Media, Society and Cycling Cultures

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Eracle
Journal of Sport and
Social Sciences

Vol. 5, n. 1 (2022)
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Media, Society and Cycling Cultures: Editorial

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Cycling is living in a new season.

The policies of restriction for public transport during the Coronavirus epidemic, the Anthropocene debate, and the need to rethink the urban and extra-urban mobilities for carrying out a model of sustainable economic and societal development are translating into renewed attention towards cycling. Consequently, it can be registered an increase in the production and selling of bikes and an impulse to the diffusion of the cycling practice in different countries.

Nevertheless, the experience of cycling and the cycling cultures are transforming in a significant way. Cycling is increasingly mediated through social media, apps, and platforms. Even when it is a solitary activity, it is more and more exposed to the connected audience on the Internet and constantly measured, counted, and made visible through complex algorithmic systems. While the history of media runs in parallel with the history of cycling, and in general, of sports, through the papers of this special issue, we will illustrate how mediatization is increasingly granular and fine-grained. It is hard, therefore, to conceive of cycling nowadays, like many activities, without any connection to the different waves of digital media. The new mediatization implies the capture into the complex apparatus of digital capitalism and the related logic of competition, marketing, and commercialization. It shapes the making of the cyclist identities and the cycling cultures.

Nevertheless, this entanglement with digital worlds is not one-sided and deterministically oriented. It is an encounter in several dimensions: it is a sign of involvement of cycling with digital capitalism and the neo-liberal ethos, but it opens new possibilities for the emergence of cycling cultures in the current dominant car-centric society. As reminded in some articles, this process found a moment of acceleration during the pandemic. The times of lockdown and the restrictions of mobility make social media, apps, and digital infrastructures even more important to develop, stabilize and maintain sociality at a distance with a multiplier effect on the spread of cycling. More and more people found cycling attractive by joining online communities and networks of cyclists. This process, as the articles recall, presents chances but also dilemmas,

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paradoxes, and issues that need additional investigations and reflections. Of course, the special issue is not intended to furnish a complete overview of the theme. It, nevertheless, presents some empirical works, mostly ethnographic from diverse countries (Canada, Spain, Italy, Germany, Australia etc.), media and platforms (Koomot, Zwift) to provoke reflections on some of the dynamics of cycling cultures.

The special issue opens with the introduction by Mario Tirino, who describes the main concepts. He discusses the concept of cycling cultures in a car-centric society and displays how it can vary not only to the countries but have many local plural instantiations. By drawing on the concept of waves of mediatization, he describes the archaeology of media cycling. In dialogue with the contributions of the special issue, he also addresses the platformization and the datafication of cycling.

The articles of Sarah Torne and Luca Benvenga (in Italian) analyze two popular platforms: Zwift and Koomot.

Sarah Thorne describes Zwift as a massive multiplayer game that leads indoor cyclists into a digital world, Watopia. Zwift became very popular during the Covid19 emergency. Zwift provides competitive races articulated in several levels of ability. The platform asks cyclists to provide information on height, weight, and power to determine the speed. This way, it gives a 'realistic' simulation of analogue cycling. Height and weight are crucial for the speed of climbing and descending. The platform draws on techniques of gamification (experience points, levels, in-game currency, achievements, and badges) to keep cyclists engaged. Sarah Thorne focuses on cheating in the platform related to the algorithm. 'Weight' is the variable at the centre stage. Notably, the platform has been accused of creating the conditions for pushing toward the eating disorder.

Luca Benvenga pays attention to Koomot, a platform designed to register races, make new maps, share photos, and exchange experiences on cycling. By drawing on a digital ethnography of Koomot, Benvegna displays how the platform permits self-tracking and the fabrication of data doubles. Data doubles are avatars that shape identities by showing the performances of cyclists. They make quantified selves. The platform keeps engaged cyclists by introducing experience scores and levels of achievement. Datafication of cycling becomes a mechanism of governmentality, as it contributes to the government of the individual conducts and the spread of a neo-liberal ethos. Moreover, the platform gathers data in collaboration with other companies, like Garmin, Lufthansa, etc. and works with local agencies of tourism for the marketing of some territories (Switzerland, Sud Tirol). The wide database permits a fine-tuning of marketing campaigns. The platform gives rise to many communities of cyclists. It is then a means for the making of new groups. At the same time, it draws, like other platforms, such as Strava, on data extraction and reinforces the logic of quantification of the selves. It shifts cycling in the dynamics of the performance society, where the search for an identity is given a response by numbers.

The granularity of mediatization in the cycling world illustrates, as Thorne and Benvenga, the pervasiveness of digital capitalism and the neoliberal ethos. The other articles of the special issue help us to understand, on the other hand, that the same process is double-faced and can enable the emergence of cycling cultures in a landscape dominated by car-centrism.

Matthew Tiessen describes how "Torontonian cyclists, armed with mobile GPS-equipped apps and a desire for exploration, sought respite from lockdowns by descending into Toronto's enormous network of ravines – its 'upside-down mountains' – and their 100-plus kilometers of urban single-track and mountain bike trails". Notably, he contrasted the dark imagery of the Covid19 cosmology nurturing fear, death, constant monitoring, preventive measures, masks, and inescapable binaries between positive/negative, vaccinated/unvaccinated, masked/unmasked, closure/opening, etc. with the liveness and the positive feelings of the mountain bike community of Toronto during the same time. Apps, smartphones, and GPS devices became the ways for Torontonians to find relief from Toronto's Don Valley, a network of ravines into the urban infrastructure. The digital instruments, here, acted as a portal for the experience of cycling where many in a hard time could experiment with the sense of freedom; the possibility of enhancing and expanding the ability of cycling in a dynamic of expansion, optimization, intensification; the experience of the state of flow, the return to biological rhythm, and the thrilling of taking risks.

Julia Bee and Suzanne Ryder, Fiona Mclachlan and Brent McDonald's articles display how digital media open new fields of visibility.

Julia Bee focuses on She36 Berlin bicycle-based collective and a social influencer, Juliet Elliott. In a male-dominated culture, She36 is a feminist collective attentive also to LGBT+ communities of cyclists. The collective shares vlogs and photos on cycling and repair activities on Tumblr and Instagram. She36 is characterized by fixed gear and without brakes bicycles. The style of the group is punk and skate movement. Vlogs inspire mobility practice and contribute to the stabilization of identities. The analysis of Julie Eliott's influencer style reveals the intersection of multiple media and platforms, vlogs, photos, etc. These contents highlight the need to move to a methodology addressing the sensory approach to the cyclist's aesthetics.

Suzanne Ryder, Fiona Mclachlan and Brent McDonald draw on an auto-ethnography of one of the authors. It reflects on how digital media has helped to make women in cycling more visible and presents the growing literature on this aspect. They describe how social media and women's clubs of cyclists in Australia (She Race Group) offered support and shared experiences to overcome the feeling of being intimidated in their attempt to access what is perceived as a dominant male practice. These groups on the Internet helped also build up new relationships by establishing a safety net of care and solidarity. These groups are helpful as well in raising political issues and combatting the discriminatory rules that penalize women's participation in cyclist races.

The special issue concludes with the articles of Rocío Blanco-Gregory and Marìa Porro Nieto (in Spanish) and Francesco Bonifacio. Both articles confirm the usefulness of the concept of cycling culture.

Rocío Blanco-Gregory and Marìa Porro Nieto focus on Vuelta de España, the popular and well-known professional race. They analyse the impact of La Vuelta, in terms of the increase in tourism. They found a positive effect of the race on the spread of cycling, and in particular, the strategy of the official and the digital media, and economic benefit for the region of Extremadura that was interested in the time of the investigations by several stages.

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Bonifacio's article, finally, draws on the participant's seven-month Milan-based observant participation, during which he worked as a Glovo part-time rider. Based on a solid empirical base, and practice-based studies on knowledge and learning, the article provokes reflection on the work of riders, a key worker in the actual regime of digital capitalism. He maintains that this work implies a specific way of urban cycling, a practice normativity that arises in a context where any training regulation is absent. He convincingly argues that "food-delivery work is accountable to a specific practice of urban cycling, that has to do with the difficult negotiation of speed, safety and accuracy". This way, he suggests that the work of the rider, heavily captured in digital capitalism, enacts a specific cycling culture.

This issue of the journal is dedicated to our friend and colleague Vincenzo Del Gaudio. Vincenzo passed away suddenly on Sunday, November 6. We will greatly miss his volcanic intelligence and his ability to study esports and other forms of sports mediatization in an original way.

Mediatization and Platformization of Cycling Cultures: Actors, Practices, Processes

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1. Mediatization of cycling

This introduction aims to describe the main issues of mediatization and platformization of cycling cultures in contemporary society. Starting with the concept of cycling culture, as opposed to the car-centric paradigm, the goal is to show the set of social actors, sociocultural processes, and cultural practices that structure the media-cycling field.

Cycling cultures can be conceived as a set of practices variously influenced by technology, economics, social interactions, symbolic values, and cultural processes (Cox, 2019; Pivato, 2019; Tirino, 2021). Based on bicycle use, in terms of the characteristics of users and their journeys, Rérat (2021, p. 14) proposes a distinction "between recreational cycling (journeys made for the sole reason of leisure or sports) and utility cycling (journeys made for a practical reason)". This distinction identifies two macro-areas of cycling cultures.

Kirsten Frandsen (2019) has done important work on the theoretical systematization of the concept of mediatization, reconstructing the approaches (socio-constructivist and institutional), the contribution of sociology and Cultural Studies, and the transformation of research objects. Therefore, we refer to her work for an introduction to the theories of mediatization of the sports. The concept of "waves of mediatization" (Hepp, 2013; Couldry & Hepp, 2016) allows us to appreciate the fact that mediatization is not a gradual, linear and homogeneous process. It, instead, develops through sudden flows of socio-technological innovation, resulting in completely new configurations of the mediascape.

Because of this "wrenching" evolution of mediatization processes, Frandsen's (2019) identifies three phases of the mediatization of sports: the first corresponds to the historical phase of broadcasting; the second refers to the liberalization of the telecommunications market, resulting from the advent of satellite and cable technologies; and the third phase frames the overall transformations of the media system produced by digitization. I suggest dividing the third phase of mediatization (digitization) into three sub-processes: social mediatization, which corresponds to the pervasive establishment of social networks with the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0; mobile mediatization, which allowed the continuous use of social networks through smartphones and tablets constantly connected to the Internet; and platformization (on which we will focus particularly in section 4). New media do not replace older media: in the era of

deep mediatization media increasingly combine in unforeseen forms in a kind of "media manifold" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

Moreover, mediatization varies considerably according to social, cultural, and economic contexts at local and global levels.. Beyond approaches, it is necessary to point out that it is not a recent phenomenon.

1.1. Archaeology of media-cycling

The great cycling stage races themselves are concrete examples of how the mediatization of sport has a long history. The Tour de France, the world's most important cycling stage race, was conceived and organized in 1903 by the newspaper "L'Auto-Vélo", in a close association with the French cycling industry, as well as national and local political institutions. The Tour constitutes one of the first cases of the mediatization of the sport. The centrality of the organizing sports newspaper perfectly matches the early pioneering forms of commercialization of the sport through the involvement of private sponsors in various forms until the advent of television broadcasting after World War II. The interaction between "L'Auto-Vélo" (media), the racing clubs (sports organizations) and the cycling companies that sponsor them (sponsors) produces an initial configuration of the "SMS triangle", in which local political institutions (interested in attracting tourists flows to their territories) and other businesses (aiming to tie their image to the Tour) also take part (Frandsen, 2019). The notion of the "sports/media/sponsor (SMS) triangle", developed by Stefano Martelli (2014), is a useful conceptual tool for considering the "sports/media complex" (Jhally, 1989) in relation to economic actors and institutions. By "SMS triangle" Martelli means a new social configuration, consisting of sports organizations (federations, leagues, clubs), media organizations, and economic actors (sponsors), while audiences – who can play the role of fans, consumers, and recreational athletes (Bifulco, 2019) – are at the center of each step of the system. This social configuration is strengthened by the benefits guaranteed to all components as a result of mediatization: in fact, the increasing centrality of televised sports reinforces the economic value of sports activity, which translates into more revenue for the organizations that sell rights, larger audiences for the adjudicating networks, and more investment by sponsors interested in tying themselves to the image of leagues, teams and athletes.

The forms of mediatization of the Tour at this historical stage are even more sophisticated. In 1925, *Le Roi de la pédale* was released in theaters. This multi-episode silent film, directed by Maurice Champreux, tells the story of a young man, who, after being hired as a mechanic by the "Automoto" team, becomes a cyclist in the Tour de France. In this case, the mediatization of cycling takes the form of an economic joint venture between the film production company Gaumont, the newspaper "L'Auto", and the company "Automoto", "who took advantage of the multiple media coverage to sell its bicycles" (Bauer & Froissart, 2015, p. 1462). By the mid-1920s, the Tour was already a popular spectacle, which - thanks to the narrative of the daily sports press - had contributed to the nascent massification of communication. The cinematic

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depiction of this great sports event constitutes a further form of attestation of the Tour's social recognition, as it combines moments of fiction with real-life footage in which famous cyclists such as Ottavio Bottecchia (winner of the 1924 and 1925 editions with the "Automoto" team) and front pages of the "Auto" appear. The communicative project of *Le Roi de la pédale*, moreover, responds to refined transmedia and intermedia logics (Tirino, 2019b; Bertetti, 2020) as it includes a "cinario" (a hybrid of novel and screenplay), a novelization with photographic illustrations, and a play.

1.2 The first phase: broadcasting and press

This first wave of mediatization of cycling contributed to the establishment of cycling as one of the oldest professional sports (Desbordes, 2006). The convergence of the commercial interests of the press and those of the cycling industry helped to increase the resources available to pay athletes adequately. In addition to the financial structure of this sports mega-event, the media played a crucial role in the public's understanding of the race dynamics. "The audiovisual construction used in broadcasting coverage and the dedicated radio channel used for internal event communication" (Frandsen, 2019, p. 51) are essential in providing the public with information about live events. After World War II, the Tour de France confirms its nature as a mediatized sports mega-event. As with other sports mega-events, television enables the development of the Tour and cycling in general. The ability to view delayed sequences that capture riders in the midst of their efforts increases the visibility of athletes, teams and sponsors. Furthermore, French television broadcasts images of race locations, reinforcing the mediatization of national tourism (Wille, 2003). Especially since the 1960s, when the Tour organization reintroduced sponsored teams after an absence of several decades, the mediatization became a driver of the cycling's commercialization process. Since 1963 French television began to offer live coverage of the last phases of each stage of the Tour. The live coverage produces a new model of sports information, in line with "the geographical and cultural-historical settings of the race" (Frandsen, 2019, p. 57). Combining sporting moments with long shots of the landscapes traversed by the race, often accompanied by news about the history, architecture, and culture of these places, the particular media experience experimented with this mix of "slow television" and "spectacular television" (Wheatley, 2011) turns many sports fans into a kind of "armchair tourists" (Waade, 2009). The mediatization of tourism as a parallel process to the mediatization of sports is a phenomenon that is still very frequent, as the paper by María Porro Nieto and Rocío Blanco-Gregory in this issue attests.

1.3 The second phase: the liberalization of telecommunications markets

The second phase of the mediatization of the sport also affects the Tour. Beginning in 1980, stage broadcasting rights are sold at higher prices and in more countries, becoming the primary source of revenue for organizers, on par with sponsorships. The liberalization of telecommunications markets sharpened competition between public broadcasters and private

television networks, which competed to buy the broadcasting rights of the most popular sporting events.

Around the primary role of television the mediatization of cycling also fosters its globalization. The ability of European broadcasting to encourage the globalization of sports is based on the creation of Eurovision (1954), an international body with the function of regulating the exchange of radio and television broadcasts between European countries. This body makes it possible to popularize major sporting events on a continental level. The Tour de France, which was already followed by many press journalists, thus becomes a televised sports content in various European countries. Foreign broadcasters invest large sums of money for the live broadcast rights to the race. They also create side programs, before and after the race, that promote the national mediation of the Tour, through commentary, in-depth coverage, quizzes, and so on. For both viewers and production, therefore, there is a "core" (the races themselves) and a "periphery" (the other programs) of major mediatized sporting events (Puijk, 2000). The case of the Tour shows how the mediatization of cycling is closely connected with the commercialization and globalization of media, according to dynamics of mutual influence between media organizations (the newspapers, television stations), sports organizations, and tourism actors (Frandsen, 2019). Although the Tour de France remains firmly connected to French national identity (Dauncy & Hare, 2003), it fully exhibits its dimension as a commercialized and globalized mega-event, capable of attracting sponsors and audiences internationally.

The case of the Tour is not unique in the history of the mediatization of cycling. The "Giro d'Italia", the second most important cycling stage race in the world, was likewise founded, in 1909, by a newspaper, "La Gazzetta dello Sport"; it developed through the convergence of the commercial interests of the publishing industry and the cycling industry, which invested significant sums to create competitive teams (Atala, Bianchi, Legnano, among others); it developed considerably, including abroad, thanks to radio reports and television coverage by the RAI, which also produced in-depth programs capable of increasing the popularity of the race and improving the technical competence of viewers (such as the famous *Processo alla tappa*, aired from 1962 to 1970). Moreover, the recognizability of the Giro in the popular cultural imaginary is confirmed by its centrality in fiction products such as *Totò al Giro d'Italia* (1948). The film, directed by Mario Mattioli, features cycling celebrities such as Fausto Coppi and Gino Bartali, together with famous comic actor Totò. It shows the work of athletes, mechanics, masseurs, and journalists before, during, and after the stages; offers visibility to teams and their sponsors; and features full-screen invented front pages of the "Gazzetta dello Sport".

As María Porro Nieto and Rocío Blanco-Gregory point out in this same issue, the Vuelta a España, Europe's third-largest cycling stage race, also began as a mediatized event, as it was co-founded by the newspaper "Informaciones" and later relaunched by the newspaper "El Correo Español - El Pueblo Vasco".

The mediatization of cycling represents a concrete example of how the mediatization of sports is not a linear and homogeneous process. In the first two phases, mediatization mainly concerns

the major events of men's road cycling (major stage races, classic competitions, world and European championships, and so on). It only partially affects other forms of cycling sports (minor races, women's cycling, youth cycling, track cycling) and almost not at all emerging forms of cycling (such as mountain biking), recreational and utility cycling.

1.4 The third phase: digitization and its subprocesses

Digitization, generically referred to as the third phase of mediatization, affects cycling practices in profoundly different forms. For analytical convenience, I distinguish three sub-processes of the digitization of cycling: the first coincides with the advent of the social media society, characterized by the rise of blogs, forums, chats and social networks, thanks to the technological evolution from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0; the second coincides with the rise of mobile communications and lays the foundation for the third, coinciding with platformization, which we will analyze in the next section. Compared to the first phase, dominated by the media logics of press and broadcasting, the main difference of the digitization of cycling is the multiplication of information and communication spaces. This is a long-term phenomenon, since, already in the second phase of mediatization, the political choice to liberalize the telecommunications market and the rise of cable and satellite technologies made the mediascape more pluralistic and diverse. Digitization makes it cheaper to produce media content, which, by contrast, previously contemplated substantial costs for equipment, transmission, post-production and distribution costs – as much for print as for broadcast. The advent of services based on user cooperation such as blogs, social networks, wikis, video sharing platforms, and tagging services ensures the involvement of users in interactive communicative relationships. Audiences are invited to generate content, evaluate products and services, and participate in contemporary cultural production. Bottom-up production, which nurtures grassroots culture, is manifested through the creation of UCG (User-Generated Content), within practice and interpretive communities. The situation of hyperconnected publics and co-producers of culture can be framed through the four basic concepts of the Social Network Society (Boccia Artieri, 2012): participation, sharing, creativity, and bottom-up production. However, the protagonism of publics, recognized by various scholars, should not obscure the power of media institutions, not necessarily weakened in the new scenario (Couldry, 2010).

The ability to convey opinions and ideas, thanks to easy access to online publication media, and the opportunity to reach broad audiences has changed the mediatization of cycling cultures, in many different ways.

Digital social environments offer cycling groups some spaces for communication, identity construction and self-representation. This specific aspect of digitization helps make the process of diversification of cycling cultures more visible. Blogs, communities and forums cover a wide set of practices, attributable to both the sports, the recreational and the utility dimensions of cycling. With respect to the sports dimension, the blossoming of digital environments allows "minor" forms of cycling to gain visibility: women's and youth road cycling and the eight other

specialties recognized by the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) (track cycling, cyclocross, mountain biking, BMX, trials, indoor cycling, para-cycling and cycling esports).

"Minor" cycling practices, in the sports and competitive arena, partly due to the visibility gained in digital communities, are often commercialized. The increased fragmentation of the broadcasting system, through the liberalization of frequencies and the activation of satellite and cable technologies, allows for niche television productions for targeted audiences, to which focused advertising investments are allocated. These dynamics demonstrate the complexity of the "media manifold" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016) constructed by digitization: in a mediascape in which old and new media coexist, both are involved in processes of remediation, mutual hybridization and complex interaction (Bolter & Grusin, 1999).

Two cultural macro-trends can be identified in the field of recreational cycling.

The first refers to cycling cultures influenced by long-term sociocultural processes that have already been active in the sports world for several decades: the wellness and fitness movement and extreme sports.

"Cycling for all" encompasses those practices that – in consonance with the basic principles of wellness and fitness movement (Foster *et al.*, 2011) – are based on the conception of sport as an indispensable activity to ensure mental, physical and social wellbeing in a non-competitive context. Especially in countries with more mature cycling cultures, such as the Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom, many associations have developed projects to break down all barriers (cultural, economic, infrastructural) that prevent the expansion of practice to marginalized individuals (the elderly, disabled, poor, etc.) (Gray & Gow, 2020; Schwanen & Nixon, 2020). Digital spaces have greatly helped to spread the initiatives (fundraisers, events, training) developed by these associations, expanding the audience of those who practice non-competitive cycling. In addition, digital communities have often strengthened a sense of belonging, creating supportive relationships among practitioners and encouraging tutoring, mentorship and other forms of mutual assistance.

Extreme cycling stimulates athletes to move the challenge with their bodies forward through ultra-endurance races. The extreme dimension of such practices is evident from their location at high altitude, particularly harsh weather conditions, length, and duration. Over time, extreme cycling and ultra-cycling have attracted more and more practitioners. Thus, ultra-endurance races have been regulated, becoming a competitive sport in their own right and attracting the attention of local institutions and sponsors. Red Bull, a brand that has linked its image to the values of energy and athletic endeavor, has sponsored numerous such competitions. Extreme cycling, moreover, increasingly resembles a lifestyle sport. In fact, its practitioners participate in these competitions because they identify in the radical relationship with nature, landscapes, and total physical exertion as fundamental elements of their conception of sport and life (Mueller *et al.*, 2019).

A second macro-trend concerns the digitization of cycling cultures committed to enhancing the connection between cycling and social and civic issues, such as gender equality (Candipan, 2019; Lubitow *et al.*, 2019; Lam, 2020), environmental advocacy, and emancipation of ethnic and

religious minorities (Newhall, 2021). Another evidence that digital spaces increase the pluralism of media and cultural representations of cycling concerns the women's issue. In their paper in this issue Suzanne Ryder, Fiona McLachlan and Brett McDonald recall that "with the advent and growth of digital and social media, a hopeful alternative to the male-dominated traditional media narratives found its way into women's cycling". Blogs, websites, and social networks pages can also function as sites of resistance to the masculinist logics of both professional sports (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013) and recreational cycling (Kim *et al.*, 2021). It remains to be thoroughly explored "the role of social media in the empowerment of women and challenging hegemonic sport discourses", as Ryder, McLachlan and McDonald state. For these activities, often digital spaces seem to reinvigorate media-cycling practices already experienced (even if marginalized) in the old media era: for example, as Julia Bee reminds us in this issue, the conception of the bicycle as a "freedom machine" was fueled by the widespread dissemination of photographs of suffragettes.

The common element of many of the cycling movements engaged in these cultural battles is an aversion to the capitalistic system, of which car-centrism is an expression (Sheller, 2005). Blogs, websites, social media pages help activist cycling reappropriate urban spaces by contesting their car-centric allocation (Kern, 2020). As Julia Bee argues in her paper in this issue, digital culture supports the emergence of new cycling cultures. Images, videos, and texts help shape the complexity of cycling cultures. Taken together, such content fuels a widespread sensibility toward building a more inclusive cycling culture overall, one that challenges the car-centric paradigm primarily through investments in infrastructure and policies dedicated to underrepresented social groups (Aldred *et al.*, 2016). The multiplicity of digital environments, within which the connection between cycling and social movements is welded, "shows the potential to create new alliances between cycling and activism as well as different cultures and milieus", as Bee writes in her paper. In addition, cycling has considerable potential in influencing youth cultures, as different practices become cycling cultures often linking to trends in music, film, and fashion. This connection is achieved precisely through the aestheticization of cycling practices shaped and disseminated through digital content. Moreover, recent cycling trends are being used to express lifestyle, status, and social distinction in an urban middle class context. The bicycle is increasingly turning into a key object of popular urban culture, with a strong focus on aesthetics, design, and lifestyle (Hoor, 2020), combining mediatization and commercialization through social networks and other digital social environments.

These macro-trends also vary significantly from context to context and, while they have, in general, a global dimension, they do not produce the same effects everywhere.

The rise of mobile communication globally, the second subprocess of the third phase of the mediatization of sports, has produced an intensification of the dynamics at work. With the availability of smartphones and affordable Internet connections, mobile communication has fostered widespread forms of hyperconnection, multiplying the production and distribution of digital content. The introjection of digital practices into daily life has profoundly altered social interactions in every field (Castells *et al.*, 2007; Ling & Donner, 2009; Ling, 2012; Ling *et al.*,

2020). This wave of mediatization has touched both sport and recreational cycling along different paths.

Similarly to what has happened in other professional sports, the particular configuration of the "SMS triangle" with respect to cycling has come under severe strain with the pervasive and massive spread of mobile communication. National federations and teams have had to cope with institutional communication issues through websites and social media, often with insufficient or limited resources (Frandsen, 2019). Some of the most established cyclists have taken advantage of the opportunity to communicate directly with fans and the press through social profiles and pages (Ross & Zappavigna, 2020). The most adept have set up a compelling strategy to build a public image appealing to fanbases and sponsors (Hambrick *et al.*, 2010), or, in the case of Lance Armstrong, to rebuild his reputation after the doping scandal (Hambrick *et al.*, 2015). However, this opportunity created by the disintermediation of sports communication has also led to contrasts between athletes, on the one hand, and clubs and federations, on the other (Tirino, 2019a), because of disputes that arose from conflicts on social media. In addition, younger athletes engaged in national and international competitions have suffered from a lack of adequate media literacy when faced with unpleasant incidents on social media (sexism, pornography, hate speech, stalking, etc.) (Tirino, 2022).

In the mobile communication society, the sports mediascape also faces considerable reconfiguration. Alongside traditional public and private broadcasters, new players are trying to gain market share. Broadcasting rights to the most watched events become increasingly expensive due to competition between traditional operators, over-the-top televisions (such as DAZN) and other tech giants (such as Youtube, Amazon, Facebook, etc.). Similarly, sports journalism becomes a more complex entity, including both broadcast correspondents and professionals from newspapers (almost always migrated online) and a constellation of other heterogeneous entities, such as online-targeted magazines (specializing on cycling or one of its specialties) and semi-professional blogs and weblogs. Each of these news media and even individual journalists seek visibility and interactions on social media, which thus become platforms for mediating sports information as a whole. Finally, by virtue of the expansion and diversification of cycling cultures, brands diversified their sponsorships, often tying themselves to the athletes and specialties that best reflected their values (as in the aforementioned Red Bull - extreme cycling case). Thanks to hyperconnection, fans have experienced exceptional opportunities to follow cycling competitions (including minor ones), connect directly with athletes, and participate in communities with related interests. This has also led to some controversial consequences, such as the increased cost of television subscriptions, the commercialization of many cycling practices, and the replacement of Decoubertinian Olympic values (joy in effort, fair play, etc.) with other values (such as winning at any cost) (Martelli & Porro, 2018).

Mobile communication also affects recreational cycling. The possibility of producing videos (including live) and images of cycling performances, rides, and events, thanks to special tools such as GoPro (typical sports camera), the creation of more or less extended circles of

audiences with whom to share emotions and passions, and the need to ensure constant communication, internal and external, of group activities contribute to the complete mediatization of the recreational cycling cultures. Images, videos and digital environments become an integral part of cycling practice. Media such as video blogs (vlogs), often updated periodically, disseminate images of cycling from a grassroots perspective. This is achieved in part by the aesthetics of recreational cycling, which are grounded in the close proximity between the camera (of devices such as smartphones and GoPro) and the cyclist's body and radically different from the aesthetics of driving a car (Borden, 2012). The vlogs are also able to return the richness and variety of cycling cultures, through their technical and symbolic equipment (types of vehicles, clothing, race terrain, landscapes, etc.). Recreational cycling becomes an inseparable mix of physical technique, cycling social aesthetics, and the circulation of audiovisual content on social media. Vlogs, apps, and social media are closely connected to the third subprocess of digitization, namely the platformization of cycling. Indeed, platforms ensure the entanglement of cycling in a network of media, as Julia Bee further explains: because cycling is a practice open to outer space and defined by the physical exertion of cyclists, the audiovisual content and data collected by platforms are parallel phenomena that ensure the practitioner's mediatized "take" on the experience he or she is having, while social media enable the collective processing of that experience through likes, shares, and reposts.

Before addressing the complex issue of platformization of cycling in the next section, this last remark allows me to include a clarification. I have proposed a distinction between three subprocesses of digitization, the third phase of mediatization of sports: the rise of the social media society, the pervasive spread of mobile communication and the platformization. This distinction responds exclusively to a criterion of conceptual clarity, since the three subprocesses are closely interrelated and more or less coeval.

2. Platformization of cycling

2.1 What is platformization?

Platformization is the third sub-process of the third wave of sports mediatization (digitization), with precise characteristics. The widespread diffusion of platforms, understood both as tools technology and as spaces that foster economic and social relationships (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Boccia Artieri & Marinelli, 2019), has led to the emergence of a new communicative ecosystem. Platforms operate 1) at the technological level, with reference to the implementation and use of technologies; 2) at the social level, with reference to communicative, relational and consumption processes; 3) at the commercial level, as companies generate profits through the advertising exploitation of user data (Paulussen *et al.*, 2017). As mediators between subjects who produce content and subjects who use them (Boccia Artieri, 2017), platforms play a crucial function in the contemporary cultural industry (Magaudda & Solaroli, 2021). The concept of the platform society allows for an understanding of how such a social configuration generates

socio-media mechanisms, such as surveillance and value extraction, that alter the processes of production, distribution and consumption. Platform society emphasizes the inextricable relationship between online platforms and social structures. Platforms do not reflect the social: they produce the social structures we live in (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). Platformization encourages the establishment of a new social arrangement. Platforms are based on three processes: datafication, commodification and selection (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018). First, they facilitate the translation of social behaviors into data that can be used for market purposes (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2019). Added to this is the "commodification" of what is recorded within the platforms (from the content put into circulation to the preferences expressed), along with the possibility of achieving a data-driven selection process. The essential element of platforms is thus the data collected, the management of which contributes to the increase of their social, cultural and economic power, along with the work of algorithms. Within the platform society, algorithmization produces phenomena at the micro level, such as filter bubbles. Certain affordances of online platforms allow the selection of content valued by users based on prior actions – such as the viewing of an audiovisual content or the expression of a preference – thereby collecting data on the users themselves. Based on this data, platforms make predictions on the basis of which they filter subsequent submissions (Parisier, 2011). Within these bubbles, profiled users mainly find content that should espouse their interests, selected through a process of data collection and algorithmization (often not overt and transparent) (Tirino & Castellano, 2021). The power of platforms certainly manifests internally, but with spillovers externally as well, since they define a technological framework, on which others operate. The data produced by others become readable by platforms and usable in a way that suits their own economic model. Although algorithms play a crucial role in such dynamics, upstream the selection process would follow the tendency of users to search for content consistent with their passions, which can result in the emergence of echo chambers.

The media logics of platformization also shape policies, practices, and cultures of professional, recreational, and utility cycling. Platformization of recreational cycling follows two prevalent media logics: datafication and gamification. These are two logics that I distinguish here only for the sake of analytical clarity, but, of course, they cooperate in defining the practical uses of media-cycling apps and platforms.

Regarding the production of data related to cycling experiences, one of the most obvious aspects is that many platforms (Strava, Zwift, Komoot) incentivize users to measure their cycling performance, with extensive datafication effects on sport and physical activity. This widespread propensity to monitor and measure exercise, sport performance, and health status is part of a broader trend toward quantification of the self (Lupton, 2016), a fundamental operation for extracting value from the datafication of human experience. As Luca Benvenga reminds us in this issue, the tenets of the neoliberal ethos – efficiency, intersubjective competition, optimization – become an integral part of the identity-building processes of athletes and practitioners, as well as in social construction processes (Ahmad, 2008).

2.2 Datafication

Strava is a social network created for recreational cycling communities. Subject, intent and goals are stated from the very beginning. In this way, the user inclined to sign up is aware that he or she is within a social network calibrated to specific interests. The community dimension within Strava is often married with a participatory dimension (Epranata & Bangun, 2022) and is evident from the very moment of access: after registering, in fact, when asked whether to gain to a Premium subscription, we notice on the screen some reviews of other cyclists belonging to the Strava community, whose name and date of subscription we can see. This expedient testifies to the desire to emphasize the individual cyclist, but also to the need for aggregation for the recreational users. He or she, in fact, can consult reviews written by other recreational user-cyclists, learn about the experience of others, and thus decide to share the same experiences by purchasing a Premium subscription. This dimension also emerges from the ability to connect with one's contacts already on the platform, discovering their routes and workouts, along with the various insights that can be monitored through Strava. The community dimension of the platform is fueled by the opportunity to weave social relationships related to the publication of media content about cycling activities. Such content can receive likes, comments, etc., from users within and outside one's own circle of contacts (as with other social networks, we can follow users and be followed by them). In addition, one can access "clubs", or groups within the platform, filtering them by sport and location.

The competition appears evident through affordances and features of the platform. Strava stimulates the self-tracking of cyclists, who thus monitor their own performance and that of others: within "clubs" and on user profiles, insights such as route, distance, elevation gain, time on the move, average power, average speed and calories burned, bike type, etc. are accessed. The opportunity to receive such information allows the system to transform "a subjective, physical experience into a symbolic representation that the individual athlete may communicate with others" (Frandsen, 2020, p. 106). The user can provide other users with a better version of him or herself, even nurturing a kind of narcissism. One can do such monitoring on a periodic basis (weekly or monthly), delving into specific details such as miles traveled, records set, as well as various other parameters. Monitoring others' data, on the other hand, allows one to make comparisons, even setting particular parameters. Strava users can connect their own wearable device with GPS (smartwatches, heart rate monitors, etc.) through which they can 1) monitor their personal progress; 2) analyze their activities in detail; 3) share their performance with their contacts; 4) place themselves within rankings and win challenges; and 5) analyze others' performances. This is possible through first and foremost data collection within the platform. This mediatized cycling practice became "a more goal-oriented, 'sportified' one, with competitive, performative, and achievement-oriented values" (Frandsen 2020, p. 107). These dynamics of accounting for the self are intensified by the automation of data collection operations on one's cycling activities (Couture, 2021).

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From this perspective, sport reproduces sociocultural dynamics typical of the "performance society", based on "rendering" (Zuboff 2019), i.e., the transformation of biometric practices and information into profitable data, which foster the inexhaustible capitalization of our daily experiences (Morey *et al.*, 2017). Thus, self-tracking-based platforms put continuous pressure on athletes to win competitions (virtual or real) and improve performance. By virtue of the possibility of recording one's own activity, sharing it, and monitoring one's own performance and that of others, we must question both the surveillance exercised by the platform itself and "social surveillance" (Marwick, 2012) or "interveillance" (Jansson, 2015), i.e., those forms of "horizontal" surveillance, carried out between users and summarized in mutual observation. More generally, cyclists are immersed in broader surveillance and tracking networks made possible by geolocation, the extensive network of cameras in urban centers, tracking data produced during each use of their devices, and many other techno control processes. Data produced by self-tracking apps are often shared on other social networks (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) for larger or smaller circles of contacts. The use of self-tracking technologies, platforms, and related social media is now an integral part of media-sports practices and socialization processes in recreational cycling (Lamont & Ross, 2020). The digitization of recreational cycling has become so normalized that it is taken for granted that many cyclists routinely use smartphones and PCs, fast mobile connections, apps and platforms, to produce and share materials, often containing data, about their experience with other cyclists. Many scholars (Lomborg & Frandsen, 2016; Smith & Treem, 2017) have expressed concerns about the consequences of intensive use of Strava and similar platforms. Barratt (2017), in his qualitative study, explains how Strava stimulates cyclists to ride more often and with greater intensity, either through direct challenge on virtual segments or by comparing individual performance. Weber *et al.* (2018) confirm that apps such as Strava, by fueling competition, have produced an increase in cycling activity. Several studies have pointed out the dangerous consequences of increased physical activity to be "shown" online, such as injuries resulting from poor preparation, the proliferation of cheating and falsification of data, obsession with times, and rather widespread forms of "soft" and "hard" doping. Moreover, several scholars have observed that self-tracking and self-surveillance platforms of physical and sporting activity strongly affect the marginalization of values typically associated with non-professional sports, such as the joy of effort and the pursuit of mental and physical well-being.

However, if we conceive of apps primarily as communication tools, we can more usefully question the meanings associated by users with the use of self-tracking platforms (Frandsen, 2019). While there is no doubt that self-tracking systems such as Strava project individuals into the web of often opaque processes of control, datafication, surveillance, and value extraction, it is equally true that they provide opportunities for communication, identity construction, socialization, and organization of leisure time.

From a communicative point of view, platforms make it possible to maintain contact with communities of like-minded individuals. Communication within platforms such as Strava often fosters the consolidation of a competitive spirit among members. However, message exchanges

Eracle. Journal of Sport and Social Sciences | **Vol. 5 (1), 2022** | ISSN 2611-6693

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between users can also have other functions, such as sharing and exchanging knowledge and providing encouragement for novice or struggling cyclists (Pajarito Grajales *et al.*, 2019). The study of the socio-communicative aspects of self-tracking apps makes it possible to show that, in some cases, the constant exchange of data about one's sports performance provides gratification through social peer support (Ehrlén, 2021).

Second, gratification is about building one's public identity as a cyclist. Apps and platforms ask users to enter certain public data, including biographical information, photos, brief descriptions, and so on. The ways in which users respond to these requests reveal individual identity construction strategies. Choices such as including photos in a cyclist uniform or riding a bicycle and self-description as "cycling enthusiast/fan" denote a specific desire to present the investment of emotional, temporal, and economic resources in recreational cycling as a defining element of one's public self.

Third, regarding the socialization processes related to self-tracking apps, attention should be drawn to the fact that recreational cycling is an activity practiced primarily for fun and recreational purposes and often aimed at preserving the pleasure of sharing and group unity. The very structuring of a "media manifold" should prompt scholars to less peremptory considerations about the incidence of performance ideology in the platformized social environments of cycling. Indeed, cycling experiences, which on Strava are "datafied" and on Zwift are "gamified" in order to extract value translated into profit by the platforms, can be shared – through images, videos, texts – in playful, critical, empathetic, emotional tones on other media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on). Although socialization through apps and platforms is rather brief and limited, Frandsen (2019) explains that in cases where "virtual" friends are also workout buddies or members of other offline social networks, shared exercise provides a useful topic of conversation for socializing. Social networks intensify "a highly developed sensibility toward an extended network of persons and media" (Hjarvard 2009, p. 167). Moreover, digital communities and social groups often reflect, extend, and shape "light" sports communities (Borgers *et al.*, 2018).

Fourth, it is necessary to analyze the control that users can exercise over their leisure time and sports activities. Apps allow people to keep a record of their cycling activities. The ability to consult objective data on one's performance induces reflection on the exercise performed and helps users "to engage with their sporting practices in (...) more serious, focused, and persistent ways" (Frandsen, 2019, p. 107). The issue of control can be addressed not only in terms of the control actions exercised by self-tracking apps over users, but also in terms of the control exercised by users over their own cycling activities. Gerard and Hepp (2018) distinguish three factors that condition the profile of sports self-trackers: the context of further practices, of which self-tracking is a part; the context of social figurations in which self-trackers are involved; and the context of social discourses about the self in our societies. The connections between these contexts give rise to two types of self-trackers. "Pragmatists" view self-tracking as "part of purposeful practices such as weight control or maintaining sleep and work routines" and the use of these technologies as "a necessary evil to achieve a certain goal" (Gerard & Hepp 2018,

p. 696). "Enthusiasts", on the other hand, appreciate the playful aspect of self-tracking technologies, and think they are an integral part of the mediatized sports experience.

Both the creation of light sports groups and the ability to track one's activities by measuring their parameters, according to Hjarvard (2009) and Frandsen (2019), are phenomena generated by the broader macro-process of individualization. In recent decades, more and more cyclists prefer to practice outside organized and recognized sports clubs, joining informal groups and associations. For these types of cyclists, the opportunity to decide for themselves how, when, and where they ride meets a need for personalization of training programs and socialization opportunities. The impact of this macro-process on cycling can be discerned from the observation that while the number of informal cyclists has grown steadily, the number of athletes affiliated with recognized cycling clubs has declined over the past two decades (Frandsen, 2019).

The platformization of utility cycling shows how the principles of datafication already applied to recreational cycling can affect the work of riders, sometimes even more disturbingly. Algorithmic management (Stark & Pais, 2020) determines the fee to be paid for each delivery, monitors the delivery process of each order, and evaluates riders' performances partly on the basis of the votes they earn, which are also used to create a ranking according to which deliveries and labor hours are distributed. Therefore, the algorithmic management system, deputed to maximize the productivity of worker-cyclists, is based on "earned" reputation. However, several studies (many of which are cited in Heiland, 2021) have highlighted the lack of transparency and the biases of algorithmic management, exposing the opacity of rider reputation management systems.

As Francesco Bonifacio's work published in this issue shows, riders' autonomy is not only limited by the algorithmic system, but also by the concrete assemblage of available technologies, sociocultural transformations, and political decisions that structure this specific cycling culture. In this sense, the material working conditions of riders also bring out the latent contradictions between the illusion of total control, monitoring and surveillance fueled by platforms as socio-technical systems, on the one hand, and the constraints, limitations and obstacles of urban material spatial arrangement, on the other. Elements such as the availability of well-lit bike lanes, the absence of potholes and good road surface quality, and limitations on the speed of car traffic are essential to ensure the simultaneous protection of the safety and speed of the rider's work. What distinguishes commuter cycling culture and rider cycling culture is precisely the element of speed. In this sense, the recommendations that platforms direct to riders regarding compliance with speed limits, safe distance, and zones closed to bicycle traffic clash with the material need to meet delivery times by dealing with traffic jams, bumpy stretches, and sudden breakdowns of the vehicle. Spatial and material knowledge of the territory becomes a valuable quality to avoid wasted time, protect safety, and maintain high standards of productivity. But material knowledge of the territory is contrasted, very often, with the information provided by apps such as Google Maps. Indeed, as Bonifacio writes in his paper, "the spatial knowledge embedded in Google Maps does not correspond to a rider's practical

sense of the space. While the former respects abstract traffic rules, the latter is the product of the incorporation of the logic of this specific practice". Finally, as Bonifacio argues, riders' cycling culture is defined by a range of practical skills, such as bicycle maintenance techniques and quick replacement of damaged components. Therefore, a new cycling culture is being built around the work of the rider, linked to the material and symbolic consequences of mobility policies in the digital age.

2.3 Gamification

Some gamification elements were introduced into recreational cycling as early as the mid-2000s by platforms such as MapMyRide. In addition, several public administrations and private companies have used gamification for awareness campaigns for the use of bicycles as a means of transportation for urban commuters (Millonig *et al.*, 2016). But this media process has intensified considerably "particularly as cycling moved indoors and onto our screens with virtual cycling", as Sarah Thorne explains in her study in this issue devoted to the Zwift platform.

Zwift is a program created in 2014 dedicated to online cycling and running. It allows its users to interact, train and compete through a dedicated platform. Zwift involves both the physical environment (where the necessary devices are installed) and a virtual environment (where users interact, train, and compete). The platform intends to foster socialization of users, who, in addition to training on their own, can participate in collective competitions. The level of immersion and interaction is very high, as the virtual worlds are very precisely constructed and users can interact with both the environment and other users as well as, physically, with the smart trainer. Smart trainers are the devices that enable participation in virtual rides. They require the removal of the rear wheel of the bicycle and the direct connection of the bicycle chain and are able to simulate inclines and changes in the road surface. Zwift allows athletic performance to be recorded and transferred into a digital world in real time, using specific hardware and motion sensors.

There are four critical phenomena associated with cycling gamification: falsification of results, health risks (Tiessen, 2014; Rey, 2015), extreme commercialization of practice, and substitutability of offline practice. The data required by Zwift to accurately represent physical movement within the game requires metrics not typically used by most recreational outdoor cyclists. The platform provides these cyclists with useful new metrics to examine their performance. This data is published on the partner site ZwiftPower.com. Falsification of performance data can occur through manipulation of the metrics and information provided. In fact, Zwift's rendering system distributes some benefits based on cyclists' self-reported weight. Since performance in Zwift is measured in terms of watts per kg, declaring a lower weight than the real one, by altering the power-to-weight ratio in a cheating way, gives cyclists a significant advantage. Ultimately, digital conversion of sports performance is still questionable. In addition to the relevance of body weight, the rider's size, shape, and riding position, all key aspects in

professional offline cycling, are not taken into account in the calculation of aerodynamics. Other cheating is accomplished by manipulating the calibration of rollers and power meters. Furthermore, the rendering system has some limitations with respect to data accuracy, inadequacy and unreliability of speed and power algorithms (McIllroy *et al.*, 2021). As a result, two side effects are the occurrence of hacker attacks and the imbalance of power between those who hold possession of billions of data (platform operators and owners) and ordinary users.

A second concern expressed by scholars includes the health consequences for athletes. Many cyclists chase the goal of losing weight beyond the recommended threshold for better results through rigid diets unsuitable for the physical exertion required by the practice. The cheating and consequences of disordered eating regimens have prompted the platform to launch numerous systems to combat the aforementioned "weight doping". The salubriousness of the premises where smart trainers are physically located is an issue that invests in protecting the health of athletes.

A third type of criticism focused on the commercialization and professionalization of cycling on Zwift. As Thorne notes, "the introduction of teams has also been central to Zwift's movement into esports and increased interest in serious competition and legitimizing the sport". According to some, the commercialization of gamified cycling generates an alteration of the values traditionally associated with recreational cycling (fun, sociability, sharing, etc.).

A fourth issue concerns the substitution of offline racing. Especially in countries where restrictions on sports practice during COVID-19 pandemic have been very severe, e-cycling has grown exponentially. Rojas-Valverde *et al.* (2022) questioned whether these virtual cycling practices can operate as digital substitutes for offline sports and physical activity. In general, e-cycling constitutes a mediatized cycling practice with a specific sociocultural and techno-media background, which is not intended to replace offline cycling. However, during lockdowns it has emerged as a mediatized practice that, according to the logic of substitution (Schulz, 2004), almost completely absorbs road cycling, namely, another practice, unmediatized or only partially mediatized.

Finally, according to Matthew Tiessen (2014), datafied and gamified recreational cycling practices reshape the inherent joy in cycling activity. Such practices produce the incorporation of sporting activity within a complex media-cultural mood, based on the typical values of the neoliberal ethos (self-surveillance, self-efficiency, performance obsession, productivity ideology). Such a media-cultural mood produces the dangerous distortions mentioned above.

Besides some weaknesses, Zwift has many strengths. The immersiveness of the racing environments, the versatility of the competitions, the opportunity to compete with athletes from all over the world, and the possibility offered to professional and recreational cyclists to train constantly during lockdowns – with performance comparable to that of outdoor cycling (Westmattelmann *et al.*, 2021) – are undoubted advantages of this mediatized cycling practice. In addition, Zwift overcomes the organizational constraints of offline cycling: races on the platform do not require the completion of administrative and authorization procedures, are not disrupted by bad weather, do not have to cope with poor road surface conditions, and do not

require expenses for transportation, accommodation, and food for teams. Another advantage is that the platform consistently reduces the danger of accidents, although it is not completely zeroed out. Finally, there is considerable room for commercial and technological development of the platform. In 2019, Zwift defines a collaboration with the Giro d'Italia, which leads to reproducing the Bologna time trial on the platform. In 2020, Zwift organizes for charity the Virtual Tour de France, with the participation of great champions from the men's and women's teams. From 2020, the UCI Cycling Esports World Championships are held on Zwift. These examples highlight how, within this platform, a "SMS triangle" is being consolidated, consisting of the media interested in broadcasting virtual competitions, sports organizations (both those that are born in the e-cycling sphere and traditional ones that intend to enter it), and sponsors. At the same time, the platform's technical crew is working on improvements to the virtual environment, such as the inclusion of video capture and e-coaching, which can enhance the virtual rider experience.

2.4 Beyond platformization. E-cycling and e-bike

Platformization does not exhaust the subprocesses of digitizing the contemporary recreational cycling experience. More radical processes of digitization concern the transformation of the bicycle into a digital medium, in a twofold sense.

On the one hand, media are authentic forms of cycling as electronic cycling (Frandsen, 2019). Here, it is impossible to summarize the extensive debate that exists within Media Studies and the sociology of sports on whether esports should be given the status of sports disciplines (Del Gaudio & Ruffino, 2021). In any case, e-cycling involves competition based on skill in the use of video games. This means that the cycling experience is based on a specific form of competitive media literacy.

On the other hand, bike becomes a material medium. Cox (2022) has illustrated the technological and cultural function of the e-bike as a conduit to electric mobility and electric car. Because of its relatively affordable purchase cost, the e-bike could become a popular means of transportation in a short period of time, able to habituate many cyclists to the ways of interacting with electric technologies (pedal assist, charging, battery maintenance, and so on). A new cycling culture is being built around this specific type of bicycle. The success of the ebike culture depends on structuring an electric "vélomobility" (Furness, 2007; Spinney, 2009; Pesses, 2010; Koglin & Rye, 2014; McIlvenny, 2015; Behrendt, 2018; Cox, 2019 and 2022), that is, an assemblage of material, technological, infrastructural, cultural, and political conditions, that contends for resources, space, and attention with the car-centric system of automobility (Urry, 2004).

However, studies on the future of mobility ignore the role of the material mediatization of the bicycle. Thanks to digitization, the e-bike could fully evolve into a true "media machine", equipped with geolocation sensors (which dialogue with apps and devices, but also prevent theft), audio-visual entertainment systems, integrated video cameras, self-tracking apparatuses,

wi-fi connections, and so on. Such an e-bike is capable of dialoguing with extended networks of devices, apps, media and social networks. The effect is a transformation of the cycling experience through the intensification of digitization, both to exploit its communicative and playful potential and to enhance insurance protection against theft and accidents.

3. Conclusions. From hyper-mediatization to de-mediatization

The mediatization approach makes it possible to investigate the transformations of cycling cultures over a very broad time span, thus complementing other more traditional fields of research such as the sociology of culture, sociology of sport and Cultural Studies. A very complex mutation reshapes interaction between cyclists, political actors, sports organizations, media entities, and economic operators. The first two phases of the mediatization of cycling act on specific social and cultural realities along with other meta-processes such as globalization and commercialization. The complex of these meta-processes, even with the variability of specific contexts, promotes the stabilization of the "SMS triangle". In this broad period, the media are mainly institutional actors with impressive socio-technical apparatuses. Their action takes place at the macro-social level, acting, together with sports and economic organizations, in the field of mass communication. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the early stages of the mediatization of cycling involve only those competitions that are sufficiently attractive to audiences and sponsors, almost completely ignoring the "minor" forms of sport cycling, recreational cycling and utility cycling.

Digital media, mobile connections, and platforms have extended mediatization – in the specific form of digitization – to all cycling practices and cultures, thanks to the typical properties of digital and telematic communication (diffusivity, cheapness, virality, and so on). The digitization of cycling cultures is as much a product of the massive diffusion of networked digital media and mobile communication technologies, paving the way for later developments in the field of health- and fitness-oriented self-tracking apps, as it is of the broader social macro-processes of individualization, commercialization and globalization. As Ehrlén (2022, p. 545) summarizes, "mediatization contributes to the diversification of the sporting landscape, enables fluidity in sports communities, and strengthens commercialization of leisure sports". The analysis of the mediatization of cycling cultures encourages us to summarize two basic trends: the extension of digitization (third wave of mediatization) to all fields of cycling experience and the cooperation between mediatization and other social macro-processes (commercialization, globalization, individualization). Understanding the meta-process of individualization can be facilitated by Hjarvard's (2009) concept of "soft individualism". This concept identifies the contemporary tendency to define the self through lifestyle, consumption choices, sexual orientation and eating habits. In this scenario, peers and the media play a crucial role in the normative orientation of individuals. Sports, recreational and utility cycling cultures contribute to the identity construction of practitioners according to increasingly fluid and informal pathways, through

constant connection with fashion, technology, and various leisure activities. The meta-process of individualization can be related to the phenomena of de-institutionalization of contemporary sports (Frandsen, 2019), which fosters the practice of sports outside the circuits recognized by sports institutions.

 A final reflection on the mediatization of cycling should be dedicated to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some scholars (Nikitas *et al.*, 2021) have critically addressed the initiatives taken by public administrations at a global level to make cycling safer and more widespread, with a view to reducing both the risk of contagion and environmental pollution. Taking into account a large number of statistics and surveys, Buehler and Pucher (2021) come to optimistic conclusions about the levels of both recreational and utility cycling in the near future. They positively evaluate the extension of protected cycle paths, the growth in bicycle sales, the increase of new practitioners during the pandemic, the recovery of commuter routes, lost during the lockdown, the renunciation of many passengers to public transport in favor of bicycles. Later, in research focusing on fourteen "bicycle-friendly" cities in thirteen different countries in Europe and North America, the same authors found a general increase in sport and recreational cycling and a concomitant decrease in utility cycling (Buehler & Pucher, 2022). Various research attests that during the COVID-19 pandemic bicycle traffic increased significantly (Kraus & Koch, 2021), especially in urban areas (Schweizer *et al.*, 2021), partly through the provision of temporary infrastructure to support bicycle and pedestrian mobility (Francke, 2022; Rérat *et al.*, 2022). These dynamics have raised the debate about the need for public investment to implement durable infrastructure and local and national policies to support practitioners. Such initiatives are essential to transform the temporary increase in bicycle traffic into a structural mutation of urban mobility toward safer, sustainable, and cheaper practices (Büchel *et al.*, 2022). Although the debate is still open, according to some scholars (Budi *et al.*, 2021) transformations in cycling practice are supported by a deeper cultural shift. The increase of practitioners in recreational and utility cycling is supported by the social demand for new lifestyles, differentiated according to heterogeneous cycling cultures, but united by the centrality of cycling mobility and environmental sustainability in defining individual and collective identities. The processes of digitization of cycling cultures exert a relevant function in the consolidation of post-COVID-19 cycling cultures. According to Budi *et al.* (2021), media is one of the factors that sustained cycling trends during the pandemic, especially through the influence of social media dedicated to cycling. Paydar and Fard (2021) highlight the contribution of mobile apps to the improvement of cycling behavior, both in terms of their motivational function and their ability to facilitate people's recognition of positive/negative environmental aspects. This may in turn lead to greater cyclists' awareness.

Moreover, a further issue related to the digitization of post-COVID-19 cycling cultures concerns the role of e-cycling. Especially in those countries with stringent traffic restrictions, e-cycling has grown vertiginously. Recreational and professional cyclists have started or continued to regularly participate in virtual races with opponents from all over the world.

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The lockdowns have shown the relevance of sports and leisure time to the mental and physical balance of millions of cyclists worldwide, as Matthew Tiessen also reminds us in his article for this issue. Social media, mobile apps, and e-gaming platforms have offered support for practicing cycling, thus limiting the anguish of forced confinement within domestic spaces. Among the side effects of lockdowns for COVID-19, however, is the intensification of the mediatization of every daily activity: work, entertainment, social relationships, sex, sports and every other sphere of life have been experienced through the digital assemblage consisting of apps, software, hardware, Web connections and screens. However, this hyper-mediatization, which has accelerated dynamics of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2016) that had already been in place for some time, has generated unpredictable reactions. On the one hand, cyclists have expressed the need to reappropriate spaces and territories, returning to riding in the streets and relishing again the pleasure of immersing themselves as much in busy urban arteries as in rural paths and nature trails. This reappropriation was supported by a media manifold, consisting of social network sites, apps and platforms. On the other hand, however, a spontaneous cycling movement has arisen based on the rejection of digital instrumentation for audiovisual production, control, monitoring, sharing and commentary of cycling experience. This trend, although a minority one, indicates that media saturation may generate a kind of de-mediatization (Kopecka-Piech, 2020) of some recreational cycling practices, in the name of recovering the direct relationship with the landscape, off-line sociality, and the non-competitive and non-quantifiable pleasure of cycling (individual or collective).

These observations on the evolution of cycling practices after the COVID-19 pandemic allow us to reflect more deeply on the transformations of the mediatization processes of cycling cultures. Not only is mediatization a complex of processes with varying intensity and extent depending on geographical and cultural contexts, not only is it divided into waves or phases with specific effects and characteristics, but it should also be interpreted as a nonlinear phenomenon and, therefore, potentially subject to regression (in cases of desaturation and disconnection from digital media).

Cycling is a social practice with multiple cultural meanings that can be traced to at least two areas: recreational (sports and leisure cycling) and utility (where the bicycle can be both a tool for work and a means of getting to work). Cycling can be conceived as a set of practices already characterized by marked cultural complexity. Ultimately, the analytical and conceptual framework of mediatization is useful for studying the ambivalence, contradictory nature and richness of the ways in which media cross, shape, and reconfigure actors, practices and processes of contemporary cycling cultures.

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Trouble in Watopia: Negotiating Community Wellbeing and Cheating in Zwift eSports Cycling

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Abstract

This article examines *Zwift* (2015), a massively multiplayer online game that uses an indoor trainer to connect one's bicycle to a virtual world. Using the trainer's various sensors, the game translates speed, cadence, and power data into the movement of the user's in-game avatar. One of *Zwift*'s most popular features are its competitive races that allow cyclists to compete against others at recreational and elite levels. As in any multiplayer game, cheating has become a concern on the platform. Much of the discussion around cheating has focused on "weight-doping," whereby an individual manipulates their weight to gain an advantage over other racers. While virtual "weigh-ins" have been implemented to curb cheating at the elite level, these have proven to be controversial and potentially harmful to racers. Drawing on studies of cheating in games, this article examines the mechanics of *Zwift* that give rise to "weight-doping" to understand the risks and potential harm of its current anti-cheat measures and their relation to self-tracking and gamification.

Keywords: cycling; Zwift; e-sports; cheating; self-tracking; gamification

1. Introduction

In the mid-2000s, sites like MapMyRide and Strava introduced recreational cyclists to self-tracking and the gamification of their sport. The mediatization of cycling has continued to intensify, particularly as cycling moved indoors and onto our screens through exer-games and other fitness platforms (e.g., Apple Fitness+, Peloton). In the beginning, Strava gave recreational cyclists the ability to map their rides, which created a record of the distance, time elapsed, elevation, and speed of their activities. Strava would become notable for its additional self-tracking measures that included estimates for calories burned, "fitness" and "freshness," training load, and, if the user provides heart rate data, the "relative effort" of one's activity (formerly known as a "suffer score"). Foremost, however, Strava is best known for gamifying outdoor cycling by creating a digital overlay on the real-world that allows cyclists to compete on local roads for the fastest times on user-designated road segments, earning the fastest cyclists the title of "King" or "Queen of the Mountain." Strava's most recent update adds the title of "Local Legend," for those with the greatest number of attempts on a particular segment. What

Strava has done for outdoor cycling, *Zwift* (2015) has brought to its virtual worlds and the gamification of indoor cycling. *Zwift* is a massively multiplayer online game that features a number of virtual worlds in which cyclists can ride and race by connecting their bicycle to the game using an indoor trainer or "smart bike." Drawing on data from the trainer's sensors, the game relies on a complex calculation of one's height, weight, and power to determine the speed of one's in-game avatar, which fluctuates based on incline and terrain. Like Strava's digital augmentation of the real world, *Zwift*'s virtual worlds also consist of real-time results for its numerous sprints and climb segments (which can optionally also be synched to a user's Strava account).

While gamification of exercise is often viewed as enjoyable and motivating, the gamification of cycling has been met with criticism for both compromising the safety of cyclists and for substituting the intrinsic value of cycling with chasing virtual achievements and self-optimization (Rey, 2015; Tiessen, 2014). The metrics required by *Zwift* to accurately render one's physical movement within the game requires data not typically recorded by most outdoor recreational cyclists, thereby giving these cyclists a new influx of metrics by which to dissect their performance. This data, however, is also available for public scrutiny on its partner site, ZwiftPower.com, that shares race results. Unsurprisingly, the visibility of this data has led to accusations of cheating, as users compare data and speculate, sometimes rightly so, about others gaining an unfair advantage in competitive events. To curb cheating, *Zwift* has implemented numerous anti-cheat measures designed to reduce "weight-doping" by flagging unusual results, adding a "cone of shame" to sandbaggers (those riding below their proper category), and requiring athletes to submit weigh-in videos prior to participating in elite race events, such as their partnership with the Tour de France and WTRL (World Tactical Racing League)'s *Zwift* Racing League's (ZRL) premier division. Weigh-ins have been at the centre of debate about cheating on the platform, as they are viewed as both a necessary defence against weight-doping and a harmful practice that encourages disordered eating (Lethbridge, 2022; Schwenker, 2021). Although prerace weigh-ins are only required at the highest level, cyclists of all levels must enter their weight for the game to calculate their avatar's movement. As a result, even cyclists participating in any competitive recreational events are acutely aware of the role that weight plays in the game's physics.

By critically examining the game's mechanics, I offer insight into *Zwift*'s gameplay and the regulations that govern its competitive events and argue that attention to rider weight in the interest of creating realism is potentially harmful and neglects the many other strategies used by cyclists to manipulate its system. The game's dynamics and the mediation of users' data intensifies concerns related to self-tracking and self-optimization (Lupton 2016; Neff and Nafus 2016) and draws unhealthy attention to weight in a weight-sensitive sport where power and skill should be key. In order to understand the dynamics of its weight mechanics, it is imperative to examine its gameplay in depth to provide important context for cyclists' experience of the game. Ultimately, the game's emphasis on weight and use of weigh-ins are urgently in need of further study.

2. Welcome to Watopia

Zwift is self-described as an app that "blends the fun of video games with the intensity of serious training" (Zwift n.d.). Available on PC and mobile platforms, *Zwift* is a massively multiplayer online game that offers cyclists a number of virtual worlds to explore including their entirely fictitious Watopia (which features a volcano, towns, deserts, jungles, mountains, and a prehistoric area with roaming dinosaurs) and worlds built on real locations with varying degrees of realism, including London, New York, France, Richmond, Innsbruck, Yorkshire, and Makuri Islands (inspired by Tokyo and its surrounding countryside). While *Zwift* is often referenced as a training program (Westmattelmann *et al.*, 2021), this is only one of several modes available on the platform, as cyclists can also choose to freely explore its virtual roads, complete an individual workout, ride with pace bots, or participate in one of its many public events, including social rides, group workouts, and a range of competitive races (including classic races, criterions, time trials, chase races, or league series).

The diverse activities and game mechanics available to cyclists situates *Zwift* in a category similar to other exer-games like Nintendo's *Ring Fit Adventure* (2019), *Switch Sports* (2022), or *Wii Sports* (2011), rather than virtual or sports simulation training experiences. While *Zwift* aims for realism in some respects, its aesthetics and mechanics are inspired by video games. The game is most realistic in its calculation of the cyclist's speed that draws on one's height, weight, and power data. In flat areas of its virtual roads, the game largely relies on power data (watts) to determine the avatar's speed, while height and weight are used to simulate drag and drafting mechanics that allow cyclists to maintain the same speed while producing less power when riding directly behind others. Climbing hills and mountains, however, shifts to a watts/kilogram (w/kg) measurement that gives lighter cyclists an advantage on ascents. Inversely, on descents, heavier cyclists descend more quickly. These advantages, however, can be mitigated by a number of tactics. Choosing the most effective bike for the route can give cyclists an advantage. Each bike frame and wheelset has its strengths, as some are lighter or more aerodynamic, while some are designed for particular types of terrain (e.g., gravel and mountain bikes). Diverting from these efforts to realistically simulate outdoor physics, *Zwift* also offers power-ups reminiscent of those found in Nintendo's *Mario Kart* games. Rather than turtle shells and bananas, however, *Zwift*'s power-ups temporarily increase or decrease cyclists' weight, alter draft dynamics (benefiting cyclists or removing draft for others), grant invisibility, and flatten rough terrain.

In addition to its overt game mechanics, *Zwift* also utilizes gamification to keep cyclists engaged and committed to regularly returning to its virtual worlds. Examples of gamification include experience points, levels, in-game currency, and achievements and badges. Cyclists may receive "bonus" power-ups that give them additional experience points (XP), which are used to increase the cyclist's level. While levels in video games typically denote a player's skill level, in *Zwift*, a cyclist's level is indicative of their time spent on the platform, as unlike most video games, a cyclist's performance will rapidly deteriorate with time away from cycling. XP are accumulated at a rate of 20 XP for each kilometre cycled, and on occasion, *Zwift* has hosted events that offer double XP. Reaching particular levels also unlocks aesthetic modifications for

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one's avatar (including head gear, glasses, jerseys, gloves, socks, and shoes). While riding, cyclists will also simultaneously earn in-game currency referred to as "drops" (i.e., sweat drops), which accumulate at an increased rate while climbing. Drops can be spent at the "Drop Shop" to purchase additional frames and wheels that offer weight and aero advantages over other bike configurations — though some options require that players reach a specified level before being available for purchase. Finally, *Zwift* currently includes more than 170 badges and achievements for completing courses and missions, giving other cyclists "ride ons," and hitting an increasingly high number of watts.

These gamification elements are used to motivate cyclists to reach goals and to increase their investment in the game. The use of gamification, however, has been met with criticism (Rey, 2015). Writing about the neoliberal applications of gamification, PJ Rey argues that "gamification is meant to re-enchant production and consumption by making them more playful" (2015, p. 291). In *Zwift*, gamification aims not only to keep players from drifting to competitors (such as cycling simulation platforms like ROUVY and Wahoo SYSTM, formerly RGT, or fitness platforms like Apple Fitness+ and Peloton), but also to ensure that cyclists continue paying subscription fees and regularly return to populate its world and events; after all, a race needs other racers. Central to any massively multiplayer online game is a dedicated fanbase and growth. Without an influx of new players, new events, and continued development of the game world, the game will become stagnant and interest will be lost. *Zwift* experienced strong growth as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that closed gyms and at times restricted outdoor movement, and there is no doubt that its developers are invested in maintaining and growing its userbase. While the precise number of users is unavailable, the company's co-founder and CEO, Eric Min, stated in 2021 that they had over three million accounts (Reed, 2021).

Beyond its Rey's neoliberal context, however, gamification is also critiqued for manipulating the motivations behind our activities. In "Gamed Agencies," Matthew Tiessen begins by imagining a world dominated by gamification; this, he argues, "is a digitally and visually mediated world in which intrinsic values aren't quite valuable, profitable or affectively desirable enough and so are overcoded and re-coded by icons, graphs, statistics, points, and badges, all in pursuit of access, privileges, productivity, prestige, and feelings of satisfaction. This is a world in which the awarding, redeeming, gifting, and trading of credits, digital achievements, and virtual trophies has become an end in itself" (Tiessen, 2014, p. 252). For cyclists who are thoroughly embedded in the world of apps that mediate cycling, this future is now. While Strava and *Zwift* have been discussed thus far, it is important to recognize that for many these are but two among a constellation of other applications that users rely on to triangulate their data. Examples of other sources that may be consulted concerning any single activity include Apple Health, Garmin Connect, Zwift Power, Intervals.icu, AI Endurance, Strava, TrainingPeaks, Today's Plan, and WTRL race results. While one would not likely make use of all of these sources simultaneously, reviewing three or four of these sources of data would not be unusual for those who regularly participate in races.

In addition to participating in individual race events, *Zwift* also hosts leagues where cyclists can join teams to compete in weekly race series. Arguably one of the most popular of such

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organized events, and the focus of this article, is WTRL's *Zwift* Racing League, which hosts several seasons each year with over 15,000 global participants across 1800 teams (WTRL, n.d., "About"). Facilitating team events is an excellent strategy for maintaining and growing its userbase, as teams help to keep players engaged by adding a social component, which creates an obligation to others to ensure one's team is able to participate in its events. The introduction of teams has also been central to *Zwift*'s movement into esports and increased interest in serious competition and legitimizing the sport. Much like other popular esports, WTRL's Zwift Racing League (ZRL) events are lived-streamed with accompanying sports commentary by varying commentators across regions. Central to this shift to esports, however, has been responding to concerns about in-game cheating.

Racer categories on *Zwift* are currently determined based on one's w/kg and FTP over a 20-minute effort (see Figure 1). FTP (or functional threshold power) is used to estimate a cyclist's one-hour power. This, in combination with one's w/kg is intended to keep categories competitive across climbs and descents (as lighter cyclists will have a significant advantage on climbing hills). Nevertheless, as many cyclists have experienced, the balancing of these categories is not always fair, as lighter cyclists may end up in events with heavier cyclists based on w/kg, but are unable to match the power output of heavier cyclists on flat and rolling sections of courses that dominate most race events. Consider for example two Mixed B division racers with the same 3.3 w/kg ranking: a 65kg racer with an FTP of 215 watts and an 80kg racer with an FTP of 264 watts.

	Men's/Mixed Divisions		Women's Divisions
A+	**4.6**wkg and **300**w FTP		
A	**4.0**wkg and **250**w FTP	**A**	**3.7**wkg
B	**3.2**wkg and **200**w FTP	**B**	**3.2**wkg
C	**2.5**wkg and **150**w FTP	**C**	**2.5**wkg
D	less than **2.49wkg** FTP	**D**	less than **2.49**wkg FTP

Figure 1: race category divisions for men and women participating in WTRL's Zwift Racing League.

In a relatively flat race, where the game's physics rely predominantly on one's watt output, the 80kg racer will have a significant advantage by being able to maintain a higher number of watts. If the 65kg racer were able to match the power of the 80kg rider over a 20-minute period, they would be disqualified and moved up to Division A, as their w/kg output would be 4.06 (264 watts/65kg) which exceeds the B Division category limits. For the lighter racer, this means that it would be difficult to be competitive in the B Division, as mountain stages are extremely rare. The significant differences in weight across racers exacerbates these effects and can result in the

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feeling that races are unfair. Following any race, users can visit Zwift Power to review race results and examine each competitor's data, including power, weight, heart rate, and w/kg across various time increments (e.g., 20m, 5m, 1m, 30s, 15s). The ability for users to review their competitor's data, however, has led to speculation and accusations of cheating (which are often shared and discussed in Zwift related groups on social media sites). Users may speculate about particularly low weights, or opportune changes to weight that allow a racer to "sandbag:" entering an increase in weight results in a lower w/kg, which can be used to prevent racers from moving up to a higher category. The ability to view this data is intended to keep users honest and to enforce rules through community policing; users may, for instance, report suspicious data or activities to Zwift or WTRL race control.

3. Cheating

When individuals speak about cheating in *Zwift*, it is very often in the context of competitive racing (McIlroy, 2021, Richardson *et al.*, 2022, Westmattelmann, 2021). Richardson *et al.* (2022), in particular, offer a thorough account of cheating in *Zwift* racing and identify several forms of cheating, including height and/or weight doping, gender doping, use of banned substances, sandbagging, unusual pedalling styles, and power and controller manipulation (pp. 5-7). Such conversations, however, do not fully capture the act of cheating on the platform, nor the nuances of the term itself. In her examination of cheating in video games, Mia Consalvo surveys players' experiences and reveals that what was considered to be cheating by players is quite varied; as she writes, "[f]rom the purist to the purely social, cheating ranged from anything outside 'one's own thoughts' in a single-player game to activities that had to make other players worse off" (103). Cheating is a continuum, rather than a clearly defined activity. For the purist, relying on outside information, such as a friend or paratexts (e.g., walkthroughs, guides, or manuals) constitute cheating. In the middle ground are those that view any subversion of the rules as cheating; for instance, the use of cheat codes, hacks, or exploits. Finally, there are those that hold the more commonly shared belief that cheating is about gaining an advantage over others, and therefore can only truly take place in multiplayer games; that is, when the cheater seeks "to gain advantage and progress further (or win) in the game" (109).

Each of these forms of cheating serves a quite different purpose. For some cheating is simply a means to progress the game when one becomes stuck — one might turn to a friend or Google in order to continue making progress in a challenging game. Some may experiment with cheat codes or exploits to test the limits of the game. There are also the triflers (Wark, 2007, p. 040), those who "recognize rules but not goals" (Suits, 1978, p.47), and the metagamers (Boluk and LeMieux, 2017), who subvert the game's rules to make a new game. For these players, cheating is not simply about breaking rules or trying to win; by changing the rules, cheating changes the game: it makes a new game. Yet, there are also, of course, the traditional cheaters who recognize the goal of the game, but not its rules (Suits, 1978, p.47), and the more malicious players at the opposite end of the continuum, which includes spoilsports and those who engage in "grief play." That is, those who recognize neither the rules nor the goals, but instead participate in a kind of dark play (Sicart, 2015), often disrupting the enjoyment of the game for others.

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4. Responses to Cheating

In *Zwift*, we find all forms of "cheaters" (depending on where your values fall on this continuum). For those looking for assistance, there are a whole host of paratextual resources available to assist with understanding the game's mechanics, optimal in-game purchases, and strategies for particular routes (e.g., bike choice and timing for using power-ups). Many also discover or learn about various hacks and exploits that exist in the game, or emerge from complications with one's trainer setup. For instance, a player might exploit a flaw in the trainer to cause momentary spikes in power that earn them a badge for hitting 1200 watts, which would have otherwise been well beyond their normal output. Richardson *et al.* describe another exploit related to an unusual pedalling style, whereby cyclists take advantage of a trainer's three-second power average by pedalling in bursts that are read as a greater power output. For some race events, an algorithm is used to detect and disqualify the use of this strategy.

Hacks are also occasionally used in *Zwift*, whereby a user manipulates the game's code or data. In 2019, a cyclist used a bot to unlock the Zwift Concept Z1 bike (colloquially known as the "tron" bike owing to its colourfully illuminated frame). While time consuming to acquire, as it is only earned by cumulatively climbing 50,000m, it is hardly an uncommon bike to see in the worlds of *Zwift*. Compared to other bikes in the game, it is considered one of the strongest all-rounder bikes. This particular cyclist, however, had used a hack to unlock the bike to use while participating in the 2019 British Cycling eRacing Championships. When the act was discovered, the cyclist was fined, suspended for 6 months, and had his title revoked (British Cycling, 2019; Rogers, 2019). British Cycling publicly stated that doing so had given the cyclist an unfair advantage. While the cyclist's method of acquiring the bike may have been dishonest, it is difficult to claim that it gave an unfair advantage. They were not the only cyclists using this Concept Z1, and others may have chosen alternate bikes as a result of sponsorship requirements (much like in professional outdoor races, which notably also produces unfair advantages). Certainly, this act concerns integrity and unsporting behaviour, but ultimately, it raises questions about the game's design; for instance, offering more equitable bike selection for elite events.

More blatant cheating through the use of hacks and data manipulation have also been raised at elite events, and those who participate in such events are regulated by more strict rules and regulations than those at the recreational level. The Zwift Accuracy and Data Analysis (ZADA), which parallels professional cycling's WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency), was created to regulate elite events, including WTRL's Zwift Racing Premier League. Though there are shared rules between elite and recreational racing, the two most significant differences are regulations that require elite cyclists to provide two sources of data for power output (e.g., using both a trainer and power pedals to record power data) and to conduct a video weigh-in prior to the race. In attempts to undermine these regulations, there have been occasions where elite racers have falsified power output data by uploading and altering files before submitting them to *Zwift* (see details on Zwift Performance Verification Board Decisions for cases 2021-01, 2021-02, and 2020-09 under "Zwift Cycling Esports Rules"). Such actions constitute more clear examples of

cheating as they both violate rules and give an advantage to the racer. Although *Zwift* has been relatively successful in identifying falsified data, its regulation of weight-doping (the manipulation of a racer's weight), however, has been met with significant controversy. The following sections will examine the challenges associated with weight-doping in eRacing at both the elite and recreational racing.

4.1 Elite Racing

In weight-sensitive sports, weigh-ins are often seen as a kind of necessary evil. They are imperative to the fairness and accuracy of competition, but are often a point of stress, as many competitors engage in unhealthy behaviours in order to have an optimal weigh-in. For this reason, there has been much debate and consideration of weigh-ins and disordered eating practices. In combat sports, weigh-ins are used to create weight-classes that ensure that competitors are matched appropriately to ensure a fair fight and to avoid endangering competitors. In *Zwift*, weight is a component of categorization (w/kg), but categories are not divided by weight. As a result, two racers can have drastically different weights, but compete in the same division. Lighter riders, however, typically have an advantage over heavier riders. In an article for *Zwift Insider*, Eric Schlange provides a detailed analysis of the effect of weight on climbs, flats, and descents. While maintaining the same power, Schlange found that "reducing your body weight by 1kg will save you ~9 seconds over an hour-long flat race" (Schlange, 2020, "How Rider Weight"). With the exception of an individual time trial, this effect is complicated by drafting, power-ups, and the group dynamics of the peloton, but it is nevertheless unsurprising that riders strive to decrease weight to increase performance. Some racers have even used an exploit in the program that allowed one to manipulate one's weight mid-race to advantageously optimize one's weight for climbs and descents. The discovery of this exploit caused quite a controversy in the community (Schlange, 2022, "The Story of #FreeLuciano"). Falsifying one's weight data can have a significant impact on one's performance, and for this reason, weight-doping is one of the most pervasive forms of cheating in *Zwift*. The use of video weigh-ins as a countermeasure, however, is not tenable at the recreational level (and, as I will argue, inadvisable). Elite racers are required to record and upload a weigh-in video "within two hours of the event start and [be] submitted to Zwift at least one hour before the event start" ("Cycling Esports Rules and Regulations version 1.0.8," 2022). There are also very specific requirements for how the video must be filmed to prevent tampering. While weigh-ins are not an uncommon practice in weight-sensitive sports, there have been criticism of the weigh-in regulations for *Zwift* races. Foremost, concerns have been raised regarding the timing of weigh-ins, which were shifted from 24 hours to one hour prior to race start times. In March of 2022, Alice Lethbridge, a professional road cyclist, wrote a letter reflecting on her experience of the weigh-in process and its potential to encourage disordered eating behaviours. As Lethbridge explains, "The Zwift algorithms where riders are penalized for every extra cm in height and every kg of weight had pushed me over the edge as I sought to raise my level of performance to try and help my team win the title. . . . I realized that being faced with weekly weigh-ins, where every registered user of zwift power would be able to see if I'd gained weight that week, had led

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me to slip back into the disordered eating habits I thought I'd put behind me" (2022). Here, Lethbridge reflects on the visibility of *Zwift*'s weight data, but her letter also comments on the shift from the 24-hour to one hour prerace weigh-in time for recording and uploading videos and expresses a preference for the 24 hour allowance, as it permits her to do a fasted weigh-in in the morning and allow for normal eating throughout the day to fuel for the race. A one-hour time restriction, she argues, at worst, encourages cyclists to restrict eating and drinking to achieve an optimal weigh-in, and, at best, makes cyclists particularly conscious of their eating behaviours. This is particularly dangerous given King and Hall's study of indoor cyclists that found that they are not fuelling properly; as they write, "cyclists conducting training sessions using indoor means do not meet sports nutrition guidelines for CHO intake pre, during or post-ride" (2021, pp. 1211-1212). Although outdoor professional cycling does not typically require weigh-ins, it is a weight-sensitive sport and research has noted that there is a prevalence of disordered eating among its athletes (Muros, 2020; Riebl, 2007). In the context of these studies, the timing of *Zwift*'s weigh-in is particularly troubling given that typical ZRL race times begin in the late afternoon or evening (e.g., 7:20 pm ET), and may fall even later depending on one's own time zone; therefore, elite cyclists may be influenced to restrict eating for much of the day.

In his three-part series, "Extreme Dieting in Virtual Cycling," Christopher Schwenker (2021) provides a thorough overview of the research on disordered eating in professional cycling and provides recommendations for *Zwift*'s virtual races. Unlike Lethbridge, however, Schwenker argues against a 24-hour weigh-in period. As he notes, "[a] weigh-in time of not more than two hours prior to competition should be implemented. By doing so, the possibility for an athlete to exhibit the extreme dieting behavior of calorie and fluid restriction prior to weigh-in followed by binging, similar to a bulimic, will be prevented and avoided. This is not the case when weigh-in is permitted 24 hours prior to the event" (part 3). This statement, however, directly conflicts with Lethbridge's experience participating in the Premier League. Reflecting on the weigh-in change to the two-hour time period, Lethbridge writes that, "[w]hat saddens me the most is that a rule change that didn't need to happen, and hasn't seen anyone change their weight to counteract the huge amounts Zwift claimed the 24-hour 'cut' was enabling, has caused a lot of stress and unhappiness and forced talented riders away from elite racing" (Lethbridge, 2022).

Based on the sources that Schwenker provided, his perspective appears to be informed by existing research on weigh-ins required in other sports. However, much of this research currently concerns combat-sports, such as wrestling, and it is well-known that these athletes can undergo significant weight changes prior to their weigh-in if timing allows (Barley, 2018; Oppliger *et al.*, 1993). The concern about the 24-hour weigh-in arises out of consideration of sports that allow significant recovery time between weigh-in and the event; as Burke *et al.* (2021) explain, "some sports (e.g., professional boxing and MMA) offer substantial recovery time (up to 32 h) between the weigh-in and event, with almost unlimited opportunities for pre-event fluid and food intake. While such sports allow the athlete to be well-fueled and hydrated prior to competition, these conditions support a culture of extreme BM manipulation." After the deaths of three competitors as a result of drastic weight cutting, many events moved the

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weigh-in time closer to the event start time (Oppliger *et al.*, 2003, p. 30). For combat sports, it is clear why regulation changes are needed to discourage disordered eating behaviours. It is, however, not clear that the recommendations used for combat sports are a benefit to cycling given the differences in the structure of events and supports available to athletes.

Unlike combat sports that are often brief and typically involve infrequent events that take place over an evening or several day tournaments, ZRL races are often 1-2 hours in duration and are held once a week over 8-10 week seasons several times a year. The format of ZRL, as suggested by Lethbridge, does not lend itself to the same disordered eating practices as combat sports. A one-hour pre-race weigh-in makes sense in a context where athletes may attempt to reduce weight over a 5-7 day period (Brechney *et al.* 2021), particularly when the event holds additional weigh-ins throughout the tournament. Cyclists would likely suffer a significant decrease in performance if they were to engage in similar drastic weight cutting tactics in preparation for each weekly race (Arnold, 2020). Instead, in the context of elite racing, cyclists may instead restrict calories on race day or throughout the series. Failure to properly fuel and hydrate before intense exercise can create the conditions for a medical emergency (Oppliger *et al.*, 2003), which is especially dangerous for racers competing at home who may not be supervised.

After consideration of these views, it is clear that research is urgently needed in the specific context of virtual cycling. It is not appropriate or sufficient to adopt the weigh-in standards of another sport, particularly those with drastically different rules, structures, and conventions. It is evident that the current one-hour weigh-in is causing harm in the ZRL community, and it is imperative that *Zwift* and its race organizers aim to reduce harm until well-supported and appropriate research is available.

4.2 Recreational Racing

At the recreational level, racers are not required to provide a video weigh-in prior to race events. Although there is an explicit rule that racers must update their weight within 24 hours of the race, this rule is not enforced. WTRL's regulations further state that "[e]ach week The Board may randomly select teams from each Division to provide height and weight video per rider up to 12 hours pre and 12 hours post race" ("Rule and Regulations 2021/22 Season"); however, this regulation does not appear to be commonly invoked. It is also likely that many cyclists are not in the practice of regularly weighing themselves prior to each race, and it would hardly be surprising to learn that not all *Zwift* cyclists own a scale. While accuracy and fairness are important to the legitimacy of the sport, WTRL's lack of enforcement around weight at the recreational level is, for now, a responsible decision. Certainly, those who explicitly manipulate weight data to gain an advantage should be sanctioned (i.e., those who manipulate weight mid-race and are discovered through data analysis). However, the enforcement of weight reporting rules would be likely to bring more harm than good to the sport.

At the moment, weight-doping is largely policed by the community by reporting suspicious data or results. As Lethbridge notes in her discussion of weigh-ins, one's weight is not only noted in Zwift Power (an external site that shares race results and racer statistics), but both the highest and lowest weights are displayed in a bold red font on both the race results (across all

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participants) and on each individual's own profile page. Therefore, when a racer notes an increase or decrease in historical weight, it will appear highlighted on their profile. It is no surprise that some might feel discouraged from updating their profiles as a result of this design choice. Yet, even encouraging racers to regularly weigh themselves prior to each race could lead to problematic eating behaviours (Galli, 2017; Neumark-Sztainer *et al.*, 2006). Recreational racers are also not likely to have the support of a coach to guide their training and eating behaviours (McIlroy 2021). Further still, weigh-in requirements are more likely to impact women, who experience higher incidents of disordered eating (Qian *et al.*, 2013) and are already marginalized in cycling (Jungnickel, 2018; Ryder *et al.*, 2021). The negative outcomes of the introduction of the weight-scale into the home have been well-documented (Crawford *et al.*, 2015), and the effects of the increased mediatization of the self through wearable technologies and devices is a growing area of research. The implementation of gamification and self-tracking in sports not only reconfigures and remediates the intrinsic enjoyment of the activity (Thiessen, 2014), but they become caught up in complex cultural and surveillance practices (Whitson, 2013). In *The Quantified Self*, Deborah Lupton argues that

> Underlying many accounts of self-tracking is a barely hidden discourse of morality, which takes the form of championing those who take action to improve themselves. When one adopts this kind of rationale for entrepreneurial self-optimisation and for the search for self-knowledge as a means to achieve it, one makes the implicit assumption that those people who choose not to engage in practices of selfhood or fail to engage successfully in them are in some way deficient: ignorant, lacking the appropriate drive, or wilfully self-neglecting (2016, p. 74).

Self-tracking and gamification in cycling provides a supposedly clear path to optimizing the self and that path is filled with rewards, achievements, and badges along the way. Yet, the reality is that this path is not so straightforward (especially in the midst of a global pandemic, where even a brief illness can significantly setback one's progress). It can be difficult for athletes when the digital rewards and acknowledgements of personal bests wane. Failure to meet goals is attached to complex moral and social expectations; failing to make continued improvement is perceived as a personal fault — one needs to work harder or lacks fortitude — rather than a normal part of fitness. When the path to success is intrinsically attached to one's weight by design, it is easy to see how problematic behaviours can manifest. If one's fitness is less than optimal, one's in-game performance can be improved by a reduction in weight; that is by improving the weight, rather than the watts of *Zwift*'s w/kg formula.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Both Lethbridge (2022) and Schwenker (2021) have made recommendations that suggest that *Zwift* should more openly discuss disordered eating and provide educational resources to their users. In his five-point plan, Schwenker states that *Zwift* should require racers to "complete an

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education and instruction module delivered by health professionals with the knowledge noted above" ("Part 3"). It is understandable why this is a difficult topic for *Zwift* to raise in the community. They may, for instance, not wish to draw negative attention to the platform while trying to grow their userbase, as recommendations to require athletes to complete workshops on the subject is unappealing to new users — and, anecdotally, I am sure many of us are quite tired of the webinars and online educational workshops that were pervasive during the work from home period of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are other ways to address this subject. *Zwift* already hosts social community events and using these as an opportunity to host community events promoting ZRL that cover a variety of subjects on fuelling and hydration strategies (e.g., pre-race, training, and endurance ride fuelling) would likely be welcomed by cyclists of all levels. Creating a positive relationship to food and fitness is crucial to countering disordered eating behaviours, and, again, as King and Hall (2021) reveal in their study of indoor cycling and nutrition, many cyclists would benefit from learning to fuel appropriately during training and racing.

Deemphasizing the role of weight in the game would also be another important step in this process. Although *Zwift* attempts to reproduce the physics of outdoor cycling, weight is not the sole determining factor in one's speed and decreasing the reliance on weight for this calculation could help to reduce problematic weight-focused behaviours and cheating. It also appears that both *Zwift* and WTRL have been experimenting with new methods of categorizing racers that draw on more factors than w/kg, and this added complexity could be a benefit to racers across all categories. The new "Autocat" system aims to make races more competitive within categories (WTRL, n.d., "Autocat"), which will help to prevent discouraging outcomes for racers who are at a disadvantage as a result of their weight (such as explored in the earlier example of two B category racers at different weights).

Additionally, if the weight data shared with *Zwift* is not especially accurate (whether intentionally or inadvertently), its gameplay will benefit from reframing the w/kg formula. And while *Zwift* strives to offer a realistic experience, it is worth reminding its developers that it is also a game that owes at least some of its inspiration to video games like *Mario Kart*, and they might consider the ways that weight in these games always has clear pros and cons in terms of acceleration, cornering, and top-end speed. Leaning into its game influences through its mechanics, power-ups, and more diverse courses in race series might help to showcase racers' skills and strengths in a way that is not weight-specific.

In the case of elite racing, at the time of writing, there is insufficient research available to make informed recommendations on the weigh-in times for these athletes; however, surveying and listening to the community will be imperative for the safety of racers in the meantime. The current season-based structure of racing does suggest that the format requires a different approach to weigh-ins than that of shorter-term tournaments found in combat sports. As stated, combat sport events operate quite differently from cycling and should not be used as a guideline for virtual cycling. *Zwift* may not have the necessary research to make appropriate recommendations to govern weigh-ins, nor assess the prevalence of disordered eating in virtual cycling; however, they do have control over the design of the game. Modifying its mechanics and gameplay could be used to both reduce the effects of weight-doping and diminish the risks

of developing disordered eating that is associated with weight-sensitive sports. In "MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research," Hunicke et al. argue for moving away from feature-based game development to experience-driven design (2). It is too easy to see realism as the optimal goal of design, but what draws cyclists to *Zwift*, rather than its competitors or other fitness platforms, is the inspiration it takes from video games. As Galloway argues, "[r]ealisticness is important, to be sure, but the more realisticness takes hold in gaming, the more removed from gaming it actually becomes, relegated instead to simulation or modeling" (2006, p. 73). Rather than aspiring to create a realistic cycling experience and model the real world in a virtual one, *Zwift* should strive to embrace what games do best: imagine new and better worlds.

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Komoot. Dati, socievolezza e auto-tracciamento

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.6093/2611-6693/9634

Abstract

Sports and physical activity apps play a fundamental role in the lives of hundreds of thousands of individuals. This leads us to consider contemporary sociality as a system of global interrelationships and networks, with the individual constantly connected to others through PCs and mobile devices.

The article, starting with a digital ethnography of the Komoot app (used in cycling) aims to illustrate how this software produces ambivalence. An exaltation of the socialisation of our experiences and a healthy lifestyle is sometimes echoed by certain customisation and/or self-monitoring practices that influence our behaviour through calculation, competition and performance.

The aim of this paper is to show how a playful dimension of our routine activities, linked to a process of quantifying the self is tangible; aspects, both of which are central to the establishment of the neoliberal ethos.

Keywords: app, community online, customization, Komoot, sociability.

1. Introduzione

Gli strumenti tecnici che nella contemporaneità intermediano i rapporti tra i soggetti ci inducono a considerare la socialità come un sistema di interconnessioni, un insieme tecno-umano caratterizzato da una coesistenza del soggetto con le tecnologie digitali (Casilli, 2013).

Lee Rainie e Barry Wellman (2012) definiscono la contemporaneità come un "sistema operativo sociale" con al centro il soggetto multitasking e *multithreaded*, costantemente connesso ad altri individui attraverso pc e dispositivi mobili. Ciò restituisce l'idea di un sistema individualizzante e reticolare, che ha portato gli autori a parlare di *networked individualism*, "in contrast to the longstanding operating system formed around large hierarchical bureaucracies and small, densely knit groups such as households, communities, and workgroups. We call networked individualism an «operating system» because it describes the ways in which people connect, communicate, and exchange information" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, pp. 14-15). Il *networked individualism* è tutt'altro rispetto all'isolamento sociale, "but toward flexible autonomy. People have more freedom to tailor their interactions. They have increased opportunities about where

— and with whom — to connect. As people maneuver through their days, lives, and networks, the nature of their ties varies from situation to situation. That means people are more selective about the people with whom they relate" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 125).

Nella sfera ricreativa e del tempo libero le app per lo sport e l'attività fisica ricoprono un ruolo fondamentale per centinaia di migliaia di individui. La crescente attenzione "alla presentazione di sé online, alla strutturazione della e-reputazione, alla difesa della privacy, sono indizi di una presa di coscienza crescente del legame esistente tra pratiche individuali di costruzione della presenza e posizionamento nelle reti sociali digitali" (Casilli, 2013, p. 61). Percezioni e pensieri soggettivi scambiati attraverso il digitale contribuiscono a formare un nostro profilo che, secondo quanto scrive Salvatore Iaconesi (2018, p. 365), rappresenta "un'interpretazione di noi ad opera di entità creative e non neutrali. Questi profili sono usati per simularci. Solo attraverso la simulazione, infatti, è possibile utilizzare questi dati per prevedere comportamenti, preferenze e dinamiche relazionali secondo gli obiettivi del marketing e del business in generale". Per questo, "ci troviamo a vivere due vite parallele e interconnesse. La prima nel nostro ordinario quotidiano. La seconda in modo radicalmente non lineare, combinatorio e computazionale, nei centri di calcolo dei maggiori operatori globali, sotto forma di simulazione" (Iaconesi, 2018, p. 365).

Nell'articolo, a partire da un'etnografia digitale[1] (Murthy, 2008; Kaur‑Gill & Dutta, 2007) dell'app Komoot utilizzata tra le altre attività nella sfera del ciclismo, ci poniamo l'obiettivo di illustrare come questo software produca un'ambivalenza. A un'esaltazione della socializzazione delle nostre esperienze e di uno stile di vita salutare fanno eco, talvolta, alcune pratiche di customizzazione e/o auto-sorveglianza che influenzano i nostri comportamenti mediante il calcolo, la competizione e la performance.

2. Il software Komoot[2]

Komoot è una piattaforma progettata per aiutare gli utenti a tenere traccia, analizzare e condividere online escursioni, corsa e passeggiate in bicicletta. L'app supporta otto tipi di attività fisica ma la più comune è il ciclismo – dal *bikepacking* al cicloturismo, dalla mountain bike alla corsa su strada.

L'app è accessibile in lingua tedesca, inglese, francese, italiana, spagnola e olandese, ed è utilizzabile da desktop e da cellulare con sistema operativo Android o IOS, con la possibilità di integrarla a smartwatch, e-bike e apple-watch.

Komoot unisce tutte le funzioni di un sistema di pianificazione percorsi in un pratico Tour Planner. Molte sono le funzioni offerte: mappe topografiche, informazioni sulla distanza, il dislivello e la durata, integrazione con dispositivi GPS tra cui Wahoo e Garmin e un potente algoritmo che permette di includere solo i tipi di strada e di sentiero desiderati. Pianificato il

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[1] L'etnografia digitale è un modo per comprendere le interazioni e le relazioni nella sfera della realtà virtuale, con la dimensione online a esercitare una posizione sempre più dominante nel favorire lo scambio di esperienze e la condivisione di interessi comuni su scala globale.

[2] Fonte https://www.komoot.it/discover. Tutte le informazioni sul funzionamento e le caratteristiche dell'app sono state reperite dal sito ufficiale.

percorso, l'app Komoot converte il telefono in un dispositivo GPS dotato di voce di navigazione *turn-by-turn* e consente di adattare l'itinerario anche in movimento.

A oggi gli utenti che utilizzano la piattaforma sono più di venti milioni in tutto il mondo. Gli utenti per ogni contributo dato alla community guadagnano punti per diventare Expert o Pioneer. È possibile ricevere un punto per ogni *highlight* creato, consigliato o per il quale si suggerisce una modifica, oppure aggiungendo foto o indicando un *highlight* pre-esistente ideato da altri. Inoltre, si ottiene un punto extra se si crea simultaneamente un *highlight*, caricano foto o si danno dei consigli alla community in merito ai potenziali percorsi e alle mappe da migliorare. Gli *highlight* sono quelle aree attrattive o paesaggistiche che l'utente considera degne di rilevazione durante il suo percorso, e che indica alla community attraverso delle apposite segnalazioni di colore rosso.

Il badge argento (Expert) viene assegnato ai membri che hanno ricevuto il sostegno della community grazie al contributo dato e alle informazioni condivise in una determinata regione.

I Pioneer sono in testa alla classifica di uno sport in una regione. Sono i membri più affidabili, "persone che non smettono mai di esplorare".

Ci sono due versioni dell'app, una gratuita, in cui si ha la possibilità di scegliere le mappe di una provincia o di una regione nelle quali utilizzare Komoot, e una premium. C'è, dunque, la possibilità di acquistare mappe per la "Regione singola", o più regioni, un abbonamento smart denominato "Pacchetto Regioni" o un abbonamento completo, il cosiddetto "Pacchetto Mondo", i cui itinerari possono essere scaricati e utilizzati offline e i percorsi registrati senza la necessità di una connessione wi-fi o dati.

La piattaforma nasce con l'idea di "aiutare le persone a vivere le loro esperienze", come osserva il co-fondatore Jonas Spengler.

Il team di Komoot è numeroso ed è composto da "fanatici dei numeri e amanti della natura". Data scientist, *community manager*, *finance manager*, *marketing director*, *android* e *ios developer*, designer ecc., tutti appassionati di sport e di avventure outdoor.

Da un anno è stata attivata per gli utenti premium la funzione "Live Tracking", che permette di condividere la posizione in tempo reale o i sentieri percorsi, oltre a monitorare il livello di consumo della batteria del telefono.

Per gli sviluppatori e i fondatori del software, Komoot è un modo per mantenere le persone connesse, invitarle a condividere alcuni percorsi creando *highlight*, inviando foto e video, seguendo altri utenti, mettendo like e personalizzando le varie raccolte.

Komoot a dicembre 2017 è stata inserita nella lista delle "12 migliori app" stilata da "The Times" (Regno Unito); nel 2018, in Gran Bretagna, è stata selezionata tra le "20 migliori app da viaggio" indipendenti, e il Global Cycling Network l'ha inserita nella top 10 delle app per ciclismo. Nel 2019, anche Bikeradar ha aggiunto Komoot nell'elenco delle migliori app per ciclisti. A luglio dello stesso anno, road.cc ha citato Komoot in un articolo sulle "26 migliori app per ciclismo compatibile con iPhone e Android". Inoltre, possiamo anche osservare come Komoot fino a oggi abbia ricevuto più di 200mila recensioni a "5 stelle" su Play Store.

3. Metodologia

Ciò che qui proponiamo è un'osservazione partecipante alle community online dei "corridori", quale gruppo filtrato della popolazione iscritta a Komoot che abbiamo scelto di esplorare. Seguirà un'analisi qualitativa del contenuto (Berger, 1982; Krippendorff, 2018) del sito web e dei commenti proposti dagli iscritti ai vari itinerari, caricati e condivisi attraverso l'app e la pagina Facebook della community Komoot. Operativamente l'analisi del contenuto consiste nell'interpretare i significati dei dati narrativi e visivi e spiegare come questi vengono inquadrati ai fini della targetizzazione dell'utente e nell'interazione gruppale.

Il campionamento effettuato è probabilistico – campionamento randomizzato semplice (Cardano, 2011). La modalità di ingresso nelle community è nascosta, approccio considerato utile poiché abbiamo ritenuto non influenzasse il comportamento degli utenti, attraverso l'aumento o la progressiva decrescita dei volumi di contenuti postati, evitando così l'effetto Hawthorne (Madge, 1966, pp. 225-227).

La raccolta delle informazioni ha avuto inizio il 15 marzo e si è conclusa il 16 maggio 2022. La data di inizio dell'intervallo di tempo coincide con il primo utilizzo del software, con il quale abbiamo interagito inviando le nostre "esperienze" come ciclo-corridori, foto dei percorsi di cui abbiamo tenuto traccia, e scritto commenti a cadenza bisettimanale nell'app, in risposta ai contenuti di altri utenti – ciò è stato fatto per comprendere il funzionamento del software, nonostante questi stessi commenti non siano stati presi in esame nell'analisi.

In questi due mesi di attività abbiamo ritenuto di aver raccolto sufficienti informazioni sull'oggetto di studio. Gli stessi elementi conoscitivi, di cui eravamo in possesso, hanno portato a una saturazione del campione, impedendoci di proseguire oltre con l'indagine in quanto ulteriori informazioni non avrebbero potuto aggiungere altro di significativo ai fini della nostra ricerca (Cardano, 2011).

Nei due mesi online abbiamo monitorato entrambe le community da pc e ricevuto notifiche giornaliere via e-mail, ogni volta che un follower aveva terminato e condiviso un tour.

Le variabili socioanagrafiche o occupazionali degli utenti dell'app non sono visibili. Per converso, sono consultabili solo le aree geografiche di chi posta i contenuti, ma si può associare all'account personale un sito o un blog privato e scrivere una breve biografia come presentazione di sé.

Quello che è stato prevalentemente evidenziato, e che sarà oggetto di analisi, è la competizione che si genera tra gli utenti esperti e tra i Pioneer – un corridore può essere contestualmente Expert e Pioneer –, nella logica della *gamification* (classifiche, punteggio, numero tour ecc.) e dell'auto-perfezionamento.

Ogni singola attività ciclistica viene auto-tracciata. I dati prodotti sono condivisi con differenti cerchie di utenti, una più vasta e una più circoscritta, che l'app definisce con il termine "amici stretti" – da selezionare tra i follower. Questo aspetto rimanda alle riflessioni di Simmel sui processi di individualizzazione, che si manifestano quando un soggetto si stacca da una rete più intima, e sui processi di ampia socializzazione, che si realizzano quando si entra a fare parte di un gruppo più composito (Simmel, 1998).

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L'utente che si registra e mappa i percorsi viene profilato in diversi modi. Il software propone altri itinerari con le stesse caratteristiche, gratuiti ma soprattutto a pagamento, nell'area geografica in cui viene svolta l'attività poiché l'app geolocalizza chi la usa.

Di seguito vedremo come a) possiamo studiare la community online, che permette un'estensione del capitale sociale del fruitore, attraverso il concetto simmeliano di socievolezza (2005); e come b) la condivisione di dati possa attivare pratiche di (auto)-sorveglianza (Maturo, Mori & Moretti, 2016; Zuboff, 2019).

Entrambe le riflessioni sono da contestualizzare entro il paradigma neolibersita, come più avanti chiariremo.

4. Discussione

4.1. La socievolezza nella comunità digitale di Komoot

La caratteristica di Komoot è la generazione e condivisione di dati, i quali sono "prodotti dagli utenti/fruitori [con i] contenuti [che] rispondono […] ai requisiti del modello di informazione, espressione identitaria, integrazione/interazione sociale ed intrattenimento" (Bagnini, 2018, pp. 158-159), che sono imposti dall'algoritmo che governa l'app.

Komoot permette anche agli individui che si allenano in solitaria di condividere i propri risultati con una rete sociale. Lo sviluppo di una plausibile comunità – offline e online – è indicatore di una specifica dimensione culturale, risultato di una tendenza generale a concepire la definizione del sé, e del sistema relazionale dell'individuo, in uno spazio multiplo (fisico e virtuale).

L'oggettivazione di interazioni e relazioni sociali, che Georg Simmel definisce con il concetto di "sociazione", trova nella "socievolezza" una plausibile forma spontanea e naturale dei processi socio-relazionali nella realtà duplicata di Komoot (Simmel, 2005, p. 35). Per il sociologo tedesco, la socievolezza quale forma di inter-individualità (Turnaturi, 2005, pp. 13-14), si realizza attraverso alcune condizioni imprescindibili: la sottrazione della reciprocità a scopi utilitaristici (la condivisione come fine e non come mezzo), la trasformazione della realtà in una forma ludica, e l'esclusione di tutto ciò che non è comune tra i soggetti, vedi lo status o la ricchezza.

Per Simmel, in questa particolare forma di sociazione "emerge una struttura sociologica alquanto degna di nota. Nella socievolezza non deve rientrare ciò che la personalità possiede come importanza oggettiva, quella che ha cioè il suo centro al di fuori della cerchia che esiste in quel momento" (Simmel, 2005, p. 45). Essa è una forma pura di relazione sociale, che acquista "una vita propria libera da qualsiasi legame dai contenuti per compiersi come fini a sé stesse in virtù del fascino che emana dall'essere distaccate" (Simmel, 2005, pp. 41-42).

Per creare una condizione oggettiva affinché possa prendere forma e sostanza la socievolezza è fondamentale la determinatezza quantitativa del gruppo (Turnaturi, 2005, p. 18), in quanto dai differenti parametri numerici scaturiscono i vari comportamenti dei soggetti. Una relazione intima è più praticabile in un insieme circoscritto. Invece, in un insieme ampio, le modalità relazionali ed espressive si forgiano sui richiami all'esteriorità, il potenziamento degli stimoli o le esperienze che accomunano gli individui.

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Pensando alla costruzione digitale della socievolezza, attuata nella piattaforma Komoot, osserviamo come ciò che si comunica, o si condivide, sono informazioni scevre dai limiti spaziotemporali tipici della condivisione off-line – con conseguente crescita del volume dei partecipanti (fondamentale perché si realizzi la socievolezza) – e, soprattutto, si tratta di informazioni che non sono intime in senso stretto.

In questo frame, è evidente il passaggio dai legami sociali basati "sulla vicinanza fisica tra le persone, ad una socialità basata su [un] rapporto […] slegato dal luogo di appartenenza" (Bennato, 2007, p. 160), con l'effetto che l'elemento fondamentale di questa connessione è la rete di contatti e la sublimazione di ciò che si scambia (nel caso di Komoot foto, video di luoghi e mappe, in breve la realtà esperita dai fruitori).

Per questi motivi, possiamo definire i rapporti nella comunità virtuale di Komoot secondo la nozione di socievolezza. Ciò, consente di considerare la vasta socialità garantita dalla Rete e da uno strumento come le app, in rapporto a una dimensione ludicizzata dell'interazione, che diventa: a) realtà a sé, b) in cui il valore e lo scopo dell'associarsi sono più importanti del resto (Turnaturi, 2005, p. 14), c) e l'elemento della relazione, quale anello di congiunzione generale, è il sé esteriore.

4.2 Auto-tracciamento e double date

L'auto-misurazione digitale attraverso l'uso di app per la salute, lo sport e l'attività motoria è uno dei modi possibili di contabilizzare il sé (Lupton, 2016).

Il dibattito accademico sulle pratiche di auto-tracciamento è proliferato negli ultimi decenni. In modo particolare, i ricercatori si sono interrogati sui motivi che hanno portato all'aumento delle auto-misurazioni. In letteratura, in seguito al passaggio da una governamentalità di tipo classico a una neoliberale (Carter, 2005), il focus si è concentrato prioritariamente sugli strumenti digitali, la performatività e lo stato di salute (Lupton, 2016; Millington, 2017; Pink *et al.*, 2017). In questa lettura, il modello di vita plasmato intorno alle garanzie del welfare, l'industrializzazione e l'equilibrio tra capitale e lavoro lascia il posto a una condizione biografica dominata dall'indeterminatezza. La responsabilità, la concorrenza inter-soggettiva e l'efficienza divengono centrali nei processi di definizione del sé e nella costruzione di una nuova realtà sociale (Ahmad, 2008).

Per Chicchi e Simone (2017) il meccanismo della competitività e la logica della performatività determinano il nuovo spirito del capitalismo neoliberale. Questo spirito si regge su due aspetti principali e tra loro interconnessi: l'auto-monitoraggio (Couture, 2021) e i dispositivi intelligenti. Nonostante l'auto-tracciamento non sia una pratica squisitamente recente (Lupton, 2016; Millington, 2017; Couture, 2021), ciò che è nuovo è la facilità dell'auto-quantificazione, sempre più automatizzata (Couture, 2021, p. 186), poiché con l'ausilio di vari dispositivi digitali la raccolta di informazioni personali è sempre più dettagliata. Per Deborah Lupton (2017, p. 564) tenere traccia di sé è diventato meno un compito da svolgere ma, piuttosto, qualcosa che viene fatto per noi.

La comprensione atomizzata del corpo e le micropratiche sono occasione di comprensione del sé (Fotopoulou & O'Riordan, 2017). Il concetto di auto-quantificazione è stato proposto per la

prima volta nel 2010 da Gary Wolf, inteso come un modo significativo per vedere e misurare il proprio miglioramento al fine di un benessere psico-fisico:

> People do things for unfathomable reasons. They are opaque even to themselves. A hundred years ago, a bold researcher fascinated by the riddle of human personality might have grabbed onto new psychoanalytic concepts like repression and the unconscious. These ideas were invented by people who loved language. Even as therapeutic concepts of the self spread widely in simplified, easily accessible form, they retained something of the prolix, literary humanism of their inventors. From the languor of the analyst's couch to the chatty inquisitiveness of a self-help questionnaire, the dominant forms of self-exploration assume that the road to knowledge lies through words. Trackers are exploring an alternate route. Instead of interrogating their inner worlds through talking and writing, they are using numbers. They are constructing a quantified self (Wolf, 2010).

Nella definizione dell'Enciclopedia Treccani (2013), l'auto-misurazione "è una «disciplina» di cura di sé, basata sul monitoraggio delle attività quotidiane (in particolare quelle sportive e alimentari) e sulla quantificazione di ogni singola azione attraverso i più avanzati dispositivi tecnologici, al fine di restaurare, mantenere o incrementare la qualità del proprio benessere vitale".

Secondo questa pratica, attraverso le analisi dei big data offerti dalle app, siamo capaci di misurare le nostre prestazioni o correggere le cattive abitudini giornaliere. Inoltre, come osserva Millington (2014), possiamo condividere questi risultati nelle community online.

Nel software Komoot la condivisione si realizza su più piani: uno solipsistico, uno duale e l'altro collettivo.

Il primo livello riguarda un'osservazione e una conoscenza del sé di tipo individuale, in cui l'utente esplora sé stesso. Nel secondo, l'individuo proietta il sé nello spazio digitale e dialoga con il suo alter-ego. Questo meccanismo di auto-interazione, che si realizza tra gli universi analogico e digitale, in letteratura prende il nome di *data double* (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000). Il *data double* è un avatar con cui relazionarsi quando si vogliono indagare le attività svolte nella quotidianità. Infine, il terzo livello è relativo allo scambio gamificato delle esperienze di vita, all'interno di un contesto molto ampio e diversificato per effetto delle caratteristiche degli utenti.

La community di Komoot presenta proprietà simili ai social network (Facebook, Instagram e Snapchat ecc.). La comunicazione è "one-to-few" o "one-to-many" (Boscaro, 2018) e ai partecipanti è concessa l'opportunità di "seguire" altri utenti o gruppi di utenti (i cosiddetti "Club") e di essere "seguiti". I materiali inviati, tanto sull'app quanto sulla pagina Facebook della community (che, fino alla data di rilevazione, contava più di 26mila membri e più di 48mila like) sono prevalentemente immagini e video dei Tour. L'utente può accedere in piattaforma con un account personale collegato alla e-mail, oppure con le credenziali Facebook. In aggiunta,

si possono ricevere suggerimenti settimanali via e-mail degli *highlight* più interessanti della regione di appartenenza.

I Tour – così come Komoot definisce le uscite (nel caso in questione in bici) – variano a seconda delle complessità dei percorsi e la loro durata. L'app memorizza la zona in cui si è svolta l'attività, il tempo massimo di percorrenza, la velocità media e l'altitudine, tutti parametri visibili dagli iscritti alla piattaforma e che, all'occorrenza, possono essere condivisi, via e-mail e, per l'appunto, nei social network.

Sia in piattaforma, sia su Facebook, il caricamento dei dati è in parte automatizzato. Gli itinerari sono chiari e si possono approfondire i dettagli con dei semplici passaggi. Nell'app è possibile visualizzare le "attività recenti" – ovvero le ultime uscite –, le "informazioni" generali, ossia "distanza percorsa" e "tempo in movimento" totale, e le "raccolte" personali, in cui indicare punti di partenza e di arrivo, grafici e mappe con la possibilità di modificare e personalizzare i tour e ricevere dei consigli sui "segmenti" dei percorsi (si può leggere, per esempio, come "alcuni segmenti del tuo percorso comprendono una superficie probabilmente non adatta al tipo di sport che hai scelto").

Gli utenti indicano i vari livelli dei tracciati (facile, intermedio e difficile), misurano le loro prestazioni nel tempo e si confrontano con gli sforzi di altri utenti sugli stessi percorsi. Le distanze sono tra loro molto diversificate, per questo motivo possiamo esplorare tour di 11 minuti (registrato in data 16/5) e tour di 5 ore e 47 minuti (del 13/5).

La condivisione, per chi ha i due account collegati, è quasi immediata. Tra i 98 *following* monitorati abbiamo altresì notato una iper-attività in relazione ai contenuti postati, in modo particolare tra gli expert e i pioneer, i quali hanno inviato dati ogni tre o quattro giorni, con percorsi mediamente lunghi (dalle due alle quattro ore) e con livelli di difficoltà crescente.

Possiamo ipotizzare che i *double data*, che si configurano come informazioni personali in continuo mutamento, obbligano gli utenti a una ridefinizione dei comportamenti.

Per Lupton (2014) al centro del processo di auto-tracciamento c'è il concetto di cambiamento, in cui i dati non appena generati sono soggetti a trasformazione, costantemente aperti alla riconfigurazione e alla reinterpretazione, grazie ai nuovi tracciamenti il cui obiettivo è migliorarsi.

Come con altre app (Fit Bit, Zeppa Life, Nike Training, ecc.), anche con Komoot al termine di ogni attività c'è un riepilogo dei dati raccolti. Questo permette di creare uno storico delle attività svolte nel tempo e di tenere traccia di eventuali miglioramenti in relazione alle performance precedenti.

Questi *double data* ottenuti dall'app Komoot sono costituiti da informazioni sul sé e, a loro volta, servono a ricostituire il sé (Lupton, 2012) attraverso i processi di auto-confronto e perfezionamento. Inoltre, la letteratura sociologica dirime le questioni di presentazione del sé attraverso ciò che Goffman (1959) ha definito *management impression*, ovvero la gestione delle impressioni del self in un contesto pubblico, con una rappresentazione strategica del sé. E in commenti di diverso tenore emerge quanto segue, in linea con i richiami alla teoria: "fantastico, che grande prestazione di nuovo" (donna, 26/04/22); "Ma cosa è stato fatto" (uomo, 26/04/22). Oppure: "Grandi prestazioni" (donna, 29/3/22); "Wow, 75 km e 1600 metri di

dislivello, semplicemente fantastico" (uomo, 26/3/22), "Super tour con […] forte altitudine" (donna, 20/3/22).

4.3 Individuo e targetizzazione

La caratteristica principale "del soggetto neoliberale è una marcata tendenza a una riflessività volta a esplorare i propri desideri e aspirazioni, rintracciare potenzialità, debolezze e margini di miglioramento al fine, analogo a quello delle imprese, di migliorare le proprie performance" (Stagi & Benasso, 2021, pp. 21-23).

Con l'utilizzo di smartphone, orologi e altri dispositivi tecnologici indossabili, "siamo in grado di eseguire personal analytics su ogni aspetto della nostra vita quotidiana: il numero di passi che facciamo, le miglia che corriamo (quanto velocemente, con quali difficoltà), la nostra frequenza cardiaca, le attività sessuali, la calendarizzazione della fertilità, l'apporto calorico, la quantità e qualità del nostro sonno, la produttività sul lavoro, i livelli di stress e perfino l'umore" (Stagi & Benasso, 2021, pp. 29-30). I dispositivi intelligenti hanno soprattutto una funzione strategica (Fotopoulou & O'Riordan, 2017; Couture, 2017). Nella società della prestazione, essi si fondano sulla competitività tra i soggetti e l'azione performativa da mettere a profitto (Chicchi & Simone, 2017, p. 125), con strategie di estrazione del sé che Shoshana Zuboff (2019) ha definito "renderizzazione", ovvero la trasformazione di micro-pratiche e rilevazioni biometriche in dati dai quali estrarre valore.

La dislocazione del rischio è una caratteristica della società prestazionale. Con le tecnologie digitali, quali strumenti al servizio della promozione della salute e di uno stile di vita sano (Millington, 2014; Lupton & Lively, 2017), la gestione del rischio si ridistribuisce, dallo Stato agli individui. "È così che si passa dal welfare al welfare neoliberale, cioè a una forma di stato sociale ibrida in cui il diritto alla salute non è più universalmente distribuito ma si deve meritare con le corrette condotte di vita" (Chicchi & Simone, 2017, p. 22). Il corretto stile di vita "diventa un dovere per il cittadino, che è libero – ma al tempo stesso responsabile – di «scegliere la salute» e la nozione di rischio e la sua elusione divengono così tecnologie chiave del controllo sociale" (Chicchi & Simone, 2017, p. 22).

Dalla prospettiva "dell'imperativo della previsione, la personalizzazione è un mezzo per «individualizzare» le operazioni di rifornimento e assicurarsi un flusso continuo di surplus proveniente dal profondo. È un processo che può riuscire solo grazie alla nostra fame interminabile di riconoscimento, apprezzamento e soprattutto supporto" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 270). Di conseguenza, la "personalizzazione e customizzazione sono il terzo «nuovo uso» della transazioni mediate dai computer" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 270).

I contenuti caricati nella piattaforma Komoot, dalle mappature dei nostri itinerari alle bellezze paesaggistiche fotografate lungo i percorsi (extra)urbani, dal tipo di bici all'equipaggiamento utilizzato, nella lettura che ne dà Zuboff (2019, p. 285), sono dati che vengono reificati e trasformati in oggetti di ispezione gerarchica. Queste informazioni sono in grado di produrre previsioni, tali da anticipare i nostri bisogni – come la vendita di itinerari personalizzati. I dati mutano in prodotti predittivi, con ampio margine di remunerazione per le aziende che ne sono in possesso (Zuboff, 2019, p. 270).

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Il mercato del comportamento ha origine da una capitalizzazione delle nostre esperienze giornaliere (Couture, 2021). L'aggressività di questo mercato si nutre di un surplus comportamentale estratto da un reticolo di dispositivi pensati secondo le necessità del neoliberismo, ovvero la connessione globale – tradotta nella *smart* e nella *gig economy* – e la "renderizzazione" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 252).

Nella lettura zuboffiana queste informazioni sono utilizzate per fabbricare prodotti da acquistare e operazioni di marketing che fanno presa sul singolo (Kumar, 2007). Così i social network o social media, mediante i quali condividere i nostri contenuti generati da Komoot, "possono essere usati per guadagnare grazie a opportunità derivanti dalla targetizzazione, con mappature che vanno dalla personalità al comportamento" (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 291-292). Anche questi metadati usati ai fini commerciali, per esempio, possono essere analizzati dalle compagnie assicurative: per ottenere un'assicurazione sulla salute o automobilistica efficace dobbiamo "venire codificati come giudiziosi, ben disposti e aperti" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 290).

La sociologa statunitense così chiosa: "la personalizzazione deriva dalla previsione, e la previsione deriva da fonti ancora più ricche di surplus comportamentale, e pertanto da operazioni di renderizzazione ancora più spericolate" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 294). Al riguardo Sam Biddle (2018) scrive che Facebook, in un recente documento definito "confidenziale", ha delineato un nuovo servizio di pubblicità attraverso il quale vendere alle aziende l'accesso ai suoi utenti e alle loro vite. Biddle afferma che Facebook, invece di offrire agli inserzionisti la possibilità di targettizzare le persone in base ai dati demografici e alle preferenze di consumo, ha offerto la possibilità di targettizzarle in base a come si comporteranno, cosa compreranno e cosa penseranno. Questo motore di previsione è stato denominato "FBLearner Flow".

Nel merito di Komoot, l'azienda collabora con Samsung per svariate campagne di marketing, con Lufthansa per l'organizzazione di itinerari di viaggio, con Garmin per la rilevazione dei dati biometrici e così via. La piattaforma dà spazio alle inserzioni pubblicitarie di enti pubblici principalmente impegnati nella promozione del turismo nel centro e sud Europa. Le raccolte sponsorizzate, si legge nel sito web, "sono un formato unico di pubblicità che ti consente di promuovere (nel posto giusto e al momento giusto) la tua destinazione tra utenti appassionati di attività all'aria aperta". Al riguardo, le "destinazioni che hanno scelto le nostre raccolte sponsorizzate" sono quasi venti. Dai numeri in percentuale, di due casi analizzati, possiamo evidenziare come la compravendita di dati può potenzialmente anticipare e cambiare radicalmente le decisioni di molti consumatori. Nello specifico:

- Switzerland Tourism, che ha scelto Komoot per i percorsi in mountain bike per un target di cittadini tedeschi, ha registrato 366mila contatti in più proponendo nove Tour (33:07 h, 296 km, 9.730 m di dislivello);
- Bikehotels Südtirol, che si è unita a Komoot per esplorare il Sudtirol (road e mountain biking), ha avuto un aumento di clic del 5.3 per cento, con un pacchetto di sette Tour (23:07 h, 281 km, 7.550 m di salite).

4.4 Gamification, endopticon, privacy

"Self-tracking apps can be considered as a part of the material culture of a society […]. By analyzing the apps, we can therefore try to examine the characteristic aspects of a specific cultural system: in our case, a set of customs and beliefs linked to a more and more neoliberal social organization" (Maturo, Mori, & Moretti, 2016, p. 258).

Nell'ambiente delle tecnologie digitali "gamification is associated with an enormous potential to quantify, store and analyze data. In addition, gamification establishes a form of self-discipline based on the «voluntary» internalization of practices which serve and are coherent with a regime of economic neoliberalism" (Maturo, Mori, & Moretti, 2016, p. 254). Per Witson (2013, p. 167) "this quantification of the self feeds into neoliberal governance projects that promise to make daily practices more fulfilling and fun. Enabled by increased levels of surveillance (self-monitoring and otherwise), these projects use incentivization and pleasure rather than risk and fear to shape desired behaviours".

Questo processo di invasiva tracciabilità del sé – nel caso di Komoot dei nostri spostamenti in bici – nella riflessione di Maturo, Mori e Moretti (2016) favorisce l'auto-sorveglianza e l'efficientamento. Si legge, al riguardo, "apps encourage us to take action and improve ourselves in an apparently scientific and rational way. Moreover, by acting on our motivations, they increase our «productivity». Apps are thus self-help devices. One might say were moving from the panopticon to the «endopticon»" (Maturo, Mori, & Moretti, 2016, p. 254).

Lo spostamento di baricentro, effetto dell'Intelligenza Artificiale (d'ora in poi AI) in grado di modificare i modelli di comportamento e decisionali, ha ripercussioni sugli individui e sulla società. Le corporation e le aziende che si occupano di scrivere gli algoritmi, che regolano l'AI e su cui le app si reggono, hanno una loro *accountability* sul progressivo incedere delle misure di ludicizzazione.

La normalità si definisce in una serie di fattori da quantificare con indicatori di performance. Ciò che si allontana da precise determinanti socioculturali è patologico, necessita di un processo di normativizzazione che ripristini lo stato di salute dell'individuo. La generale tendenza all'auto-controllo della salute, evocata da una regolare ricorsività a postare le proprie uscite in piattaforma, rimanda a un possibile atteggiamento preventivo richiesto nella società individualizzata, attraverso il quale acquisire maggiore consapevolezza del sé e del proprio stato di salute.

In questo contesto, "la gamification appare quindi come una tecnologia che permette da un lato di efficientare il coinvolgimento attivo del soggetto nei processi di estrazione di valore […] ma soprattutto […] di creare nuovi metodi, criteri e standard per la misurazione delle prestazioni soggettive" (Chicchi & Simone, 2017, p. 78).

Parafrasando ciò che scrive Jess Couture (2021) a proposito dell'app Strava, anche i Club Komoot sono una funzione progettata per aggiungere altri livelli di socialità alla piattaforma. Iscrivendosi gratuitamente ai vari Club, gli utenti possono vedere e commentare gli itinerari degli altri membri ed estendere la comunità virtuale.

Tuttavia, a differenza di Strava, in cui "non ci sono restrizioni per aderire ai Club" (Couture, 2021, p. 193), in Komoot solo i Pioneer possono fondare o entrare nei Club, che secondo il sito

web oggi sono migliaia ripartiti per regione e/o paese. La *gamification* è la prerogativa di accesso a questi Club. In Italia, procedendo per esemplificazione, ci sono Club fondati dal singolo utente – il punteggio più alto è registrato da "Alberto Sordi", 10.808 km con 571:11 ore di distanza –; ma anche gruppi più organizzati con uscite regolari (tre o quattro a settimana), come il "B.C. Molteni" con 5846 di distanza percorsa e 277 ore, il "Paddy Cullens Cycling Club", con 573 persone che seguono la pagina Facebook, o il "Gravel Club", con 2802 follower.

La condivisione dei tracciati su Facebook può comportare la necessità di acquistare il pacchetto in abbonamento per visualizzare gli itinerari, con conseguente auto-tracciamento della zona di pertinenza. La possibilità di generare dati su dati, anche da utenti non iscritti alla piattaforma, non solo fornisce a Komoot la possibilità di generare nuova conoscenza, ma apre anche a spazi di discussione connessi alla tutela della privacy degli utenti in Rete.

Tuttavia, dal 2020 l'app rende disponibili diversi livelli di privacy. "Che si tratti di casa, dell'ufficio o della residenza di un famigliare, puoi configurare una zona privata attorno agli indirizzi che desideri, rendendoli visibili soltanto a te. Le zone private nuove/modificate verranno applicate a tutti i Tour completati, sia passati sia futuri. Ciò non vale invece per i Tour pianificati" (come si legge sul sito ufficiale). Inoltre, è possibile gestire i *following* e creare una lista di amici stretti, "proprio come nella vita reale", e rendere l'account privato, in modo che solo i follower autorizzati possano vedere gli spostamenti. Infine, alcuni tour possono essere resi visibili esclusivamente a sé stessi, a una cerchia di amici, ai propri follower o a tutti gli iscritti.

La condivisione di dati può portare a conseguenze negative in relazione alla sicurezza personale. Tuttavia, questa dimensione della privacy è riconosciuta dalla giurisprudenza, nonostante ci siano ancora molte lacune a causa della natura fluida dei social e delle piattaforme digitali in genere (Ebrahimi, Tushev, & Mahmoud, 2021).

5. Osservazioni conclusive

Questo studio si colloca all'interno di un filone di ricerche incentrato sulla relazione tra tecnologie digitali e attività ricreative. Limitatamente a Komoot abbiamo potuto osservare l'interazione intersoggettiva e gruppale tra diversi corridori – escursionisti, amatoriali e amatoriali agonisti – impegnati in differenti discipline ciclistiche ma, soprattutto, attivi in diverse aree internazionali.

Il lavoro di ricerca si è principalmente soffermato sulle analisi degli itinerari dei follower e degli utenti che l'algoritmo rendeva visibili sui device utilizzati (cellulare e pc), in seguito ad una semplice operazione di customizzazione messa a punto dallo stesso.

Possiamo sintetizzare quanto emerso nelle seguenti riflessioni.

Le piattaforme digitali hanno un forte impatto sul nostro sistema relazionale, poiché estendono il concetto di comunità. Internet, a questo proposito, consente scambi reiterati nel tempo e in uno spazio illimitato, in cui spesso sono gli avatar (i *double date*) che garantiscono una connessione quotidiana.

L'utente non solo può far parte di una rete globale e scoprire, anche solo virtualmente, itinerari altrimenti non accessibili, ma il software Komoot può generare profitti (anche condivisi) da

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alcune operazioni che noi consideriamo innocue e legate allo svago. La geolocalizzazione e il condvidere tramite post i percorsi, con relative distanze e foto, creano un nostro profilo di consumatore. Per le aziende risultano così meno onerose una serie di pratiche di monetizzazione del tempo libero, sulla base di un processo di quantificazione delle relazioni ludico-ricreative.

App come Komoot, inoltre, aiutano a comprendere come le tecnologie possono rielaborare all'infinito le narrazioni dominanti. Nelle piattaforme, l'immagine dicotomica "soggetto-oggetto rappresentato" è messa in crisi. La tensione che scaturisce "penetra dentro la contraddizione" tra la produzione di tecnologie digitali (le quali nascono con lo scopo di assicurare livelli più alti di sorveglianza e una centralizzazione del potere) e l'uso risignificato che ne fa il soggetto in termini di performance e auto-miglioramento (Canevacci, 218, pp. 382-394).

Per concludere, Komoot offre interessanti spunti riflessivi, sia in termini di funzionamento dell'app sempre più simile ad un social network, sia in riferimento ai comportamenti routinari delle persone, le cui variabili di genere o geospaziali in alcuni casi sembrano annullarsi quando si pone l'accento su questioni come lo sport, l'attività fisica e la salute.

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To the ravines! Encountering, exploring, and expanding Toronto's mountain bike trails during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper is about how Toronto's urban mountain bike trails offered an escape from the reductive worldview I'm calling the "Covid Cosmology." I describe how in the face of Covid-19 lockdowns, Toronto's mountain bike trails offer cyclists salutary experiences that run counter to those offered by the centralized authorities intent on managing the pandemic. These salutary experiences include: 1) Freedom; 2) Expansion, Optimization & Intensification, 3) Flow, 4) Boundaries, Exclusions, and Creating Community, and 5) Risk.

Informed by non-representational ethnographic approaches (Vannini, 2015), I examine the use and expansion of Toronto's urban mountain bike trails by venturing into the wilds that exist above, below, and alongside urban environments during the pandemic's painful periods of lockdowns. The objective: to speculate about the ways human potential can be expanded with the help of urban wilderness and in response to totalizing ontologies designed to define life itself using a narrow, binaristic worldview.

Keywords: mountain biking, Toronto, flow-risk-freedom, Covid-19, singletrack.

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When there was a wilderness, we wandered wild and free.
(Metric, *Pagans in Vegas*, 2015)

What people enjoy is not the sense of being in control, but the sense of exercising control in difficult situations. It is not possible to experience a feeling of control unless one is willing to give up the safety of protective routines. Only when a doubtful outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether she is in control. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 61)

1. Introduction

This paper is about Toronto's urban mountain bikers and the experiences they pursued in the city's expansive trail system during the Covid-19 pandemic. I describe especially how Toronto's mountain bikers sought out and found feelings of freedom and flow amidst these trails during the Covid-19 lockdowns and how mountain biking in the city afforded riders a welcome respite from what I describe as the "Covid Cosmology." I suggest that in the face of lockdowns and restrictions, Toronto's mountain bike trails offered cyclists a range of experiences that ran counter to those offered by the Covid Cosmology. The experiences I will describe include: 1) Feelings of Freedom; 2) Expansion, Optimization & Intensification, 3) Flow, 4) Boundaries, Exclusions & Creating Community, and 5) Risk.

Fig. 1. Don Valley mountain bike trail in the fall (photo by author).

Toronto's mountain bike trails are located in the city's Don River Valley – one of Toronto's vibrant river-lined ravines that gently drain into Lake Ontario (Bonnell, 2014; Bozikovic, 2016). Throughout the pandemic, these trails were used by cyclists in search of feelings of freedom, flow, and ecological escapism. Here I want to focus on the ways nature-loving city dwellers in

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Toronto – the fourth largest metropolis in North America – navigated the urban/nature divide during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to pursue adventure along the informal single-track trails that puncture and resist the ever-expanding impositions of Toronto's urban grid. To do so I will turn to non-representational ethnographic approaches – particularly my own role as a participant and researcher immersed in Toronto's mountain biking "scene" – to speculate about Covid-19 logics and lockdowns, as well as some of the reasons Toronto's ravines beckoned to those who sought alternative ways of being and becoming during the Covid-19 crisis.

As described by Canada Research Chair, Dr. Phillip Vannini, non-representational ethnography is a methodological approach premised upon the researcher's "impressionistic" and "inevitably creative" engagements with their research subject. The goal is to generate reflections that "animate rather than mimic," that "rupture rather than merely account," that "evoke rather than just report," and that "reverberate instead of more modestly resonating"; for Vannini, non-representational ethnography offers a "true escape" from "the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery" (2015, p. 318). As Vannini explains, non-representational ethnographies have much to offer the scholarly community in so far as they animate lifeworlds using evocations that "aim to enliven, render, resonate, rupture, re-imagine" and that "generate possibilities for fabulation" (2015, p. 320). Crucially, non-representational enthnographic research recognizes the researcher's body as "the key instrument for knowing, sensing, feeling, and relating to other and self" (Vannini, 2015, p. 321) and is an ideal tool for engaging with "body-centered activities that require the performance of skill" and "kinesthetic awareness" (2015, p. 322).

But before we get too deep into this paper's ethnographic account of mountain biking in the Don Valley in Toronto during Covid-19, let's explore the conditions that precipitated the need for Torontonians to leave their homes during the lockdowns in search of the urban wilderness, tree portals, and single-track trails that snake through the city's ravines and provide users with a getaway from the everyday (Vannini & Vannini, 2016).
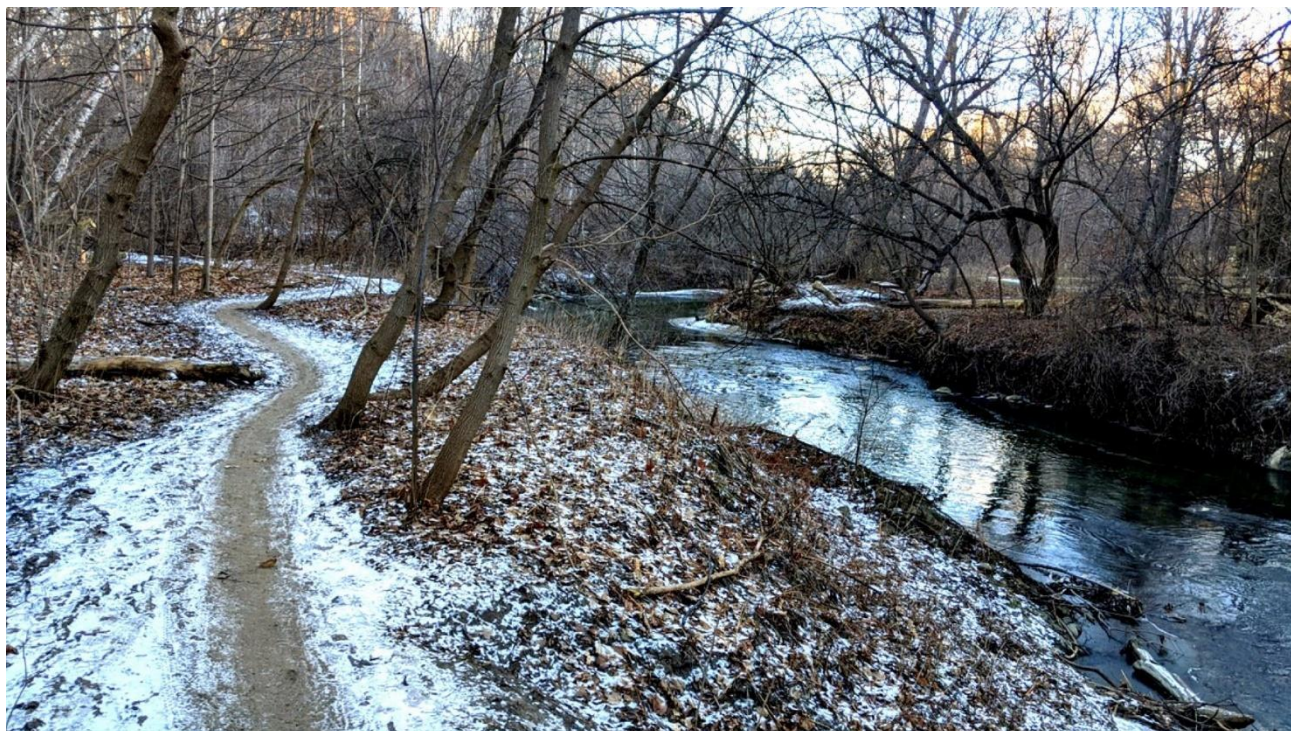
Fig. 2. Don Valley mountain bike trail in the winter (photo by author).

2. Setting the scene: Covid-19

The world's most recent pandemic – Covid-19 – had many tragic consequences on individuals and societies. In Ontario, Canada – the location for this paper's field research – 13288 people have died from or with Covid-19 (ontario.ca, 2022), a death rate of 0.000896 per 100000 citizens. In an effort to slow viral transmission, local politicians and public health officials imposed unprecedented controls, lockdowns, and mandates. These mandates were facilitated – at least in the case of Ontario and its capital city Toronto – by the declaration of emergency orders and mandates, both of which by now (late 2022) have – for the most part – been removed (Taylor-Vaisey, 2022).

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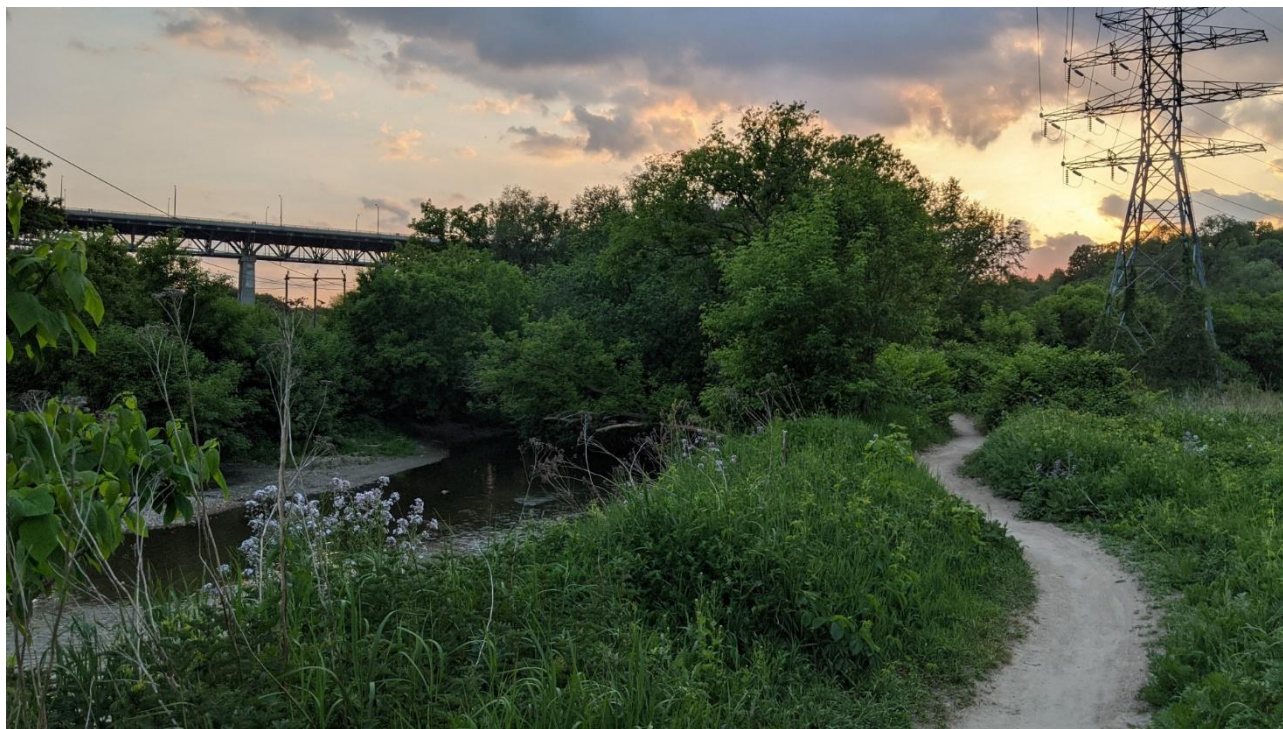
Fig. 3. Don Valley mountain bike trail in the late summer (photo by author).

The controls, orders, and mandates of the Covid-19 era contributed to the emergence of a globally pervasive world view, or even ontology. This ontology functioned to divide the world into black and white categories that offered citizens a sense of medical and moral clarity alongside a manageable list of appropriate behavioural responses; it was an ontology that offered new forms of biomedical management while struggling to account for the collateral damage that often occurred (Critical Art Ensemble, 2002; Joffe, 2021; Kampf & Kulldorff, 2021). This ontology – or "Covid Cosmology" – divided our worlds into manageable couplets and binary categories that narrowed our options while offering us a glimpse of a medically and digitally delimited future managed by vaccine passports and other electronic forms of surveillance (Best, 2010; Kofler & Baylis, 2020). This was a world that digitally separated the "haves" from the "have nots," the compliant from the resistant. The binaries that defined Covid-19 functioned not only to respond to the complexity of evolving political, public health, or economic priorities, but also to narrow the very field of potential in order to more smoothly facilitate medical, bureaucratic, corporate, and political management (Wimberly, 2017).

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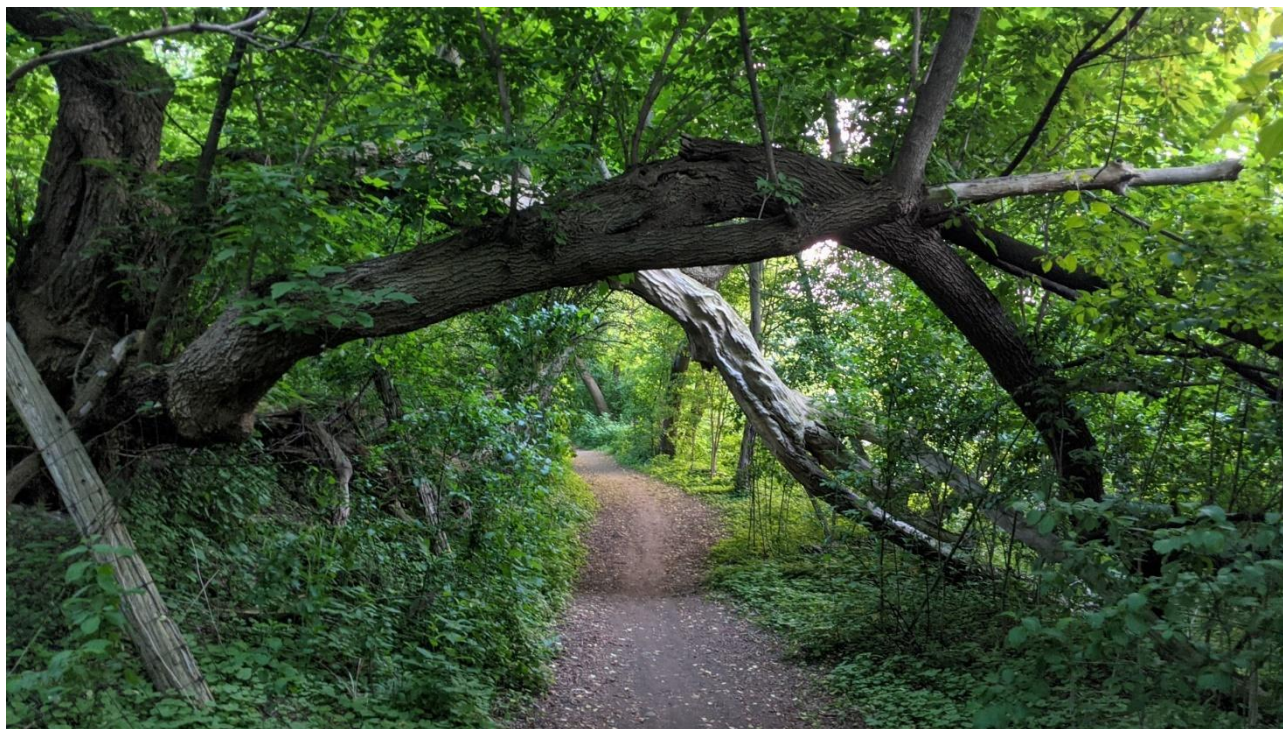
Fig. 4. Don Valley mountain bike trail in the late summer (photo by author).

Within the Covid Cosmology citizens experienced a centralized system able to be efficiently managed with QR codes (Chagla, 2022). Their collective horizons were shaped by binary categories such as: positive/negative, masked/unmasked, emergency/new normal, lockdown/reopening (Bardosh et al., 2022; Dai, et al., 2021; see also: McKinsey, 2019; Rockefeller Foundation, 2021; United Nations, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2019). Resistance to the Covid Cosmology was often ignored or censored (Kleitman, et al., 2021). Governments worked with big tech companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter (Sheng, 2020) to filter information. Pharmaceutical company profits soared and public debt levels surged. Many lost their jobs, friends, family ties, and small businesses (Rider, 2022).

The binaristic options that defined the Covid Cosmology caused millions of citizens in countries like Canada to start wondering whether this "new normal" – this narrowing of potential – was also about normalizing other new realities – realities created by organizations eager to guide or "nudge" society in new ways towards greater conformity and control (Clancy, 2021; Doshi, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Feitsma, 2018; Government of Canada, 2017; Hart, 2022; Ontario.ca, 2020; West et al., 2020; Whitehead, et al. 2019)? In the face of such options, Toronto's mountain bikers looked to the city's urban wilderness – its ravines – for a place to get lost in the trees.

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Fig. 5. Don Valley mountain bike trail with sketchy bridge in the late summer (photo by author).

3. Toronto's mountain bike community

Having outlined some of the consequences of Covid-19 and the policy response to the pandemic, let's shift gears and explore some of the ways these policies energized and invigorated the mountain bike community in Toronto, specifically in Toronto's Don Valley and its expansive, community built, quasi-sanctioned network of single-track trails. Torontonian cyclists, armed with mobile digital devices, GPS-equipped apps like Strava and Trailforks, and a desire for exploration, sought respite from lockdowns by descending into Toronto's enormous network of ravines – its "upside-down mountains" – and their 100-plus kilometers of urban single-track and mountain bike trails.

Toronto's former Chief Urban Planner Jennifer Keesmat has described Toronto's system of ravines as "a natural, connected sanctuary that is respected as essential to the health of the city and promoted for use and enjoyment through education and stewardship" (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 4). Toronto's ravine system is an often overlooked, but nonetheless impressive and massively significant, part of Toronto's urban infrastructure and is integral to the health, well being, and economic prosperity of Torontonians. Toronto's ravines consist of six watersheds covering more than 44000 acres of urban wilderness and, cumulatively, are one of the largest urban park systems in the world.

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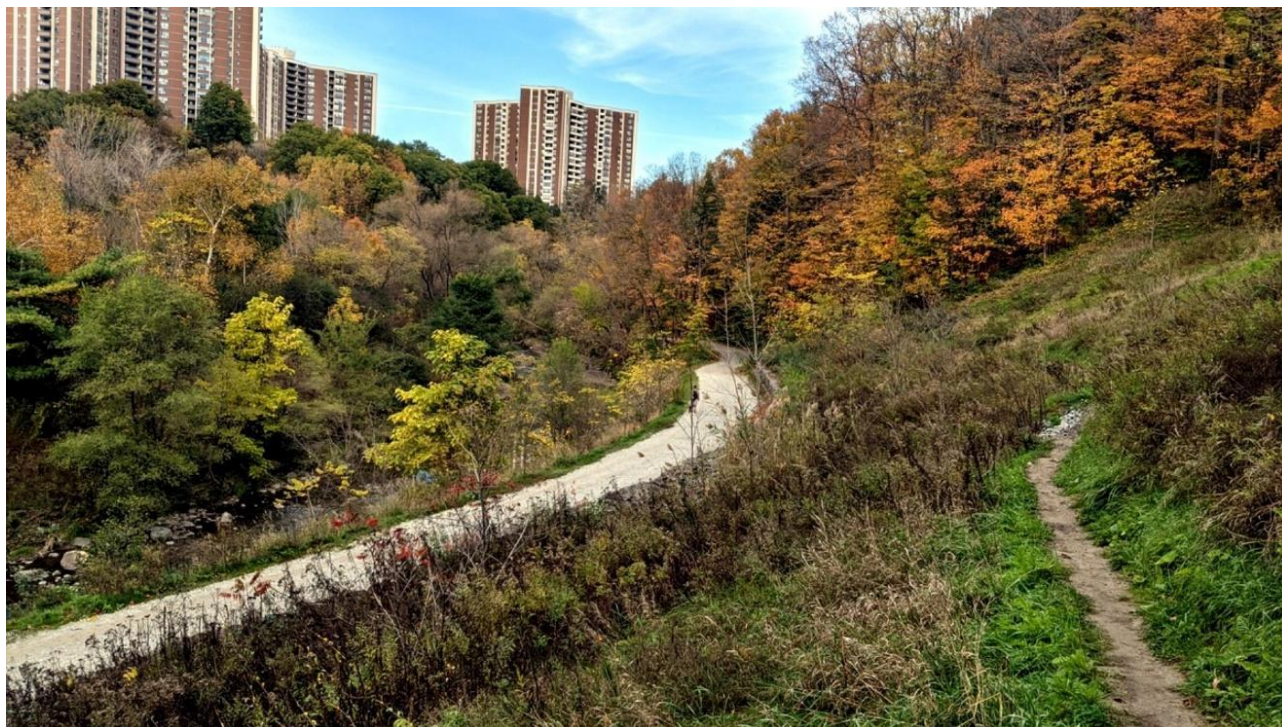
Fig. 6. Don Valley mountain bike trail next to "regular" trail (photo by author).

Encountering nature in the city is overwhelmingly regarded as positive (Cervinka, Röderer & Hefler, 2012; Leong, Fischer & McClure, 2014). Indeed, recent research indicates that the more citizens feel connected to nature and the more they overcome what has been described as "nature deficit disorder" or "ecophobia" (Gaard, 2011; Warkentin, 2011), the more compelled they are to nurture, conserve, and take care of the natural features of their urban environments and local communities (Latimer & Miele, 2013); moreover, connecting with nature in urban settings increases emotional resilience, physical health, and happiness (Balmford, 2005; Bell, 2014; Diener, 2009; Maller et al, 2006; Mantler, 2015; Martinez-Juarez, 2015; Pietilä et al, 2015; Pröbstl-Haider, 2015; Romagosa, 2015; Zelenski, 2014). In other words, much recent research has provided evidence that immersing oneself in natural urban landscapes promotes psychological and physical health (Buchecker & Degenhardt, 2015) – something we all desperately need during pandemics and other crises!

Given urban nature's overwhelmingly salutory effects, I want to dig deeper into the specific ways emerging modes of urban ecological immersion and escapism are being expressed in Toronto. My thoughts and speculative observations are informed by a mix of non-representational ethnography, theoretical musings, and my ongoing engagement with online forums, cycling apps, and cycling publications that contribute to my belief that cycling in nature in Toronto is about more than merely exercise or getting some fresh air.

Toronto's diverse mountain biking community has, for 30 more than years, been maximizing Toronto's oft-neglected Don River Valley by creating "ephemeral infrastructure" amidst Toronto's bounded territories in the form of 100 kilometres of semi-clandestine singletrack

trails that twist and turn along the edges of ravines walls, and that pass beside sewage treatment plants, hydro-corridors, and decommissioned waste dumps.

Fig. 7. Don Valley mountain bike trail – putting incomplete infrastructure to work (photo by author).

My own mountain bike participation has taken place in parallel with my academic work for almost three decades in Toronto and beyond. During this time, as an academic, I have published and presented research on many topics – from finance and algorithms, to nature and cycling. Alongside these nearly three decades of study and research, I've also been an avid mountain biker. I'm not much of a mountain bike racer (although I like to mention that I *did* participate in one 24-hour race in my mid-twenties at Hardwood Hills mountain bike park in Ontario), but I am a consistently committed mountain biking enthusiast and immersed in these communities. I've also worked as a mountain bike mechanic during my undergrad; I've mountain biked all over Ontario; and I've gone on dedicated mountain bike trips to Utah, West Virginia, North Carolina, Vermont, and British Columbia (including mountain biking destinations such as Whistler and Vancouver's North Shore). In my experience, mountain biking has always been about venturing into unknown worlds, about communing with nature, about finding flow, thrills, and spills, and about being together with old friends and making new ones. I also like that mountain biking is a relatively sustainable and ecologically friendly recreational activity, especially when one bikes to the trails from home, which I do the majority of the time here in Toronto, and a pretty low impact activity (compared to more motorized recreational activities, at least) (Evju et al., 2021).

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Fig. 8. Don Valley mountain bike trail next to bridge with graffiti (photo by author).

4. Digital & social media's contribution to mountain biking in Toronto

During the Covid-19 lockdowns and quarantines, Toronto's mountain bikers and adventure seekers were longing for something more, and turned to their phones and apps in pursuit of escape, nature, wildness, and states of flow. Thankfully, Toronto's urban mountain bike trails were more than ready to support the needs of cabin-feverish cyclists. And thanks to digital devices, apps like Strava and Trailforks, and the crowd-sourced data that was especially at hand during Covid-19 (including an increasing number of YouTube videos featuring riders enjoying Toronto's trails), these trails had been made visible to many who – during the pandemic – were able to experience them for the first time. Most striking, however, was that as the pandemic continued, new trails continued popping up in the ravines (with names like Moartown, Donaconda, Trash Panda, and Trail Apples), seemingly in response to the demands of growing numbers of mountain bikers, and as a result of Toronto's urban wilderness having become increasingly transparent and accessible thanks to the affordances of digital technologies intersecting with the desires of locked down cyclists. These new trails are always built by fellow mountain bikers in order to add to the community. The trail builders tend to prefer anonymity or obscurity given the "underground" nature of this trail system and the ambiguous relationship of the mountain bike community with city bureaucracies, etc.

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The use of digital technologies in the recent development and popularization of the Don Valley's mountain bike trails is key to these trails' ongoing expansion – particularly during Covid. The massive impact of digital technologies and mobile devices (such as smartphones, GPS devices, GoPro sports cameras) is particularly notable given these trails' longstanding and fraught history with the city – one that has often been antagonistic, in so far as the trails represented an unsanctioned use of public property and were typically associated with environmental degradation and "extreme" trail users (Blackett, 2010; Merringer, 2011). In fact, "back in the day" – until about 2010 – the trails' whereabouts (their routes, entry and exit points, etc.) were only passed from one rider to another by word of mouth. There were no physical maps, no online PDFs to consult, no detailed point-to-point descriptions. But with the advent of smartphones, GoPro sports cameras, GPS systems, and three online platforms in particular – YouTube, and apps Trailforks and Strava – the whereabouts, status, and difficulty of Toronto's mountain bike trails has been revealed for all to see. Since then, the riding community has changed and expanded and there's no going back now!

The increasing visibility of the trails has contributed, in turn, to more users and an expansion of the trail network. After all, natural surface trails – even in a metropolis – are only viable if many people use them, since plant overgrowth and tree fall results in trails inevitably disappearing over time. The role of Strava and Trailforks, by encouraging more ridership, also contributes to the upkeep and resilience of the trails themselves. Indeed, where once the visibility of the trails would have been regarded as a risk to their existence (due to the liability-obsessed naysaying of the city), today the visibility of the trails is integral to the maintenance of the ever expanding trail network.

For those mountain bikers intent on escaping to the wild outdoors during the Covid lockdowns, Strava and Trailforks were especially integral to their ability to access and explore Toronto's mountain bike trails system. While both apps offer GPS-enabled location and mapping information, they serve different purposes (but can also be connected to one another).

Strava, on the one hand, allows users to create their own trail "segments" that correspond to certain user-determined stretches of trail. Once created, users can track multiple data points that correspond to categories such as: speed, elevation, power (watts outputted), difficulty, trail popularity, and how their adventures and trajectories compare to other users; additionally, based on aggregated user data, Strava allows users to view the Strava Global Heatmap (https://www.strava.com/heatmap), where trails and user trajectories are viewable on a global scale and are represented using differing levels of colour intensity that corresponds to how popular or trafficked a given section or segment of trail is based on user data.

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Fig. 9. View of Toronto skyline from Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

Trailforks, on the other hand, compliments Strava by focusing more on trail status (e.g. dry, muddy, icy), trail descriptions, trail elevations and other geographical details in order to offer mountain bike specific data on particular trail systems and infrastructure. Together – along with the Strava Global Heatmap and ongoing updates, additions, and data – these apps offer an unprecedented amount of information for would-be mountain bikers intent on going on two-wheeled urban adventures surrounded by as much wilderness as downtown Toronto has to offer.

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Personally, the apps and features I find most useful are: 1) Strava's Global Heatmap, which I use to identify popular routes, obscure or unknown riding locations, as well as slowly emerging evidence that new trails are being built in the Don's trail network; 2) Trailforks' GPS mapping abilities, which keep me from getting lost in the field, and 3) Strava's ability to serve as a sort of "social media" app, allowing me to follow other riders' rides and accounts, or to use Strava's "Flyby" function to see who else was on the trails with me during my rides.

5. Five mountain biking experiences that afford riders an exit from the Covid Cosmology

In what follows I reflect – based on my own experiences as a mountain biker in the Don and on the experiences of others, both on and offline – on six experiences that locked down Torontonians may have encountered as they made their way down from Toronto's urban grid into the city's ravines. The experiences I will be reflecting on are: 1) Feelings of Freedom, 2) Expansion, Optimization & Intensification, 3) Flow, 4) Boundaries, Exclusions, and Creating Community, and 5) Risk. All of these experiences were restricted during the height of the Covid lockdowns. Indeed, with little emphasis during Covid on the value of physical fitness, being outdoors in the sunshine (for vitamin D, for instance), or cardiovascular workouts, mountain biking in the Don Valley in Toronto – whether over the winter or during the spring and summer season – often felt like an illicit act. Indeed, I recall one day early in the Covid-19 lockdowns, that police vehicles were combing the ravine's parklands in search of people illegally having a picnic or sharing a park bench together.

5.1. Feelings of Freedom

The Don's mountain bike trails are the result of the desires of the trail builders and trail blazers; we benefit today from their sweat, choices, vision, effort, and dirty fingernails. These mountain bike trails are the effects of the desires and collective choices of individual trail builders and cycling enthusiasts over time. The Don's trails are almost all below the surface of the city's grid. To access them, riders (or hikers, dog walkers, etc.) must find their way down into the ravine and, more crucially, must be able to find their way back out. Just recently I ran into a group of teenagers on their bicycles, lost, on the wrong side of the river, unable to bike back up the rocky, rooty, and steep trails to their destination kilometres away.

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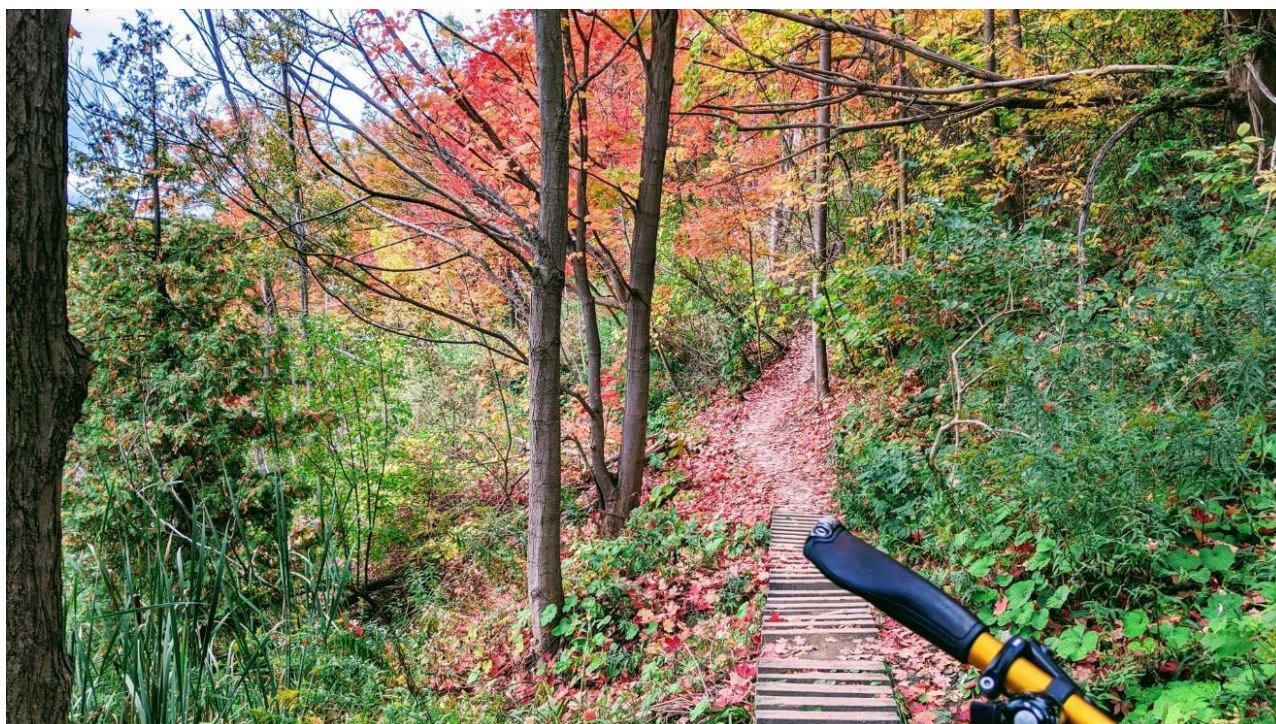
Fig. 10. Don Valley mountain bike trail with small rider-built bridge (photo by author).

The Don River Valley's mountain bike trails are usually entered through a gap in the trees, often only identifiable by the faint outlines of a trail. But by puncturing the city/nature divide one is taken across a threshold that separates the urban grid from the wilds of the urban wilderness below. By breaching the thicket, copse, grove, or brambles one begins a descent into a world with fewer grids, fewer rules, more creativity, more options, and more flow. Once you roll across this threshold, the temperature drops, the air is fresher, and the smells are of pine, decaying leaves, and dirt. Note too that these are not static thresholds or wilds – they change by day and are transformed with weather and by the seasons. They offer riders a different experience every time. When in the Don, the city disappears above as the ravines and tree tunnels open to welcome the urban adventurers and explorers. How different this experience is from a Zoom meeting! Or your bedroom office! Or the pandemic pajama bottoms you've worn for a week! Upon crossing the city/nature divide one experiences an opening rather than a closing. Options rather than orders. Motion rather than mandates. So many sensations!

So what exactly is it that beckons to us from the gaps in the trees and urges us to pursue the path that gestures towards the woods? How do these arboreal openings seemingly invite us in, urge us to explore, to uncover their earthly offerings (Tiessen, 2007)? Admittedly, we might not all be compelled to respond affirmatively to these invitations of nature (though we all have our inviting experiences to which we respond), but for those of us pulled into the forest we are left wondering: What force is doing the pulling? Conversely, from what are we escaping? And in plunging into the woods, what do we become? And what do we leave behind?

Certainly there is a transformation that takes place. In my case – especially during Covid – upon cresting the threshold and plunging into the tree lined trails I become a projectile, a bird, a

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trajectory. No longer am I a desk-monkey or locked down subject. Instead, I follow the curves, pursue desire lines, avoid the roots, feel the wind, breathe the moist air, hear the scratch of my tires in the dirt and the call of the birds from the trees. What are these sensations, these elemental experiences and feelings? Instinct? Am I experiencing an immune response? At the very least I am improvisationally pursuing freedom from those forces that I needed to escape, whatever they were. I am reclaiming agency, mobility, maskless breathing, speed, excitement. My temperature rises, I sweat, I breathe heavily, my legs pound, my feet spin in endless circles, my yearning for pleasure and pain is being satiated, my body is an expression of health rather than a suspected source of sickness.

Fig. 11. Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

Of course I am not alone. Other cyclists, hikers, joggers, nature photographers, foragers are here in the Toronto's urban wilds with me. Are we all seeking similar things? Or are we all just seeking to *escape* similar things? What are these woods, these trails, these trees whispering to us? Regardless, here we are free to choose our own way, our own paths, our own futures. Time slides away. Timeless time takes over.

But freedom in these woods is not endless nor boundless. There are rules: trails to follow, trees to dodge, inclines and declines to overcome, fear, resist. There is also trail etiquette to adhere to: oncoming climbing riders get priority, no skidding, ride through puddles not around them, say "solo" or "last one" or "three back" to oncoming riders to warn them of approaching

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bikers, pick up litter if you can, greet your fellow trail users with a smile, nod, or "hello." These rules shape the experience, reveal to us the edges of what's possible, ensure that our experiences of freedom in the forest are not simply chaos, and remind us that with freedom comes responsibility, duty, consequences.

So how to define this feeling of what feels like "freedom"? One way to think of a space like the Don Valley mountain bike trails is as a third space, separate from the binaries, grids, and rigid demands of the city above. Here the bureaucracy, red tape, budgets, and planning is left behind. What emerges instead is unsanctioned ephemeral infrastructure created through grassroots initiative, maintained by enthusiasts, embraced by flow seeking freedom seekers, and sustained by good will. This third space – which is enormously expansive – is intensified because of its very proximity to that for which it is a foil. Here in the woods the striations of everyday life seem as though they can be left behind. Adventure awaits.

I should recognize too that what these ravines and their mountain bike trails represent for me does not mean that they represent "freedom, etc." for others – even other riders. My point is merely to suggest that these ravines offer something profoundly *different* than what is offered elsewhere in the city, and that this otherness became particularly salient, valuable, and desirable during Covid. Additionally, while everyone obviously experiences the Don River Valley and its trails and ravines differently, I would like to suggest that of all of its users, it's the Don's mountain bikers that – perhaps – make the most of the ravines. After all, the Don's tributaries and ravine edges are essentially large ditches, resulting from the massive flows of water from the melting of the last glaciers following the previous ice age around 10000 years ago. In other words, these ravines are anything but "mountains," the ideal landscape for mountain bikers to ply their trade. But despite these meagre slopes, Toronto's mountain bikers shape these river-edge cliffs and elevations *into* mountains by optimising the trails using switchback climbs, and endless, short, steep, pitched ascents and descents.

But here again, the malleability, flexibility, potential of the ravines reveal themselves since these trails are actually rather "world class" as far as mountain bike infrastructure goes. Indeed, *Bike Magazine* – an award-winning mountain bike magazine – wrote a longform article on the Don trails in 2018 (pre-Covid) wherein author Devon O'Neil described the Don trails by saying that "Toronto holds the most unlikely promised land in North American mountain biking, a bounty of such challenge and character and unfathomable variety that I will struggle to explain it for months" (O'Neil, 2018). O'Neil, a mountain bike industry veteran who was encountering the Don and its users for the first time, explains that the trail network, "in a pair of glacial ravines known simply as 'the Don,' carries an almost mythical reputation among those who frequent it. With 60 miles of handbuilt singletrack wedged in a city of 6 million people, it's hard to comprehend how it remained a secret for so long. But before [ride tracking apps like] Trailforks and Strava, only those who knew someone – or were willing to spend hundreds of hours exploring – had any idea how expansive it was" (O'Neil, 2018).

5.2. Expansion, optimization & intensification

Expansiveness is something that can be experienced in the Don. The trail network has up to 100km of divergent, overlapping, intertwining connections – so there's room to roam. Few can ride it all in a single day – though some try, if their online GPS routes posted to websites and

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apps like Strava are any indication. The Don allows mountain bikers to stretch their wings, to explore, to extend their adventures – and by extension themselves – over vast territories. The Don offers spaces for exploration, unknown and uncharted territories for conquering. It offers trails of different difficulties and varying risks. These spaces are where new skills develop, new challenges emerge, new victories are achieved, new possibilities are encountered. In other words, the Don offers us territories within which we can discover what we're capable of and affords us opportunities to optimize and actualize our potential and innate powers. As mountain bikers, we seek to improve our skills – our climbing, descending, speed, cornering ability, technical riding abilities – and in such instances the Don delivers, or at least it provides terrain, obstacles, and ravine walls that challenge riders of all skill levels to improve. You see, a mountain biker can only climb so steep a hill or traverse so technical a rock section; that being the case, even a geological ditch like the Don can – if cultivated in a way that maximizes its affordances – offer challenges for even the most extreme rider to master. Mastery, in turn, results in the unfolding of further optimization which, in turn, contributes to the ongoing expansion of the mountain biker's horizons – whether in terms of skills or sense of self.

Fig. 12. Don Valley mountain bike trail creating a third space by passing under train bridge (photo by author).

This potential for expansion – the ability to access expansive spaces and in turn expand oneself – is another aspect of the Don trails that runs counter to the Covid Cosmology and its solutions that were playing out on the city's surface. Instead of a system built around obedience to narrow ontologies, the Don offers a graduated range of potential opportunities that allow its users the freedom to cultivate and nurture their best selves. The question the trail builders always seem to be asking themselves is: How can we shape the land and carve the trails in a way

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that allows people to maximize their potential without making the challenge too overwhelming? Or how can we maximize achievable difficulty? Or how can we create a graduated set of challenges across a vast expanse that allows users to discover what they're capable of becoming (as a way of discovering who they are and can be). Indeed, perhaps the greatest fear of the Don mountain biking community is that the city lays claim to the trails, potentially dumbing them down for more general audiences, making them more accessible, less challenging, and lacking – therefore – opportunities for infrastructural or personal expansion.

5.3. Flow

If there's anything that everyone can enjoy its achieving states of flow, experiencing effortless movement, being "in the zone," experiencing near unconscious progression through space and time as one achieves intended milestones and goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As Csikszentmihalyi explained in his bestselling book *Flow* in which he popularized the concept, "[f]ollowing a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow" (1990, p. 41).
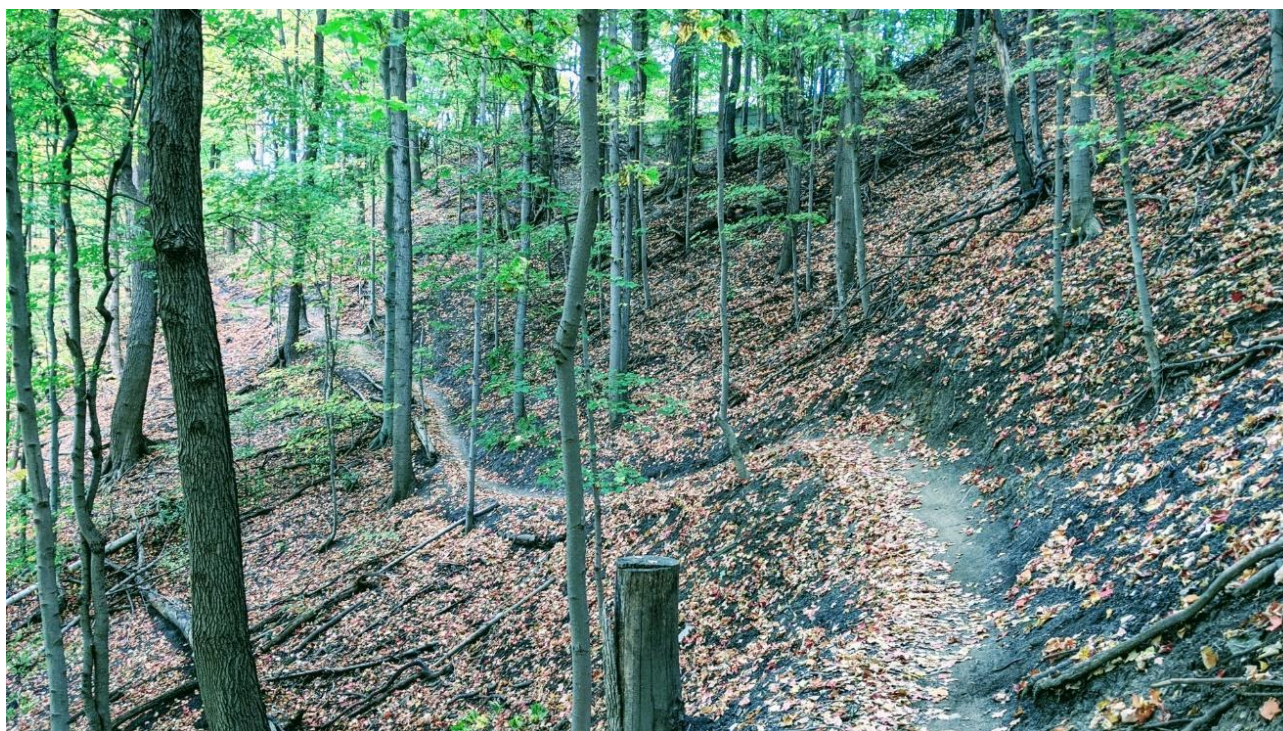
Fig. 13. Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

Flow is on offer in the Don. The trails constantly undulate, pushing you forward. There are a proliferating number of small jumps with which to catch air – to fly – and many rollercoaster-like drops and descents that thrill every time. Cycling, in general, is a shortcut to experiencing states of flow – that blissful combination of mobility, speed, fear, expertise, technique, and risk that results in an affective high or euphoria. Experiences of flow are also

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experienced by mountain biking in the Don, and elsewhere, due to the rhythmic pulsing of the back and forth twists and turns – it doesn't take too many S-curves to get into the mood! To-ing and fro-ing through the woods at speed results in heightened levels of intensity, a sensorially compressed sense of space, and an accelerated experience of time that puts one's worldly worries in the rear-view mirror. Attention instead is attuned to not crashing, to staying upright, to rolling faster, to railing the berms harder, to landing jumps, to nailing climbs. The mind defragments. The prescriptiveness of the Covid Cosmology is forgotten for a time. A heightened level of awareness, pleasure, thrill, fear, challenge, and desire aligns to satisfy our urge for the things we're yearning for – or yearning to escape.

Flow is also achieved by editing out risks – by focusing on goals, by just having goals. In the pursuit of flow, trail-builders and riders embrace natural obstacles and impediments rather than avoiding, removing, or flattening them. Indeed, the bigger the gap, the steeper the decline, and the "sicker" the drop, the more the riders are compelled to rise to the challenge. I've noted, for instance, that professional downhill mountain bikers could not possibly be assessing all the risks – rocks, roots, trees, dropoffs – that confront them as they hurtle down mountains at breakneck speed. Rather, what they are doing is *editing out* incoming information and inputs at rapid speed. They are not taking stock of all the things that make the trajectory difficult, insurmountable, impossible; rather, they are attuned only to the possible, to the goal. They edit out the risks, because merely focusing on risks does not serve the objective: the need for speed, the need for flow. These racers are following paths of least resistance in order to discover how fast they can descend, to improve on their previous best times, to encounter what is possible. This too runs counter to the Covid Cosmology, which focused so much on risks, obstacles, and dangers that all the collateral damage brought about by doing so was ignored. The effects, in turn, were often horrifying (and largely ignored).

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Fig. 14. Finding flow and urban infrastructure on a Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

5.4. Boundaries, exclusions & creating community

Although vast, the expansiveness of the Don trail system is not without limit. It's a more or less delineated space, with insides and outsides, inclusions and exclusions, and fairly distinct boundaries. While from a certain perspective these boundaries set limits on what can be done within them, they also define the third space within which the activities and experiences offered by the Don can happen. The third spaces in the Don exist as separate from the sanitized snippets that all too often define our experiences of nature in the city. Instead of fenced in, manicured, hand planted and curated environments, the Don's third spaces are unruly, unmanicured, and forgotten zones of wilderness that have been left alone just long enough to take on a life of their own. These places, thereby, offer a degree of impenetrability, mystery, foreboding – qualities that compel, in this instance, Toronto's mountain bikers who have become frustrated with the imperatives of more civilized samples of urbanized or planned nature, to explore ways to break free from the grids that demarcate how human beings can or cannot cavort amidst the greenery. That being the case, the thresholds, boundaries, barriers, borders of the Don trails are integral not only to the experience, but also determine the nature of what is possible.

Indeed, the Don mountain bike infrastructure is not simply defined by the boundaries that separate the city grid above from the wildness below the city's surface. After all, within the Don Valley there also are many domesticated, developed, and officially sanctioned spaces that are meant to be experienced by wide swathes of the general public: paved bike paths, drinking fountains, public bathrooms, picnic areas, parking lots, horse stables, park benches, sports fields, and more. But these are not where the mountain bikers go. Indeed, these more

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pedestrian spaces designed by the city to accommodate the masses, are actively avoided, circumnavigated, punctured, traversed, escaped whenever possible by the mountain bikers. During Covid, for example, new mountain bike trails were built that ran exactly parallel to – but separate from – the paved routes: they meandered around the parking lots while connecting pre-existing trails to one another. This connectivity serves as a network within the pre-existing and expanding network of the city's own infrastructure. So while both the domesticated Don and the mountain bike trail infrastructure occupy the same valley, they exist as separate but overlapping domains with their own borders and boundaries, users, builders, and advocates. At the same time as the Don's mountain bike trails exist within bounded territories that cater to particular users and interests, these boundaries evolve and expand as the mountain biking community continually seeks to extend the network outward, to fill in the gaps, to maximize the ravine's affordances, and to foster an interconnected network wherein users can experience flow. Trails also sometimes disappear: they get wiped out in a landslide when the ravine walls crash into the river due to erosion, or they fall into disuse because they just aren't very good trails to begin with (too little flow, too much difficulty, too proximal to city infrastructure). Since the goal of the mountain bikers is to be able to experience flow-states in an evolving environment of speed, nature, thrills, and spills, the trail network must be expanded, interconnected, refined, maintained, improved, optimized.

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Fig. 15. Don Valley mountain bike trail and community member (photo by author).

Hence the boundaries of these wild spaces must remain flexible, malleable, conditional. But wherever they are, and no matter how contingent they might be, the boundaries of the Don's mountain bike trails are always distinct from the world outside and thereby allow the magical experiences that go on within them to remain protected from encroachment from undesirable entities that risk infringing upon the fragile interplay of terrain, desire, risk taking, and flow-seeking that define the insides (the mountain bike trails, users, and infrastructure) from the outsides (the city's grid, the above world, the Covid Cosmology that seeks to control even outdoor territories where adventure, risk, potential, and vitality prevail). The boundedness that defines the insides from the outsides and that determines the accessibility of these trails, although selectively exclusionary, enables the goals of this particular community to be

expressed. This expression is made powerful and desirable by offering something beyond that which can be found at the surface. The perimeter at the trails' edge that for some appears frightening, dangerous, daunting, dusty, rocky, dark, etc. creates the internal coherence that allows the community to express its desires relatively unmolested. The city turns a blind eye. Less skilled trail users fear being run over by more experienced cyclists. A sort of homeostasis is achieved within which one possible objective – flow and freedom! – can be pursued by those who seek it.

5.5. Risk

Finally, let's talk about risk – that which the Covid Cosmology points to when proposing lockdowns. Of course, a single-minded pursuit of risk-avoidance can itself be dangerous, and must always be evaluated relative to other larger, more complex, objectives and goals.

The courage required to pursue risk – to stare down danger – also enlarges the spirit. Courage is sometimes described as contagious once witnessed, and surely spreading courage is a good thing? In a recent article on extreme sports and mountain biking, the author states that risk-filled activities such as mountain biking are where "a mismanaged mistake or accident would most likely result in death" (Roberts, Jones & Brooks, 2018; see also Brymer, 2005; Brymer, 2010; Brymer, Cuddihy & Sharma-Brymer, 2010; Brymer & Oades, 2009; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017). Yet, as the authors explain, regardless of their motivation and despite the risk inherent in their activity, "mountain bikers reported copious benefits to mental health and well-being related to their engagement. There was a high reported usage of mountain biking as a coping strategy" (Roberts, Jones & Brooks, 2018). According to Jeys et al., mountain biking carries a "significant risk of life-threatening injury across all levels of participation" (2001, p. 197). So perhaps, during Covid, it was the refusal to take risk into account, or even the desire to experience risk that motivated scores of Toronto mountain bikers to seek adventure in the city's forested ravines?

After all, if the Covid Cosmology sought more than anything to control the specific risk that was infection, then raw or overt risk-taking outside the environments managed by government and public health could have been one of the most preciously rare experiences of the pandemic. Is there any wonder that regular old bicycling – an inherently risky activity, or at least one that offers the sensation of risk – was so popular? Is there any wonder why so many new mountain bikers – from young to old, wealthy to poor, male to female – sought solace via risk in Toronto's comparatively wild ravines and forests?

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Fig. 16. Tree roots next to a Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

6. Concluding reflections

The Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to an unprecedented, coordinated global response from bureaucrats, politicians, and health representatives, the objective of which was to crush the virus and avoid all virus-related risks (illness from Covid-19, death, infection, etc.). This single-minded objective was implemented by viewing reality through to a narrow ontological framework that divided the world into controllable and identifiable black and white binaries – the Covid Cosmology.

This Covid Cosmology shrunk what was possible for the healthy majority during Covid-19. In the face of this restrictive ontology, healthy, vital, vibrant people in cities like Toronto sought out activities that allowed them to expand their skills, seek adventure, and engage with risk. Mountain biking in Toronto's Don Valley trail network was one such activity. During Covid the number of people cycling on the Don Valley's trails increased and the trail system itself expanded. What also expanded were the lives of those mountain bikers for whom lockdowns, restrictions, and masks were not the only option. For these adventure seekers, the Don Valley offered opportunities to grow, to commune with nature, and to connect with the wilderness, and to expand their horizons and communities.

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Cycling Media and Collectives. Cycling Vlogs and Mobile Infrastructures

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Abstract

Not only have cycling communities produced a visual culture consisting of photography, videos, fashion, art and bikes themselves. Conversely, images and videos produce and shape cycling culture and therefore communities. Aesthetics in the digital culture thus contribute to the complex of cycling mobility.

In this paper, I concentrate on cycling vlogs as part of mobile infrastructure. Cycling vlogs cultivate a "social aesthetic" (Born *et al.*, 2017) that adapts symbols from cycling culture, hereby bringing into circulation, and thus shaping, cycling practices. Nevertheless, the interconnection of different platform media like Youtube and performance tracking apps makes digital cycling cultures a place of data production and harvesting of different sorts.

1. **Introduction**

Mobility causes over 20% of CO_2 emissions in European societies (Umweltbundesamt, 2021). Finding the way out of the "lock-in" in automobility (Urry, 2004) requires perspectives not only from planners and engineers but also the humanities and social sciences. We need to understand how deeply society is invested into mental and material images of car centrism (Sheller, 2004). This includes also perspectives of mobility cultures as Aldred and Jungnickel (2014) call for as well as Cresswell's (2010, 18) suggestion that mobility must always also be represented in "constellations of mobility". In this paper, I build on the idea of cycling cultures by deploying a perspective from media culture to expand the focus beyond the already-existing representation in this field. I discuss vlogging from an aesthetic perspective, by concentrating on examples from sports vlogs as practices that are prone to commercialization but also might support emerging cycling cultures beyond the field of sports. Cycling practices are produced and shaped not only by riding a bike alone but by many practices surrounding cycling which contribute to images and imaginations of cycling. Furness (2014) for example underlines the importance of subcultures of cycling expressed in fashion, (punk) music and DIY cultures. In the following, I will concentrate on vlogs that connect cycling cultures with sport.

Although many vlogs are embedded in an influencer and selfie culture, they simultaneously contribute to cycling media culture. Thereby, vlogs can become a medium

to re-invent and negotiate the meaning of cycling in circulating media practices. One very important aspect of this ongoing negotiation is that cycling is not related to a single dominant image or narration. This is an important potential for new representations of cycling to gain a wider reach in society: Cycling is a manifold technique that relates in different ways to very different communities and practices. Cycling is not one but many practices and can be mobilized also in relation to different social movements, like intersectional feminism (Bee, 2018; 2019; Eberlein & Bee, 2022; Pinzuti & Bee, 2022; s. f. gender and mobility: George, 2021; de Madariaga, 2013) or mobility justice (Sheller, 2018). Although I cannot discuss all the ways of representing cycling online in this paper, my aim is to explore and critically discuss the potential of vlogs by focusing on their sensory aesthetics using a close reading of a few examples.

2. Cycling Culture in Social Media

I will start with an example of the photographic social media practice of Berlin-based bicycle collective She 36 and then move on to videos on Youtube by influencer Juliet Elliott. These examples are not representative for cycling vlogs in general but serve as examples to demonstrate more conceptual arguments about cycling media cultures (Bee, 2022).

Since in most societies automobility is the dominant "mobility paradigm" (Sheller & Urry, 2006), cycling culture is predominantly a niche culture. Cycling, although imagined and celebrated as an individual activity, is often also a collective activity, be it organized by cycling collectives or cycling activists. Especially when it comes to cycling cultures, local offline and digital practices are coming together, as the initiative All Women Ride on komoot shows, a navigational app for cycling, hiking and walking. Cycling is celebrated by blogs like the one by Berlin-based cycling collective She 36. Their blog contains historical references to female cyclists, thus building memory and publicity for achievements made by women in the male dominated sector that is professional road cycling. In a post about road cyclist Tamara Polyakova, her accomplishments, victories, and achievements are listed. The post is part of a bigger digital archival effort to present female icons of cycling. These are collaged with childhood photographs and citations of women from the group on bikes: "When you receive your first bike as a gift, it doesn't matter where you are (...) The only thing that counts is RIDING it!" The blog creates counter perspectives to a predominantly male narrative of cycling history. Historical cycling personas and personal biographies are linked on the Instagram and Tumblr accounts of the group. Both are elements of the group's cycling activism: role models in cycling and memories of empowerment through mechanically generated self-induced movement. These can be understood as strategies of appropriating mobility as well as urban spaces (Kern, 2020, p. 170) by using photography and biographical narrations. She 36 also self-represents their activities in photos like fixie trick cycling in public urban spaces. The style of the group moves between punk and skate movements, retro aesthetics, and alley cat (messenger-style lane racing). The members pose with their bikes in ironic group photos like one in which the group is assembled on an excavator. These images show how a collective of cyclists as well as cycling as a collective activity are portrayed using visual and narrative techniques. In doing so, the practice of blogging connects to historic meanings

of women on bikes in public spaces as practiced by the suffragettes, for whom the bicycle was a "freedom machine" (Keck, 2022; Ross, 2021).

During the early 20th century, the bicycle historically and drastically expanded women's range of movement. Early on, women posed with bicycles (Kinsey, 2011); by taking photographs, the suffragettes were able to circulate images of women riding bicycles in public spaces. Like the bicycles themselves, these images were vehicles of feminist mobility. Mobility is not only represented but (pre)figured in visual practices that map out mental and imaginary spaces.

In an interview, a founding member of She 36 told me about the vlog Fixed on Fixed (Raechel Harding, 2015), a short film from Australia featuring female fixie riders. It was this vlog which inspired her to form a cycling collective. This might be only one example of vlog culture circulating and inspiring cycling practices, but it shows how online and offline practices potentially entangle not only by documentation but also by archival and other practices that contribute to the history of cycling. In this line of thought, mobility practices would not only be shaped by practices of walking, cycling, driving, etc., but also informed, negotiated, and stabilized by different intersecting forms of media.

3. Cycling Vlogs

In this part, I would like to address the imagery of post-cinematographic moving images at the intersection of sport and cycling culture. In doing so, I consider amateur films circulating on platforms like Youtube and Vimeo not only as representations of cycling, but as practices that interact with other mobile and data practices (Adey, 2017, p. 210).

Vlogs are often serially produced films by private individuals, companies, NGOs, journalists or state actors. They have experienced their rise in web 2.0 through participatory media formats. Many of them convey content and knowledge, engage in skill sharing, and, especially in the case of private individuals, have a diary-like structure. Films usually revolve around a theme such as nutrition, pets, repair, beauty, sports, activism, or political education, for example in the field of (political) self-representation or through citizen journalism (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009), which can also pursue problematic and misleading information policies. For influencers in particular, the mix of content and personal life is attractive for establishing a brand. This often includes topics such as fashion, beauty and furnishing, but also household hacks. Sports and fitness vlogs have become a major genre across media in recent years, combining fitness tips, nutrition, and lifestyle. It is often criticized for its body politics and normative ideals (Gerling *et al.*, 2018, pp. 64-69). While vlogs are informed by fictional forms and aesthetics from other media forms and influenced by cross media storytelling, they stage themselves as documentary in order to make vloggers appear authentic. Vlogs have adapted the perspective, aesthetics and politics of the selfie, which uses jump cut montage and long takes to center a person in the imagery. Vlogs from amateur sectors have become more professional over the years, as has the vlog considered below, which integrates extra diegetic music and intertitles in post-production, as well as using montage more continuously, thus creating greater continuity between various perspectives, such as the selfie shot, the subjective view while cycling, and filming each other while riding together. In most cases however, cinematic procedures such as shot reverse shot are dispensed

with, since usually only one camera is used and the vlog in general does not aim at the narrative realism of cinematic modes of production.

Vlogs are often produced serially, e.g., weekly. They thus allow for a tighter (weekly) feedback loop between cycling as a practice and vlogging than for example, the representation of cycling in cycling films (Withers & Shea, 2016). They are also potentially more embedded in mobile practices of cyclists – both those who make them and the cyclists who watch them. Riding thus generates images of cycling from a "grassroots perspective" feeding back into the cycling community. Mobile media are highly connectable to digital infrastructures and intensify meanings of mobility and movement by aesthetics, shaping relations and affordances regarding the choice of mobility – as well as the production and sharing of data in the interconnection of vlogs and fitness, tracking and health apps.

Particularly active in the field of cycling vlogs are semi-professionals who exhibit very diverse styles of combining sportive and cultural aspects of cycling. This way, they can be attractive to different types of cyclists at the same time. Protagonists appropriate symbols from cycling culture and remediate them in fitness vlogs.

Cycling vlogs can be roughly categorized into long races/traveling; repair and maintenance; messenger, tricks and fixie; mountain bike and downhill as well as road cycling and semi-professional riding in gravel cycling.

Especially in the field of sports and fitness, vlogs have become highly frequented media forms in recent years. Numerous cycling vlogs have emerged on the borderline of activism, self-promotion, and celebrity. Performative elements of appropriating the city also come into play, as in Diego Valero's Youtube vlogs from Bogotá (see for example the channel Fixed Gear Bogotá). Here, cyclists film each other riding through the city with particularly creative way-finding and tricky riding, weaving through traffic as in courier films). The aesthetic transitions to skate and BMX vlogs as well as music cultures like hip-hop and punk are fluid. Fixie, for example, often stands as a symbol for cycling cultures. It cultivates the idea of DIY and opposes commercialism while strongly correlating with styles taken from messenger cultures. Vlogs by fixie riders show perspectives closely related to urban environments and other traffic participants. Numerous vlogs are staging tricks and the performative appropriation of the city and urban infrastructures through the virtuous parcouring of car traffic. In this activity, people film each other instead of employing the solitary and subjective point of view camera perspective of the GoPro or a hand held camera that is often used in sports vlogging. Since cyclists film each other to get a view of tricks and maneuvers like in skate board videos, this is somewhat different from the vlog described below which exhibits a mix of predominantly subjective and selfie perspectives. By filming and uploading these videos, perspectives of cyclists on cyclists experience greater dissemination. Also their perspective is literally performed in relation to city infrastructures.

Other vlogs can be seen in the tradition of travelogues that show long-distance rides using GoPros or small hand held cameras, which are also used in downhill. Some vloggers even use drones for documenting the performances. Bike packing and overnight trips with little luggage on rather sporty bikes have found a broader audience on Youtube or Vimeo in recent years, and often depict an escape from everyday life. It is no longer just men who share this kind of 'adventure' on video platforms. Cycling outfitters have addressed this segment more and more in recent years. The sense of community and

lifestyle of traveling is praised by the community in the comment sections (e.g. Kelsey Leigh's multi-part vlog from Pittsburgh to DC on their Youtube channel). In addition to ultra-long races of thousands of kilometers – e.g., from Alberta in Canada to Mexico – the bike packing genre includes relaxed tours lasting several days, which tie in with the travelogue genre (see here, for example, the popular German travel vlog by Radelmädchen).

The vlogs of Juliet Elliott, on which I focus below, often mix bike hacks and repair sessions with road cycling trips and, before the Covid-19 pandemic, participation in social events like amateur or semi-pro races.

Like the Youtube channel discussed below, some bike blogs and vlogs aim for an intersectional perspective in cycling. One example is the blog A Quick Brown Fox by African-American cycling blogger and the first Black professional cyclist Ayesha McGowan, who produces, among other media, a podcast interviewing women about their cycling experiences. Especially in the male- and white-dominated segment of road cycling, podcasts like McGowan's are important in appealing to the breadth of cyclists and opening up the meaning of cycling. This can also be linked to the collective Ovarian Psycos portrayed in the film of the same name by Joanna Sokolowski and Kate Trumbull-LaValle (2016), for whom riding together represent moments of anti-racist, queer-feminist empowerment. The mobility of cycling (spatial empowerment) and the mobility of media (empowerment through representation) double here.

4. Road Cycling Vlogging

In the following, I focus more closely on the channel of semi-professional cyclist Juliet Elliott, as her vlog illustrates well how sportive cycling and cycling culture interact. It also represents a sensory perspective on cycling that mobilizes affects. Her Youtube channel combines short films of rides, repairs, and bike fashions. Elliott is a British, white, former sports model and former professional snowboarder who is sponsored by various brands in her second career as a cycling ambassador. Her signature "Morning!" call starts off each of her videos. Part of her extensive social media presence includes weekly vlogs that revolve around cycling themes, often documenting and showcasing her performance on a road, gravel, or mountain bike. Elliott's style targets post-punk and empowerment feminism, intertwining product placement and fitness movements in which (vegetarian) diet and fashion also play a role. The adaption of symbols from subcultural movements such as alley cat and bike messenger cultures allows for connectivity to existing movements and connects aesthetically to retro chic beyond the bike scene. What is interesting here is the embedding of apps in the audiovisual and sensory media form that allow the spectators to be connected on several levels. Since sports and media culture are closely intertwined here, it is worth taking a closer look at the aesthetics that permeate these assemblages.

While Elliott is semi-professional, the mode of action of her vlog represents certain moments of empowerment for women in cycling that could apply to everyday life as well – even if not everyone commutes by racing or gravel bike. Here, of course, it is important to distinguish between sport cyclists, commuters, and cycling enthusiasts in terms of the target group.

Other vlogs, such as that of vlogger Francis Cade, regularly showcase protagonists of the international cycling scene. Filming while riding together, interviews and ethnographies of the cycling scene overlap in his vlogs, just as in Juliet Elliott's. Her vlog is predominantly filmed by her – unlike many vlogs made by more urban fixie related groups who film each other – and range from local to international events and rides. As a semi-pro, Elliott is not characterized by a sleek style comparable to many male road cyclists; on the contrary, her symbol is the anarchist cat and her arms and legs are covered by tattoos. Nevertheless she presents expensive cycling and street wear as well as gadgets. She thus embodies a mixture of punk, street fashion, DIY and feminism, which shows her to be a digital entrepreneur and influencer but also a pioneer of cycling that is no longer aimed solely at physical performance. At the same time, her vlog has the potential to radiate widely among groups of cycling enthusiasts that focus on a more than sportive dimension in cycling. This, of course, also makes the vlog part of contemporary forms of value creation through follower economies. Rather than the pursuit of sport alone and the enhancement of performance, this channel targets the creation of a cycling lifestyle and utilizes an affective strategy of branding which is very common to influencing in general. Affect includes more than the display of motions of the vlogging person but is embodied by aesthetic strategies on which I focus below.

Landscapes, from Devon in southern England, where Elliott lives, to the Lake District, to cycling hotspots in California, Mallorca, and Japan, play a central role in the videos. Scenery is an important part in the viewing experience and distinguishes cycling vlogs from other more place based practices like work outs. In terms of genre, travelogues and selfie aesthetics mix here and are remediated (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Rides are often dramaturgically associated with an event, such as checking out a new café with the obligatory cake-eating of road-biking frequent-burners, swimming in lakes, rivers, or the sea, or a camping trip to small events. This is also important in terms of community building and narration because it celebrates cycling as a way to explore landscapes with a full body sensorium. An important point of entry for female riders might be this appropriation of a male practice of exploration and mobile perceptions.

Central to the viewing pleasure of her vlog is the actualization of cycling as a sensory activity, which through its multimodality, and the proximity of the camera to the body and predominantly subjective perspective, strongly contrasts the visual aesthetics of driving (Borden, 2012, p. 45). Sensory images of cycling produced in the channel are very different from car culture and literally introduce cyclist's perspectives into media cultures. During the rides, the video transmits affects that accompany cycling and can be actualized in watching from a subjective perspective on one's own body, when, for example, a particularly difficult climb has to be mastered or a particularly rapid descent is experienced. As in the Zwift performance app, Elliott becomes partly a kind of avatar (though not filmed over the shoulder) when we see her mastering sections of a gravel ride from a subjective perspective, or coming close to tears of exhaustion in races lasting several hours and compressed into minutes – such as a timed fjord race in Norway – or flying over hills on a mountain bike. Here, the camera creates affective intensity and sensory transmission of strong forces acting on the body.

Although Elliott focuses on races and rides in picturesque landscapes, her vlog is adaptable to everyday culture. Specifically the more cultural aspects make it accessible to a wider audience beyond sport, or, put differently, the aspects of fitness and culture are so intertwined, that often fitness culture and body images become the lingua franca of

vlogging. The channel also combines skill sharing and repair or other bike hacks as "skilled practice" (Grasseni, 2009), called for by the community in the comments below the videos. The mundanity of cycling in commuting or training is linked to events, such as races or special rides like bike packing excursions. The kinesthetic and mobile perspective as well as the staging of cycling culture allow the viewers to relate to their own cycling practice aesthetically – especially the style, the bikes, and the fashion are formative. I am less interested in a mimetic appropriation of what is presented in vlogs by cyclists than in the sensory and affective aesthetics of cycling explored in vlogs. Through the mobile camera that Elliott attaches to her body during her rides that intertwines movement and joyful or strained affects, affects and embodied knowledge are also actualized and mobilized in the spectator's body. The style and rhythm of cycling is experienced and thus potentially appropriated; moreover, the vlog images positively connote cycling, which enables affective connectivity to the particular style that connects viewers not only to the individual influencer but also to the cycling community. Affective branding of cycling might also include creating positive emotions concerning individual influencers as a brand as well as in regards to the presented products. Within the vlog, different functions and styles of social media combine. Style, the mixture of symbol, fashion, body images, bikes and camera aesthetics, operates here as a "social aesthetic" (Born *et al.*, 2017) in the making of communities. The social aesthetics of cycling culture brackets apps, platforms, and image styles. Images of cycling contribute to a culture of mobility, which in turn establishes a particular spectator position that draws on a body memory. The circulation of images thus also has the potential of a bodily and sensory aesthetic, not only on the level of production, but also of reception. In this exchange, not only a narrative and meaning-making element emerges, but also an affective value (Massumi, 2018) that shapes the reception of cycling and supports affective branding of influencer vlogs as well.

Processes of exchange are also visible at the level of "platformization" (Poell *et al.*, 2019) as well as the interconnection of platforms and apps: Elliott's use of Zwift, which she integrates into the vlog, like other vloggers do too, is potentially directly connectable to one's own use of Zwift, which in turn enables virtual riding together. In this case, also physical performance, brand loyalty and community building are connected – also on the level of data production. Zwift, like komoot, also features community aspects. The training medium for riding at home and the social medium of the vlog are condensed in Elliott's vlogs, but also ultimately extended; her videos are connectable to bodily and social techniques in that they are themselves part of the social and audiovisual networks that branch out into everyday life and other practices. The interaction between the different platforms and applications as it is typical for digital media ecologies (Fuller, 2005) is central here to intertwining techniques – cycling as a bodily technique and the social aesthetics of cycling communities with training applications. But these interconnections of different visual cycling practices are also a way to connect aesthetics of vlogs with the production of data in application. Visual representations of speed and are for example connected in a vlog by Katie Kookaburra, who occasionally shares metrics like speed and incline in her Youtube channel mimicking a car display or produces videos in partnership with Zwift. When influencers integrate Zwift into their vlogs, the visual arrangement doubles because – as in the vlog – cycling is watched as avatar sport, similar to a gaming video showing a gamer play. Zwift can be connected to a sensor that measures cadence. Similar to other bodily data, such as through the bike

computer that combines speed and data from sensors that measure heartbeat and pulse. Through integration into the vlog, cycling becomes a way of producing and connecting various forms of data. Potential interfaces to smart devices can also connect GPS signals and therefore mobility data to tracking and navigation apps like Strava and komoot, for example, applications that form social media interfaces. Combining physical data and mobility data makes cycling applications an interesting field of data capitalism. Through the visual cycling culture through which communities organize themselves, these applications are not only popularized, and used to connect a community of cyclist to an influencer on different platforms, but also aestheticized in the vlog.

A vlog like Elliott's entangles the bodily technique of cycling with social media, data tracking, and techniques such as self-optimization. A prototypical "intraaction" (Barad, 2007) between bodies and techniques of a digital community can be experienced in a condensed entanglement of cycling and vlogs.

5. Transindividuations of Cycling

What becomes paradigmatic in the assemblage of media practices around cycling media is the processual interconnection of aesthetics, data production, mobility, and community building that I would like to call, with Simondon (2020), the individuation of cycling in its technical milieu. The vlogs can be critically seen as governmental techniques (Foucault, 2009) of the (sportive) self (Martschukat, 2020), but also – simultaneously – they are a technique of mobility: an aesthetically informed way to relate the self to the environment as well as to the cycling community in a mobile way. Techniques of cycling, techniques of the subject, and techniques of the vlog here couple into an assemblage. This can contribute to cycling cultures and the creation of communities on the one hand. On the other hand, community building is a strategy of influencer economies and social media in general.

Gilbert Simondon described the dynamic and interdependent interplay of environment and techniques as individuation which was taken up in socio-technical views on the mutual shaping of social practices and technology. He extended this notion to the realms of the psyche, and to living as well as material techniques. For an activity to achieve consistency, a process must undergo a repetitive turning back upon itself. In this "ontogenesis", a milieu is folded inward; through these processes, the milieu in turn changes. Cycling, from the perspective of the theory of individuation, can be described as a set of processes that intertwine techniques: techniques of the self, of cycling, and of media representations. Cycling intertwines milieu and practice and in turn affects the milieu of public space as well as one's own subjectivity. Vlogs and other cycling media potentially shape this interaction and in turn form a milieu themselves. This individuality, Simondon argues (2020, pp. 9-11), is directly connected to a collectivity that is more than the sum of the individuals. This he calls transindividuation, or "group individual" (2020, p. 9). Cycling here is a trans/individual as well as technical practice. It entangles digital and public milieus with individual bodies creating a community and a (digital) milieu of cycling.

The question of individuation, at the intersection of mobility practices and media of cycling, is interesting because it shapes a social aesthetic, a "materiality of identity" (Hediger, 2016, p. 265) of cycling. However, instead of assuming a more or less fixed

identity of cyclists, I propose to think of individuations as dynamic processes that do not represent a cycling individual. Individuations simultaneously take into account material, psychological, technical and social aspects of cycling. Cycling is thus understood as entangled with digital media culture without being just produced by or influenced by it. Technology and sociality intertwine in processes of exchange between individuation and milieu, of body, apps, and visual culture.

This approach allows me to shift the perspective away from phenomenology or purely sociological analyses of contemporary cycling identities, such as subcultures in media or individuals deploying media, to an intersection of the individual, social and technical – indeed, aesthetic and digital – practices. Even if the vlogs described here are not representative of the broad, heterogeneous, and dynamic field of cycling in general, I use them as an example for digital cycling cultures that connects individuation of mobility practices, community, sensory aesthetics as well as applications to track, measure and translate cycling into data. This model emphasizes the processual openness of media forms of mobility that intertwine in cycling. Cycling is thus not one singular technique, but combines a range of techniques, being itself an interface to different sorts of media.

This interconnectedness makes sense especially in the affective sensory interfaces where cycling culture creates new ways, styles, eventually fashions, and thus subcultures, which in turn are intensified in image and body practices. Cyclists invent styles, signs, and fashions that play a central role not only in cognitive capitalism (Massumi, 2015, p. 25) but also in data capitalism (West, 2019). Specifically this interconnection of different sorts of data with lifestyles displayed by vlogs opens up new markets that extract value and eventually data from cycling communities.

At the moment, cycling is being appropriated in many ways on social media, even though white and able bodied perspectives still dominate their visuality. Cycling continues to differentiate itself in the face of certain subcultures, styles, and markets. It can be variously appropriated – but this makes it also attractive for a new market of lifestyle products as well as applications.

Mobility practices draw on imaginaries and self-image, clothing, navigation, and infrastructures (and the circumvention of the auto-centric violence inscribed in them). These practices are linked to others, shaping aesthetics that also have real effects on the enjoyment of cycling. Here, Simondon's theory of individuation as simultaneously individualizing/collectivizing and aestheticized/medialized as trans/individuation takes hold. Elliott's vlogs, for example, generate affective value and additionally charge the symbols of cycling with a kind of joy, which is to be understood, in Brian Massumi's terms, as a virtual value of affect that can be commercially siphoned off. But they also carry the affect of the joy of cycling, and thus enable new, bodily references to city, space, and self: cycling can be enfolded in these socio- and self-techniques and, conversely, force, enable, and affirm them. Cycling can also be a practice of creating a milieu that empowers individuals who are not often thought of in the planning of public space to cycle, to appropriate space and also to travel rural landscapes.

Therefore, the argument here exceeds a linear logic – we do not have a pure culture of cycling that in a second step is capitalized and medialized, and not all of the online cycling culture determined by social media economies can be reduced to the development of new markets and data strategies. We must nevertheless take seriously the appropriation signs and images of cycling culture (Furness, 2014) in the production of cycling bodies and circulating body images in order to understand the role of aesthetic phenomena for a

culture of mobility. Using Simondon's theory of milieu, one can say that the interconnected media of cycling becomes a milieu of possible individuations of cycling, which is not to be equated with an individuation of the cyclist. Inversely, cycling shapes that milieu of images, apps and sensors individuating around the body in cycling because it creates favorable conditions to combine aesthetics and data practices as well as mobility data and physical data. Simondon's theory of individuation and milieu should be understood here as reciprocal: individuation also affects the milieu of transport and enables it to change.

Vlogging bears the possibility for amateurs displaying their practices to contribute to the public imagery of cycling. In contrast to cycling in films, in digital media the representation of cycling is closely connected to using apps and platforms. Here, cycling is part of a network of digital infrastructures like apps with social media functions (i.e., komoot, Zwift, Strava).

6. Datafication and sensory cycling aesthetics

Although data mining must be taken seriously, cycling vlogs create other images of public spaces than the dominant car culture and contribute to a different understanding of mobility.

Vlogs, as opposed to films, circulate and participate more directly in an everyday culture. Although films are part of cycling communities, like the documentary Ovarian Psycos, which is frequently screened in events organized by cycling collectives or activists, vlogs are more embedded in other media practices as argued above. Vlogs and apps are more closely interconnected. Both media participate in a network of media and communication, like social media and platforms with the ability to comment, like, share etc. A cycling trip can be seen on Youtube as well as cycled by sharing the data on komoot. So the experience is datafied and can be perceived audio-visually, as well as applied in one's own activities – online or offline, visually and by using data, for example by indoor cycling with Zwift.

Secondly, vlogs generally activate a full sensory spectrum. Films as well are able to address the spectator with a full sensorial spectrum (Sobchack, 2004; Marks, 2000). But the vlog, with its camera often positioned subjectively or hand held near the body supports more the illusion of the avatar as well as the connection to a "real" person, i.e. not an actor. This person, the vlogger, in whose life – however staged – the viewers participate at least in part and with whom they share a passion is often active on different platforms. The sensory aesthetics connect practices, bodies and landscapes/urban environments. Close to the body of the vlogging cyclist, the viewer participates in movement by kinesthetic senses and feels the breath and breathlessness of riding. But instead of being a direct, unmediated experience, this set of experiences is highly mediated. The affective power of riding becomes a lived experience especially when you share the riding experience. This can be supported by metrics like in the vlog of Katie Kookaburra mentioned above. If you see her climb a steep hill, you might know what this feels like when you see how steep it is – let's say 10% rise – because you know what it feels like your own actualized bodily knowledge. The datafication here supports the process of circulation as well as the intensification of the experience. Vlogging serves as a bridge intensifying the experience and the interconnection of applications. This might be

the case even if you do not ride together directly but share a common interest or aesthetics of an online community.

Both the datafication of cycling and the audiovisuality/sensory are two sides of the same coin that makes up cycling's social as well as digital aesthetics. Viewed through the perspective of social aesthetics, aesthetics are not a surplus in riding but fundamentally shape cycling experiences. Especially in networked cultures, sports aesthetics heavily depend on and are influenced by visual representations of activities including certain cultivated styles and body images. This might as well open the door to commercialization, but also shows that aesthetics are neither secondary to practices nor to the interconnection of different sorts of platform media. A community – online and offline – cultivates styles that reciprocally stabilize individuations of cycling. These are important in everyday life, where cycling often plays an undervalued role in the 'hierarchy' of mobilities. Mobility does not start on the bike – it is produced by many decisions that direct the body habitually towards certain ways of mobility. The presence of cars in urban environments, as well as their omnipresence in audiovisual culture including big commercials in print and online, as well as films, normalizes car centrism. Vlogs might as well be a way of articulating other perspectives and other relations to public spaces. Since the bi/tricycle is an "open media" (Schwaab, 2022, p. 189; Bee *et al.*, 2022, pp. 11-13) – compared to the cocoon of the car (Manderscheid, 2018, p. 34) this again connects to the sensual quality of cycling vlogs that cultivate an experience of openness and relatedness with the landscape, urban or rural and therefore public spaces that enable different forms of communication than in a car (Aldred 2010). It also revalues self-induced movement even at the price of an ambivalent fitness culture that normalizes certain bodies (and bikes, usually with only two wheels) and devalues others, and which on the whole is connected to the fitness imperative of neoliberal societies (Martschukat, 2020) that is most visibly embodied by fitness vlogging. Where the car privatizes public spaces and separates the inside from the outside, cycling connects inside and outside (Schwaab, 2022). It is this very quality that makes it also a very vulnerable practice in a car culture. Its openness and connectivity to different media and modes of transport is also a gate for data production that migrates from sports to everyday culture in "smart cycling" that aims to perfect cycling as a consumer experience (Nikoleava *et al.*, 2021).

7. Resumé

While the car is the symbol of Fordism and its standardization processes, which are also very much inscribed in most cities in Europe and the Americas as well as Asia, cycling can be a very flexible practice, that is currently being negotiated and reinvented. Nevertheless, it is practiced, and therefore shaped, by communities that cultivate cycling aesthetics. These community do not necessarily ride together but share a digital practice. Simondon coined the term "transindividuation" (Combes, 2013) to describe the mutual production of collective and individual techniques embedded in social and technical milieus. For him, technological practices are also forms of individuations. This has a dynamic of reciprocity. Media cultures individuate in the milieu of cycling and cycling individuates in the milieu of media cultures. Cycling operates in both fields: as a social, technological, and collective practice that relates bodily techniques, images, practices (mental, material, bodily), and social practices in public spaces. Cycling is produced as a

visual and sensory digital practice. Vlogs contribute to the emergence and/or stabilization of cultures and communities of cycling. At the same time, they allow for an individual practice, or support riding alone with virtual communities. Representations contribute to the individuation of cycling as well as to the one of cyclists that is certainly more needed in spaces where cycling is not as normalized as in the Netherlands or Copenhagen. Instead of sticking to cycling identities, the term individuation or transindividuation can describe the complex becoming of entangled techniques of social, digital and sensory media, data production, and bodily practices producing cycling mobilities. Collectivity seen through cycling media, is not a fixed and stable group. It is more a situational and local activity that emerges entangled with digital practices. Cycling seen this way is not a pure technique, as it is often imagined, a pre-technology or back-to-the-roots gesture. Instead, it is often related to digital infrastructures, even if – as is the case with several DIY cultures– it tries to subvert auto-centrism.

In digital media ecologies different platforms and apps are more and more interconnected, creating an environment. Cycling media practices can connect physical data and mobility data by sensor technology that can also be shared with the community.

Vlogs can be a way to support multiple intersections of subjectivations – even partial, very situational ones – and (digital) mobility practices.

Cycling has potential to also reach out to existing cultures by connecting with music or fashion than by staying the same or introducing a general image. The processes of cycling connecting to different social movements shows the potential to create new alliances between cycling and activism as well as different cultures and milieus. Seen through the lenses of social aesthetics as well as Simondon's socio-technical theory of individuation and milieu, vlogs and images can be media to negotiate meanings of cycling that feed back on the practice itself.

But cycling is also attractive for data extraction specifically because it is celebrated as culture in this very moment. For cycling specifically, the emerging cultures are running the risk of becoming a scene of commercial data mining. In digital culture, it becomes a practice that produces mobility and physical data at the same time. By using tracking apps as well as sharing data from cycling computers, apps interlink with the creation of cycling communities that produce data about cycling. These productions are small scale and flexible, given that cycling measures the public space different than cars. The creation of cycling culture is therefore closely connected to the datafication of cycling. Specifically the idea presented above of individual as well as collective cycling does not connect only members of the cycling community but sees cycling cultures in the larger context of the digitalization of traffic in the so-called smart city. Cycling so becomes an attractive medium for digital urban infrastructures. Smart applications for cycling connected to health apps like Lumos helmets and other gear even underline the trend the interconnection of platforms and smart things, transforming cycling into smart cyling (Nikolaeva *et al.*, 2021).

Both perspectives – the applications and the production of data as well as the community building are connected as it is the case for different online communities in socio-technical individuations.

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Social media and community building in competitive women's road cycling

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Abstract

Social media has become a central part of the modern-day broadcasting of women's sports, and it is argued to be of great importance to the development of women's sports (Vann, 2014; Thorpe, Toffoletti & Bruce, 2017). However, the relationship between digital and social media and the development of women's sports is complex (Sherwood, 2020). In this paper, we explore social media narratives in competitive women's road cycling. Digital and social media are a central communication center in cycling, and self-tracking technologies and associated media are imperative to cyclists' socializing and cycling practices and identities (Duggan, 2020; Lamont & Ross, 2019). Few studies have focused on social media and its narratives in a competitive road cycling field. The paper considers an autoethnographic account of the first author in the local bike racing scene of Melbourne, Australia. The paper reflects on the role of social media in gaining access to road cycling, bypassing structural and social barriers, and community building in the field of women's racing.

Keywords: social media, women's sport, competitive road cycling, ethnography

1. Introduction

Traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television broadcasting, have significantly shaped the history and practice of competitive road cycling. The first bike races were organized by newspapers to increase sales, and radio and television broadcasting increased the popularity and demand of the sport. However, women's road cycling has not enjoyed the same media privileges as the men's side. Despite the existence of early women's cycling records and races, these have largely been ignored (Gilles, 2018; Bootcov, 2019); women's participation in races

was often denied and no separate races were organized (Kierwsnowa, 2019); and currently, the elite women cycling races do not have the same (live) media coverage (Van Reeth, 2021). With the advent and growth of digital and social media, a hopeful alternative to the male-dominated traditional media narratives found its way into women's cycling, and women's sport at large.

1.1. Women's sport and the hopeful alternative of 'new' media

The exceptional growth in the number of women entering into sport has challenged hegemonic discourses around the meaning and practice of sport and has subsequently created alternative beliefs and practices where women in sport may find legitimation, new forms of empowerment, and a place to belong (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014). However, women continue to have less opportunity and power to effectively change male-dominated ideologies and power structures, nor are women taken seriously as athletes (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014). The symbolic annihilation of women athletes and women's sport in sports media is part of this continued struggle to change the power structures in which men control sport and male hegemonic ideology rules (Messner, 2002). With the increased digitization of the media landscape, scholars and activists have argued for the potential of digital, particularly social, media to counteract the lack of positive presentations of women in traditional forms of media (Hardin, 2009; Vann, 2014).

The rise of internet-based news and social media has changed the field of representation, including an expansion of public voice and information sharing on social networking sites (Bruce, 2016). Toffoletti, Ahmad and Thorpe (2022) argue that the rise of sport and fitness culture for women has coincided with the growing popularity of social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The narratives created through the use of these digital media platforms in women's sport include those of empowerment and increased visibility, however they can also be spaces of surveillance and anxiety (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2022). Nonetheless, access to digital media creates the opportunity to bypass gatekeepers to traditional sport media, for women to gain some control over how they are represented, and potentially build new audiences (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2022; Bruce, 2016). As Toffoletti *et al.* (2022) argue, "social media have become an important site for women in sport and fitness cultures to represent their experiences, promote their achievements, and create shared networks and communities of practice" (p. 30).

1.2. Social media and promoting women's sport communities

Social media platforms impact the relationships of active women with their social environments (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2022). The interactive and creative features of social media, and the ways that like-minded women engage with these mediums, support the formation of "collective sporting identities in digital spaces" and facilitate creative forms of digital production (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2022, p. 34). Women regularly use blog networks to document personal experiences of participation in sports and to provide resources for others about physical activity, health, and

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fitness, often with the goal of organizing and building community, and (re)conceptualizing sport and sportswomen differently from traditional media (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Even though the blogosphere is not inherently feminist, it allows women to share their experiences without gatekeepers to frame their accounts (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013). This uninterrupted sharing of women's sporting experiences on accessible blogs, social networks, and user-produced content is imperative to the promotion and celebration of women and sport and it offers the opportunity for women to challenge and rewrite gender and sport identities (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Where most popular (mainstream) sport blogs revolve around covering professional sports, women can use digital and social media as a space for resistance against the masculine hegemony of sports (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013). In their study on women sports' bloggers, Antunovic & Hardin (2013) found that "more than one-third of the bloggers stated or implied that their blog's purpose was to provide resources and information or to create a space for community" (p. 1385). When women take the initiative to blog about sports, they create their own outlet and speak about experiences that might otherwise not be heard, challenging the marginal status they occupy in the dominant sport structure (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Messner, 2002).

Cyclists have also taken up digital and social media to claim space in the sports landscape, and a gendered relation between the sport of cycling and the use of digital media exists. Social media is a late-modern site of social, economic, and gender power struggles (Lamont & Ross, 2020). Strava, often referred to as the Facebook of cycling (Sourri, 2021), is a strong example of how a social self-tracking digital technology affects road cyclists' gender performances by, for example, finding pleasures and pressures of winning according to patriarchal sporting values (Barrie, Waitt, & Brennan-Horley, 2019). Cyclists are also active on mainstream social media platforms. In Instagram-use among cyclists, some men are complicit in reproducing heteronormative masculinity, while some women use their social media posts to resist the male hegemony of cycling (Lamont & Ross, 2020). In a study on social media posts by women and men in South Africa in relation to racing events, Kim, Choi, Lappeman and Salo (2021) found that, in their sample, women tended to post more about relational aspects of cycling, such as riding with friends or family and about bike routes quality and the recreational aspect of cycling.

2. Methods

The varied research that examines cycling from a social perspective clearly indicates how broad the social world of cycling is (Lamont & Ross, 2020). Cycling is a practice that comes in many different forms: leisurely, (un)organized, tourism, commuting, competitive and couriering. So far, most studies have focused on leisure cyclists and their use of digital and/or social media (e.g. Duggan, 2020; Lamont & Ross, 2020; Barrat, 2017; Ross & Zappavigna, 2019). While some of the studies on social media and cycling have included women (e.g. Lamont & Ross, 2020; Duggan, 2020; Kim et al., 2021), no known studies have looked at how social media shape the narratives of women's participation in competitive road cycling. Besides, research on social media and sportswomen is often focused on online self-presentation, fit-spirational

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media, marketing, sponsorship, and elite and professional sport. This paper focuses on how social media is used to create social networks and community in women's competitive road cycling. The central questions we will address are what is the role of social media in competitive cycling and the challenging of hegemonic sport discourses and empowerment of women? What is the role of social media in women's entry into the sport? What is the narrative of social media use in bypassing the gatekeeping to the traditionally male-dominated space of bike racing? In our exploration of these questions, we draw on the first author's (auto)ethnography on gender and labor relations in (professional) women's road cycling. Through witnessing, observing, participating, and imbedding oneself into a field of practice, the ethnographer can pay close attention to relationships, reciprocity, representation, and voice (Pillow & Mayo, 2012). In this way, ethnography allowed us to gain in-depth insights into how social interactions shape a women's cycling community, both on- and offline. Between 2017 and 2020, the first author conducted an ethnographic study on women's road cycling. The research methods included observations of professional women's road cycling in Europe, at the Women's WorldTour (WWT) and other UCI classed races; semi-structured interviews with 15 elite or professional women cyclists, of which 13 were Australian; and ethnographic participation in the local recreational road racing scene in Melbourne. The fieldwork in Melbourne included navigating the online and offline world of road cycling to access and remain in the field. While the offline fieldwork was discontinued due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the author continued to be part of the online cycling community. The first author was a member of two different cycling clubs, and she joined several social media groups that were related to women's cycling. She participated in many aspects that constitute the local scene of road cycling, such as outdoor and indoor velodrome rides, social rides, training rides, criteriums, handicap racing, a three-day Tour, coffees, brunches, barbecues, and more. The lived experiences and observations of the first author were systematically collected into fieldnotes. The extensive fieldnotes, and relevant interview transcripts, form the data that are used for this paper. For this paper, the data were analyzed through deductive coding in relation to gender and social media using NVivo analysis software.

3. The role of social media in shaping lived experiences in competitive road cycling

3.1. Becoming a rider

Many women who are competitive in cycling have entered the field through a male relation, such as their father, brother, or partner (McLachlan & Trott, 2018; Ryder, 2021). These women often have experience in riding their road bike either by themselves, in duo's or in bunch rides. Despite this introduction by a male relation, women experience competitive road cycling as an intimidating field to enter (Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hinckson, 2016; Ryder, 2021). Without that cycling experience and network, the first author turned to the internet to find a way into the field of road cycling. She googled cycling clubs and women's cycling groups and added existing social media accounts to her follow list. Over the time of her fieldwork, she found

several different women's cycling groups: SheRace, Wheel Women, GirldRide! Melbourne, Melburn Durt. Where possible, she also started following individuals who repetitively popped up in her searches or that were suggested by platforms' algorithms. After initial contact through club websites, phone calls, and emails, she was advised to first gain experience riding a road bike. She was directed to the websites of organized women's groups such as Breeze Rides and Wheel Women.

Using Facebook, the author contacted a group of diverse women who were welcoming women to participate in their casually organized outdoor velodrome trainings. These training sessions allowed for the initial offline contact with people in the field. Some of the participants and the male trainer of the group sent Facebook friend requests to the author. Through the group's Facebook Messenger group, the women updated each other on the sessions and other activities. During the velodrome sessions, the first author talked about her wish to become a racing road cyclist and the trainer sent a message on Facebook Messenger sharing information about a women's criterium she could participate in. In these messages, the trainer shared information about getting a racing license with Cycling Australia (now AusCycling), how to sign up for the race and the required material, such as cleats, a red back light and a helmet with a certified sticker.

About a year after those velodrome sessions, a criterium and attempts to go for lone bike rides, the first author connected to the newly established Facebook group called SheRace. The women behind the initiative wanted to create a group where women could find and offer support to get more women into racing. Since the group was new, the initiators hosted brainstorming sessions at the workplace of one of the women. In this way, the online group became an in-real-life setting. At the event, the first author met a representative from a cycling club that was located in the part of town that the first author lived in, and she said: "we are always looking for more women to join the club!". This club became the first club that the first author became a member at. In this paper, the club is called Old Time Wheeling (OTW).

After a break from participatory ethnographic research in Melbourne, and doing fieldwork in Europe, the first author returned to Melbourne. Before this break, she had crashed during a race, and she was anxious to return to riding and racing. To get back on the bike, she turned to the SheRace group and posted a message asking for help. She received eight likes and 21 comments in which several women offered help to get back into riding: track sessions on an indoor velodrome led by a woman on alternating Sundays; an accompanied ride to the criterium track of Coburg cycling club to practice laps; an elite cyclist offering cornering skills on a parking lot. Importantly, a representative of a new cycling club mentioned their women-only training rides on Thursday mornings. The first author joined one of these rides, and she became a member of the club afterwards. This club is referred to as West Ride Club (WRC).

Throughout the first author's fieldwork in the competitive road cycling field in Melbourne, social media was a crucial part of her participation. Through the social media pages, she was informed about announcements and cancellations of races and events. She was able to follow other women's pages to see how they experience racing and riding and use that information to connect to them in real life at races or events. It allowed for finding photographs of races she participated in that added to experiencing what is appreciated in the field. Facebook was used

to introduce the author as a researcher on cycling and ask for informed consent. Through Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, the author was able to communicate directly with members and actors in the field to ask questions, agree to meetings, and continue a relationship. The social media connection worked both ways, as people in the field were able to contact her, such as a club member of OTW did, when she sent the first author a photo album of a race that was shared on Facebook.

3.2. The clubs' use of social media

Most of the Melbourne cycling clubs have social media accounts, mainly Facebook. This section specifically focuses on the use of social media by OTW and WRC during the time of fieldwork in relation to women's lived experiences in the gendered reality of competitive road cycling. OTW is a race-oriented cycling club. OTW runs criterium series with an Open Grade system, where A grade lasts the longest (60 minutes) and D grade the shortest (40 minutes). When there would be two or more women participating, the commissaire (race official) would announce a "race within a race", meaning the women would participate in the regular grade and compete against each other for prize money. After every race, a club member would write race reports, publish these on the club's website and share the link of their Facebook page. The reports would include comments on how the race went, who attacked, who did a lot of work, who made mistakes, and the report would end with who got first, second, and third. The women's podium would be mentioned in these reports; however, a race report was not included.

Besides race reports, at some of their races, OTW would hold a prize ceremony. Officials would call placed riders to the front, hand out envelopes with money or a medal, and someone would take a photo that would be uploaded to the Facebook page. When a women's race was held, the placed riders would be included in these photo moments and their achievements would be mentioned online.

WRC was a newly established club and looking for members. A representative of the club that suggested the club's Thursday morning women's ride to the first author, was actively recruiting women on the social media groups. When women would ask questions about riding, she would write a comment and invite them to join the club's rides. WRC had a mission to be a women-friendly and encouraging club where women could find regular social riding, training, and like-minded people to race. As a member of WRC, you receive newsletters (e-mail) about the club's activities, you are part of WhatsApp groups where members and leaders can communicate directly to each other. The club also has an active Facebook and Instagram account where they post pictures of their rides, share information about upcoming cycling trips and events, and promote what their club has to offer to potential new members.

3.3. Connecting a community

SheRace, Melburn Durt, Wheel Women, Girl Ride! Melbourne are all groups active on social media with the aim to attract more women to the sport and activity of cycling. It is unsurprising that the women behind these groups initiated social media accounts. Research shows that social

media platforms "serve as a virtual communication center underpinning a global social world of cyclists that enables members to interact with one another in a fluid, dynamic manner" (Lamont & Ross, 2020, p. 356), and many cyclists are highly digitalized using bike computers, supporting apps, and sharing their data online with other cyclists (Barrat, 2017; Barrie, Waitt, & Brennan-Horley, 2019). The aim of the different social media groups was to offer the chance for women to connect to each other in relation to bike riding and racing. The different components of cycling (riding, racing, track, cyclo cross, road) are closely related to each other, as most racers also ride socially, and social riders might pick up racing. This overlap results in many crossovers of members of these groups. For example, SheRace members would have dipped their toes in several groups and some members would encourage social riders to try out racing.

SheRace specifically aims to get more women into competitive cycling, into racing. This online community uses Facebook and Instagram to encourage women to ask questions and to connect women who do not want to show up at races and events alone. Similar to the young women from MacKay & Dallaire's (2013) study on skateboarding, these groups share the collective identity of women cyclists, and have collectively organized online because the space of cycling has failed to welcome them. The aim to attract more women to the sport is to challenge the male-dominance and hegemony of the space and offers opportunities to reconstruct the gender order.

SheRace was founded in 2018 by five women from one of the Melbourne cycling clubs. Besides these five administrators, the other women who are very active on the SheRace Facebook page are often connected to cycling clubs, and specifically cycling clubs that organize women's races. They are on the committee, or they are the women's representative of their club. They use the SheRace page to post about race skill sessions, promote their club's races or races they are associated with, and sometimes post about livestreams or TV screenings of professional women cycling races. Members will respond by sharing their experiences in the field of racing, often with encouraging language to convince women who have not participated before to sign up. Women without these experiences will ask questions about the events. SheRace members are grateful for the page because they learn about races and events they wouldn't hear about through the usual channels. The usual channels are the organizational bodies such as AusCycling and its regional representative council, Victoria Cycling.

The in-real-life setting of bike racing is continuously referred to as "too intimidating" for women to feel comfortable enough to enter. With an online community of SheRacers, the group wanted to undermine this feeling of intimidation and offer a friendly entrance to racing. The goal was not to form solely an online community, but an online community that supports in real-life action, such as undertaking bike racing. While the initiators of the group created the group to help other women, they were also helped themselves if more women would take up bike racing. It would mean that when the number of racing women would increase, that their power as a group would grow, and they could make more demands for a change in culture and structure. From a competitive perspective, to have more women race means more competitors, bigger racing fields which results in more challenging races. More challenging races is often associated with a higher sense of achievement and satisfaction from their leisure activity. A

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criterium with four A-grade riders is less challenging and less competitive than a field of at least 20 riders. The women who want to be the most competitive, at the top of their game, will currently race with men because those bunches are bigger which offers more opportunities to improve racing skills. However, when women race in their 'own' field, the racing is different as the field is smaller and the style of racing differs. The use of social media to create and/or support a community is viewed as a tool to increase competition in women's racing.

3.4. Getting the community to race

Besides SheRace using the online space of social media to motivate women into racing, the established cycling clubs were looking for ways to get women to join their specific races. During her interview, elite Australian rider Maria (pseudonym) gave the example of racing at an Open Grade race at a club in the South of Melbourne. She described her style as aggressive, meaning

> "You know, I'm gonna try and control this race for a little bit because I felt like I had the strength to do it, and I did, and it was funny because they kept letting other men go off the front and as soon as I attacked, even though it was probably the best attack of the night, everyone jumped on it!" (Maria)

Three days after her race, she received a phone call from a committee member who wanted to know what the club could do to get "more females" out to their races. Maria told the committee member "a lot of women are on social media; we just need to get it out on social media. Because the [club's] committee is mostly made up of older gentlemen, that aren't really great on social media. So, I said: hey, I'm good on social media and then hopefully more women will come out. And I did, so yeah". From this exchange, we gather that women's participation in racing is low and the club was looking for ways to change that by asking a female participant in their open grade for advice. The elite rider observed that many women who ride bikes are active on social media and that by "just getting it out on social media" would affect women's participation in the club's races. She observed that most committee members are "older gentlemen" who are not equipped to use social media and perhaps also not to use social media in a way that would speak to women participants. She offered to post about the club's racing and encourage her followers and the members of the specific women cycling groups to participate in the races. While this strategy might spark interest (an elite cyclist endorsing a race, specifically encouraging women to join while simultaneously affirming it is a male-dominated space), posting about a race-series once or a couple of times is unlikely to result in structural and cultural real-life changes.

SheRace is a bottom-up, self-initiated group that saw a gap in the field of cycling racing where women were led down. In an interview with elite Australian rider Camille (pseudonym), she discussed the likes of AusCycling and Victoria Cycling, and she brought up SheRace. She said:

"One thing I should note, is last year, there was some girls who started this group called SheRace or SheRides, and they said: hi, this a safe space where girls can join uhm and if they wanna race, we're here for you to help and support. Anyway, they just they worked with [this] cycling club, got more races on 'cause there was previously like five women's races on a Wednesday night and this year they ended up having one every single week, like ten or twenty rounds or something, and then, with Cycling Victoria, they made a women's only handicap race. And as I've said, most NRS races the female field would be like 30? Apparently, before I was cycling, in 2013, 2014, that number was like 50-80, so it dropped a lot. Now, they [the organizers of the Handicap race] ended up getting over 100 girls for this women's handicap. Just because they kept posting it in this group, being really supportive, saying: girls, you know, there will be marshals, it's all inclusive, don't be scared, the girls just really felt really supported and safe in that environment. I felt that was so impressive! That they were able to get over a hundred girls. For this race, with people that had never raced before. Some people raced, uhm, whereas at a national level, you can't get more than 50." (Camille)

Women took matters into their own hands and were successful where the traditional institutions fail to deliver. The NRS, National Road Series, is the national road cycling competition, and the women's field fluctuates in numbers over the decades. The different social media groups campaigned strongly online to raise the participation rates, while simultaneously setting up a real-life event where women feel respected and taken seriously.

3.5. Safety

The connectivity of women through the SheRace community, which is strongly linked to the members of the other social media groups such as GirlRide! Melbourne, goes beyond the collective courage of showing up at the intimidating spaces of bike races. The members of these online groups build relationships with one another through liking each other's posts, commenting, asking questions, and discussing issues that arise. The following fieldnote shows how this online relationship building also translates into in-real-life community building regarding safety and care.

The first author participated in the Shimano super crit in 2018. This criterium was an important race on the local race calendar. Women's C and B grade started at the same time, 07:30 am, which caused chaos and confusion once the commissaire gave the start signal. C and B grade riders were mingled and to race a crit, the bunches needed to split. The splitting happened with a group of B grade getting away, followed by a group of C grade and a continued mixed bunch of C and B grade riders. This chaos, confusion, and the bad weather from the week before brought a lot of tension into the field, and crashes happened in three consecutive laps in the same corner. The first author was involved in the first crash. After falling, a rider hit her from behind, flying and landing hard on the concrete. After the third crash, the race was neutralized,

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and all injured riders were lined up on the curb waiting their turn to get medical assistance. The first author went to ask how the rider who hit her was and approached the group of women she was surrounded with. One of the women asked if the rider needed a ride home, and she added: "which might be weird because we only know each other from Instagram". This interaction is an example of how women can connect through online community groups which can result in real-life actions and behavior that benefit their safety and care.

3.6. Resistance

Cycling activities are leisure/recreational by nature, they are essentially fun and entertaining, meaning that cyclists have entertaining experiences together in the field, which spill over to the online environment as well (Asan *et al.*, 2021). For women, the fun of their cycling activities can be taken away by the masculine culture of their sport, and it serves as a barrier to enter the sport. To undercut this, women cyclists take to the online groups which can lead to organizing new groups. Posting and commenting on the SheRace Facebook page about sexist regulations, decisions, and messaging in the field of road racing offers the opportunity to resist the male-dominance of competitive cycling by creating a collectively understanding and actions against these issues. Like Anutonvic & Hardin's (2013) bloggers, the activities in the SheRace group reflect their own participation in the sport and their relationship to it. However, the group administrators try to keep topics related to their main goal of the group: women supporting women to race and sharing knowledge and information to make it easier to get into racing. On 13 May 2021, a member posted with outrage about how AusCycling announced the State Advisory Council appointments, which was symbolized by a stark gender imbalance in council members. Many SheRace members interacted by liking (60 reactions) and commenting (103 comments) on the post. A new Facebook group was initiated, the Cycling Equity Coalition, a private group where people can discuss and act on all things related to equity in cycling across Australia. The initiators wrote an open letter to the CEO of AusCycling that was signed by 119 people supporting the call for a 40% minimum representation of women on all AusCycling subcommittees. The representatives were invited to speak with the CEO, the letter was discussed in the next board meeting and work was commenced to ensure a more diverse mix of AusCycling community appointed in 2022. The existing social media community of SheRace and the other women's cycling groups Australia-wide, enabled the mobilization, attention, and action for this letter to affect real-life promises, policy changes and initiatives.

3.7. Sponsoring

The first author was an active member of the WRC club for the second half of her fieldwork. This club offered many activities: two weekday morning rides, different distance rides on Saturday morning, coffee and brunch after the rides, family/social rides with barbecue's, skill sessions, logistically organized rides further removed from Melbourne, weekends away riding

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and/or training, and participating in and supporting race events with members of the club. One of the founding members had his own coaching business, and he and his wife had a strong influence on the club. Before the founding of the club, many members already participated in (training) rides organized by the coach or were already his client.

The first author's initial goal of joining WRC was to get back into riding and continue to stay in touch with the field of road cycling in Melbourne. However, the environment of WRC invited for the first author to regularly undertake rides (sometimes Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings) and partake in most of the club's social and cycling activities. The coach offered to take the first author on as a client. He worked with a tiered coaching package system: a bronze, silver, or gold deal. The gold deal included training schedules in the software Training Peaks, weekly update chats, massages, nutrition advice, and bike fits. He offered the gold package to the first author for a reduced prize if the author agreed to some low-key social media labor. This labor mostly meant to tag the coach and his business, post about the coaching she was receiving, and to be a representative of the coaching business at races, by wearing the club's kit that also carried the coaching business' name. During the discussion on his services and the proposed social media labor, he referred to a local recreational young woman cyclist who had a big following on social media, particularly Instagram (almost 11,5k followers in May 2022). The coach alluded to the fact that many men responded to her posts and that she would use her femininity to attract followers. It was unclear if the coach suggested for the first author to take a similar method concerning the discounted deal the coach offered, as the coach did not clarify whether he wanted her to post similar posts on social media. Nonetheless, the coaching was short lived as the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns started only two months into the agreement.

3.8. Social media during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Victorian government enforced lockdowns to prevent or slow down the spread of Covid-19 starting in March 2020, limiting Melburnian cyclists to only cycle in pairs, indoors or within a 5km radius of their residence. As part of the coaching package, the coach had offered the first author to rent one of his indoor trainers for $100 to also ride indoors. The coaching during the lockdowns was limited to indoor-training sessions, which were communicated via direct text messaging or direct uploads to the Training Peaks software.

The club, WRC, offered Zoom 'rides' to check in on each other and to stay connected to the club and fellow members. Most members had access to indoor trainers, but others would only join for the chat. Throughout the lockdowns, which kept changing in limitations, the club communicated with the members via email newsletters about the current situation and limitations and possibilities of riding.

During the beginning of the lockdowns in March 2020, a member of the SheRace community initiated what she called the Social Distancing Segment Series. Every week, she announced an in-real-life (IRL) and a Zwift (Watopia) Strava Segment, and participants could finish them within a week of the announcement. Women were encouraged to join a Strava club that allowed

for the initiator to view how participants did on the segments. At the end of each week, she would post the rankings of the different grades (A/B/C/D) on the SheRace Facebook page and name the winners. The participants had to undertake the segments solo and, in this way, not break the lockdown rules. For safety reasons, no descent segments were included. The series were positively received in the community and many women participated. In the presentation of the series, the assumption was made that the women in the group at least had a Strava account and that many women would have access to Zwift and indoor trainers. This assumption indicates the normalized relation between having Strava and being a cyclist. While there are gendered differences in the use of the self-tracking technology (Barrie, Waitt & Brennan-Horley, 2019), the use and access to Strava was so normalized that the use of the platform was utilized to continue some sort of relationship to other women cyclists and the sport that connected them all, both online and offline.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to discuss social media narratives in competitive women's cycling in relation to community building. Through reflecting on these narratives, we aimed to understand more about the role of social media in the empowerment of women and challenging hegemonic sport discourses. We considered ethnographic lived experiences of the first author and collected fieldnotes from participatory observations in the local bike racing scene in Melbourne. The analysis of these data shows that women in competitive cycling use social media to form a community that enables them to participate more effectively in a male-dominated field. To be part of the different social media groups gives women access to information and the opportunity to ask for specific information they feel they need. Women connected with each other through many different platforms such as several Facebook pages and chats, Instagram, Strava, but importantly, these relationships took shape more strongly when women met each other in real life and translated their online acquaintances to offline practices.

The goal of the social media groups was to get more women into cycling, and specifically into racing. While getting more women into racing might not necessarily be reflected in membership numbers (Ryder, 2021), the women who are participating do so in a better informed, confident, and effective way. They can take the gathered information and translate those into in-real-life actions, such as going for women-only rides, sign up for skill sessions or participate in criteriums, handicap or other types of races. Clubs and in-real-life groups can effectively communicate about their activities to potential participants and the interactive features of social media allow for women to ask questions and receive answers. Social media provides a platform for women to see themselves back in the posts and pictures that are posted, which normalizes women's participation in cycling races. Our analysis also showed that social media in competitive women's cycling offers the opportunity for women to connect online and benefit from those relationships at cycling practices, such as care at crashes or low-key sponsor deals with other actors in the field (such as a cycling coach), albeit emphasized femininity can play a role in these types of arrangements (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Besides leaning on an online

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community to participate in competitive cycling, women used the social media community to organize themselves to protest sexism, initiate in-real-life activism, such as an open letter to the CEO of AusCycling, and affect change.

This paper showed how the digital world and the offline body and environment came together for women to gain something online to use in their offline life in competitive cycling. Our findings support that "sharing in the real world and the online environment enhances one another" in cycling communities (Asan *et al.*, 2021, p. 12). While these effects of social media in community building can be considered positive and occasionally empowering, it is important to consider who has access to these groups, pages and eventually community. Social media have become mainstream and very integrated in day-to-day life, but they know many associated problems such as mis- and disinformation, social media addiction resulting in dissatisfaction with the quality of interpersonal relationships, and reduced mental health, (see for example Alcott, Gentzkow, & Yu, 2019; Bevan, Gomez, & Sparks, 2014; Sheldon, Antony, & Sykes, 2020). Not everyone has or wants a social media account, so when an in-real-life community, like the women's competitive cycling community, moves mostly online to social media, this affects who has access to important information about racing and cycling practices.

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Un estudio de los efectos de la promoción turística y el impacto mediático de la Vuelta Ciclista a España en el contexto de la región de Extremadura

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Abstract

This article focuses on sports tourism in the context of a cycling event such as the Vuelta Ciclista a España, an event that has been growing gradually over time, becoming part of the professional calendar. This cycling competition takes place over a period of twenty-one days, in which selected and invited teams take part.

It is usually held at the end of August or the beginning of September, thus closing the three major cycling tours that lead the men's World Tour category, which usually begin in May with the Giro d'Italia and continue in July with the Tour de France.

This research analyzes some of the stages of the 2013 route that make up this great Vuelta in order to find out the social and tourist impact that they caused to the different localities through which they travelled and stayed overnight. It also aims to examine the profile of the tourist who travels in the form of sports tourism in order to enjoy the cycling races in situ and, in turn, to be close to their idols, as this sport is one of the few in which there is such proximity between the athletes and the public attending the event.

Keywords: Cycling Tour of Spain, Stages, cyclists, social and tourist impact, spend the night, trips, sports tourism.

1. Introducción

El ciclismo es un deporte que siempre ha estado presente en nuestras vidas y que se ha ido expandiendo con el paso del tiempo. En España, cuenta con un gran prestigio siendo cada vez más personas las que lo practican.

Centraremos nuestra atención en la Vuelta Ciclista a España, evento conocido por gran cantidad de personas, ya sea a través de la campaña de marketing que realiza la organización de

la carrera, por el boca a boca entre amigos o familiares, a través de los medios de comunicación, etc. Se trata de llegar a conocer, entre otros aspectos, la importancia de esta competición ciclista como método de promoción turística del país.

Este artículo se ha elaborado queriendo ahondar en un tema que a día de hoy no se ha investigado lo suficiente, como es el turismo deportivo que actualmente se considera una tipología turística en auge, siendo cada vez más los destinos involucrados que tratan de satisfacer las necesidades actuales de los turistas deportivos activos y pasivos. En concreto se ha profundizado en la modalidad deportiva del ciclismo de competición como evento turístico centrando la atención en los participantes activos, los ciclistas y, fundamentalmente en los participantes pasivos, los turistas que acuden a presenciar el evento.

El trazado de la Vuelta Ciclista a España no siempre ha sido el mismo en sus diferentes ediciones. El objetivo es investigar algunas de las etapas de la Vuelta Ciclista a España 2013 porque en esa edición existieron varios pasos por ciudades de la Comunidad Autónoma de Extremadura, región de las autoras del trabajo, y se pretende observar el impacto social y turístico que se generó en el sector hotelero, en particular, y en el sector turístico, en general, de estas localidades. Es relevante saber todo lo que mueven estos tipos de eventos deportivos, que se siguen manteniendo con el paso de los años, para poder mejorar ciertos aspectos como la promoción turística de las localidades implicadas, el desarrollo y mejora de los servicios turísticos y la adecuada generación de una oferta turística, consiguiendo así atraer a más personas en futuras ediciones y elevar su prestigio como evento turístico y deportivo de alto nivel, pues este tipo de competiciones engrandece el potencial turístico de muchas zonas bastante desconocidas del territorio español.

Además, se tratará de averiguar el perfil del turista que se desplaza a disfrutar de la Vuelta y también su grado de conformidad respecto a diferentes cuestiones, como la promoción turística o el impacto mediático con el que cuenta esta prueba deportiva como evento turístico. Analizaremos el beneficio que aporta en las localidades por las que se rueda, como, por ejemplo, si los turistas quedaron satisfechos para volver o comentarlo con su entorno. Se pretende saber si se usan con frecuencia las redes sociales que difunden información sobre la prueba o simplemente si este tipo de turista que se está analizando publica fotografías relacionadas con la carrera.

Se tratará de conocer, a través de una encuesta a los turistas deportivos que acuden al evento, si la estrategia de promoción turística, utilizada por los comentaristas de *RTVE* con sus aportaciones sobre la historia, mostrando el patrimonio de los municipios o la vista de parajes naturales por donde discurre la Vuelta, es suficiente para captar la atención de los futuros turistas que podrían acudir a las localidades por la que discurre la carrera. Para finalizar, hay que añadir un último argumento, que creemos que es importante, y es que Extremadura ha acogido un total de 30 salidas y 27 llegadas en esta prueba ciclista.

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2. Una aproximación al turismo deportivo en España

La práctica deportiva ha cogido un gran impulso con el paso de los años, convirtiéndose, así, en algo habitual dentro de la sociedad española actual. Debido al decrecimiento que estaba sufriendo el modelo turístico de sol y playa en la segunda mitad de los años 80, se plantearon alternativas diferentes para dar respuesta a las demandas que comenzaban a surgir. La idea era conseguir satisfacer las expectativas de aquellos turistas que mostraban desinterés por este modelo que llevaba tantos años dando sus frutos. Para ello, se creó una oferta turística complementaria en la que la actividad físico-deportiva estuviera presente, pues se ha ido observando que el turismo deportivo comenzó a experimentar un gran auge como principal motivo por el que viajar. Pero este crecimiento exponencial ha venido de la mano de un crecimiento en el turismo de bienestar y la importancia que en la actualidad le vamos dando al turismo de salud (Rodríguez Muñoz, 2020).

Dicha oferta turística contaba con una serie de requisitos según Merino Mandly (1998), por lo que tendría que ser integrada, pues se encontraría dentro de otras ofertas y, a su vez, podría ser un aliciente para la oferta principal. Además, sería atractiva con el fin de que los turistas se sintieran motivados por su elección. Podría caracterizarse también por ser recreativa, es decir, relacionada con la desconexión y el disfrute. Por último, y no menos relevante, tendría que estar promocionada para que llegara a más personas a través de diferentes medios, ya fuese en formato digital o en papel y, así, conseguir una mayor cantidad de clientes. Para lograr lo expuesto, este proyecto necesitaba un sustento, es decir, ayudas económicas tanto del sector público como del privado.

Una gran cantidad de autores encuadran el turismo deportivo dentro del turismo activo, que la Secretaría General de Turismo (2004) definiría como:

> aquel que tiene como principales motivaciones la realización de actividades recreativas y de esparcimiento, la interpretación y/o conocimiento de la naturaleza, con diferente grado de profundidad y la práctica de actividades deportivas de diferente intensidad física y riesgo que usen expresamente los recursos de forma específica, sin degradarlos o agotarlos (p. 14).

Según la clasificación de González Molina (2008), podría decirse que dentro del turismo activo se coloca el *turismo de aventura*. Una nueva tipología turística que, a su vez, está dentro del turismo de naturaleza y que consiste en realizar actividades físicas con un elevado riesgo. Siguiendo a González Molina (2008), el turismo deportivo sería:

> una rama del turismo de aventura, donde se llevan a cabo modalidades deportivas muy específicas y con unas características muy definidas por su reglamentación, institucionalización, así como por el tipo de instalaciones y materiales que se necesitan para su práctica (p. 86).

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En definitiva, el turismo activo se clasifica de distintas formas, pero antes de llevar a cabo dicho proceso hay que saber diferenciar cuál es el segmento al que pertenece; en este caso se refiere al turismo de naturaleza que es el que engloba a todos los demás.

Una vez ubicado el concepto de turismo deportivo dentro de la clasificación expuesta, desarrollaremos algunas de las formas en las que se ha desarrollado este término. La primera de ellas fue elaborada por Hall (1992) que considera que el *Sport Tourism* son "aquellos desplazamientos realizados por actividades recreativas (no comerciales) para participar u observar actividades deportivas fuera del lugar de residencia habitual" (citado en Latiesa y Paniza, 2006, p. 135). Hubo otra definición que fue mejor acogida, obteniendo una mayor difusión:

> todas las formas activas o pasivas de la actividad deportiva, participando casualmente o de forma organizada, bien sea por razones comerciales o de negocios o no, pero que necesariamente impliquen un viaje fuera del lugar habitual de residencia o trabajo (Standeven y De Knop, 1999, citado en Latiesa y Paniza, 2006, p. 135).

Siguiendo la línea de esta última conceptualización, hay que sumarle una clasificación doble para entender mejor el propio concepto:

- "Deporte en vacaciones", que puede tener, a su vez, dos variantes. La primera resalta que el turista realiza alguna actividad física en el tiempo que duran sus vacaciones y la segunda hace referencia a que el turista, a la hora de elegir su destino, no tiene preferencia por aquellos que ofertan algo relacionado con el deporte.
- "Vacaciones deportivas", propone diferentes opciones como:
  - Vacaciones deportivas puras activas, donde el principal motivo del desplazamiento del turista es la práctica deportiva.
  - Vacaciones deportivas puras pasivas, en las que el turista asiste a eventos deportivos con el único fin de observar.

Actualmente, siguiendo a Latiesa y Paniza (2006), se utiliza con mayor frecuencia el término *Tourism Sport* que se definiría como "aquellas personas que viajan fuera de su lugar de residencia habitual y participan activa o pasivamente en deportes competitivos o recreacionales como una actividad secundaria" (p. 136).

En algunos países la actividad física moderada se considera deporte, mientras que otros países conciben el deporte como una actividad física relacionada únicamente con la competición.

Analizando el estado del turismo deportivo en España, los datos más recientes son del año 2020. Los resultados obtenidos en la Encuesta de Turismo de Residentes (ETR/FAMILITUR) y la Encuesta de Gasto Turístico (EGATUR) muestran que el 4.3% de los viajes realizados en 2020 fueron por motivos deportivos. Además, hay que sumarle las llegadas de turistas internacionales cuya intención era la misma que la de los nacionales, llevar a cabo la práctica de algún deporte. Estos representan 0,4 millones, lo que equivale a un 2.6% del total de viajes

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realizados por dichos turistas. A continuación, podremos observar el Gráfico 1, donde se representan los resultados de las encuestas realizadas por la División de Estadística y Estudios de la Secretaría General Técnica del Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte.

Gráfico1. Viajes de residentes en España y llegadas de turistas internacionales realizados por motivos deportivos y gasto total asociado.
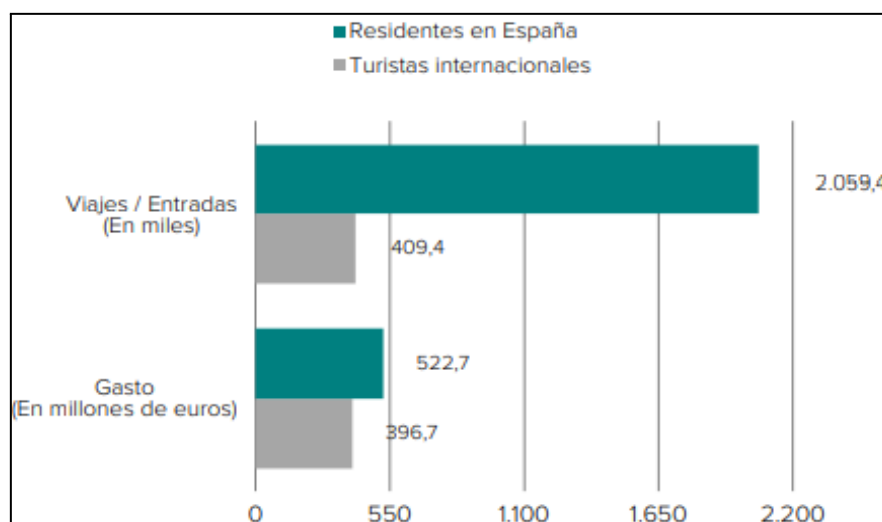
Fuente: Anuario de Estadísticas Deportivas (2021).

Otro dato significativo es la temporada de realización del viaje. Si observamos el Gráfico 2, se aprecia que la mayoría de los turistas se suele desplazar con más frecuencia durante los fines de semana.

Gráfico 2. Época de realización del viaje por motivos deportivos.
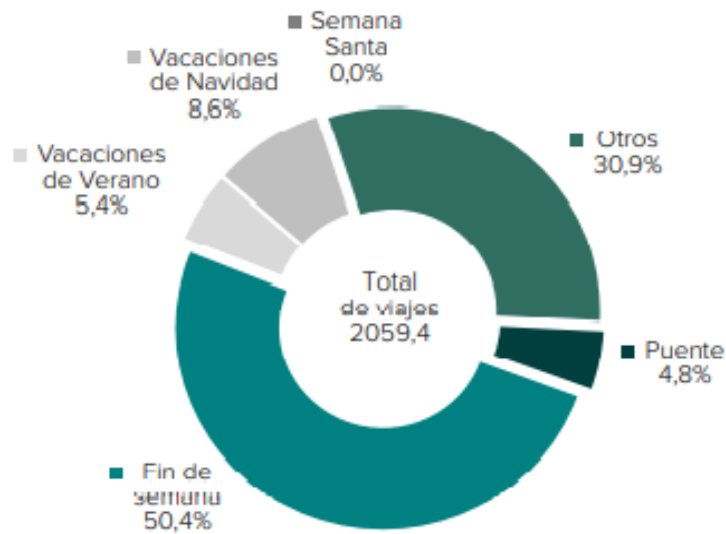
Fuente: Anuario de Estadísticas Deportivas (2021).

Por último, el tipo de alojamiento donde suelen pernoctar una gran parte de los turistas deportivos son los hoteles (37%). En el siguiente gráfico (Gráfico 3) observamos los porcentajes de ocupación de los distintos establecimientos.

Gráfico 3. Tipos de establecimientos donde pernoctan los turistas deportivos.

Fuente: Anuario de Estadísticas Deportivas (2021).

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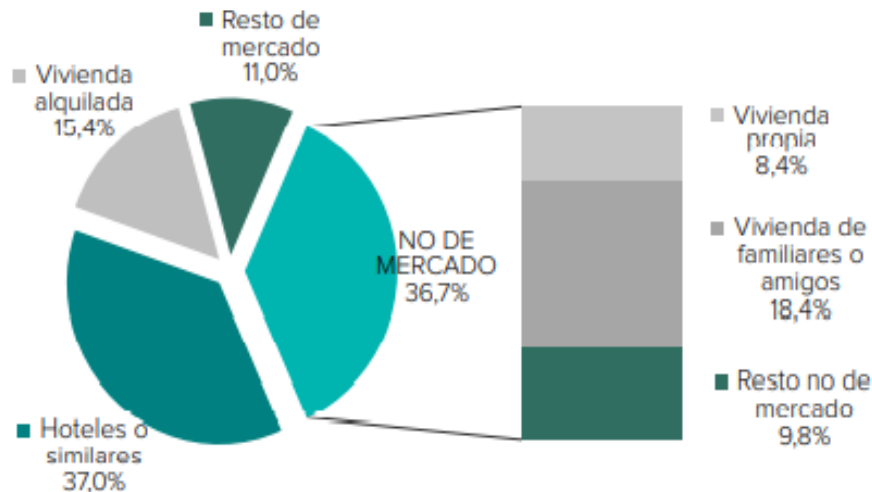
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3. El cicloturismo como tipología de turismo deportivo

El cicloturismo se refiere a la práctica del ciclismo, que aúna dentro del propio concepto deporte y cultura, ejercicio físico y formación (Oliva Melgar, 1986). No existe una definición exacta como tal, ya que el cicloturismo acoge todas las formas de ciclismo recreativo, sin tener en cuenta el ciclismo de competición.

Normalmente, los cicloturistas forman parte de un club o una agrupación donde se juntan con otras personas con las que salen a rodar los fines de semana, programan viajes con el fin de realizar otras rutas diferentes a las ya frecuentadas, participan en marchas cicloturistas, etc. Incluso, pueden llegar a planear acudir como espectadores a alguna carrera profesional, como el Tour de Francia o la Vuelta a España.

Como se ha mencionado, existe una clasificación en la que destacan las "vacaciones deportivas", considerando dentro de ellas una división que distingue las "vacaciones deportivas puras activas" y las "vacaciones deportivas puras pasivas". Nos centraremos en aquellos turistas que optan por estas dos modalidades, analizando las competiciones más relevantes realizadas tanto dentro del territorio nacional como del regional.

Comenzaremos con las "vacaciones deportivas puras activas" en las que el turista se desplaza concretamente para realizar algún deporte, en este caso, para participar en algunas competiciones de ciclismo o marchas cicloturistas. Recalcaremos que las pruebas citadas serán, únicamente, de carretera y de BTT.

3.1. *Algunos datos de interés sobre el cicloturismo*

Al realizar el análisis de la Vuelta a España contemplamos que todos los corredores cuentan con una licencia federativa. La creación de esta tarjeta, que aúna toda la información personal del corredor, tenía como fin principal que los ciclistas pudieran optar a diversas competiciones (únicamente las celebradas dentro del territorio nacional, pues competir fuera de España conlleva invitaciones de federaciones, del propio organizador del evento o, simplemente, pertenecer a un equipo profesional).

En 2017 surgió una agencia de viajes de cicloturismo, *Bikefriendly*, ubicada en Huesca. Esta empresa aporta su propio sello de calidad ayudando y trabajando conjuntamente, con todos los establecimientos turísticos que quieran renovarse, adaptando a la demanda actual y ofreciendo facilidades a los ciclistas que compran sus respectivos servicios (guardabicicletas individuales, herramientas, zona de lavado, etc.) Además, la propia agencia crea rutas de varios días y organiza viajes en bicicleta por toda España y por otros países como Andorra, Francia y Portugal. En su página oficial encontramos un apartado donde aparece toda su oferta (entre otros, alojamientos extremeños situados en la provincia de Cáceres), aunque también cuentan con una guía de los mejores establecimientos recomendados para cicloturistas.

Centrando nuestro objetivo en el ciclismo, es necesario saber que en Extremadura existen ocho centros BTT, seis de ellos ubicados en la provincia de Cáceres y dos en la provincia de Badajoz. Se trata de espacios destinados principalmente a la práctica del ciclismo de montaña, aunque pueden realizarse otras actividades como el senderismo.

Como novedad reciente, el hotel Cap Negret situado en la localidad alicantina de Altea, lograba a principios de 2022 el sello *Bike Territory Turismo*, siendo el primer hotel en conseguirlo. Dicho sello fue elaborado por la Real Federación Española de Ciclismo y tiene como objetivo "reconocer a los territorios, ciudades o empresas que afrontan las demandas de la sociedad en los nuevos retos y apuestan por el fomento del turismo en bicicleta, la movilidad sostenible y la práctica del ciclismo deportivo y de competición", así lo cuenta la propia federación en su página.

3.2. Principales pruebas de cicloturismo y ciclismo de competición en España

A continuación, describiremos algunas de las carreras más importantes donde compiten ciclistas profesionales y otras donde participan ciclistas aficionados.

La primera carrera expuesta es reconocida como *Non Stop Madrid - Tajo Internacional – Lisboa*. Su primera edición fue en 2013, donde los ciclistas llevaron a cabo relevos entre aquellos que pertenecieran al mismo equipo y los tiempos se fueron sumando conforme las etapas finalizaban. Esta carrera, de más de 770 Km, discurre por senderos y caminos rurales incluyendo también algunos tramos de carretera, por lo tanto, se usa la bicicleta de montaña.

Por otro lado, mencionar una de las marchas cicloturistas más significativas de España, la *Quebrantahuesos*, con 30 años de historia. Conocida como la gran fiesta del ciclismo de carretera en España. Todas sus ediciones se han celebrado en el Pirineo Aragonés y el Pirineo Francés, cuya sede central se encuentra en Sabiñánigo (Huesca). Existen dos recorridos: el *Gran Fondo* compuesto por casi 200 km, donde se suben cuatro puertos importantes: Somport, Marie Blanque, Portalet y Hoz de Jaca; y el *Treparriscos Medio Fondo*, con 85 km donde se suben dos puertos de montaña: el puerto de Cotefablo y el Alto de Petralba.

Aparte, mencionamos algunas marchas sobresalientes dentro del ámbito nacional, de ciclismo en carretera:

- *La Perico.* En reconocimiento a Pedro Delgado, comentarista en la televisión pública española desde 1995. En 1994 dejó el ciclismo y empezó a celebrarse esta ruta de carácter internacional.
- *La Induráin.* En homenaje al ex ciclista profesional Miguel Induráin, que cuenta con 30 años de antigüedad.
- *Larra Larrau.* Su nombre se debe a uno de los puertos que se asciende durante la ruta, Larrau, perteneciente al Pirineo. El punto de salida de esta marcha es Isaba, localidad navarra del Valle del Roncal.

Respecto al turismo deportivo pasivo, destacaremos las competiciones más relevantes que mueven a mucha gente para disfrutar del espectáculo, ya sean residentes del lugar o apasionados del ciclismo.

La *Vuelta a Burgos* es una carrera por etapas a la que acuden muchos equipos, cuales WorldTour, Protour y, en menor medida, continentales. La primera edición fue en 1946, donde únicamente pudieron competir los hombres. Tras la edición de 1947, hubo un receso y no se reanudó su celebración hasta 1981, gracias al apoyo de la Diputación de Burgos. En 2015 crearon una

edición femenina, obteniendo en 2019 un reconocimiento internacional en el calendario de la UCI (Unión Ciclista Internacional), y ascendiendo en 2021 a la máxima categoría del profesionalismo. Esta vuelta es una gran promoción turística para la propia ciudad de Burgos, aunque, sobretodo, se quiere realzar la imagen de la provincia. En agosto de 2021, Burgos se convirtió nuevamente en "capital mundial del ciclismo", así informaron en la página oficial de La Vuelta Ciclista a España, con el fin de celebrar el octavo centenario de la construcción de la Catedral de Santa María, considerada Patrimonio de la Humanidad.

Otra prueba es la *Vuelta Ciclista a Andalucía*, con 68 años de antigüedad. La primera edición fue celebrada en 1925, y a pesar de no celebrarse durante treinta años, fue rescatada en 1955 por un grupo de amigos de la Agrupación Ciclista Malagueña. La UCI en los años 1999 y 2000 la evaluó como la mejor organización dentro de las 479 pruebas élite celebradas en los cinco calendarios internacionales. Actualmente continúa siendo parte del calendario de la UCI y en 2022 acogerá la primera edición femenina. Enfatizamos que este evento es sostenible con el medio ambiente y es la primera vuelta ciclista en España incluida en la carta verde del deporte español.

3.3. Principales pruebas de cicloturismo y ciclismo de competición en Extremadura

En la región de Extremadura existe un nutrido elenco de pruebas de conocido reclamo turístico referidas al ciclismo. Referenciaremos algunas de ellas contempladas en el calendario nacional de la RFEC.

La primera de las 11 que forman este calendario de copas y que abre la temporada en el mes de febrero es la *Copa de España Masculina Circuito Guadiana*. Salió a la luz oficialmente en 1968 y durante un largo período de tiempo se celebraron dos ediciones anuales de la misma: una en febrero y otra en septiembre. La carrera tuvo un pequeño receso, pero volvió a celebrarse en 1986 y pasó a formar parte de la Copa de España de Ciclismo Aficionado en 2007. La Peña Ciclista El Pedal (actual Club Ciclista Guadiana) fue la promotora de esta carrera que, a pesar de no tener la documentación al día, con la ayuda de Jesús Díaz (ciclista emeritense perteneciente al Club Ciclista Imperio de Mérida) pudieron celebrar la primera edición de 1968. Esta colaboración supuso que en los documentos oficiales apareciese el nombre del club de Mérida como organizador (De la Cruz & Carbonero, 2017). Esta carrera mueve a ciclistas de todas partes de España e incluso equipos extranjeros.

Por otra parte, destacamos una de las marchas ciclodeportivas más importantes de Extremadura, la *Nor3xtrem*, nacida en 2014 gracias a un club ciclista de Cáceres y reconocida nacionalmente por la RFEC en 2016. El nombre de la prueba hace referencia al paso por la que discurre, pues aúna tres valles del norte extremeño: Valle del Jerte, Valle del Ambroz y La Vera.

Para finalizar, la *Vuelta Ciclista a Extremadura* (1985) fue impulsada y consolidada durante 25 años por José Guillén Gallardo, figura muy relevante dentro del ciclismo extremeño. En 2005 la UCI la consideró una prueba de categoría 2.2., generando una mayor participación de equipos profesionales.

El trienio desde 2007 hasta 2009 fueron "los años bonitos de la Vuelta", así lo afirmaba el propio José Guillén, pues supuso un empuje económico y turístico para la región. La población local también se volcaba y muchos medios comenzaron a realzar su imagen.

4. La Vuelta Ciclista a España: Historia, funcionamiento y mención especial a la 68ª edición

Este evento nació en el año 1935 de la mano de Clemente López Doriga que obtuvo la ayuda de Juan Pujol, director del diario *Informaciones*, donde participaron 50 ciclistas que tuvieron que atenderse ellos mismos si tenían algún imprevisto durante la carrera, pues por aquel entonces no existían los coches de apoyo de los diferentes equipos participantes.

En 1936 se pudo celebrar la segunda edición a pesar de la mala situación política que asolaba a España. Estuvo suspendida, volviéndose a retomar en 1941 donde predominaba la participación española, ya que otros países se encontraban en conflicto debido a la II Guerra Mundial. Tras celebrarse la edición de 1942, hubo una segunda suspensión de la Vuelta debido a los escasos ingresos del país, celebrándose nuevamente en 1945 gracias al diario *Informaciones*, que se desentendería de la organización de la prueba en 1950. En este último año, el evento estuvo nuevamente parado por falta de patrocinadores que lo impulsaran, aunque en 1955 volvió a ver la luz gracias al periódico *El Correo Español-El Pueblo Vasco*. Cabe destacar que fue realmente en la década de los 60 cuando obtuvo el máximo reconocimiento.

En 1979 la empresa Unipublic, tomó las riendas y comenzó a encargarse del funcionamiento de La Vuelta a España, siendo Javier Guillén su director. Esta empresa también organiza la conocida "CERATIZIT Challenge by La Vuelta" nacida en 2015, y que en 2018 pasó a ser una carrera por etapas para el pelotón femenino, siendo la primera prueba española que entró en la categoría Women's WorldTour.

Respecto a la carrera masculina, hoy día, cuenta con cuatro maillots (*maillot rojo* o maillot de líder, *maillot verde*, conocido como maillot por puntos, *maillot de lunares* o maillot de la montaña y *maillot blanco* o maillot de joven que premia al mejor ciclista menor de 25 años). Además, desde 2012, se premia al ciclista que más ha peleado por la etapa, con el premio a la combatividad.

Existe otra presentación oficial que es la de los equipos, y se suele celebrar uno o dos días antes del comienzo del evento, donde también se realiza la actuación en vivo de la sintonía oficial que acompañará a los corredores en cada una de las etapas.

En 2013 se llevó a cabo la 68ª Edición de la Vuelta, empezando el 24 de agosto y finalizando el 15 de septiembre, vio un total de 198 corredores (38 españoles) de 22 equipos diferentes. Únicamente consiguieron completar todas las jornadas 144 ciclistas, entre los que destacamos los nombres de Alejandro Valverde y Joaquín Rodríguez, logrando un tercer y cuarto puesto respectivamente en la clasificación general, y Daniel Moreno dos victorias de etapa.

El recorrido estuvo compuesto por 21 etapas que sumaron 3.358,9 kilómetros en su conjunto, incluyendo gran parte de las diferentes comunidades autónomas españolas. Entre las etapas, encontramos una CRE (Contrarreloj por equipos) y una CRI (Contrarreloj individual), además de las clásicas etapas de media montaña, llanas y de montaña.

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Las dos etapas que se han analizado en este trabajo son la 6ª: Guijuelo – Cáceres, y la 7ª: Almendralejo – Mairena de Aljarafe, siendo ambas bastante llanas. En la primera de ellas, las localidades extremeñas de Baños de Montemayor, Aldeanueva del Camino, Plasencia, Grimaldo, Cañaveral y Cáceres pudieron disfrutar del paso de la carrera; mientras que en la segunda etapa lo hicieron municipios como: Almendralejo, Villafranca de los Barros, Los Santos de Maimona, Zafra, Calzadilla de los Barros, Fuente de Cantos y Monesterio.

5. Metodología

Para analizar las dos etapas mencionadas de la *Vuelta a España 2013*, que son las etapas que transcurren por territorio extremeño, recurrimos a dos métodos de recogida de datos.

En primer lugar, aplicamos una metodología cuantitativa basada en una breve encuesta telefónica a los establecimientos hoteleros de algunas de las localidades por donde discurrió la Vuelta en las dos etapas objeto de estudio, con el objeto de conocer si la ocupación de los establecimientos acaparaba sólo a los turistas deportivos activos o también al público o turistas deportivos pasivos.

Y, en segundo lugar, se recurrió de nuevo al método cuantitativo, donde aplicamos una encuesta más profunda a la población turista asistente a esas dos etapas de la prueba, seleccionando una muestra aleatoria por conveniencia de 222 personas provenientes de toda España y lanzando la encuesta a través de plataformas digitales. La encuesta se dividió en cinco apartados amplios: a) Perfil sociodemográfico y vinculación como turista deportivo a la Vuelta a España; b) La Vuelta ciclista como reclamo turístico; c) Impacto mediático del evento; d) Impacto social y económico del evento; y e) Impacto medioambiental del evento.

Las cuestiones que se plantearon en la encuesta fueron en forma de opciones múltiples de respuesta para el primer apartado y utilizando la escala de satisfacción de Likert para el conjunto de las preguntas que formaron los cuatro apartados restantes.

La herramienta elegida para la recopilación de datos ha sido el cuestionario en línea, es decir una encuesta exploratoria por Internet. A diferencia de otras herramientas de detección, esto permite una reducción significativa de costes y tiempos de detección y permite llegar a una gran población. Dado que se trata de una población con una amplia socialización en Internet, esta herramienta parece aún más apropiada.

Entre las muchas plataformas en línea que apoyan la construcción y difusión de encuestas web, *Google Forms* fue nuestra elección. Utilizando esta herramienta, se le pide al investigador que elija entre las muchas opciones disponibles, que tienen efectos significativos en los resultados generales de la encuesta (resultados de investigación, tasas de respuesta, errores de medición, etc.).

El camino de la investigación incluye, por lo tanto, una primera fase en la que se procede a una revisión sistemática de la literatura sobre el fenómeno investigado que permitirá la construcción del cuestionario en línea. La segunda fase ha estado centrada en la construcción de las aplicaciones. En esta fase, sin embargo, antes de proceder a la redacción final del cuestionario, se realizó una simple exploración cualitativa previa con breves entrevistas cualitativas realizadas

a un pequeño número de personas que han formado parte del público a las etapas analizadas de la Vuelta. Los resultados de esta prueba previa permitieron una construcción más válida y fiable de los elementos propuestos en la encuesta web. Una vez definido el cuestionario, se implementó en línea en la plataforma *Google Forms*. La tercera fase, se dedicó a la difusión, entre los turistas deportivos pasivos, de la encuesta y de las formas de participación y, posteriormente, a la recogida de opiniones y actitudes sobre el fenómeno estudiado. Por cuestiones de espacio no se anexa el cuestionario en este artículo, pero se le provee al lector el enlace donde se puede visualizar (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/17urbW2xbYeHPXiTVTkwU2SwIFW3YTarZsa045Nk0E i8/prefill).

6. Resultados

6.1. Resultados de la encuesta a los establecimientos hoteleros

A continuación, observaremos la influencia que tuvo La Vuelta Ciclista a España 2013 en el sector hotelero extremeño. En la Tabla 1 se muestra la distribución de los equipos y personal de la Vuelta alojados entre los distintos establecimientos.

Tabla 1. Distribución de equipos y personal de la Vuelta alojados en establecimientos de Extremadura en la Vuelta 2013

Nombre alojamiento turístico	Localidad	Equipos alojados
Aqualange	Alange	Bmc Racing Team FDJ.fr
Acosta centro	Almendralejo	Garmin - Sharp Lampre – Mérida
Acosta Vetonia	Almendralejo	AG2R La Mondiale Lotto Belisol Team Argos – Shimano
Nueva Dulcinea	Almendralejo	Caja Rural
AHC	Cáceres	Team Saxo - Tinkoff Vacansoleil – Dcm
Fontecruz Cáceres	Cáceres	Euskaltel - Euskadi Katusha Team Movistar Team
Sercotel Extremadura	Cáceres	Belkin Pro Cycling Team Orica Greenedge Jurado
Las Lomas	Mérida	Radioshack Leopard

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Tryp Medea	Mérida	Cannondale Pro Cycling Omega Pharma – Quickstep
Romero	Mérida	Cofidis, Solutions Credits Team Netapp Endura
Velada Mérida	Mérida	Astana Pro Team Sky Procycling
Parador de Mérida	Mérida	Dirección de carrera Servicio médico

Fuente: Elaboración propia a partir de Unipublic (2013).

Con la encuesta realizada a los hoteles extremeños donde se quedaron a pernoctar tanto los equipos participantes en La Vuelta 2013 como el personal que hizo posible su funcionamiento, se pretendió averiguar si, aparte de los equipos, alojaron a otro tipo de clientes durante las mismas fechas. La respuesta de los establecimientos encuestados fue, en un 40%, afirmativa y algunos coincidieron en que gran parte del porcentaje de su hotel lo abarcaba el personal de La Vuelta. Por otra parte, preguntamos si contrataron personal adicional, a lo que nos contestaron que sí, en algunos casos, concretándonos que contrataron más personal de limpieza y camareros. También confirmaron que la edición de 2021, en la que la Vuelta tuvo tres etapas que atraviesan Extremadura, alojaría a personas relacionadas con el funcionamiento de La Vuelta y equipos. Por otra parte, se decidió medir, a través del método Likert, una serie de planteamientos. En primer lugar, se quiso saber si el paso de la Vuelta incrementó las reservas. Esto se pudo afirmar en sólo dos establecimientos. En segundo lugar, preguntamos si tuvieron que llevar a cabo algún cambio en la carta o menú del comedor, a lo que un 40% lo afirmó, frente a un 60% que lo negaba. Normalmente, los equipos ciclistas con un rango más alto van preparados con sus cocineros y, por eso, gran parte de los alojamientos no tienen que hacer ningún cambio para adaptarse a la dieta de los ciclistas. En tercer lugar, nos interesamos por el prestigio del hotel, preguntando si La Vuelta 2013 les había ayudado a mejorarlo: un 60% indicó de manera afirmativa que la celebración del evento fue un impulso para su negocio, en cambio, el 40% restante señaló que no estaba de acuerdo. Por último, la mayoría de los alojamientos encuestados (80%) manifestaron que no querían que la Vuelta volviera a celebrarse cerca del municipio donde se encuentra su establecimiento.

6.2 Resultados obtenidos a través de la encuesta a la población turista

Los resultados obtenidos de la encuesta a la población turista serán analizados en diferentes secciones, siguiendo la estructura del modelo de cuestionario aplicado.

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6.2.1 Perfil sociodemográfico y vinculación como turista deportivo a la Vuelta a España

Participaron un total de 222 personas de todo el territorio nacional, entre ellas 183 hombres y 39 mujeres. Como se aprecia en la Tabla 2, los grupos de edad fueron muy variados: un 27.5% pertenecían al grupo de 18 a 24 años, seguido del grupo de 25 a 34 años con un 23.9%; el tercer lugar fue para el grupo de 35 a 44 años representados con un 21.2% y tras este continuaba el grupo de 45 a 54 años con un 14.4%; en penúltimo lugar se situaba el grupo de 55 a 64 años con un 8.6% y, por último, un 4.5% de mayores de 64 años.

Tabla 2. Edad de los turistas deportivos encuestados

Grupos de edad	%
18-24 años	27.5
25-34 años	23.9
35-44 años	21.2
45-54 años	14.4
55-64 años	8.6
> 64 años	4.5

En cuanto al lugar de residencia (Tabla 3), la mayoría procedían de Extremadura (36.8%), seguidos de Galicia (13.1%), el País Vasco (9%), Castilla y León y Madrid (6.3%), Andalucía (5.9 %), Castilla La Mancha (4.5%), Comunidad Valenciana (4.1%), etc. Contestaron de todas las comunidades exceptuando Ceuta y Melilla.

Tabla 3. Comunidad Autónoma de procedencia de los turistas deportivos encuestados

C.A. de procedencia	%
Extremadura	36.8
Galicia	13.1
País Vasco	9
Castilla y León	6.3
Madrid	6.3
Andalucía	5.9
Castilla La Mancha	4.5
Comunidad Valenciana	4.1

Respecto al nivel de estudios, en la Tabla 4 nos encontramos a un 32.4% con estudios universitarios, con formación profesional un 25.7%; un 15.3% representaba por igual a personas con máster o doctorado y a aquellos que tenían Bachillerato; los que llegaron hasta la Enseñanza Secundaria representaron un 5.9%, y con Educación Primaria un 5.4%.

Tabla 4. Nivel de estudios de los turistas deportivos encuestados

Educación	%
Educación Primaria	5.4
Educación Secundaria	5.9
Bachillerato	15,3
Formación Profesional	25,7
Estudios Universitarios	32,4
E. Postuniversitarios (Máster, Doctorado)	15,3

En referencia al estado civil (Tabla 5), predominaban los solteros con un 52.7% frente a un 35.1% de casados; un 8.6% aquellos que tenían pareja de hecho, y el resto se repartía entre los que eran separados (1.4%), divorciados (1.8%) y viudos (0.5%).

Tabla 5. Estado civil de los turistas deportivos encuestados

Estado Civil	%
Soltero	52.7
Casado	35.1
Pareja de hecho	8.6
Divorciado	1.8
Separado	1.4
Viudo	0.5

Nos interesamos en saber si las personas que se desplazan para ver estos eventos realizaban algún tipo de actividad física; una inmensa mayoría de las respuestas fueron positivas (95.9%) y únicamente un 4.1% no llevaban a cabo ningún tipo de actividad física habitualmente. También una gran cantidad de personas, entre las que respondieron de manera afirmativa, practicaba ciclismo habitualmente (77.3%). El porcentaje restante practicaba otros deportes muy variados. Más de la mitad de las personas encuestadas practican turismo deportivo, tanto de forma pasiva como activa (54.5%), aunque también hay algunas que solo lo practican de forma activa (30.6%) o únicamente de forma pasiva (14.9%) y, en consecuencia, han asistido en alguna ocasión como espectador a pruebas de ciclismo (97.7%). Entre los encuestados, un 50% se desplazó para ver la Vuelta Ciclista a España del año 2013.

La sexta etapa (Guijuelo - Cáceres) obtuvo un porcentaje de personas desplazadas del 32.5%, seguida de la séptima etapa (Almendralejo –Mairena de Aljarafe) con un 29.1%. Fueron estas las etapas más señaladas por nuestros encuestados, debido a que gran parte de los que participaron eran extremeños. En menor medida asistieron a la última etapa con final en Madrid (12.8%). Entre las etapas de montaña, destacamos la 20ª con final en el Angrilu, a la que acudió un 12%.

Por otra parte, al observar la Tabla 6, descubrimos que los encuestados habían estado en otras ediciones de la Vuelta Ciclista a España a partir del año 2013. En la edición del 2018 estuvieron el 52.2% de los encuestados y en la del 2019 un 47.8%, por lo que se obtuvieron porcentajes muy igualados, en cambio, a la edición del 2020 solo acudió un 21.5%, principalmente debido a la situación sanitaria de nuestro país a causa de la pandemia mundial.

Tabla 6. Afluencia de los turistas encuestados en las ediciones de la Vuelta 2018, 2019 y 2020

Ediciones	%
2018	52.2
2019	47.8
2020	21.5

Destacamos que cuando las personas encuestadas se han desplazado como turistas deportivos pasivos han pernoctado en la zona un 45.5%. Mayoritariamente, este tipo de turistas pernocta

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en hoteles (45.8%), aunque también en casas rurales (20.8%), apartamentos turísticos y campings (10%), albergues (5%). También señalaron otros lugares para pernoctar como: hostales, la casa de algún familiar y autocaravanas (ver Tabla 7). Aquellos que solo van a ver la carrera y vuelven a su lugar de residencia se posicionan en similar porcentaje a los que hemos analizado anteriormente (45.5%). Suelen hacer gastos en el sector de la hostelería: restaurantes, bares, cafeterías, etc. (95.2%). En cambio, hay algunas personas que no se desplazan, si la etapa pasa por su ciudad.

Tabla 7. Tipo de alojamiento utilizado por los turistas deportivos que pernoctan

Tipo de Alojamiento	%
Hotel	45.8
Casa Rural	20.8
Apartamento Turístico	10
Camping	10
Albergue	5
Resto de alojamientos	8,4

En la Tabla 8, se puede observar que, para desplazarse, los turistas deportivos pasivos, casi en su totalidad, utilizan coche particular (88.3%). También se desplazan para ir al evento, en bicicleta (4.5%), transporte público (1.8%), caravana (1.8%) y a pie (1.8%). Gran parte de ellos, estos viajes los realizan con amigos (43.7%), aunque también con la familia (34,7%), siendo una minoría aquellos que los llevan a cabo con la pareja (13.1%) o solos (7.2%).

Tabla 8. Medio de transporte usado por los turistas deportivos encuestados para acudir al evento

Medio de transporte	%
Coche propio	88.3
Bicicleta	4.5
Transporte público	1.8
Caravana	1.8
A pie	1.8

En cuanto al tiempo máximo que las personas invierten en sus desplazamientos, predominan aquellos que su trayecto dura más de una hora (88.3%) y en la distancia máxima de desplazamiento nos indicaron un 77.9% que realizaba más de 100 kilómetros.

A la hora de elegir una etapa (ver Tabla 9), las preferencias son las etapas de montaña (84.7%), quedándose al margen las etapas de media montaña (7.7%), las de contrarreloj (4.1%) y las llanas (3.6%). En relación con estos resultados, suelen desplazarse con más frecuencia a los puertos de montaña (70.7%), seguido, con porcentajes igualados (12.6%), aquellos que viajan a

la llegada al municipio y a las localidades que hay entre el municipio de salida y el de llegada; y en último lugar, a la salida del municipio (4.1%).

Tabla 9. Etapas de la Vuelta preferidas por los turistas encuestados

Tipo de etapa	%
De montaña	84.7
De media montaña	7.7
Contrarreloj	4.1
Llanas	3.6

El motivo principal por el que las personas se desplazan a ver las etapas de la Vuelta a España es porque les gusta el ciclismo (87.4%), y en menor proporción, porque quieren estar cerca de los ciclistas profesionales (5.9%), o incluso para acompañar a alguien del entorno que se sienta atraído por este deporte (4.1%).

El 76.4% de estos turistas deportivos pasivos tenía pensado acercarse a disfrutar de la edición de 2021, entre los que un 46.6% de ellos iría a alguna de las etapas que pasaron por Extremadura. De las tres etapas que atravesaron Extremadura, la que contaba con el final en el Pico Villuercas (etapa de montaña) fue la más seleccionada (76.3%) frente a un 17.2% que indicó la etapa de Navalmoral de la Mata – El Barraco, y, 6.5% la etapa de Bélmez – Villanueva de la Serena. El 74.2% de las personas que se desplazarían para ver alguna etapa no se quedaría a pernoctar cerca de la zona de estas tres etapas, frente al 25.8% restante sí lo haría.

6.2.2. Evento deportivo como reclamo turístico

Para analizar la Vuelta como reclamo turístico, se utilizó la escala de Likert. Los encuestados coincidieron en que sí es suficiente la imagen proyectada de las localidades durante la Vuelta en los medios de comunicación, siendo las descripciones de los puntos de interés de dichas localidades una ayuda para el fomento del turismo en la región. También concuerdan en que los paisajes mostrados por el helicóptero les parecen bonitos, pero opinan que deberían aparecer más. Afirmaron que durante la retransmisión de la Vuelta conocen lugares nuevos, aprenden sobre su patrimonio y, a raíz de ello, si se sienten atraídos por algún lugar en concreto, organizan un viaje para poder visitar la zona en un futuro.

A estos turistas deportivos, cuando viajan para ver alguna etapa, les gusta visitar la ciudad para conocerla mejor y, a su vez, la recomiendan a amigos y familiares. Cuando planifican este desplazamiento, estudian el libro de ruta para asegurarse de los horarios del paso de la carrera establecidos por la organización y llegar al lugar sin problemas.

6.2.3. Impacto mediático del evento

Ahora se trata de analizar el impacto mediático que puede alcanzar este evento durante su retransmisión. Respecto a publicar fotos de la Vuelta en las redes con la ubicación exacta, fue una cuestión disputada, aunque hubo más gente que sí estaba de acuerdo. Las personas no suelen publicar *tweets* usando el *hashtag* oficial, pero parte de ellas siguen a la cuenta oficial de la Vuelta para estar al día.

La aplicación creada para la Vuelta no suele usarse, pero sí leen las noticias que aparecen en prensa y navegan por Internet buscando los resultados y noticias de la Vuelta.

El canal por donde más personas se conectan para ver la Vuelta es *RTVE*, aunque *Eurosport* también tuvo una buena acogida, pero bastante inferior. Esto puede deberse a que este último es una canal de pago. Además, estos telespectadores suelen tener el hábito de sumarse a la retransmisión desde el principio para no perder detalle de la etapa, pero si no pueden verla en directo se conectan en diferido. Además, gran parte de las personas encuestadas han llegado a usar la radio para seguir el evento.

En alusión al vídeo promocional de la Vuelta, muchas personas coinciden que transmite sentimientos y llega al público que lo observa. Añaden que, con el paso de los años y de las ediciones, se ha observado mejora en los vídeos actuales, pero prefieren que vuelvan los *spots* publicitarios de antes porque transmitían más emoción. Por último, la sintonía oficial, según los encuestados, debería componerse para la ocasión, en vez usar canciones ya elaboradas.

6.2.4. Impacto social y económico del evento

Respecto al impacto social y económico que ocasiona el paso de la Vuelta, descubrimos que supone un impulso para los comercios de los diferentes municipios, aunque piensan que es excesiva la inversión realizada.

Por otra parte, observamos que la celebración de la Vuelta Ciclista a España es un aliciente para la práctica de este deporte, principalmente para los más jóvenes, ya que los ciclistas profesionales constituyen referentes para ellos. Otra motivación de la Vuelta es que incita a la práctica de turismo deportivo de forma activa.

Nuestros encuestados manifestaron la existencia de problemas a la hora de encontrar aparcamiento durante la celebración del evento y que las carreteras cortadas durante el paso de la carrera congestionan el tráfico. A pesar de estas dificultades, se mostraron de acuerdo en que el dispositivo de seguridad de la Vuelta es efectivo y trata de que todo esté en orden durante el paso de la carrera por los municipios, sintiéndose bastante afortunados si alguna etapa pasa por su localidad de residencia.

El evento aporta una nueva experiencia y ventajas socioeconómicas a los residentes del lugar. Dicha experiencia contribuye a un mejor comportamiento y acogida a los turistas por parte de los vecinos.

El paso de la Vuelta también supone el arreglo de carreteras y setos de las diferentes localidades participantes, proyectando una mejor imagen a las personas que sigan la carrera por la televisión o se desplacen para disfrutarla *in situ*.

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6.2.5. Impacto medioambiental del evento

La última sección de la encuesta se centró en el impacto medioambiental que puede ocasionar el evento. Los encuestados no estuvieron de acuerdo en que la contaminación acústica durante esta gran vuelta por etapas repercutiera de manera negativa en las localidades donde se celebra. También negaron que las carreteras por donde circula la Vuelta se llenen de residuos lanzados por los ciclistas, y en cuanto a los regalos que reparte la caravana, confirmaron que no son excesivos, por lo que no repercute de manera negativa. Y para finalizar, manifestaron que realmente los municipios que acogen salidas y llegadas de la Vuelta terminan en buen estado.

7. Principales conclusiones y futuras líneas de investigación

Cada vez son más las comunidades que apuestan por este modelo de turismo tratando de satisfacer una demanda turística existente. Cualquier gran vuelta ciclista por etapas que se retransmita y llegue a un gran número de países, se convierte en un escaparate turístico para poder atraer a más viajeros.

Se ha podido observar que, a pesar de que con el paso de los años son más mujeres las que se sienten atraídas por el ciclismo como evento deportivo y turístico, el número de hombres las sigue superando con creces.

Las personas que más asisten a este tipo de eventos como la Vuelta Ciclista a España, se encuentran entre los 18 y los 44 años, solteros, principalmente, que cuentan con un nivel de estudios bastante alto (universitarios). Estas personas hacen deporte habitualmente, siendo su preferencia el ciclismo. A su vez, practican turismo deportivo tanto de manera activa como pasiva, y cuando lo realizan de esta última forma, invierten una gran cantidad de horas y kilómetros en sus desplazamientos, efectuados, en la mayoría de las ocasiones, con un coche particular y acompañados de familiares y/o amigos.

Algo que sorprende es que entre todos los que participaron como sujetos de la muestra investigada, muchos de ellos se quedan a pernoctar en la zona por donde pasará la etapa, estando este porcentaje igualado con el de los que van y vuelven en el mismo día.

Casi todo aquel que se desplaza termina haciendo un gasto turístico, ya sea en el sector hotelero o en la hostelería, lo que representa un empuje económico para la localidad donde se celebra la Vuelta.

Estos turistas deportivos prefieren acercarse a los puertos de montaña para disfrutar de la carrera y sentir la cercanía de los ciclistas durante la ascensión, ya que en una etapa llana el paso de los corredores es más fugaz.

En cuanto a la planificación de la ruta, resultó bastante curioso que un porcentaje elevado de personas hiciera uso del libro de ruta elaborado por la organización. Este libro no siempre ha estado a disposición del público.

Un elemento a favor de la retransmisión por televisión de la Vuelta es que, cada vez, más personas se unen para seguirla en sus respectivas casas desde muchas partes del mundo. A los

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telespectadores les parecen suficientes las descripciones de los puntos de interés aportadas por los comentaristas, aunque demandan más imágenes de los paisajes mostrados por el helicóptero. A pesar de ello, cuando se sienten atraídos por alguna localidad, programan un viaje para poder visitarla.

En el aspecto social, todos concuerdan que la celebración de la Vuelta a España es una nueva experiencia para los residentes del lugar y por lo tanto ayuda a generar un mejor comportamiento de los habitantes para acoger a los turistas que visiten la localidad. Representa un buen dato, ya que existen lugares en los que la demanda turística es elevada y, en cambio, los vecinos no se encuentran conformes debido a que ese exceso de visitantes repercute negativamente en su tranquilidad.

Los resultados evidenciaron que las personas estaban en desacuerdo en cuanto a la contaminación que puede llegar a ocasionar un evento de semejantes dimensiones, como la Vuelta Ciclista a España. Esta manifestación generalizada nos indica que, a pesar de mover a una gran cantidad de personas, los lugares por los que circula la carrera están bien cuidados y trata de no dañar los espacios naturales y urbanos.

En referencia a la encuesta distribuida a los establecimientos turísticos, realmente fue sorprendente. No les gustaría que en las futuras ediciones de la Vuelta se celebre alguna etapa cerca de su alojamiento turístico. Y resulta extraño, ya que un 60% de los mismos argumentó que el paso de la Vuelta 2013 había incrementado el prestigio de su establecimiento, añadiendo, además, que en 2021 alojarían de nuevo a equipos ciclistas o personal relacionado con el funcionamiento de la Vuelta. En todo caso los eventos deportivos siempre están ligados al turismo y su constante innovación, haciendo que se conviertan en generadores económicos, pues como argumenta Blanco-Gregory (2018, p.13), en la actualidad, gracias a los medios de comunicación de masas, este tipo de innovaciones deportivas llegan de manera directa al espectador, causando un gran impacto social y económico en el sector.

Respecto a las oficinas de turismo, creemos que deberían promocionar, ya sea a través de redes sociales o elaborando folletos, la celebración de la Vuelta España en Extremadura. El fin de esta promoción es que atraiga a más turistas para que visiten el municipio. Otra idea añadida a lo anterior sería colocar un stand, tanto en la salida como en la llegada de la etapa, donde se repartieran folletos turísticos de la localidad y de la zona.

Realmente, la investigación no se puede cerrar porque siempre va a haber aspectos que vayan cambiando o elementos que se puedan mejorar. Sería deseable investigar la edición del 2021 e indagar sobre los pensamientos previos de la muestra acerca de la edición de 2022 que volverá a tener etapas en la región extremeña. En este caso, se podría tener en cuenta en la investigación a la población local junto con el sector de la hostelería, como partes muy importantes en el desarrollo turístico en cuestión del evento.

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Cycling as a food-delivery rider. Or the difficult negotiation among speed, safety and accuracy

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Abstract

Platform-based food-delivery riders have been primarily analyzed in relation to organisational or regulatory issues, thus overlooking the actual practices that involve them materially, bodily and cognitively. In particular, less attention has been given to a central aspect of this occupation: cycling. By understanding food-delivery work as a social practice (Hui *et al.*, 2016), this paper aims to show that:
1) the organisational and material conditions in which food-delivery work takes place frame the emergence of a specific mode of urban cycling, which concerns the difficult negotiation of speed, safety and accuracy.
2) in order to meet the requirements of practice, riders draw on a set of norms and practical skills by which they define the correct way to accomplish this work.
The research draws on a seven-months Milan-based observant participation (Wacquant, 2015) – during which the author worked as a Glovo part-time rider – supplemented by 21 in-depth interviews with workers.

1. Introduction

> "My brother and I used to joke about it... when we were riding slowly on our lunch breaks... we'd say: "can you imagine doing a delivery at this speed? [...] it's not that you have to go like crazy, then you'll crash... but you have to have *a certain rhythm*, otherwise... you won't make it. I don't speed, but I have a constant rhythm when delivering, which is *not the same rhythm as when I'm driving the bicycle for my own sake*".
>
> (Dolores, 33, F)

Although it has attracted only marginal interests from the many scholars who have studied food-delivery work, cycling is a crucial concern in this work. The literature on food-delivery riders is divided into three main strands of research. First, as a pivotal example of platform

labour, food-delivery work has been analyzed in relation to historical processes concerning the flexibilization of labour relations and the crisis of standard forms of employment. Labour law scholars have criticized the self-employed status of food-delivery workers, arguing for platforms accountability as employers (e.g. Aloisi, 2021; De Stefano, 2019). A second interpretative strand has addressed the implications of the organisational model of digital labour platforms on workers representation. A substantial amount of movement studies has witnessed the emergence of new forms of workers organisation (Borghi *et al.*, 2021; Cini *et al.*, 2021; Leonardi *et al.*, 2019; Marrone, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarone, 2020), emphasizing aspects of solidarity in response to the progressive individualisation of the workforce. A third area of research, mainly addressed by labour sociologists and organisation scholars, has explored new forms of labour process control enabled by the use of algorithmic technologies. Studies conducted in various national contexts (Barratt *et al.*, 2020; Griesbach *et al.*, 2019; Heiland, 2021; van Doorn, 2020; Veen *et al.*, 2020) have noted the existence of information asymmetries between platforms and workers, highlighting the opacity of the so-called algorithmic management, and the use of reputational systems geared to increase workers' productivity. By focusing primarily on the relationship between riders and platforms from an organisational or a regulatory perspective, the literature seems to have overlooked the actual practices that materially, bodily and cognitively involve food-delivery workers. Which is quite surprising, considering the attention reserved to other similar occupations, such as the urban bike messengers (e.g. Fincham, 2007; Kidder, 2011).

Only more recently researchers have turned their attention to "the prosaic labour of actually being a delivery worker" (Timko & van Melik, 2021, p. 498). For instance, by framing food-delivery work as a dirty labour, Gregory (2021) highlighted the risks associated with riding in urban traffic. Similarly, the ethnography by Timko and van Melik (2021) explored the daily experience of food-delivery riders, describing how they cope with the anticipation of risks and unexpected events while cycling.

Capturing the riders' point of view, these studies have accurately described the workers' experience, addressing hotly debated issues such as safety and precariousness from a subjective standpoint. This article aims to follow this perspective, addressing cycling as a crucial analytical dimension in order to observe the implications of the way food-delivery work is organised by digital labour platforms. Firstly, it shows how the way this work is algorithmically and spatially organised reflects on the daily experience of riders, setting requirements that are difficult to balance. Secondly, it shows that in order to meet these requirements, riders incorporate specific skills and practical norms, based on which they define the correct way of cycling as a food-delivery worker. To explore these issues, the paper aims to answer two main questions:

1) What are the organisational, technological, and material conditions that frame the emergence of a specific form of urban cycling?

2) What cognitive, tacit and bodily skills are mobilized by riders to mediate different work requirements? Or, in other words, how does one (learn to) cycle as a rider?

From a theoretical point of view, the article draws on the heterogeneous corpus of practice theories (Hui *et al.*, 2016) that have found room within the field of mobility studies and, more specifically, in the "sociology of vélomobility" (Cox, 2019). The next paragraph presents some

sensitizing concepts for the analysis of the empirical material, particularly drawing on Schatzki's theory and on practice scholars interested in the study of learning from a situated perspective. In section 3, we more clearly delimit the object of study, providing some methodological considerations. In sections 4 and 5, we address the first and the second research questions respectively. In the last section, we provide some conclusive considerations.

2. What we refer to when we talk about practices

Practice-based studies (Gherardi, 2019; Hui *et al.*, 2016) are a set of social theories as heterogeneous as the theoretical backgrounds from which they have originated. Beyond internal disagreements – e.g. between humanist and post-humanist theories – they share the purpose to resolve classical dualisms in sociological thinking: individual/structure; mind/body; subjectivism/objectivism[1] – by recognizing an ontological primacy to practical activities[2]. Moreover, practice theorists agree in conceiving practices as double articulations, as the flexible arrangement of different elements and as situated performances (Shove *et al.*, 2012), while disagreeing in defining their constitutive ingredients – see, for instance, Shove *et al.* (2012) and Reckwitz (2002).

This article principally draws on Schatki's theory, as it seems particularly suited to explore the endogenous emergence of a normative frame of an occupation without standards on neither a regulatory nor practical level. According to Schatzki (2005, p. 58), practices are primarily an open-ended set of actions orchestrated by virtue of three main organisational principles: "a pool of understanding, a set of rules, and a teleoaffective structure". It is important to note that none of these elements refers to an individual or to a structural plane. "The understandings that link the actions composing a practice are better construed as abilities that pertain to those actions[3]" (Schatzki, 2005, p. 59). Rules involve "explicit formulations, principles, precepts, and instructions that enjoin, direct […] people to perform specific actions" (Schatzki, 2010b, p. 79). Examples of rules that structure food-delivery work are the organisational procedures implemented by platforms to govern workers – the payment mechanism, the (opaque) reputation system underlying algorithmic management – but also indirectly, the traffic law that riders must deal with during delivering. Rules are associated with authority, but they "never *simpliciter* determine what people specifically do" (Schatzki, 2005, p. 60), as practices are also governed by a normative frame that Schatzki calls *teleoaffective structure*: a "range of acceptable or correct ends, acceptable or correct tasks to carry out for these ends, acceptable or correct beliefs (etc.) given which specific tasks are carried out for the sake of these ends". The lemma *telos* indicates that all practices are goal-oriented, meaning that they entail a set of "ends that

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[1] In this regard, many contemporary practice-theories have their roots in Giddens' structuration theory, and Bourdieu's theory of habitus – both usually labelled as first-generation practice scholars.

[2] As Nicolini (2011, p. 602) noted, practices "are not […] just mere descriptions of what people do; they are meaning-making, identity forming, and order-producing activities".

[3] Relying on a sophisticated philosophical elaboration that is beyond the scope of this article, he distinguishes between practical and general understandings, defining the former as a distinct concept with respect to habitus or practical consciousness – see Schatzki (2002).

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participants should or may pursue" – e.g. delivering food as quickly as possible. The second term indicates that actions are also affectively determined. "The specification of how someone will proceed for the sake of certain ends is tied to her beliefs, hopes, and expectation" (Schatzki, 2001, p. 60). A final crucial dimension concerns the material arrangement where practices take place. On this point, Schatzki distances himself from the principle of symmetry of post-humanist approaches – e.g. Gherardi (2016) – as well as from scholars who treat materiality as an integral element of social practices – e.g. Shove (2016). According to him, materiality is ontologically distinct from practices, but intimately connected to them according to four types of relations: causality, prefiguration, intelligibility, and constitutions. In Section 4, the concept of prefiguration will enable us to explain the role played by the city and its material arrangement in structuring food-delivery work.

Scholars have recently highlighted the implications of Schatzki's theory for organisation studies, emphasizing its contribution to understanding the micro-foundations of work practices and organisations (Loscher *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, by elaborating the organisational principles that orchestrate practices, Schatzki's theory allows to explain how different elements hold together, forming a socially recognizable entity – e.g. a distinct way of cycling. However, what it does not illustrate as effectively is how practices reproduce themselves over time. Firstly, because it remains mostly at a highly theoretical level. Secondly, because – as most practice scholars – Schatzki pays little attention to the role of social agents, neglecting how they become "able to meet the requirements of a practice" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2016, p. 22), and what are the implications on the practice itself, in terms of reproducing or changing its normative standard. To explain how a practice is underpinned by "successive moments of performances" (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 7), we may turn our attention to studies on situated learning (e.g. Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) that anticipated the practice turn in organisation studies years before the pivotal book of Schatzki and colleagues (Bruni, 2019). In accordance with Schatzki, this perspective admits that practices guide the actions and identity formation of social agents (Nicolini 2011), but it also emphasizes the active role they play within the network of relationships that emerge around any social practices (Lave & Wenger 1991). By participating, social agents construct their skills and capabilities in accordance with the practice requirements. This does not mean that they merely incorporate the practice requirements into their behaviours, as they also actively construct the norms to adhere to (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2016, p. 15). This aspect is particularly relevant in the case of this study, because in the absence of a formalized apprenticeship and training, riders learn most of their job by doing and by sharing their work experience with each other. Moreover, by means of participation practitioners construct their own identity as (more or less) *legitimate* or *competent* workers (Lave & Wenger 1991). Combining these two theoretical perspectives also makes it clear that a teleoaffective structure is never unique and stable, as differences between participants are likely "to imply conflict and the potential to fail" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2016, p. 15).

3. Methodology

The empirical data in this article come from a larger research conducted in Milan between 2020 and 2021. The study followed a mixed-methods approach, built upon an observant participation carried on from January to July 2020, during which the author worked as a part-time rider for the platform Glovo. The inversion of the terms of the more common notion of "participant observation" was advocated by Wacquant to emphasise the active involvement of the researcher, who submits himself to the forces of the field under scrutiny, "so as to gain a visceral apprehension of that universe […] for its analytic reconstruction" (Wacquant, 2015, p. 6). This (theoretical-)methodological approach enabled a double analytical operation. On the one hand, it lets us inductively grasp the requirements of this work-practice. On the other, it allowed the researcher to investigate his own learning as a specific object of study, by reflexively analysing the incorporation of dispositions and competencies needed in order to work as a rider. The ethnographic material was collected on a daily basis and analyzed following a grounded approach (Charmaz, 2006). Gradually, the analytical categories emerging from the field have been articulated in an interview guide that was used to conduct in-depth interviews with 21 riders. Finally, a last source of data – that will be very limitedly used in this paper – comes from a survey physically administered to a sample of 130 riders.

Before discussing the empirical results, it is necessary to delimit the focus of this article within the broader research from which it originates. This article refers only to bicycle couriers, although not every rider works by bicycle. This choice is based on the empirical material collected during the fieldwork. Working – and observing – by bicycle, the author himself has spent more time with bicycle couriers than with motorbike or car riders. In addition, the survey data indicate a clear prevalence of bicycles over other vehicles in the context of observation: only about 11% of the survey sample use motorbikes or cars. Similarly, within the sample of interviewees, only 2 riders out of 21 use a motorbike. As highlighted elsewhere (Bonifacio & Benedittis, 2022), differences also occur between those using muscle bikes and electric bikes, both in terms of income and self-perceived work career as a rider. In this article, we intend to bracket these differences as much as possible, emphasizing the common features of the specific mode of cycling stemming from this work – whether with muscular or electric bicycles.

4. Organisational and material conditions of work

In short, the work of a food-delivery rider has to do with delivering meals in an urban area. In this section, we outline some of its constituent traits, focusing on the organisational and material forces that define the conditions for the emergence of a specific mode of cycling.

4.1. Organisational rules

In terms of remuneration, riders are variably paid for each delivery made, the value of which is contingently calculated by the platform based on the distance to be covered or any

supplementary bonuses in the case of adverse weather conditions[4]. From an organisational point of view, riders' self-employed status reflects a (relative) possibility to manage how and when to work. Riders choose which vehicle to use and are personally responsible for its maintenance, also in case of any possible theft. They can (relatively) choose which orders to accept among those assigned by the platform, and what routes to take to complete a delivery. However, a number of empirical studies has demonstrated that riders' autonomy is constrained within the limits set by the platform, which directly influence their working conditions. These constraints are discursively sustained by ideals of meritocracy and self-entrepreneurship (Galière, 2020) and are configured in a technological infrastructure – the platform – relying on algorithms and on the massive use of crowd-sourced data. Among its many functions, the so-called *algorithmic management* (Stark & Pais, 2020) enables platforms to:

- Calculate the fee for each delivery.
- Monitor the delivery process for each order.
- Evaluate workers' performances by computing a constellation of different parameters, including customers and restaurants ratings.
- Sort riders into a ranking, based on their rating, which discriminate their access to the booking of working hours.

The riders' configuration in the technological infrastructure (Akrich, 1992) has serious implications on work. The flexible piecework system (van Doorn, 2020) requires riders to optimize their earnings during the hours they are registered to work, by selecting which deliveries to accept (Bonifacio, 2022) and, as Dolores observed in the opening interview excerpt, by cycling at a certain rhythm. As a consequence of the reputation system based on customers and restaurants evaluations, riders have to pay special attention to the service care in order to avoid negative ratings: from the way they interact with customers and restaurants, to how they cycle when delivering food. In this regard, riders need also to adjust their riding style by considering what they are carrying in their backpacks, hence avoiding potholes, or choosing routes with no cobblestones. Transporting food requires riders to be more precise than other bicycle couriers – for example, urban bike messengers who deliver files – and this is another structuring dimension of work practice. Precisely to avoid receiving a negative review, it is not uncommon for riders to decide not to deliver the order – e.g. if they find out that a drink has spilled during the delivery.

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[4] The inability to determine one's own remuneration independently has often been contested as an element of subordination of riders to the platform(van Doorn, 2020)

4.2. Urban material arrangement

The urban infrastructure is a highly influential material dimension of food-delivery work. As we mentioned before, the urban material arrangement (Schatzki, 2010a) is not simply constitutive of any mobility practice. It *prefigures* them, by favouring the existence of certain practices and hindering others. To give a trivial example, consider how easier it is to cycle in a flat city like Milan than in a steep city like Genoa or Naples. In addition to the morphology of the territory, urban design also establishes – or rather, expresses – a "hierarchy of use" (Cox & Van De Walle, 2007, p. 122) of different mobility technologies[5]. Prescriptive elements of urban design include the paving of streets. For instance, the poor conditions of the cobblestones in many areas of Milan is detrimental to the maintenance of one's own vehicle, and a potential cause for accidents. Another prescriptive element of the urban design that is directly referred to vélomobility practices concerns the density of bicycle lanes. In that regard, one can easily imagine how much easier and safer it is to ride in cities such as Amsterdam or Copenhagen than in Milan, where despite the increasing presence of cycle lanes, the bicycle is still considered a secondary means of transportation.

Considering the relation between mobility practices and urban arrangement enables to capture contextual specificities (Horton *et al.*, 2007) and to take into account the relationship between the riders' work and other practices with which it competes – and conflicts – for space and time[6] (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 126). Traffic is the most obvious manifestation of this difficult coexistence. Using a practice-oriented lexicon, we can understand traffic as a "texture" (Gherardi, 2006) of different mobility practices and technologies – cars, motorbikes, public transportation, pedestrians – governed by a set of prescriptions that are objectified (in road signs) or institutionalized (in traffic laws). Every mobility practice, including that of the rider, is to be understood both as a *part of* the urban traffic and as a *viewpoint* on it. According to the second understanding, traffic constitutes a mix of obstacles, a set of logics external to the riders' point of view[7], in conflict with the way the work is organised. This clearly appears in the following field note, which recalls a main problematic aspect of this work: safety.

> In the square[8], riders are deriding the new initiative proposed by Glovo, which
> started distributing facemasks to couriers at some restaurants in the city.
> According to many riders, it is a cosmetic initiative, similar to others arranged

[5] As sociologist Ole Jensen observes, "mobilities do not 'just happen' or simply 'take place'. Mobilities are carefully and meticulously designed, planned and 'staged' (from above)" (Jensen, 2013, p. 4)

[6] As Tosoni (2015, p. 14) observes, "any kind of practice […] opens at the same time new possibilities for other practices, force them to a coordination, or rule them out in a conflictive way".

[7] As often happens when our taken-for-granted breaks up, many riders have remarkably realized the incidence of traffic during the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. During that time, in the words of one interviewee, 'the city was all about cyclists. […] You went by ear, without even looking at the traffic lights, only by listening if someone was coming the other way'.

[8] The square evoked in the field note is one of the many places of the city where groups of riders meet before and after work. The author used to spend time with this group of workers during ethnography, learning the trade with them. Indeed, as well as being a place for socialising, the square and all the places where riders gather together represent informal learning contexts, where riders collectively construct and hold a work-related knowledge. Although we will evoke *the square* again later, a detailed reconstruction of collective learning processes exceeds the space of this article.

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by the platform with regard to road safety: 'safety…', Andrea comments, 'these people understand safety as *following the highway code, as if I were a normal cyclist...* they know very well that I can't always follow traffic laws. Because if I lengthen each delivery by half a mile, out of 100 deliveries it becomes a lot of miles... and doing more miles means earning less. Here, safety is not about riding on the sidewalk or not. *You also have to know how to use the sidewalk.* I fell once, yes... But the Italian Cyclists' Association can't tell me: "Oh, don't ride on the sidewalk, go slow, go easy, don't ride the wrong way". As if I am riding a bike on vacation. Fuck, *do you even know how this job actually works?*"

<div align="right">(Field note, 22/6/2020)</div>

This field note highlights the risks associated with riding in urban traffic, revealing a tension between how the work is organised and remunerated and the need to comply with abstract safety rules and procedures. One cannot always follow traffic laws, as Andrea observed, because the algorithmic management and the piecework payment system – organisational rules – constantly induce riders to circumvent it. Similarly, as we have already mentioned, riders must also pay attention to what they carry inside their backpack, taking care that food doesn't spoil or get cold, to avoid possible negative reviews. The combination of these organisational, technological and material conditions frames the specifics of food-delivery work, as a cycling practice that requires the difficult mediation of speed, safety, and accuracy.

It is important to note that in order to neglect their employer status, platforms do not require riders to have any specific expertise in terms of safety, nor they do provide riders with any training. Nonetheless, riders are observed to develop their own sense of safety at work, building on a set of competencies and practical principles – e.g. "*knowing how to use the sidewalk*"– that are anchored in the way the work is organised, and in the urban setting where it takes place. In the next section we will survey what competencies do riders mobilise in order to accomplish this difficult task, focusing respectively on cognitive, tacit and bodily skills.

5. Riding

5.1. *"Most of all, you have to think"*

"Yes, *you have to ride. But most of all you have to think.* The road you choose makes the difference… you think about where you have to go, what's the fastest route, which is not *necessarily the safest* [...] you look at where you are, where is the customer's destination, you imagine the road… I turn this way… the street there is no good, I am going to find cobblestones there, so I am going to go the other way, right? […] *This work forces you to think about the route you are going to take...* that way there is men at work, that way there is a nice straight avenue... that way you can take the bicycle lane... so you imagine your route before you've taken it. More or less you arrive around the destination simply by heart,

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without really knowing street names [...] Otherwise, you see riders using the voice navigator, that completely dissociate you from what you're doing: that way you don't learn shit about the city, and it also puts you in danger"

<div align="right">(Interview with Giovanni, 46, M)</div>

A main practical understanding of this work concerns a peculiar geographical knowledge of the city. As this interview excerpt shows, "thinking about the route to take" rests on a practical understanding of the space, according to a twofold meaning. First, it is practical "in the sense of convenient, that is, easy to master and use" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 86) as it obeys to a poor logic, which does not require a theorizing effort. While supported by a cognitive dimension, in fact, the mastery of space exhibited by riders is not based on a cartographic knowledge of the city. Rather, it is constructed through the elaboration of a "practice-referred mental map"(Bonifacio, 2022, p. 94) made of nodes and references – bicycle lanes, pedestrian zones, traffic directions, the presence of cobblestones, men at work – that achieve their own significance with respect to how the work is algorithmically organised. In this regard, we can also elaborate on the role played by Google Maps or by other mobility apps. In abstract terms, the possibility of consulting a digital map reduces the entry barriers of this work, by extending the recruitment of potential practitioners (Shove *et al.*, 2012) to people who lack the geographical knowledge that is needed to move around the city. However, if we situate the use of Google Maps within the actual experience of a food-delivery rider – as Giovanni does – it appears as a main source of danger and of time waste. The spatial knowledge embedded in Google Maps – which is only relatively customisable, based on different modes of transportation – is not consistent with a rider's practical understanding of the space. They rely on two different logics. While the former respects abstract traffic rules, the latter – and here we come to the second meaning of the adjective 'practical' – results from the incorporation of the practice requirements described in the previous paragraph. In fact, as Giovanni noted, the *safest* route may be inconvenient in terms of speed, and therefore inconsistent with the practice ends. By the same token, the fastest route could be highly detrimental in terms of safety:

"it's not that by going faster you gain more money, you just risk going more easily to the hospital... you can go 100 mph, I go 50 and I get there before you [...] *the roads you choose matter...the mischief... being cunning...* for example, in that corner there is a traffic light, no? But if you turn right at the street before, you go through there and you don't have to stop at this traffic light... or you don't have to go this way where the cops might annoy you [...] do you see how much time you save? You don't think about it, but 3 minutes here, 4 minutes there... in an hour I'll make one more order. If you make three orders, I will make five."

<div align="right">(Interview with Claudio, 43, M)</div>

As we can see, a rider's mental map differs from that of a general cyclist because it processes the route that most closely balances the need to deliver quickly and safety concerns. Moreover,

for the reasons highlighted above, thinking about the route to take is also important in order to meet another important requirement of this work: accuracy. As Dolores points out:

> "When you are carrying the meal inside the backpack, you *have to be* very careful to avoid potholes, cobblestones... otherwise you risk everything falling over […] depending on what you have inside, *you have to ride one way or another...* if you are carrying only McDonald's food, you can take the cobblestones, you can jump jump jump, you don't care. If you have beverages inside, you have to be more careful because the drinks will spill. If you carry 5 Chinese soups, then you have to be even more careful. So, basically, you can't ride the same if you take 5 soups or 5 McChicken..."
>
> (Dolores, 33, F)

5.2. Riding fast, practicing safety

From the rider's perspective, safety is not simply about obeying traffic laws. As a "cultural knowledge that takes the form of practice" (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001, p. 236), safety constitutes something that is learned "as a style of being at work" (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001, p. 237). As we already showed in relation to the ability to use the sidewalk, the construction of a safe style of cycling has to do with the strategic use of the urban arrangement.

> I am shadowing Giovanni during a delivery session [...] We have turned onto Corso Sempione, just before the intersection with Via Procaccini. We are facing a bus and a car approaching the crossroads. The traffic light is already yellow. From the right side of the road, Giovanni moves to the left in a moment, crossing the space that has formed between the car that is slowing down and the bus that is already occupying the intersection. He flanks the tail of the bus on the left side, which protects him from oncoming cars from Via Procaccini, as he turns left. In five seconds he has already crossed Corso Sempione. [...] I am amazed by his agility in traffic. However, when I catch up to him on the other side of the street, Giovanni quite scientifically dismisses my astonishment, merely observing that: "first, you have to fill in the spaces; second, you have to know where the bus is going".
>
> (Field note, 27/6/2020)

This episode from my ethnographic diary is a good example of what it means, in practice, to combine speed and safety when delivering. Both pieces of advice that Giovanni gives me constitute what Gherardi and Nicolini (2001, p. 239) define as "teaching to see". The first precept – filling the blanks – expresses all the ineffability of a knowledge that "can be practiced but cannot be taught" (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001, p. 236). It has to do with the ability to anticipate the future development of one's performance by mastering time and space while cycling. In order to fill spaces, it is not enough to see them in advance. A rider has to know how

to occupy the space at the right time, or when to use the brake: tacit skills (Strati, 2003) that concern the rider's relationship with the bicycle and, more generally, with the urban material arrangement. The second precept concerns the ability to mobilize the "border resources" (Brown & Duguid, 1994) of the city: aspects of the urban material arrangement that a particular community of practitioners attach with specific meanings. Similar to the use of pedestrians as shields observed by Kidder (2009) in the work of urban bike messengers, Giovanni operates a re-signification of the bus, which becomes a resource to protect himself while riding fast in traffic. More generally, the ability to "label the dangerous" (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001) while cycling requires a particular sensitivity to the material stimuli of the city: the arrow of a bus that is turning right, the flashing light indicating a gate that is about to open, the presence of a door on the sidewalk from which someone could exit any moment. Of course, the competence to recognize what is dangerous is not entirely achieved *ex novo*, as it rests on knowledge and dispositions incorporated by social agents along their social trajectories (Bourdieu, 1990). However, it takes a specific form as a result of incorporating the teleoaffective structure of this work practice, defining the "professional vision" of a food-delivery rider (Goodwin, 1994).

5.3. Managing the body (and the bicycle)

Cycling fast in the urban traffic is not only riskier than elsewhere, but also more strenuous. As Giovanni notes, this work "is an exhausting ongoing process of stopping and starting", punctuated by waits while standing outside restaurants and stairwells upon stairwells to reach the customers' homes. Of course, managing with physical fatigue has to do with the care of one's body – e.g. many riders stress the importance of eating and the need of getting plenty of rest after work. But it is also about learning how to ride a bicycle efficiently. Antonio, a 50-year-old rider, reported his strategies to optimize muscular efforts by activating the upper part of his body, which intuitively is less associated with riding a bike.

> "Putting the handlebar a little lower changes the movement of the upper body. […] They say: you pedal with your legs. It's not only that. If you pedal only with your legs, after two hours your legs feel like two pieces of wood. [...] If you are not prepared, at 50 years old, the day after you do 80 km you don't even get out of bed... So, after a while doing this work, you say: "Shit, I'm tired". Then, you start thinking about how to reduce the effort… how to get on the saddle properly, or how to place the handlebar…"
>
> (Antonio, 50, M)

Antonio highlights the fatigue of cycling dozens of kilometres, day after day, emphasizing the need to optimize his effort. Interestingly, he does not work directly on his own body. He focuses on the bicycle, which he understands as a precondition for adjusting his body movements and, consequently, the effort required to accomplish them. The bicycle management calls into question a series of tasks and skills collateral to cycling in the strict sense. From routine maintenance – "Your brakes and tires must always be in perfect

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conditions!" – to the ability to change an inner tube in case of a flat during work. This way, the bicycle itself represents a sign of recognition within the professional community, based on which riders formulate judgments about the correct way to work. As with the other sources of knowledge mentioned above, riders interpret the condition of their bicycle as a badge of (greater or lesser) professionalism, contributing to the construction of the normative standard of this work. In the following field note, Antonio clearly explains how the bicycle of a food-delivery rider should look like, labelling me as a novice by simply inspecting my bicycle cluttered with unnecessary weights:

> Antonio: [...] that bicycle is yours? Well, *then you're not a rider...*
> Me: What do you mean?
> Antonio: Look, I don't know...you can tell... come on...so, for example, *your bike has the crank set...* look at the riders' bikes, do you see any crank set?
> Me: Mmmh, actually I don't know what a crank set is…
> Antonio: It is the chain guard... you don't need it... why do you think no one has a crank set?
> Me: Why?
> Antonio: *That's why you're not a real rider!* Because it's heavy...more importantly, because if you drop the chain, you lose more time putting it back with the crank set...that's why! Thus, *I look at your bike and I understand that you're not in that mechanism...* look at us, nobody uses the crank set!
>
> (Field note, 15/5/2020)

6. Conclusions

So far, scholars have mainly portrayed food-delivery work as a poorly regulated occupation on a regulatory level, underestimating its scarce standardisation on a practical and normative level. This article has attempted to fill this gap, showing the endogenous emergence of a normative frame – what Schatzki calls "teleoaffective structure" – that organises the way of cycling related to this work as the difficult negotiation of speed, safety and accuracy. For this purpose, we first identified the organisational and material elements that frame this work practice within a set of constraints and possibilities. Then we described the set of cognitive, tacit, and bodily skills that enable riders to meet the work requirements, constructing its normative standard. Now we would like to conclude with two final remarks.

First, by focusing on cycling as a central aspect of this work, we showed that riders build on practical understandings and skills that are *consistent with* the way their work is organised, constructing a normative standard to adhere to in terms of how they should cycle while delivering. However, by stressing the organisational and material conditions within which food-delivery work take place, we argue for emphasizing the responsibility of food-delivery platforms. Of course, the risk associated with cycling in urban traffic is somehow irreducible. However, as Gregory (2021) noted, the organisational conditions set by platforms create other risky dimensions – e.g. the financial risk associated with the piecework payment system – that

have substantial implications on the riding. Basically, this also suggests that changes in the interplay of the organisational and material elements might affect the very nature of this work. This was quite clear when we mentioned the influence of the urban material arrangement, noting how easier is to cycle in a flat city as Milan than in other urban contexts. It is even more perceivable when it comes to certain organisational rules. For example, we can easily assume that the adoption of an hourly payment system, as introduced by Just Eat, may reduce the need to speed up the ride, enhancing workers sensitivity to safety issues. In this regard, interesting insights may arise by comparing different organisational arrangements.

Second, in this article we decided to bracket the heterogeneity of the workforce, focusing on what defines the distinctiveness of an emerging mode of cycling associated with food-delivery work. Nonetheless, the riders' heterogeneity emerged in several points during the discussion. For instance, in section 5 we observed that the competence of labelling "the dangerous" is built on a set of pre-existing skills and dispositions achieved by social agents along their social trajectories. Thus, we implicitly assumed that workers with different social backgrounds may incorporate a different practical logic rather than the one described in this paper. For example, the episode of Antonio indicating the importance of another requisite of this work practice concerning energy and fatigue management, highlighted that age difference holds important implications on the riders' performances. This suggests that prescriptive elements of work descend not only from an organisational dimension, but also depend on the conditions of social agents themselves – e.g. on their bodily capital (Wacquant, 2002). Therefore, shedding light on the heterogeneity of the riders' daily experience opens new ways to exploring the social stratification internal to this occupational community and platform workers overall – as labour scholars argued (Cansoy *et al.*, 2020).

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Archambault, F. (2022). *Il controllo del pallone. I cattolici, i comunisti e il calcio in Italia (1943-anni Settanta)*. Firenze: Le Monnier

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Il recente libro di Fabien Archambault sul "controllo del pallone" costituisce un interessante contributo allo studio della storia dello sport e, più in generale, a quello della storia sociopolitica dell'Italia della prima Repubblica. Il volume, infatti, è basato su un'ampia ricerca di fonti di archivio e propone un approccio diverso da quello della maggior parte degli studi sulla storia del calcio italiano.

In proposito va ricordato che le ricerche sul tema sono piuttosto numerose. Dopo la pionieristica Storia del calcio in Italia di Antonio Ghirelli, uscita per la prima volta nel 1954 e più volte ristampata, sono apparsi importanti contributi sia di autori italiani (in particolare, la Storia sociale del calcio in Italia di Guido Panico e Antonio Papa, pubblicata dal Mulino nel 1993), sia stranieri (John Foot, Calcio. 1898-2006. Storia dello sport che ha fatto l'Italia, Rizzoli 2007; Simon Martin, Calcio e fascismo. Lo sport nazionale sotto Mussolini, Mondadori 2006). Queste ricerche hanno rappresentato un significativo passo in avanti della storiografia sportiva, ma si sono concentrate in larga parte sullo sport-spettacolo: hanno preso in esame anche la dimensione popolare e sociale del calcio, ma l'hanno intesa soprattutto partecipazione della popolazione agli eventi dello sport-spettacolo.

Il tema della pratica amatoriale del gioco è stato meno indagato. Il contributo di Archambault cerca di colmare questa lacuna per il periodo che va dalla fine della Seconda guerra mondiale agli anni '70, concentrandosi sui due più importanti enti che promuovevano lo sport: il Centro sportivo italiano (Csi), fondato dall'Azione cattolica nel 1944, e l'Unione italiana sport popolare (Uisp, oggi Unione italiana sport per tutti), nata nel 1948 e legata ai partiti comunista e socialista.

Nell'Italia della "guerra civile fredda", lo sport non poteva restare immune dal clima di contrapposizione e dallo spirito di crociata con il quale era vissuto il confronto politico. Tra il Csi e l'Uisp, che rappresentavano a livello sportivo le due principali correnti politiche del Paese, si sviluppò un forte antagonismo perché ciascuno dei due gruppi voleva prevalere sull'altro e servirsi dello sport per la creazione del consenso politico. Tale antagonismo ebbe l'effetto di incentivare e diffondere significativamente la pratica del calcio.

Per certi aspetti, il Csi e l'Uisp raccolsero l'eredità del regime fascista, che aveva trasformato lo sport in un fenomeno di massa, ma ne aveva fatto anche uno strumento di creazione del consenso. Nei confronti del calcio, però, il fascismo aveva avuto un atteggiamento "ambiguo": ne aveva sfruttato la popolarità come spettacolo (il caso limite si raggiunse con i campionati

mondiali del 1934, disputati in Italia e vinti, forse anche grazie agli aiuti arbitrali, dalla nazionale italiana); nello stesso tempo, non lo aveva considerato una disciplina adatta a educare la gioventù e a creare l'"uomo nuovo", tanto che non ne aveva promosso la pratica, se non in forma limitata, nell'ambito delle organizzazioni giovanili.

I partiti politici del dopoguerra misero da parte queste perplessità, anche perché negli anni '50-'60 il calcio divenne lo sport più popolare, superando il ciclismo, che fino ad allora era stata la disciplina prediletta dagli italiani. Il cambiamento era dovuto alla modernizzazione del Paese indotta dal miracolo economico. Il ciclismo era stato lo sport preferito dell'Italia uscita dalla guerra, quando la popolazione usava soprattutto la bicicletta e i corridori italiani, a partire da Coppi e Bartali, mietevano successi in tutta Europa. La modernizzazione e la motorizzazione di massa – avvenuta prima attraverso i motoscooter e, dagli anni '60, con le automobili – fece gradualmente perdere attrattiva alla bicicletta e al ciclismo sportivo. A favorire il calcio fu anche l'avvento della televisione, giacché il gioco, per il suo avere luogo in uno spazio ristretto, si presta particolarmente bene alla ripresa televisiva.

L'Uisp e il Csi, come racconta Archambault, dedicarono il massimo sforzo per promuovere il gioco del pallone e reclutare in tal modo nuovi militanti. Diverso era il loro rapporto con il calcio professionistico, che spesso era considerato una frivola distrazione (soprattutto nell'ambito dell'Uisp). Tuttavia, entrambi i gruppi dovettero accettare che i loro iscritti si appassionassero ai campionati professionistici, che del resto rientravano negli interessi anche di molti leader dei partiti di riferimento. «E tu vorresti fare la rivoluzione senza sapere che ha fatto la Juve?», avrebbe chiesto Togliatti a Pietro Secchia secondo un celebre (ma non verificabile) aneddoto.

Anche il calcio professionistico era fortemente politicizzato, perché spesso i dirigenti politici cercavano di usarlo come strumento per la creazione del consenso nelle loro aree geografiche di riferimento. Il caso più noto è quello di Achille Lauro, sindaco di Napoli e presidente del Napoli calcio negli anni '50, il quale si servì della squadra per propagandare la propria immagine. Fece scalpore, in particolare, l'acquisto di Hasse Jeppson, un calciatore svedese considerato uno dei più talentuosi del momento, che fu ingaggiato nel 1952 per la cifra record di 105 milioni di lire. Anche la politicizzazione delle squadre di club aveva le sue radici nell'Italia fascista (si pensi, per fare un esempio, al Bologna di Leandro Arpinati negli anni '20), ma le finalità erano diverse e il fenomeno era meno diffuso. Nei primi decenni del dopoguerra, invece, la prassi di presiedere squadre di calcio per ottenere consenso politico si diffuse in maniera capillare, come testimoniato dall'elenco di deputati-presidenti proposto da Archambault (pp. 193-195).

La politicizzazione del calcio professionistico non è mai venuta meno e nel corso degli anni i rappresentanti politici hanno continuato a servirsi delle squadre per ragioni di consenso. Nella pratica amatoriale del gioco, invece, tra gli anni '60 e '70 prese avvio una "depoliticizzazione": i gruppi come il Csi e l'Uisp persero la centralità nella promozione dello sport che avevano negli anni precedenti, grazie alla proliferazione di società indipendenti, non legate agli ambienti politici. Anche questo, per certi aspetti, era un elemento di modernizzazione.

Dal libro di Archambault emergono anche altri elementi interessanti, tra i quali lo squilibrio territoriale tra le diverse aree del Paese e, in particolare, il ritardo del Mezzogiorno nella

diffusione della pratica dello sport. Il Csi e l'Uisp, infatti, erano attivi soprattutto nelle regioni centro-settentrionali, mentre a sud di Roma la loro presenza era di gran lunga inferiore. Era un aspetto della "questione meridionale sportiva", che attraversa tutta la storia dell'atletismo italiano ed è tuttora presente. La questione non riguarda solo lo sport-spettacolo (nel calcio, com'è noto, è un "problema" particolarmente evidente, visto che le formazioni più titolate appartengono tutte alle regioni del Centro-Nord e, in particolare, al Nord-Ovest), ma anche la diffusione della pratica sportiva amatoriale. In passato il problema era più evidente ma anche oggi, sebbene la pratica dello sport, e del calcio in particolare, sia diffusa su tutto il territorio nazionale, la "questione meridionale" non è stata risolta, come dimostra, tra l'altro la maggiore diffusione di impianti e strutture (e la loro qualità) nelle regioni centro-settentrionali.

La questione meridionale è solo una delle chiavi di lettura del Controllo del pallone. In termini più generali, infatti, il volume "ha voluto mostrare precisamente il momento fondatore e la genesi della collusione tra calcio, politica e religione, che costituisce appunto la particolarità del caso italiano" (p. 311).

Negli ultimi anni, la situazione è completamente cambiata rispetto al periodo preso in esame da Archambault, sia per la diffusione capillare di società calcistiche e squadre amatoriali non legate alla politica, sia per la scomparsa del sistema dei partiti nel quale erano nati gruppi come il Csi e l'Uisp (entrambi ancora attivi, ma meno attrattivi del passato), sia per i cambiamenti nei mezzi di comunicazione, che hanno modificato la fruizione del calcio spettacolo e hanno influenzato anche la pratica amatoriale. L'auspicio è che, dopo Il controllo del pallone, nuovi studi possano prendere in esame i decenni più recenti della storia del calcio italiano.

Politica, economia e questioni sociali nel calcio contemporaneo

Grant, W. (2021). *Political Football. Regulation, Globalization and the Market.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda

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Abstract

In *Political Football. Regulation, Globalisation and the Market*, Wyn Grant examines the political economy of football and its difficult relationship with the market. Grant argues that the world of football is largely exempt from the measures of the regulating state and is to some extent self-regulating. The political economy of football has become more important because the game has been colonised by elements of the economic class. There is a tension between the profit-maximising understanding of football and a more community-oriented, democratic vision aimed at pursuing government policy goals. The insights of economics and politics are necessary to understand the political economy of football, but they should not be mixed. Economics allows us to understand the characteristics of the football market, while politics allows us to analyse both the politics of co-optation and engagement and the politics of resistance.

Keywords: Calcio, Economia politica, Regolamentazione, Globalizzazione, Mercato.

Introduzione

Nel suo libro, *Political football. Regulation, globalization and the market*, Wyn Grant esamina l'economia politica del calcio e il suo difficile rapporto con il mercato. Fin dalle prime pagine è lo stesso autore ad asserire che il tema centrale del libro è "la necessità di temperare e regolare le forze globalizzanti del mercato che agiscono nel *bel gioco*" (Grant, 2021, p. 2). L'uso di nuove tecnologie per la trasmissione delle partite e la comparsa di nuovi mezzi di comunicazione hanno aumentato la pervasività del gioco del calcio. La globalizzazione ha creato nuove pressioni, in quanto le società di calcio sono diventate pedine delle ambizioni di Stati, consorzi e uomini d'affari facoltosi e disposti a pagare cifre esorbitanti per l'acquisto di una squadra di calcio o dei suoi diritti televisivi. Grant sostiene che il mondo del calcio è in gran parte esente dall'azione dello Stato regolatore e, in qualche modo, si autogoverna (Grant, 2021, pp. 126-128). Ciò vale, in special modo, per il caso inglese attraverso l'affermazione di un modello di "*light

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touch regulation" (Grant, 2021, p. 19), imposto dopo la depoliticizzazione dello Stato regolatore e interventista negli anni '80 e '90 del XX secolo, realizzato attraverso le riforme in senso neoliberista dei governi conservatori di Margaret Thatcher (Grant, 2021, p. 19). In qualsiasi altro mercato, ricorda l'autore, un comportamento così caotico e occulto comporterebbe un tasso di fallimento ben più elevato. Nonostante la sconsideratezza finanziaria, continua Grant, i club sopravvivono e questo si deve, secondo lui, alla passione che il gioco del calcio riesce ancora ad evocare nelle masse dei tifosi.

1. Processi di globalizzazione del mondo del calcio

Anche se, nel suo testo, Grant cerca di dare una visione globale del calcio, egli esamina più approfonditamente il funzionamento del calcio inglese e introduce alcuni elementi di storia della globalizzazione del calcio che, secondo lui, hanno "alterato" il calcio inglese e, di conseguenza il calcio mondiale, trasfigurandone la natura a partire dagli anni '90 dello scorso secolo (Grant, 2021, p. 13). Nel 1992 – riporta Grant – in Inghilterra la FA Premier League fu lanciata dopo che ventidue club si staccarono dalla Football League in cerca di un accordo televisivo migliore, con una campagna pubblicitaria *glamour* e memorabile da parte del suo partner, Sky Sports di Rupert Murdoch, che si aggiudicò i diritti esclusivi per trasmettere le partite in diretta (Grant, 2021, pp. 43-44). Nella stessa stagione, la UEFA ribattezzò la *Coppa dei Campioni* – con la quale ogni vincitore del proprio campionato nazionale in Europa partecipava a un torneo a eliminazione diretta per determinare il campione continentale – come *Champions League*, con un formato ad anello progettato per garantire che i club più blasonati e più ricchi si affrontassero più spesso e avessero maggiori probabilità di trionfare in una competizione vinta negli ultimi anni da alcune *outsider* dell'Europa orientale come lo Steaua Bucarest e la Stella Rossa di Belgrado (Grant, 2021, pp. 11-15). Tre anni dopo, il centrocampista belga Jean Marc Bosman vinse una causa storica presso la Corte di Giustizia Europea contro il suo ex club RFC Liegi, che aveva rifiutato il suo trasferimento a Dunkerque quando il suo contratto era scaduto nel 1990. La Corte stabilì che ciò violava il diritto di Bosman alla libera circolazione in tutta l'UE, sancito dal Trattato di Roma del 1957, che i giocatori dovevano essere liberi di trasferirsi alla scadenza del contratto e le leghe nazionali all'interno dell'UE (così come la UEFA) non potevano più limitare il numero di cittadini dell'UE autorizzati a giocare in una squadra di calcio (Grant, 2021, pp. 43-44). Tutto ciò, insieme all'emergere del gruppo degli "oligarchi russi" dopo il crollo dell'Unione Sovietica nel 1991, aprì le porte alla globalizzazione del calcio europeo, in termini di compravendita dei giocatori, proprietà dei club e di trasmissione delle partite attraverso l'acquisizione dei diritti televisivi. Secondo Grant, queste trasformazioni hanno interrotto e, in alcuni casi, compromesso i legami tra i club e le loro comunità di tifosi, rendendo le competizioni legate al mondo del calcio più prevedibili e meno eccitanti.

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2. Tentativi e fallimenti di regolamentazione del mercato del calcio

Nel dibattito sul governo del calcio mondiale, il tema della regolamentazione è sempre presente, ma i suoi risultati sono largamente deludenti e inefficaci. Mentre Grant esamina i modelli di proprietà in Germania (*50+1*) e in Spagna, che tentano entrambi di coinvolgere i tifosi nella gestione dei club (Grant, 2021, pp. 60-63), e guarda agli sforzi per diffondere e far attecchire il *bel gioco* in Australia, in India, negli Stati Uniti, in Giappone, in Cina e nei paesi del Golfo Persico (Grant, 2021, pp. 34-42); l'autore si sofferma in particolare sul caso britannico, concentrandosi sull'analisi del dominio del calcio inglese da parte delle "*big six*" (Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United e Tottenham) e gli effetti della vendita a investitori stranieri di club più piccoli come il Charlton Athletic, di cui Grant è un grande tifoso (Grant, 2021, p. VII), il Northampton Town e il Watford (Grant, 2021, p. 39). Il calcio inglese si trova in una posizione particolarmente sfavorevole in questo senso, a differenza della Germania, a causa della sua tradizione economicamente liberale e individualista che propende per l'autoregolamentazione o la deregolamentazione. I continui fallimenti di questo approccio sono catalogati in modo estremamente dettagliato da Grant, che analizza come le privatizzazioni abbiano creato nuovi organismi di regolamentazione (Grant, 2021, p. 19), aprendo teoricamente la strada per l'introduzione di organizzazioni indipendenti che garantissero una maggiore responsabilità degli organi di governo e migliorassero i famigerati test "*fit and proper*" (Grant, 2021, p. 156), che hanno permesso numerose acquisizioni da parte di individui che non disponevano dei fondi attesi. L'esempio più eclatante è quello del Wigan Athletic, venduto due volte nel 2020 e poi commissariato. I principali problemi del calcio, non solo in Inghilterra, come i proprietari disonesti, il razzismo, il gioco d'azzardo e il sessismo, sono stati a malapena affrontati e normati, nonostante le occasionali campagne di sensibilizzazione (Grant, 2021, pp. 60-63) e di *sportwashing* (Grant, 2021, p. 33).

3. Calcio e scommesse

I club della Premier League si sono opposti al suggerimento del *New Labour* di introdurre un organismo regolamentatore *super partes* e le proposte avanzate dal deputato conservatore Damian Collins e dall'ex direttore del Sunderland, Charlie Methven, lasciano la regolamentazione nelle mani della English Football Association invece di coinvolgere il Parlamento inglese, che si è interessato alla massiccia pubblicità e sponsorizzazione dell'industria del gioco d'azzardo nei club del campionato inglese (di seconda fascia), concludendo che le ludopatie rappresentano un rischio per la salute pubblica (Grant, 2021, pp. 155-156). Il mondo del *football* è pieno di sponsorizzazioni di società di scommesse che, in alcuni casi, sono addirittura proprietarie di società di calcio. Persino gli avvertimenti sul "gioco d'azzardo responsabile" continuano a sostenere l'idea che il gioco è divertente e che chi ha una dipendenza lo fa semplicemente in modo sbagliato (Grant, 2021, pp. 87-103). Grant, tuttavia, non menziona nel suo libro le proposte laburiste avanzate nel 2019, che prevedono di dare ai sindacati dei tifosi il potere di nominare o rimuovere i membri del consiglio di amministrazione e di acquistare azioni (Corbyn, 2019), o di fare in modo che la Premier League investa il 5%

degli introiti televisivi nel movimento calcistico di base (Wilson, 2019). Grant – inoltre – sostiene che, paradossalmente, i tifosi potrebbero essere il più grande ostacolo a una riforma efficace del sistema-calcio, a causa del loro desiderio di *vincere a tutti i costi*, che distorce una prospettiva più ampia che guardi soprattutto alla sostenibilità economica e finanziaria dei club (Grant, 2021, pp. 146-148).

4. La questione di genere nel calcio

Un merito indiscusso del libro è rappresentato dal sesto capitolo dove si fa un'approfondita disamina sui recenti sviluppi del calcio femminile e descrive la lunga storia di sessismo, misoginia e patriarcato nella storia del gioco del calcio. Grant tesse una narrazione puntuale a partire dai resoconti storici delle prime partite femminili, in cui i giornalisti si indignavano per l'abbigliamento delle giocatrici, in quanto non abbastanza femminile e venivano accusate di essere uomini travestiti quando erano troppo performanti o dotate fisicamente. Oggi la misoginia persiste, forse in modo meno evidente, ma il divario retributivo tra campionati maschili e femminili è, ormai, un abisso. Il divieto di praticare il calcio femminile a livello agonistico in Inghilterra è stato rimosso solo nel 1971 ed è deludente vedere come non si sia ancora andati oltre la rappresentazione classica della donna che ha portato a un atteggiamento protettivo nei confronti degli sport femminili.

Conclusioni

Nel libro, probabilmente concepito e in buona parte scritto in epoca pre-covid, si toccano solo rapidamente temi spinosi e di grande attualità come il fallimento della *Super League* europea e l'efficace mobilitazione dei tifosi contro di essa (Grant, 2021, p. 10), l'idea della Premier League di aggiungere una "trentanovesima partita" al campionato inglese giocata all'estero (Grant, 2021, pp. 45-46) o l'iniziativa *Project Big Picture* che concentrerebbe più soldi e potere televisivo per le *big six* (Grant, 2021, p. 9). Grant – come scritto – accenna a questi temi, come d'altronde si limita solo ad accennare alle conseguenze dirette del Covid-19 sul mondo del calcio, che secondo l'autore ha riproposto la questione relativa ai limiti della globalizzazione del calcio inglese e mondiale (Grant, 2021, p. 24).

Grant è attento a non rimpiangere un'età dell'oro del calcio, sottolineando che gli attuali problemi di razzismo, sessismo e omofobia risalgono al XIX secolo e che, nonostante la globalizzazione e la gentrificazione, la massima serie inglese nel 2020 presenterà molti degli stessi club del 1920, che hanno beneficiato delle disparità di ricchezza di allora come di oggi (Grant, 2021, p. 55). L'autore ha ragione, tuttavia, ad osservare come la ricerca del *soft power* abbia alimentato le oscene ricchezze riversate sul Manchester City, acquistato dal gruppo Abu Dhabi United nel 2008, o sul Paris Saint-Germain, comprato dal consorzio Qatar Sports Investment nel 2011 e incoraggiato dall'ex presidente della repubblica francese Nicolas Sarkozy, e come questo abbia distorto la concorrenza (Grant, 2021, pp. 41-42). Queste pratiche speculative hanno esacerbato i problemi legati alla mancata redditività della maggior parte dei

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club calcistici, anche se il fallimento e la chiusura di club professionistici – come nel 2019 il Bury (Grant, 2021, pp. 3, 130-131), club inglese fondato nel 1885 – rimangono sorprendentemente rari e hanno reso la necessità di una regolamentazione indipendente la questione più urgente del calcio mondiale.

I club di calcio offrono un importante senso d'identità e di appartenenza ai tifosi, ma l'impersonalità e la distanza delle nuove proprietà possono creare nuove tensioni all'interno delle società e, in special modo, con il popolo dei tifosi. Inoltre, la corruzione degli organi di governo internazionali del mondo del calcio (FIFA e UEFA *in primis*) è stato un problema significativo degli ultimi anni e il rapporto simbiotico di questo sport con il gioco d'azzardo continua a destare preoccupazione.

La soluzione che propone Grant è un migliore quadro normativo nazionale e internazionale, soprattutto per quanto riguarda la proprietà, pur sapendo che gli interessi di club, giocatori, agenti, tifosi, proprietari, *broadcaster*, società di scommesse e organi di governo differiscono enormemente e che sarà difficile trovare un disegno normativo che resista sia alle sfide legali sia agli sforzi per aggirare le regole (Grant, 2021, pp. 3, 145-159). Grant non si rivolge ai tifosi – che probabilmente conoscono già questi temi – quanto agli individui e alle istituzioni che potrebbero essere in grado di istituire un organismo di regolamentazione. Illustra le potenziali insidie legate all'asimmetria di informazioni tra i club e i loro attuali/potenziali proprietari e chi dovrebbe regolare il mercato. In tale contesto, sarebbe essenziale fare chiarezza sui poteri e sui limiti che un ente simile dovrebbe avere, così come renderlo abbastanza solido da evitare di diventare ostaggio dell'industria del calcio o di essere vulnerabile di fronte a eventuali sfide di natura legale contro i club o le stesse federazioni nazionali e istituzioni sovranazionali. La proposta dell'autore è quella di istituire un regolatore statutario (Ofsoc) con il compito di vigilare sulla correttezza finanziaria dei club; tuttavia, questo soggetto non potrebbe fare nulla di concreto per affrontare i problemi del razzismo, della globalizzazione, del sessismo e del gioco d'azzardo che sono stati descritti in modo così convincente nel testo (Grant, 2021, pp. 156-158). Questo perché, per Grant, non ci sono soluzioni predefinite per la regolamentazione, ma la complessità del gioco e le sue dimensioni economiche richiedono una maggiore attenzione da parte dello Stato. Grant conclude *Political Football* con una nota di pessimismo, citando la mancanza di interesse da parte dei club nel permettere a estranei di regolamentarli e l'incapacità di UEFA e FIFA – travolte da numerosi scandali che ne hanno minato la credibilità e l'efficacia alle fondamenta – di adattarsi alla globalizzazione (Grant, 2021, pp. 158-159), però offre almeno suggerimenti concreti per una soluzione pratica.

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Per una decostruzione (e ricostruzione) del coaching sportivo

Jones, R.L. (2019). *Studies in Sports Coaching.* **Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to locate coaching within the field of sport and physical activity scholarship. In this regard, the volume *Studies in Sports Coaching* authored by Robyn L. Jones, sketches out a critical sport coaching paradigm. Drawing on this perspective, (micro)sociological studies on coaching allow to address a wide range of pedagogic, political, and symbolic processes. It is argued that analyzing situated interactions and language in use provides a powerful means for deconstructing the taken-for-granted aspects of the daily coaching endeavor. This focus can also sustain an effort to break down the communication gap between the scholars and the coaches, conjoining the communities on action-research initiatives primarily concerned in reconstructing the sporting cultures.

Keywords: language in use; micropolitics; pedagogy; power; sports coaching.

1. Il coaching nella società della prestazione

Negli ultimi anni non sono affatto mancate riflessioni sulle pratiche sportive e motorie in relazione all'emergere dell'ordine neoliberale (Donato *et al.*, 2019). Diversi fattori, tra cui la crisi dei sistemi di Welfare e la conseguente colonizzazione dell'esistenza da parte del mercato, così come i mutamenti demografici e degli stili di vita, hanno favorito il successo di una pluralità di attività fisiche, sportivizzate e non, per la realizzazione dei *body project* individuali. Se è indubbio che, oggigiorno, la trasformazione e il mantenimento del corpo (anche grazie all'esercizio) svolgono un ruolo cruciale ai fini della costruzione identitaria (Crossley, 2006), la pratica motoria-sportiva risulta altresì sovraccarica di funzioni (di carattere compensativo, igienico, educativo, estetico, affettivo, normativo) nelle dinamiche di governo della popolazione.

In quest'ottica, la cura e l'educazione corporea mediante l'attività fisica si configurano come parte di una più complessiva (e pervasiva) strategia di investimento sul sé che sta al centro di un regime societario anche definito "della prestazione" (Chicchi & Simone, 2017); vale a dire, una società fortemente individualizzata la cui razionalità si fonda su un agire performativo orientato

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ad accrescere il potenziale espressivo e le risorse a disposizione di ciascuno. Lo testimoniano il successo della fitness e delle relative offerte commerciali tese a modellare individui-consumatori "sovrani di sé" (Sassatelli, 2010), dei *lifestyle sports* (Wheaton, 2013), degli interventi nel sociale realizzati tramite progetti di partecipazione sportiva, tanto istituzionali quanto auto-organizzati, accomunati delle retoriche dell'inclusione delle popolazioni svantaggiate (Pedrini, 2020; Ekholm & Dahlstedt, 2021).

D'altronde, scrivono Bifulco e Tirino (2019, p. 10), lo sport "opera sulle modalità di strutturazione dei fatti sociali – nelle sue componenti di livello micro, meso e macro – e ne è a sua volta condizionato". In una realtà sociale come quella contemporanea imbevuta di alcune logiche che contraddistinguono la pratica agonistica e dell'esercizio fisico, non stupisce quindi che tra i principali dispositivi di sapere/potere grazie ai quali si modella il soggetto spicca il *coaching*: "gli strumenti della formazione/valutazione/meritocrazia" (Chicchi & Simone, 2017, p. 124).

Entrata a far parte del linguaggio comune, in via del tutto generale la parola *coaching* sembra designare "tutte le attività di accompagnamento centrate sull'individuo e finalizzate allo sviluppo personale, in termini sia di adattamento psicologico che di aumento della *performance"* (Nicoli, 2015, p. 203). Si tratta di strumenti di grande successo, capaci di mescolare in forme sincretiche conoscenze disparate: dalla fisiologia alla scienza comportamentale, passando attraverso l'ampio spettro delle scienze umane e sociali, la strategia militare, le filosofie orientali, la religione, la letteratura, le norme legislative, la cultura popolare. Benché oramai impiegato su larga scala (in azienda, a scuola, nell'arte come in politica) il *coaching* ha infatti avuto origine, e continua a essere impiegato, proprio all'interno delle attività motorie con l'obiettivo di costruire praticanti di successo. Allenatori/allenatrici, istruttori/istruttrici, insegnanti, personal trainer, *mental coach* e maestri sono solo alcune tra le odierne figure del *coaching* sportivo, talmente importanti nell'esperienza quotidiana che, senza le stesse, sarebbe impossibile concepire la pratica fisico-agonistica nelle sue diverse manifestazioni.

Alla luce di queste considerazioni, studiare il *coaching* sportivo assume una duplice valenza. Anzitutto, permette di gettare luce sui processi educativi che forgiano l'identità dell'atleta-praticante di determinate discipline. Ma, soprattutto, studiare il *coaching* fornisce l'opportunità di cogliere come avviene, a partire da ben precisi ambiti atletico-sportivi, la (ri)produzione di modi di pensare e agire strettamente connessi alla realtà circostante. Votata alla comprensione dello sport *coaching* in chiave sociologica (Jones *et al.*, 2010) tutta l'opera di Robyn L. Jones prende le mosse dall'assunto secondo cui il *coaching* non si sviluppa in vulnus sociopolitico; al contrario emergerebbe "*in, with and from the culturally structured world*" (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 276). Può dunque risultare utile partire da qui e, in particolare, dal volume *Studies in Sports Coaching* uscito nel 2019 per dissodare un terreno di ricerca ancora poco battuto in Italia, ma che può rivelarsi fertile al fine di indagare criticamente i mondi dello sport e dell'attività fisica.

2. Tra lavoro pedagogico e micropolitica

Studies in Sports Coaching condensa le interpretazioni maturate dal sociologo della Cardiff Metropolitan University in oltre vent'anni di impegno intellettuale. Al cuore del libro (e della carriera dell'autore) risiede il tentativo di sfidare gli approcci consolidati, di matrice positivista, allo studio dello sport *coaching*, molto attenti agli aspetti tecnici e funzionali del *coaching,* ma pressoché disinteressati a problematizzare lo spazio relazionale e discorsivo in cui si dispiega. Opponendosi alla vulgata scientifica, l'obiettivo di fondo di Jones consiste invece nel radicare lo studio del *coaching* sportivo dentro una cornice socioculturale di stampo critico, partendo cioè dell'idea che il *coaching* costituisce una "pratica sociale situata e complessa"*,* intrisa di credenze spesso date per scontate dagli agenti sociali.

Lungo il portentoso volume (davvero denso di riflessioni, concetti ed esempi) l'intuizione di partenza è declinata in sette sezioni. In seguito all'introduzione al testo (parte 1), vengono presentati alcuni estratti dei principali saggi pubblicati tra il 1998 e il 2018 (parte 2, parte 3, parte 4, parte 5). La selezione propone sia contributi concettuali sia articoli di ricerca, molti dei quali scritti a più mani. Sono le pubblicazioni che hanno influito maggiormente sul dibattito accademico internazionale, dando impulso a un'agenda di ricerca interessata a esplorare il *coaching* sportivo nei termini di un lavoro pedagogico non privo di zone d'ombra e ambiguità:

> like teaching, coaching is fundamentally about making a myriad of connections
> not only to and between subjects and methods, but as important (if not more
> so) to and between other persons and life in general (Jones, 2019, p. 41).

Le connessioni tra i processi educativi e il più ampio contesto socioculturale rappresentano dunque l'oggetto privilegiato dell'indagine. Per poterle esaminare risulta indispensabile, nell'ottica di Jones, addentrarsi nella quotidianità del *coaching* attraverso uno sguardo "microsociologico" teso a decostruire il sapere sotterraneo utilizzato da chi prende parte al *coaching* per fare ciò che effettivamente fa.

"Ruolo", "interazione", "potere" sono i perni concettuali attorno cui è costruita una proposta interpretativa basata sulla riarticolazione di diversi classici del pensiero e dell'analisi sociale, in modo particolare Ervin Goffman (la prospettiva drammaturgica) Harold Garfinkel (e più in generale l'etnometodologia) Michel Foucault e Pierre Bourdieu (lo sguardo relazionale alla disciplina e al dominio) lo psicologo-pedagogista Lev Semënovič Vygotskij (l'attenzione al linguaggio nelle dinamiche di apprendimento).

Dal punto di vista metodologico, un simile sguardo si traduce in ricerche etnografiche concentrate su quella che potrebbe essere chiamata, con delle parole evocative, la *nitty-gritty reality* del *coaching*. Gli studi empirici contenuti nel libro riguardano principalmente alcuni sport collettivi inseriti in contesti di alto livello in Europa e nel Regno Unito. Tuttavia, la prospettiva ben si applica a qualunque contesto atletico-sportivo (come peraltro suggerisce il plurale del titolo). Il *coaching* sportivo viene infatti visto da Jones come una pratica in ogni caso caratterizzata da elementi di complessità, nella quale tendono a sovrapporsi e ibridarsi lavoro pedagogico e politica.

In primo luogo, il *coaching* si sviluppa in ambienti organizzati dove coesistono cooperazione e conflitto. Gli agenti sociali sono perciò impegnati in un continuo "lavoro micropolitico" (*micropolitical working*s) (Jones, 2019, p. 85) che consiste nel mettere in gioco le risorse di potere disponibili per trarne dei vantaggi. Ciò implica la necessità di capire i contesti, i codici comunicativi in vigore, le lotte che li attraversano, come posizionarsi. Nelle ricerche condotte sul calcio professionistico e semiprofessionistico riportate nel volume è significativo che gli allenatori dichiarino di paragonarsi più a dei politici neoeletti, o a dei politici che rischiano di perdere il proprio ufficio, che a degli educatori. Il mantenimento della carica di *coach* a questi livelli sembra dipendere dall'abilità di modulare il programma educativo alle aspettative (solo in parte esplicite) degli assistenti, della dirigenza e degli atleti.

In secondo luogo, pur all'interno di realtà strutturate con una loro storia e un orizzonte di valori dato, le figure del *coaching* hanno interesse a ottenere il consenso attorno al programma pedagogico proposto. Quotidianamente, guidando e correggendo gli atleti attraverso specifici atti comunicativi, le figure del *coaching* cercano di allineare i praticanti al proprio credo. L'orchestrazione avviene di frequente senza forzature. Per esempio, nello studio della micropolitica del *coaching* durante le routine di allenamento, viene data molta l'attenzione all'umorismo. Stando alle osservazioni su alcune squadre di calcio e rugby citate, i *coach* utilizzano di frequente l'umorismo nel corso delle interazioni. Lo adottano come una tecnica "disciplinare" (*disciplinary humour*) (Jones, 2019, p. 217) grazie alla quale cementificare il senso di attaccamento al gruppo e riguadagnare il controllo sulla collettività, rendendo accettabile un certo modello di *coaching*.

In terzo luogo, il lavoro pedagogico opera attraverso tecniche ad un tempo disciplinari e "pastorali" (queste ultime ritenute quintessenza dell'arte moderna del condurre e manipolare i viventi seguendo l'esegesi di Foucault) che consentono il mantenimento di un certo *status quo*. Ciò significa che nell'ambito del *coaching* i momenti di confronto con le atlete/gli atleti contribuiscono a consolidare una cultura e delle gerarchie locali, ma perfino costrutti simbolici e relazioni di potere strutturali. Come affermano efficacemente Markula e Pringle (2016) in chiave foucaultiana, il *coaching*, tramite il discorso, rende la "governamentalità" esperienza vissuta. Questo appare con evidenza nei programmi sportivi, così in voga nelle strategie di welfare di stampo neoliberista, rivolti ai/alle giovani che vivono in contesti economicamente e socialmente deprivati (Ekholm & Dahlstedt, 2021). Sebbene motivati dalla missione dell'*empowerment* e del miglioramento della condizione giovanile, i dialoghi maieutici dei *coach* si concentrano quasi esclusivamente sull'attitudine personale dei ragazzi e delle ragazze, trattando la loro condizione (attuale e attesa) come una faccenda di responsabilità individuale. Mentre a rimanere sottaciuti sono i processi di ordine economico, lo stigma sociale e le decisioni politiche che concorrono alle disuguaglianze, finendo così per legittimare lo stato delle cose.

3. Decostruire a partire dal linguaggio in uso

Da quanto detto se ne deduce che, nell'analisi di Jones, centrale è il linguaggio in uso nei processi di socializzazione, quando è in gioco l'adattamento a un certo sistema sociale. Per esaminare come il modo di parlare esprima un universo di valori ed eserciti effetti sulla realtà,

Jones trae ispirazione da Vygotsky e rivisita la categoria di *scaffolding* (letteralmente, "impalcare"), una metafora che sta a indicare il supporto all'apprendimento in una cornice educativa. Più esattamente, tre livelli di *scaffolding* tra loro interconnessi entrerebbero in gioco nel *coaching*.

Al livello più elementare dell'esperienza, il linguaggio assicura l'"ordine dell'interazione" e la "gestione delle impressioni", per dirla con Goffman. Questo avviene con espressioni di conferma, sollecitazione, riformulazione. Mentre a livello intermedio, l'adozione di un certo linguaggio consente la costruzione delle "regole del gioco" e delle "convenzioni", per esempio con istruzioni, domande, spiegazioni tecniche – in breve, espressioni che definiscono la "buona pratica" (Jones, 2019, p. 235). Ma regole, convenzioni e definizioni non sono neutre, dal momento che vengono influenzate da (e a loro volta influenzano) una serie di costrutti culturali. A livello più generale quindi, lo *scaffolding* riferisce al modo in cui il linguaggio crea significati collegati all'esperienza della vita nel senso più ampio. In tal senso, lo *scaffolding* entra in azione mediante commenti, aneddoti, leggende, spiegazioni del senso di ciò che si sta facendo.

Così, studiando con Chris Cushion le interazioni pedagogiche nel calcio giovanile, Jones (2019, p. 167) si rifà a Bourdieu definendo il *coaching* una forma di "violenza simbolica" basata su relazioni comunicative "implicitamente imposte per estorcere la sottomissione": la sua peculiarità consiste, infatti, nel rendere scontato l'arbitrio culturale, facendo sì che venga misconosciuto come tale e accettato come necessario e non-problematico. I discorsi motivazionali delle figure del *coaching* sul campo di allenamento, il lessico adottato nel correggere i gesti atletici, la riformulazione delle tattiche di gioco sulla lavagna nello spogliatoio sono le modalità tramite cui viene inculcata nei ragazzi, continuando con Bourdieu, la "logica della pratica" calcistica. La conseguenza è la divisione dei ruoli e l'esclusione di alcuni aspiranti calciatori. Per esempio, il giudizio sulle qualità espresse da alcuni giocatori, definiti dai *coach* come "*boy*" o "*kid*" (dunque non sufficientemente all'altezza del ruolo) finisce per porre questi giovani ai margini della squadra e comunicare ai compagni il "curriculum nascosto" del "buon calciatore". Analogamente, le affermazioni dei ragazzi che si affidano ciecamente agli insegnamenti dei *coach* in nome di ambizioni "legittime" (entrare in prima squadra, ottenere un contratto decente, diventare un pro) appaiono come una sorta di "buona volontà culturale" (*cultural goodwill*) (Jones, 2019, p. 151) – una docilità complice, da parte dei giovani, che ha l'effetto di consolidare il dominio dei coach e porli all' apice del team.

Non solo. Per trasmettere un'etica sportiva e socializzare i ragazzi alla cultura calcistica, le figure del *coaching* si avvalgono dei commenti sui risultati della squadra, dei racconti rispetto ai traguardi raggiunti in passato, o dei consigli rispetto a quante ore riposare prima di una partita. Dall'analisi risulta che il calcio si configura come una cultura fortemente gerarchica che affonda sui principi dell'accettazione della subordinazione, sull'autocontrollo, sull'impegno, sulla ricerca della vittoria, sull'estetica del talento. Nel Regno Unito (e sarebbe interessante capire cosa accade in altri paesi, Italia compresa) questa sembra essere la "cultura dominante" nel campo sociale: una vera e propria *doxa* della quale gli allenatori si fanno artefici e custodi a partire dai settori giovanili.

Sulla scorta degli studi di Jones, altre ricerche recenti sul calcio giovanile hanno messo in evidenza come agiscono gli allenatori all'interno di un "*masculinity-saturated landscape*" dove viene ristabilito, giorno per giorno, l'ordine materiale e simbolico tra i sessi (Adams, 2020, p. 465).

Pertanto, le routine di allenamento e le modalità di comunicazione quotidiana (spesso all'insegna dell'ironia) consentono ai *coach* di socializzare i ragazzi alle loro credenze in materia di genere, il cui esito è la valorizzazione della mascolinità egemonica. Inoltre, portare alle estreme conseguenze l'attenzione al linguaggio in uso (trattandolo come uno dei mezzi principali per l'esercizio di quelle che potrebbero essere considerate "forme soft di dominazione") permette di esaminare criticamente ciò che accade al di là dei momenti pedagogici, durante la vita nello spogliatoio e la convivialità. Nel suo complesso, la comunicazione socievole può allora essere intrisa di violenza simbolica. Attraverso dialoghi scherzosi, aneddoti, pettegolezzi e nomignoli le figure del *coaching* possono infatti influire sulle percezioni dei/delle praticanti e delineare, assieme alle convenzioni del gioco, la geografia del campo sociale, le figure di autorità e l'etica incarnata della pratica. È quanto viene argomentato in una ricerca etnografica condotta personalmente su una palestra di "boxe popolare", da oltre un decennio animata da un collettivo che gravita nelle reti della sinistra di movimento (Pedrini *et al.*, 2020). Nonostante all'interno del gruppo il *coaching* sia teso a promuovere una pratica "alternativa" alle versioni dilettantistiche e professionistiche del pugilato, le interazioni socievoli riproducono spesso le medesime "categorie di visione e divisione sociale" in vigore nello sport agonistico (maschile/femminile, bravo/scarso, compagno/avversario, vittoria/sconfitta) con esse, un *corpus* di valori allineato ai discorsi oggi imperanti sul miglioramento della salute, sul raggiungimento di certi canoni estetici e del miglioramento di sé tramite l'attività fisica.

4. Decostruire per ricostruire

Nelle ultime sezioni di *Studies in Sports Coaching,* le ricerche condotte con una metodologia qualitativa all'interno di un quadro interpretativo critico vengono rilette nel segno della *phronesis* aristotelica. Per Aristotele la *phronesis* rappresenta la saggezza pratica, la capacità di comprendere la realtà, riconoscere i problemi e agire di conseguenza in modo etico. Mutuando questa idea, Jones prova a dare organicità alla propria traiettoria intellettuale avanzando una proposta teorica (parte 6 e conclusioni della parte 7). L'originalità della teorizzazione affonda nel voler costruire un ponte comunicativo (e di intenti) tra figure accademiche e figure del *coaching*, in tal modo superando la separazione tra "ragione teorica" e "ragione pratica".

Nel tentativo di rompere la spirale della riproduzione, frutto di una visione tecnico-strumentale dell'attività pedagogica in ambito atletico, l'enfasi viene perciò posta sulla possibilità immaginativa del *coaching*. Al fine di valorizzarla è introdotto il concetto di *quality of mind*

> A 'quality of mind' argues for a more reflexive account of one's location and habitus […] than simply reflection on an issue, event or performance. In doing so, considerable space is built for agency, in judiciously examining the self in terms of the role occupied (Jones, 2019, p. 327).

Quality of mind rappresenta una virtù: l'abilità (dei *coach*) di mettere a tema la complessità e porsi una serie di interrogativi; può voler dire, per esempio, passare dal vaglio critico di una sessione di allenamento al domandarsi chi gioca un ruolo nel costruire quella sessione, dalla

comprensione di ciò che si osserva "dalla panchina" a questioni generali riguardanti le ragioni che rendono possibile il dispiegarsi di un tipo di *coaching* in un tipo di contesto e le sue implicazioni educative.

Le ricerche di Jones evidenziano che l'esito di un certo modo di comunicare innesca spesso la subordinazione all'autorità, promuovendo modelli culturali fortemente normativi senza che le figure del *coaching* mettano in discussione il proprio operato quotidiano, frutto anch'esso di precedenti percorsi di socializzazione. Tuttavia, la *quality of mind* tiene presente la dimensione dell'*agency*; tiene cioè in conto che il *coaching*, articolandosi all'interno di ben precise cornici socioculturali, si sviluppa nel tempo, ha un particolare passato, rende possibile un particolare presente ed è rivolto al futuro: "In this respect, it is based not on what we have or what we know, but on the absent; what we do not yet know" (Jones, 2019, p. 331).

Il concetto di *quality of mind* sottolinea così la possibilità di ottenere un ripensamento delle culture sportive a partire dal *coaching*. A questo proposito Jones introduce un secondo concetto, quello di "riparazione" (*work of repair*) (Jones, 2019, p. 337). In linea con gli assunti degli studi precedenti, anche la riparazione è teorizzata nei termini di un'attività (micro)politica: una negoziazione perenne, in particolare con i/le praticanti, che deve affondare su una comune volontà di trasformazione. Ed è qui che può entrare in gioco la ricerca, con la sua vocazione critica, e farsi strumento al servizio del *coaching*. Anche perché le resistenze al cambiamento possono provenire *in primis* da atlete e atleti. In uno studio con Liv Hemmestad su una squadra norvegese di pallamano femminile, si mostra come l'introduzione, da parte dell'allenatrice, di un nuovo linguaggio pedagogico improntato alla cooperazione, all'uguaglianza e alla tolleranza (principi ritenuti coerenti con i valori della società scandinava) inneschi una serie di conflitti con le giocatrici, socializzate a una cultura individualista e poco disposte a mettere in discussione la sicurezza ontologica acquisita circa la propria identità di atlete di alto livello (Jones, 2019, p. 301). Facendosi promotrice di una "riparazione progressiva" (*progressive repair*) del proprio operato, l'allenatrice, in quanto "attore virtuoso" (*virtuoso actor*), adopera allora una serie di accorgimenti e costruisce momenti di confronto con le giocatrici.

Esempi come questi mostrano che certi contesti di *coaching* sono più propensi alla sperimentazione e alla trasformazione di altri: sport d'élite e professionismo sono attraversati da finalità ben differenti dallo sport di base, o rispetto ad attività prettamente di svago o più marcatamente spirituali (come alcune arti marziali orientali e lo yoga). La riparazione necessita di "tempo", "sensibilità", relazioni costruite dando spazio all'emozione e ai sentimenti (Jones, 2019 p. 284). Ma fino a che punto un *coach* dovrebbe essere disposta/disposto a farlo? Quali interessi la/lo muove? Qual è il limite oltre il quale non spingersi? Come evitare che le attenzioni personali non si trasformino in vincoli di dipendenza? Come contemplare le relazioni personali, dare spazio ai sentimenti dei/delle praticanti, con le pressioni del contesto?

La riparazione dischiude, insomma, anche una serie di ambiguità: rispetto alla difficoltà nel coniugare attenzione all'individuo nella sua interezza e performance agonistica, oppure rispetto all'impossibilità, da parte dei *coach*, e nonostante i tentativi di cambiare un certo modo di interagire, di predire esattamente le azioni dei/delle praticanti, cosa esattamente apprenderanno. Poiché mosso dal coniugare speculazione e azione, anche teorizzando Jones non sottostima le difficoltà insite nei processi di trasformazione reale. Anche per affrontare i dilemmi pratici, nel

2012 lo studioso è stato tra i fondatori della *Sports Coaching Review* (rivista di studi critici rivolta tanto alla comunità accademica quanto alla comunità del *coaching*) e, da alcuni anni, è impegnato nella supervisione di diversi progetti di ricerca-azione che hanno per oggetto diverse organizzazioni atletico-sportive.

In definitiva, muovendosi tra decostruzione e (tentativi di) ricostruzione, *Studies in Sport Coaching* non offre tanto una teoria unificata del *coaching* sportivo, quanto una prospettiva sensibilizzante rispetto a una serie di temi e processi che necessitano di ulteriori concettualizzazioni ed indagini. Con le parole di Jones (2019, p. 366): "No definitive answers are extended, just directions of travel".

5. Conclusioni

Il lavoro di uno dei massimi studiosi di sport *coaching* costituisce un importante riferimento per approcciare un aspetto cardine dell'esperienza sportiva. Vista l'attenzione rivolta alle interazioni nell'ambiente organizzativo, la prospettiva discussa può declinarsi su diversi contesti di pratica, tenendo presente l'ampio ventaglio di attività atletico-motorie che costellano il panorama sociale contemporaneo.

Gli scandali recenti legati agli abusi subìti dalle ginnaste olimpiche (alla mercé di staff tecnico e dirigenti) così come il panico morale attorno alle MMA innescato dall'omicidio di Willy Monteiro Duarte (per mano di due lottatori) impongono la necessità di ripensare le finalità e le modalità educative del *coaching* sportivo. Gli studi microsociologici di Jones ci restituiscono un'immagine assai distante dalle retoriche di senso comune (in parte semplificatorie, in parte consolatorie) secondo cui esercizio fisico e sport si fanno portatori di benessere, individuale come anche collettivo. Semmai, se non problematizzati a partire dai loro aspetti più minuti e ordinari, sport e attività fisica (anche per mezzo del *coaching)* rischiano di rimanere un grande meccanismo di ratifica delle gerarchie sociali e delle categorie cognitive a fondamento della realtà. Per questo motivo, la proposta teorico-analitica del sociologo britannico si rivolge a studiose e studiosi stimolando al dialogo con le comunità di pratica, così da rompere l'*episteme* tecno-regolativa del *coaching* e rimodellarlo in senso etico, nella sua dimensione di cura. Perfino sul versante della ricerca applicata ancora molto deve essere fatto.

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