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Communication Practices and Social Tie Formation: A Case  
Study of Recreational Lifestyle Sports Cultures

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## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

### Abstract

This case study examines contemporary recreational sports practitioners' communication practices and social tie formation from the perspective of two lifestyle sports disciplines: climbing and trail running. Online survey results from 301 climbers and trail runners from Finland indicate that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has established its place in recreational lifestyle sports cultures; however, it has not done it at the expense of face-to-face (FtF) communication. Online interaction produces weak social ties with instrumental and informative value, but physical location is essential in establishing ties with emotional and appraisal value. This paper argues that it is the sports subculture and individual practitioners' needs that define how interaction is realized, and what importance different online and off-line communication practices have. Besides studying communication practices, this case study explores the social meanings practitioners attribute to their social contacts.

*Keywords:* computer-mediated communication, social media, social networking, social support, sports practitioners

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

### Communication Practices and Social Tie Formation: A Case Study of Recreational Lifestyle Sports Cultures

New communication technologies have changed the dynamics of social interaction (Baym, 2015; Rainie & Wellman, 2014). In the context of sports, practitioners share online sports-related material such as exercise data; information about events, locations, techniques, and equipment; and stories about success and failure. This process takes place in the form of text, pictures, videos, “likes,” and shares on various social media sites. With the help of smartphones, action cameras, activity trackers, and mobile applications, the popularity of sports-related social media practices is growing (Millington, 2014; Thorpe, 2016). However, to a large extent it remains unclear how sports practitioners interact online, what meanings they attribute to their social interaction, and what relevance face-to-face (FtF) communication and joint physical activities still have in recreational sports cultures.

Previous literature shows that social interaction is strongly associated with physical and mental health enhancing outcomes (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Seeman, 1996). Among the documented positive effects of social support are higher perceptions of self-efficacy, improved task performance, better coping, and better disease resistance and recovery (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002). Furthermore, studies indicate that by influencing self-efficacy, social peer support subsequently impacts physical activity levels (Anderson, Wojcik, Winett, & Williams, 2006; Samson & Solmon, 2011). Recent research has additionally found that sports-related social media use can motivate people to increase their everyday sports practice (Mahan, Seo, Jordan, & Funk, 2015; Zhang, Brackbill, Yang, & Centola, 2015). Since physical activity levels among Europeans continue to decrease (European Commission, 2014), further research on the value of social interaction in recreational sports is increasingly important.

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

This case study approaches the topic from the perspective of two lifestyle sports disciplines in the Finnish context. The focus of this study is on recreational sports. In this paper, recreational sports practitioners are defined as nonprofessional leisure-time physical activity enthusiasts whose main focus of practice is on physical and mental well-being and on individual development. Recreational sports practitioners engage in a range of exercise levels with varying goals, motivations, and actions. Based on empirical evidence, this study shows that social interaction is an essential part of recreational sports. Moreover, this paper argues that it is the sports subculture and individual practitioners' needs that define how interaction is realized, and what importance different online and off-line communication practices have.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Online Communication Practices in the Context of Sports**

A contemporary definition of computer-mediated communication (CMC) includes all digitally mediated and, to a growing extent, mobile communication (Herring, 2008). Today, a considerable part of interpersonal interaction is computer mediated and occurs in the form of instant messages, group discussions, and shared activities on social media sites. Following Wenger, Trayner, and de Laat's (2011) conceptual framework, this paper understands social media to include both interest-based online communities, such as YouTube and Reddit, and relationship-based social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter.

Previous studies on recreational sports practitioners' CMC practices are few. Most previous research on social media and sports has focused on sports fandom, professional athletes, and sports marketing (see Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Studies have examined fan-to-fan communication (e.g., Boehmer & Tandoc, 2015; Clavio, 2008; Clavio, Burch, & Frederick, 2012; Frederick, Clavio, Burch, & Zimmerman, 2012), athlete-to-athlete communication (e.g., Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010), fan-to-athlete communication (e.g., Clavio & Kian, 2010; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012), and

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

consumer communication from the perspective of online sites (e.g., Hardin, Koo, Ruyhley, Dittmore, & McGreevey, 2012; Hodge, Pederson, & Walker, 2015; Kwak, Kim, & Zimmerman, 2010; Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011) and event organization (e.g., Hambrick, 2012).

Hur, Ko, and Valacich (2007) are among the first to study communication practices from the viewpoint of sports practitioners. In their study, Hur et al. focus on practitioners' motivations and concerns with sports-related information retrieval and online shopping. Ojala and Saarela (2010) examine further the needs and motivations of practitioners to share exercise data in multisport online communities. Kang's (2014) research on endurance-sport online communities broadens the perspective from the needs and motivations to other factors that affect members' knowledge-sharing behavior. Most recent studies that investigate the relation between practitioners and online platforms include Geurin-Eagleman's (2015) research on master sports participants' use of online communities, and Stragier, Evens, and Mechant's (2015) research on practitioners' motivations to share physical activity status updates on social networking sites.

The reviewed studies emphasize the relationship between sports practitioners and diverse social media platforms. Most of the conducted research is grounded on a uses and gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Studies have found that information gathering, interaction, experiences, and entertainment are the main gratifications for people to use social media services for sports-related purposes (Geurin-Eagleman, 2015; Hur et al., 2007; Kang, 2014; Ojala & Saarela, 2010; Stragier et al., 2015). Only two of the reviewed studies additionally suggest forming social contacts or gaining emotional social support (Hur et al., 2007; Ojala & Saarela, 2010) as a gratification.

Academics have brought up the one-sidedness of the previous research on social media and sports, and therefore they suggest that researchers move toward a more integrated

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

application of theory and expand the methodological approaches of future studies (Filo et al., 2015; Pedersen, 2014). In the context of lifestyle sports (Wheaton, 2010), a more comprehensive approach on the role of social media in sports has already been adopted. Many recent studies rely on the conceptual framework that Woermann (2012) builds in his research on social media practices in freeskiing culture. At the heart of Woermann's analysis is the content that practitioners themselves produce and consume online. Woermann argues that recording and sharing sports activities enable practitioners to experience the technical details and the aesthetic nature of the performance, and thus help them develop their sports practice. However, reflection online is by no means an individually conducted activity. On the contrary, Woermann's research shows that sharing on social media is a unifying practice among members of a subculture (Woermann 2012).

Similarly, Jones (2011) and MacKay and Dallaire (2012) study skateboarders, Dumont (2014) climbers, and Olive (2015) surfers with the focus on production and consumption of self-produced material online. Reviewed studies on lifestyle sports strongly agree that the use of social media has been integrated into sports practice. Physical experiences and social media shape each other as practitioners increasingly and continuously share and consume media products (Dumont, 2014; Hutchins, 2011; Jones, 2011; MacKay & Dallaire, 2012; Olive, 2015; Woermann, 2012). In this process, the line separating producer and consumer is fading. Woermann (2012), following Dumont (2015), describes prosumption, the consumption of self-produced leisure content, as an ongoing process that challenges commercial sports media.

Research on sports practitioners' social interactions helps us understand practices of prosumption, identity formation, power relations, and cultural hierarchies in lifestyle sports cultures (Thorpe, 2016). This study attempts to broaden the scope of previous research mainly focused on proficient lifestyle sports by looking at recreational practitioners' social

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

interactions online and FtF. Whereas all of the reviewed studies on lifestyle sports have been conducted with qualitative methods, this study takes a mixed-methods approach with the goal of extending understanding of contemporary lifestyle sports cultures. Furthermore, this paper looks at both communication practices in lifestyle sports and the reasons behind communicating and forming social ties with other practitioners.

### **Social Ties and Social Support**

Social ties are “the links that bind individuals to other individuals, as manifested in the frequency and kinds of communications among individuals” (Pickering and King, 1995, p. 480). Using their social ties, people share various resources, such as information or goods. Social ties can be either weak or strong. People who are connected through strong ties are often willing to share more resources, compared with people who are connected through weak ties (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). However, a group of people connected via strong ties are limited to the resources within the group unless some of the members have access to other groups through their weak ties (Burt, 1993). The strength of the weak ties is therefore that they provide more diverse resources than do strong ties (Granovetter, 1973).

When sharing resources, individuals also exchange social support. Social support can be informational, instrumental, appraisal, or emotional (Berkman et al., 2000). In the context of sports, informational support can be seen as providing information about sports gear, instrumental support as teaching sports techniques, appraisal support as encouraging a fellow practitioner to overcome a physical challenge, and emotional support as consoling a practitioner after an unsuccessful attempt.

Social support has been shown to impact physical activity behavior indirectly by influencing self-regulation and self-efficacy (Anderson et al., 2006; Samson & Solmon, 2011) or intention (Cavallo et al., 2013). Social support can be exchanged between two people or among many people. Network support “enables people to feel part of a group



## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

whose members have common interests and concerns” (Cutrona & Russell, 1990, p. 322).

Mahan et al.’s (2015) research on social network support indicates that the use of running-related social media has an impact on running behavior, and overall life satisfaction.

Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2015) conducted a controlled trial on online social networks and physical activity, which shows that adding a social comparison element to a support network increases participants’ physical activity levels.

In the present paper, social ties and contacts are used as synonyms, and defined as interpersonal weak or strong connections to other practitioners within the same sport. In this study, both interpersonal and network support are taken into consideration. Instead of measuring the relationship between online activities and sports behavior (as in Mahan et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2015), this study aims to gain a better understanding of the social motivations that lie behind them. Moreover, to identify which social norms are products of sports subcultures, this study makes comparisons between two sports disciplines.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This case study examines contemporary recreational sports practitioners’ communication practices and social tie formation from the perspective of two sports disciplines: climbing and trail running. The purpose of this paper is to investigate practitioners’ social interaction, and the meanings they attribute to it. This study looks at similarities and differences between the selected sports. The comparison is done to find out which factors affect social tie formation and, consequently, social support exchange. The following research questions are posed to meet the goals of the study:

**RQ1:** What is the role of CMC technologies in the context of recreational lifestyle sports?

**RQ2:** How and why do recreational lifestyle sports practitioners form social

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

ties with each other?

**RQ3:** What are the relationships among practitioners' communication practices, social tie formation, and the meanings attributed to social ties?

### **Method**

#### **Sample and Procedure**

This study is limited to individual recreational sports practice; in other words, elite sports, team sports, and sports clubs are excluded from the study. Moreover, this research has its focus on physical activities that can be labeled as lifestyle sports (Wheaton, 2010). The central common factor in lifestyle sports is practitioners' holistic orientation toward the practice. In lifestyle sports, participants' physical and mental as well as cultural, emotional, and existential needs are taken account (Atkinson, 2010).

Two lifestyle sports disciplines, climbing and trail running, were selected for the study. A choice was made among lifestyle sports disciplines that have a long tradition of practice, have gained popularity in recent years, are practiced around the globe, and are clearly visible online. To some extent, comparisons between the two sports enable generalization of the results to other lifestyle sports disciplines. Climbers and trail runners were studied in Helsinki, Finland. Helsinki was chosen for this study because both climbing and trail running are practiced widely and have strong communities in the region.

#### **Data Collection and Distribution**

Data collection took place from March to May 2016. The online questionnaire was promoted on sports-specific Facebook groups and online communities, and directed toward practitioners living in the Helsinki area. Permission for promoting the questionnaire was given by the administrators of the sites and specific groups. The questionnaire was available in Finnish and English. Participants were not asked to disclose their nationalities or promised

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

any rewards for participation. As the questionnaire was only promoted online, the collected data were limited to people who use social media as a part of their sports practice.

In the questionnaire, participants were asked questions related to their climbing or trail running communication practices and sports-specific social contacts. Social contacts were defined in the questionnaire as “people you know through climbing/ trail running.” Most questions were close ended and had multiple choices as well as space for supplementary answers. Different perspectives for examining social interaction were how, where, with whom, and how often it took place. Following, participants were given Likert-scale statements regarding their social contacts in the context of a sports discipline. The used statements measured to what extent practitioners receive informational, instrumental, appraisal, and emotional support from other practitioners. In closing, participants could answer two open-ended questions about the meaningfulness of their social ties related to climbing or trail running.

Altogether, 301 climbers and trail runners answered the questionnaire. Of these participants, 59% were climbers and 42% were trail runners. Regarding gender, 53% were male, 46% female, and 1% other. In terms of age, 18% were in the age group 15–29, 49% in 30–39, 27% in 40–49, and 6% in 50–69. A combined variable of practice length, frequency, and self-estimated competence shows that 16% of participants can be classified as novice practitioners, 60% as intermediate practitioners, and 24% as advanced practitioners.

### **Data Analysis**

Questionnaire data were analyzed using statistical analysis (SPSS) software. Statistical analysis was used to summarize and describe the empirical data and to investigate relationships among different variables. Descriptive statistics and independent samples t test were calculated for these purposes. Open-ended questions (256 answers) were coded

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

inductively and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The purpose of the inductive analysis was to identify themes that may not have been taken into account in the questionnaire design. Coding required reading through all the answers three times. Sample responses were selected from each emerging theme. Some of the sample responses were translated from Finnish by the author.

### **Results**

#### **Face-to-Face Communication**

On average, 90% of practitioners in both sports interact FtF with other practitioners (Table 1). However, climbers communicate comparatively more FtF. Almost 60% of climbers interact at indoor or outdoor sports sites once a week or more, whereas less than 20% of trail runners do it as often. In comparison, trail runners interact more at sports events. However, because the number of events practitioners participate in yearly is limited, the overall amount of trail runners' FtF communication with other practitioners is considerably lower, compared with that of climbers.

The reason why climbers engage more FtF with each other is likely because climbing is geographically more defined and limited compared with trail running, and thus climbers have a higher probability of meeting other climbers while they practice the sport. Moreover, indoor climbing halls provide a year-around location for climbers to frequently meet and engage FtF. A question about participants' sports practice supports this reasoning. Almost 80% of trail runners state that they practice alone at times, whereas only slightly over 40% of climbers ever practice alone. As for trail runners, the lack of well-defined locations may explain the importance of sports events as FtF interaction locales.

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

### **Computer-Mediated Communication**

The results show that most practitioners who took part in the questionnaire are active users of social media (Table 2). On average, more than 90% of practitioners follow and over 70% take part in sports-related discussion online. Furthermore, more than 90% of practitioners read and 30% write sports-related articles, reviews, or blog posts online. The frequency of consuming textual content is significantly higher compared with the frequency of producing it. Most practitioners consume content weekly but produce it only occasionally. Trail runners both consume and produce textual content somewhat more actively, compared with climbers.

Apart from textual content, practitioners frequently consume visual content online. More than 90% of practitioners watch sports-related pictures and videos online, and most do it on a weekly basis. Climbers consume visual content slightly more often, compared with trail runners. Besides consuming, on average 80% of practitioners occasionally take sports-related photos and/or record sports-related videos.

In addition to consuming and producing textual and visual content, practitioners share it too. Over 60% of practitioners share sports-related articles, reviews, or blog posts online. Moreover, 70% of practitioners share photos and videos they have watched, and more than 70% of practitioners share photos and videos that they have taken themselves. However, the average frequency of all sharing activities is less than once a month.

The only CMC practice that shows a significant difference between the two sports is recording and sharing sports exercise data with the help of technology such as sports watches, activity trackers, or mobile applications. Of trail runners, 90% record and almost 60% share exercise data, whereas only over 30% of climbers record and less than 20% share data with

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

other practitioners. Most trail runners record exercise data weekly but share it only occasionally.

A review of mediated communication channels (Table 3) reveals that social networking sites provide the main channels for practitioners to communicate personally with each other. By contrast, online communities and e-mail are not widely used for one-on-one communication. Comparison between the sports shows that trail runners communicate slightly more via online communities than do climbers. Conversely, the results indicate that climbers use more personal communication channels, as they communicate more via phone calls, text messages, and mobile applications. The results thus suggest that climbers form more personal social connections with other practitioners than do trail runners.

### **Social Ties**

The results presented above show that practitioners have an evident need to interact with each other. As a consequence of interaction, practitioners may form social ties. The results of the questionnaire reveal that most practitioners in both sports form social ties with other practitioners (Table 4). However, the locations where ties are formed vary between the sports. In line with the previous findings, the results show that most climbers form ties at indoor or outdoor sports sites, whereas most trail runners form ties at sports events and online.

**Meanings related to social ties.** A five-point Likert scale was further used to measure what meanings practitioners attribute to their social ties. Average scale values were counted for each sport, and a t test was used to measure statistical significance between the mean values. Table 5 shows the extent to which practitioners of each sport agree on the statements about their social ties.

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

The results of the questionnaire indicate that practitioners attribute many instrumental and informative meanings to their social ties. For practitioners, sports-related contacts provide information about indoor and outdoor sports sites, events, and gear. Moreover, social ties provide sports-related news and entertainment as well as advice on training techniques.

Apart from informational and instrumental support, social ties provide emotional and appraisal support. When it comes to emotional and appraisal support, the results show significant differences between the sports. Climbers more often feel that their social ties are caring and motivating, provide a sense of belonging, and help them develop in their practice. Consequently, climbers find their social ties more important than do trail runners. The reason for this is presumably because climbers interact more FtF.

To test the assumption of FtF communication being crucial for forming contacts with emotional value, practitioners in both sports were divided into two groups, depending on how often they interact FtF with other practitioners. The previous statements about social contacts were used, and with the help of a t test, the counted means were compared between the practitioners who interact with other practitioners FtF less than once a week and at least once a week. The results (Table 6) reveal that those practitioners who interact more FtF attribute stronger emotional meanings to their social contacts, and thus, presumably, form stronger social ties with other practitioners. It is however relevant to note that a comparison between practitioners in the similar categories shows that climbers in both categories attribute stronger emotional meanings to their social contacts than do trail runners.

Explanations for the perceived differences between climbing and trail running can be found from the specific and cultural variations between the sports. For example, in climbing, forming contacts is often a necessity because of security reasons. While climbing partners secure each other, they are likely to give technical advice too, and thus help each other to develop in their practice. Moreover, as noted earlier, training conditions in each sport affect

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

how and where practitioners interact, and thus what kinds of ties they form with each other. If conditions make interaction difficult during practice, practitioners look for interaction elsewhere. In this regard, social media offer many possibilities for practitioners to get connected.

**Reasons for forming social ties.** An inductive analysis of all open-ended questions revealed additional meanings and reasons for why practitioners form social ties with other practitioners. Most of these reasons could be found in both trail runners' and climbers' answers. Categorization of the coded data brought out the following six main reasons for forming social ties:

***Friendship and family relations.*** The most frequently coded reason for forming social ties is the fact that practitioners want to form deeper friendships and relationships with other practitioners. For many climbers and trail runners, these relationships extend beyond physical practice. A 29-year-old male said, "I spend time with my climbing friends even when I'm not climbing." Similarly, a 46-year-old female noted: "Some of my trail-running contacts have become friends also outside trail running."

Besides friends, some practitioners have a partner or family members with whom they practice. A 23-year-old female climber stated, "Me and my spouse share climbing as a lifestyle." Other practitioners express a wish for a partner. For example, a 32-year-old female said she would "like to find a like-minded partner among trail runners."

***Companionship and community.*** For many practitioners, other people provide training company. Especially in climbing, forming social ties is related to security. As stated by a 28-year-old female, "The more climbing partners you have, the better chances you have that you don't need to climb alone without belayers." Trust and security are topics that climbers often mention together. A 34-year-old female said, "I want to practice with people



## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

whom I can trust.” Also, many trail runners think that training companionship increases security during the practice. A 40-year-old male runner stated, “It’s more fun and safer to practice in a group.”

Besides providing security, many practitioners think that sports-related social ties provide added motivation for practice. A 56-year-old male runner reflected thus: “They [other runners] make me do harder and longer training sessions that I couldn’t complete alone.” Likewise, a 39-year-old female noted: “Other climbers help me challenge myself in climbing without taking unnecessary risks.”

For some practitioners, joint practice provides a sense of community. A 37-year old male climbers stated: “We have experienced small and big adventures together. Those are the memories that connect people.” Similarly, a 46-year-old female trail runner noted: “It’s nice to share experiences and to belong to a group.” A 35-year-old female climber contemplated further: “Climbing contacts provide a community that might only be bound by climbing. It’s refreshing because in no other context do I have such differing types of friends.”

***Extended training possibilities.*** Many practitioners state that forming social contacts considerably extends their own training possibilities. For example, a 34-year-old female said, “Climbing alone wouldn’t work with my children, but with climbing friends we have spent many nice days outdoors.” For trail runners, training company often enables running on unknown grounds. A 46-year-old female noted: “I would be fine without social contacts, but the practice would be lonely and limited to the paths that I know.”

Some practitioners travel far away to do sports together. A 40-year-old male runner stressed the importance of “organizing and participating in events together, and all kinds of practical things such as sharing travel or accommodation.” Likewise, a 28-year-old nonbinary

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

climber said, “We organize climbing trips and get-togethers and share rides to climbing sites.”

**Sharing.** Many practitioners highlight a shared passion, values, or lifestyle as a common ground for forming social ties within a sport. A 29-year-old female reflected thus: “I often realize that I and other trail runners share many similar values such as respect for nature, equality between people, liberalism, etc.” Similarly, a 31-year-old female stated: “It’s very easy to spend time with other climbers because we share a passion and a lifestyle and enjoy similar things.”

In line with the quantitative findings, sharing knowledge and experience emerged as a theme from the qualitative data, and was used as a reason for forming social ties. A 33-year-old nonbinary climber said, “It’s nice to exchange beta with other climbers and, for example, information regarding security.” Similarly, a 46-year-old female stated: “It’s nice to hear about experiences and get advice from other runners.” Sharing knowledge is especially appreciated by practitioners at lower levels of competence. A 39-year-old female climber stated: “I want to learn from people who are more experienced than I am.”

**Social nature of humans.** Some practitioners reason that forming social contacts is a part of human nature. A 31-year-old male runner stated: “Relations with other people are important.” Similarly, a 36-year-old male climber said: “I think social contacts are important no matter with whom you form them.”

Some climbers stress the social nature of the sport. A 29-year-old male said, “I want to form social contacts because climbing is a social sport. Most often you practice climbing together, even when bouldering alone.” Similarly, a 40-year-old male explained: “Climbing is above all a social sport. Failure is a big part of the sport and the few moments of success in climbing are worth sharing with someone.”

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

***Time used for practice.*** Some practitioners want to form social ties because they dedicate a considerable amount of their free time to practice. A 28-year old female noted: “Climbing is a time-consuming sport, and that’s why there is not much time for other social contacts.” Similarly, a 52-year-old male said, “I spend half of my free time on trail-running paths, and so it’s natural to form contacts.” Practice can also provide time to disengage from everyday life. A 28-year-old female climber put it this way: “Sometimes it’s good to have contacts who are completely outside of work and my ‘other life.’”

**Reasons for not forming social ties.** As the quantitative analysis shows, not all practitioners form social ties with each other. Categorization of the coded qualitative data brought out the following three reasons for this:

***Lack of interest.*** The most common reason mentioned was lack of interest. Some practitioners see forming contacts as too much work. A 25-year-old female explained: “Sure it wouldn’t be bad to have more contacts, but so far I haven’t had the energy to try to find contacts through trail running.” Others are satisfied with their existing social network. A 24-year-old female climber said, “I have a nice social circle now, so why would I change the surroundings?”

Lack of interest can also be due to a dislike toward other practitioners. A 48-year-old male stated: “Those who have sacrificed their lives for trail running can be very self-centered people.” Similarly, a 35-year-old female noted: “There are many friendly climbers, but also nasty ones. Some climbing groups are very clannish. People can be scornful or even try to make climbing harder for others.”

***Forming contacts is challenging.*** For some practitioners, forming social ties feels challenging. A 43-year-old female trail runner said, “I’m a lone wolf and it’s hard for me to

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

take initiative to form social contacts.” Similarly, a 33-year-old male climber stated: “I would like to [form social ties], but it feels challenging. I haven’t done anything to form contacts.”

For some practitioners, a lower level of competence makes forming social ties harder. A 51-year-old female explained: “I haven’t been that active in running during the past year, and so I haven’t joined any practice, partly because I think I’m too slow.” Similarly, a 27-year-old female said, “I don’t feel like I’m a climber. Therefore, it feels hard to create any contacts with others, and I don’t really want to do it either.”

Challenges can also arise from lack of time. A 28-year-old male climber noted: “The time reserved for the hobby isn’t enough for forming new contacts.” Likewise, a 37-year-old male runner stated: “I have other hobbies too, and don’t have time to form contacts with everyone.”

***Practice for individual development.*** Some practitioners focus solely on their individual development, and thus do not see forming social ties as important. A 32-year-old male climber explained: “I’m more focused on developing myself than on forming social contacts.” Similarly, a 24-year old male runner stated: “This hobby is more for myself.”

Other practitioners stress the meditative aspects of sports practice. A 42-yearold male runner said, “During practice I want to be by myself, surrounded by my own thoughts—or even better without any thoughts.” Likewise, a 34-yearold female stated: “For me, climbing is like meditative yoga or ‘a dance on the walls.’ I don’t practice climbing because of social contacts or to become technically skillful. My goals are different.”

### **Summary of the Results**

The results of this study show that both trail runners and climbers interact actively and in various ways with other practitioners. Through interaction, practitioners form social ties with one another. For the participants in this study, online activities have become a natural

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

part of sports practice. Practitioners frequently follow sports-related social media content, and occasionally post or share content online. Online communication supports weak ties with instrumental and informative value. High online activity does not however diminish the relevance of FtF communication in contemporary recreational sports. The results show that in the context of sports, location still plays a central role when it comes to establishing social ties with emotional and appraisal value.

Comparisons between the sports indicate that climbers form stronger ties with other practitioners. Climbers communicate more FtF, use more personal mediated communication channels, and attribute more emotional meanings to their social contacts than do trail runners. Explanations for the perceived differences between climbing and trail running can be found from specific and cultural variations between the sports.

A qualitative content analysis reveals that recreational lifestyle sports practitioners form social ties because of a need to develop friendships, family relations, training companionship, and community. They also form social ties to gain extended training possibilities and share life values and experiences with other practitioners. In addition, social ties are formed purely because practitioners spend a considerable amount of time in sports practice. The identified reasons for not forming social contacts are the fact that practitioners do not have interest in it, feel it is challenging, or that they practice sports solely for individual reasons.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The present paper investigated recreational lifestyle sports practitioners' communication practices and social tie formation. The results of this case study support earlier findings on CMC in lifestyle sports (Dumont, 2014, 2015; Jones, 2011; MacKay & Dallaire, 2012; Olive, 2015; Woermann, 2012) by showing that for the studied population,

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

social media practices have integrated with the physical activity. Practitioners consume, produce, and share information, entertainment, and experiences online. However, this paper argues that even though CMC has established its place in recreational lifestyle sports cultures, it has not done it at the expense of FtF communication. Whereas online interaction produces weak social ties with instrumental and informative value, physical location is essential in establishing ties with emotional and appraisal value.

Furthermore, this paper shows that online activities are not limited to proficient lifestyle sports practice but rather reach across the whole sports culture. Recreational practitioners frequently follow sports-related social media content, and occasionally post or share content online. When compared to previous studies on content production and sharing, the quantitative findings of this study indicate that, on a larger scale, these activities may not be as common and frequent as previous qualitative studies (e.g., Jones, 2011; Olive, 2015; Woermann, 2012) on lifestyle sports suggest.

In the present paper, CMC has been examined as a separate entity from FtF encounters. The division was made to clarify the role of CMC technologies in recreational lifestyle sports cultures. However, in everyday life, physical activities are often highly mediated, as practitioners record data, photos, and videos while they engage in the sports practice. Online activities should thus be seen as an extension of the physical activities, and vice versa.

Concluding, this paper supports a social shaping approach (Baym, 2015) as a useful perspective for understanding the role of CMC technologies in recreational lifestyle sports. Using this perspective, new communication technologies are seen to provide affordances that guide the actions of practitioners. However, it is the sports culture, situational impacts, and personal choices that shape how practitioners use these technologies.

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

The overall comparison between sports disciplines shows that communality and a “doing together” mentality are stronger in the climbing than in the trail running culture. However, a subculture does not define the actions of individual practitioners. As this study shows, some trail runners build stronger supportive contacts with other practitioners, even though the subculture is not necessarily conducive to that. Moreover, both climbers’ and trail runners’ reasons for forming or not forming social ties within the sport vary between practitioners because they are based on individual needs, goals, and motivations for the practice.

These notions are indications of the power of individualism in contemporary Western societies. In recreational sports, the lack of stable organizational structures gives individual practitioners an authority to decide how and to what extent they want to interact with fellow practitioners, and with whom they want to form social ties. Following this line of argument, this paper suggests that, rather than simply looking at practitioners as members or products of a certain subculture, it may be more prudent to view them as networked individuals (see Rainie & Wellman, 2014) who rely on the network support provided to them by their sports-related social contacts.

Drawing a practical implication, this paper emphasizes the need for sports-related social media platforms and services that awaken individuals’ interest for sports and, more importantly, encourage people to practice together. Encouraging recreational sports practitioners to meet FtF is an initial step in helping them develop stronger influential ties that provide motivation and support to maintain a physically active lifestyle.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The most notable limitation concerns the sample of this study. The data used in this study were collected online only, which means that all practitioners who participated in the

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

questionnaire use social media as a part of their sports practice. Therefore, those practitioners who do not use social media at all as a part of their practice are outside the scope of this study. The results cannot be generalized to include all sports practitioners in the selected sports. In the future, a comparative study between the users and nonusers of social media would supplement the results of this study.

Furthermore, the sample of this study was limited to one city. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to nonurban settings or other regions. For future reference, a comparative study conducted in another European city could be used to verify or challenge the conclusions drawn from this study.

As the role of networks in everyday lives of people is growing more important (Rainie & Wellman, 2014), future research is needed on the network support that recreational sports practitioners provide one another. One future line of research is to look more carefully at what kind of communication and what kind of social support have the best impacts on physical activity levels. Furthermore, research on networked individualism in the context of recreational sports would help deepen the understanding of new organizational structures in contemporary leisure-time cultures.

### **Case Questions**

1. This case study centered on individual recreational sports. How might the results of this study shift if team sports or professional sports were on focus?
2. This case study was conducted in Finland. Could the results of this study be generalized to other countries?
3. This paper argues that FtF communication is important for forming strong social ties. What additional values do strong ties give to the sports practice?



## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

4. Do you agree that social shaping is an appropriate approach for understanding the role of CMC technologies in contemporary lifestyle sports? Why? Why not?
5. Do you think seeing sports practice as a lifestyle affects practitioners' communication practices?
6. Most participants of this study occasionally produce sports-related content online. What do you think motivates practitioners to produce and share content with other practitioners?
7. Why is recording and sharing exercise data such an important part of the trail running but not the climbing subculture?
8. What additional value do social media give to lifestyle sports? What would contemporary lifestyle sports be without social media?
9. This paper argues that sports practitioners ought to be perceived as networked individuals. Does that mean contemporary lifestyle sports communities network based? If yes, how does network-based organization differ from organization in sports clubs?
10. Do you think that the reasons for forming or not forming social ties with other practitioners are true also for practitioners in other lifestyle sports disciplines?

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

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COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

Appendix

**Table 1** Frequency of FtF communication (%; N = 301)

<b>FtF communication</b>	<b>Practitioners</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Less than once a month</b>	<b>Once or twice a month</b>	<b>Once a week or more</b>	<b>Total</b>
Interact at indoor or outdoor sites	trail runners	11	44	29	16	100
	climbers	2	17	24	56	100
Interact at sports events	trail runners	9	79	11	2	100
	climbers	32	62	6	0	100

**Table 2** Frequency of CMC (%; N = 301)

<b>CMC activities</b>	<b>Practitioners</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Less than once a month</b>	<b>Once or twice a month</b>	<b>Once a week or more</b>	<b>Total</b>
Follow discussion	trail runners	1	6	16	78	100
	climbers	5	10	20	66	100
Participate in discussion	trail runners	13	34	30	24	100
	climbers	26	31	16	26	100
Read articles, blog posts etc.	trail runners	0	16	24	60	100
	climbers	2	17	28	53	100
Write articles, blog posts etc.	trail runners	58	28	9	5	100
	climbers	80	15	2	2	100
Share articles, blog posts etc.	trail runners	40	37	15	8	100
	climbers	33	43	13	11	100
Watch photos or videos	trail runners	2	23	30	45	100
	climbers	2	9	29	61	100
	trail runners	22	31	27	20	100

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

Take photos or videos	climbers	7	34	39	19	100
Share photos or videos seen	trail runners	31	43	18	9	100
	climbers	29	40	22	9	100
Share photos or videos taken	trail runners	28	40	22	10	100
	climbers	18	44	29	8	100
Record exercise data	trail runners	10	10	11	69	100
	climbers	63	11	10	17	100
Share exercise data	trail runners	44	27	9	20	100
	climbers	83	11	2	3	100

**Table 3 The use of mediated communication channels for personal communication (%; N = 301)**

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Trail runners</b>	<b>Climbers</b>
Social networking sites	78	84
Online communities	26	3
Phone call	19	47
Video call	2	1
Mobile applications	30	64
SMS	22	46
E-mail	25	20

COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

**Table 4** Locations for forming social ties (%; N = 301)

Location	Trail runners	Climbers
Indoor or outdoor sites	45	89
Sports events	60	31
Online	59	42
Elsewhere	15	13
I do not form social ties with other practitioners	14	5

**Table 5** Statements about social contacts

Statement	Practitioners	Mean	SD
My contacts provide me information about indoor or outdoor sports sites	trail runners	4.19*	0.66
	climbers	4.38*	0.65
My contacts provide me information about sports gear	trail runners	4.14	0.67
	climbers	4.24	0.65
My contacts provide me information about sports events	trail runners	4.17*	0.64
	climbers	3.86*	0.89
My contacts provide me sports-related news	trail runners	3.82	0.70
	climbers	3.74	0.83
My contacts provide me sports-related entertainment	trail runners	3.98	0.64
	climbers	4.02	0.76
My contacts provide me advice on techniques	trail runners	3.50*	0.78
	climbers	4.08*	0.78
My contacts provide me a sense of belonging	trail runners	3.62*	0.76
	climbers	4.04*	0.76
My contacts care about me	trail runners	3.26*	0.68
	climbers	3.88*	0.71
My contacts are important for me	trail runners	3.34*	0.71
	climbers	4.02*	0.69
My contacts motivate me to practice	trail runners	3.62*	0.97
	climbers	4.05*	0.82
I am a better practitioner because of my contacts	trail runners	3.17*	0.98
	climbers	4.09*	0.91

## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL TIES

Note. Based on a 5-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree).

\* indicates statistical significance between trail runners and climbers,  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 6** Statements about social contacts in relation to FtF communication

Statement	Practitioners	Mean lessftf	SD	Mean moreftf	SD
My contacts provide me a sense of belonging	trail runners	3.55*	0.78	3.90*	0.63
	climbers	3.83*	0.81	4.21*	0.68
My contacts care about me	trail runners	3.19*	0.66	3.62*	0.74
	climbers	3.79	0.75	3.94	0.66
My contacts are important for me	trail runners	3.27*	0.69	3.62*	0.74
	climbers	3.88*	0.67	4.13*	0.68
My contacts motivate me to practice the sport	trail runners	3.52*	1.00	4.10*	0.44
	climbers	3.92*	0.73	4.17*	0.87
I am a better practitioner because of my contacts	trail runners	2.98*	0.93	4.10*	0.63
	climbers	3.92*	0.95	4.21*	0.87

Note. 5-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). \* indicates statistical significance between practitioners who interact face-to-face less than once a week (lessftf) and at least once a week (moreftf),  $p < 0.05$