



Exploring Flow Experience in Mountain Climbers: Insights for Enhancing Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

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Flow experience in mountain climbing can be understood as an individual's state of complete absorption when facing challenges that match their abilities. This study aims to explore the meaning of flow experience in mountain climbers from a phenomenological perspective and examine its implications for educational leadership. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, using in-depth interviews and member checking to ensure the validity of the data. The interview results were analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings revealed five key themes of flow experience among mountain climbers: (1) engaging in meaningful experiences by enjoying nature and fostering personal and social connections, (2) achieving a state of immersion characterized by focus, safety, and self-control, (3) relying on preparation, skills, and decision-making to face climbing challenges and risks, (4) using mountain climbing as a process for self-development, reflection, and value formation, and (5) experiencing positive emotional, physical, and psychological effects. These insights suggest that the principles of flow, such as focus, intrinsic motivation, and adaptive decision-making, can be applied to educational leadership to enhance teacher engagement, decision-making under pressure, and personal development.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, recreational activities that promote physical, psychological, and social well-being have gained increasing attention worldwide. Among these activities, mountain climbing has emerged as a popular trend in Indonesia, attracting thousands of participants annually (Mahadewi et al., 2025; Putra et al., 2025; Widhiningsih et al., 2024). This phenomenon reflects a broader societal interest in outdoor activities that can enhance mental health, personal growth, and social connections. According to Rahman and Kristiyanto (2018), individuals are drawn to mountain climbing for recreation, nature engagement, and the pursuit of new experiences. The rise in recreational climbing is not merely a leisure trend but also represents an opportunity for

society to foster resilience, focus, and emotional regulation. Therefore, understanding the psychological processes underlying climbing experiences, particularly the concept of flow, is crucial for promoting activities that enhance human potential. By studying flow experiences in climbers, researchers can provide insights into designing interventions in education and leadership that cultivate intrinsic motivation, concentration, and adaptive problem-solving in broader contexts (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Despite its growing popularity, the psychological and experiential dimensions of mountain climbing remain underexplored, particularly in recreational contexts (Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Holidi, 2025; Syafiih, 2025). Many individuals engage in climbing without a systematic understanding of the mental processes that contribute to engagement, satisfaction, and personal development (Dewi & Manshur, 2026; Khofsah, 2025; Kusumawati, 2025). While recreational climbers often report feelings of joy, immersion, and achievement, these experiences have not been fully investigated from a phenomenological perspective. Most existing studies focus on professional athletes or competitive rock climbers, whose motivations, training regimens, and psychological responses differ significantly from those of recreational participants (Steinmetz et al., 2022). Consequently, the absence of research on recreational climbers leaves a gap in understanding how flow experiences emerge in ordinary participants (Adeoye & Munawwaroh, 2025; Munawwaroh et al., 2024). Addressing this gap is critical, as insights into flow can inform strategies for personal development, risk management, and leadership skills, demonstrating how recreational engagement with nature can support cognitive, emotional, and social growth in broader educational and organizational contexts.

In Indonesia, the growing popularity of mountain climbing is reflected in tourism statistics and participation rates. According to Jatengprov (2025), nearly 960,000 tourists climbed 15 mountains in Central Java last year. Mount Rinjani also experienced a dramatic increase in climbers, rising from 39,226 in 2021 to 139,163 in 2023 (Rinjani National Park, 2025). These figures illustrate that climbing has become a significant recreational activity, engaging a wide spectrum of participants with diverse backgrounds, motivations, and experiences (Fauzi et al., 2025; Hasanah et al., 2024; Safitri, 2024). Climbers frequently report that the activity provides opportunities for relaxation, socialization, and self-development while facing tangible challenges such as difficult terrain, unpredictable weather, and physical limitations (Utami, 2021). Moreover, this engagement often triggers a state of optimal experience known as flow, where individuals feel fully immersed, focused, and intrinsically motivated, resulting in meaningful personal insights and emotional satisfaction (Abuhamdeh, 2020). This real-world phenomenon demonstrates the potential of

recreational climbing as a natural laboratory for studying human consciousness and performance.

Previous research on mountain climbing has primarily examined motivation, risk perception, and physical performance, leaving psychological and experiential dimensions underexplored. Salmah et al. (2024) highlight that climbers are driven by intrinsic factors, such as recreation, and extrinsic factors, such as enjoying natural scenery. Similarly, Gaffar et al. (2019) found that recreational climbers in West Java engage in climbing for self-development, achievement, and relaxation rather than competitive purposes. These studies suggest that climbing can produce positive outcomes for well-being and personal growth. However, they do not deeply analyze how flow experiences—defined as a state of complete absorption, balance between challenge and skill, and sense of control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) manifest in recreational climbers, leaving a critical gap in understanding the psychological mechanisms of engagement and satisfaction in this context.

Furthermore, most existing studies focus on extreme sports athletes or rock climbers, emphasizing competitive performance, risk-taking, and professional training (Steinmetz et al., 2022). This focus limits the generalizability of findings to recreational participants, whose goals, preparation, and experiences differ significantly. Afifah (2019) highlights that recreational climbers experience flow when their abilities match the challenges of climbing, yet this insight has not been fully examined from a phenomenological perspective. Investigating flow in recreational climbing offers a unique contribution by linking outdoor experiential engagement to positive psychology, personal development, and leadership skills. Such research is particularly relevant for educational leadership, where principles of flow—concentration, intrinsic motivation, decision-making, and adaptive problem-solving—can inform strategies for teacher engagement, student motivation, and organizational development.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of flow theory, recreational mountain climbing, and educational leadership. While flow has been widely studied in work, sports, and educational contexts (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Abuhamdeh, 2020), its application to recreational climbers as a model for developing leadership and management competencies remains underexplored. By employing a phenomenological approach, this research captures the lived experiences of climbers, uncovering how immersion, focus, and intrinsic motivation emerge naturally. The insights derived from these experiences can inform educational leaders on methods to cultivate engagement, resilience, and adaptive decision-making within schools and organizations. Moreover, linking flow to leadership competencies addresses a significant gap in the literature, providing actionable knowledge for enhancing professional and personal growth through nature-based recreational activities.

Based on the background and gaps identified, this study seeks to answer the question: “What is the meaning of flow experience in recreational mountain climbers, and how can it inform educational leadership?” The preliminary argument is that recreational climbing provides a rich context for understanding flow, highlighting the interplay of challenge, skill, concentration, and intrinsic satisfaction. By exploring the lived experiences of climbers, this research contributes to both positive psychology and educational management by offering evidence-based strategies to enhance engagement, motivation, and reflective practice in leadership settings. Ultimately, the study bridges the gap between recreational experiences in nature and professional competencies, demonstrating that principles derived from flow can be adapted to educational leadership to foster creativity, resilience, and holistic development. strategies are actually

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023; Fahmi, 2024; Niam et al., 2024; Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). The phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the meaning of flow experience among mountain climbers from the subjective perspective of the participants. According to Herdiansyah (2020), phenomenology emphasizes social reality as constructed by the beliefs and understanding of the involved subjects. This approach allows the study to investigate the psychological meaning of flow based on the lived experiences of individual climbers, providing in-depth insights into how they perceive and interpret this phenomenon.

The research was conducted among mountain climbers in Indonesia (specific locations can be added as needed). The location was selected due to the active climbing community, which provides access to participants who meet the study criteria. The choice of location also facilitates direct in-depth interviews with participants, ensuring rich and contextual data.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews guided by questions developed from Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) flow experience theory. The dimensions of flow according to Csikszentmihalyi (1990) include challenge-skill balance, concentration on the task, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, loss of self-consciousness, sense of control, autotelic experience, action-awareness merging, and perception of time transformation.

Five participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the following criteria: 1) having a hobby of mountain climbing for more than three years with at least ten climbs, 2) being a non-athlete climber, and 3) willingly participating in mountain climbing activities (Friday & Leah, 2024). The participants’ demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of Research Participants

Participant	Age (Years)	Climbing Experience (Years)	Number of Climbs
VA	22	4	12
AM	25	9	25
MA	24	9	89
LH	23	7	180
IR	21	6	20

The interview data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). According to Smith & Fieldsend (2021), IPA involves several steps: reading and understanding transcripts in depth, making initial notes, developing themes, identifying connections between themes, and searching for cross-case patterns by comparing themes from all participants to discover common patterns.

To strengthen data validity, member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the findings. This ensures that the results accurately reflect the subjective reality of the research informants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study focuses on the meaning of flow experience among mountain climbers from a phenomenological perspective. Data were obtained from in-depth interviews with five participants who had been climbing mountains for more than three years, with a minimum of ten climbs. The experience of being carried away and fully focused on mountain climbing activities provided meaning, which is described in the following themes.

Meaningful Experiences for Enjoying Nature and Building Personal and Social Connections

Enjoying the beauty of nature is one of the motivations for participants to engage in mountain climbing. Participants feel satisfied when they see the beauty of nature. They feel calm, clear-minded, and free when they are directly exposed to nature. Participant IR said:

"I want to be free when I have the intention to climb a mountain. So I want to be directly confronted not with humans, but with the environment or nature."

Facing nature directly provides a sense of calm and refreshes the mind. Participants only focus on climbing activities without paying attention to other people's judgments. They feel free to express themselves and enjoy the activities they are doing without worrying about other people's judgments. Therefore, mountain climbing activities also provide a break from daily routines.

In addition to enjoying nature, mountain climbing is seen as a way to conserve nature. As expressed by MA:

"Yes, sometimes with tree planting events. So it's not just about climbing mountains, but planting and caring for nature."

In this case, a meaningful experience is gained from seeing the planted trees grow and benefit many people, which brings a sense of pride and satisfaction. Participants realize that nature is not only to be enjoyed for its beauty, but also to be protected and cared for so that it continues to provide long-term benefits.

Mountain climbing companions influence the meaning felt in mountain climbing. A person's true nature and attitude will appear when facing various conditions during mountain climbing. This is reflected in AM's statement:

"Maybe it depends on your friends. If your friends are willing to take turns, it's nice. Taking turns means that the difficulties and joys of the journey can be shared, for example, if I sprain my ankle, my friend offers to help carry my things."

Through the activity of climbing, participants get to know the character and nature of their climbing companions better, which then becomes a lesson in socializing.

Friends who show compatible traits and attitudes during the climb make the atmosphere more lively, which then creates a sense of togetherness. The moments of togetherness felt during mountain climbing create a distortion of time, as shown in MA's statement:

"Usually, when camping and meeting close friends, we are on the same wavelength. So, we can relax while cooking and forget about time. Because when we find the right friends, it can be more exciting and we forget about time."

Enjoying climbing activities with friends makes participants forget the time and not realize how quickly it passes. In addition, climbing companions can also provide social support when facing challenges and obstacles on the mountain. This also motivates participants to climb mountains again because they miss the atmosphere they experienced while on the mountain.

Mountain Climbing as a State of Flow Accompanied by Focus, Safety, and Self-Control

Mountain climbing is interpreted as a process rather than reaching the summit. Although the summit is one of the goals to be achieved, participants feel a meaningful experience from the process itself. This is expressed by AM:

"I am happier with the process. The process during the climb is how it is,

so there is no rush to reach the summit. I am happy with the process that is being undertaken, enjoying it more."

Facing challenges on the trail and overcoming them creates meaningful experiences. The difficult and easy challenges of mountain climbing evoke sensations that trigger a range of emotions, such as sadness, joy, fear, panic, and excitement. Some participants expressed a preference for difficult challenges because they produce an adrenaline rush. However, some participants preferred a balanced route between difficult and easy paths because they wanted to enjoy a relaxed climb while still experiencing the adrenaline rush. Facing difficult paths evoked feelings of sadness when their abilities were tested, but also produced enthusiasm to overcome the challenges.

In enjoying the mountain climbing process, participants faced each climbing route with a flowing feeling. They only focused on what they were doing at that moment without thinking about anything else. This was expressed by AM:

"Even though the trail is difficult, even though the trail is easy, just go with the flow. So you enjoy the journey more."

In this case, participants feel immersed in the climbing process. Their minds and body movements are in sync with the conditions of the trail they are traversing. Even though there are easy and difficult challenges, participants still enjoy the climbing activity in every process they undertake.

Enjoying the process rather than reaching the summit is also based on the main goal of mountain climbing, which is to return home safely. All participants stated that safety is paramount, especially when facing conditions that pose a threat to life. As expressed by LH:

"On Mount S, we set off with three people. We arrived at the shelter around 2 PM, and at that time, there was a storm. We felt moved. At that time, I was asked to make a decision between going up or down. I decided to go down for safety reasons. I felt satisfied because my friends trusted my decision and they were not disappointed even though we had traveled far from City M by motorcycle, a 7-hour journey, and then climbed the mountain."

In this case, facing risky conditions requires self-control, calmness, and staying focused to make the right decisions. Additionally, facing difficult conditions with a sense of togetherness and trust in one another can bring satisfaction, even if the desired outcome is not achieved.

In facing difficult conditions, spirituality plays a role in influencing the experience. Spirituality can help one become more focused when facing difficult conditions. This was expressed by MA:

“Yes, walking while praying, because my mind used to be filled with negative thoughts and I couldn’t focus. Then, while praying, I felt calm, and it felt like a relief.”

Difficult conditions can cause anxiety, characterized by many negative thoughts, but this can be overcome with a strong spiritual belief. Believing in God and surrendering to the circumstances creates a sense of calm and focus. This then helps participants find solutions to the situations they face.

Preparation, Skills, and Decision Making as the Basis for Facing the Challenges and Risks of Climbing

Mountain climbing is understood as an activity that requires physical and mental readiness, technical skills, and survival strategies. This preparation is essential to face various conditions on the mountain. This is reflected in IR's statement:

“There are steps to follow. We must be aware of our own shortcomings, then understand the process of our development when undertaking a climb, for example, awareness of our physical condition, awareness of our mental limits, and whether we are physically strong or weak and dizzy. Then we must know our limits first, without forcing ourselves. Second, we must seek useful knowledge, both before and during the climb, such as survival skills. So, if we already have this knowledge, all that remains is how to apply it.”

From this statement, it is clear that many preparations are made before climbing a mountain, ranging from logistical preparations to physical, mental, and sufficient knowledge related to mountain climbing. Knowledge of how to survive in the wild is essential in mountain climbing as a means of coping with unpredictable natural conditions. These preparations are a way to balance one's abilities with the challenges of the mountain.

Understanding one's physical condition and making the right decisions are necessary when facing the risks of climbing. In this case, self-control is essential to balance one's ego with one's abilities. Participants try to calm their minds so that they can consider various possibilities before making a decision. In addition, advice, support, and trust among fellow climbers also influence satisfaction with the decisions made. Some decisions are also made through discussions among fellow climbers. This was expressed by VA:

“It's a joint decision, asking your friends if they are still strong or not. Then, if everyone is still strong, the journey continues, but it's important to be careful and slow down because it's nighttime and the path is not visible without a flashlight.”

Wrong decisions have also been made by participants, but they try to correct those decisions and use the mistakes as lessons for future climbs. Knowing what decisions are right or wrong is based on observing the surroundings and being aware of all possible consequences of those decisions.

Mountain Climbing as a Process of Self-Development, Life Values, and Reflection on Life

The experience of mountain climbing provides lessons that shape one's character. Through the challenges and risks faced, the experience of mountain climbing encourages reflection on life, positive change, and the internalization of positive values. The process of mountain climbing, which provides tranquility and comfort, allows participants to reflect on themselves. This then leads to personal change, as expressed by LH:

"In the past, we often went out at night, but now it's different, like a drastically different life. What used to be like a very naughty child is now different. Now, when on vacation, we just climb mountains in search of peace and comfort. Bad habits have been replaced after discovering a new hobby, namely mountain climbing."

The positive values gained from mountain climbing experiences are applied in daily life. The internalized values include responsibility, empathy, humility, and discipline. Responsibility is evident when they ensure their own safety and that of others. In addition, responsibility is also gained from the way they take responsibility for the decisions they make when facing challenges on the mountain. This sense of responsibility then becomes a good habit in daily life, such as being responsible for completing obligations in college or at work. This was expressed by IR:

"If we spend time on things that are less useful, it means looking for more useful activities or activities that are responsible, for example, when there are lectures and other responsibilities, they must be done as soon as possible. Especially if there are lecture assignments, they usually have to be submitted close to the deadline. That's what I learned from the world of mountaineering. There is a lot of free time that is not utilized well, so that when the deadline is approaching, we become rushed."

In this context, besides responsibility, time management also becomes a value internalized in daily life through mountain climbing activities.

The values of empathy and humility are gained when participants face challenges that pose risks. Participants do not underestimate the challenges they face on the mountain, even if they are easy to overcome. They also become more

appreciative of other climbers and help each other when needed. Facing risky conditions on the mountain evokes empathy, which is then followed by helpful behavior. This was experienced by LH:

"We helped someone experiencing hypothermia. At that time, their team couldn't handle it, so we helped and saved their life."

Participants feel empathy when they see others in difficulty. This then encourages helpful behavior regardless of the relationship or background of the person being helped.

Positive Impact of Mountain Climbing on Emotional, Physical, and Psychological Conditions

The climbing experience had a positive effect on the emotional and psychological well-being of the participants, such as the emergence of positive emotions, fresher minds, increased mental resilience, and awareness of physical condition. Emotional and psychological well-being was derived from the sense of calm and positive emotions that arose during the mountain climbing process. This activity is a recreational activity that serves as a break from daily routines. This is reflected in IR's statement:

"There is a phase when I really want peace from the hustle and bustle of life, I want to be alone. But when there is an invitation, I focus on the team. When there is an invitation during that phase, I can join in, I am more flexible. Because earlier, if I wanted to be alone, it meant seeking peace."

In this case, mountain climbing becomes a place to rest and calm oneself from the problems of life. In addition, the challenges faced during mountain climbing also serve as a means of training mental endurance.

Psychological well-being can be triggered by positive thoughts and a supportive environment. Participants feel refreshed by the natural and social environment in the mountains. LH said:

"Empty, calm. Empty does not mean no thoughts, it just feels relieved. The natural environment, such as the sound of birds, makes me feel calm. The people there are better than here. When you meet someone there, they always say ' '. Here, it's not like that."

Social support from the environment evokes positive emotions that trigger social well-being. In addition, the sense of togetherness that arises from climbing activities done together provides a feeling of joy and comfort.

In addition to more positive psychological conditions, physical conditions also experience positive effects. Participants feel that their bodies are fitter when they regularly climb mountains. This is reflected in the statement

"Physically, we become healthier. For example, climbing maintains endurance and stamina, so we feel satisfied. When we finish, it feels good."

Mountain climbing is seen as a recreational sport that not only affects physical fitness but also has psychological effects. Physical endurance becomes stronger due to the physical activities performed during mountain climbing.

Discussion

Flow experience is a state of optimal consciousness in which an individual is fully engaged in an activity, balancing challenges with skills, having clear goals, immediate feedback, and a sense of control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Mountain climbing, as carried out by the participants, represents a flow experience because climbers were fully immersed in reaching the summit while effectively matching their skills to the challenges faced (Annisa et al., 2025; Thohir, 2024; Zamroni & Maulida Thohir, 2025). Immediate feedback occurred when participants adjusted decisions after recognizing errors, and the feeling of immersion was maintained alongside focus on the ultimate goal of returning home safely. This demonstrates how flow involves both engagement and self-regulation, which are relevant to decision-making and focus in educational leadership contexts.

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), flow consists of multiple components, including challenge-skill balance, concentration on the task, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, loss of self-consciousness, sense of control, autotelic experience, action-awareness merging, and the perception of time transformation (Bulqis & Fachri, 2025; Insani & Ari, 2023; Ni'am et al., 2025). The first theme, mountain climbing as a meaningful experience, reflects the components of loss of self-consciousness and altered time perception. Participants reported deep enjoyment of nature and social interactions, where time seemed to pass more quickly due to immersion in the activity. The sense of freedom and focus on climbing, rather than external judgments, exemplifies how flow can support intrinsic motivation and engagement, principles applicable to educational leadership (Wayne et al., 2024).

The second theme, climbing as a state of flow characterized by focus, safety, and self-control, illustrates autotelic experience, action-awareness merging, concentration, clear goals, and sense of control (Banfield, 2024). Participants found satisfaction in the climbing process itself, rather than solely reaching the summit, reflecting intrinsic motivation (Baumann, 2021). Their actions occurred naturally and spontaneously, demonstrating deep concentration and merging of awareness and action (Shepherd, 2021). Clear

goals, including returning home safely and appreciating nature, reinforced focus and task engagement, while self-control allowed participants to navigate risks safely (Abuhamdeh, 2020; Lavoie et al., 2022).

The third theme, preparation, skills, and decision-making, relates to challenge-skill balance and unambiguous feedback. Climbers prepared physically, mentally, and technically before expeditions, ensuring that challenges matched their abilities, which is central to achieving flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When encountering obstacles, participants made decisions, received immediate feedback from the environment, and corrected mistakes, which enhanced the flow experience by allowing adaptive learning and performance adjustment (Reser & Scherl, 1988; Schaffer & Fang, 2022). This adaptive decision-making mirrors the problem-solving and reflective capacities needed in educational leadership.

The fourth theme, internalizing life values through mountain climbing, highlights the impact of flow on personal growth. Experiences on the mountain, such as facing challenges and interacting with peers, fostered values like responsibility, empathy, humility, and discipline, which participants applied in daily life (Hussain & Kumar, 2025). This theme emphasizes how immersive experiences can promote self-development and moral reflection, offering parallels for fostering teacher and student growth within educational leadership.

The fifth theme, psychological and physical benefits, shows that flow experiences positively affect well-being, resilience, and physical fitness. Participants reported increased positive emotions, mental clarity, and a sense of achievement, supporting the idea that flow contributes to overall satisfaction and life quality (Mazaya et al., 2025; 2024). These benefits underline how promoting flow-like engagement in educational settings can enhance motivation, well-being, and performance among educators and learners.

In summary, the flow experience in mountain climbing demonstrates principles such as intrinsic motivation, focused attention, adaptive decision-making, and value internalization, all of which have direct implications for educational leadership. By understanding how flow fosters engagement, concentration, and personal development, educational leaders can design strategies that enhance teacher motivation, decision-making under pressure, and holistic professional growth. Thus, the phenomenological insights from mountain climbing provide valuable lessons for improving leadership practices in education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight that the flow experience in mountain climbing encompasses meaningful engagement, focused attention, skill-challenge balance, decision-making, and value internalization. The study reveals that mountain climbing not only provides immersive experiences but also fosters personal growth, resilience, and the internalization of positive life values such as responsibility, empathy, discipline, and self-reflection. These insights demonstrate that flow experiences can serve as a model for enhancing motivation, engagement, and adaptive decision-making in educational leadership, offering lessons on how educators and leaders can cultivate intrinsic motivation, focus, and holistic development in learning environments.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was small and limited to a specific group of mountain climbers, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, data were collected through self-reported interviews, which may be influenced by participants' subjective interpretation and memory. Future research could expand the sample across diverse populations and incorporate longitudinal or observational methods to better understand how flow experiences influence behavior and leadership practices over time. Additionally, exploring flow in other high-engagement activities or educational contexts could provide further insights into its application for professional development and leadership in education.

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