk and outdoor, adventure recreation has been approached from a number of different perspectives; of particular relevance are theories of risk from two distinct disciplinary areas: cognitive science and socio-cultural studies. As Lupton (1999a) has argued, cognitive science tends to view risk as a set of objective dangers that rational, calculating individuals must negotiate in going about their daily lives; however, such approaches reduce the meanings of risk to the individual level and thus fail to consider the “symbolic meanings created through the social world” (p. 22). One prominent area where cognitive scientific approaches to risk dominate is the area of public health, notably within the health promotion literature; accident prevention, for example, is a key site where discourses of risk consistently emerge (Green, 1997). According to Green, the health promotion field commonly positions risk as calculable and predictable; accidents, therefore, should not happen, and when they do, they are a result of “ignorance, mis-calculation, or the deliberate negligence of known risks” (p. 116). From the

perspective of public health professionals, it is the public's "uneducated" construction of accidents, and therefore risk, as "unpredictable" that undermines accident prevention efforts. Another popular area of risk literature is directed at outdoor recreation practitioners and deals with issues of legal liability and risk management (e.g., Cloutier, 2000). This literature also adheres to realist and cognitive science perspectives of risk; its focus is to assist practitioners in identifying and mitigating "real" risks—both objective (i.e. physical objects or environmental factors) and subjective (i.e., human factors such as decision making, level of experience)—for legal, financial and ethical purposes. Thus, both health promotion and risk management literatures commonly mobilize realist definitions of risk and fail to question how a specific phenomenon comes to be viewed as a risk in a particular geographic or social context.

A number of researchers have focused on the positive aspects of risk by considering the cultural appeal and potential benefits associated with risk in the context of outdoor, adventure recreation. For example, as Giulianotti (2009) notes, social psychological frameworks have been used frequently to examine the personal and social benefits associated with participation in adventure recreation activities (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; LeBreton, 2000; Lyng, 1990). The broader politics of risk recreation have not been explored to the same extent. Several scholars, however (particularly in sociology and cultural geography), have employed socio-cultural perspectives of risk to examine the ways in which outdoor adventure recreation is linked to gender, race and class politics, while questioning how "risk" may intersect with these aspects of social identity (i.e. Braun, 2003; Davidson, 2008; Fletcher, 2008; Laurendeau, 2008; Laurendeau & van Brunschot, 2006; Stoddard, 2010). My work drew on these literatures to better understand how backcountry snowmobiling practices involved risk discourses that are implicitly racialized, classed, gendered, etc.

Risk and Social Identity: Intersections of Race, Class and Gender. Braun (2003)

examines articulations of “race” and “nature” in extreme sports and adventure travel through a critical analysis of images and advertisements in outdoor adventure magazines (e.g., *Outside*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Backpacker*). Based on this analysis, Braun develops an argument that sees outdoor adventure recreation as strongly tied to white, middle-class “risk culture.” Risk culture refers to the “cultural and representational practices that produce risk as culturally meaningful ... it consists of an important set of discursive practices through which race, class and gender differences are articulated and temporarily sutured” (p. 178). Drawing on Beck’s *World Risk Society* (1999) and the concept of “reflexive modernization”⁸ (Beck et al., 1994), Braun views “risk culture” as partially constitutive of white, middle-class identities. He argues that, in dominant American culture, having the resources to choose risks “is seen as an individuating activity associated with whiteness” (p. 198); taking risks, in this context, is generally viewed in a positive light. In contrast, non-white subjects are more often positioned as “at-risk” and are thus constructed as passive, helpless, or deviant. Braun’s analysis indicates the presence of a risk-taking binary, in which one can either be subject *to* risk or voluntarily engage risks—the latter being more culturally valued. This binary, in turn, is implicated in processes of racialization, whereby “race” is constructed, in part, through representations of “at-risk” subjects in need of paternalistic interventions.

A similar risk dichotomy is found in Davidson’s (2008) study of media representations of mountaineering accidents in New Zealand, where accident victims were categorized as either

⁸ According to Beck (1994; 1999), “risk culture” is central to late modern Western societies, where “debates and conflicts over risks have begun to dominate public, political and private arenas” (Lupton, 1999a, p. 59). “Reflexive modernization” refers to the way in which individuals in these societies have developed a greater awareness of risk and have thus become increasingly critical of the social structures that accompany post-industrial, modern societies.

admirable risk-takers or irresponsible and reckless. Davidson employs a socio-cultural understanding of risk that views the media as central to the construction of ideas about risk. His study compares media coverage of a mountaineering accident on Mount Tasman involving local, Caucasian guides and climbers with two other accidents involving international tourists from Latvia and Indonesia. Davidson found that locals were consistently portrayed as “true adventurers” that were willing to take risks while maintaining a sense of personal responsibility. Any accidents in which they were involved, therefore, were merely seen as a result of bad luck. In striking contrast, he compares an incident involving Latvian (tourist) climbers to the Mount Tasman incident involving New Zealand climbers—both incidents resulting in the same number of fatalities. Through an analysis of the narrative themes in print news media, Davidson argues that the incident involving Latvian climbers was not portrayed as particularly meaningful to New Zealand residents; this was evidenced, in part, by the lack of national news media attention it received in comparison to the Mount Tasman incident. A further contrast was found in the types of media coverage that resulted following an incident involving Indonesian tourists. While New Zealand climbers were consistently treated as heroic victims of uncontrollable circumstance, Indonesian climbers were represented as foolish, reckless and inexperienced foreigners in need of education; their very presence in the mountains was questioned, and their right to recreate in such spaces was criticized. The incident involving the Indonesian tourists was portrayed as inevitable, with the victims being portrayed as somewhat deserving of their misfortune. Here, Davidson’s work resonates with Braun’s (2003) assertion that nature is a “discursive site through which the effects of race are produced and naturalized...but where not all subjects fit risk cultures ideological frames” (p. 176-177). Using a similar thematic analysis of print media, my work

explored the “ideological frames” of risk culture discursively constructed in media representations of snowmobiling avalanche deaths in Western Canada.

Recent sport sociology scholarship has also considered how risk-taking behaviour may be connected to broader issues of social stratification, such as class, race and gender (Giulianotti, 2009). However, as Giulianotti has observed, there remains much room for development in risk-related research within the sociology of sport; one of the key areas identified for further scholarly research is risk cultures/sub-cultures. I would argue that Western Canadian, mountain-based adventure recreation, though composed of numerous unique sub-cultural groups, represents a key site where such research needs to occur; these specific risk cultures are particularly salient given their continual presence in representations of Western Canadian regional identity. Furthermore, backcountry snowmobiling offered an ideal activity and locale for examining discourses of risk, as risk is often considered central to the activity, and, as Stoddard (2010) suggests, the “backcountry” is constructed as an inherently “risky” landscape.

Lupton (1999a) argues that there is a growing fascination with the opportunities for pleasure and excitement afforded by risk. This “counter-discourse” (p. 148) differs from the dominant perspectives on risk, which tend to emphasize its negative aspects. Outdoor recreation is a central area where cultural appeal has been built around risk.⁹ For example, Lupton notes that adventure recreation activities have been used frequently to market products that implore consumers to be different by embracing risk (see also Braun, 2003). In this respect, activities “coded as dangerous or risky” are seen as a means to escape the confines of an “overly regulated body/self” (Lupton, 1999a, p. 152). However, there is a double bind here. In one sense,

⁹ Ironically, the popularity of “risky” outdoor recreation activities has grown at the same time as activities have become increasingly “safe” due to improved technology, safety equipment, etc..

participation in outdoor, adventure recreation may be viewed as a way to achieve a sense of authenticity and individualism. On the other hand, within contemporary neo-liberal societies (such as mainstream North American culture), individuals are expected to make rational decisions about risks that align with societal expectations for healthy lifestyle choices (McDermott, 2007); risks, in this sense, should be avoided, and individuals should make the “right” choices about their health and safety. Thus, risk occupies a position of ambivalence in neo-liberal societies, where choosing to participate in outdoor, adventure recreation may cause one to be simultaneously criticized and/or admired (Donnelly, 2004). Though participation in “risky” activities may cause an individual to be labelled as courageous or heroic, Lupton (1999a) suggests that the “heroic risk-taker” is not a subject position to which individuals have equal access. Gendered representations of risk most often recognize men as heroic, while women that engage in “risky” behaviours are viewed as anomalies, passive victims, or as reckless, selfish and irresponsible (e.g., see also Frohlick, 2006, Stirling, 2010).

White and Young (2007) use an empirical approach to investigate the connections between risk, gender and sport in Canada. By looking at sports related injuries and fatalities, they suggest that sports injury is highly gendered, with men sustaining higher levels of death and injury relative to women. They argue that “the social construction of masculinity as we know it in Canada has a negative impact on men’s health” (p. 263). Suggestively, the notion of risk is both celebrated and naturalized for men to a greater degree than it is for women, and sporting practices perceived to be risky and physically demanding have become key cultural sites for the construction and verification of masculinity (see also Whitson, 1990). Research from the CAC supports the claim that injury/death in backcountry winter activities is indeed gendered in Canada: between 1996 and 2007, eighty-eight percent of recreation related avalanche fatalities

involved male victims (Jamieson, et al., 2010), and all of the avalanche-related snowmobiling deaths that have occurred in Canada in recent years, including during the 2008-09 and 2009-10 winter seasons, involved male victims (Kelley, 2009b). As of 2013, there were no reports of avalanche related fatalities involving female snowmobilers in Canada.¹⁰ While these statistics indicate that men have been the primary victims of avalanche related snowmobile deaths in Canada, they do not tell us anything about how snowmobiling practices may serve as a site for the social construction of masculinity(ies).

Laurendeau (2008) theorizes the relationship between risk and gender using Lyngé's (1990) concept of "edgework"¹¹ looking at the ways in which risk and gender intersect during recreational activities in which voluntary risk is considered to be central to the activity (e.g., skydiving, mountaineering, snowboarding). Laurendeau argues that risk and gender are active constructions that not only intersect, but are also "mutually constituting in so-called risk sports" (p. 300). Further, he maintains that sporting cultures have "gendered risk regimes" that inform peoples' experiences and "form the context within which [they] engage in their own gender and risk projects" in these activities (p. 301). In employing the concept of "risk regimes," Laurendeau draws on Connell (2002), who suggests that organizations have particular patterns of gender relations or "gender regimes" attached to them. Laurendeau furthers this idea by suggesting that adventure recreation activities also have corresponding risk regimes that are

¹⁰ The CAC's incident report database does not explicitly state avalanche accident victims' sex, and their sex-based statistics do not distinguish between different types of recreational activities. Therefore, it is unclear as to what activity female avalanche victims were participating in when they died. However, no statistical or anecdotal evidence of female snowmobiling fatalities in Canada could be found in the CAC database or through a general internet search.

¹¹ "Edgework" is a term originating from the American author Hunter S Thompson; it has been popularized in academia by Lyngé's (1990) work on the sociology of risk. In this context, it refers to the boundary one negotiates during "risky" activities where a feeling of exhilaration is sought whilst maintaining a sense of control over one's actions.

highly gendered. To illustrate his point, Laurendeau draws on the work of other scholars (i.e., Donnelly, 2004; Thorpe, 2005, Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008) that have discussed the gendered dimension of discourses of risk and responsibility in adventure recreation practices, such as mountaineering, snowboarding and skydiving. Overall, he maintains that the way in which individuals choose to engage in voluntary risk activities (or not) is linked to questions of responsibility (such as *to* whom and *for* whom one is responsible):

How they answer this question is also part of the kind of masculinity or femininity that they construct, a construction shaped or constrained by understandings of both risk and gender that are in operation at the community or subcultural level, as well as more broadly. (p. 302)

Exploring themes of risk and responsibility in particular sporting subcultures therefore sheds light on the ways in which outdoor recreation practices (such as backcountry snowmobiling) are implicated in gendered power relations. Though Laurendeau primarily draws from the work of other scholars in this study, he has explored similar themes empirically in his own work, which critically examines risk and social control (Laurendeau & Brunschot, 2006) and gender and sexuality (Laurendeau, 2004) in the context of North American skydiving subcultures. These works further suggest that outdoor, adventure recreation functions as a key cultural site for the social construction and/or contestation of ideas about both risk and gender.

Risk and the Media. The interplay between risk and gender has also been previously observed in media discourses surrounding public tragedies in Canada. One such example comes from Pacholok's (2009) analysis of print news media during the 2003 Okanogan Mountain Park forest fire in Kelowna, British Columbia. As Pacholok describes, this fire occurred in a year with an unprecedented number of forest fires in BC. It was also an especially destructive fire, as it

destroyed hundreds of houses, forced thousands from their homes and damaged a portion of a national historic site as well as the majority of Okanagan Mountain Park. It also resulted in the deaths of three firefighters and a state of emergency being officially declared in the region.

In her investigation of the media coverage surrounding these events, Pacholok (2009) observed that discourses of risk and gender were prevalent in public dialogue and local news coverage of the firefighting efforts. Interviews with individual firefighters and analysis of newspaper articles revealed the presence of a distinct social hierarchy between various local firefighting groups—particularly between The City of Kelowna (structural) firefighters and the BC forestry (wildland) firefighters. While both groups were predominantly comprised of men, the wildland firefighting group was more diverse, as it included several female and First Nations members. The social hierarchy that developed between these two groups manifested as unequal praise and criticism being directed at each of the groups by media and community members; the City of Kelowna firefighters, in particular, received greater praise and recognition in the community. Fuelling this hierarchy were media representations that depicted structural firefighters as brave and heroic while wildland firefighters received little recognition.

Central to the strategies of differentiation that polarized the two firefighting groups were the workings of gender—particularly masculinity (Pacholok, 2009). Pacholok maintains that “gendered strategies of self” were used both individually and collectively in the community. By “strategies of self,” Pacholok refers to the ways in which individual firefighters attempted to position themselves and their group as superior by undermining the credibility of other firefighting groups. This was accomplished by adopting a “measuring stick of firefighting competence,” which included such attributes as “remaining calm in a crisis, using aggressive tactics, controlling emotions and exterminating fire” (p. 489). As Pacholok suggests, such

standards are essentially analogous to dominant ideals of masculinity—thus, undermining the competence of other firefighters was a means of de-masculinizing them. Firefighters also attempted to reinforce their competence by associating other groups with attributes stereotypically linked to femininity (e.g., passivity). Based on these findings, Pacholok argues that a consideration of gender is essential for understanding the social hierarchy that developed between firefighting groups in the community. Furthermore, she argues that print news media perpetuated dominant discourses of masculinity and heroism by providing media coverage that favoured the City of Kelowna fire fighters. This bias, according to Pacholok, may have been a strategic move by the newspapers “because they recognized that their audience would identify more readily with structural firefighters as heroes, while wildland firefighters, being a more diverse group, including more women and First Nations firefighters, would not fit quite so readily into a heroism frame” (p. 486).

Pacholok’s (2009) research highlights the role of media in the social construction of gender and the ideological and discursive construction of the community “hero”—particularly in the wake of public tragedy. She suggests that in times of crisis and uncertainty, heroes are discursively constructed by drawing on dominant cultural narratives and that tragedies are often used to reproduce these narratives (i.e. dominant gender hierarchies). For example, media representations of the Okanogan firefighting groups revealed that the groups and individuals favoured in media coverage were homogenous in terms of race/class/gender. In the face of crisis and tragedy, therefore, representations of diversity were subordinated (i.e., wildland firefighters) in favour of homogenous portrayals of heroic, white, working class men (i.e., structural firefighters). Such representations suggest that, despite the growing cultural diversity of Canadian communities (Banting, Courchene, & Seidle, 2007b), discursive constructions of

heroism often remain decidedly homogenous. This study is also indicative of the central role news media plays in circulating ideas about heroism following public tragedies in Canadian communities.

The discursive construction of community “heroes” is a theme also explored by Goldstein & Tye (2006) in their examination of mourning practices in Pouch Cove, Newfoundland. Their study followed the public response to the drowning of three teenage boys whose “lives were lost while jumping from one ice pan to another, in a traditional follow-the-leader or ‘chicken’ type game, called ‘copying’” (p. 233).¹² Goldstein and Tye base their analysis on direct observation of community events (e.g., funerals and public memorials), conversations with local residents and media texts (e.g., stories and interviews in local newspapers). While investigating the public memorialisation of these three deaths, Goldstein and Tye noted continuous discourses of heroism in the community—in both public dialogue and media representations. The process of “hero-making,” they argue, offers insight into important cultural values and has deep connections to both regional and national identities. In the case of the Pouch Cove drownings, Goldstein and Tye argue that constructing the victims as brave and heroic was one strategy of resistance used to counter the possibility of outside interpretations: “by naming the drowned boys as heroes, members of Pouch Cove and of the rescue effort resisted outside interpretations of the boys as reckless and dismissals of their deaths as unfortunate but self-inflicted” (p 246). Additionally, Goldstein and Tye suggest that the discourses of heroism that surrounded the deaths were strongly linked to regional identities that were steeped in gender and class politics. Specifically, the boys were symbolically linked with representations of a collective Newfoundland identity

¹² Initial media reports suggested that the boys died while “copying,” however, these reports were later contested by various community members (Goldstein & Tye, 2006).

grounded in white, working class masculinity. “Reshaping of the boys and the fisherman as heroes becomes a central act of resistance in its validation for all Newfoundlanders of a way of life that is disappearing” (p. 248). Here, Goldstein and Tye refer to changes in rural lifestyles resulting from the collapse of the cod fishery in the mid-1990s. Their findings support the idea that the cultural construction of the heroic can be, in itself, an act of resistance and a validation for a particular regional identity whose hegemony is somehow threatened. These critical considerations of hero-making and the public memorialisation of accident victims in rural communities were particularly salient for my research given that the events I explored involve widespread media coverage of the untimely deaths of young men in rural settings. Furthermore, the interactions Goldstein and Tye discuss regarding hero-making, shifting economic profiles and regional identity resonate with rural Western Canadian communities, such as Sparwood and Revelstoke, where traditional resource-based (“boom and bust”) economies are being diversified and transformed into sites of tourism and outdoor recreation.

While only a limited number of studies have examined the relationships between news media and outdoor, adventure recreation, several key themes have emerged in this research. First, mainstream news media have been accused of ignoring the potential benefits of outdoor, adventure recreation while simultaneously over-emphasizing the risks and sensationalizing accidents when they do occur (Beedie & Bourne, 2005). Second, similar to research critiquing the mainstream media’s tendency to trivialize women’s sporting accomplishments (i.e. Adams, 2006; Wensing & Bruce, 2003), both news media and pop-culture texts have been found to support inequitable gender relations by producing negative portrayals of women in mountain environments (Frohlick, 2006; Rak 2007; Stoddart, 2010). Frohlick (2006), for example, found that international news media coverage of British mountaineer Alison Hargreaves’ death often

framed the accomplished mountaineer as a “bad mother;” mountaineering and motherhood produced greater social anxiety and scrutiny compared to mountaineering and fatherhood (see also Stirling, 2010). Frohlick’s analysis of news media and mountaineering texts also revealed that “the linkage of women with reproduction and thus as gendered, maternalized ‘Other’ in relation to the fraternal geographies and normative white sporting bodies of the mountaineering hero [was] made repeatedly” (p. 481). These representations of female mountaineers stand in stark contrast to those that commonly portray white men as heroic adventurers. However, despite continued evidence of sexism in mountaineering practices and representations, many elite women climbers “talk about sexism as if it were a thing of the past” (Rak, 2007, p. 133). As Chisholm (2008) has theorized, activities such as rock climbing are always informed by gender—regardless of whether the climber acknowledges gender differences. Thus, it is important to look at these practices from a critical perspective. Backcountry snowmobiling practices and representations should also be examined with a similarly critical lens, as they are part of a complex social discourse whose politics are not always immediately discernible.

Summary & Conclusions

This literature review explored themes surrounding risk, place and identity in previous outdoor recreation scholarship, with a particular interest in research that employs sociocultural perspectives. From this review, it was clear that sociocultural explorations of outdoor, adventure recreation are sparse. Moreover, the politics of place and identity in Western Canadian mountain locales has not been explored with regard to snowmobiling practices, and outdoor recreation research has yet to examine backcountry snowmobiling from a critical, cultural studies perspective. By examining discourses of risk, gender and identity in media representation of snowmobile avalanche accidents in Western Canada, this project highlights the political nature

of outdoor recreation representations and discourses. The results of this study provide a unique contribution to the existing body of outdoor recreation research by incorporating an interdisciplinary framework that draws from (and contributes to) existing literatures in outdoor recreation/leisure studies, sport sociology, cultural studies, social/cultural anthropology and cultural geography. It also bridges gaps in the existing scholarship by using a cultural studies/poststructural approach to better understand how outdoor, adventure recreation and notions of “risk” are tied to regional identities, identity politics and social stratification in Western Canada. The identity politics inherent in outdoor recreation practices are understudied in this capacity, and, considering the growing academic interest in cultural studies of sport/leisure (Rowe, 2004), the outcomes of this inquiry provide a unique Canadian context with which to further this area of research.

Theoretical Framework

The research questions posed in this study are epistemologically grounded in social constructionism. Based on the principal of ontological relativity, this paradigm assumes that reality and truth are products of social construction; knowledge, therefore, is culturally and historically contextual—it is never objective or absolute, but subject to constant change, resistance and negotiation (Schwandt, 2000; Patton, 2002). Reality, therefore, is not constructed individually, but socially through “shared understandings, practices, [and] language” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 196). Questions of power are fundamental to research that employs a social constructionist perspective and are thus central to this project.

This study’s central purpose and research questions were addressed using critical cultural studies and poststructuralist feminist theory. Critical cultural studies, according to Kellner (1995), involves engaging in ideological critique of cultural texts, images and narratives with the goal of unmasking dominant, hegemonic ideologies, while seeking forms of resistance and counter-hegemonic representation. Thus, critical theory and cultural studies are highly influenced by Marxism and have been used to question the ways in which power and ideology circulate, and are contested, in discursive practices and cultural texts (Hall, 1997; Kellner, 1995). However, such theories have often been criticized for positioning ideology as a dominant, unified articulation of the interests of the capitalist ruling class.

In spite of such criticism, Kellner (1995) defends the use of ideological critique in cultural studies research. However, he attempts to address theoretical criticisms by problematizing traditional Marxist definitions of ideology. Namely, Kellner advocates for “multicultural ideological critique” (p. 58)—a way of analysing cultural texts that considers intersecting forms of oppression, such as race, gender, sexuality and class. Ideology, in Kellner’s

view, is present in cultural texts where it mobilizes “consent to certain dominant core assumptions about social life” (p. 58). These core assumptions (e.g., about human nature, race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.) are mobilized by different groups as “common sense” and used to support their own agendas in social struggles for power and control; “thus, while there is no one unified and stable dominant ideology, there are core assumptions that different political groups mobilize and deploy” (p. 58).

Early cultural studies research relied on structuralist methods of analysis such as semiotics (Saukko, 2003).¹³ Though these traditions offered new ways of theorizing power and oppression in society, they also rely on structural theories of language that do not fully account for the plurality and instability of social meaning (Weedon, 1987). For example, semiotic analysis allows researchers to decode the imbedded meanings in a particular text by analyzing the cultural meanings associated with a particular assemblage of signs (see Chandler, 2002; Laughey, 2009). However, such approaches have been criticized for their attention to the structure and fixity of language and failure to acknowledge the multiple, contested and changing meanings of signs (Weedon, 1987).

While cultural studies continues to examine the relationship between culture and social domination, it understands cultural texts, such as popular culture products, not to be mere loci of domination. Rather, it views them as a site of contestation over meaning, where different groups compete to set forth their understandings of the state of the affairs in the world. (Saukko, 2003, p. 100)

¹³ Semiotics was prevalent in cultural studies research in the 1960’s and was based on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and French cultural theorist Roland Barthes (Chandler, 2002).

This recognition of the instability of social meaning is evidence of the recent influence of poststructural theory in cultural studies research, in which the former attempts to understand “the relation between language, subjectivity, social organization and power” (Weedon, 1987, p. 12); it is, therefore, invaluable to contemporary cultural studies research such as the media analysis undertaken in this project.

Poststructuralism is an umbrella term for a variety of theoretical positions, but all have in common some shared assumptions about language, meaning and subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). Common to all poststructuralist perspectives is the belief that language constructs, rather than reflects reality. Thus, language is understood as a site of social and political struggle that enables us to “think, speak, and give meaning to the world around us” (p. 31). According to Weedon (1987), language is where “actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested” (p. 21). It is also where our subjectivity is socially produced. This view differs from liberal humanist perspectives, which interpret subjectivity as innate, fixed and coherent; rational consciousness and personal choice are central to an individual’s subjectivity in humanist paradigms. Conversely, Weedon describes poststructural subjectivity as dynamic, unstable, multiple, conflicting and a product of the culture and society in which one lives. In poststructural accounts, language and discourse are central to the understanding of social organization, meaning and power.

Because my research has an explicit focus on analyzing representations of gender and masculinity in adventure recreation discourses, feminist poststructural theory (Weedon, 1987) was particularly useful for interpreting the data in this study. Weedon offers a theory of feminist poststructuralism that addresses questions of how social power relations—such as those surrounding gender, class and race—are exercised and transformed. This theory suggests that

experience has no natural or innate meaning, but is given meaning within discursive systems, “which are often contradictory and constitute conflicting versions of social reality, which in turn serve conflicting interests” (p. 33). Masculinity and femininity, for example, are understood as being socially and discursively produced, and therefore historically and culturally contextual. The meanings attached to gender, however, often appear as “natural” and “real” rather than as discursive constructions that sustain particular power relations. From a feminist poststructural standpoint, cultural texts (such as newspaper articles) are sites where the meaning of gender is discursively constructed and reproduced. Thus, though some discourses of gender may seem enduring and natural, Weedon notes that they are socially constructed, unstable and often serve very particular political interests. Feminist poststructuralism, then, is well suited to the study of identity politics (see also Weedon, 1999).

The paradigm outlined by Weedon (1987) combines some of the basic tenets from both feminist and poststructuralist theoretical traditions. She draws heavily on Althusser, Derrida and Foucault to conceptualize ideology, power relations and discourse. She also draws on contemporary feminist theory, which has political roots stemming from the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s. According to Weedon, the Women’s Liberation Movement has been central to the development of both feminist and poststructural theory. Though feminist theory encompasses a wide range of views on women’s oppression (i.e. radical, liberal and socialist feminism), all feminist paradigms are concerned with the gendered structures of society and how these structures facilitate women’s subordination. But, as Weedon draws out, *poststructural* feminist theory offers something that other forms of feminist analysis do not—it accounts for the cultural appeal of patriarchal social relations (without resorting to Marxist explanations of false consciousness) and considers why “women and men adopt particular discursive positions as

representative of their interests” (p. 12). Thus, feminist poststructuralism attempts to demonstrate how patriarchal power relations “function both institutionally and individually through the production of patriarchal forms of subjectivity” (p.171).

Weedon’s (1987) feminist poststructuralism provides a theoretical lens that challenges researchers to examine, critically, the discourses surrounding particular social practices. This includes questioning the types of power relations that are (re)produced in a particular discourse, as well as examining the points of resistance that may offer opportunities for transformation. Weedon’s work draws much from Foucauldian poststructuralism in its emphasis on power/knowledge and the historical nature of specific discursive relations. Specifically, she argues that “knowledge and power work systematically to marginalize women, defining [them] as ‘other’” (p. 171). The production of social meaning, she argues, is part of an infinite process of deferral that Derrida calls *différance*. In this sense, social meanings are only fixed temporarily and are never neutral; they always involve questions of power.

Feminist poststructuralism is also heavily influenced by Althusserian Marxism, which focuses on ideology and the importance of class structure and economic relations of production (Weedon, 1987). However, Weedon expands upon Marxist theories that reduce discourse, social organization and power to capital-labour relationships. Similar to Kellner’s (1995) critical cultural studies and multicultural ideological analysis, Weedon notes that there is “space within this poststructuralism for other forms of power relation, such as gender and race, which must not necessarily be subordinated to class analysis, although questions of class and the interrelation of forms of oppression will often be crucial to the analysis” (p. 31). Though feminist poststructural theory has a strong focus on deconstructing hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality, it also acknowledges other intersecting forms of oppression (such as race and class) as central to

understanding power relations. Moreover, Weedon's position moves beyond structural-Marxist notions of ideology and oppression by recognizing media texts as a site of social struggle, rather than a site of domination, where underlying ideologies need to be unmasked for social emancipation. Such a theoretical lens was useful for analyzing how risk, gender and regional identity were discursively constructed and interconnected in the media texts which constituted the data set for this study. At the same time, poststructural feminist theory was useful in considering how particular media representations were tied to power relations and the politics of identity by constructing "common sense" knowledge about gender, race, class and sexuality.

Methods

Methodology

Qualitative methodologies are particularly valuable for research that seeks to examine social phenomena in depth and detail (Patton, 2002). The purpose of this study was closely aligned with the goals of qualitative research, as it utilized naturalistic inquiry to examine the power relations and identity politics surrounding media representations of snowmobiling avalanche deaths in Western Canada. Therefore, qualitative methodologies were privileged throughout this study.

A case study approach allowed a thorough examination of the details surrounding recent representations of snowmobiling avalanche deaths. This approach is prevalent in qualitative social science research, though scholars have often disagreed as to whether a case study is a methodology or an object of inquiry (Creswell, 1998). The distinguishing feature of case study research is its focus on a specific, unique, bounded system or “case,” which may be comprised of a program, event, activity, individual, or phenomenon (Cresswell, 1998; Stake, 2000). A “collective case study,” according to Stake (2000), involves looking at multiple cases to study a specific issue or phenomenon. For the purposes of my project, a collective case study was undertaken to examine print news media representations of two specific snowmobiling avalanche incidents in BC that resulted in fatalities. Therefore, by framing this project as a collective case study, I used media texts from two critical avalanche accidents to study the politics of place and identity surrounding snowmobiling avalanche deaths in Western Canada.

Like much contemporary qualitative research, this project used purposive sampling in the selection of case studies and corresponding texts (Patton, 2002). In particular, I employed a strategy similar to what Patton refers to as “critical case” and “theoretical” sampling. According

to Patton, theoretical sampling involves strategically selecting case studies that highlight the concepts, theories, or phenomenon of study. The concepts sought through case selection in this project were media representations of snowmobiling avalanche deaths—particularly those that discussed risk, gender, regional identity and mountain culture. Interest in this project was conceived out of observation of these discourses in recent media representations of avalanche accidents, and thus they remained central to the sampling strategy. As Patton also notes, critical case sampling entails choosing cases that “make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things” (p. 236). The significance of the two incidents chosen for analysis in this study was determined through a preliminary review of snowmobiling avalanche incidents in Western Canada over two consecutive avalanche seasons: 2008-09 and 2009-10.¹⁴ Two notable incidents (or critical cases) emerged during this time period—one from each avalanche season. These events were deemed most significant in scope in terms of the number of people involved, the number of fatalities that occurred and the amount of media coverage which followed the events. They, therefore, served as the focus for this collective case study project.

The 2008-09 avalanche season resulted in an unprecedented number of (recreational) avalanche deaths in Canada (Kelly, 2009b). The most significant event in this period was an avalanche in Harvey Pass, a backcountry area in the Elk Valley region of southeastern British Columbia. This incident claimed the lives of eight male snowmobilers from nearby Sparwood, BC. The following season, 2009-10, had a lower than average number of avalanche deaths; however, one incident on Boulder Mountain, near Revelstoke, BC, involved over two-hundred

¹⁴ “Avalanche seasons” correspond with winter seasons and therefore run from approximately December-April in Canada.

people (on snowmobiles) and resulted in two fatalities and dozens of injuries. These two avalanche incidents garnered a vast amount of local and national news media coverage—an amount that far exceeded any other single event in these years. In addition, the scale of these events, and the amount of media coverage they received, meant that they continued to be referenced in subsequent media reports of other, unrelated avalanche incidents. For these reasons, the Sparwood and Revelstoke avalanches were considered critical cases with a rich source of primary data.

A case study is a form of empirical inquiry that investigates a particular issue or instance while taking into account the complexities of its social context (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2003). Kellner (1995) maintains that research in cultural studies should include a consideration of the broader social, political and economic contexts in which particular cultural texts are situated. This project incorporated such an analysis by specifically including information about the regions in which each incident occurred (e.g., social, demographic, political and economic data), as well as a brief history of recreational avalanche awareness, education initiatives and debates in Western Canada. Information on the snow and avalanche conditions at the time of each accident was also included. This data was obtained from provincial and municipal government websites and the CAC.

Sampling & Data Collection

The data for these case studies was drawn from local and national print news media sources. In particular, texts from the *Globe & Mail*,¹⁵ the *Calgary Herald*, *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Free Press* and the *Revelstoke Times Review* were used in this analysis. As one of Canada's

¹⁵ The Greater Toronto (Metro) edition of the *Globe and Mail* was used in this analysis; it is the only edition available on microfilm at the University of Alberta. I contacted the *Globe & Mail* via telephone, and they advised that the national news sections are the same for all editions of the newspaper.

prominent English language newspapers, the *Globe & Mail* was used to examine how the events were discussed at the national level. The *Calgary Herald* and *The Vancouver Sun* offered regional perspectives from both sides of the Columbia Mountains. The *Free Press* (Ferne) and the *Revelstoke Times Review* provided representations from the rural communities nearest to where the avalanches occurred. These latter two publications are affiliated weekly community newspapers and served to provide local perspectives on each event.

This study relied on archival research of print media texts as the primary mode of data collection. Articles were first located with the use of publication specific search engines and the Factiva Database. Articles were then obtained in hard copy whenever possible—either in their original print form or on microfilm/microfiche. The purpose of this collection strategy was to consider the positioning, layout and accompanying images of news stories as an important source of data that may be otherwise unavailable in electronic formats. Though the majority of newspaper articles were published in the first two weeks following each accident, to be thorough in this investigation, data collection included a search for any articles that appeared from the day following the avalanche, up to and including April 30, 2011—the anticipated end date of the 2010-11 avalanche season.¹⁶ Additionally, this sampling timeframe extended a full year past the date of the last avalanche chosen for this data set and, thus, allowed for the inclusion of any commemorative stories published on the first (or subsequent) anniversaries of the avalanches. News reports and feature articles directly related to the incidents in question served as the focal point of the analysis. Editorial columns were also considered. Letters to the editor, however, were beyond the scope of this study. This project was not intended to investigate how audiences

¹⁶ The end of April typically marks the end of the Canadian avalanche season; however, 2010-11 resulted in a larger than average snow pack and a late spring; as a result, the CAC extended their services for several additional weeks. However, no major avalanche incidents occurred in this time.

interpreted or responded to media texts. Rather, it explored how the politics of place and identity were operative in media representations of snowmobiling avalanche deaths as well as how power relations manifested in seemingly impartial media discourses.

Data Analysis

A textual, thematic analysis of media representations and discourses was used as the primary method of analysis in this collective case study. This type of media analysis is common in cultural studies, poststructuralist and feminist research that explores questions of gender and the media (e.g., see Adams, 2006; Laurendeau & Adams, 2010; Pacholok, 2009; Trimble & Everitt, 2010). Such approaches are grounded in traditions of semiotics, critical theory and poststructural notions of discourse analysis, and they were therefore suitable for the theoretical orientation and epistemological paradigm that informed this study.

The specific methods for media analysis used in this project followed those devised by Sampert & Trimble (2010). This method of media discourse analysis has been loosely adapted from the work of Jäger (2002) and Cappella & Jamieson (1997). As a tradition of inquiry that has been used in qualitative research across many different academic disciplines, discourse analysis “acknowledges that language is a form of social interaction and focuses on its meaning based on the cultural and social context in which it is used” (Trimble & Everitt, 2010, p. 56). Accordingly, Sampert and Trimble (2010) suggest that, when sampling media texts, the researcher should critically reflect on the context and character of the chosen texts (i.e. audience, format, structure, etc.). Textual analysis should then include five areas of consideration, beginning with a summarization of the surface features of the text (i.e. format, structure, layout). For newspaper articles, this includes a consideration of the “headlines, lead paragraphs, quotations, [and] conclusions” (p. 329). Second, the analysis should include a detailed summary of the thematic

structures of the text. This includes a discussion of the central themes and arguments that are constructed in the text. Third, a description of the scripts and discursive frames used in the article should be noted. This refers to any storylines that are used to create narrative tension in the article or the presence of any narrative devices that helps the reader form an interpretation by tapping into their existing cultural knowledge. Fourth, the researcher should consider the use of any rhetorical devices in the text. Rhetorical devices refer to any “stylistic choices that convey... meaning” and may include things such as “forms of argumentation, symbols, images, [and/or] sources” (p. 329). Finally, textual analysis should look for any ideological assertions made in the text. For example, this might include claims about human nature (including statements about gender, class, race, etc.), social or political values, etc.

Sampert and Trimble’s (2010) method of media discourse analysis provide a clear set of guidelines for performing qualitative textual analysis from a critical perspective. However, in addition to these methods, I also considered the discursive silences that surrounded specific media representations. Poststructural theorists, in particular, have advocated for new ways of analyzing cultural texts and performing cultural critique that incorporates considerations of discursive silences. Kellner (1995) suggests this involves looking at texts as sites of social struggle, where the “discursive silences” or margins of the text are taken to be as important as what is actually present in any given representation. Laurendeau & Adams (2010), for example, have used this form of inquiry to examine the discursive silences pertaining to risk and gender in Olympic discourses of women’s competitive ski jumping. Examining the discursive silences surrounding snowmobiling avalanche deaths in my project involved a similar process of reflecting on what was not discussed in the text, who was excluded and whose interests were privileged (and necessarily whose were not) in textual representations.

Data analysis commenced by reading through newspaper articles and using manual, open coding strategies to identify the thematic structures, discursive frames, rhetorical devices, ideological assertions and discursive silences present in the media texts. Articles were then reread with attention to the emergent themes identified. Collaboration/peer debriefing with my supervisory committee was also used to help summarize the themes identified in the media analysis. Newspaper articles from each case were reviewed independently at first, and then compared in a cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis was not intended to generate universal explanations or causality of social phenomena, but rather to develop rich, detailed descriptions of case studies including contextual differences and patterns of interaction (Patton, 2002).

Limitations

Media discourse analysis offers a productive means of examining the dominant ideologies and discourses that circulated through media representations of the respective avalanche accidents. One notable limitation of this method, however, is that it does not account for the diverse ways in which audiences may interpret media texts. The goal of this study, rather, was to identify and analyze critically the representational politics at play in media depictions of snowmobiling avalanche accidents. To address the potential criticism of the interpretive nature of discourse analysis work, this project precluded the use of universalizing claims in the study findings and is, instead, deeply situated in its social and historical context.

Contextualizing the Research

To contextualize this study, I will first provide an overview of the locales in which each of the two avalanche incidents occurred. This includes a summary of relevant geographic, demographic, economic and social features of the communities. Second, I will contextualize avalanche safety in Western Canada by outlining its historical development as well as the contemporary issues, debates and initiatives that surround avalanche education and backcountry snowmobiling in Western Canada.

The Kootenay Rockies¹⁷

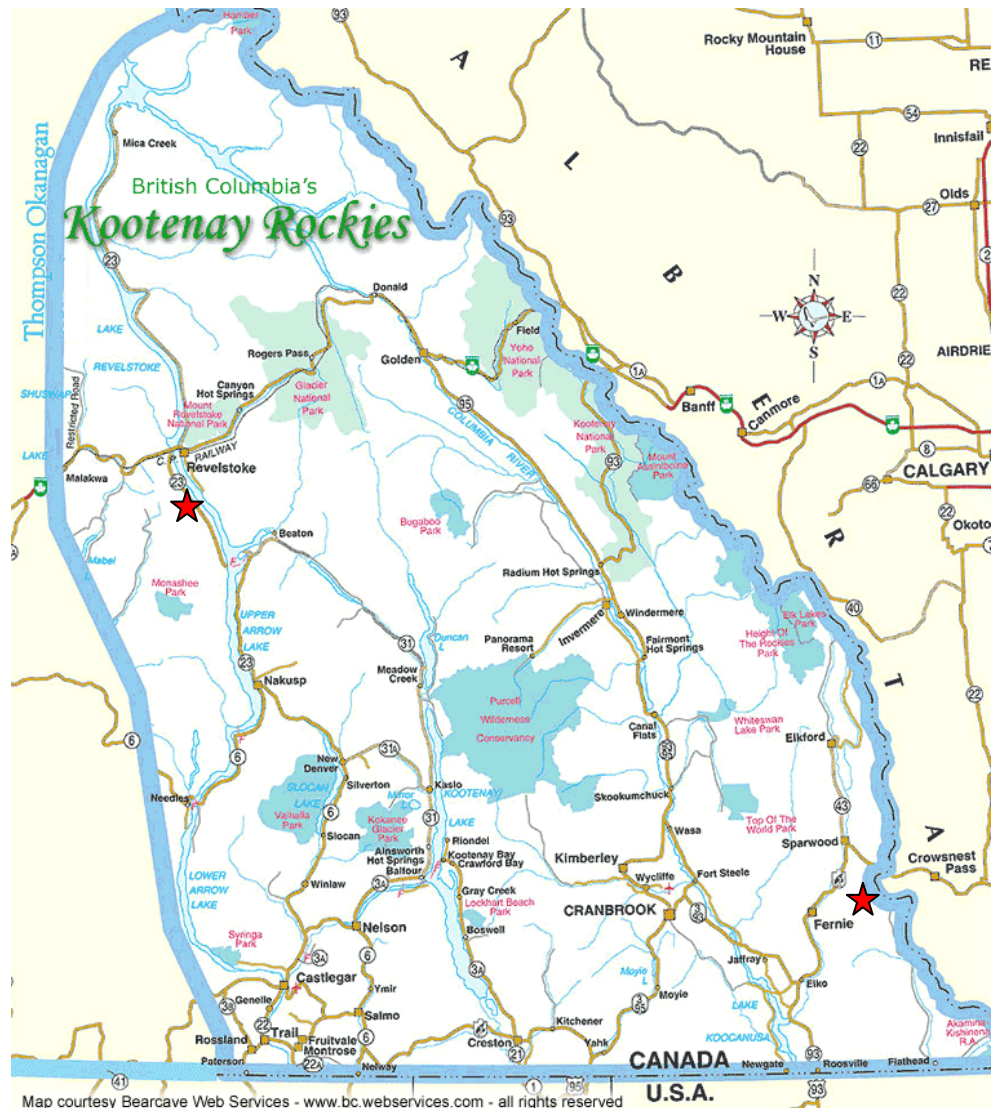
Sparwood and Revelstoke are both situated within the Kootenay Rockies—a mountainous region located in the southeastern corner of BC (see Figure 1, Figure 2). This region is home to four mountain ranges (the BC Rockies, Purcells, Selkirks and Monashees), four national parks (Mount Revelstoke, Glacier, Yoho and Kootenay) and approximately 170,000 residents. According to Tourism BC (n.d.a), the region is “a vast, rugged landscape...[and] the lifestyle is laid back with an emphasis on outdoor living.” The Kootenay Rockies have an abundance of outdoor recreational resources that are highly promoted by the province of BC. Though much of the region’s economy is tied to natural resource extraction—particularly mining and forestry—tourism and outdoor recreation are an increasing source of economic growth and diversification; this trend is evident in both Sparwood and Revelstoke.

¹⁷ Information on the Kootenay Rockies was compiled using the Tourism BC Website (Tourism BC, n.d.a).

Figure 1.
Map of British Columbia depicting the Kootenay Rockies Region (Tourism, BC, n.d.a).



Figure 2.
Regional map of the Kootenay Rockies (Adapted from Bearcave Web Services, 2011).



Map courtesy Bearcave Web Services - www.bc.webservices.com - all rights reserved

Sparwood

Sparwood is a town of approximately 3800 residents located in the Elk Valley region of the southern Kootenay Rockies (see Figure 2); it is situated on the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains approximately 18 km west of the Alberta border and 30 km northeast of Fernie, BC (District of Sparwood, n.d.). According to the District of Sparwood's (n.d.) *Community Profile*, Sparwood is a resource-based community that is primarily centred on coal extraction, with forestry related industries also playing a significant role in the local economy. The majority of Sparwood residents are English-speaking, Euro-Canadians with very few individuals self-reporting as Aboriginal or visible minorities—approximately 3% respectively (Statistics Canada, 2007b). According to 2006 Statistics Canada census data, when compared to the rest of the province, residents of Sparwood are younger and have higher annual incomes—with a notable exception being women's average annual income (see Table 1). Overall, families in Sparwood do quite well financially; however, the economic portrait of the community is also characterized by an obvious gender disparity (Statistics Canada, 2007b).

Table 1. Median income levels in Sparwood, Revelstoke and British Columbia in 2006¹⁸

	Total Median Income*	Men's Median Income	Women's Median Income
British Columbia	\$24,867	\$31,598	\$19,997
Sparwood	\$26,472	\$55,333	\$18,032
Revelstoke	\$24,965	\$38,522	\$17,793

*Data is for persons 15 years and over with income.

Though Sparwood's economy is largely reliant on the Elk Valley Coal mining industry, tourism and outdoor recreation is a growing sector of the regional economy and also plays a

¹⁸ Table adapted from 2006 Statistics Canada census data (Statistics Canada, 2007a; 2007b).

fundamental role in the local way of life (District of Sparwood, n.d.). The town's main tourist attraction is the Titan Terex¹⁹—one of the world's largest trucks that was previously used in area coal mines. Outdoor recreation opportunities (e.g., skiing, hiking, fishing, golf, snowmobiling) are also increasingly promoted by the town. However, unlike nearby communities (e.g., Fernie, BC²⁰) that have decided to promote their outdoor recreation resources, Sparwood has made a concerted effort to maintain and promote its history in coal mining and resource extraction. A recent redevelopment of the District of Sparwood website reflects this relationship, as a series of captions and images highlight the town's pride for its coal mining industry, working class demographic and outdoor lifestyle.²¹

Revelstoke²²

Revelstoke is a remote mountain community of approximately 8000 residents situated on the Columbia River between the Monashee and Selkirk Mountain ranges. It is located along the Trans-Canada Highway, 641 km northeast of Vancouver, BC, and 451 km west of Calgary, AB (See Figure 2). Like many communities in southeastern BC, Revelstoke began as a supply centre for the mining industry. It later became an important locale for transportation, forestry and hydro-

¹⁹ The Titan Terex, is the “world's largest tandem axel, off-road dump truck” (Derworiz, McGinnis & Van Russell, 2008, p. A1).

²⁰ Fernie has a similar history rooted in natural resource extraction; however, with the addition of the Fernie Alpine Resort, the community has become much more active in promoting their outdoor recreation resources--particularly through the ski hill, which promotes a variety of self-propelled recreation activities such as mountain biking, hiking, etc.). Many other tourism services have developed in the region to serve this expanding tourism market.

²¹ For example, the website's title caption reads: “Big mountains. Big coal. Big trucks. Big smiles. Big hearts. Small town. Big Story.” Website images depict mine workers, 4x4 trucks and ATV's, denim jackets, and a backyard family barbeque. Sparwood residents are depicted as hard working but laid back people who enjoy the outdoors and the simple pleasures of living in a mountain community: “... if there's one thing we are to everyone, it's a mining community; a collection of hard-working fun-loving people who happily call Sparwood home...” (District of Sparwood, n.d.).

²² Information compiled using the City of Revelstoke Community Profile (City of Revelstoke, 2012).

electric industries. A main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) passes through Revelstoke, and the town also houses the CPR's operational and maintenance headquarters for the region. Today, Revelstoke's economy is highly diverse and is dependent on four main economic sectors: transportation (CPR), forestry, tourism and public services. Compared to the rest of the province, Revelstoke has a relatively young and homogenous population. The majority of residents are English-speaking and Euro-Canadian. According to the 2006 census data, approximately 3% of residents self-identified as Aboriginal, and less than 2% of residents identified themselves as a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2007a). The community's median income is similar to the provincial average overall; but, like Sparwood, men fare much better than women (see Table 1). There is also a significant amount of part-time and seasonal employment in Revelstoke, primarily due to the seasonal nature of the tourism and forestry industries.

Revelstoke has a long history of outdoor recreation (particularly ski jumping),²³ however, the tourism industry was not formally established until the Trans Canada Highway was constructed through the town in 1962. The industry has grown steadily since that time, with significant increases noted over the past ten years. In the last decade, the city has developed a Tourism Strategy, a Tourism Development Committee and implemented both summer and winter tourism websites; the local ski hill, Revelstoke Mountain Resort, opened in 2007. The city's website and tourism publications actively promote Revelstoke's railway heritage and alpine scenery as central to the community's identity. The region's natural resources, alpine environment and outdoor recreation opportunities are positioned as central to the local way of

²³ The Revelstoke Ski Club was established in 1914 and organized its first ski jump competition in 1915. The Revelstoke ski jump became world renowned and was the site of many record setting ski jumps (Scott, 2005).

life.²⁴ Hiking, mountain biking, rafting, kayaking and canoeing are popular in the summer months and, due to the high amount of average snowfall, winter activities are particularly popular (e.g., ski touring, heli-skiing, downhill skiing, nordic skiing and snowmobiling). Snowmobiling, in particular, has greatly increased in the region and Revelstoke is actively promoted as a snowmobiling destination. Data retrieved from records maintained by local snowmobiling clubs suggest that the number of snowmobilers visiting Boulder Mountain—a popular snowmobiling destination near Revelstoke—rose from approximately 2500 in 1990 to over 15,000 in 2007. As the self-proclaimed “powder snow capital of Canada,” Revelstoke is also home to the Canadian Avalanche Centre (CAC).

Avalanche Safety & Education in Canada

Canada’s national avalanche centre, the CAC, was established in 2004 to oversee public avalanche safety and education in Canada; they are a non-profit, non-governmental organization that is primarily funded by the federal and provincial governments (i.e., AB & BC) as well as through sponsorships and donations raised through their charitable foundation—the Canadian Avalanche Foundation (CAF) (CAC, 2012c). According to their website, the CAC is responsible for coordinating public avalanche safety programs, delivering avalanche awareness and education programs, providing curriculum and support to avalanche course instructors and encouraging avalanche related research; they also develop and deliver public avalanche bulletins and warnings for mountainous regions in Western Canada.

The CAC’s location in Revelstoke reflects the historical development of snow science research in Canada. Early avalanche research and education originated in the Rogers Pass area

²⁴ The region is described by Tourism BC (n.d.b) as a place appealing to “outdoor enthusiasts and extreme winter sports seekers....getting out of doors here is mandatory – and compellingly convenient.”

with efforts to establish a route for the CPR and, later, the Trans-Canada Highway (Calvert & Portman, 2006; Scott, 2005). According to Calvert & Portman (2006), Canada's largest avalanche accident occurred in 1910 when 62 CPR workers were killed while trying to clear the tracks in Rogers Pass; the Canadian mining industry has also been highly affected by avalanches with 114 fatalities between 1870-1979. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Canadian avalanche research was being conducted by the National Research Council (NRC) and Department of Public Works (DPW) with the help of Swiss experts, local mountain guides and Park Wardens. The Canadian Parks Service (CPS) took over avalanche safety and forecasting in the Rogers Pass in 1957.

Public concern about avalanches in Canada primarily began with the mining and transportation (i.e., rail and highway construction) industries (Calvert and Portman, 2006). The first formal avalanche safety course²⁵ was held in Rogers Pass in 1969 and was delivered to mining inspectors following a large avalanche accident at Granduc Mine near Stewart, BC:²⁶ “Prior to 1969 small individual courses had been held for recreational skiers and climbers in both Alberta and on the west coast by individuals who felt they had some understanding of the dangers of avalanches” (p. 79). Avalanche safety courses for backcountry ski guides began informally in 1972, and in 1973, the NRC partnered with the BC Institute of Technology (BCIT) to create the “NRC/BCIT avalanche schools, which became the standard courses required of aspirant guides” (Scott, 2006, p. 204). A variety of public avalanche safety courses were also

²⁵ The course was taught by local experts Fred Schleiss and Peter Schaerer, who later founded the Canadian Avalanche Association (Calvert & Portman, 2006).

²⁶ Sixty-eight men were buried by the avalanche and twenty-six were killed.

offered by the Canadian Ski Patrol System (CSPS), the Federation of Mountain Clubs of B.C. and the CPS (Calvert & Portman, 2006).

By the late 1960s, backcountry skiing (i.e., ski-touring and heli-skiing) was becoming increasingly popular in Canada, and more recreational avalanche accidents were occurring as a result (Calvert & Portman, 2006). The growing popularity of backcountry skiing, in combination with record-breaking snowfall amounts in the early 1970s resulted in many avalanche accidents involving skiers in Western Canada throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1981, The Canadian Avalanche Association (CAA) was established to unite independent organizations involved in avalanche safety, education and research (e.g., the NRC, Parks Canada, BC Highways, ski resorts, the heli-ski industry and the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides) (Calvert & Portman, 2006). After nearly being forced to close in 2003 because of a lack of financial resources, the CAA received an influx of federal and provincial funding following a particularly deadly avalanche season in 2002-03²⁷ (Feds to fund, 2004); this led to the creation of Canada's present day national avalanche centre—the CAC.²⁸

According to the historical records of the CAC (Jamieson et al., 2010), as of 2007, at least 766 people have died in avalanche accidents in Canada. Although historically, avalanche fatalities most often involved people living, working or driving through avalanche terrain, today,

²⁷ The 2002-03 avalanche season resulted in 29 avalanche related deaths in Canada.

²⁸ The CAA currently serves as the professional association for the industry by supporting the community of professional avalanche operations in Canada and representing the avalanche community to external stakeholders (CAA, 2012). The CAC is more operational in nature and is concerned with public avalanche safety, while the CAF provides fundraising support for the centre's public avalanche programs. The three organizations (CAA, CAC, CAF) share a website and are all based out of the national avalanche centre in Revelstoke, BC.

the vast majority of accidents involve outdoor recreationalists.²⁹ While backcountry skiing incidents have declined in recent years due, in large part, to the efforts of the CAC, snowmobile related avalanche accidents are currently on the rise in Canada (CAC, 2012b; Kelly, 2009b).

The history of backcountry snowmobiling in Canada is relatively short, and there is a gap in the literature concerning its development. The first lightweight, one or two passenger snowmobiles was not introduced until the late 1950's (International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association [ISMA], n.d.). Snowmobile sales increased in Canada throughout 1960s-70s as the activity gained popularity; many provincial snowmobile associations and local snowmobile clubs were also established across Canada during this time (e.g., ASA, n.d.; BCSF, n.d.). According to statistics from the ISMA (n.d.), there were over 590,000 registered snowmobiles and more than 40,000 snowmobiles sold in Canada in 2012; additionally, the economic impact of snowmobiling in Canada is estimated at \$7 billion annually. Thus, the activity has become extremely popular and represents a significant facet of the Canadian economy. However, despite its popularity, snowmobiling has also been the subject of much criticism, particularly for noise disturbance, ecological damage and safety concerns (Debresson, 2012).

Recent advances in technology have resulted in snowmobiles that are lighter and more fuel-efficient than earlier models, thus making backcountry terrain more accessible (see Bonogno, 2008); additionally, though climbing slopes or "high marking" has been popular since snowmobiling's inception, new technology has enabled access to more aggressive terrain. These trends are reflected in the CAC's recent records of avalanche accidents, where snowmobiling has recently surpassed backcountry skiing as the activity that now results in the

²⁹ From 1970-2007, 445 individuals lost their lives in 295 different avalanche accidents in Canada, and 92% of all fatal accidents involved recreationalists (Jamieson et al., 2010).

greatest number of annual avalanche accidents and fatalities (CAC, 2012b). One of the most prominent issues regarding avalanche safety in Canada today is the increasing number of snowmobile related avalanche accidents (e.g., see BC Coroner’s Service, 2009; Kelly, 2009b); this concern developed, in large part, due to both the Sparwood and Revelstoke avalanche incidents.

Because the majority of CAC staff and avalanche forecasters are backcountry skiers, there is currently a perceived “culture gap” between snowmobilers and the CAC;³⁰ the result of this gap is that snowmobilers are much less likely than backcountry skiers to possess the recommended safety equipment and training for travel through avalanche terrain (BC Coroners Service, 2009; Vanderklippe, 2010c). In response to these issues, in 2009, the CAC consulted stakeholders and identified several strategies for improving snowmobile avalanche safety; this included hiring a snowmobiler on staff, developing signage and avalanche bulletins specific to popular snowmobiling trails and riding areas (Kelly, 2009a; 2009b), and creating a research project to examine snowmobilers’ decision-making in avalanche terrain. The CAC also redeveloped its website to include a web page specifically for the sledding³¹ community with a tagline that reads, “Go further. Experience More. Be Safe” (CAC, 2012a).

³⁰ Because CAA was initially established due to concerns over the high number of avalanche deaths involving backcountry skiers, their programs and services were traditionally directed to this community.

³¹ The term “sledding” is used interchangeably with “snowmobiling” and is the preferred term in many snowmobiling circles.

Case Study #1 - Sparwood, BC

On December 28, 2008 a group of eleven men were caught in a series of avalanches while snowmobiling near Harvey Pass, a popular backcountry destination in The Flathead Valley near Fernie, BC. Eight men were killed in the accident; they ranged in age from twenty to forty-five years old and all were long-time residents of the Sparwood area. Three survivors, initially buried by the avalanche, were able to free themselves and begin walking to safety; they were rescued by helicopter a short time later. Search and rescue officials had been alerted to an emergency situation via a SPOT satellite messenger device³² activated by one of the victims. After being rescued, one of the survivors returned to the site of the avalanche to assist rescue crews in locating the missing snowmobilers. Though the victims were all equipped with avalanche transceivers,³³ some of the men had survived a first avalanche and had set their beacons to “receive” in order to locate their buried companions. Thus, when a second avalanche buried the entire group, they were no longer emitting transceiver signals that would have assisted in the rescue/recovery operation.

In the hours that followed the accident, as rescuers searched for the eight missing men, community members held an outdoor candlelight vigil at the Titan Tirex³⁴—the town’s tourist attraction. Meanwhile, messages of support and sympathy poured in from across the country

³² A “SPOT” satellite messenger is a personal electronic device equipped with GPS and emergency communication capabilities.

³³ Avalanche “transceivers” or “beacons” are small radio transmitters that are designed to be worn while travelling in avalanche terrain. They have a “transmit” and a “receive” setting. During normal backcountry travel, the “transmit” setting is activated, and the transceiver will emit a signal that another device can receive. If someone becomes buried, rescuers can activate the “receive” function to help locate buried victims.

³⁴ The Titan Terex, often referred to as the world’s largest truck, is the “world’s largest tandem axel, off-road dump truck” (Derworiz, McGinnis & Van Russell, 2008, p. A1); it was used in Sparwood area coal mines prior to being displayed as a tourist attraction alongside Highway 3 in Sparwood, BC.

through news media and social networking sites. As news of the tragedy spread and the deaths of the eight men were confirmed, Sparwood became the focus of local and national media attention. Stories about the victims, their families, snowmobiling and avalanche safety were prevalent in local and national newspapers in the days and weeks that followed. A week after the accident, a large group memorial service was held inside the Sparwood arena. Two-thousand people attended the memorial, while thousands of others reportedly watched a national broadcast of the service on the CBC (Edwards, 2009). Government officials attended the memorial service, including the town's Mayor, local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) and federal Member of Parliament (MP). Written messages of sympathy were also provided by the Premier of BC as well as the Prime Minister and Governor General of Canada. Fundraising initiatives were created to assist the victims' families and included trust funds that were set up in each of the victim's names as well as memorial decals that were designed by a local resident and sold in the community.

At the time of the accident, snow conditions in the area were considered to be quite unstable, and the avalanche risk was rated as "considerable" by the CAC. This rating carries the warning that natural avalanches are "possible" and human-triggered ones are "likely" (CAC, 2011a). A special bulletin was also issued by the CAC two days prior to the accident warning outdoor enthusiasts that avalanche danger would quickly increase with significant snowfall, which the area was forecasted to receive. After the avalanches, the CAC issued the following advisory: "Travel in the mountains is very dangerous at this time. Conditions are hair-trigger, with the chance of full depth avalanches running to ground. If your holiday plans involve ripping it up in the backcountry, seriously consider making new plans" (Toneguzzi, 2008). Snow conditions across BC remained unstable and avalanche risks were elevated for much of the

winter season. Despite these warnings, the 2008-09 season resulted in an unprecedented number of snowmobiling-related avalanche fatalities in Canada—nineteen in total, all of which occurred in British Columbia. The Sparwood avalanche deaths were the first snowmobiling related avalanche fatalities of the season; the 11 other deaths occurred later in the season. This above average number of snowmobile-related fatalities prompted the BC Coroner’s Office to conduct a “death review panel” to investigate the 2008-09 “avalanche related deaths of snowmobile operators” (BC Coroner’s Service, 2009). This investigation resulted in fifteen recommendations aimed at increasing backcountry snowmobile safety; recommendations were directed at BC and Alberta provincial government ministries, snowmobile clubs/associations, manufacturers and the CAC. A special report was also released by the CAC entitled, “The Year of Sledding Dangerously” (Kelly, 2009b). This document outlined the circumstances surrounding the high number of snowmobiling fatalities in the 2008-09 avalanche season and discussed the CAC’s response and future strategies for education, training and prevention.

Research Findings: Sparwood

The data set for this case study included 60 news and feature articles, 4 editorial/opinion columns and 171 images (photographs or diagrams) from four newspapers: *The Globe & Mail* (GM), the *Calgary Herald* (CH), the *Vancouver Sun* (VS) and the *Fernie Free Press* (FP).³⁵ Though the primary focus was on textual, thematic analysis, images were considered to be important “texts” that signify meaning (e.g. see Chandler, 2002; Hall 1997; Sampert & Trimble, 2010) and were therefore included in both the Sparwood and Revelstoke case studies.

The majority of the media coverage surrounding the Sparwood avalanche deaths occurred in the first ten days following the accident. Articles regarding the accident, the rescue effort and the group memorial service were prevalent in all four publications reviewed for this study. Several memorial/anniversary stories also appeared on the one year anniversary of the avalanche. In discussing the results of my media analysis, I first describe the surface features of the texts (layout and structure, etc.). Second, I examine the overall framing of the newspaper articles through a discussion of the three most common discursive frames employed in the media texts: “tragedy/grief,” “human interest” and “drama.” Third, I identify the overarching themes that emerged in my textual analysis and provide a detailed discussion of the three that were most prevalent. These include themes entitled, “tragedy, grief and community support,” “rural masculinity” and “dangerous conditions and unpredictable nature.” Fourth, I discuss the discursive silences that surrounded the media coverage the Sparwood avalanche.

³⁵ Sixteen news/feature articles and 24 images were from the GM; 23 news/feature articles, 2 editorial pieces and 77 images were from the CH; 8 news/feature articles, 1 editorial piece and 23 images were from the VS; 13 news/feature articles, 1 editorial piece and 47 images were from the FP.

Surface Features

All four newspapers devoted a large quantity of media coverage to the Sparwood avalanche. Articles related to the accident appeared on the front page of the GM for four days, the CH for five days and the VS and FP for two days each.³⁶ The majority of the other articles appeared in the front section of the newspapers--often on multiple pages. At times, this multi-page collection of avalanche-related articles created a feature section dedicated to the Sparwood avalanche in the front section of the newspaper.

An abundance of photographs accompanied news and feature articles in each of the four newspapers. Similar images appeared across the four publications, and, on occasion, the same image was used in multiple papers. The first area of photographic similarity was of images depicting public memorialisation of the avalanche victims, such as spontaneous memorials and public gatherings (e.g., crowds of people holding candles, collections of candles and flowers placed in the snow, groups of people hugging and crying, etc.). Photographs of the public memorial service held at the Sparwood arena were also recurring. This included images of the “makeshift stage” (Graveland, 2009), which was flanked by two snowmobiles and displayed large photographs of the eight victims. Below the stage, individual tribute tables held floral arrangements and displayed the victims’ personal effects. Many of these photographs contained images and objects imbued with symbolic cultural meanings. For example, candles and flowers, in this cultural context, have come to signify emotions such as sadness, grief, sympathy, hope, etc. The proliferation of images displaying these objects in public spaces, therefore, helped to construct and reinforce the notion that the accident was a tragic event that elicited widespread

³⁶ The FP is only published in print once a week, which accounts for the fact that only two issues of the newspaper had front page stories about the avalanche. However, stories about the avalanche accident were given more coverage on the newspaper’s website, which is updated daily.

grief and sadness in community. Thus, Sparwood was constructed as a community united in its grief. Furthermore, the repetition of images depicting public gatherings and grieving crowds effectively positioned the Sparwood avalanche as a matter of public interest and the victims as worthy of public sympathy. This effect was amplified by the fact that local and provincial government officials attended the public memorial service while the Governor General and Prime Minister of Canada sent messages of support.

Individual photographs of the eight victims, often arranged side by side, were also present in all four publications. Repetition of these images made the victims “knowable,” thereby giving their deaths greater public significance. Photographs of the avalanche victims most commonly had an informal aesthetic—depicting the men in casual clothes (e.g., ball caps, cowboy hats, sunglasses, camouflage, t-shirts, plaid) and casual settings (e.g., informal rather than formal portrait photographs). Personalization of the avalanche victims was further secured through individual tribute articles eulogizing each of the eight men in the CH, VS and FP. Additionally, close up photographs of grieving family members and images taken inside their homes (e.g., the family sitting together in their living room) reinforced the personalization of the victims, whom were, in turn, constructed as worthy and knowable to the Canadian public.

Also observed in the four publications, were images depicting the grief and emotional trauma endured by one of the avalanche survivors. Close-up photographs of one of the men looking visibly upset and distressed (e.g., teeth clenched, eyes cast down or away from camera, hand covering mouth, rubbing eyes, etc.) were present in all four newspapers. These images were accompanied by headlines, captions and articles that emphasized the “gut-wrenching dilemma” (Komarnicki, 2009a) and “inner turmoil” (Walton & Bailey, 2008b) faced by the survivor on the day of the tragedy and in the year that followed. This combination of images and text signified

the grief of the survivors, and, in doing so, placed the audience in a sympathetic subject position. By focusing on the survivors' emotional hardships and personal struggles, media texts, in effect, limited the space for critical viewpoints and mobilized sympathy for the avalanche survivors.

Titles, headlines and captions, which helped to bring meaning and context to the articles and photographs, often emphasized the dramatic nature of the incident. Article titles/headlines such as, "A crack, a slide and a desperate dig" (Walton & Bailey, 2008a) or "7 bodies pulled from snow" (Van Rassel & Sinoski, 2008) are examples of headlines that appeared in large, bold font in the GM and VS. Other common titles/headlines focused on the tragic nature of the accident and the personal struggles, grief and mourning experienced by the survivors, the victims' families and the Sparwood community. Examples included "Sparwood mourns its lost sons" (Komarnicki, 2009b) in the VS and "Survivor recounts 'gut-wrenching' avalanche tragedy" (Komarnicki, 2009a) in the CH. Headlines, therefore, helped to construct the dominant discursive frames of human interest and tragedy/grief throughout the texts.

A number of article titles and headlines—particularly in the GM and CH—used direct quotations from the accident survivors, the victims' families and community members. Examples included "Each and every one of us know them" (Matas & Walton, 2008, [GM]) and "How do you heal?" (Van Rassel & Zickefoose, 2008, [CH]). The use of quotations and contractions in article headlines produced an informal tone of voice by mimicking oral discourse (Bignell, 2002). Additionally, quotations introduced an element of personalisation into the texts by positioning the reader as an "insider" with the use of deictic terms such as "us," "them," "you" etc. According to Bignell, the presence of deixis in media texts "makes reference to the position of a speaker" (p. 89), and in doing so, presumes a shared discourse with the reader. This, he

argues, is characteristic of the informal, orally-based tone of many popular newspapers which “connote familiarity, camaraderie and entertainingness” to the reader (p. 89).

Informal tone and address were most notable in the CH’s coverage of the avalanche. In addition to deictic phrasing in titles and headlines, idioms—which are common in oral (informal) discourse—were also utilized regularly. For example, headlines/titles such as, “Survivor *wrestles emotions* to find friends” (Komarnicki, 2008, emphasis added), “Survivors faced *gut-wrenching* decision” (Komarnicki, 2009a emphasis added) and “Riders say snowmobiling is “*in [the] blood*” (Cryderman & Myers, 2008, emphasis added) employed idiomatic phrasing thereby giving the texts an informal tone. A further example was evident in the headline, “Here’s to the boys,” which appeared in both the CH (Komarnicki, 2009d) and the FP (Here’s to the boys, 2009). This phrase contains a quotation, a contraction and a deictic term (*the* boys). It also includes a colloquial expression reminiscent of an old time pub cheer, thus connoting informality and (male) camaraderie.

Despite this recurring informality in headlines, overall, the four newspapers’ articles used a combination of formal and informal address in their coverage of the Sparwood avalanche. The majority of articles, in the FP as well as in the other newspapers, referred to the avalanche victims and survivors formally (by first and last name or by last name only); however, informal address was observed on occasion (addressed by first name only). One article in the FP, for example, was entitled “Jeff’s story,” and recounted the events surrounding the avalanche from the perspective of one of the survivors. Informal address, in this sense, positions the readers as if they know Jeff personally; therefore, there is an assumption of a shared cultural discourse. It also supports the construction of the human interest frame in the articles.

The local FP newspaper was more formal than expected in its coverage of the avalanche, though many examples of informal address were found elsewhere in the paper. For example, condolences and messages of support (including poetry and photographs) were published throughout the newspaper; this included messages from local businesses, government officials, community organizations and individual citizens. In addition, thank you notices from the victims' families were present throughout the newspaper and were addressed to the rescuers, volunteers and local community. Though these condolences and thank-you messages were not formally included in my analysis, their presence was noted as contributing to the overall context in which the news articles appeared.³⁷ Specifically, the collection of messages from community members and public figures was one example of how the media (re)produced the notion of collective public grief in the community.

Narrative structure of news articles also contributed to the media's framing of the Sparwood avalanche. Though article structures varied across and within the four publications, several important similarities were noted. Closing paragraphs and article conclusions were quite varied, with few discernible patterns observed in the textual analysis. However, multiple texts contained leading paragraphs explaining how Sparwood was a small, "close-knit" community and how the men killed were friends, family and locals: "They're all small-town British Columbia boys with a love of snowmobiling. They attended the same schools, worked in the same mines and played in the same mountain playground" (Derworiz et al., 2008, p. A1).

³⁷ Additional texts that appeared adjacent to the Sparwood avalanche news coverage (not included in this analysis) included articles on general avalanche safety and education, previous avalanche accidents in Canada, fundraising initiatives for local search and rescue organizations and trust funds set up for the victims' families by the community of Sparwood.

Emphasis on the closeness of the victims and the community in the opening paragraph established this as an important issue, and therefore framed the story in a particular way.

Framing

Several distinctive media frames structured the newspaper coverage of the Sparwood avalanche. The dominant frames identified in the textual analysis included “tragedy/grief” and “human interest.” Though less prevalent, “drama” and “public safety” media frames were also observed. Herein, I briefly discuss the characteristics of these four discursive frames, and, in doing so, I explore the issues that were positioned as most salient in the newspaper coverage of the Sparwood avalanche.

The most common discursive strategy deployed in newspaper texts to discuss the Sparwood avalanche was a tragedy/grief media frame. All four newspapers utilized this frame repeatedly in their coverage of the avalanche, and it was undoubtedly the most dominant media frame. This approach focused attention on the tragic loss of life and the subsequent grief endured both individually and collectively by the victims’ families and members of the Sparwood/Elk Valley community. Article headlines and titles such as “Sparwood mourns its lost sons” (Komarnicki 2009b) and “Hundreds share grief at vigil for ‘good guys’” (Derworiz et al., 2008) characterized this frame. The issue of greatest concern constructed in this frame was the untimely death of young, “good” men who were portrayed as worthy victims. According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), positioning individuals as “worthy victims” in media texts means that they will “feature prominently and dramatically...they will be humanized, and ... their victimization will receive the detail and context in story construction that will generate reader interest and sympathetic emotion” (p. 35). Worthy victims, therefore, are portrayed as deserving of public sympathy and are produced through the inclusion of carefully selected narratives (and

the exclusion of counter-narratives that might produce unfavourable representations). In the case of the Sparwood avalanche, greatness and worthiness was imbued upon the victims, in part, because they suffered a tragic and untimely death; however, this alone does not make them worthy victims. More importantly, the men were positioned and celebrated as archetypes of a (hegemonic) regional identity, which was continuously celebrated in the media texts (e.g. family oriented, blue collar, resource-based, rural masculinity). The details of this identity will be discussed in greater detail in the thematic analysis, but suffice to say, the construction of the avalanche victims as archetypal “Valley Boys” (e.g., see Walton & Bailey, 2008a, p. A4) made their deaths particularly tragic and deserving of public sympathy.

The loss of “good men” was unanimously constructed as the central issue in the tragedy/grief frame. Articles were surprisingly limited, however, in the proposed solutions offered to prevent similar deaths from occurring. Though some articles focused on prevention through improved avalanche education/awareness programs, others maintained that Elk Valley residents were already keenly aware of the risks surrounding backcountry snowmobiling:

Most people who frequent the area—including those caught in the avalanche—have completed a training course and are well aware of the risks when they head into the backcountry. ‘It’s just like flying an airplane, there’s always the potential of something going wrong.’ (Derworiz et al., 2008, p. A3)

In other words, articles consistently represented the belief that an unfortunate reality of mountain recreation is that accidents happen; here, risk was positioned as an inherent but unpredictable reality. From the perspective of health promotion experts, such thinking is both emblematic of “lay” constructions of risk and is also viewed as a barrier to accident prevention because it portrays accidents as unpredictable rather than calculable and therefore preventable (Green,

1997). Therefore, the media's discussion of accident prevention and avalanche education was far outweighed by the tragedy/grief framing that focused attention on the community's sorrow.

Recurringly intertwined with the tragedy/grief perspective was a human interest frame constructed through an abundance of personalized images, narratives and descriptions of the avalanche victims and survivors. In particular, many articles highlighted the victims' and survivors' personal struggles, emotional anguish and/or triumphs. For example, surfacing repeatedly in the media coverage was the emotional turmoil that the only profiled survivor endured during and after the accident and rescue operation; these stories were often accompanied by captions and images depicting him as emotionally distressed and troubled. Stories and headlines emphasized the ethical and emotional dilemmas he faced while he searched for his friends and in his eventual decision to leave the accident site and walk to safety. For example, a CH article described how "he and two of his friends made the agonizing choice...to leave eight others buried under the snow to save their own lives" (Van Rassel, 2009, p. A3). At the accident's one year anniversary, the GM, CH and VS continued to follow this survivor's personal struggles by detailing the breakdown of his common-law relationship and his struggles with addiction and depression in the year that followed the accident (e.g., see Matas, 2009).

Headlines and captions that portrayed the avalanche victims and survivors as familiar and knowable also contributed to the human interest frame. Portraying the men as "familiar" (rather than "strangers") is a rhetorical strategy which, as previously mentioned, contributes to the informal tone of newspaper texts and positions readers as cultural insiders (Bignell, 2002). For example, headlines/titles such as "Each and every one of us know them" (Matas & Walton, 2008) and "How do you heal?" (2008) appeared in the GM and CH and contributed to the

informal discourse, human interest framing and personalization of the avalanche victims and survivors.

Tragedy/grief and human interest were by far the most dominant media frames deployed by the four newspapers. However, two secondary ones were also observed: drama and public safety. Dramatic framing of the avalanche accident was most prevalent in the national media coverage and the least common in the local newspaper. One of the most dramatic headlines, “Death at 6000 feet” (2009) appeared on the front page of the GM; another headline, reflecting both the tragedy/grief and drama frames, referred to the Elk Valley region as the “valley of tears” (Walton & Hunter, 2009). The avalanche was sensationalized through the use of dramatic terms and phrasing; in particular, headlines, captions and narratives detailed harrowing tales of survival, death and emotional trauma. For example, a GM article entitled, “A crack, a slide and a desperate dig” included the following sub-heading: “After searching the snow with bare hands, 3 snowmobilers forced to leave 8 other buried, escaping ‘just in time’ before another slide” (Walton & Bailey, 2008a). Such dramatic framing helped shore up the Sparwood avalanche victims’ representation as heroes by emphasizing their extreme physical and emotional challenges. At the same time, these dramatic adversity narratives resonated with traditional masculine heroism discourses and thus supported a particular construction of masculinity. This construction of heroism is explored further in the thematic analysis.

A final discursive frame, public safety, was also observed in some of the media texts. This frame was present, to varying degrees, in all four publications. In articles that deployed this frame, the Sparwood avalanche was used as a warning to outdoor enthusiasts of the dangers associated with backcountry mountain travel. Texts that utilized public safety framing tended to emphasize the dangerous nature of backcountry snowmobiling and the “critical” (Fernie weather

conditions, 2008, p. A4) or “hairtrigger” (Hunter, 2008b, p. A4) avalanche conditions present across much of BC during the 2008-09 winter season. The dominant message in these articles was that skiers and snowmobilers should respect the (dangerous) backcountry by heeding avalanche warnings and trail closures issued by professionals.³⁸ The public safety frame also intersected with the human interest frame in many of the texts. Because the avalanche victims were typically portrayed as both familiar, relatable people and average Sparwood men (rather than members of an extreme sporting subculture), the incident was easily mobilized as a public warning to other outdoor enthusiasts, with the subtext being that if it could happen to them, it could happen to anyone.

Although the public safety frame had the potential to introduce debates regarding backcountry snowmobiling (e.g., safety issues, user conflicts and environmental issues), media texts largely avoided critical commentary directed specifically at the avalanche incident or its victims. Instead, statements on avalanche safety were often generalized and at times directed to skiers as well as snowmobilers. The articles’ grouping of the two activities together served to neutralize any criticism and stigma being directed at snowmobilers in particular. Because snowmobiling was not singled out as more dangerous than skiing, public safety representations did not contradict favourable depictions of the Sparwood snowmobilers that appeared throughout the media texts. Additionally, suggestions on how to prevent similar accidents from occurring again focused on general principles of avalanche safety and rarely referenced the specific details of the Sparwood incident. Repeatedly, the victims were represented as “knowledgeable,” “experienced with search and rescue equipment” (Walton & Bailey, 2008a, p. A4) and therefore

³⁸ At the time of the Sparwood avalanche, there were avalanche warnings but no trail closures in the area where the accident occurred.

responsible and safety conscious. In turn, this portrayal was further punctuated by numerous comments emphasizing that the men were *not* high-marking (e.g., see Walton & Bailey, 2008a; 2009). Comments from the victims' families, friends and community members were deployed to portray the avalanche victims as "well prepared" (Van Rassel & Komarnicki, 2008a, p. A9), "very experienced" (Derworiz et al., 2008, p. A1), "knowledgeable sledheads" (Walton & Bailey, 2008a, p. A4) who were "playing safe" (Edwards, 2009, p. 2), aware of the risks and equipped with the necessary safety equipment. The net effect of such framing was to transform suggestively risky behavior into a public service message about avalanche safety by shifting the focus to the unpredictability of the avalanche (e.g., "it could happen to anyone") rather than questioning the behavior of victims and survivors.

Several notable exceptions to this representation were observed in media texts. For example, one article included a critical statement from the Mayor of Fernie: "Fernie Mayor Cindy Corrigan said the men should not have ventured out into that particular area because the avalanche risk was high" (Van Rassel & Sinoski, 2008, p. A4). Additionally, one victim's wife was quoted in the GM rhetorically asking: "When you sit back, is it worth leaving your kids for? ... In the end, what's the payoff?" (Walton & Bailey, 2009, p. A6). Despite the occasional inclusion of such critical comments, when present, criticism was brief and often individualized (i.e., it was framed as being one person's individual opinion and was, thus, easily dismissed). Furthermore, both of these critical statements came from women, and similar remarks from men were not observed in the media texts. Because Sparwood's snowmobiling culture is dominated by men and the media coverage primarily privileged men's voices, these critical viewpoints are easily dismissed. Critical perspectives on snowmobiling safety were, therefore, not part of the media's dominant discursive framing of the avalanche.

Thematic Analysis

A number of interrelated themes emerged in the analysis of media discourses surrounding the Sparwood avalanche. Herein, I discuss the dominant themes identified through the textual analysis as a means of examining some of the representational politics that surrounded the avalanche accident. In the initial review of newspaper texts, five themes were noted (Grief/Tragedy; Community Cohesion & Support; Rural Pride & Outdoor Lifestyle; Male Camaraderie & Rural Masculinity; Dangerous Conditions & Unpredictable Nature). However, after a secondary analysis, the initial categories were further condensed into three dominant thematic areas: 1) Tragedy, Grief & Community Support, 2) Rural Masculinity and 3) Dangerous Conditions & Unpredictable Nature. These themes incorporate the five categories initially identified and offer a succinct grouping of the dominant thematic areas consistently articulated throughout the newspaper texts.

1) Tragedy, Grief & Community Support

Most folks around here wouldn't have thought it possible, but somehow, the tragedy has linked this small town even closer. And outside, as the snow piled up and the mercury dipped just below zero, the roar of a snowmobile could be heard passing by. (Walton & Hunter, 2009, p. A6)

[As] the first anniversary of the tragedies approaches, the grief here is palpable; the town, the families, the survivors still struggling. (Komarnicki, 2009f, p. B2)

Tragedy, grief and community support emerged as the most dominant theme in the textual analysis, and it was ubiquitous across all four newspapers reviewed for this study. This

theme was centred on the tragic nature of the avalanche deaths and the grief felt by residents of Sparwood and the Elk Valley. Headlines and article titles such as “Town unites in grief” (Town unites in grief, 2008) and “Sparwood mourns its lost sons” (Komarnicki, 2009c) typified this theme, which depicted a town devastated by the unthinkable loss of eight local men. Collective grief was said to unite an already “close-knit” community where everyone was affected by the tragedy and was thus supporting each other in the struggle to move forward.

Though it surfaced in all four newspapers, the tragedy, grief and community support theme was most prevalent in the three larger newspapers (GM, CH, VS) and less dominant in the local Fernie/Sparwood newspaper (FP). The prevalence of this theme in the larger newspapers helped to portray Sparwood as a close community united in grief to readers from outside of the community, province, etc.. This is not to say that the Fernie/Sparwood media was not attuned to the grief of the local community. Rather, the tragic nature of the accident and the grief and support of residents may “go without saying” in such a small community; thus, it need not be iterated as overtly in local news media. However, though this theme was not as prevalent in FP news articles—it did exist elsewhere in the newspaper. For example, messages of support (from community organizations, victims’ families etc.) appeared in the FP in the weeks that followed the avalanche. A full page statement, issued by the Mayor of Fernie appeared in the FP and was titled, “We grieve as one” (2009). Other similar messages appeared throughout the paper suggesting that, though the grief of the community was not as overtly expressed in news articles, it was represented elsewhere in the local newspaper.

Statements like “we grieve as one” are illustrative of two common ways in which Sparwood and the Elk Valley were represented: as a “close-knit” community and as a community united by its collective grief/mourning. Narratives portraying the community as

united by its collective grief and support for the avalanche victims' families performed important ideological work in the texts. In particular, it denied the presence of any criticism or dissent by constructing a homogenous community identity. Specifically, the identity in question was "...a community united by grief, by its pride in its local boys and its protectiveness toward them and their adventurous way of life" (Fortney, 2009, p. A3). Similar to Goldstein & Tye's (2006) analysis of media coverage surrounding the accidental deaths of young men in a rural Newfoundland community, media texts also portrayed the Sparwood avalanche victims as heroes of whom the community was proud. Goldstien & Tye maintained that these representations acted as strategies of resistance enabling the community to counter outside interpretations of the accident while simultaneously validating rural ways of life. Similarly, the collective grief narrative in the Sparwood texts presented the community in a homogenous and uncomplicated way, which effectively silenced dissenting voices and positioned snowmobiling as central to the community's identity and mountain culture. Sparwood was portrayed as united and "close-knit"—a place where residents stick together and support each other. As one article in the VS explained, "much of that closeness, no doubt, comes from the fact Sparwood is essentially a one-industry town, where most people work for one of the five coal mines in the area, or in one of the many spinoff industries that supports them" (Culbert & Skelton, 2008, p. A8). Inherent in such logic is the assumption that because people work together, they share similar lifestyles, values, personalities, etc.. While community "closeness" may exist, to some degree, at a geographic and structural level (e.g., Sparwood is a small town with few services), the ideology of a close-knit town also has symbolic significance. Specifically, the presumed greater connectedness (and absence of conflict) that residents in rural communities are assumed to share is seen as rooted in a common lifestyle and core values; however, presumably, this ideology may also marginalize

community members whose beliefs and values fall outside those reflected as central to the dominant construction of collective identity.

All four newspapers repeatedly referenced the fact that the avalanche victims were local men, born and raised in the Elk Valley. For example, as the GM noted, “most of the men grew up here, hunting, fishing and honing their skills as ‘sledheads’ in the East Kootenays ... when they weren’t working in the coal mines or for companies that support the five mines in the valley” (Walton & Hunter, 2009, p. A6). By establishing the men as “locals” as opposed to “tourists” or “outsiders,” these kinds of statements served two rhetorical functions: first, they reinforced the notion that the deaths should hold greater significance for the community; second, they conveyed the impression that the victims were knowledgeable about the terrain, experienced in backcountry sledding and who were therefore justified in their pursuit of mountain adventure. An officiant of the public memorial service, for example, referred “more than once to ‘outsiders not understanding the lure of the mountains’” (Fortney, 2009, p. A3). Suggestively, representing the men as knowledgeable and experienced “locals” operated to entitle them to take on the risks associated with backcountry snowmobiling, resulting in their actions and decision being largely depicted as socially acceptable in the majority of media texts.

The deaths of the eight snowmobilers were portrayed as an unthinkable loss to the community of Sparwood and the Elk Valley; the counter-weight to this narrative was the repeatedly expressed idea that the men “died doing the sport they loved” (Edwards, 2009, p. 2). One avalanche survivor, for example, was quoted in the GM stating that “he wanted residents in Sparwood – where all of the deceased were from – to know of the joy...that also took place in the backcountry that afternoon. ‘They died doing what they loved’” (Walton & Bailey, 2009, p. A6). While this narrative became a means of easing the grief and sadness surrounding the accident, it

also romanticized the idea of men risking and losing their lives while pursuing their passion for adventure (i.e., snowmobiling). Though risking one's life for backcountry snowmobiling was constructed as socially acceptable in many of the texts, presumably, not all "risky" activities would be granted the same social reprieve (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse). In this case, backcountry snowmobiling was portrayed as an acceptable "risky" activity³⁹ due, in part, to the supposed experience of the avalanche victims. Moreover, as previously noted, the glorification of masculinity and mountain conquest has a rich history in western Canadian frontier narratives (e.g., see Robinson, 2005), and risk is a celebrated aspect of masculinity in many sporting discourses (e.g., see Frohlick, 1999-2000; Laurendeau, 2008; Stoddart, 2010; White & Young, 2007). Repetition of comments proclaiming that the men "died doing something that they loved" helped to validate backcountry snowmobiling as an acceptable activity for these men and also functioned to abdicate the avalanche victims of any responsibility, blame or criticism for the accident.

The deaths of the eight snowmobilers were also used as an opportunity to celebrate the outdoor lifestyle of the Sparwood, Elk Valley and East Kootenay Region. For example, local MLA Bill Bennett was quoted in the VS expressing the idea that "playing in the mountains is part of our culture here in the Kootenays" (Komarnicki, 2009b, p. A3). The avalanche accident and the media discourses that surrounded it became an active site for the construction and celebration of regional identity and mountain culture. Economic factors may have also influenced these representations considering that snowmobiling is a popular winter activity in the

³⁹ Media constructions of "risk" surrounding the avalanche accident are discussed in greater detail within the "dangerous conditions and unpredictable nature" theme.

area and tourism and outdoor recreation activities are a significant source of regional economic prosperity (District of Sparwood, n.d., p. 12).

The tragedy, grief and community support theme also included recurring narratives that positioned Sparwood as a town struggling to move forward following the avalanche. Articles in all four newspapers referenced the emotional scars that plagued the family, friends, rescuers and especially the avalanche survivors, the latter of whom were depicted as wracked with guilt. For example, the sister of one of the avalanche survivors was quoted in the GM stating that “[her brother] is too traumatized to talk about his ordeal.... His physical injuries are nothing compared to the survivors’ guilt. ‘He doesn’t want to go back there’” (Walton & Hunter, 2009, p. A6). Emphasizing the survivors’ emotional turmoil and feelings of guilt, in combination with descriptions of a united community that supported the victims and survivors’ actions, ultimately served to limit potential questions or criticism of the snowmobilers’ actions and behaviours. Accordingly, the tragedy, grief and community support narratives, with their emphasis on supporting the families and survivors through the healing process, overshadowed any pointed questions being raised as demonstrated in a CH editorial column: “Those of us drawn to the mountains in all their deadly beauty know this is not a time to blame the dead. The eight who perished were fathers, sons and brothers” (Remington, 2008, p. B1).

Peräkylä & Ruusuvouri (2011) argue that the social categories used to describe individuals (e.g., father, brother, etc.) in texts have significant normative implications and perform important ideological work. Asking “Why this categorization now?” (p. 532) prompts a consideration of what is accomplished by using a particular label, and what are the social and moral implications of this categorization? Such questions are particularly relevant in the case of the Sparwood avalanche victims considering the media’s continuous reiteration of the men as

fathers, husbands, brothers, etc. As Peräkylä & Ruusuvouri argue, categories allow us to infer obligations and actions; terms such as “father” and “husband,” for example, suggest family obligation and thus help to construct a positive representation of the avalanche victims. Their image is softened through the use of these categories, which portrayed them as moral, family men, as opposed to other available options such as “snowmobiler” or “thrill-seeker.” These kinds of representations thus helped to establish the tragic nature of the avalanche deaths because the loss of husbands and fathers is more easily mobilized as a tragic event worthy of public sympathy when compared to “thrill seekers,” for example.

Within the tragedy, grief and community support theme, the avalanche accident was portrayed as particularly tragic for several distinct reasons. First, the deaths were accidental, and there were a large number of casualties⁴⁰: “When a town of 3,600 people loses eight men in one day, the tentacles of grief touch nearly everyone in the community” (Culbert & Skelton, 2008, p. A8). Second, as previously discussed, the victims were all local men (not tourists) who were portrayed as worthy victims. In particular, media representations depicted “good,” family-oriented, blue-collar men that loved the mountains—an identity which has been closely associated with the town of Sparwood and the Elk Valley region. As one “lifelong” Sparwood resident explained, “we are a close community...when you are born and raised in the (Elk) Valley, you are the Valley” (Derworiz et al., 2008, p. A3). The celebration of local identities was consistent in the narratives of grief and mourning that characterized the media coverage of the Sparwood avalanche. Accordingly, the accidental deaths of local men were considered exceptionally tragic and contributed to the dramatic and human interest framing this story

⁴⁰ The Sparwood avalanche resulted in the single largest loss of life in any one accident in BC in 2008 (Culbert & Skelton, 2008).

received in the media. This also amplified the popularity of this story for both local and national news media.

2) *Rural Masculinity*

They were husbands, brothers, friends and neighbours, but also miners, outdoorsmen and just plain boys. As the world rang in the New Year, the people of Sparwood, BC managed their grief over the loss of eight memorable men. (Death at 6,000 feet, 2009)

While the sight of the two snowmobiles propped up on each side of the stage...might be jarring to an outsider, they speak perhaps the loudest about who they were: small-town, blue-collar “Valley Boys” who loved the outdoors and its many pleasures, with riding their “sleds” in winter at the top of the list. (Fortney, 2009, p. A3)

The second theme identified in the analysis revolved around representations of rural masculinity, which was consistently observed in texts throughout the four newspapers. Overall, this theme involved the construction and celebration of a particular version of rural masculinity that was comprised of a number of interrelated elements. As evident in the above introductory quotations, it was strongly linked to regional (local) identities, working class lifestyles, outdoor recreation, technology, domesticity and male camaraderie. Together, these elements intertwined to construct a dominant version of hegemonic rural masculinity in the texts. Herein, I examine the ways that each of these elements was mobilized in the discourses of rural masculinity that permeated the newspaper coverage of the Sparwood avalanche.

Local Identities & Rural Pride

As previously noted, descriptions of Sparwood and the Elk Valley as a small, “close-knit” community were ubiquitous in the media texts. This idea was overwhelmingly positioned as a positive aspect of the town’s rural lifestyle—namely because Sparwood was constructed as a supportive community where everyone knows and looks out for one another: “I know we’ll all just pull together...especially Sparwood. We’re a close community” (Randy Roberts in Van Rassel & Komarnicki, 2008a, p. A9), stated a spokesperson for one of the victim’s family’s in the VS. Depictions of Sparwood as a close-knit community were also intertwined with rural pride narratives. These narratives frequently referred to the community’s affection for, and identification with, a distinctly masculinized mountain culture that embraced outdoor (motorized) recreation: “Snowmobiling is a way of life in this tiny town nestled in the mountains. ‘We play extreme. That’s just the way it is...either you have the nerve or you don’t’” (Derworiz & Komarnicki, 2008, p. A4). The preceding quotation, by one of the victim’s brothers, illustrates how the media’s use of deictic terms such as “we” and “you” homogenized the identities of Sparwood residents—in this case portraying residents as masculinized, risk-seeking snowmobilers. Numerous articles also referred to the avalanche victims as “Valley Boys” (e.g., see Komarnicki, 2009d; Walton & Bailey, 2008a)—an affectionate term and local moniker used to describe men who were born and raised in the Elk Valley, worked in the resource industry and participated in snowmobiling and various other outdoor pursuits (e.g., hunting, fishing and motorized recreation). This construction of masculinity (i.e., blue-collar, adventurous and outdoor-oriented) was present throughout the texts and the affectionate use of the term “Valley Boys” to describe it was indicative of a distinctly local and masculine rural pride narrative. Media coverage of the public memorial service, in particular, brought together themes of rural pride and masculinity. The musical dedication chosen to close the memorial

service was a song entitled, “Small Town” (Graveland, 2009). Articles discussing the memorial service repeatedly positioned the avalanche victims as archetypes of both rural masculinity and local mountain culture: “like many in this town, his passions were the [sic] outdoors and fast machines” (Walton & Hunter, 2009, p. A6). Such representations helped to normalize backcountry snowmobiling as an acceptable practice in the community and also reinforced the media’s dominant portrayal of Sparwood’s masculinized regional identity, rural lifestyle and mountain culture. In effect, these representations defensively positioned snowmobiling, the avalanche victims and Sparwood’s regional identity as venerable—thus proscribing any potential criticism that might surround the practice of snowmobiling, the avalanche deaths or the masculinized rural identity of the Elk Valley region.

Working Class Lifestyles

Media representations of Sparwood’s masculine rural lifestyle repeatedly included references to the town’s working class, blue-collar economy and the mining heritage of the Elk Valley. The three larger newspapers (GM, CH, VS), in particular, framed Sparwood as a mining town and reiterated that the avalanche victims were workers in the local mining industry. Such representations both personalised the avalanche victims and contributed to the working class discourses that frequently surrounded the media’s representation of snowmobiling culture and the regional identity of the Elk Valley. This representation of Sparwood as, first and foremost, a blue-collar mining town was further entrenched through analogies made between the avalanche accident and a previous fatal mining disaster in the region: “Several of the men were second and third generation coal miners in Sparwood. [The Mayor] said he anticipates the impact on the

town will be like that of a mining disaster years ago” (Matas & Walton, 2008, p. A1).⁴¹ The effect of such a comparison is to both convey the magnitude of the avalanche accident’s devastation on the community and to reproduce the dominant narrative of innocent and worthy victims.

Sparwood’s mining history and blue-collar lifestyle was also frequently connected to recreation in the media texts. Specifically, a “work hard, play hard” logic was purportedly embodied by the avalanche victims and the community in general: “Amid tearful moments, ripples of laughter spread through the crowd as stories emerged of pranks and small-town escapades among the work-hard, play-hard ‘Valley Boys’” (Komarnicki, 2009d, p. A1). The masculinity constructed through such representations reinforced the working class stereotypes associated with “Valley Boys,” while simultaneously softening their image by representing them as playful and good-humoured. Portrayals of hard-working men who spent their free time enjoying the wilderness playground in their backyards were prevalent in the media texts: “Besides working together, Sparwood’s residents also play together—going out on weekends to explore the breathtaking wilderness that surrounds them” (Culbert & Skelton, 2008, p. A8). These representations homogenized Sparwood residents as blue collar mine workers and thus contributed to the masculinized rural identity constructed in the texts. An underlying assumption in these narratives is the idea that the community is united in its affection for the local mining industry as well as in its fondness for wilderness, outdoor adventure and (motorized) recreation. The rural pride and blue-collar masculinity narratives that emerged in the data support Brandth & Haugen’s (2005) assertion that economic structures greatly affect how masculinity is constructed

⁴¹ In the spring of 1967, an explosion at the nearby Balmer North Mine killed 15 miners.

in rural communities. Accordingly, representations of masculinity in the Elk Valley were inextricably linked to the region's mining industry.

Outdoor Recreation and Technology

Central to the media's representation of Sparwood residents in general and the avalanche victims in particular, was the fundamental role that outdoor and motorized recreation played in their lives. For example, individual tribute articles (i.e., articles written about each of the men killed in the avalanche) that appeared in the CH, VS and FP spoke of the men's love for snowmobiling, dirt biking, adventures in all-terrain and four wheel-drive vehicles as well as hunting, fishing and horseback riding (e.g., "Avalanche victims were outdoor enthusiasts," 2008). One victim's tribute article described him as being "raised to be a snowmobiler" (Derworiz & Komarnicki, 2008) while another one was characterized as embodying a "go big or go home motto" (Komarnicki, 2009c, p. A3). The media's representations of the relationship between the men and snowmobiling positioned the sport as being "in [their] blood" (Cryderman & Myers, 2008, p. A5). This reproduced the belief that the avalanche victims were expert snowmobilers; it also normalized rural masculinity as naturally adrenaline-oriented, risk seeking and inescapably connected to motorized (outdoor) recreation. Such normalization is evident in a GM caption that referred to the victims as "just plain boys" (Death at 6,000 feet, 2009). The subtext of such language use was the ideological assumption that "boys will be boys." One of the effects of such logic was its neutralizing of any potential critique directed at the men's actions; to this end, the Sparwood men could not be faulted for the avalanche as they were simply acting as rural men—following their "inherent" need for adrenaline and passion for mountain adventure. Referring to the men as "boys" also associated their behavior with the innocence of childhood play, which further diffused potential criticism of their actions.

Snowmobiling and other forms of motorized recreation played a central role in the media's construction of rural masculinity:

Like many in this town, his passions were the outdoors and fast machines. When there was no snow, he threw himself into “mud bogging” with trucks. But with fresh powder, he wanted to get out with his RX1 turbo Yamaha snowmobile, after spending \$7000 on upgrades just two weeks earlier. (Walton & Hunter, 2009, p. A6)

As previously noted, technology is an important site for the construction of masculinity in rural communities (e.g., see Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Bye, 2009); indeed, the normative embodiment of this masculinity is often measured through a man's ability to master both nature and technology (Bye, 2009), and snowmobiling is a quintessential example of this relationship. Competitive consumption also featured into the media's representation of this rural masculinity-technology relationship (e.g., possession of snowmobiles and other motorized “toys”). This multifaceted relationship was illustrated both through what the newspapers chose to highlight regarding the memorabilia displayed at the Sparwood public memorial service⁴² and by how they described the items. For example, one article described them as “talismans of active, adrenaline filled lives” (Fortney, 2009, p. A3). Another contained the following description of the public memorial service:

Two snowmobiles sat propped up at the front of the Sparwood arena. White lights shone down on photographs of each of the dead men. One by one, those closest to the victims stood before memorial tables that held photos, sledding equipment,

⁴² For example, a child's t-shirt with the slogan “My daddy's sled is faster than your daddy's sled,” or a plaque reading “The one who dies with the most toys – wins” (Fortney, 2009, p. A3; Graveland, 2009, p. A4).

tools, trophies and hunting gear to illustrate the eight men's lives. (Komarnicki, 2009d, p. A1)

In effect, the abundant media coverage of such displays, combined with the repeated descriptions of the men's love of motorized recreation helped to construct technology as a central aspect of rural masculinity in the region.

A further facet of this connection the media forged between technology and rural masculinity was repeated references to the men's mechanical aptitude; individual tribute articles (in the CH, VS, FP), for example, noted that several men were mechanically inclined and "could fix anything" (Tributes, 2009, p. 5). Other articles remembered them through nicknames that referenced their mechanical abilities: "His father...called him 'super-wrench' for his instinctive mechanical skills" (Walton & Hunter, 2009, p. A6). Overall, the media reproduced the notion that possession, operation and maintenance of motorized technologies was an important aspect of hegemonic rural masculinity in the Sparwood area. Thus, the data aligns with Brandth & Haugen's (2005) assertion that rural masculinity is commonly expressed by mastering nature with machines (technology).

The vast majority of articles analyzed framed snowmobiling—not as an extreme sport—but rather as an everyday activity for men from the Elk Valley. One notable exception was a GM article entitled "Thrill seekers take modern technology to extremes" (Bonoguore, 2008). This article described how advances in snowmobile technology have resulted in "a different breed of snowmobiler" (p. A5) because new machines allow greater access to backcountry mountain terrain. However, though the article's title and introduction appeared to critique the high-tech and extreme nature of backcountry snowmobiling, this critical stance was ultimately neutralized by counter arguments Bonoguore posed comparing snowmobiling to backcountry skiing and

other recreational pursuits. Specifically, she argued that participants in many different recreational activities are constantly looking for new ways to push the limits of their sport, and snowmobiling was no exception. The opening Bonogno's article initially provided for a critical public discussion and understanding of the Sparwood incident was definitively closed through her decision to end the article with a quote from the BC Snowmobile Federation's president, who defended the reputation of backcountry snowmobilers by suggesting that most are educated and prepared: "Like any other motorized form of recreation, it has its risks.... Most snowmobilers don't take it lightly. They're well equipped" (p. A5). Thus, despite the initial critique presented, this article did not diverge significantly from the vast majority of texts analyzed, which positioned backcountry snowmobiling as a common and acceptable practice for men from the Elk Valley.

Both the "working class lifestyle" and "technology" elements that helped construct rural masculinity in the texts contained narratives that positioned the avalanche victims as "boys" who simply "played" with their "toys" (i.e., snowmobiles and other off-road vehicles). A GM article, for example, quoted a family member describing the men as "just a big group of kids who want to play...playing in the snow was their passion" (Walton & Bailey, 2008b, p. A4). This kind of infantilization of the avalanche victims was present in multiple articles across the four publications. However, referring to grown men as "boys" did not have an emasculating effect in this case; rather, these statements functioned rhetorically to abdicate the men of responsibility for their actions by associating their behaviour with the immaturity and innocence of childhood play. In this sense, framing the men as boys served to neutralize the sense of responsibility an adult would normally be subject to, thereby shoring up the dominant construction of the Sparwood men as non-culpable, worthy victims. This positioning of the men as boys was not, however,

without its contradictions regarding the construction of rural masculinity. On the one hand, rural masculinity was made meaningful through ruggedness, adventure and risk-seeking. On the other hand, it was naturalized through characteristics like playfulness and innocence, which are more frequently associated with childhood and femininity. Similarly, there was an interesting juxtaposition between the media's descriptions of the avalanche victims as "fun loving family men" (Komarnicki, 2009d, p. A1) and those that positioned them as just "boys." These are competing terms in the sense that "family men" is a category that connotes responsibility and domestic obligation while "boys" connotes immaturity and adolescence. The presence of these competing terms in the descriptions of the avalanche victims suggests that popular ideals of the "family man" do not necessarily include domestic responsibility in the same way they might for women (e.g., see Frohlick, 2006).

Domesticity

Depictions of the Sparwood avalanche victims as "good guys" (Derworiz, et al., 2008) revolved around their representation as "devoted father[s]" (McGinnis, 2008, p. A4) "loving" husbands/partners (Komarnicki, 2009d, p. A3) and "fun-loving family men" (p. A1). All four newspapers consistently portrayed the victims as responsible and family-oriented. For example the CH described one victim as "'the one to take care of everybody' ... [He] was a married father of two little girls... 'definitely a family man'" (Komarnicki & Zickefoose, 2008, p. A4). Article headlines, captions and opening paragraphs often referenced the men's family and marital status (i.e., most had children and were either married or in long-term common-law relationships with women). This established the victims as loving fathers and husbands in committed heterosexual relationships, thereby normalizing and celebrating a particular version of (heteronormative) rural masculinity in the texts.

While the media naturalized the avalanche victims' embodiment of normative rural masculinity, they also portrayed the men as somewhat exceptional; specifically, they were discursively constructed as brave and heroic men that were idolized by their families and community members. For example, the opening sentence of a FP article read, "Eight Sparwood snowmobilers died doing the sport they loved as they tried to save each other" (Edwards, 2009, p.2). The avalanche victims were praised for being "brave" (e.g., Walton & Bailey, 2008a, p. A1), and were "honour[ed]" with a community candlelight vigil (Derworiz et al., 2008, p. A3) and a "silent salute" (Edwards, 2009, p.2) at the public memorial service. Harrowing accounts of the men's rescue attempts, survival and death were composed using words such as "bravery" and "honour"—thus evoking heroism discourses (e.g., military). More overt references to heroism were also present in the texts: "they were great men, who are truly heroes and deserve to be remembered forever" (McGinnis, 2008, p. A4). Thus, the victims came to signify heroism through their avalanche ordeal, but also through their depiction as "good guys" (e.g., Matas & Walton, 2008, p. A4) who were "typical of the people [in Sparwood]" (Culbert & Skelton, 2008, p. A8). Pacholok (2009) argues that media discourses of heroism are more easily attached to subjects that embody normative and hegemonic constructions of masculinity—particularly during times of crisis; this is a strategic move by media that is based on the assumption that audiences will more readily identify with dominant cultural ideals of masculinity. This concept was reflected in the Sparwood data as evidenced through the media's simultaneous construction of the avalanche victims as heroes and family men who embodied local ideals of masculinity (i.e., blue collar, adventure-seeking, etc.). Thus, domesticity narratives were central to the dominant rural masculinity constructed in the texts, and portraying the avalanche victims as family-oriented helped to position them as plausible heroes.

Domesticity featured into the rural masculinity celebrated in the media texts descriptions of the avalanche victims as loving family men; however, there were also gender contradictions within this narrative. While women who leave their families and risk their lives for mountain adventure are often considered “bad mothers,” men are more likely to be praised (and less likely to be criticized) for taking the same actions (e.g., see Frohlick, 2006). Such logic was reproduced in media constructions that simultaneously portrayed the Sparwood men as good fathers who also enjoyed “risky” mountain adventures. It was not considered an oxymoron to be a “good father” and a “risky adventurer” as it often is for women. Criticism of the men’s parenting abilities did not materialize in the textual analysis, as the men were celebrated for being heroic and adventurous fathers more than they were condemned for it. There were, however, several exceptions to this—though critical perspectives of the men’s parenting abilities did not feature prominently in any of the newspaper articles. For example, one victim’s wife queried:

“When you sit back, is it worth leaving your kids for” she asked, rhetorically. “In the end, what’s the payoff? It’s not worth it, realistically.” Her husband, she said, had been buried in a serious avalanche several years ago, and found unconscious, but that didn’t shake his devotion to the pursuit. She said he told her that if he ever died in such a manner, he would, at least, be out doing something he loved.

She added: “It doesn’t make it acceptable.” (Walton & Bailey, 2009, p. A6)

This example highlights some of the issues that were marginalized in the narratives of heroism and rural masculinity that were so often reproduced in the media texts; specifically, the toll these pursuits may take on family relationships. Other comments questioning the men’s actions and decisions related to the avalanche were sporadic throughout the texts. Overall, they were sparse,

individualized (i.e., framed as one individual's perspective) and therefore did not interfere with the overall representation of the men as devoted fathers and husbands.

Male Camaraderie

The final aspect of the media's representation of rural masculinity was male camaraderie and homosociality. The celebration of male camaraderie in Sparwood's snowmobiling culture was pervasive in all four newspapers but was most overtly displayed in the CH. Though women were not explicitly excluded from snowmobile outings (i.e., several of the avalanche victims' wives/partners reportedly joined their husbands at times), the activity was readily constructed as a central locale for socially intimate male bonding. The following comments from the CH exemplify some of the ways that male camaraderie and homosociality were reflected in the media discourses:

It was the camaraderie of snowmobiling that he was attracted to, says his mother.

(Massinon, 2008, p. A4)

They always go out in a group of guys. (Derworiz & Komarnicki, 2008, p. A4)

The two brothers often went out snowmobiling together, part of the group of

"Valley Boys" who craved the extreme sport. (Komarnicki, 2008, p. A5)

Terms like "Valley Boys," and headlines such as "Here's to the boys," (2009) further articulated the public celebration of male camaraderie as an important feature of Sparwood's snowmobiling culture. Within this discourse, relationships between men were not only highly valued, but also compared to domestic partnerships; here, some of the men were described as "so close they referred to each other as the wife" (Walton & Bailey, 2008a, p. A1). Arguably, a

tension can be found across these various representations of the avalanche victims: on the one hand, they were constructed as good fathers devoted to their families, but on the other hand, they were framed as equally devoted to their male friendships/camaraderie through spending all of their free time with “the boys.” And while women were occasionally mentioned as participants of snowmobile outings, their presence was not represented in any of the camaraderie narratives. Rather, camaraderie narratives helped to construct the backcountry as a “masculinized sportscape” (Stoddard, 2010) where, as Stoddard argues, women are often marginalized and their experiences are mediated by male leadership and expertise. In this way, the snowmobiling narratives produced through the media were highly masculinized, with the net effect being that their commonly articulated frame of Sparwood’s community identity as defined through snowmobiling was, in fact, a highly gendered and therefore exclusive identity.

3) Dangerous Conditions & Unpredictable Nature

Everybody knows when you play in the backcountry, it’s one of the hazards and sometimes it happens. Even on ski hills, it happens in controlled environments. (Van Rassel, 2009, p. A3)

They had every piece of equipment on them they could have on them. When Mother Nature rears her ugly head, sometimes it doesn’t matter what you’ve done. (Komarnicki, 2009e, p. A4)

The third theme identified in the media analysis was entitled “dangerous conditions and unpredictable nature.” Throughout the four reviewed newspapers, the Sparwood avalanche incident was used to articulate the danger and severity of avalanche conditions throughout BC to

outdoor recreationalists. It was widely acknowledged in the various texts that, at the time of the Sparwood accident, avalanche conditions were rated as “severe” (Van Rassel & Sinoski, 2008, p. A4) in the backcountry, and the CAC had warned of increasing avalanche dangers. In these articles, terms such as “spooky” (Van Rassel & Zickefoose, 2008, p. A4), “hair-trigger” (Hunter, 2008b, p. A4) and “critical” (Fernie weather conditions, 2008, p. A4) were used to describe the snow conditions on the day of the accident and in the days that followed. The CAC also issued the following warning, which was quoted in several of the media texts *after* the Sparwood avalanche took place:

Travel in the mountains is very dangerous at this time. Conditions are hair-trigger, with the chance of full depth avalanches running to ground. If your holiday plans involve ripping it up in the backcountry, seriously consider making new plans. (Toneguzzi, 2008, p. A3)

Unlike the CAC warnings issued prior to the avalanche,⁴³ this statement contained a very direct and personalized message that was overtly critical of backcountry snowmobiling in avalanche conditions (e.g., “If *your* plans involve *ripping it up* in the backcountry...” [emphasis added]). The presence of this strongly worded message after the accident implied that snowmobilers should learn from the Sparwood incident and avoid (dangerous) backcountry terrain. Failure to do so would, suggestively, be a dangerous and irresponsible act that would call their behaviour into question. Alternatively, despite the fact that CAC warnings had been issued prior to the avalanche, the Sparwood men were often celebrated as blameless victims and/or heroes who were rarely subjected to blatant media criticism. In one sense, the above CAC warning aligned

⁴³ These warnings were available through regular avalanche bulletins on the CAC website, but they did not receive widespread media coverage until after the Sparwood avalanche.

with the dominant risk narrative constructed in the media texts by emphasizing the dangerous snow conditions in the backcountry. However, it also challenged the dominant representation of avalanches being unpredictable by suggesting that such “accidents” are a result of reckless behaviour (i.e., “ripping up the backcountry”).

Central to the “dangerous conditions and unpredictable nature” theme was the dominant narrative of the unpredictability of risks associated with backcountry snowmobiling. Though the prevailing media frame depicted avalanche conditions as hazardous at the time of the accident, the Sparwood men were described as safe and experienced backcountry snowmobilers who were well equipped for travel through avalanche terrain. Furthermore, the men were represented as being not only fully aware of the inherent risks involved in backcountry snowmobiling, but also as accepting and embracing of them. Implicit to such logic was the assumption that because the avalanche victims were believed to be experienced and educated on the risks of backcountry snowmobiling, they had a right to snowmobile in avalanche terrain; the net effect was not only to represent their behaviour as socially acceptable, but also to absolve them from any blame or criticism.

Risk discourses, as Lupton (1999a) has argued, always embody particular ontological perspectives, which have attendant constructions of the subject. Risk, as represented through the media texts, predominately reflected a realist perspective by supposing that there are “real” dangers associated with backcountry snowmobiling. This view was particularly evident in articles that outlined the hazards of backcountry winter travel, such as those that discussed the CAC and the scientific nature of avalanche forecasting (e.g., see Hunter, 2008a; Toneguzzi, 2008). The technical and scientific discourses associated with avalanche forecasting employ cognitive scientific approaches (see Lupton, 1999a), which ultimately view risks as objective

dangers that are calculable and predictable. In turn, this view also aligns with liberal humanist paradigms that celebrate autonomous, rational, free-thinking subjects. This materialized in the data through the recurring suggestion that the victims were aware of the avalanche risks and equipped with the necessary safety equipment⁴⁴—thus, they made informed decisions based on calculated risks and were portrayed as well within their rights to do so. However, though the dominant risk discourses that emerged in the analysis adhered to realist perspectives, overall, avalanche accidents were portrayed as unpredictable rather than calculable: “they had planned their trip...in advance and every safety precaution was taken.... ‘There are things you have to watch for and they are unpredictable’” (Van Rassel & Komarnicki, 2008a, p. A9). Such “lay perspectives” of risk (Green, 1997), while being realist, ultimately undermine the logic of calculability, thus abdicating the men of responsibility for the accident.

A contradiction emerged in some of the articles that discussed the risks of backcountry snowmobiling. Specifically, while they warned of extreme avalanche conditions and described the formation of unstable snow conditions, they also analogized the unpredictability of avalanches to that of gambling. The unpredictability narrative occupied a more prominent role in media coverage overall, but, on occasion, these extreme conditions and unpredictability narratives also occurred within the same article. For example, a FP article entitled “Avalanche Roulette” (Eckersley, 2009), provided detailed descriptions of how weak base layers and unstable conditions form in the winter snow pack (thus suggesting a scientific predictability to avalanche forecasting). On the other hand, the article concluded by comparing avalanches to gambling (i.e., roulette), thereby insinuating that they are unpredictable. Thus, the title of the

⁴⁴ Though many articles stated that the avalanche victims were aware of avalanche risks, the coroner found no evidence that the men had checked CAC avalanche bulletins before setting out on the day of the avalanche (Matas, 2009).

article and its concluding comments diverged from the dominant narrative constructed in the text. Because this article appeared in the FP—one of Sparwood’s local newspapers—suggesting that avalanches are predictable, following such a well publicized accident, would effectively draw negative attention to the actions of the avalanche victims and would thus likely be undesirable for a local newspaper. However, larger newspapers also included gambling metaphors to describe avalanches as unpredictable. In the GM, for example, a RCMP officer was quoted comparing avalanche risks to “a crap shoot” (Walton & Bailey, 2008b, p. A1). Thus, though the public discourses represented in the texts at times acknowledged the scientific nature of avalanche forecasting, they often reverted to lay constructions of risk and accidents as unpredictable, thereby revealing tensions between public (lay) and expert (e.g., CAC) accounts of risk. The produced effect of this tension was that while the media texts may have created the appearance of objectivity through discussions of avalanche forecasting, because more weight was granted to narratives positioning avalanches and accidents as unpredictable, scientific discourses were little more than window dressing in many of the texts.

While portraying the Sparwood avalanche as unpredictable, media representations depicted the avalanche victims as safety-conscious, prepared, experienced and responsible: “Friends described the adventurers as ‘knowledgeable sledheads’ who were experienced with search-and-rescue equipment including [avalanche] transceivers, shovels and probes” (Walton & Bailey, 2008a, p. A4). This safety and responsibility narrative was common and recurring across the texts. On multiple occasions, articles included comments from friends, family and community members that emphasized the men were specifically *not* reckless, irresponsible or engaged in high-marking. For example, one GM article quoted a victim’s family member as saying: ““He wasn’t this irresponsible thrill seeker...they really knew what they were doing””

(Walton & Hunter, 2009 p. A6); while another one explained that, because of insufficient snow cover, “the area would have been impossible to engage in what’s known as high-marking” (Walton & Bailey, 2008a, p. A4). These representations of responsible men trained in avalanche safety and rescue were central to the media coverage and were rarely contested (despite the presence of CAC warnings before the accident). Again, these recurring positive representations of the avalanche victims helped to shore up depictions of the men as worthy victims deserving of public sympathy.

This depiction of the victims as safe and responsible did not go so far as to suggest that the snowmobilers were risk-averse, however, as this would have contradicted the rural masculinity constructed elsewhere in the texts. Narratives of the safe and responsible snowmobiler worked alongside narratives of rural masculinity to construct the victims as adventure-seeking (masculine), yet safe and responsible (domestic). There was, therefore, a delicate balance being sought to construct a positive image of a responsible man that embraced adventure who was neither too risky (reckless) nor too risk-averse (emasculated). For example, one victim’s friend described how “his buddies ribbed him about the GPS ‘ball and chain’ that let his wife keep track of his movements. But the ‘sensible’ snowmobiler took the teasing in stride” (Komarnicki, 2009g, p. A3). This comment illustrates how the masculinity valued in this snowmobiling culture was attached to ideas of risk-seeking, freedom, adventure and an escape from domesticity. It also reinforced gendered stereotypes that position men as risk-takers and women as risk-averse. To be too safety-conscious, risk-averse or domestic was, in a sense, demasculinizing and would not fit with the dominant constructions of masculinity articulated throughout the texts. Thus, these narratives point to a fissure in the representations of the snowmobilers as safety-conscious and responsible family men.

The media portrayed the community of Sparwood as largely accepting of the men's decision to snowmobile in avalanche terrain. This apparent public acceptance was often connected to the idea that the men were aware of the risks associated with backcountry snowmobiling. A prevailing narrative that emerged in the "dangerous conditions and unpredictable nature" theme maintained that the men were aware of the hazards and risks of snowmobiling but considered the joy and thrill of the activity to be worth the risks. For example, a headline in the CH read, "Victim 'knew' deadly risks" (Komarnicki, 2009b, p. A1), while another one contained remarks that stated "even as the community grapples with the enormity of the deaths in Sparwood, they say the rewards of snowmobiling far outweigh the risk" (Cryderman & Myers, 2008, p. A5). These beliefs were also evident in comments included in media texts proclaiming that, despite the Sparwood avalanche, people will (and should) continue to engage in backcountry snowmobiling: "The tragedy has not stopped snowmobilers from going into the backcountry... 'Those guys would all be rolling over in their graves if we stopped doing what we do...why would that make you quit? You know the risk before you take it'" remarked one of the avalanche survivors in the GM (Matas, 2009, p. A5). The logic underlying this backcountry snowmobiling risk acceptance was based on the view that though the backcountry is a dangerous place, accidents are unpredictable and inevitable; in other words, accidents happen, and they are merely a result of "bad luck" (e.g., see Walton & Bailey, 2008a, p. A4). This was a common public view represented through the media texts. For example, in the CH, a RCMP officer "wondered if it was realistic to expect any action that could protect against the unpredictability of natural forces like avalanches... 'we humans have no control over that at all,' he said" (Van Rassel & Komarnicki, 2008b, p. A3). This, along with other similar comments, suggested a public resistance to government regulation of backcountry snowmobiling. The CH,

in particular, represented this as a common public view, which perhaps reflects both the conservative political climate in Alberta as well as the popularity of backcountry mountain snowmobiling in the region. Anti-regulation sentiments glimpsed in the CH were informed by liberal humanist perspectives, which value self-responsibility and autonomy over state imposed regulations:

This is a free country and we are not likely to ever outlaw people from entering dangerous wilderness areas. All we can do is hope those venturing out into mountains heed the warnings that are given for their protection and for those who must then try to save them. (“The need to heed,” 2008a; 2008b, p. A10)

Such liberal humanist views on regulation effectively marginalized discussions regarding potential actions or interventions (e.g., government regulation of backcountry access) aimed at preventing this or similar accidents from occurring again. Moreover, such references to “a free country” functioned rhetorically in the texts by reproducing conservative ideologies of anti-regulation regarding backcountry snowmobiling.

Through emphasizing the unpredictability of avalanches while excluding and/or minimizing portrayals of snowmobiling as a risky activity requiring greater regulation, the media representations often normalized the risks involved in backcountry snowmobiling (particularly in the CH). This was also accomplished by comparing backcountry snowmobiling to a variety of other recreational and transportation activities. For instance, the CH alone compared snowmobiling to bull riding (Cryderman & Myers, 2008, p. A5), rafting, canoeing, skiing and snowboarding (Remington, 2008, p. B4), swimming in the ocean and flying in an airplane (The need to heed, 2008, p. A10). However, such comparisons were problematic given that the avalanche occurred at a time during elevated warnings of unstable snow conditions. The other

activities mentioned, therefore, would only be comparable in the event that participants ignored elevated, location-specific warnings. The presence of these similes in the media texts helped to diminish the potential construction of backcountry snowmobiling (in avalanche terrain) as an overly “dangerous” or “risky” activity, which, in turn, also curtailed criticism of the men’s decision to enter the backcountry.

Despite the dominance of the “unpredictable nature” narrative, there were also several notable examples of individuals trying to disrupt this belief. The CAC, for example, was featured in an article entitled “Forecasters warned of dangers on Sunday” (Hunter, 2008a, p. A5), which noted that avalanche warnings had been issued for the area in which the accident took place. The CAC stated that, “the setup is fairly predictable” though the tipping point for an avalanche is often unpredictable. A CH editorial also challenged the idea that the avalanche was unforeseen: “There were warnings. There were signs. There were decisions made to ignore those.... While there is randomness to such accidents, there is predictability to them, as well” (“The need to heed,” 2008, p. A10). However, despite this positioning of the avalanche as predictable, critical commentary present in the texts was often also accompanied by a justification of the men’s actions: “Many are shaking their heads at the senselessness of it all...yet who among us has not been close to the edge, feeling safe?” (Remington, 2008, p. B1). This comment demonstrates how informal discourse (Bignell, 2002) was used in the media texts to mobilize sympathy for the victims by suggesting to the readers that the Sparwood men were just like them. Thus, though there were some brief inclusions of critical comments, the media representations, overall, depicted the avalanche victims as blameless and the accident as a random act of “Mother Nature.”

References to Mother Nature were recurring in the texts. For example, statements about how the men were “taken by Mother Nature” appeared in numerous articles (e.g., see Fortney, 2008, p. A3). This understanding of nature as an uncontrollable, unpredictable and dangerous feminine force also implied that mountains and wilderness are “dangerous” places that men are lured to because of the beauty of Mother Nature. As one editorial column warned, “even as these areas beckon us with their beauty they should also repel us with their peril” (“The need to heed,” 2008a, p. A10; 2008b, p. A14). This discourse draws from traditional representations of females as sexual temptresses as well as from binary constructions that associate women and femininity with nature. Blaming “Mother Nature” for the avalanche accident was a strategy that effectively abdicated responsibility away from the men by suggesting that they were randomly and unjustly victimized by Mother Nature (rather than implying that they were at fault for ignoring the avalanche warnings). For example, one resident, quoted in the CH, stated that, “the men were ‘playing hard, playing safe... [they] respected the mountains, the snow... [they] were taken by Mother Nature” (Fortney, 2009, p. A3). Because the men were constructed as blameless victims that were cruelly taken by Mother Nature, there was little space for discussions of culpability in the texts.

The subject of blame and responsibility was a sensitive topic, and when present, it often involved tensions and contradictions. As previously noted, dominant media discourses portrayed the men as worthy victims; the corollary to this was that criticism appeared minimally in the texts and was, at times, even directly discouraged: “This is not the time to blame the dead” (Remington, 2008). The GM also included comments from a local pastor who directed the following statement to the survivors of the avalanche: “Do not accept the blame of the ignorant who have not walked a mile in your boots” (Graveland, 2009, p. A4). The inclusion of this

statement also carried religious and moral implications as the religious discourse worked to further ward off critique. When present, critical statements were often indirect—that is, they offered a critical standpoint without directly blaming the avalanche victims. For example, the GM quoted the president of a local snowmobile club stating that “Most snowmobilers would have avoided going on a day like yesterday” (Matas & Makin, 2008, p. A6). Similarly, the CAC was diplomatic in its media response to the tragedy, as it did not directly criticize the men’s actions. Rather, it suggested that education was the key to prevention and that simply carrying rescue equipment was not enough to protect yourself. One instance of direct criticism surfaced in the VS when the Fernie Mayor remarked, “the men should not have ventured out into that particular area because the avalanche risk was high” (Van Rassel & Sinoski, 2008, p. A4). This statement, however, was an anomaly when compared to the overall representations of a supportive and uncritical community response.

Media representations of the Sparwood avalanche contained numerous aforementioned tensions with only the occasional critical commentary being offered. Overall, they did not provide significant public debate on the issues surrounding backcountry snowmobiling. The coverage did not vary significantly between the four newspapers, and the dominant themes were relatively consistent across the four newspapers.

Discursive Silences

Through textual analysis, dominant narratives, ideologies, frames and themes were identified in the media texts. In addition to discussing the avalanche details, the media texts also reproduced discourses of regional identity, rural masculinity, risk, liability and regulation as it related to backcountry snowmobiling. Inevitably, they portrayed these issues in particular kinds

of ways while simultaneously excluding other representations. Thus, a critical examination of the dominant media discourses also revealed several prominent discursive silences.

As discussed in the thematic analysis, the tragedy, grief and community support theme was structured by the dominant narrative of Sparwood residents as united by their grief and support for the avalanche victims, survivors and families. This narrative carried over into social life more generally, as the media represented Sparwood and the Elk Valley as a cohesive community of like-minded individuals that valued their rural, blue-collar, outdoor lifestyles. Within this frame, very little space was given to critical perspectives (e.g., those that might have suggested that Sparwood was anything other than a cohesive, rural, blue-collar, snowmobile-loving community); thus, the dominant discourse of a cohesive community identity largely went unchallenged. Discursive silences were particularly evident regarding criticism towards the practice of snowmobiling. Considering that eight men from one community were killed in the accident, it is understandable that little criticism was directed specifically at the avalanche victims. However, more general criticism of backcountry snowmobiling was also silenced in the texts. Portrayals of Sparwood as united in its affection for the victims and snowmobiling obscured the presence of any debates (e.g., regarding conflicts between backcountry user groups, environmental disputes and regulation of backcountry snowmobiling, etc.). At times, the texts included comments that gestured toward these debates, yet they seldom engaged with them in a comprehensive way. For example, the following comment—by a representative of the University of Calgary Outdoor Centre—appeared in the CH: “Prepared snowmobilers still represent the exception rather than the majority.... ‘I hate to say it, but something of this magnitude might be the wake-up call they need to start respecting the conditions of their environment and get training’” (Cryderman & Myers, 2008, p. A5). Such statements are indicative of criticisms that

backcountry snowmobilers face in outdoor recreation circles. Given that snowmobilers are, at times, accused of being ill informed and uneducated on avalanche safety and rescue, it is curious that media did not significantly address these debates in their coverage of the Sparwood avalanche.

Representations of the masculine subculture associated with backcountry snowmobiling was also characterized by discursive silences. The type of rural masculinity normalized was both narrowly defined, and, at times, contradictory. It was a masculinity constructed through blue collar employment (i.e., mining industry), technological and mechanical proficiency (i.e., big trucks and motorized recreation), affection for outdoor adventure (i.e., risk seeking, but responsible), dedication to family and male friendships and a “work hard, play hard” mentality. These qualities epitomized definitions of “The Valley Boys” in the media texts, thereby silencing and marginalizing other forms of masculinity that exist in the community (e.g., men who are openly risk averse, have white collar jobs or do not enjoy snowmobiling, etc.). A CH article, for example, gestured toward the centrality of snowmobiling to Elk Valley lifestyles:

“Snowmobiling is a way of life in this tiny town nestled in the mountains. ‘We play extreme. That’s just the way it is...Either you have the nerve or you don’t’” (Derworiz & Komarnicki, 2008, p. A4). This example illustrates how the media often used individual comments to make universal statements about the community’s character. The construction of snowmobiling as “a way of life” for the community marginalized and devalued the identities of residents who are not included in this subculture. The “we” constructed in these discourses refers to a very particular subset of the population. Women’s voices, for example, were notably absent from snowmobiling discourses.

Although their voices were occasionally included in media texts, women were most commonly represented as grieving widows and spouses of men who loved snowmobiling. In an interview with one victim's wife, for example, the CH referred to her as someone who "shared her husband's love of snowmobiling and doesn't fault him for hitting the slopes last Sunday" (Komarnicki, 2009b, p. A3). This comment operated to shore up the media's overall construction of Sparwood as a supportive, snowmobile-loving community and was also reflective of the dominant way that the men's spouses were represented—as supportive and understanding of their passion for snowmobiling. While several of the articles referenced women as being occasional snowmobiling participants, they were conspicuous by their absence in the discourses of adventure-seeking and camaraderie that were posited as central to both snowmobiling culture and the Elk Valley's regional identity. Thus, the exclusivity of snowmobiling was obscured and discursively silenced in texts that presented it as an inclusive activity that was an important part of community life: "Snowmobiling is so popular that many residents feel it could have easily been them caught in Sunday's accident" (Culbert & Skelton, 2008, p. A8). Here, snowmobiling is depicted as universal in the community, and there is no acknowledgement of who is actually welcomed and able to participate in this culture/practice (e.g., local, working class, heterosexual men). There was also a conspicuous absence of demographic data regarding previous snowmobiling fatalities in Canada—most notably, the fact that no women have ever been killed by avalanches while backcountry snowmobiling. This challenges the notion that backcountry snowmobiling is an inclusive practice, and it begs the question of who is actually participating in the activity.

The celebration of hegemonic rural masculinity, male camaraderie and homosociality in the texts effectively silenced the processes through which this masculinity and male bonding was

achieved: through the exclusion of women and other (marginalized) expressions of masculinity. The produced effect of this silencing was the upholding of traditional gender dynamics, which ultimately favour men's interests by celebrating their pursuit of mountain adventure while simultaneously positioning women as responsible for the domestic sphere.

Additionally, little consideration was given to how male bonding may be pursued at the expense of the victims' family relationships. In media texts, the avalanche victims were touted as good fathers, family men and heroes who were admired by their community: "These men are what community is all about" (Edwards, 2009, p. 2), noted one Sparwood resident in the FP. Yet, their love of backcountry snowmobiling eventually cost them their lives, and their families were left behind to grieve. As Coffey (2003) has remarked, outdoor adventure recreation has a dark side that is often considered a taboo subject.⁴⁵ Specifically, the quest for adventure often comes with personal costs such as risking "shattering the lives and breaking the hearts" of those you love the most (p. xvii), and the risk of leaving family members behind to grieve in the event of severe injury or death. The hesitancy to engage in such discussion was also reflected in the media coverage of the Sparwood incident, where a celebration of the men and their passion for adventure obscured potential criticism of this lifestyle. Indeed, backcountry snowmobiling in avalanche terrain was portrayed as an activity in which the average rural man regularly engages, thus normalizing this behaviour as a common practice for local men, rather than something that is extreme with potentially tragic and traumatic consequences for their families. This representation ultimately rested upon a gendered logic that assumed women are responsible for

⁴⁵ Coffey's (2003) work refers specifically to high level mountaineering and climbing, but a parallel could arguably be drawn to backcountry snowmobiling.

the domestic realm—both in terms of looking after the family while men are away and being there to support their family in the occurrence of injury or death (e.g., see Frohlick, 2006).

The dominant risk narrative that characterized media coverage of the Sparwood avalanche referred to the dangerous avalanche conditions at the time of the accident, the inherent risks of backcountry snowmobiling and the unpredictability of Mother Nature. In spite of the media's inclusion of the CAC's warnings regarding high avalanche risk at the time of accident, the Sparwood men received little blame or criticism in the vast majority of the media coverage. Rather, they were portrayed as knowledgeable, safe, local men who were prepared, experienced and aware of the risks. Several discursive silences were evident in the margins of these representations. First, there was little discussion of the fact that the men either ignored the avalanche warnings or were unaware of them in the first place. The inclusion of such critical dialogue may have contradicted representations of the men as safe, prepared, educated, responsible, heroic, etc. Second, referring to the avalanche as a random and unpredictable act of Mother Nature also provided limited room for critique of the men's actions. Moreover, debates on potential prevention and/or public intervention strategies (e.g., regulation, enforcement or education) were also silenced in the texts. Though increased avalanche education was discussed to some extent in several of the articles (e.g., see Treharne, 2009), this was not a dominant topic overall; its presence was ultimately overshadowed by the representation of the Sparwood victims as well-equipped and educated on avalanche safety. If greater education was needed, therefore, it was more of a general statement in the texts and was not directed towards the Sparwood victims in particular. The overall sentiment was that it was just an unfortunate accident, and there was nothing that could or should have been done to prevent similar deaths from occurring.

Case Study #2 – Revelstoke, BC: The Big Iron Shootout

On March 13, 2010, a large group of snowmobilers were gathered at Boulder Mountain near Revelstoke, BC, for a snowmobiling event known as the *Big Iron Shootout* (BIS). This loosely organized annual event involved snowmobile drag races and a “high-marking” contest where drivers propel powerful snowmobiles up a steep mountain slope, competing to see who can reach the highest point before descending. An estimated two hundred participants were watching the event from the bottom of a slope known as “Turbo” when a large avalanche, triggered by one of the high-marking snowmobiles, released on the mountain burying many of the spectators and participants. In the end, two men from Alberta were killed by the slide, and approximately thirty more were injured—some seriously. Both veteran and novice snowmobilers were in attendance and spectators included men, women and children, many of whom had travelled from across Western Canada to attend the event.

In the avalanche’s immediate aftermath, as participants tried to locate and rescue those buried by the slide, a large scale rescue operation was launched by local search and rescue officials. It was unclear how many had been buried by the avalanche, and initial reports suggested that there could be dozens, if not hundreds, of casualties. Helicopters soon arrived with rescue personnel and avalanche dogs, and the injured were airlifted to a staging area where ambulances waited to take them to the Revelstoke hospital. The RCMP also airlifted approximately fifty snowmobiles off the mountain and spent the evening knocking on hotel room doors and investigating unattended vehicles in order to determine if anyone was unaccounted for on the mountain. By the following day, fears of mass casualties had subsided, and it was confirmed that only two people had been killed in the accident.

According to the CAC (2011), the avalanche risk at the time of the accident was rated as “high” in the alpine—meaning that avalanche conditions were “very dangerous” and that “travel

in avalanche terrain [is] not recommended.” Conditions at or below treeline were rated as “considerable,” with human-triggered avalanches likely. The high-marking portion of the BIS event took place on a steep alpine slope—Turbo—which was located above the treeline. While some BIS attendees were experienced backcountry snowmobilers equipped with the recommended safety gear, others were novice sledders that did not have the necessary equipment (e.g., avalanche transceivers, probes and shovels) or training (e.g., avalanche safety course).

The Revelstoke avalanche received a vast amount of media attention across Canada, and the incident sparked intense public debate about backcountry snowmobiling and avalanche safety. The City of Revelstoke and local snowmobile clubs denied any affiliation with the BIS. Rumours circulated in the media that the alleged organizer of the event was a Calgary man known in the sledding community as “Ozone Dave” (Richards, 2010a, p. A4). As the alleged event organizer, he was highly criticized for disappearing after the accident and avoiding contact with the media, the RCMP and the victims’ families. In the weeks that followed the avalanche, the RCMP conducted a full investigation of the BIS; they considered pressing charges of criminal negligence against the alleged organizer and charges of child endangerment against parents who brought their children to the event. However, by the end of April, the investigation was completed, and the RCMP concluded that there was insufficient evidence to charge anyone involved in the event with criminal negligence. Charges were ruled out because the event was determined to be “loosely organized” and “although high marking was a part of the event in past years, it was not on the agenda [in 2010], ‘presumably because of the avalanche risk’” (Walton & Windgrove, 2010, p. A8).

A total of seven snowmobiling-related avalanche deaths occurred in BC in the 2009-10 avalanche season—a marked decrease from the nineteen that occurred the previous year.

However, the BIS was a high profile accident because of the number of participants involved and the prolific media attention it received; thus, debates surrounding backcountry snowmobiling remained prevalent in the media. After the BIS, the BC provincial government announced new licensing and registration regulations for off-road vehicles (e.g., snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles). The federal government and the CAC also announced a new North-American avalanche danger rating system. Media coverage of this new legislation and public warning system often referenced the avalanche that occurred at the 2010 BIS. The RCMP's criminal investigation also gained local and national media attention. Though criminal charges were eventually ruled out, one of the injured survivors of the avalanche filed a lawsuit against the alleged event organizer, the snowmobiler whose high-marking triggered the avalanche and two local snowmobile organizations. At present, this case is still before the courts.

Research Findings: Revelstoke

The data set for this case study included news and feature articles, editorial columns and a variety of images from four newspapers: *The Globe & Mail* (GM), the *Calgary Herald* (CH), the *Vancouver Sun* (VS) and the *Revelstoke Times Review* (RTR). Specifically, 35 news or feature articles, 4 opinion/editorial columns, 3 editorial cartoons and approximately 34 images (photographs or diagrams) were included in the study.⁴⁶ The majority of the articles were published in the first week following the avalanche. A variety of issues, opinions and debates were represented in the articles, but several distinctive themes dominated the media coverage. In discussing the results of my media analysis, I first describe the surface features of the texts. Second, I examine the overall framing of the newspaper articles through a discussion of the three most prominent discursive frames: “public safety,” “drama” and “tragedy/grief.” Third, I identify the overarching themes that emerged in my textual analysis and provide a detailed discussion of the three that were most prevalent. These include themes entitled, “the need to improve backcountry safety,” “snowmobiling: a high risk activity” and “a hyper-masculine subculture.” I conclude with a discussion of the discursive silences that surrounded media coverage of the Revelstoke avalanche.

Surface Features

The four publications reviewed for this case study included a variety of media coverage such as news and feature articles, editorial columns and cartoons. Aside from the editorial items, the majority of articles were published in the front news section of the local and national

⁴⁶ Twelve news/feature articles, 1 editorial cartoon, and 13 images were from the GM; 12 news/feature articles, 1 editorial piece and 10 images were from the CH; 8 news/feature articles, 1 editorial piece and 4 images were from the VS; 3 news/feature articles, 2 editorials pieces, 2 editorial cartoons and 7 images were from the RTR.

newspapers. Additionally, the avalanche received a significant amount of front page news coverage. Articles related to the avalanche and the BIS appeared on the front page of the GM for three days, the CH for four days, the VS for one day and the RTR for two days.⁴⁷

Articles were commonly accompanied by photographs (e.g., of the avalanche site, rescue operation and participants), maps (e.g., of the Boulder Mountain and Revelstoke area), diagrams (e.g., of the avalanche site and slide path) and graphs (e.g., of avalanche statistics in Canada). Some of the most popular and recurring images were aerial photographs of the avalanche site with abandoned snowmobiles and debris scattered on the mountainside. All newspapers included images of the avalanche site and at least one of these aerial photographs. These images, often accompanied by dramatic captions and headlines, helped to construct the avalanche as a dramatic and chaotic spectacle. For example, the same aerial photograph depicting about twenty broken and abandon snowmobiles appeared in the GM and CH. Many of the snowmobiles were lying upside down or on their sides in the snow and, because they were photographed from the air, they resembled human bodies lying on the ground. The GM caption for this photograph read: “Snowmobiles are strewn about yesterday in an area where a killer avalanche occurred...” (Vanderklippe, 2010a, p. A1); similarly, the CH’s caption was: “Nearly two dozen snowmobiles litter the snow near the bottom of an avalanche run on Boulder Mountain...” (Richardson et al., 2010). The words used to describe the avalanche (e.g., “killer”) and snowmobiles (e.g., “strewn about” or “littering the snow”) contributed to this portrayal of drama, chaos and disorder. These images were also devoid of people, thus contributing to the impersonal representation of the

⁴⁷ The RTR is published weekly, which accounts for why only two issues of the newspaper had front page stories about the avalanche.

accident, which ultimately opened the door for greater media criticism of snowmobiling, the BIS and the event's participants.

Several differences in photographic representation were also noted between the four newspapers. The GM and CH, for example, contained the greatest number of dramatic images. This included the aerial photographs as well as close-up images of injured survivors lying in hospital beds. An interesting juxtaposition between impersonal and highly personalized images was also present in these newspapers. Personalised images, most notably in the CH, included close-up photographs of the avalanche victims, their friends, avalanche survivors, etc. These types of images contrasted with the aerial photographs of the avalanche site by focusing on the human element of the tragedy. The more personalised photographs in the CH coverage seemed to position the audience in a sympathetic subject position more so than the other publications, which is understandable considering that the avalanche victims were from central Alberta.

Another key difference was noted in RTR. Specifically, the most dominant and recurring images were centred on the emergency response effort and local officials' response to the avalanche. For example, there were numerous images of the rescue helicopter and the ambulances waiting to evacuate injured participants. One image in particular depicted a mountain backdrop with three ambulances parked side by side and a helicopter in flight; the caption read, "A helicopter takes off after bringing in several victims of Saturday's tragic avalanche to *waiting* ambulances" (emphasis added). The sub-title of the article accompanying this photograph was, "With hundreds watching snowmobiling event, toll could have been higher if not for rescuers, officials say" (Cooper & Orlando, 2010). Here, an image of the rescue operation was paired with text that constructed it as orderly and effective (i.e., the death toll could have been higher, and the ambulances were ready and waiting). While no images of the

avalanche victims appeared in the RTR texts, photographs of the RCMP, Search and Rescue personnel and CAC staff were present. The prevalence of these types of images worked to distance Revelstoke from the emotional, human interest aspects of the story; instead, it constructed the community as detached from the victims and their families but as effective and admirable in its rescue efforts. Similarly, the VS did not include any images of the avalanche victims and the newspaper coverage contained very few photographs overall—the exception being one aerial photograph of the avalanche site and one image of a search and rescue crew loading a helicopter with two avalanche dogs. Several maps and diagrams depicting avalanche statistics were also featured. The combination of these impersonal photographs and diagrams effectively represented the BIS as a disaster with faceless and unknowable victims. Thus, the individual deaths were not portrayed as particularly significant to readers.

Overall, the headlines that dominated the media coverage of the BIS emphasized conflict, debate, trauma and the “dangerous” and “extreme” nature of backcountry mountain snowmobiling. For example, a GM headline, “A dangerous pursuit, a deadly outcome” (2010, p. A1), appeared in bold, capitalized text above two news articles on the avalanche. One of these articles included a map of the Boulder Mountain area with the caption, “Recipe for disaster” (Vanderklippe & Grant, 2010, p. A9). The CH & VS also included headlines such as “Charges possible in fatal slide” (Richards, 2010b) and “Survivors recall avalanche terror” (Cuthbertson, 2010). These types of headlines and captions focused attention on the conflict and drama surrounding the incident. They also helped to construct backcountry snowmobiling as a dangerous and extreme practice. In one of the most overt examples, the GM ran a story entitled, “The adrenalin rush of turbo-charged snowmobiling” (Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010). This article included an image of two airborne snowmobiles racing down a mountain slope with the

subtitle, “Danger is part of the thrill of this macho sport....” Additionally, the story heading in the newspaper utilized bold text tag lines such as “Extreme Sport” and “Backcountry Power Trips” to identify the article in the newspaper. In these and many other examples, the surface features of the media texts were important contributing factors in the framing of the articles. Specifically, the headlines, titles and other prominent text used to identify the articles and images privileged the sensational, dramatic and controversial aspects of the story, thus diminishing other possible meanings. A further discussion of the specific frames and themes communicated in headlines and images is provided in the “media frames” and “thematic analysis” sections.

All four publications exhibited a combination of formal and informal discourse (see Bignell, 2002) in their coverage of the avalanche. For example, they all addressed the avalanche victims by first and last names or last name only, thus mimicking more formalized news discourse. The absence of personalized stories about the victims, and, in some cases, the lack of photographs (most notably in the VS) also contributed to representations that portrayed an element of formality in the news publications. However, there were also many examples of informal discourse noted in the media texts—particularly in the CH. As Bignell (2002) remarks, by mimicking oral discourse, media texts convey informality to the reader, thus assuming a shared cultural discourse. Some of the ways that the CH communicated informality included the use of personalisation, quotations, slang terms and nick-names in the article titles and headlines. Personalisation, for example, occurred through labelling the victims as “friends” (Komarnicki & McGinnis, 2010) and “family men” (Fortney, 2010). Another article entitled, “Ozone Dave called ‘pretty gung-ho’” (Richards & Massinon, 2010), connoted informality with the use of a nickname and direct quotation of a slang term. The purpose of this informality, I would argue, is

to position the victims as familiar to the reader, or to position the reader as an “insider” (e.g., to snowmobiling culture), thus eliciting a sympathetic response from the audience.

The general structure of news articles reviewed was quite varied, and lead paragraphs were diverse in content. Several stories were introduced using descriptions of a serene mountain setting prior to the avalanche, or dramatic, visceral narratives from those caught in the avalanche. Others immediately introduced the conflicts and debates surrounding the BIS. Article conclusions were equally as varied, but many ended with a discussion of what changes should occur (e.g., regulating backcountry access or improving avalanche warning systems) and what questions remain (e.g., Who is liable? Will there be criminal charges?, etc.). Several articles concluded with statements emphasizing the trauma and grief faced by families of the injured and deceased. The variety of perspectives presented in the BIS newspaper coverage suggests that, to a certain extent, media texts functioned as a site debate on issues surrounding backcountry snowmobiling.

Alongside interviews with BIS participants, survivors and snowmobile enthusiasts were accounts from expert sources such as the CAC and RCMP. Overall, this combination of sources gave the appearance of variety and objectivity in the media coverage of the event. However, a closer reading of the dominant frames and themes presented in the articles provides a more comprehensive view of how the media represented this event in several distinctive ways.

Framing

The first discursive frame that emerged in the textual analysis was “public safety.” This was by far the most dominant media frame observed across the four publications. The issue of greatest salience in this frame was the threat to public safety posed by backcountry snowmobiling and the subsequent need to prevent future accidents, injuries and fatalities from

occurring. The concern for “public” safety articulated in this frame referred not only to backcountry snowmobilers, but also to other backcountry enthusiasts (e.g., BIS bystanders or other backcountry users such as skiers, etc.) and search and rescue personnel (many of whom were volunteers). For example, in a RTR editorial column, BC’s Minister of Public Safety, Kash Heed, stated that improved avalanche awareness and education was important “not only for one’s personal safety, but for the safety of those around them and for those who may be called on to help in a rescue situation” (Heed, 2010, p. 6). Unsurprisingly, the RTR articles expressed particular concern for the safety of local search and rescue crews, even referring to them as “the heroes of winter” in one editorial cartoon (Buchanan, 2010a, p. 6). It was interesting to note that, although many of the texts discussed the masculine sub-culture surrounding backcountry snowmobiling, this did not significantly factor into the public safety frame. It was acknowledged that high powered snowmobiles are marketed to young men (“Snowmobile community”, 2010), and that backcountry snowmobiling is largely a “macho” sport that embraces “danger” (Vankerklippe & Mason, 2010, p. A15) and “thrill-seeking” behaviour (e.g., Staseson & Komarnicki, 2010, p. A5); however, when discussions of public safety arose in the texts, they were broadly directed at backcountry recreationalists in general and did not propose any targeted action to address this culture of masculinity. By failing to address masculinity in the public safety frame, therefore, a prominent snowmobiling safety issue was unexamined in the media texts. Rather, the issues brought forth in the public safety frame were depicted as problems concerning the general public. By framing the BIS and backcountry snowmobiling as a broader threat to public safety (as opposed to a threat only to the participants), the safety concerns articulated in the media texts took on greater social importance. In effect, this lent greater support to the idea of proposed government intervention and regulation of backcountry

snowmobiling, which was something discussed in many of the articles across all four publications.

Within the public safety frame, the Revelstoke avalanche was portrayed as especially problematic because it was seen to be predictable and preventable. For instance, an editorial column in the VS stated that, “the Revelstoke avalanche was not only predictable, but predicted.... So as devastating as the tragedy is, it was foreseeable” (“Snowmobile community,” 2010, p. A16). In this editorial, as in many of the other media texts, the incident was used as a warning to other snowmobilers and an example of what can happen when people are “reckless” and “irresponsible” in the backcountry (p. A16). Article headlines such as, “Snowmobile community must commit to safety” (2010), “A dangerous pursuit, a deadly outcome” (2010) and “BC vows push for improved backcountry safety” (Vanderklippe & Matas, 2010) exemplified this frame. There was consensus in the media texts over the central idea that backcountry sledding can be dangerous and that something must be done to prevent future harm. However, discussions of liability and recommended courses of action were the topics of much debate; thus, conflict was an important component of the public safety frame. For example, tensions between stakeholders (e.g., local snowmobile organizations, event organizers, BIS participants, provincial legislators) were often highlighted, and debates on liability, responsibility and regulation were prevalent. I further explore these conflicts and the ideologies informing them in the thematic analysis section.

The second discursive frame was “drama,” whereby the avalanche accident was sensationalised through the media’s focus on narratives that emphasized dramatic spectacle (e.g., a large scale event and rescue with many casualties), suspense (e.g., search for survivors) and devastation (e.g., injuries and loss of life) surrounding the incident. Examples of media discourse

that typified this frame include references to the “mayhem” (Vanderklippe, 2010a, p. A9), “chaos and panic” (“Four children left fatherless,” 2010) as described by avalanche survivors. Additionally, within this frame, the avalanche site was portrayed as a dismal landscape; The GM, for instance, described it as “a debris field of mangled machines” (Vanderklippe & Grant, 2010) and “a cemetery that [had] been robbed” (Vanderklippe, 2010c, p. A15). The use of war and battle metaphors were also a common rhetorical device employed in this frame. For example, participants described the avalanche site as similar to “a war zone” (McGinnis, Markusoff & Seskus, 2010) that looked “like a bomb had exploded” (Vanderklippe, 2010a, p. A9) and rescue workers were likened to “a small army” (Seskus, 2010, p. A3). The GM and CH’s dramatic framing was further facilitated by images of the avalanche site that were reminiscent of war zone/battlefield scenes. Snowmobiles were scattered about in many of the photographs. Some lay half buried in a large field of debris (e.g., pieces of snowmobiles, clothing, etc.). Pictures of helicopters, ambulances and injured survivors also contributed to this dramatic and war-like imagery. The use of both war metaphors and the selected visual images supported the avalanche’s representations as a dramatic spectacle fraught with chaos and disorder, the effect of which was to support the notion that the BIS requires outside monitoring, control and intervention. The drama frame was the most prevalent in the CH and GM; it was not observed to the same extent in the VS or RTR newspapers, where the public safety frame was more prevalent. In this respect, the BC newspapers seemed to avoid sensationalizing the accident and instead focused on the debates surrounding proposed regulation and education measures. The out of province newspapers were further removed from the issues at stake and thus had more freedom to sensationalize the accident using dramatic narratives designed to capture the readers’

attention (this presumes that their readers, overall, would not be as interested in changes in BC snowmobiling regulations as those residing within the province).

The final frame that surfaced was “tragedy/grief,” which was most prevalent in the CH, as it was the only newspaper to include several articles centred on the tragic loss of “great guys” (Fortney, 2010) and the subsequent grief experienced by the avalanche victims’ friends and families. This framing focused attention on personal details about the men’s lives (i.e., occupation, family relationships, hobbies, etc.): “Two snowmobilers killed in an avalanche near Revelstoke...were business associates and good friends, always keen to hit the outdoor trails when they clocked out from their small-town oilfield hauling company...” (Komarnicki & McGinnis, 2010, p. A1). Such personalisation supported the tragedy/grief frame by making the avalanche victims more knowable to readers, thus giving their deaths greater significance. It was also evident in the way that articles included many (positive) descriptions of the victims’ lifestyle and individual characters. For example, family and friends were quoted describing the avalanche victims as “great guys,” “family men” (Fortney, 2010, p. A3) and “hard workers” (Komarnicki & McGinnis, 2010, p. A4): “He was very much a hard worker, a go getter. He started his own business from the ground up, made it a success. A true loyal guy” (p. A4). The tragedy/grief frame was also constructed through the inclusion of emotional responses from the victims’ friends and families (i.e., personal descriptions of their grief and sadness) that were largely absent in the other publications. One logical explanation for this variation in framing may be the fact that both of the victims were from Central Alberta. News media tend to concentrate on matters of “local” interest, and because the victims were “tourists” in Revelstoke but “locals” in Calgary, they therefore received a more favorable depiction in the CH.

The three identified discursive frames—public safety, drama and tragedy/grief—were not mutually exclusive; they were at times intertwined and overlapping. The use of drama as a dominant discursive frame, for example, helped to accentuate the tragic nature of the accident and also created a sense of urgency around the public safety issues discussed in the texts. This was accomplished through the use of dramatic storylines with narrative tension designed to attract readers' interest in the spectacular nature of the event. The tragedy/grief frame reinforced the public safety frame in much the same manner. Specifically, in highlighting the tragic, untimely loss of life and sharing personal details about the men and their grieving families, media texts may have inadvertently elevated concerns for public safety by making examples of the men killed in the Revelstoke avalanche. Issues surrounding public safety were overwhelmingly constructed as the most important aspects of this news story and were assumed to be of greatest salience to the readers. Several factors likely contributed to this frame's dominance, including the large number of participants, organized structure of the event and the high number of snowmobiling related avalanche deaths in the previous year. The result of this dominant public safety discourse was a proliferation of debate regarding backcountry snowmobiling in the media texts.

Together, the three discursive frames provided the audience with a context and orienting framework with which to interpret the avalanche accident. Though this study did not explore how individuals interpreted the texts, an analysis of the media frames and themes provided a glimpse into the dominant ideologies and power relations that surrounded particular issues and practices such as those pertaining to backcountry snowmobiling. An examination of the specific themes that emerged in media coverage of the BIS provides a further level of detail and analysis in this study.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to determine the leading themes and arguments presented in the newspaper texts. Five themes were initially identified in this phase of analysis; however, after a secondary review, three emerged as dominant and were thus selected as the primary themes: 1) Need to Improve Backcountry Safety, 2) Snowmobiling: A High Risk Activity and 3) A Hyper-masculine Subculture. Much like the media frames discussed above, themes were rarely mutually exclusive, often overlapping and occasionally contradictory—a phenomenon which speaks to the complexity of the socio-cultural context in which this event occurred. The characteristics of each theme and the interplay between them are discussed herein. The three identified themes represent general areas of discussion that consistently emerged in the media texts. However, each theme contained many contentious issues and points of debate that were not homogenized in or across the media representations. Thus, newspaper texts were a rich source of debate on some of the social issues surrounding backcountry winter recreation in Western Canada.

1) Need to Improve Backcountry Safety

In light of the Mar. 13 Boulder Mountain avalanche...issues surrounding snowmobile safety and education have come to the forefront. (Cooper, 2010, p. 10)

Both the government and the public want to see some changes in light of increasing snowmobile-related avalanche deaths. And ‘if change does not come through stakeholder and community action, it will be imposed by the public interest.’ (“Snowmobile community,” 2010, p. A16)

The first notable theme that emerged in the textual analysis was the need to improve backcountry snowmobiling safety, which was observed on a recurring basis in all four publications and was, undoubtedly, the most pervasive. As illustrated through the above quotations, the central issue characterizing this theme was the idea that change was needed to prevent future deaths involving backcountry snowmobilers. The solutions proposed, however, were quite varied, as a range of opinions and potential actions were profiled in the media coverage. For example, specific issues debated included questions about who should be blamed and/or held liable for the BIS fatalities (e.g., participants, event organizers, local snowmobile clubs, the province), what should be done (e.g., education, regulation, enforcement, litigation) and who should pay for rescue costs and avalanche education programs (e.g., victims, government). In this sense, the media was the site of lively debate regarding avalanche safety and backcountry snowmobiling in Western Canada. Additionally, the BIS became a catalyst for debate and change regarding snowmobiling safety and avalanche education in Canada. In particular it prompted provincial safety reviews and resulted in the BC government implementing mandatory licensing and registration regulations for off-road vehicles (e.g., see Fekete, 2010a; “Local reaction,” 2010).

A standard rhetorical device that accompanied this theme was the inclusion of “expert” opinions and knowledge on backcountry avalanche safety. This included a proliferation of images, interviews and quotations from officials representing the CAC, RCMP, municipal government (e.g., Town of Revelstoke), provincial government (e.g., BC Ministry of Public Safety, BC Ministry of Tourism) and federal government (e.g., Parks Canada, Environment Canada). Officials from these agencies were positioned as experts by the media due to their positions of power and authority on issues related to public safety, backcountry access and

regulation of off-road vehicles. Because much of the expertise questioned or condemned unregulated backcountry access for snowmobiles in avalanche country, the inclusion of these sources reinforced the notion that backcountry snowmobiling was a threat to public safety. For example, BC's Minister of Public Safety, Kash Heed, was quoted multiple times in all four newspapers assuring the public that the BC government would take action to prevent similar snowmobiling fatalities from occurring on public land in the future: "The government is looking at a 'comprehensive approach' designed to rein in irresponsible backcountry behavior. 'The Ministry of Tourism is looking at what they can do to ensure that we have safer use of these machines on Crown lands'" (Vanderklippe & Matas, 2010, p. A8).

In the three larger newspapers (i.e., GM, CH, VS), discussions of possible actions aimed at improving snowmobiling safety were quite broad and included topics such as changes to Canada's avalanche warning system, mandatory licensing and registration for off-road vehicles, rescue fees for accident victims and the possibility of criminal charges (e.g., negligence and child endangerment) for participating in the BIS. The discussions that appeared in the RTR, on the other hand, were more homogenous. Specifically, it was unique in its focus and obvious preference for increased education initiatives (i.e., improvements to the CAC avalanche warning system, public outreach, avalanche safety training and greater funding for the CAC). This preference for education over enforcement was not surprising considering that the CAC's headquarters are in Revelstoke and it has an education mandate. Additionally, snowmobiling is a significant source of economic prosperity in the community—bringing an estimated \$8 million annually to the region's winter economy (Powell, 2011).

Multiple sites of tension permeated the debates that characterized this theme. One of the most widespread was the discussion about "freedom" and whether or not the backcountry can

and/or should be regulated. Evident in these discussions were collectivist versus individualist perspectives on regulation and freedom. Specifically, the freedom debate was often framed as a dichotomy with regulation, enforcement and controlled backcountry access on one side and an unregulated, wild landscape where individual responsibility, self determination and voluntary compliance are valued on the other side. Both snowmobiling and wilderness landscapes were commonly associated with freedom in the media texts:

For participants, the Big Iron Shootout and events like it celebrate that spirit of freedom and risk-taking... (Grant, 2010, p. A8)

[E]xtreme sports enthusiasts still take on Mother Nature each winter, thriving on the freedom of the backcountry....No amount of rules or regulations can stop such free will.

(“Can’t regulate backcountry,” 2010, p. A8)

This notion of mountain landscapes as locales of freedom is reminiscent of historic tropes of Western Canadian frontier nationalism, which arguably continue to circulate, albeit more subtly, in contemporary debates on outdoor recreation. One rider, interviewed by the CH, stated that elevated avalanche risks do little to deter riders because “the thrill of ‘beating’ nature is actually an added enticement” (Staseson & Komarnicki, 2010, p. A5). Snowmobiling, therefore, was portrayed as a way to celebrate freedom and conquest. This ideology also aligns with longstanding colonial discourses in Canada that—unlike Aboriginal perspectives of nature—celebrate the “taming” of “wild” landscapes that are perceived to be dangerous and risky (e.g., see Mackey, 1999). Such media representations of the BIS portrayed the conquering of wilderness landscapes through “risky” snowmobile practices as a means of achieving a sense of freedom that is presumably missing from constrained and “overly regulated” modern lifestyles (e.g., see Lupton, 1999a, p. 152). Therefore, when present, these freedom discourses ultimately

undermined the dominant public safety (e.g., regulation) discussions that circulated through many of the media texts.

Central to the framing of the freedom narrative was the idea that education would enable and empower individuals to make better personal decisions regarding the risks associated with backcountry snowmobiling; from this perspective, regulating backcountry access was viewed as unfair (because it impinges on individual freedom) and impractical (because regulations are difficult to enforce). In favouring personal responsibility above government regulation, these perspectives engaged liberal individualist views of accident prevention. Such arguments and opinions were frequently expressed by snowmobilers, BIS participants, the CAC and Parks Canada staff (e.g., see Fekete, 2010a). Comments from the director of the BC Snowmobile Federation, for instance, appeared in a VS editorial column stating that, “greater education is needed” and that “each of the sledders who participated in the [BIS] made a choice, and...greater regulation is not needed” (“Snowmobile community,” 2010, p. A16). Then premier of Alberta, Ed Stelmach, also shared this opinion, arguing that “common sense is more important and...rules would be too onerous to enforce” (p. A8). These perspectives negatively position regulation as the antithesis of freedom; thus, regulations were viewed as not only difficult to enforce, but also as an invasion of personal freedom—a concept which, as previously noted, is highly valued in many snowmobiling circles. Education, on the other hand, is viewed as more appealing than regulation because, presumably, it does not impinge on individual freedom.

Contrasting views of the freedom narrative were also observed in the media texts. Specifically, statements issued by BC government officials often argued that education initiatives alone were insufficient in preventing fatalities and that a combination of education and regulation would be the best way to prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future (e.g.,

see Heed, 2010; Vankerklippe & Matas, 2010). This support for government regulation emerged from across the political spectrum. As BC New Democrat Party (NDP) critic Mike Farnworth remarked in the GM, simply making people aware of the avalanche danger is “not good enough” (Vanderklippe & Matas, 2010, p. A8). Because the media coverage of the avalanche framed backcountry snowmobiling as a threat to public safety (e.g., rescue crews and bystanders were put in harm’s way), government intervention was often portrayed as a necessary response. The ideology underpinning this logic is that snowmobilers are careless, untrustworthy and, thus, need to be governed for the purpose of public safety. As a result, the freedom debate often depicted snowmobilers in an unfavourable light—they were either considered uneducated (i.e., in need of education programs) or reckless (i.e., in need of government regulation). Snowmobilers themselves, however, often held a different view. While virtually all snowmobilers cited in the media agreed that greater regulation was unnecessary, some maintained that, though the majority are aware of the inherent risks, greater education would be beneficial: “snowmobilers have a personal right to ignore avalanche warnings and shouldn’t be subject to more regulation.... We need greater education...so people can make better-informed decisions” (Les Austin in Pynn, 2010, p. A4). Others were dismissive of both education and regulation by arguing that they are already aware of the inherent dangers but consider the rewards of snowmobiling—such as “adrenaline” and “freedom” (Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010, p. A15)—to be worth such risks.

Discernible within the debates over freedom and regulation were nostalgic cultural attachments to the notion of the “Wild West.” In these representations, the backcountry was depicted as an unregulated landscape that serves as a “high altitude playground” (Vanderklippe, 2010b, p. A15) for adventure-seekers:

The allure, say snowmobilers, is the “total freedom” to explore that landscape. The backcountry is a haven for the rule-averse. Even groomed trails don’t have speed limits. There are no requirements...no questions asked.... “You can go everywhere. You can just point at the mountain you want to go to and then you just go there.” (Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010, p. A15)

Such media representations reinforced the notion that snowmobiling and backcountry landscapes offer access to unrestricted freedom (i.e., from the constraints of modern society): “Many snowmobilers take great pride in thumbing their nose at authority. They chase after wide open spaces where they can do what they like in unsanctioned activities without government-imposed rules and with vehicles they are not required to register” (Matas, 2010, p. A15). Though few media texts explicitly referenced the connection between snowmobiling and (nostalgic) discourses of the Canadian “Wild West,” AB NDP house leader Rachel Notley was quoted in the Calgary Herald acknowledging this relationship: “To reject [regulations] out of hand just because we want to maintain this Wild West mentality is short-sighted and doesn’t help Albertans” (Fekete, 2010b, p. A4). The brief “Wild West” critique offered in this article gestures to the complex cultural politics at play in snowmobiling discourses. In particular, this reference to the “Wild West” draws on (and critiques) nostalgic cultural narratives of the Canadian frontier as an unpopulated and unregulated wild landscape. Additionally, popular historical narratives often romanticized the Wild West as a site of conquest for white, middle-class men; based on the media representations of the BIS, these conquest narratives continue to circulate in contemporary snowmobiling discourses. Snowmobiling discourses that draw from the Wild West narrative insinuate a particular socio-political orientation regarding both masculinity (i.e., its association with freedom and conquest) and the (de)regulation of public space. Moreover, debates over what

“the West” and “the backcountry” symbolize (e.g., uncontrolled playground) and what behaviours or practices are considered (un)acceptable on public land are inherently political as they privilege particular practices and identities and construct a version of regional identity through discussions about the symbolism of specific mountain landscapes. As evident by the presence of varying views on freedom, education and regulation in the media texts, newspaper coverage of the BIS was the site of considerable debate on issues concerning the regulation of snowmobiling. Though narratives romanticizing the freedom afforded by snowmobiling in unregulated backcountry terrain were present throughout these debates, overall, media coverage favoured public safety discussions that involved proposed improvements to public safety through both government legislation and public avalanche education programs.

An additional area of tension within the debates over the need to improve backcountry safety was an apparent “culture gap” between backcountry sledders and the CAC, which many snowmobilers perceive to be a skier-based organization (Vanderklippe, 2010c, p. A7). This topic was addressed most directly in the RTR, GM and VS; numerous texts included comments attributing the high number of snowmobile-related avalanche accidents in recent years to a disconnect between snowmobilers and the CAC. As one GM article noted, “the cultural gap between snowmobilers and avalanche professionals may be partly to blame for low levels of safety training in the fast-growing sledding community” (Vanderklippe, 2010c, p. A7). Embedded in media discussions of the ski/sled culture gap were assumptions that sledders were uneducated and inexperienced in avalanche safety compared to backcountry skiers and snowboarders, whom have been the target of avalanche awareness initiatives for a longer period of time. However, it was clear that some snowmobile enthusiasts felt unfairly maligned by the

media coverage of the BIS and the suggestion that backcountry snowmobiling, in particular, needed greater regulation:

Many snowmobilers are worried that the public will see the weekend's tragedy as evidence of gasoline-mad rednecks recklessly playing on the mountain. Anyone – snowmobilers, skiers or snowshoers – encounters avalanche risks in the backcountry...and regulating only snowmobilers is an unfair attack on those who don't possess the athleticism to ski their way into danger. (Vanderklippe & Matas, 2010p. A8)

This statement appeared in the GM, where the authors summarized the opinions expressed by an experienced backcountry snowmobiler from Calgary. Several tensions and contradictions are evident in this statement and in the related debates that surfaced in the media texts. First, snowmobiling was positioned as similar to other self-propelled backcountry travel modes (i.e., skiing and snowshoeing) in terms of the level of risk and danger involved. However, the practice of high marking, which is unique to snowmobiling and often linked to avalanches, was not acknowledged, nor was the idea that snowmobiles—being faster and heavier than a skier—are more likely to trigger an avalanche (Klassen in Pynn, 2010). Furthermore, it was suggested that regulations targeting snowmobilers would discriminate against people with limited physical mobility. This comment contradicts other media narratives that depicted snowmobiling as a hyper-masculine practice. In particular, snowmobilers are de-masculinized by implying that they are less physically capable than backcountry skiers, snowshoers, etc.

Other media texts also featured backcountry snowmobiling proponents who attempted to refute the idea that snowmobiling was more dangerous than backcountry skiing and that sledders were unaware of avalanche risks: “The snowmobiling community is getting the message, as evidenced by the low turnout at this year's Big Iron Shootout” (Lori Zacaruk in Cooper, 2010, p.

A10). Between the four publications, the VS, in particular, portrayed backcountry snowmobilers as a ‘problem’ and a threat to public safety: “Clearly, then, there is a serious problem with some snowmobilers. Not all snowmobilers, but the sledding community must begin to take responsibility for all sledders, particularly those who engage in reckless behaviour” (“Snowmobile community,” 2010, p. A16). Though all four publications contained texts and quotations that challenged the negative portrayals of the BIS and sledding enthusiasts, the collective sentiment was one which portrayed backcountry snowmobiling as problematic. The “culture gap” between snowmobilers and the CAC was also problematized through these representations, which often promoted the idea that change is needed to improve avalanche safety in the backcountry snowmobiling community. The BIS was, therefore, an incident which prompted debate and resulted in proposed actions to improve public safety.

2) Snowmobiling: A High Risk Activity

‘Once-in-20-years slide’ descends on a high-risk snowmobiling event, creating a debris field of mangled machines and killing two.... (Vanderklippe & Grant, 2010, p. A1)

The snowmobile riders swept away in Saturday’s avalanche ... weren’t out for a leisurely putter through virgin powder. They were daredevils and fans gathered for the Big Iron Shootout, a non-sanctioned contest where the top prize—bragging rights—goes to the driver who can propel a sled farthest up the slope. (Grant, 2010, p. A1)

The second theme identified in the textual analysis was the idea that backcountry snowmobiling is a “high risk” activity. Many articles represented snowmobiling as a rule-averse, extreme activity where reckless participants engaged in dangerous practices (e.g., highmarking in

avalanche terrain). For example, the GM's front page headline on the day after the accident read, "A dangerous pursuit, a deadly outcome" (2010) in bold capital letters. Similarly, in subsequent coverage, backcountry sledding enthusiasts and BIS participants were referred to as "daredevils" (e.g., Grant, 2010, p. A1), "thrill-seekers" (e.g., Seskus, 2010, p. A3), "adrenaline junkies" and "hooligans" (e.g., Staseson & Komarnicki, 2010, p. A5) that were addicted to risk; at the same time, continual references were made to the BIS as being an "unsanctioned" (e.g., Cuthbertson, 2010, p. A1), "underground" or "renegade" (Vanderklippe & Wingrove, 2010, p. A7) event.⁴⁸ These representations portrayed BIS participants and sledding enthusiasts in general as reckless and anti-authoritarian, thus reinforcing the notion that backcountry snowmobiling is a dangerous and high risk activity.

The representations in this theme aligned with discussions about improving backcountry snowmobiling safety identified in the first theme. In particular, the appeals for improved public safety were substantiated through the coinciding representations of snowmobiling as a high risk and dangerous activity, which operated to marginalize other expressions of the activity. This social struggle to define backcountry snowmobiling (within and outside of the snowmobile community) was evident throughout the media texts; it was especially apparent in the aforementioned comments by individuals who tried to refute the media's overarching construction of backcountry snowmobiling as a "high risk" and "dangerous" activity (e.g., see Cooper, 2010; Vanderklippe & Matas, 2010). Though media texts contained competing discourses regarding the nature of backcountry snowmobiling, individual comments that attempted to counter the activity's negative reputation were greatly overshadowed by the dominant construction of backcountry snowmobiling as extreme and dangerous practice.

⁴⁸ The BIS was not sanctioned by the Town of Revelstoke or any other "official" snowmobiling organization.

Alongside representations of the BIS as a “risky” practice were negative portrayals of snowmobilers as having little knowledge of, or regard for, avalanche safety and the risks associated with backcountry winter travel. In this sense, two perspectives of risk perception were present within this theme, and they were at times both present and contested within a single text (e.g., Fortney, 2010). The first perspective positioned snowmobilers as unaware and uneducated regarding avalanche risks and backcountry safety while the second one portrayed them as aware but accepting and/or dismissive of the risks. The most common representation in the media texts positioned the BIS participants as aware of the avalanche risks but reckless and irresponsible for their decision to ignore them. Thus, they faced criticism for being both “unsafe” and resistant to change. This perspective was evident in comments made in the VS by BC’s Solicitor General and Minister of Public Safety:

“As you enter one of the trails, there is a sign that clearly shows it’s extreme conditions and the avalanche dangers... [P]eople that went into the area ignored that warning and they made the decision to actually go in there...People need to make...responsible decisions based on the experts that tell us when, in fact, it is dangerous to go in there.”
(Pynn, 2010, p. A4)

A highly critical CH editorial further exemplified how the snowmobilers were often portrayed as negligent and unintelligent for dismissing avalanche risks: “It may seem obvious. If an avalanche warning goes to EXTREME, it kinda means STAY OUT unless you have slush for brains and want to DIE under the stuff” (Martin, 2010, p. A4, emphasis in original). Throughout this article, the author made repeated derogatory comments regarding the BIS participants’ intelligence. He also condemned their behaviour by emphasizing the large amount of physical and monetary resources required in the rescue operation: “Parks Canada has added up the damage to its bottom

line from deploying 12 helicopters and dozens of support staff to pull daredevils and spectators out of their own ignorance and stupidity” (p. A4). By disparaging the intelligence of snowmobilers through depictions of “ignorant” and “stupid” thrill seekers with “slush for brains” (p. A4), these representations also reflected class-based stereotypes about snowmobiling. In particular, working classes are often negatively portrayed (stereotyped) as unintelligent and uneducated; further, I would argue that though backcountry snowmobiling in Canada is an activity that requires a large amount of disposable income, it is popular in resource-based communities and is often associated with working class lifestyles.⁴⁹ Because the BIS prompted widespread media debate regarding the practice of backcountry snowmobiling, media representations of snowmobilers as unintelligent appeared to be directed at both the BIS participants and the snowmobile community in general (e.g., see Snowmobile Community, 2010; Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010).

Images were also used to question the intellect of snowmobilers and to criticize their dismissal of avalanche warnings. For example, a GM editorial cartoon (Untitled editorial cartoon, 2010) depicted an animated avalanche (labelled “Mother Nature”) angrily yelling at a snowmobiler to “smarten up” while surrounded by signs warning of avalanche danger. Another, in the RTR, titled “What does it take?” (Buchanan, 2010b) depicted the CAC’s avalanche warning scale with an additional category (beyond the “extreme” rating) entitled “Duh, stay home.” Photographs of the avalanche warning signs posted at the Boulder Mountain trailhead on the day of the avalanche also functioned rhetorically by visually emphasizing that the warnings were ignored; thus, these images reinforced the idea that the accident was preventable. These

⁴⁹ Based on the notion that participation in snowmobiling requires a significant amount of money and resources, “Working class,” in this sense, refers to a cultural rather than economic construct.

types of representations effectively portrayed the injuries and loss of life as a result of poor decision making (i.e., unintelligence) and “reckless[ness]” (Martin, 2010, p. A4). The BIS, therefore, was constructed as “a recipe for disaster” (Vanderklippe & Grant, 2010, p. A9).

It is interesting to note the varying ways in which this theme manifested across each of the four publications. The idea that backcountry snowmobiling is a “high risk” activity was most prevalent in the GM and least prevalent in the RTR. One reason for this may be that resource-based communities closest to the accident site (i.e., Revelstoke) have a greater connection to sledding culture, due, in part, to the economic benefits they receive from the snowmobiling industry and the important role that it plays in their expressions of community identity. Thus, they have a greater vested interest in presenting a favourable image of backcountry snowmobiling. However, though snowmobiling may be celebrated elsewhere (e.g., in municipal government and tourism literature) as part of Revelstoke’s identity, this was not evident in the news coverage of the BIS. Rather, themes related to community identity emerged in relation to the rescue and recovery operation. Revelstoke area “locals” were positioned as (heroic) rescuers and volunteers rather than as (irresponsible) snowmobilers and participants in the BIS. There was no mention of Revelstoke residents participating in the BIS, but many articles emphasized the number of locals involved in the rescue effort (e.g., volunteer search and rescue crews, medical staff, civilians, etc.). As a result, the RTR distanced residents from the BIS as the “risky” snowmobiling practices associated with the event were in no way connected to Revelstoke’s identity.

3) A Hyper-masculine Subculture

There is no denying that part of the reason they stick around is the boys’ club. Though families are an important part of the fraternity—fathers and children bond from a young

age on the slopes...Women ride, too, but backcountry riders are primarily men, and the culture reflects it. The jokes are off-colour, the bravado inflated, the trucks and trailers enormous. (Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010, p. A15)

The third theme that emerged in the textual analysis was the depiction of backcountry snowmobiling as a hyper-masculine subculture. Many of the texts described snowmobiling in general and the BIS in particular as a “macho sport” (Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010, p. A15) that “celebrates risk-taking” (Grant, 2010, p. A8) and requires “courage...endurance... [and] stamina” (p. A8)—qualities stereotypically associated with masculinity. Similarly, high marking was represented as an opportunity for men to compete against each other for “bragging rights” (p. A1). This competitive masculinity was also linked to technology, as men competed to see who had the most powerful machine and the greatest audacity: “Danger is part of the thrill of this macho sport, in which men drag-race up mountains and ‘want to have the baddest sled in the land’” (Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010, p. A15). These representations socially construct technology as a masculine domain and snowmobiles as a tool through which to achieve a hyper-masculine subjectivity. Further illustrating this relationship, Vanderklippe & Mason likened snowmobiles to power tools and wild animals: “[His] snowmobile bucks like an unbroken stallion ... [he] cracks the throttle, and his machine wails like a chainsaw” (p. A15). These masculinized metaphors functioned rhetorically by further entrenching the connection between snowmobiles/technology and masculinity; this was accomplished through associating snowmobiles with other objects commonly imbued with masculine characteristics (i.e., wild stallions and chainsaws). This narrative drew on romantic ideals of (frontier) masculinity, where man controls beast/nature and technology. Moreover, this representation of snowmobiling

implied that only hyper-masculine men can master such powerful machines. Thus, snowmobiling was normalized as a hyper-masculine domain. Such representations supported the other dominant themes identified in the media texts (i.e., “Need to Improve Backcountry Safety” and “Snowmobiling: A High Risk Activity”). In particular, because this hyper-masculinity embraced risk and adventure, these representations reinforced the notion that backcountry landscapes and snowmobiling are indeed “dangerous” environments and “risky” practices. Thus, the three dominant themes identified in the analysis worked together to support the overall framing of backcountry snowmobiling as a problem that requires government intervention in order to improve public safety.

The technological discourses that emerged through the media’s representation of snowmobiling and the BIS had profoundly gendered and classed connotations, as they consistently articulated hyper-masculine, working class subject positions to backcountry sledding culture. For example, a snowmobile manufacturer interviewed by the GM stated the following: “These machines...are not for everybody...some people like to drive a Prius. But some people want a Lamborghini and that’s what we can give them’....for a cost that any young Alberta oil worker can manage” (Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010, p. A15). Though the texts did not discuss who these machines were *not* for, the connection between snowmobiles and hyper-masculinity was firmly established. At the same time, such representations necessitated the exclusion of (subordinated) identities including feminine ones and other forms of masculinity. The reference to a “Prius” and “young Alberta oil workers” is also significant, as it recognized a particular type of masculinity as central to sledding culture—namely young, working class males employed in resource-

based industries. In short, men with soft hands, urban tastes and environmental consciousness do not fit the dominant construction of backcountry snowmobilers.

Several articles also included comments suggesting that (male) BIS participants' passion for snowmobiling was "in the blood" (e.g., Cryderman & Myers, 2008; Mason, 2010). This type of statement functioned to naturalize connections amongst snowmobiling, masculinity and biology, thereby downplaying the socially constructed nature of both snowmobiling and gender; the net effect was to shore up the inequitable social relations that currently permeate mountain sledding culture. The allusion to sledding being "in the blood" was also used to describe snowmobiling as an addiction fuelled by a love of adrenaline. However, equating snowmobiling with addiction serves to abdicate responsibility and rationalize behaviour that would otherwise be subject to public scrutiny (e.g., highmarking in high risk avalanche conditions). These representations, therefore, became a way for sledding enthusiasts, victims and survivors of the avalanche to resist and counterpose the negative portrayals of snowmobiling that circulated in news media following the accident. At the same time, the phrase "in the blood" is a cultural idiom that functioned, in this context, to position snowmobiling as a "natural" part of the participants' identities—thus, they should not be criticized for what they cannot control.

Overall, media representations of the BIS were dominated by portrayals of a hyper-masculine sub-culture ruled by thrill-seeking, "macho" men (Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010, p. A15). An interesting tension emerged, however, as narratives of domestic masculinity surfaced in both the discourses surrounding the BIS participants and the avalanche victims' memorialisation. This included representations of male snowmobilers as good fathers and husbands with a reverence for family life. Not surprisingly, this perspective was most notable in the CH, which presented a more favourable image of the victims, emphasizing that the men were

hard working, amateur sledding hobbyists whose families came first. For example, a CH article entitled ““Great guys; family men mourned” (Fortney, 2010), described the victims as “family men, and proud of it” (p. A3). One victim’s wife was quoted in the article saying that her husband preferred to be with his wife and family and that the BIS was his one weekend a year to be with “the guys.” This statement emphasizes the victim’s family-oriented lifestyle, and, in doing so, underscores the notion that he was *not* someone who (selfishly) spent all his time with “the guys.” This representation appeared to pre-empt any potential criticism that might question the men’s lifestyle choices and decision to participate in the BIS. As Coffey (2003) and Frohlick (2006) have noted, participants of extreme adventure activities (e.g., climbing and mountaineering) have often faced public (media) scrutiny for their decision to engage in risky activities—especially if they have families. Frohlick (2006) notes that women, more often than men, are accused of faulty parenting and selfishness for choosing to engage in “dangerous” activities that put their lives at risk. Media representations of the BIS support this idea, as the men killed in the accident were both fathers to young children, and though they faced considerable public scrutiny in the media coverage of the accident, their parenting abilities were not the focus of criticism. Domestic masculinity narratives, thus, added another layer of complexity to the dominant theme of snowmobiling as a hyper-masculine subculture; specifically, they “softened” the image of backcountry snowmobiling as a hyper-masculine practice by portraying the victims as family men first and foremost. In this sense, narratives of domesticity allowed the victims’ family members to resist media criticism by constructing them as good, family men who were “worthy victims” (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 35).

Despite this introduction of domestic masculinity narratives, representations of snowmobiling as a hyper-masculine practice remained intact in the media coverage. This was

accomplished, in part, through the strong presence of homosocial narratives that celebrated the importance of male bonding in the sledding community:

‘They were very close’ ...on their weekends off, the men took off for the mountain playground. In summer, they quadded together; in winter they took their snowmobiles to hit the slopes. ‘It was work, quadding and snowmobiling.’

(Komarnicki & McGinnis, 2010, p. A4)

As this example illustrates, connections between male homosociality and mountain adventure were ubiquitous in media texts—at times challenging the counter-narrative that sledding culture embraces family-oriented domestic masculinity and suggesting instead that relationships between men were of the utmost importance. A CH article further exemplified this theme through anecdotes about two BIS participants whose mothers and sisters asked them to give up backcountry snowmobiling because of the associated risks; both men refused on the grounds that snowmobiling was their “passion” (Staseson & Komarnicki, 2010, p. A5). One man further stated that “[his] life is about going out, having fun with the guys, and scaring [himself]” (p. A5). These anecdotes reinforce dominant gender stereotypes that equate masculinity with individualism, adventure and risk-seeking behavior, while femininity is linked to domesticity, risk-aversion and emotion. It also speaks to the power imbalance that structures these gendered relationships. Specifically, the celebration of rugged masculinity and individualism suggests that men should follow their passion, no matter the cost. Feminist scholars and mountaineering enthusiasts (e.g. Frohlick 2006; Rak, 2007) have been critical of such masculine stereotypes in mountaineering culture, suggesting that it is (unjustly) considered socially acceptable for men to leave their families and risk their lives in pursuit of passion and adventure while women are often criticized for the same behaviour. The above comments by the Revelstoke avalanche

victims' families shore up normative understandings of "appropriate" homosociality in the sense that they position the men as family oriented, yet in need of the occasional mountain adventure with "the guys" in order to escape the constraints of domestic life. Sport, in general, has long been considered an appropriate environment for homosocial relationships or "male companionship" (Whitson, 1990, p. 25). As such, there was no outward rejection or criticism of the (homosocial) "boys club" (Vanderklippe & Mason, 2010, p. A15) involved in backcountry sledding as constructed through the media texts; rather, homosociality was discursively constructed as "normal," as long as heterosexual and domestic masculinity remained on the perimeter.

Homosocial narratives in the media texts occasionally referred to the "boys club" (Komarnicki & McGinnis, 2010, p. A4) and outdoor (mountain) "playground" involved in backcountry snowmobiling. This language, on the surface, seemed to contradict the hyper-masculine subculture theme by infantilizing the victims. However, it also reinforced dominant gender stereotypes by drawing from the clichéd cultural logic that "boys will be boys." Thus, their love of snowmobiling was normalized and constructed as a natural outcome of masculine subjectivity.

The GM and CH, in particular, represented snowmobiling as a hyper-masculine subculture. The VS and RTR narratives focused more on public safety and did not include many specific references to the "macho" culture of backcountry sledding. However, I would argue that explicit references to masculinity need not always be present for this theme to circulate in media texts. For example, hyper-masculinity is implied (unless noted otherwise) when speaking of high-risk, outdoor adventure activities such as backcountry snowmobiling. Therefore, while masculinity may not have been directly addressed, it was signified elsewhere and emerged from

the margins of the text. For example, in the VS, articles reported the two Albertan's deaths using descriptions of the BIS as an "extreme" event in "dangerous" conditions. This, combined with interviews conducted exclusively with male survivors, implied a particular type of masculinity. Thus, while these media texts did not explicitly discuss backcountry snowmobiling's hyper-masculine subculture, they still normalized this type of subjectivity for its participants. The fact that several newspapers explicitly mentioned the hyper-masculine subculture associated with backcountry snowmobiling is significant because it illustrates the role that this event played in stimulating discussion on some of the complex issues and cultural politics (e.g., gender) surrounding outdoor adventure recreation in Western Canada. However, these discussions did not result in significant debate or criticism (e.g., the idea of snowmobiling as "naturally" masculine was relatively unchallenged in the texts); thus the hyper-masculine discourses present in the media coverage of the BIS had minimal transformative effect.

Discursive Silences

The themes and debates that emerged in the media texts following the BIS also demonstrated several prominent areas of discursive silence in the avalanche's news coverage. The most notable ones included perspectives from both female snowmobilers and local participants in the BIS. These absences, whether intentional or not, had the effect of constructing and circulating dominant ideologies regarding what was problematic (or not) about backcountry snowmobiling. Therefore, to conclude the media analysis, I consider these discursive silences and their role in communicating ideas (e.g., about the BIS, snowmobiling, risk, gender, etc.) to the Canadian public.

Representations of risk were consistently structured around the dominant narrative that individuals make personalized decisions about how they negotiate objective risks or "real"

dangers that are inherent to backcountry snowmobiling. This narrative drew from realist and psychological understandings of risk and aligned with the liberal humanist paradigm of the rational, free-thinking subject. However, what fell to the periphery in this narrative was the acknowledgement of social forces and processes that affect risk-taking behaviour and conceptions of risk. Thus, the dominant risk narrative reflected the view that risk negotiation is a highly individualized process. For example, the BC Solicitor General and Minister of Public Safety, Kash Heed, issued an Op-Ed column in the RTR entitled, “Avalanche safety starts with the individual” (Heed, 2010, p. 6). From this perspective, the best way to improve backcountry safety and prevent future fatalities was by educating individuals on the “real” dangers associated with travel in avalanche country. Thus, the dominant framing placed the onus on the individual to make well-informed and “safe” decisions. While this type of narrative celebrated cultural ideals of individual freedom and self-determination, it failed to acknowledge the social aspects of risk and risk-seeking behaviour. One particular example is the cultural prevalence of a hegemonic, hyper-masculinity that celebrates risk-seeking behaviour—both in sledding culture and in society more generally. This type of masculinity is reproduced across various social contexts and practices; thus, it is, to some extent, culturally valued and therefore enticing. Men who engage in “risky” behaviours and practices (e.g., highmarking in avalanche conditions), therefore, are drawing from dominant cultural narratives and are not merely acting as autonomous, free-thinking subjects. Their decisions are affected by social and cultural forces; they do not occur in a “vacuum” uninfluenced by society. In effect, the individualistic perspective on risk reproduces the belief that there is no problem with backcountry snowmobiling culture, per se, but rather the problem lies with a few “bad apples” whom, individually, cause problems by exercising poor judgement. Such logic limits criticism and

negates the need for social transformation of (hyper-masculine) snowmobiling culture by problematizing individual behavior rather than larger social structures such as gender. As White and Young (2007) have noted in the context of sport, hegemonic constructions of masculinity have a negative impact on men's health (i.e., injuries and fatalities) in Canada and are therefore deserving of our critical attention (see also Evans, Frank, Oliffe & Gregory, 2011). Evans et al. have applied this idea to the practice of snowmobiling in Canada, arguing that boys and men sustain the greatest number of injuries because masculinity is connected to risk-taking behavior. These arguments suggest that cultural constructions of masculinity may be at least partially responsible for injuries and deaths that result from dangerous sport and recreation practices such as high marking in avalanche terrain.

As discussed in the thematic analysis, a number of the media texts acknowledged the presence of a hyper-masculine sub-culture surrounding backcountry snowmobiling. Although hyper-masculinity was, to varying degrees, critiqued in these articles, there remained a discursive silence around the subordination of femininity and women's voices in the media's coverage of the BIS and in sledding culture more generally. Overall, women's voices and perspectives were either absent from the texts or they were marginalized and presented in narrow ways. For example, several articles stated that men, women and children, or "entire families" attended the BIS (Vanderklippe, 2010a, p. A9); however, the majority of the comments/interviews included were from male participants. There were, of course, several notable exceptions to this—one being comments from an injured participant's wife, one from a woman who attended the event with her husband and another from a female avalanche safety instructor. However, the inclusion of these female voices did little to disturb the prevailing gender stereotypes that were supported and reinforced throughout the texts. Specifically, connections the media reproduced between risk

and gender overwhelmingly positioned men as risk-takers (i.e., the appropriate subjects of risk recreation), while women were portrayed as risk averse, passive observers and grieving spouses who supported their husbands' passion for backcountry snowmobiling. For example, one GM article included an interview with a woman whose husband and young son were severely injured by the avalanche (Mason, 2010). The woman, who did not attend the BIS, admitted that she had concerns about the event (e.g., that it was allowed to continue despite avalanche warnings); however, the article focused on her emotional turmoil upon learning that her son and husband were severely injured in the accident. Despite the brief mention of her objections to the BIS, she was portrayed as a concerned but dutiful wife, who, although suffering, supported her husband and son's activities because it was their passion and it was "in [their] blood" (p. A15). Portraying women as risk-averse, emotional and supportive further perpetuated dominant representations of traditional femininity and snowmobiling as a masculinized practice; in particular, these representations positioned women and femininity in supportive roles where they remain on the sidelines or, quite literally, in the passenger seat.

The media's representation of backcountry snowmobiling's hyper-masculine culture was most often associated with men who resided outside of Revelstoke (i.e., *not* "locals"). Snowmobilers and BIS participants profiled in the media texts were never identified as local residents. More commonly, articles identified participants as residents of other communities, provinces, etc. For example, in the CH, Revelstoke city councillor and snowmobile group liaison, Steve Bender, described the BIS as follows: "The Big Iron Shootout is where people come from quite distant areas to bring very powerful, souped-up machines and to see how far they can climb up a big mountain. It's extreme high marking" (McGinnis, Markusoff & Seskus, 2012, p. A5). Thus, a discursive silence emerged in the texts regarding the perspectives of locals

who supported or attended the BIS. As previously discussed, the City of Revelstoke promotes itself as a world-class snowmobiling destination and as a region with strong attachments to outdoor adventure recreation. While it is unclear how or whether many “locals” actually participated in the BIS, media representations in all four newspapers portrayed the participants as reckless men from outside the community. In doing so, the behaviour of BIS participants was distanced from local practices and identities. As a result, the BIS was constructed as an unsanctioned event that was neither supported nor attended by Revelstoke area residents. Presenting the BIS as organized and attended exclusively by tourists and outsiders may have opened up greater space for debate and critique than if the event had a local connection—particularly in the local (RTR) newspaper. In this case, critique, though present, was articulated to an elusive and unknowable “tourist” rather than residents of the local community.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

Table 2. Summary of research findings

	Sparwood	Revelstoke
Surface Features	<p>Front section news coverage for 10 days 60 news or feature articles, 4 editorial columns, 171 images</p> <p>Highly personalised narratives and photographs of avalanche victims</p> <p>Captions, titles and headlines emphasizing tragedy, community cohesion</p>	<p>Front section news coverage for 7 days 35 news or feature articles, 4 editorial columns, 3 editorial cartoons, 34 images</p> <p>Dramatic narratives and aerial photographs of the avalanche site and rescue crews</p> <p>Captions, titles and headlines emphasizing drama, chaos, dangerous conditions and the extreme nature of backcountry snowmobiling</p>
Media Frames	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Tragedy/grief 2) Human Interest 3) Drama 4) Public safety 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Public safety 2) Drama 3) Tragedy/grief
Dominant Themes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Tragedy, grief & community support 2) Rural masculinity (rural pride, working class lifestyles, outdoor recreation, technology, domesticity and male camaraderie) 3) Dangerous conditions & unpredictable nature 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Need to improve backcountry safety 2) Snowmobiling: a high risk activity 3) Hyper-masculine subculture
Discursive Silences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Criticism and debate regarding backcountry snowmobiling and the avalanche victims' actions 2) Alternative representations of rural masculinity 3) Women's voices and harm caused by the men's passion for adventure 4) Debates regarding the regulation of backcountry snowmobiling 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Social/Cultural forces that promote risk-seeking behaviour (e.g., social constructions of masculinity) 2) Perspectives from female participants 3) Local residents who attended or supported the BIS

Cross Case Comparison

A number of interesting frames, themes and discursive silences emerged through the analysis of the media discourses surrounding the Sparwood and Revelstoke avalanche incidents (see Table 2). Though the dominant discourses varied between these two cases, similarities were also identified. Cross-case comparison aims to identify the contextual differences and patterns of interaction in the way in which the media portrayed these two events. The goal of this comparison is a deeper understanding of how media representations of adventure recreation (i.e., backcountry snowmobiling) draw from and contribute to ideas about risk, social identity and the politics of place in Western Canadian mountain communities.

Case Study Context. The avalanche accidents examined in this project share some contextual similarities: both occurred in popular snowmobiling areas near resource-based communities in the Kootenay Rockies, they involved snowmobilers travelling in backcountry mountain terrain during times of elevated avalanche warnings, and they resulted in multiple injuries/fatalities and a vast amount of media coverage in local and national newspapers. Despite these similarities, each case was situated in a unique social context which, accordingly, resulted in varying media discourses.

Amongst the most notable contextual differences between the two cases were the number of participants involved (11 Sparwood men versus approximately 200 BIS participants), the number of fatalities (eight Sparwood men versus two male BIS participants), the residence of the victims (local Sparwood residents versus visitors/tourists to Revelstoke) and the structure of the activity (informal/unstructured recreational snowmobiling in Sparwood versus the “quazi-organized” high marking competition in Revelstoke). Additionally, the BIS resulted in a RCMP

criminal investigation and a costly rescue/recovery operation.⁵⁰ The Sparwood incident was also distinct in that it occurred during the holiday season (between Christmas and New Years) and included public memorialisation of its victims through an outdoor, community candlelight vigil and a nationally broadcast public memorial service. These contextual differences undoubtedly contributed to the way the avalanche deaths were framed by news media, and they were thus considered in the textual analysis.

Surface Features. In comparing the surface features of the media texts from each case study, several notable differences were apparent. First, while both avalanche incidents garnered abundant media coverage, the Sparwood one resulted in almost twice as many articles and over five times as many images as the Revelstoke incident (see Table 2). This discrepancy was somewhat surprising considering that the BIS was a larger scale event (i.e., it had fewer fatalities but more participants and injuries) that resulted in a criminal investigation and widespread media debate. It also suggests that the media considered the Sparwood avalanche to be of greater public interest than the Revelstoke one. Based on the thematic analysis, this was due, in part, to the fact that the Sparwood victims were deemed non-culpable, heroic and therefore worthy of public sympathy.

Second, Revelstoke media coverage included three editorial cartoons—two of which were critical and satirical—while the Sparwood texts did not include any. This speaks to the greater platform for debate that existed around the Revelstoke incident as compared to the Sparwood one. Moreover, the satirical cartoons disparaged the intelligence of snowmobilers,

⁵⁰ The cost of the BIS rescue/recovery operation was estimated at around \$100,000 (Fekete, 2010a). The scale of the rescue effort was much larger than Sparwood due to the high number of snowmobilers involved, the initial uncertainty over the number of victims, and the number of snowmobiles that had to be removed from the accident site.

which suggests that critique was not only directed at snowmobiling practices, but also towards the BIS participants and avalanche victims in particular. This varied significantly from the Sparwood representations, which regularly depicted the avalanche victims in a positive light.

A third variation was also observed in the visual images used to represent each incident. Specifically, photographs in the Sparwood texts were often highly personalized and emotionally charged (e.g., depicting the victims' personal lives and grieving community members) while the Revelstoke images were predominately and comparatively depersonalized (e.g., depicting the avalanche site, the recovery operation and offering little insight into the victims' personal lives). Further perpetuating these differences were article headlines, titles and photographic captions that conveyed tragedy, grief and community cohesion in the Sparwood texts in contrast to the drama, chaos and disorder portrayed through the Revelstoke ones. Finally, informal discourse was observed to a greater extent in the Sparwood texts. In particular, readers were often positioned as "insiders" through the use of deictic terms in article headlines and titles, while this seldom occurred in the Revelstoke coverage.

Overall, the surface features in each case helped to construct and reinforce the dominant discursive frames the media used to narrate the events surrounding each avalanche incident. Specifically, the media's abundant coverage of Sparwood, their deployment of personalized and emotional images and narratives, along with their positioning of readers as sympathetic "insiders" operated to construct its dominant media frames: "tragedy/grief" and "human interest." Likewise, the Revelstoke texts' depersonalized images and narratives, formal discourse and focus on chaos and disorder supported the "public safety" and "dramatic" media frames that were most commonly used to discuss the BIS.

Media Frames. The “tragedy/grief” frame that dominated the Sparwood media coverage was also present in the Revelstoke texts, though to a much lesser extent. While all newspapers framed the Sparwood avalanche victims as “great guys,” only the CH extended such treatment to the BIS victims. A “public safety” frame was also identified in both case studies, though it manifested in quite different ways. As the dominant media frame in the Revelstoke case, it worked to portray the avalanche as predictable and preventable, thereby opening up a space for debate on backcountry snowmobiling practices, including possible government intervention aimed at preventing similar incidents from occurring in the future. As the least dominant media frame in the Sparwood texts, the public safety frame enabled the media to articulate a message to the public regarding general principles of avalanche safety and backcountry snow instability in BC. However, because these articles emphasized the unpredictability of avalanches, alongside the victims’ backcountry knowledge and experiences, critical commentary and debates about snowmobiling practices were muted in the texts.

While the media represented both accidents through a “dramatic” frame, it was, nevertheless, differentially deployed and appeared with less frequency in the Sparwood texts. There, it materialized in concert with a “human interest” frame that rendered the men’s harrowing experience of adventure, life and death in a particular way: as traditional masculine heroes and, thus, worthy victims. Personalized narratives and photographs, which focused on the Sparwood victims and survivors’ private lives, emotional anguish, as well as ethical dilemmas that they faced during and after the avalanche, ultimately served to portray them as knowable, relatable and thus, worthy of public sympathy and support. With the BIS avalanche, however, the dramatic frame operated to depict it as chaotic, disordered and panic-filled, shoring up arguments calling for interventions and regulations to improve the safety of backcountry snowmobiling.

Conspicuously absent from this coverage was the “human interest” frame as the BIS victims remained relatively unknown to the Canadian public: few media texts provided either personal details about their lives or images of them.

Themes. While examination of the dominant media frames helped to identify the issues portrayed as most salient in each case, a thematic analysis offered a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the representations, arguments and issues constructed in the texts. Overall, the comparison of dominant themes (see Table 2) elicited more differences than similarities in how these two events were discussed in print news media.

The most prevalent theme identified in the Sparwood case study, “tragedy, grief and community support,” depicted a small town united through its grief over the loss of eight (“good”) local men. Here the narratives portrayed Sparwood as a town not only struggling to move forward but also as a proud, supportive community defensive of the avalanche victims, backcountry snowmobiling and the distinct (masculinized) mountain culture and outdoor lifestyle of the Elk Valley region. This theme, in turn, distinguished media representations of the two avalanches in three distinct ways. First, the community cohesion ascribed to Sparwood was based on the town’s collective grief over the loss of the avalanche victims and its pride for the outdoor mountain lifestyle that the men embodied. Because the BIS avalanche victims were not from Revelstoke, the media did not portray local residents as emotionally affected by their deaths. Community cohesion narratives, therefore, were sparse; and, when they did materialize, they were articulated to the town’s participation in the rescue effort—not to its attachment to the victims. In this way, the media firmly distanced Revelstoke residents from the BIS, its “risky” snowmobiling practices, and thus, did not depict locals as defending the identity and culture of their community in the same way the texts did with the Sparwood incident. This was interesting

considering that Revelstoke continues to promote itself as a world-class snowmobiling and outdoor recreation destination that defines its collective regional identity through its outdoor lifestyle and adventurous mountain culture (e.g., see City of Revelstoke, 2012).

The second distinctive characteristic of the Sparwood tragedy/grief theme was the prevalence of counter-narratives celebrating the men's passion for outdoor adventure and the notion that they died doing what they loved. While some CH articles discussed the BIS victims' passion for outdoor adventure, this was not a central theme overall, and it paled in comparison to media representations of the Sparwood men. This is not surprising considering the depersonalised nature of the BIS media coverage; because the news media framed its participants as problematic, the men's passion for adventure was criticized more than admired. Furthermore, because they were not from the Revelstoke area, their deaths were portrayed as less tragic—thus negating the need for counter-narratives (as in the Sparwood case) to ease the communal grief.

Finally, there was also a notable difference in the social categories used to describe the avalanche victims from each incident. The Sparwood snowmobilers were commonly referenced through categories that conveyed their family status (e.g., sons, fathers, husbands, etc.), which differed from representations of the Revelstoke victims. While several CH articles referred to their family status, this was not normative of media representations in general; rather, the victims were more often referred to using terms that conveyed little information about their personal lives (e.g., "snowmobilers") and through categories that positioned them as risk-seeking snowmobilers (e.g., "thrill-seekers," and "daredevils," etc.). Ultimately, these different portrayals of the victims contributed to the media's overall contradictory framing of the Sparwood snowmobilers as worthy victims and the Revelstoke snowmobilers as troublesome and

problematic, despite the fact that both groups engaged in “risky” behaviour by snowmobiling in areas with elevated avalanche warnings.

Masculinity related themes were observed in both case studies; for Sparwood, this manifested through a “rural masculinity” theme, while, for Revelstoke, media coverage centred on snowmobiling’s “hyper masculine subculture.” Several differences and similarities were noted between these two themes. One of the most significant distinctions was the media’s depiction of a masculinized snowmobiling subculture in the Revelstoke texts while, for Sparwood, a masculinized mountain culture was associated with the region’s collective identity (rather than just the practice of backcountry snowmobiling). More specifically, narratives of working class lifestyles, rural pride, outdoor recreation, technology, domesticity and male camaraderie were intertwined to construct a dominant expression of Elk Valley masculinity, with the avalanche victims being portrayed as its archetype. Media representations depicted these men as typical “Valley Boys:” blue-collar workers that lived by a “work hard, play hard” mentality and who regularly engaged in outdoor and motorized recreation; and as devoted family-men who also highly valued the male camaraderie of snowmobiling. By comparison, the “hyper-masculine subculture” theme found in the BIS-related texts portrayed snowmobiling itself as problematic through depictions of sledding as a dangerous, “macho” activity that celebrated risk-seeking behaviour and competitive masculinity.

A further distinction in the media’s representation of masculinity involved the presence of heroism narratives in the Sparwood texts, where the avalanche victims and survivors were continually celebrated as brave and heroic local men; these types of narratives did not surface in the Revelstoke coverage, further illustrating the media’s positive representation of the Sparwood victims and relatively negative portrayal of the BIS ones. Bravery and heroism narratives

operated in the Sparwood texts to construct its victims' masculinity as exemplary; in contrast, narratives of a thrill-seeking, reckless, competitive masculinity rendered the BIS participants as problematic. Shoring up this good/bad binary of masculinity was the media's portrayal of the Sparwood snowmobilers as respectable family men in contrast to the BIS participants' positioning as reckless adventurers with little regard for their safety. Domestic masculinity narratives, which portrayed the avalanche victims as loving fathers and husbands, were observed in both cases and helped to soften the hyper-masculine image of the snowmobilers; however, they were not a central component of the BIS media coverage—appearing mainly in the CH through anecdotes from the victims' close friends and family. Thus, the media strategically used the “family man” narrative to support the construction of the Sparwood victims as heroic and exemplary “Valley Boys.” The scarcity of this narrative in the Revelstoke case allowed representations of an irresponsible, reckless and hyper-masculine “boys club” to dominate media depictions of the BIS snowmobilers.

One of the notable similarities in the respective masculinity themes was the naturalized association of snowmobiling with working class identities and competitive masculinity through the consumption of technology. Moreover, in both cases, snowmobiling was portrayed as a “boys club” offering an appropriate site for homosocial relationships between men. The key difference, however, was that with the BIS event, backcountry snowmobiling was rendered an extreme activity, while in the Sparwood case, it was simply shown to be a “normal” everyday practice of Elk Valley men. And while these respective versions of masculinity shared many similar characteristics (e.g., adventure-seeking, technologically proficient, etc.), the Sparwood media coverage placed greater value on these masculine identities by celebrating them as central to the local rural lifestyle and culture. The end result of the media's differential valuing of these

masculinities was a contradictory depiction across the two avalanche sites: backcountry snowmobiling, its participants and masculine subculture were positioned as socially acceptable and culturally valued in the Sparwood texts, but as problematic in the Revelstoke ones.

A final similarity identified in the respective masculinity themes was the media's naturalization of backcountry mountain terrain as a "masculinized sportscape" (Stoddart, 2010) that celebrates male risk-taking and adventure in a homosocial environment. Thus, media representations of both avalanches similarly reinforced dominant gender stereotypes by linking masculinity with individualism, risk-seeking, adventure and technology; but as this cross-case comparison demonstrates, a higher value was placed on (and therefore normatively authorized) the Sparwood victims' embodiment of these characteristics—which in turn were strongly articulated to narratives of place, local identity and community—as compared to when the BIS victims and participants' expressed these masculinized qualities.

Discourses surrounding risk, avalanche predictability and liability varied greatly between the Sparwood and Revelstoke cases. For example, the third theme from the Sparwood analysis—"dangerous conditions and unpredictable nature"—described the hazardous snow conditions and avalanche warnings issued across the Elk Valley and much of BC at the time of the avalanche and in the weeks that followed it. However, despite this discussion of known avalanche risks, the media deployed a dominant risk narrative that positioned "Mother Nature" and the Sparwood avalanche as random and unpredictable; thus, the avalanche was framed as an unpreventable tragedy, and its victims were deemed non-culpable. The Revelstoke avalanche, by comparison, was portrayed as predictable and preventable, and the victims' actions were a topic of much media debate. It is here where an important inconsistency emerged in the newspaper coverage of the avalanche accidents: though realist perspectives of risk were observed in both cases,

calculability discourses (e.g., the notion that avalanche risks can be calculated and measured) were largely excluded from coverage of the Sparwood avalanche, as the incident was instead framed as a random act of “Mother Nature,” a line of reasoning incongruent with realist views.

Media representations also positioned backcountry snowmobiling as either a “safe” or “risky” practice depending on the avalanche context. In the Sparwood texts, where snowmobiling was portrayed as a relatively safe practice, this was partly achieved through comparisons that likened it to other outdoor adventure recreation activities; in short, backcountry sledding was depicted as inherently risky—but no more dangerous than other backcountry outdoor pursuits. Moreover, because its victims were positioned as both supported by their community and as experienced snowmobilers who respected “Mother Nature” but embraced risks, their passion for backcountry snowmobiling was not only socially accepted, but also implicitly admired, as evidenced by the absence of any criticism of their actions in the texts. In contrast, BIS participants were condemned rather than admired as backcountry snowmobiling was portrayed as a dangerous practice, in which participants knowingly (and foolishly) embraced its risks. The two leading themes from the Revelstoke case study (i.e., the “need to improve backcountry safety” and “snowmobiling: a high risk activity”) illustrate the media’s problematization of backcountry snowmobiling as an overly risky practice and its mobilization of the avalanche as a catalyst for change; this transpired through contentious media debates regarding avalanche education and proposed changes to the legislation, regulation and enforcement of backcountry snowmobiling. While the media reproduced, in both cases, liberal humanist views regarding snowmobiling regulation and backcountry access (i.e., valuing individual freedom, de-regulation of public space, etc.), a fundamental difference between them was the platform they afforded for the recurring presence of competing viewpoints on

snowmobiling safety in the Revelstoke texts, particularly as this related to government intervention. This contrasted with their treatment of backcountry snowmobiling in the Sparwood case, which focused on avalanche education (rather than regulation and enforcement) as a means for improving public safety. Furthermore, because the Sparwood incident was primarily constructed through a tragedy/grief frame, media representations of it were comparatively depoliticized, and therefore stood in stark contrast to the highly politicized way that the BIS avalanche was made meaningful in the texts.

A final disparity between the two cases regarding the media's representations of risk, safety and liability was the divergent portrayal of the respective avalanche victims. While the media depicted the BIS victims as uneducated and regularly questioned or criticized their intelligence for being reckless and anti-authoritarian, the Sparwood snowmobilers were constructed as respectable men that embodied both the hegemonic rural masculinity and regional mountain culture of the Elk Valley. This discrepancy was exemplified through the media's recurrent invoking of a "culture gap" between snowmobilers (in general) and the CAC in their coverage of the Revelstoke accident and the conspicuous absence of this discussion in the Sparwood texts. Consequently, while backcountry snowmobiling was constructed as a high-risk, dangerous and extreme activity through the Revelstoke incident, it was disparately framed as a common and respectable outdoor practice in the Sparwood texts.

Discursive Silences. Several discursive silences were identified in each case study (see Table 2), and a number of similarities were noted between them. For example, media coverage of both avalanches constructed snowmobiling as a highly masculine domain where participants value risk, adventure and the freedom to explore backcountry mountain landscapes. As a result, other expressions of both snowmobiling and masculinity were marginalized. The voices of risk-

seeking, adventurous, female snowmobilers were absent from these representations as were those of risk-averse fe/male snowmobilers. Consequently, the media often perpetuated gender stereotypes whereby masculinity was linked to risk, adventure and technological proficiency while femininity was connected to risk-avoidance, domesticity and emotion. Furthermore, critical perspectives from the victims' female spouses were occasionally alluded to but not highlighted in representations of either incident. When present, women were most often portrayed as supportive and understanding of their husband/partners' passion for adventure, thus shoring up notions of "the good wife" and discursively silencing any criticism of how this passion may have caused pain and suffering for the victims' families.

Another discursive silence emerged regarding the social and cultural factors involved in risk negotiation and the social construction of "risky" behaviours. While this silence was most prominent in the Revelstoke texts, narratives from both cases ultimately viewed risk negotiation as an individualized process, with little consideration given to the broader social factors affecting how individuals view and negotiate risk in outdoor activities (particularly in social interactions between men). This silence was most obvious in the Revelstoke case where criticism of backcountry snowmobiling and high-marking practices was prominent, yet the media's denunciation of BIS participants did not include any significant discussion of the social factors that may influence "individual" decisions to engage in "risky" practices like snowmobiling and high-marking in avalanche terrain. In both cases, therefore, risk negotiation was depicted as an individual determination, whether this be in the Sparwood case where the men were praised for their decision to voluntarily engage risk, or in the BIS one in which participants were condemned for it. And while the media's coverage of both accidents reproduced a realist ontology and cognitive scientific perspectives that viewed risk as a collection of objective dangers that

rational, calculating individuals must negotiate (e.g., see Lupton, 1999a), such logic ultimately operated to disregard important social factors that affect the growing issue of snowmobile-related avalanche deaths in Canada. Specifically, this includes the cultural value placed on masculinities that embrace risk-seeking behaviour (e.g., see White & Young, 2007) as well as the historical role that mountain conquest has played in the construction of national identity (e.g., see Mackey, 1999; Robinson, 2005) and mountain culture in western Canada. In short, things that have been culturally and historically valued are also part of the problem, and they should therefore be part of the conversation.

Two notable differences were identified regarding the case studies' discursive silences. First, unlike the Revelstoke incident, the Sparwood media coverage was inundated with perspectives from local residents who participated in backcountry snowmobiling, sympathized with the avalanche victims and defended these practices. The second distinction was the lack of criticism and debate in the Sparwood texts, concerning the avalanche victims' actions and the practice of backcountry snowmobiling, compared to the prolific media debate that characterized the Revelstoke case. Such discrepancies illustrate the media's dichotomized representation of the two avalanche incidents and the fundamental role that narratives of community and collective identity played in creating these divergent interpretations. In particular, the media's construction of Sparwood as a cohesive community defined through a rural mountain cultural identity enabled the positive portrayal of backcountry snowmobiling and the avalanche victims, thereby limiting critical debate in the media coverage. In the same way, the absence of community and collective identity narratives in the Revelstoke case facilitated the media's comparatively negative portrayal of backcountry snowmobiling and its participants and thus created space for critical viewpoints in the BIS coverage.

Significance of Research Findings

The purpose of comparing media representations of the Sparwood and Revelstoke avalanche incidents was to draw out the social complexities and processes through which risk and identity discourses circulated in these depictions of outdoor adventure recreation and to further consider the produced effects of these representations. Thus, to conclude this study, I briefly discuss the significance of the main research findings that emerged through this cross-case comparative media discourse analysis. To begin, I discuss the implications of the risk and liability discourses observed across the two case studies, and I conclude by examining the significance of these discourses' intersection with regional and social identity discourses in the media's sense-making of the avalanche incidents.

Risk & Liability Discursive Effects. In their coverage of both Sparwood and Revelstoke, the media deployed risk discourses on three fronts: in their representations of the avalanches, backcountry snowmobiling practices and the snowmobiling participants/victims. The most common way that “risk” materialized across these fronts was through realist and cognitive scientific paradigms. Risks, therefore, were framed as objective or “real” dangers that individuals must rationally evaluate, calculate and negotiate when making decisions about their behaviour (Lupton, 1999a). Accordingly, a liberal humanist view of subjectivity—valuing individual freedom, personal choice and rational consciousness—was also privileged through the media's consistent portrayal of the snowmobilers as knowledgeable (or not) about the inherent risks of backcountry snowmobiling (e.g., avalanches) and their normalization of individualized decisions regarding whether or not to engage these risks. As previously noted, such individualistic understandings of risk negotiation are both culturally valued (e.g., liberal individualism) and

problematic because they disregard socio-cultural factors that influence risk-seeking behaviours (e.g., dominant constructions of masculinity, conquest-based outdoor adventure discourses, etc.).

Realist perspectives also fail to attend to the socially constructed nature of risks: they are defined in particular social and historical contexts and, inevitably, involve power relations. Specifically, something defined as a “risk” is inscribed with symbolic meanings which may be associated with notions of liability, responsibility and blame; thus, knowledge about risk is political and never “value-free” (Lupton, 1999a). This was exemplified through the two case studies’ divergent portrayals of backcountry snowmobiling and avalanche risks as well as in the notions of responsibility, liability and blame that accompanied these representations. Because of the media’s dominant rendering of the Sparwood men as safe and experienced local snowmobilers, the avalanche, in turn, was portrayed as unpredictable; its victims were thus deemed non-culpable, and no proposed changes to snowmobiling regulations were discussed. Coverage of the Revelstoke incident, by comparison, portrayed the snowmobilers as reckless and uneducated non-locals involved in a predictable and preventable accident; the BIS participants and victims were, therefore, constructed as irresponsible and culpable, with proposed changes to snowmobiling regulations being widely discussed.

Despite the presence of realist risk logic in the media’s framing of both avalanches, a significant inconsistency emerged in the cross-case comparison: although the CAC had issued avalanche warnings prior to both incidents, liability and blame discourses were much more dominant in coverage of the Revelstoke tragedy, arguably because of its depiction as both predictable and preventable. Descriptions of the Sparwood incident, on the other hand, reproduced what is at the very heart of realist critiques of risks, notably a “lay” perspective that views accidents, and therefore risks, as unpredictable. Such logic, realists argue, in turn operates

to inhibit accident prevention efforts by presuming that nothing can or should be done to prevent similar accidents from occurring in the future (Green, 1997). Thus, the net effect of the media's inconsistent rendering of the avalanche accidents was to undermine the very message they sought to promote through their depiction of the Revelstoke incident: that accidents (including future avalanches) are preventable through calculated rationality and prevention efforts (e.g., snowmobiler avalanche education and regulation).

While the media represented backcountry snowmobiling in both cases as an inherently “risky” activity, the Sparwood men were, nevertheless, differentially admired for embracing these risks—which were also celebrated as an important part of the local mountain culture and outdoor lifestyle of the region; this stood in stark contrast to their sense-making of the Revelstoke avalanche victims who were condemned for their participation in a “risky” and “dangerous” activity. The conflicting and often contradictory ways in which the media deployed risk discourses in their portrayals of the avalanches, and backcountry snowmobiling more generally, speaks to the complex identity politics and power dynamics at play in these representations. Inherent to the risk-taking binary the media constructed was the inequitable notion that while some individuals are encouraged and lauded for voluntarily engaging risks, others are simultaneously positioned as at-risk (Braun, 2003). This was clearly exemplified through the media's differing representations of the accidents whereby backcountry snowmobiling—a voluntarily engaged risk activity—was constructed as a positive, admirable and heroic practice for the Sparwood men but as a negative, reckless and irresponsible one for the BIS participants. Significantly, whereas Braun's work on risk culture's binary hinged around race, local identity operated in this role in the media's coverage of the snowmobiling incidents, illustrating Donnelly's (2004) point of the contemporary cultural ambivalence toward risk;

specifically, that the outdoor recreation contexts in which risk-taking is culturally valued are highly variable. Based on the results of this study, I would argue that, in the case of backcountry snowmobiling, this risk ambivalence was inextricably linked to ideas about who should use backcountry mountain spaces and for what purposes. In this sense, identity politics, in terms of both gender and place, were indeed at play in the media's varying depictions of snowmobiling risks and in their corresponding assumptions about who should or should not be engaging these risks. This was particularly evident in their recurring celebration of the Sparwood "Valley Boy" identity, a label that operated to establish the avalanche victims as experienced locals, thereby entitling them the legitimate right to explore their local mountain playground, engage backcountry snowmobiling risks and endanger their lives in pursuit of their passion for adventure without being subject to criticism. This aligns with Davidson's (2008) findings in his media analysis of mountaineering accidents in New Zealand, whereby local male victims were venerated as heroic and admirable risk-takers ("true adventurers") in uncontrollable circumstances; by contrast, international climbers involved in similar accidents were framed as foolish, irresponsible, uneducated and reckless foreigners whose very presence in the mountain environment was criticized.⁵¹ Though Davidson's risk discourse conclusions hinged on a local-foreigner binary, I would argue that, considering the strong regional identity discourses that surfaced in the Sparwood case study, the concept of "foreigner" could also be applied to domestic residents from outside the community and region where the avalanches occurred. Accordingly, the results of this collective case study support Davidson's assertion that accidents involving "locals" are viewed as more socially significant by news media and that "local"

⁵¹ Davidson's (2008) study examined several cases in which Indonesian and Latvian tourists were racialized in media representations of mountaineering accidents in New Zealand.

victims are more likely to be framed as non-culpable and heroic. In this way, the media naturalized connections amongst place, community, masculinity and heroism in their coverage of the Sparwood avalanche.

Heroism narratives were a significant area where themes of risk and liability intersected with discourses of local identity, masculinity and working class culture in the media texts. For instance, the findings of the thematic analysis suggest that, because the Sparwood avalanche victims were local men who embodied hegemonic constructions of rural masculinity (i.e., outdoor adventure-seeking, blue-collar, family-oriented, etc.), regional identity and mountain culture, the media readily linked them to heroism discourses. These identities were privileged through the public celebration and memorialisation of its victims as well as in the media's conspicuous silencing of criticism and debate surrounding the avalanche accident. Interestingly, the BIS fatalities shared many of same demographic and social identity characteristics as the Sparwood men (e.g., young, heterosexual, white men with families who were employed in the resource industry and enjoyed outdoor adventure recreation); however, their position as community outsiders and their participation in what media texts described as a "dangerous practice" resulted in widespread debate and criticism, a notable lack of public memorialisation and a conspicuous absence of heroism narratives in the texts.

Previous research (Goldstein & Tye, 2006; Pacholok, 2009) suggests that news media play a central role in circulating heroism discourses following public tragedies and that this process of "hero-making" (Goldstein & Tye, 2006) offers important insights into dominant cultural values and constructions of collective (i.e., regional and national) identity. In particular, Pacholok (2009) argues that media depictions of public tragedies and heroism often reproduce dominant cultural narratives about gender, class and place identity. In my study, the heroism

narrative prevalent in the Sparwood case was explicitly aligned with local, rural, working class, heterosexual, adventure-seeking and masculine subjectivities. By discursively constructing the avalanche victims as heroic men that embodied the local way of life, these media representations, in effect, also solidified Sparwood's community identity in a particular way: as a homogenous and "close-knit" community with a simple, blue-collar, rural and masculinized mountain culture lifestyle.

According to Fierlbeck (1996), identity has two distinct but competing functions: "to set us apart from others...and to allow us to form social bonds...with other individuals" (p. 19).

The regional identity discourse that circulated in media representations of the Sparwood avalanche readily reflected this idea, as Sparwood/Elk Valley residents were consistently portrayed as a close-knit group of like-minded individuals defined by a unique mountain community of blue-collar, outdoor enthusiasts. This community identity discourse was also strongly tied to narratives of place—as evidenced by the recurring "Valley Boy" label as well as rural pride and mountain adventure narratives that dominated media representations. Hickcox (2007) argues that both place and regional identities are discursive constructions of community that operate to uphold particular social relations. The findings of the thematic analysis suggest that, in regards to the Sparwood/Elk Valley community identity discourse, this included sustaining the cultural hegemony of a working class, masculinized mountain culture that supports motorized outdoor recreation.

"Place-making" consists of social and discursive processes as well as embodied practices through which community and regional identities are formed and lived (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997b). As an embodied practice, snowmobiling clearly functioned in this way in media representations of Sparwood's communal identity, which was also framed through the residents'

alleged attachment to the rural mountain landscape. In particular, locals were portrayed as having an innate attachment to the local landscape, and this connection was presented as a natural, inescapable and embodied experience (e.g., it was, “in their blood”). These findings align with other research on Canadian national identity. Kaufmann and Zimmer (1998), for example, have argued that Canadian identity discourses are often based on the presumption that identity is largely determined by a “naturalization of the nation;” that is, through the establishment of a symbolic link between the nation and its natural landscape, whereby “specific landscapes ... are depicted as forces of moral and spiritual regeneration capable of determining the nation and giving it a compact, homogeneous, unified form.... [that] appear[s] to be shaped by physical rather than social factors...” (p. 6). I would argue that a similar “naturalization” process operated at the regional (as opposed to national) level, through the media’s representation of a homogenous Elk Valley/Sparwood community identity rooted in a shared, “natural” passion for the local mountain landscape and outdoor, adventure recreation. This was perpetuated through the “Valley Boy” label, a term which further naturalized this symbolic connection between physical landscape and regional identity. Yet, rarely acknowledged in these kinds of representations, Hickcox (2007) argues, are the socio-political dimensions of identity and place with the produced effect of homogenizing and marginalizing the diverse identities found within any community. Understanding the socio-political dimensions of “place” necessarily includes questioning *how* particular places become classed, racialized and gendered through discourse (Low, 2007). In the case of the Sparwood and Revelstoke avalanches, one of the ways in which place and community came to be gendered and classed was through the media’s anchoring of them in masculinized and working class discourses.

Risk, Social & Regional Identities: Intersections. One of the central goals of this research was to consider how representations of risk were intertwined with social and regional identity discourses in the media's coverage of the avalanche accidents. Braun's (2003) observation that "not all subjects fit risk cultures ideological frames" (p. 177) contoured my examination of the identities reproduced in the news media's representation of backcountry snowmobiling; in this way, my focus was to understand which types of identities did or did not align with the ideological frames of snowmobiling's risk culture. As previously noted, local rural identities were closely linked to risk discourses in the Sparwood texts; but, gender and class narratives also emerged as having played an important role in the media's representations of risk and liability. While the production of racialized identities has been shown to be significant in other adventure recreation and risk contexts (e.g., see Braun, 2003; Davidson, 2008), this did not emerge as a dominant theme in my research.

Intersections between risk and masculinity were pervasive in the media's coverage of the avalanches as both backcountry snowmobiling practices and settings were highly masculinized. More specifically, the media naturalized backcountry mountain settings as "risky" and "masculinized sportsapes" (Stoddard, 2010) that serve as an appropriate site for the (re)production of hegemonic masculinity and homosocial relationships between men. Though women were not necessarily excluded from this masculinized space (i.e., some women reportedly participated in backcountry snowmobiling), their presence and perspectives were marginalized in the media coverage; here, they were most often portrayed as risk-averse individuals supportive of their husbands' passion for adventure, but who were nevertheless conspicuously absent in the recurring camaraderie narratives that celebrated male-bonding (by way of adventure-seeking) as a central aspect of backcountry snowmobiling. To this end, the

media's depiction of both avalanches portrayed adventure-seeking masculinity as central to snowmobiling's "risk culture" (Braun, 2003). Likewise, Laurendeau's (2008) notion of a "gendered risk regime," which he argues operates in all outdoor adventure recreation settings, was readily reflected in the media's account of backcountry landscapes and snowmobiling practices. In reproducing this regime, the media naturalized a masculine/feminine binary through the connections they forged amongst masculinity, adventure, snowmobiling, backcountry mountain landscapes and risk on the one hand, and femininity, domesticity and risk aversion on the other hand. Moreover, my research findings also support Laurendeau's notion that risk and gender are "mutually constituting in so-called risk sports" (p. 300); that is, masculinity/femininity are fashioned, in part, through the way individuals choose to engage voluntary risks (or not). This, in turn, Laurendeau argues, is shaped by understandings about risk and gender that circulate both within particular sporting cultures as well as in society more generally. Readily evidenced in my research was the media's active involvement in this circulation process through the inextricable connection they construed between masculinity and risk in their coverage of the avalanches, which ultimately naturalized the logic of masculinity and risk as being mutually constitutive.

The media's portrayal of backcountry mountain settings as masculinized sportsapes is a finding that also aligns with Frohlick's (2006) research on mountaineering culture, in which media representations actively coupled women with reproduction and domestic responsibilities "in relation to the fraternal geographies and normative...sporting bodies of the mountaineering hero" (p. 481). The implication of such representations is a perpetuation of dominant gender stereotypes that contribute to women's marginalization in mountain environments and adventure recreation contexts. Although risk was inextricably linked to masculinity in both the Sparwood

and Revelstoke cases, the media's depiction of risky mountain environments served a different purpose in each case: for Sparwood, it reiterated the bravery, heroism and exemplary masculinity of the avalanche victims, while, for Revelstoke, it reinforced the need for regulation of snowmobiling and backcountry access.

Working class identities also intersected with masculinity and risk discourses in both case studies. Despite the fact that snowmobiling is an expensive hobby, media representations of the incidents strongly linked sledding culture to a "work hard, play hard" blue-collar lifestyle. However, because the Sparwood avalanche involved local men all employed in the regional mining industry, class-based discourses occupied a much stronger position in its media coverage, with working class identities, rural lifestyles and snowmobiling/outdoor recreation being celebrated as central to the Elk Valley Region's identity. In contrast, regional identity discourses were not prominent in the media's portrayal of the Revelstoke incident where the victims and participants were non-locals. Brandth & Haugen (2005) suggest economic structures greatly influence how masculinities are constructed and contested in rural communities. They argue that, in resource-based communities in particular, technology plays a central, albeit contradictory role in its construction and reproduction. On the one hand, technological advances in resource industries have eliminated or reduced the opportunities for men to enact hegemonic rural masculinity through the traditional means—manual labour; on the other hand, technology, particularly that which is an extension of a man's body, has become a means through which masculinity is constructed in an era of diminished physical labour. Sparwood and Revelstoke both have resource-based economies; mastering snowmobiling technologies and engaging in risk recreation, suggestively provide an ideal means through which to construct hegemonic rural masculine identities. Thus, the effect produced through the media's associating snowmobiling

with working class culture was to shore up the normative blue-collar, masculinized regional identity and rural pride narratives that dominated the Sparwood texts in particular.

Despite the two accidents sharing contextual similarities (i.e., male-only experiences, snowmobiling in backcountry mountain terrain during times of elevated avalanche warnings, fatalities, etc.), my analysis has demonstrated how the media produced contradictory representations of risk and liability in their sense-making of backcountry snowmobiling, avalanches and their victims. The media steadfastly reproduced a realist understanding of risk in their depiction of the Revelstoke avalanche as a preventable accident and its victims as reckless snowmobilers fuelled by hyper-masculine propensities; the net effect was to render backcountry snowmobilers as requiring avalanche education and regulation. Yet, the socially constructed nature of risk, and the inherently politicized way in which it is deployed in representations of outdoor adventure tragedies, was readily revealed through the media's rendering of similar actions (i.e., the Sparwood men snowmobiling in an area of known increased avalanche risk) and consequences (i.e., fatalities) as an unpredictable accident and its victims as heroic, appropriately masculine and passionate outdoor recreation enthusiasts. Fundamental to this politicized demarcation of appropriate versus inappropriate risk was the mobilization of a regional identity discourse in the case of the Sparwood accident; a process in which local community members were actively engaged. Just as local residents of Pouch Cove, Newfoundland worked, through the media's coverage of a drowning tragedy, to resist outsider interpretations labelling three home-grown drowned boys as reckless masters of their own fate (Goldstein & Tye, 2006), so too did Sparwood community members seek to mediate outsider interpretations of its snowmobiling tragedy by naming its victims as heroes. Like Goldstein & Tye's findings, the heroic narrative through which the Sparwood victims' actions were framed was strongly linked to regional

identities that were steeped in gender and class politics. Specifically, in the same way that the drowned boys were symbolically linked with a collective white, working class, masculine Newfoundland identity, the media's construction of the Sparwood snowmobilers positioned them as emblematic of the Elk Valley regions' working class, rural, masculine collective identity.

Conclusion

This study provides an examination of two well-publicized BC backcountry snowmobiling avalanche accidents: one in Sparwood and the other in Revelstoke. Guided by the following questions: 1) how are “risk” and “liability” socially constructed in news media coverage of the avalanche incidents?; and 2) how do these representations intersect with social and regional identities?, I used a collective case study approach (Stake, 2000) and Sampert & Trimble’s (2012) method of media discourse analysis to analyze critically the media’s framing of the accidents. Drawing from critical cultural studies (Kellner, 1995) and feminist poststructuralist theory (Weedon, 1987), I examined the politics of place and identity in these two “critical cases” (Patton, 2002) with the goal of understanding how adventure recreation (i.e., backcountry snowmobiling) discourses draw from and contribute to ideas about risk, identity and place in Western Canada.

Socio-cultural studies of outdoor, adventure recreation are sparse in the scholarly literature, and snowmobiling practices, in particular, have not been previously examined from a critical, cultural studies perspective. Thus, this study bridges a gap in the existing outdoor recreation literature by exploring the politics of place and identity in contemporary snowmobiling discourses in Western Canada. It also expands upon previous outdoor recreation research by incorporating an interdisciplinary framework that draws from (and contributes to) existing literatures in outdoor recreation/leisure studies, sport sociology, cultural studies, social/cultural anthropology and cultural geography. It provides a unique contribution to the existing outdoor recreation literature through its poststructuralist examination of how risk discourses are deployed in media representations of backcountry snowmobiling tragedies.

Neither snowmobiling nor risk have been examined in this way; thus, this research provides new insight into outdoor adventure recreation practices in Western Canada.

My findings posit that the Sparwood and Revelstoke avalanches were made meaningful through politicized identity discourses that circulated in media representations of the respective accidents. In their depiction of these recreation-based tragedies, news media normalized and (re)produced particular social meanings (e.g., about risk, masculinity, heroism and snowmobiling practices) and identity discourses (e.g., gendered, classed and regional identities), which ultimately celebrated the identities and practices of the Sparwood snowmobilers while disparaging and criticizing the BIS participants and practices. These divergent and often contradictory representations of risk and backcountry snowmobiling were, therefore, illustrative of the power relations that infused the media's framing of the avalanche accidents.

The media's deployment of risk discourses in relation to the two incidents was fraught with tensions. Their normalization of realist and cognitive scientific perspectives that favour a liberal humanist understanding of risk negotiation logically aligned with their framing of the Revelstoke avalanche as foreseeable and preventable. In contrast, their characterization of the Sparwood incident as unpredictable undermined the very thrust of such logic, and in doing so, revealed the socially constructed nature of risk. Accordingly, these varying deployments of risk discourses (and their attendant representations of liability and blame) worked to construct the snowmobilers' identities in divergent ways for each case. In particular, the media sanctioned "local" men embodying working class and hegemonic (rural) masculine identities as the appropriate subjects of risk recreation. Thus, while backcountry snowmobiling was portrayed as inherently risky in both examples, it was constructed as a socially acceptable and admirable risk for some individuals to engage in (i.e., the Sparwood victims), but as an irresponsible and

reckless one for others. Similarly, the media characterized backcountry mountain locales both as “masculinized sportscares” (Stoddard, 2010) and risky environments; but while the Sparwood snowmobilers were celebrated in these spaces, the BIS participants were criticized. At the same time, by reproducing narratives of snowmobiling’s masculinized culture, setting and “gendered risk regime” (Laurendeau, 2008), the media helped to forge and reinforce connections between snowmobiling, risk and masculinity. In particular, they (re)produced risk and gender ideologies that position men as naturally risk-seeking and further marginalized women/femininity in mountain, adventure recreation settings. This effect was further heightened by the media’s failure to address the social factors that influenced the victims’ risk-seeking behaviour in the first place (including ideologies of masculinity and mountain conquest). The media, thus, deployed simplistic and contradictory risk narratives that constructed the avalanche victims as either problematic (i.e., BIS participants) or admirable and heroic (i.e., Sparwood snowmobilers). In doing so, they also helped to fashion particular communities and collective identities, such as the Sparwood “Valley Boys.” These representations of a homogenous regional identity and mountain culture, however, privileged local, rural, working class, adventure-seeking masculine identities. Identity politics, therefore, were deeply entrenched in the risk discourses constructed in the media texts.

The study findings also suggest that news media play an important role in “hero-making” (Goldstein & Tye, 2006) following recreation-based tragedies such as avalanche accidents. As illustrated through the cross-case comparison, the media depicted the Sparwood fatalities as especially tragic; in concert with local residents, the media framed its victims as heroes because they purportedly embodied hegemonic constructions of rural masculinity and local mountain culture; to this end, the media largely functioned to uphold dominant social relations in the

community. In other words, the hero-making effects of the news media coverage functioned to re-inscribe normative understandings of gender, class and regional identity that ultimately operated to preserve the dominance of particular expressions of collective identity. In the Sparwood case, the media often naturalized this local identity as a product of residents' innate and collective attachment to the physical landscape (e.g., mountain and wilderness setting) and outdoor recreation practices. But, as Mackey (2000) argues, such collective identities "do not emerge spontaneously from some primordial source... [They] are shared fictions created and maintained through media, education, cultural products, and government programs" (p. 125). The media outlets examined in my research clearly operated in this way, demonstrating that identities (including the Sparwood/Elk Valley one) are not naturally derived, but cultural constructions sustained, at least in part, by media discourses that inescapably produce socio-political effects.

With the Sparwood and Revelstoke accidents, this included the media's valorization of risk identities that undermined accident prevention efforts, community discourses that homogenized diverse and hybridized identities and gender discourses that perpetuated masculine stereotypes and marginalized women in outdoor, adventure recreation contexts. As Rak (2007) argues, "the uses and representations of the body in wilderness environments are always politicized and always involve issues about power, knowledge, and pleasure (or pain)" (Rak, 2007, p. 111).

Perhaps the study's most surprising finding relates to the depth of critical commentary put forth in the media's reporting of the BIS. Unlike the Sparwood case, media coverage of the Revelstoke avalanche was identified as a site of lively public debate regarding backcountry access and snowmobiling practices. It was anticipated, therefore, that this greater presence of

competing viewpoints would problematize snowmobiling practices, backcountry access and “risk” in new and interesting ways. While this was true to a certain extent, this study demonstrated that, despite the presence of competing viewpoints, media representations also reproduced gender stereotypes (e.g., naturalizing the connection between masculinity, risk and technology as well as femininity, domesticity and risk aversion). Furthermore, though they identified backcountry snowmobiling practices as hyper-masculine, the media did not question the cultural dominance of a masculinity that values and promotes risk-seeking behaviour or the prevalence of outdoor recreation discourses that value mountain conquest; therefore, frontier masculinity narratives were naturalized through the media’s coverage of these tragedies. Finally, though much of the media’s coverage of the BIS dismissed lay perspectives of risk (as unpredictable) by deploying a cognitive scientific view that renders avalanche risks as predictable, surprisingly, this did not result in greater critical analysis of potential risk factors. Specifically, because the media adhered to liberal humanist views of risk negotiation, individual choices were criticized (i.e., the avalanche victims and BIS participants), but the broader social factors influencing these choices were largely ignored.

As noted in the research proposal, one limitation of this study is the interpretive nature of discourse analysis work. Several strategies were utilized to address this limitation. First, each case was deeply situated in its social and historical context; thus, research findings were not generalized beyond the respective case studies (e.g., to other accidents, locales, outdoor recreation practices, etc.). Second, collaboration with the project supervisor was used to analyse the dominant themes identified through the media discourse analysis. An additional limitation emerged in the data collection phase. Specifically, because newspaper articles from the GM, CH and VS were located through a database search (Factiva), using specific search terms, it is

possible that articles concerning the avalanche incidents were overlooked and thus excluded from the data set. To account for this, a manual search was also conducted through the newspapers for one month following the accident, as well as in the week surrounding the anniversary of each incident. Additionally, no public database was available to search articles in the community newspapers (FP and RTR). As a result, a manual search was conducted through these newspapers using the same time parameters used for the provincial/national newspapers. It is therefore possible that not all articles were included in the data set. However, every attempt was made to locate relevant texts that fell within the sampling frame. Furthermore, the goal of the textual analysis was identify dominant media themes across the data set—thus making it unlikely that omission of an individual article would drastically alter the research findings.

A final study limitation concerns the method of inquiry: media discourse analysis. While this method interrogates how dominant ideas circulate through media representations and discourses, it does not account for how audiences interpret these texts. The intent of this study, however, was to interpret the representational politics at play in media depictions of snowmobiling avalanche accidents. Exploring audience interpretations of these representations (e.g., by snowmobilers, stakeholders and the general public), therefore, would be a productive area for further scholarly research.

Further areas for future research include the analysis of media discourses from other adventure recreation contexts in order to compare how risk discourses circulate and intersect with the politics of place and social/regional identities in various outdoor recreation examples; and, given backcountry snowmobiling's overwhelming portrayal as a masculinized practice, an investigation of women's snowmobiling experiences would potentially serve to counter balance representations that naturalize snowmobiling as an inherently masculine domain. Such inquiries

would expand upon the findings of this study and thus lead to further understanding on the identity politics that surround snowmobiling as well as other outdoor, adventure recreation activities in Canada.

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