

1 **Ski Mountaineering: Spectator Interest and Potential**

2 **Upcoming Changes for a New Olympic Sport**

3
4 *The inclusion of ski mountaineering in the 2026 Winter Olympic Games in Milano/*
5 *Cortina d'Ampezzo marks a significant milestone in the sport's development. This*
6 *study examines consumer interest and anticipated popularity, commercialization,*
7 *and environmental impact changes. Using an online survey (N=279), we analyzed*
8 *attitudes toward ski mountaineering's Olympic debut. While only 27.2% of*
9 *participants expressed a strong interest in watching the sport, 54.5% expected a*
10 *significant popularity increase due to increased media coverage. The study also*
11 *highlights concerns about commercialization and potential environmental*
12 *consequences, with 74.6% emphasizing the importance of sustainable development*
13 *strategies. These findings suggest that while Olympic inclusion may boost*
14 *participation and economic opportunities, it also necessitates careful management*
15 *to balance growth with sustainability.*

16
17 **Keywords:** *Ski Mountaineering, Olympics, Sport Popularity, Commercialization,*
18 *Environmental Impact, Audience Engagement*

19 20 21 **Introduction**

22
23 In order to remain the biggest sports event, the Olympic games must continue
24 to be innovative. One way to achieve this is to implement new sports into the
25 Olympic program. This started with the introduction of the snowboard halfpipe
26 event in the 1998 Olympic Games and continued in recent editions by including
27 sports such as skateboarding, BMX, freestyle, or sport climbing and surfing (Falcao
28 et al., 2021; Renfree et al., 2024). Reasons for including action and adventure sports
29 can be found in the International Olympic Committee's attempt to rejuvenate the
30 Olympic Games and become more attractive for younger spectators (Falcao et al.,
31 2021; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). Ski mountaineering as a competitive sport includes
32 formats such as individual races, vertical races, sprint races, team races, and relays,
33 which vary in the amount of uphill and downhill sections as well as duration. These
34 formats have already been used in competitions such as the first ski mountaineering
35 competition such as the World Championships in the year 2002 (Schöffel et al.,
36 2023). The inclusion of Ski mountaineering as a new discipline of the Olympic
37 program for the 2026 Winter Games in Milano/Cortina d'Ampezzo reflects the
38 International Olympic Committee's (IOC) efforts to expand the Olympic Program
39 with new sports (Toohey & Veal, 2007). Ski mountaineering appeared as a military
40 patrol event in the winter Olympic Games held in 1924 in Chamonix. However, this
41 event was removed from the Olympic program due to a lack of public attention. It
42 was then held as a demonstration sport during the following editions of the Olympic
43 Games but was removed in 1948 due to several avalanche deaths entirely from the
44 Olympic program (Schöffel et al., 2018). The inclusion of a sport into the Olympic
45 programs marks a considerable step in developing a sport. It provides a unique
46 canvas for this sport to be presented to millions of spectators, which could lead to
47 further growth (Toohey & Veal, 2007). However, this inclusion in the Olympic

1 program can also lead to significant changes within the sports (Thorpe & Wheaton,
2 2011). The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games saw the first appearance of sport climbing
3 on the Olympic stage (Schöffel et al., 2020). Sport climbing is a sport that, in its
4 competitive form, consists of three distinct disciplines: lead, boulder and speed
5 (Lutter et al., 2017). However, in the 2020 Olympic Games, sport climbing was only
6 represented in a combined format of all three disciplines. This innovative format
7 meant that athletes had to fundamentally change their training (Schöffel et al., 2020).
8 The format change that has been observed in sport climbing makes it reasonable to
9 expect possible race structure developments in ski mountaineering as well.
10 Especially since the disciplines such as team relay and team sprint will be introduced
11 to the sport during the Olympic Games (Schöffel et al., 2023). Further developments,
12 similar to what could be observed for sport climbing, include 3-D animation,
13 optimized camera work, and specialized commentators that might lead to a more
14 professionalization of the sport (Lutter & Schöffel, 2020). Professionalization and
15 commercialization often alter the values and practices of outdoor sports as they
16 transition from recreational activities to competitive disciplines (Bautev & Robinson,
17 2022). Individuals within the outdoor sports communities are often averse to being
18 governed by organizations that do not appreciate the sports culture and value
19 because they fear that the sports might lose their independence and cultural origin
20 (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). Thus, whilst the inclusion of a sport into the Olympic
21 Program will bring more attention, there is a high probability that this can cause
22 tensions within the sports community (Renfee et al., 2024). As seen with other winter
23 sports, the inclusion of a sport into the Olympic program can lead to economic
24 benefits, ecological stress, and potential conflicts (Reiterer, 2019). Therefore, this
25 study examines the anticipated changes following the inclusion of ski mountaineering
26 in the Olympic Games. Therefore, the research question of this paper is: What are
27 the expected effects of ski mountaineering's inclusion in the 2026 Winter Olympics
28 on consumer interest, media coverage, and environmental sustainability?

29 The paper is structured as follows: After the Introduction, which outlined the
30 significance of including new sports in the Olympic Games, focusing on ski
31 mountaineering and its potential effects on popularity, commercialization, and
32 environmental impact. The Materials and Methods section describes the empirical
33 research design, including the survey methodology, participant recruitment, and data
34 collection. The Results present key findings on consumer interest, expected media
35 coverage, sponsorship growth, and environmental concerns and the discussion analyzes
36 these findings in relation to previous research, highlighting the implications of Olympic
37 inclusion on the sport's commercialization and sustainability. Finally, the Conclusion
38 summarizes key insights, provides recommendations for stakeholders, and suggests
39 areas for future research to monitor the long-term impact of ski mountaineering's
40 Olympic integration.

41

42

43 **Materials and Methods**

44

45 The study follows a direct primary empirical research design focusing on
46 consumers' perspectives on the sport of ski mountaineering. The questionnaire was

1 available in German, tested beforehand for clarity of wording and logical structure,
 2 and revised accordingly. The participant's recruitment was based on the snowball
 3 principle, and no eligibility criteria were applied. The survey period was 30 days,
 4 from November 12th to December 11th, 2024, and was accessible via the SoSci
 5 Survey platform. Where possible and appropriate, a five-point Likert scale with (1)
 6 disagreement/ unlikely and (5) agreement/ likely was used to answer the questions.
 7 These scales have been widely used since they best reflect the participant's
 8 perspectives (Li et al., 2008; Revilla et al., 2014). The participant's recruitment was
 9 based on the snowball principle; no eligibility criteria were applied, and no incentives
 10 for participation were provided. The questionnaire was structured as follows (Table
 11 1). The first section included socio-demographics such as age, gender, income, etc.
 12 The following section focused on the participant's immersion in ski mountaineering
 13 by asking questions like "How often do you go ski mountaineering during the winter
 14 season?" The following section focused on the participant's expectations of changes
 15 within the sport of ski mountaineering itself by asking questions like "Do you expect
 16 ski mountaineering to grow in popularity?" The final section referred to changes
 17 that could happen in different fields, such as tourism or nature conservation.
 18 Therefore, questions like "How strongly do you estimate the environmental impact
 19 resulting from an increase in ski mountaineering popularity?" If necessary, brief
 20 explanations were provided before the questions were asked to ensure that all
 21 participants had a similar understanding of the specific topic in question
 22

23 **Table 1.** *Structure of the questionnaire and brief description of items*

Item	Description	Level of Scale
Demographics	Age, gender, level of education and income	Nominal and interval
Personal immersion	Amount of participation and general interest in ski mountaineering	Ordinal
Ski mountaineering and the Olympic Games	Increase in media attention, sponsors, competition	Ordinal
Tourism and nature	Effects on tourism in mountainous regions, conflict with other sports, negative effects on nature	Ordinal

24
 25 The data were initially analyzed descriptively, and a series of Spearman rank
 26 correlations and Pearson's correlations were conducted to calculate the correlations.
 27 Group differences were calculated using linear regression (ANOVA) with Bonferroni
 28 post-hoc. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0.2
 29

30 31 **Results**

32
 33 A total of 431 questionnaires were completed. After removing questionnaires
 34 due to missing data, 279 could ultimately be used for the evaluation.
 35

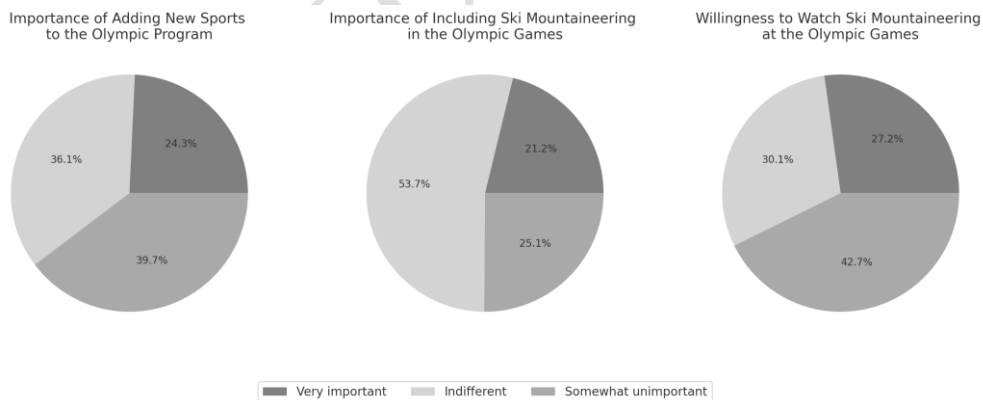
1 *Participants*

2
3 Of the participants, 42,3% (n=118) are female, and 57,7 % (n=161) are male.
4 The largest age group is 82,8 % (n=231) between 18 and 29 years, and the largest
5 net income group is 33,5% (n=99) between 2001 and 2500€. Regarding education,
6 65,9% (n=184) have a high school diploma, followed by 22,6% (n=63) with a
7 university degree. 52,3% (n=146) of the participants stated they are generally active
8 in winter, and 15,1 % (n=42) participate passively.

10 *Ski Mountaineering as a New Olympic Sport*

11
12 Of the participants, 14,7% (n=41) have a (very) high interest in ski
13 mountaineering in general, and 56,2% (n=157) have a medium to low interest. The
14 general inclusion of new sports into the Olympic program is seen by 24,1% (n=69)
15 as (very) important and by 39,4% (n=110) as (somewhat) unimportant. The
16 inclusion of ski mountaineering in the Olympic Program is seen by 21,2 % (n=59)
17 as (very) important and by 53,7 % (n=150) as (somewhat) unimportant. 27,2%
18 (n=76) show a strong willingness to watch ski mountaineering during the Olympic
19 Games, whereas 30,1% (n=84) are indifferent, and 42,7% (n=119) show a low
20 willingness. Figure 1 illustrates the findings regarding the inclusion of new sports
21 in the Olympic Games, as well as the inclusion of ski mountaineering and the
22 willingness to watch ski mountaineering at the upcoming Olympic Winter Games.

23
24 **Figure 1.** *Participant's perspective on the importance of new Olympic sports, ski*
25 *mountaineering, and willingness to watch ski mountaineering during the Olympic*
26 *Games*

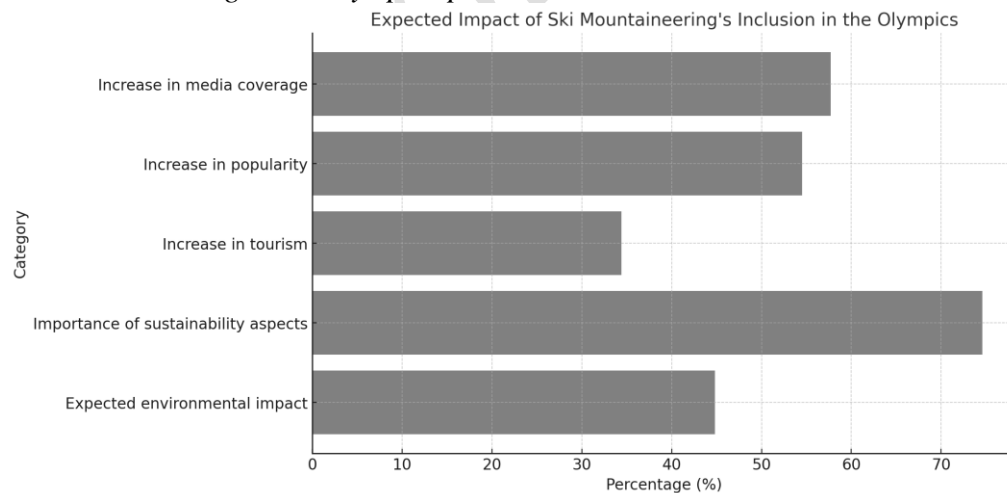


27
28 Referring to whether this inclusion will influence the general interest in the
29 sport, 36,6% (n=102) believe there will be an increase, whereas 26,5% (n=74) do
30 not see a potential increase, and 36,9% (n=103) are indifferent. No significant
31 differences in the socio-demographic factors have been found for all the presented
32 results.
33
34
35

Changes in the Future of Ski Mountaineering

57,7% (n=161) expect the media coverage to increase (very) strongly, and 54,5% (n=152) expect the popularity of ski mountaineering to increase (very) strongly. Increased popularity is expected to result from increased media coverage ($r=.652$, $p<.001$). 62,4% (n=176) expect a (very) substantial increase in potential sponsors for the sports. This increase is expected to result from higher media coverage ($r=.518$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, the amount of competition is expected by 43,1% (n=126) to (very) substantially increase, and 21,5% (n=60) expect a medium increase. This increase is expected to result from increased media coverage ($r=.481$, $p<.001$) and popularity ($r=.438$, $p<.001$). From a touristic perspective, 34,4% (n=96) expect a (very) high and 36,2% (n=101) a medium increase in recreational ski mountaineering as a result of increasing polarity ($r=.361$, $p<.001$). This increase in tourism is not expected to cause a higher potential for conflicts between different winter recreational sports ($r=-.103$, $p<.001$). However, the increase in tourism is expected to negatively affect the environment ($r=.166$, $p<.001$). In general, the adverse effects on the environment are expected to be minor by 26,4% (n=74), and 44,8% (n=125) expect (very) strong effects. Therefore, 74,6% (n=209) rate the incorporation of sustainability aspects as (very) important in promoting ski mountaineering. 42,7% (n=119) expect changes in nature conservation due to the inclusion of ski mountaineering in the Olympic Games. Figure 2 illustrates these findings.

Figure 2. Participants' expectations of the potential upcoming changes surrounding ski mountaineering as an Olympic Sport



Between the genders, a significant difference could be observed for the expected effects on the environment ($r=.217$; $p<.001$) as well as for the need to include sustainability aspects ($r=.174$; $p=.005$). The remaining socio-demographic factors revealed no differences for the remaining items. No significant difference exists between those who engage actively in ski mountaineering and those who do not. The only exception was a significant difference ($p<.001$) in how important ski mountaineering is in the Olympic Program.

1 Discussion

2
3 This study aimed to assess the potential consumer interest and upcoming
4 changes for ski mountaineering as a possible effect of becoming an Olympic Sport.
5 Since almost 83% of this study's participants are between 18 and 29 years old, the
6 results of this study present valuable insights into the perspective of this specific age
7 group, which is also the age group that seems to have a waning interest in the
8 Olympic Games (Flint & Vranica, 2016; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). According to
9 the results of this study, there seems to be a low since less than 1/3 show a clear
10 interest in watching ski mountaineering events during the Olympic Games. This
11 number is surprising since more than 2/3 of the participants are generally interested
12 in active or passive winter sports. This low interest in a new Olympic action sport
13 opposes the results of Wheaton & Thorpe (2019), who found that 60% of the
14 participants believed that including action sports would lead to them watching more
15 of the Olympic Games. It remains to be seen how the spectator's interest in ski
16 mountaineering will eventually develop. However, there might be the risk that ski
17 mountaineering faces issues similar to those seen in other sports. Like windsurfing,
18 introduced to the Olympic Games in 1984, ski mountaineering as a course-racing
19 event has to compete against more media-friendly and more spectacular forms of
20 skiing events for spectator attention (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2011). Interestingly, more
21 than half of the participants consider the general inclusion of action sports relatively
22 unimportant. This is a surprising finding since including action sports is supposed
23 to increase the interest of young spectators (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2022). This finding
24 might be explained by the fact that multiple action sports have been included over
25 recent years. Therefore, the need for further inclusions might be lower than in
26 previous editions of the Olympic Games. To achieve the goal of reaching younger
27 spectators, the IOC has to provide good media coverage strategies. This includes
28 specialized commentators, optimized camera work, and a way to provide a good
29 digital overview of the current race standings. To present the sport in a spectator-
30 friendly way is especially important since almost one-third of the participants are
31 indifferent and could become more willing to watch ski mountaineering. Since ski
32 petrol as the preliminary event has been removed from the Olympic program due to
33 the lack of spectator interest (Schöffel et al., 2018), providing good and media-
34 friendly coverage of the competition formats will be crucial. Even though there
35 seems to be a low willingness to watch ski mountaineering, the inclusion into the
36 Olympic Games is expected to increase the sport's popularity by almost 55 % of the
37 participants, most likely resulting from increased media coverage. This increase is
38 expected to lead to more competition and more sponsors for the sports. This
39 development would lead to economic benefits for athletes and the sport in general.
40 These expectations are comparable to those of Bortolan et al. (2021), who stated
41 that including a sport in the Olympic Games will lead to an increased participation
42 rate and growth of the sport and increased investment from the sports industry in
43 this sport. On the one hand, these changes can be seen as a good thing. However, on
44 the other hand, increased professionalization and commercialization might pressure
45 the sport to create new competition and media-friendly formats. Such a change has
46 already been observed surrounding the introduction of sport climbing in the

1 Olympic Games, and mainly since these changes in competition formats could
2 already be observed for ski mountaineering (Schöffel et al., 2023), it seems
3 reasonable to assume that in the future, further changes will occur.

4 A growing interest in outdoor activities seems to exist, intensified due to the
5 COVID-19 Pandemic (Weed, 2020). This growing interest can also be observed in
6 the sport of ski mountaineering. In Germany, there has been an estimated increase
7 from less than 200.000 in the year 2000 to more than 600.000 people engaging in
8 ski mountaineering in the year 2020 (Deutscher Alpenverein, 2024). As a result of
9 the COVID-19 Pandemic, when numerous ski resorts were temporarily closed, the
10 number of ski tourers increased significantly (Schlemmer & Schnitzer, 2023).
11 Therefore, including ski mountaineering in the Olympic Games might be a good
12 decision since it seems to be a form of winter activity that has gained more interest
13 over recent years. However, the people who engage in ski mountaineering as a
14 recreational activity tend to have an average age of almost 43 years (Deutscher
15 Alpenverein, 2022). Since one of the results from this study shows the relatively
16 low interest in ski mountaineering in the younger age group, this sport might not
17 entirely represent the targeted younger audience. A potential explanation could be
18 that ski mountaineering becomes a sport practiced by winter sport recreationists later
19 in life, at a stage where other disciplines like alpine downhill or freestyle skiing are
20 seen as too dangerous due to high speeds and acrobatic air manoeuvres. Suppose
21 the inclusion will lead to an increase in recreational use. In that case, it will be of
22 high importance for the sports federation to provide educational teaching since ski
23 mountaineering is a sport that involves dangers such as avalanches and crevasse.
24 Since avalanche and crevasse deaths have led to the complete exclusion of the sport
25 from the Olympic Program (Schöffel et al., 2018), the IOC needs to guarantee the
26 participants' safety during the Olympic Games. Suppose there will be an increase in
27 popularity and professionalization. This might lead the sports industry to develop a
28 more versatile range of products, better or more lightweight products, and long-
29 lasting products. Therefore, this change could be a valuable opportunity for the
30 sports industry to develop new markets and user groups.

31 The results of this study highlighted some aspects that need to be considered by
32 sports federations and other organizations to be prepared for potential upcoming
33 changes resulting from Olympic Games inclusion. Incorporating sustainability
34 aspects and reducing adverse environmental effects especially seems relevant since
35 some two-thirds of the participants see this as (very) important. Almost half of the
36 participants expect changes in nature conservation. Male participants see the effects
37 on nature as being more prolonged. This could be explained by the fact that male
38 participants, whilst not significantly, tend to participate in ski mountaineering more
39 often and, therefore, might experience adverse effects on the environment more
40 often during the execution of the sport. To protect nature and reduce adverse
41 environmental effects, sports organizations and federations should implement
42 education programs extending beyond the Olympic Games, focusing on practicing
43 the sport safely and in an environmentally friendly manner. These educational
44 programs are highly relevant since winter recreation can disturb animals and
45 damage vegetation (Rixen & Rolando, 2013). Even though the participants in this
46 study do not see increased conflicts with other winter recreationists, the education

1 programs should also aim to prevent intergroup conflicts (Miller & Vaske, 2016).
2 Strategies such as zoning or educational programs that prevent the rise of conflicts
3 should be considered by the relevant organizations and federations as well as for
4 tourism destinations. Furthermore, these stakeholders might have to develop sound
5 strategies for sustaining ski mountaineering as a winter tourism activity in the
6 current climate change. Therefore, including nature and climate protection strategies
7 seem to be very crucial.

10 Conclusion

12 This study provides valuable insights into the potential changes for ski
13 mountaineering resulting from its inclusion in the Olympic Games. Since the
14 participants primarily represent the age group that seems to be targeted by the IOC
15 by including action sports, this can be seen as a strength of this study. However, a
16 limitation of this study can be seen in the relatively low rate of people engaging in
17 ski mountaineering. This might explain the low rate of people wanting to watch ski
18 mountaineering. Further, ski mountaineering does not seem to be very well known;
19 therefore, during the Olympic Games, it needs to be presented in a way that can
20 increase attention. If this increase in attention is successful, the expected changes
21 can lead to economic benefits for athletes, the sport, and tourism, resulting from
22 increased popularity. This increase in popularity might also lead to adverse
23 environmental effects. Therefore, sports organizations and federations need to
24 develop sound strategies to be prepared for those potential upcoming changes.
25 Future research should monitor whether the aspects identified in this study occurred
26 or what other changes resulted from including ski mountaineering as an Olympic
27 Sport. Overall, the latest development in the sport of ski mountaineering provides
28 great opportunities for the growth of the sport.

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