

Climbing: a variety of sport practices and alcohol consumptions

François Féliu⁽¹⁾, Christophe Bonnet⁽²⁾, Yannick Le Henaff⁽¹⁾, Clémence Piedagnel⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Université de Rouen Normandie, Laboratoire Dysolab. Francois.feliu@univ-rouen.fr ; yannick.le-henaff@univ-rouen.fr ; clem.pieda@orange.fr

⁽²⁾ Université Paris Nanterre, Laboratoire CeRSM : christophe-bonnet@hotmail.fr

Abstract : The link between sport and alcohol consumption is often seen as equivocal and sportsmen and sportswomen are often seen as high consumers. At that time, it appears that this link has not been investigated among climbers. We consider climbing as an “adventure sport”. Our research is drawn on quantitative data (n=721) and allow us to think the complex relations that climbers could have with alcohol. Two categories seem to emerge : the boulder climbers in one way with an overconsumption of alcohol, and the lead climbers in the other hand with a more moderate consumption. The communication will analyze these two categories in order to think about two subcultures among the French climbers. Those differences could be explained by different factors as gender and social classes.

Key words : rock climbing; bouldering; alcohol; ; risk ; gender

Résumé : La relation entre sport et consommation d'alcool est souvent considérée comme ambiguë, avec une surconsommation fréquemment détectée chez les sportifs. Aucune étude ne semble avoir investiguée cette relation chez les pratiquants de l'escalade. Notre étude, se fondant sur les 721 réponses à un questionnaire, nous permet de penser la relation, complexe, que les grimpeurs entretiennent à l'alcool. Deux profils semblent se détacher de notre étude : les bloqueurs d'un côté avec une surconsommation d'alcool et les grimpeurs de difficultés de l'autre avec une consommation plus modérée. Il s'agit ainsi d'analyser ces deux catégories pour saisir les différents facteurs qui sont mis en jeu, notamment en termes de genre et de catégories sociales des pratiquants, amenant à penser, au moins, deux sous-cultures différentes dans le milieu de l'escalade français.

Mots clés : escalade ; bloc ; alcool, risque, genre

In this communication we aim to better know the ambiguous and sometimes paradoxical relationship between alcohol and sport. Indeed relationship between alcohol and athletes are controversial but closely linked (Palmer, 2015). Several researches showed that athletes drink heavier, and especially elite athletes (Lorente, Peretti-Watel, Griffet, & Grelot, 2003 ; Peretti-Watel et al., 2003). Sport influence seems nevertheless heterogeneous depending on several characteristics such as age, socioeconomic status, gender, or the kind of sport (Kwan et al., 2014 ; Lebreton et al., 2016).

Our research aims to better understand the complex link between sport and alcohol by focusing on one team sport (rugby) and two individual sports (climbing and tennis). In this communication nevertheless the focus will be on climbing, that we first analyzed. Moreover, it appears that no studies have been done on climbing and alcohol consumption.

Despite democratization¹ (Aubel, 2011) and olympism² that increasingly institutionalize climbing, without homogenizing practices, climbing is still regarded as an adventure sport (Breivik, 2010). We hypothesize that there are subcultures (Bogardus, 2012) in the climbing world.

But what is the link between climbing and alcohol? Which relations climbers have with alcohol while “adventure sports” are often describe as sport with a strongly male ethos that could bring a combination of risks taking (Breivik, 2010). Are climbers a risk taking population about alcohol consumption? Is there different cultures depending on climbing practices: bouldering, sport climbing, outdoor or indoor climbing, alpinim ?

Based on a questionnaire (from an ongoing research study on tennis, rugby and climbing³), we will try to describe the alcohol practices of French climbers. We will take into account both the concept of subculture and the sociological variables, which are part of a subculture.

This communication is based on the analysis (still in process) of the 721 first climbers who answered the survey. Our sample description allow us to identify two main groups: the boulder climbers (35,9%) and the sport or lead climbers (51,7%). The mountains climbers are only, 12,3%. It seems that the practice influence the alcohol consumption with an alcohol overconsumption among bouldering climbers. Indeed, the first results lead us to believe that climbing practices is more important than sociological variables on alcohol consumption. Bouldering is, nevertheless, more correlated to young man than the two others practices. A bouldering subculture seems to appear. We can suggest a hypothesis : drinking allow sportsmen and sportswomen to conform themselves with the sport culture, even if that could be detrimental to performance and going against some sanitary and social injunctions. We can add that only 12.5% are involved in competition. All these questions renew the sport role, here climbing, as a prevention factor or a risk factor.

Two groups of climbers: bouldering and sport climbing:

In order to analyze deeper the relation between climbers and alcohol, we need to know better who they are. One of our difficulty was to compare our results to others data because little is known about climbers in France. The literature focused mostly on the comprehension of the identity of the different culture of climbers and the existence of subcultures or groups' conflicts. Moreover, climbers could be gathered in two federations: the French federation of alpine clubs (FFCAM) and the French federation of climbing and mountaineering (FFME); that make harder to have national data.

First at all, in our sample, 32.7% of the respondents are women, while they are 39.93% among the FFME members⁴. Two third (66.2%) of the climbers are younger than 31 years old (25.8% between 16 to 23; and 40.4% for the 24 to 31 years old), almost 19% have less than 40, 8% between 40 to 47 and finally just 6.8% are older than 48⁵. Those data confirm other survey that show that 80% of climbers are less than 40 (Aubel, 2011).

¹ In the beginning of April 2018 the French Federation of Mountain and Climbing (Fédération Française de Montagne et d'Escalade) reached to 100 000 members.

² On April the 3rd, 2018, the International Olympic Committee decided that climbing will be an olympic sport in the next summer Olympics Game in Tokyo.

³ « La construction d'un rapport propre à l'alcool chez les sportifs dans deux pratiques. Mise en place d'une recherche interventionnelle », survey granted by INCA until 2019.

⁴ FFME, *Plan de féminisation FFME 2014-2017*, En ligne : https://www.ffme.fr/uploads/federation/documents/plan_de_feminisation_ffme_2014.pdf

⁵ The average is 30 years old while the median is 28.

The climbers of our sample, thirdly, fit with the previous analyzes which reveal climbers are mostly students (or high school pupils), and white-collar workers (from lower middle class to middle classes with high cultural level) (Aubel, Ohl, 2004; Aubel, 2000), but we do not see rise of working class as Aubel noted in 2011 (Aubel, 2011)⁶. Climbers are, for instance, 40% from middle class with high cultural capital, 20% are employees and 20% are students; and 63% earn less than 30 000€ by year. To conclude, we can summarize that our climbers sample is done by young men and women (67.3% vs. 32.7%) which are students or middle-class with a high cultural capital from cities (78.4% of climbers live in urban areas).

Climbers do, mostly, climbing for fun (87.5%) because only 12.5% told us practicing competitions⁷. Only 12.3% climb in mountains, while 51.7% do sport climbing and 35.9% for the bouldering. Women are doing more than men sport climbing while men are more in bouldering. The younger climbers (under 30) are overrepresented among boulder climbers, while the 30-40 years old climbers are (over represented) among sport climbing and finally mountaineering is done by the oldest. So, we have two main categories regarding the kind of climbing practice: bouldering (with an over representation of young men from lower middle class or workers) and sport climbing (with an overrepresentation of women, climbers in their thirties and middle class with a high cultural capital)⁸.

Climbers and alcohol: no evident explaining factors

Without surprise, 97.9% of the climbers who answered our survey have already drunk alcohol⁹. Moreover, 89.6% of the climbers says they already have been drunk. This result fits with the international literature reviews (Lisha & Sussman, 2010; Kwan et al., 2014) which shows a positive relationship between sport and alcohol consumption. The literature put forward four principal factors that could explain this relationship between sport and alcohol consumptions: gender, age, socio-economic status and the sport intensity.

In our quantitative survey, gender is not a clear cut factor. there as many women than men who claim that they have already drink alcohol. A difference appears when it is about having already been drunk where men are overrepresented. The main difference is about about the way of drinking and the quantity of drinks. Women drink less than men do: they have 3.7 while men have 6.5 (in average AUDIT score). For the World health organization a score higher than three for women and four for men means a risky profile of alcohol consumer. Moreover, women seem to consume fewer drinks for each consumption time than men (61.4% of women says that they drink one or two drinks vs. 48.7% of men). The age does not appear as a significant factor. The socio-economic status also does not seem to be relevant. And only the sport intensity should explain, a little bit, the alcohol consumption for climbers. The climbers who do competitions seem to drink less than the one who climb for leisure : they are overrepresented among the one telling they never drink after trainings (26.7% vs. 16%). For this factor, we find the same results, finally, that Miller and al. (2003) who do not show an important relation between high intensity and a high alcohol consumption.

To conclude, the factor mainly used by researchers to explain the relation between alcohol and sport are not relevant for French climbers in our sample. Gender factor seems to be, with the intensity (competition vs. leisure), the factors explaining the most the way of alcohol consumption for climbers. We argue that the hegemonic masculinity (Palmer, 2015) could explain that, but we need to investigate this topic in our interviews to understand better differences. However, it seems that climbing specialties (sport climbing or bouldering) make sense to understand the complex link between alcohol and climbers.

Sport climbing vs. bouldering: two subcultures?

⁶ This result is, maybe, due to the methodology: surveys done by Internet is, often, less complete by the working class or the lower middle class.

⁷ In 2000 Olivier Aubel found the same results (Aubel, 2000).

⁸ Due to a lower rate of climbers practicing mountaineering, we decided, for this paper, to not focus on that group.

⁹ Depending the French observatory of drugs and addiction, in 2013 93% of 18-75 years old have already drunk alcohol. OFDT, *Chiffres clés* 2013, available on <https://www.ofdt.fr/publications/collections/periodiques/drogues-chiffres-cles/>

The key factor is the climbing specialty: it seems that bouldering is favoring alcohol consumption. For example, boulder climbers are over represented among climbers who have been drunk (94.2% vs. 85.8%). They, also, are overrepresented among persons who have been drunk during the last 12 month at least once a month (51.3%) or once a week (54.1%) while sport climbers are overrepresented among persons saying “never” (60.8%). One important question of AUDIT score is to know if someone have already worried, during the last 12 months, about the (his/her?) alcohol consumption: boulder climbers are overrepresented among those persons (53.3%, vs. 33.3% and 13.3% for mountaineering). Moreover, boulder climbers are overrepresented among persons who drink “often” alcohol after training : they are 50.6% vs. 36.1% for sport climbing and 13.3% for mountaineering. And the way round, 65.6% of sport climbers say that they never drink after trainings.

Why are those differences? As we previously explain sport climbers and bouldering climbers do not have the same sociological background, and we expect that to explain the differences. As bouldering is more done by young men from lower classes could imagine they are more in what Palmers call the hegemonic masculinity than sport climbers who have a higher cultural and economic background, and who gathered more women. The four factor used in the previous part could not explain the link for all climbers, but they are relevant for the two subcultures.

We expected, as well, that the practicing background could be important: is the climber practice in association or in a private climbing wall? Recently private bouldering gyms are in expansion in France, and that could, in addition of sociological factors, participate to this dichotomy as climbers could get a beer in the same place were alcohol consumption is highlight. Those subcultures will be investigated by interviews to understand carefully the construction of two identities of climbers.

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