

Lifestyle sports delivery and sustainability: clubs, communities and user-managers

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Abstract

Lifestyle and informal sports have been recognised by policy makers as offering opportunities to increase participation in physical activity, particularly amongst hard to reach groups. Lifestyle sports are, however, double edged in their potential to achieve these goals. Their playful and non-traditional features may attract new participants less interested in traditional sports but the very liquidity of these activities may mean that the engagement of participants is fragmented and not sustained beyond a particular period in their lives. This paper presents the perspective of mountain biking user-managers; those involved in the delivery, clubs and communities of mountain bikers across the UK. Findings suggest that whilst lifestyle sport communities are dependent on the work of formalised clubs to gain access to the funding and resources they need to sustain their activities, core participants will not always want to have to liaise or become involved formally within a club structure. In addition clubs will not succeed in delivering sustained activities in line with sport policy to increase and maintain participation by relying on individual grants and without the support of an active informal user community. Accounts highlight the

importance of engaging informal user communities with a sense of ownership such as locals to ensure new participants are integrated and the community is able to replenish.

Keywords

Informal sports; mountain biking; policy; funding; hard to reach

Introduction

Lifestyle sports have been identified as representing an opportunity for policy makers to encourage and sustain new engagements in sport and physical activity by new user groups, particularly young people (Tomlinson *et al.* 2005, King & Church, 2015).

Lifestyle sports, sometimes referred to as informal sports, are seen as routes to increasing participation as more playful physical cultures than traditional sports, and because of their emphasis on participant rather than institutional control (Turner, 2013; Wheaton, 2015) . Lifestyle sports are expressive of identity and provide symbolic meaning for participants alongside other cultural preferences such as music, art and fashion (Wheaton, 2010, 2013). Potentially they can provide a useful platform for expanding participation in sport by groups traditionally associated with low participation such as young women and young people from socially disadvantaged groups (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; King & Church, 2015).

Understanding if policy initiatives to support lifestyle sports can achieve such progressive outcomes is a complex issue. Turner's (2013) study of a new major indoor skateboard park in Scotland revealed that the facility was a success in terms of

participation, but had negative consequences for the experiences of skaters inside and outside the park. Furthermore, leisure theory has identified a changing cultural context to leisure activities in general that will also affect participation and experience in lifestyle sports. The theorisation of leisure as liquid, shaped by self-development (Blackshaw, 2010) and wider changes in all aspects of people's lives (Roberts, 2011) recognises that participant involvement in lifestyle sport will be fluid and uncertain, often linked to particular phases of in people's lives and identity development. For policies aimed at increasing participation in physical activity lifestyle sports are double edged in their potential to achieve policy goals. Their playful and non-traditional features may attract new participants not interested in traditional sports but the very liquidity of these activities may mean that the engagement of participants is fragmented and not sustained beyond a particular period in their lives.

The participant experience of lifestyle sports has been explored across a range of activities, users and settings, however, this paper argues that **the** challenges of sustaining participation in **these** informal sports has been given little attention. **The** analysis of lifestyle sport governance in academic research is **also** only partially developed. Understanding the potential opportunities of **informal** sports for achieving policy goals for participation in sport and physical activity requires more research into the activities and experiences of those involved in **their** management and delivery.

The next section of the this paper summarises some of the key issues identified in academic research into lifestyle sports governance and subsequent sections present new findings based on primary data from semi-structured interviews with user-managers of lifestyle sports, in this case, mountain biking. The findings provide new

insights suggesting that sustaining participation in lifestyle sports requires policy and management initiatives that are built on and acknowledge the informal co-dependencies between clubs and user communities. This paper recognises the integrated nature of lifestyle sport communities exploring the role of ‘user-managers’; that is those involved in lifestyle sport delivery who are a part of, acutely aware of and influenced by user experiences which have been the focus of so much of the academic literature.

Lifestyle sports governance and sustainability

Lifestyle sport empirical research is dominated by participant accounts (see other papers this edition) focussing on a wide range of issues such as experience, emotions, spaces, behaviours and power relations between users. These reveal how involvement in lifestyle sports can, for some participants, be a long-term life and identity project. For others it conforms to Blackshaw’s (2010) notion of liquid leisure and participation is transitory as individuals are involved in many other leisure and sports activities over time. The governance, regulation and management of lifestyle sports, however, is less well understood. Tomlinson et al. (2005), for example, argued over a decade ago that the institutionalisation of the provision of lifestyle sports and the subsequent impacts on participants requires further examination. Gilchrist & Wheaton (2011) also claimed that that the understanding of these activities within lifestyle sport policy contexts is limited.

More recently, research on policy and governance in lifestyle and informal sports has started to emerge (cf. Turner, 2013; King & Church, 2015; Gilchrist and Osborn,

2016;) along with discussions of the relationship between theory and management of informal sports (Adams & Deane, 2009; Warner, 2016; Warner, Dixon, & Chalip, 2012). Commentators have identified how informal sports activity is influenced by the relationship between national professionalised policy makers and the local delivery of sports. May et al. (2013) for example, explore the often volunteer led delivery of informal sports by voluntary sports clubs (VSC) who are looked upon to deliver on sport participation targets in a top down approach led by central policy bodies. Turner (2013) draws on the work of Norbert Elias (2000) to argue that a top down approach leads to a funding hegemony that contributes to a civilising process controlling the behaviours and experiences of informal sports participants, clubs and communities.

For Warner et al. (2012), the structural and environmental contexts in which sport is played affects the sense of community experienced by those in and around sport which in turn will influence regulation, management and sustainability of participation. Their study sought to compare formal and informal settings for sports participation finding seven factors that were particularly important in building a sense of community including administrative consideration, common interest, competition, equity in administrative decisions, leadership, social spaces, and voluntary action. A number of the key governance and management issues identified by Warner et al. (2012) such as administration, leadership and competition have been studied by research that focuses on the role of [National Governing Bodies \(NGBs\)](#) and sports clubs in the regulation of lifestyle sport especially the role of volunteers and voluntarism more generally.

In some lifestyle sports, policy bodies and their funding structures have a more influential effect on participation and governance than traditional sports due to a lack of NGBs. For example mountain biking in the UK is governed not by a specific governing body but by British Cycling, and within the lifestyle sports sector there is a dearth of governing bodies by which to implement such plans. This can have consequences for clubs and the sense of community as the role of NGBs in planning resources and applying for funding with partners lower down the hierarchy can be very influential on sport clubs tasked with delivering activities (May et al., 2013). In many lifestyle sports, therefore, with relatively poorly developed NGBs, local participation in sport is often dependent upon the delivery of activities by volunteers who organise, direct and manage community sports clubs. Volunteering can be vital for developing a sense of community in sports settings and, in turn, the role of volunteer can become an important part of an individual's identity (Cuskelly & O'Brien, 2013).

Yet a large body of work has recognised the problems of recruiting and retaining volunteers for sports clubs affecting their capacity to deliver opportunities for sports participation (cf. Coates, Wicker, Feiler, & Breuer, 2014; Cuskelly & O'Brien, 2013). Others have found that the 'the unique culture of VSCs is directly shaped by the deep-seated values and motives of their volunteers.' (May et al., 2013, p. 413). One consequence is that the sports clubs can operate for the benefit of their members rather than playing a role in developing the social capital of all participants (Adams & Deane, 2009). Furthermore, the independence and self-interestedness of VSCs can inhibit the implementation of sports policy makers at the national level because their interests and values may not always coincide with those of sports policy (Garrett, 2004).

In the UK, sports provision at a local level also relies upon the ability to successfully obtain grant funding to support facility development and coaching yet previous research claims that government funding can exacerbate problems of relying on volunteers due to increased institutional pressure and expectations in relation to volunteer roles (Coates et al., 2014). Funding bodies also make requirements that VSCs have specific mission statements, that they cater for specific target groups and professionalise their activities yet clubs often lack the time and expertise to implement these requirements, or even to access such grants (Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2013).

This situation is particularly problematic for lifestyle sports communities and sports clubs which are inherently informal in nature. May et al. (2013) identify three types of club structures: informal clubs being characterised as having few or no formal management practices; semi-formal clubs reporting some formalised management practices, most commonly development plans and clubmark accreditation; whilst formal clubs report a higher number of formalised management practices including development plans, written club policies, job descriptions for volunteer positions, clubmark accreditation, external partnerships and an active engagement and willingness to assist with government targets (May et al., 2013). Indeed a lack of formal organisation and the unstructured nature of lifestyle sports can make it difficult just to document accurate measures of participation (Wheaton, 2015). May et al (2013) also found that the least formal clubs lacked the infrastructure to fully engage with policy objectives due to a lack of volunteers and suitable facilities and spaces to accommodate the delivery, and a lack of capacity to deal with the bureaucracy. Nevertheless, strategic planning is often crucial to the functioning of VSCs to cope

with the uncertainty associated with government funding (Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2013).

Informal sports clubs that are more typical of lifestyle sports rather than mainstream sports such as football and swimming have a strong tendency to be social organisations in which members simply want to play their sport (May et al., 2013). L'Aoustet and Griffet (2001) juxtapose participation in formal and informal sport as fundamentally different from each other, in part through the requirement for membership of a governing association or club in formal setups whilst informal lifestyle sport participants may not require membership and even reject institutional links. Green, Thurston and Vaage (2015) go as far to argue that a shift towards lifestyle sport participation amongst young people in Norway has coincided with a diminishing role for sports clubs and teams, whilst others have argued that club based sport has been recognised as exclusive and out of touch with modern forms of consumption (Goretzki, Esser, & Claydon, 2008).

The experience of lifestyle sports, therefore, is more likely to be shaped by the nature of the participant community rather than a formal governing body or club. For Warner and Dixon (2011, p. 258) sense of community can be defined as 'characteristics that lead members to feeling a sense of belonging, attachment, shared faith and interest in common goals or values'. Lifestyle sport communities have been described as tribal, insular, and at times exclusionary in nature (cf. Crosset & Beal, 1997; Edensor & Richards, 2007). Nevertheless lifestyle sports have also been recognised for the strong social connections formed between participants of informal communities where belonging, even to a loose sporting community is central to the experience. Mountain biking has been recognised as a community based on shared values, identities and

lifestyles (Ruff & Mellors, 1993; King & Church, 2015) with Lüthje et al. (2006) crediting user innovators within the community for continually progressing and developing the sport outside of commercial or policy domains. Brown (2016) argues that mountain biking is heavily reliant on informal norms and therefore mountain bikers who lack belonging to the community can experience entrenched feelings of disconnection and alienation affecting their performances as outdoor citizens.

Alongside these interactions between participant communities and the administrative and delivery roles of VSCs, NGBs and policy in shaping informal sports, Warner et al. (2012) further highlighted the influence of the environments and spaces of sport on the participant experience. It is claimed, for example, that there is a trend towards less formal, less organised venues for participation in sport. Green et al. (2015) observed a shift in the blend of club-based and informal venues towards the latter, as sports clubs become less important generally, and for children moving into youth and young adulthood in particular.

In addition, clashes and conflict over space both amongst users and between users and the regulators of space have been shown in a range of locations to be highly influential on lifestyle sport participant experiences (Gilchrist & Osborn, 2016 for parkour; Ravenscroft, Church, Gilchrist, & Heys, 2013 for kayaking; Tynon & Gómez, 2012 for surfing; cf. Vivoni, 2009 for skateboarding) User and manager conflict within mountain biking is the subject of several studies (cf. Brown, 2016; Carothers, Vaske, & Donnelly, 2001; Ramthun, 1995) in addition to an extensive body of work which explores the impact of mountain biking on the ecological functioning of green spaces they use for their sport (Beaumont & Reader, 2001;

Davies & Newsome, 2009; Goeft & Alder, 2001; Quinn & Chernoff, 2010).

Consequently many participants in mountain biking develop forms of self-governance of spaces whilst the managers of lifestyle sports spaces and facilities are continually negotiating complex relationships and power relations with the sports participants, landowners of spaces and other users (Brown, 2016; King & Church, 2015; Ravenscroft et al., 2013).

This emergent literature on the complexities of the governance, regulation, delivery and management of lifestyle sports participants and spaces reveals that changes in participation in these activities and the sustainability of participation cannot simply be understood by impact studies of policy measures. The perspectives and experience of managers have been neglected in previous lifestyle sports research which has focussed on user experiences of governance. Instead it is necessary to consider, as this paper does, how any policy initiatives interact with the formal and informal governance and regulation of lifestyle sport that will involve policy makers, NGBs, VSCs, user communities and the managers and owners of spaces. The primary research discussed in this paper is based on interviews with individuals involved in the delivery and management of mountain biking. These informants were chosen to explore these issues as they are involved in all these different intersecting aspects of governance and regulation because the managers of mountain biking spaces and facilities are usually long standing participants in the sport and the associated lifestyles and cultures. It is argued in this paper, therefore, that they are better described as user-managers since their user experiences shape their actions as managers of clubs, spaces and facilities. The next section of this paper describes the methods used to undertake research with user-managers of mountain biking spaces.

Methods

This study presents empirical analysis of findings from qualitative interviews with nine individuals who play key roles in the delivery or management of mountain biking. Whilst the study makes no claims to capture the entirety of mountain biking delivery in the UK purposive theoretical sampling was employed with the aim of including a broad range of managerial experiences across a broad range of locations with differing organisational patterns and practices. Informants all held at least one recognised delivery role such as site manager, club chairperson, club committee member, coach etc. in either a voluntary or employed capacity with nearly all of them acting in a number of different capacities (see table one). Informants were based in multiple destinations across the UK offering access for mountain biking and as such offer a perspective on a broad range of policy interventions, clubs, communities and spaces in their accounts as well as an understanding of mountain biking as a lifestyle sport. In addition to their managerial roles, all informants also identified as mountain bikers, either as past or current users of multiple sites and thus were embedded within the wider mountain biking community. Thus accounts offer the perspective of ‘user-managers’ which recognises the importance of self-governance, belonging and community in the delivery and experience of lifestyle sports.

Table 1 Here

Participants were recruited through respondent driven snowballing and existing contacts which proved highly effective given the emphasis placed on community and connectedness within the mountain biking community, even beyond individual sites (cf. Brown, 2016). Seven semi structured interviews were conducted in person with two conducted via recorded telephone conversation. All data collection was carried out by the same researcher. The research sought to understand the types of practices occurring in mountain biking delivery, who amongst the community takes part, and how the practices are experienced by those within the community and was partly informed through previous discussions with users (King & Church, 2013, 2015) in order to promote a dialogue between users and managers over the delivery of lifestyle sports. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were coded to organise and reduce the data, identify themes and relationships within the data and subjected to interpretation and analysis to generate key concepts (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Respondents gave written consent for the recording of data and all identifiable details such as participant names and locations have been removed to protect participant identity.

The UK mountain biking context

Mountain biking is a lifestyle sport which has increased in popularity in recent years (Hardiman & Burgin, 2013). Because of the informal nature of the sport participation data is scarce but research by the Outdoor Industries Association in conjunction with Sport England (2015) indicates 420,000 people participate in mountain biking once a week and it accounts for 9% of all outdoor recreational activities in England. It is

estimated that 11.8 million in the UK own a mountain bike (Tourism Intelligence Scotland, 2011). Research by (Taylor, 2010) claims mountain bikers are motivated to participate through play, fitness, interpersonal rewards, self esteem and personal challenge, and physical and mental escape. Mountain biking, however, is not a homogenous activity with disciplines continually evolving, new styles emerging and participants crossing between activities which has led to a lack of consensus on agreed terminology. Davies & Newsome (2009) identify five different riding styles as cross country, touring, downhill, freeride, dirtjump according to their potential impacts on the environment. Whilst King and Church (2013) group downhill, dirtjump and freeride participant under the generic term DDF because of the use of similar equipment shared attitudes to competition, risk and their practices, and use of space in comparison with cross country participants.

Provision for mountain biking is formed largely of pay to ride mountain bike parks for dirtjump and downhill disciplines or trail centres for cross country or open access trails on government or local authority managed land for a range of disciplines. In addition mountain biking also occurs on private sites accessed informally either with or without landowner permission. It is in these settings which informal dirtjumps and freeride apparatus are located which are participant made and owned. Therefore these settings assume a cultural importance above other commercially run or externally managed settings and facilitate stronger place identification for participants (Moore & Graefe, 1994; Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992).

Findings

Delivering mountain biking: clubs and volunteers

The delivery of mountain biking across managed sites is often dependent upon the activities of an active membership club and the work of those members as volunteers. Volunteers are depended upon to carry out the majority of club-based work often with high levels of responsibility for demanding issues such as safety as evidenced by descriptions from volunteers themselves of their own responsibilities.

P 7: I have many roles in the club but I am unofficial safety officer and I am club secretary officially and trail manager so I have a number of roles, I just volunteer my time.

P 8: Other than coordinate between projects I am an ambassador for the club so I go to community meetings and manage sort of relationships. I kind of have those relationships between us and them and the council and us and other people that fund cycling.

In the club set ups involving the interviewees, all of the work is carried out by volunteers in terms of day to day to day running such as membership, marketing, coaching etc but also in terms of sustaining a future for access at space such as applying for funding or obtaining sponsorship. Some sites [charged an entry fee for site access or for competing in race events](#), of which a percentage funded the delivery of activities. [Most respondents, however](#), discussed a grants based approach to the running of mountain biking sites relying on applying for and receiving piecemeal funding attached to specific projects or activities.

As noted by (Adams, 2014), funding support becomes a structural necessity for VSCs but simultaneously ties them in to broader strategic aims and objectives of upper-tier organisations. Obtaining funding from external bodies requires clubs and volunteers to negotiate legal and legislative issues and to measure the impact of the intervention through club membership or increased participation. Respondents described engaging hard to reach groups of people as a key funding priority, [one of which was women and girls. In previous research on mountain biking women and girls represent approximately 10% of the mountain biking population \(Carothers et al., 2001; Ruff & Mellors, 1993\) and this therefore presents a significant challenge for clubs to meet funding targets. Other target groups include young people, for whom the sport of mountain biking may have appeal, but who are resistant to formalised activities such as organised rides or becoming members of a club where their participation would be captured.](#)

P 8: The funding is dependent on us getting fifty percent women into it and a percentage of ethnic minorities.

P 4: They have run a project here which has just finished between us and ***** which was for less abled cyclists with a range of modified bikes that people could come and try.

Grants were often experienced as very specific and short lived strategies which were rarely sustained beyond the life of the project with one participant commenting ‘once the funding runs out there is often indecision about what to do’ (P 2). Respondents identified that generating meaningful and sustained involvement, especially with young people, required more significant investments. As noted by one participant:

‘encouraging involvement is quite an expensive thing to get in to’ (P 2). Several respondents commented on the importance of providing training for what is a technical and high risk sport which requires a certain level of skill and fitness even at beginner level. In another example, the participant below who runs a cycle club describes the additional elements that are required to sustain an intervention for encouraging new mountain bikers that may have to be sourced from multiple benefactors.

P 8: You need storage and you need bikes, so you need to fill in a lot of funding forms and the council need to give you permission to put it somewhere in the park. We work well with the council but a lot of barriers to a lot of clubs is like if you can’t store kit. Where will I put cones? Where you gonna store the earth to replace the track? And where are you gonna store the rakes and the spades to maintain the tracks? So any track needs lots of facilities next to it and that needs funding.

The findings suggest that volunteers are able to generate funding but as Coates et al. (2014) noted they also face other major institutional challenges as a result of their involvement. Respondents also described the onus upon volunteers and clubs to maintain the space itself as the trails require continuous maintenance and rebuilding to prevent erosion. [Orr’s work highlights the highly skilled work carried out by heritage museum volunteers despite limited training.](#) Mountain biking sites are continually at risk from closure because of the importance of maintaining safe riding conditions. Club volunteers [frequently become responsible for often large scale trail work with limited resources.](#) Interviewees expressed some concern about the volume of work dependent upon volunteers and the sustainability of these arrangements.

P 4: Nobody in the club is paid to do the work. We have a digger driver which we pay a ridiculously low amount considering the hours he puts in and we have a trail manager that sometimes works sort of full time during the week up there and we pay him fifty pound a day. I mean about ninety five percent of the work that is done up there is volunteer work.

P 8: The nature of the surface it is limestone and dust it wears over time and one issue is putting more limestone dust on it and we have got some wheel barrows but you need sort of fifty wheelbarrows to resurface the whole track and so it is a big job maintaining the track.

The reliance on piecemeal funding streams does not provide a guarantee that a successful intervention will continue, or that new participants will engage long-term. Respondents describe their experience of projects failing because of gaps in income or at the end of set projects. The funding situation was frustrating at sites where they could see potential for developing participation but the future funding was not secured.

P 3: You know it's all money and we have rinsed our back account building the new trail so we are just waiting to see if there is funding to build more.

P 4: The difficult thing is that I can see it working but that doesn't mean the person with the money will put some more in.

Mountain biking clubs and the volunteers attached to them are clearly instrumental in the delivery of mountain biking, securing funding, organising training, addressing conflicts and managing spaces for users. [This is similar to other lifestyle sports in the](#)

UK where voluntarism is fundamental to how the sport is managed and undertaken. For example, canoeing and kayaking relies for access to many rivers on voluntary agreements with landowners negotiated by volunteer local club members which also results in ‘free riders’ who are not local club members also using the rivers covered by the agreements (Church & Ravenscroft, 2011). As discussed in the following excerpts, however, the lifestyle dimension and social world of mountain biking communities does not emanate from the club. As noted by Midol (1993) the approval of one’s peers as opposed to that of a formal organisation is often the measure of prestige for participants of informal sports. Unlike other cycling communities such as road cycling (cf. Bull, 2006), mountain bikers often reject formalising their involvement through membership of an organised club (CTTR, 2013).

P 9: We have exceeded all our targets except with clubs. The idea is that if you get someone into a cycling club they will then cycle and cycle and cycle. Mountain bikers almost view a club as almost an infringement on their freedom and that’s a huge generalisation but if you look at the figures it bares it out that clubs for mountain biking there are some really good ones out there but most people who mountain bike aren’t in a club.

The club structure and setup itself was acknowledged as a barrier for engaging those very groups the clubs received funding to attract. These issues were particularly pertinent in the work to engage young people and the user-managers note how engagement with mountain biking changes over the period of youth as identities and lifestyles develop. As noted by King & Church (2015), government managed sites require youth mountain biking participants to negotiate with clubs and authorities to

participate in activities such as jump and trail building which can see them migrate to other less managed sites.

P 1: To young kids absolutely between the ages of six and eleven having that club structures brilliant. For twelve to sixteen and up, to join a club at that age is more difficult because it's much more about the informal setting.

P 2: We do quite a lot of engagement with local youth with clubs and we have tried to do it with led cycling through our woods and things like that and we may even get a referral from social services but again it's too formalised and too group like.

Instead, as the findings below suggest for young people in their teenage years, and indeed for many adults, mountain biking is centred on informal lifestyle communities which exist at and across particular mountain biking sites. This presents both opportunities and challenges to user-managers and policy generally.

Delivering mountain biking: users, communities and spaces

The delivery of mountain biking is strongly influenced by the community of users occurring both across and within individual locations. Mountain bikers express a basic desire for acceptance and to be an insider (Brown 2016). Belonging to both other members the community and to the spaces within which their lifestyles are situated is central to the experience of mountain biking. Whilst some mountain bikers were involved in club activities, at all sites there was recognition of a wider body of users who performed the sport and who shared a strong community ethic outside of

any formalised club, policy or management structure. The respondent below offers an interpretation of the community at one location:

P 2: They are just people who have got together and they kind of ebb and flow and they have kind of got connections with other riders in the area but they are not a club, often it is a close knit community and they know everybody and they know about what is going on and some of them simply don't like that sort of formalised thing.

Within these communities there was a reliance on informal norms to regulate the use of outdoor space (cf. Brown, 2016). These operated beyond the rules of site managers and in some cases served to exclude individuals from full involvement in the mountain biking community, some of whom may have been from hard to reach groups which policies and funding streams were working to include (King & Church, 2015). Nevertheless user-managers also recognised the role community insiders played in upskilling new riders and (informally) training users in these informal codes of practice. Whereas many initiatives put in place formal volunteer schemes to train new participants it was suggested that 'if the volunteer base is representative then as role models they will bring them in but it's not that easy' (P7). Instead there was recognition of the informal volunteer, those core members within a strong community, that were often more effective than officially recognised volunteers or coaches in integrating new users.

P 1: If you don't have a biking community and you launch a bike park then they are not going to know how to ride it.

Whilst clubs were crucial in obtaining funding, delivering and practically supporting mountain biking, it is the view of those who deliver mountain biking that without a core and stable community any site of provision is unlikely to be successful. A buoyant community founded on strong social connections was crucial to ensuring a site or intervention would have longevity. In line with previous studies of lifestyle sports, specifically surfing (Beaumont & Brown, 2016; Olive, 2016; Olivier, 2010), mountain bikers develop a sport-space bond and value the opportunity to develop ownership through informal communities of 'locals' (King & Church, 2013). With roles as both users and managers, the respondents in this study recognised the importance of being connected and involved with this this community as part of sports delivery.

P 6: The worst thing that could ever happen is if someone has got an area that they want me to develop I can see that it will be a three month to four month project but what I realise is that I then need to have that ownership and find someone who wants to look after those trails because if you don't they will just decline.

P 2: The ownership issue is massive cos what happens at a lot of trail centres and in particular it is interesting cos at ***** because of the way that the money came in and had to be spent they just steamroller over the locals so the locals were quite happy that they got their own mountain bike trail but they didn't have a say in where it went. It instantly disengaged a group of people that also become increasingly renegade against the trail.

Acceptance and belonging to a wider outdoor community has been challenging for mountain bikers due to the nature of their movement and practice in spaces such as

national parks (Brown 2016). As previous research shows (Bavinton, 2007; Borden, 2001; Vivoni, 2009), the difficulty to gain access to spaces for the permitted performance of lifestyle sports is well documented with users experiencing conflict with both other users as well as with landowners, officials, or those managing the space. Locals play a vital role in negotiating these conflicts and are often active in campaigning for access rights. [Previous research describes how the actions of locals to protect their sporting environment imbues these participants with a sense of authority \(Olive, 2016\)](#). Lifestyle sports are grass roots activities and as such permitted access to sporting spaces can often result from the activities of one or two central figures who act to represent the local community on access issues. For those involved in delivery there was a recognition of the work of core members or insiders within the local mountain biking community in liaising with external parties to obtain permissions. As one participant asserts ‘a lot of these things are down to the individual’ (P1). User-managers discussed relationships between themselves and locals in policing and managing activities at sites and the problems of ensuring that participants adhered to site rules and the access to the space was maintained outside of a club structure.

P 2: If there is group there you say right this is your site for you to use. It is there twenty four hours a day to use as you see fit but if you trash it or if it is trashed we don't have the money to rebuild it and fix it. We have got the lottery funding and we match funded that partially though our own workforce but if this gets burnt or destroyed that's it.

Whilst the community was crucial in creating a sustainable user base at mountain biking sites, respondents reported that at times relying on individual participants

within these informal communities was problematic as there were some who wanted to continually adapt trails to suit their own riding style and experience, or they lacked trail building experience in terms of practical skills.

P 7: We have had quite a few people witter on at us or whatever and say we would like to get involved in the trail building and that is great and I think that the sort of people that want to get involved in building the trails, and I can understand, want to build a lot of trail very quickly and then they can ride it the next day. So you know we obviously have standards that need to be upheld and to make sure the trail lasts a long time so that doesn't work well with that.

In addition the lifestyle sport community is transient as many studies have noted (Anderson, 2014; Edensor & Richards, 2007; Roberts, 2011; Wheaton, 2010). The young and often aspirational nature of the community means that if those core figures move on, the future of an entire site can be jeopardised.

P 7: You get a few core people who work really hard and things can go great for a year and then they have a change of job or they are moving to so and so and then all of a sudden you are back to square one.

P 3: It's a fashion. You get that hardcore that will continue with it but overall most take an interest for a year or two and throw out the bike and do something more interesting.

As leisure theorists have noted leisure lives can be liquid and changeable (Blackshaw, 2010). [Mountain biking is an example of leisure that is self-generated; participants are](#)

making their own culture through patterns of actions known to members of the community but which are fluid and informal (Orr, 2006; Tomlinson & Crouch, 1994).

These quotes indicate that through their own positions as both producers and consumers of mountain biking, the user-managers are aware of this contemporary cultural context and accept this as an issue to be negotiated in their management approaches and their personal engagement with user communities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The delivery of mountain biking is heavily reliant on piecemeal funding and the work of user-managers, sports clubs and volunteers to develop the sport and the space and to attract new participants, often from hard to reach groups to the sport. Alongside Sotiriadou and Wicker (2013) and Turner (2013), this research has shown that in order to sustain activities an isolated funding approach does not provide stability for sports clubs or the communities they serve to grow and develop. Sustainable delivery of mountain biking requires supporting infrastructure and facilities to generate continued engagement which many grants do not take into account. **Targeting funding at hard to reach groups rather than improving the offer for existing participation is preventing mountain biking sites from developing buoyant communities of locals who are crucial contributors to vibrant and inclusive leisure spaces.** The research demonstrates the wide range of responsibilities undertaken by club volunteers such as obtaining funding, safety, trail maintenance and negotiations with local landowners and the personal pressures this creates. Recruiting and retaining volunteers is, however, a challenge for many sports clubs (Coates et al., 2014; Cuskelly & O'Brien, 2013). It is especially problematic for lifestyle sports, for whom the community lack enthusiasm for formalising processes within sport.

Many facilities are only manageable if a formally recognised club is operating and there are problems ensuring longevity of mountain biking delivery without a club structure to secure funding, arrange trail maintenance and in some cases, operate a site on a day-to-day basis. These findings show, however, that a club provides no guarantee the resource stays maintained or well used. Clubs may be formed in lifestyle sport spaces, however, locals and core participants will not always want to have to liaise or become involved formally within a club structure. Clubs [and their volunteers](#) involved in delivery of mountain biking must have resonance with the wider sport community and without this they lack acceptance from participants that will limit the sustainability of the club and participation more generally.

There have been calls for more consideration of the lifestyle aspects such as the community values and ethos in the management of lifestyle sports which have been addressed in this study by its focus on the user-managers involved in mountain biking delivery. Community and belonging have been extensively explored from the user perspective in previous work (Beaumont & Brown, 2016; Dupont, 2014), and recognised the phenomenon of locals or insiders. This research shows that in addition to the interactions between users, the community also encapsulates the practices of governance, regulation and management which occur in and around them. The findings also show that involving the community in the delivery of lifestyle sports may be crucial to ensuring longevity of participation. Whilst club volunteers are relied upon to engage in formal activities, it is the view of user-managers that the local community will show others how to use these spaces and improve their skill set, set examples about good practice, and provide direction over the future of the site.

Accounts highlighted the importance of engaging those with a sense of ownership such as locals to ensure the success and sustainability of a policy interventions and demonstrated how user-managers were able to recognise and engage with this core community. Successful and sustained delivery relies upon a community of core participants who are willing to informally take on roles and nurture a strong, sustainable and cohesive user base alongside user-managers, and the recognition of such models of delivery within sport policy.

It has been suggested that lifestyle sport communities and participants are transient and changeable in a way that limits the effectiveness of policy and attempts to increase physical activity and participation through these sports (see Roberts, 2011 for more on this). This challenge for sports policy is linked to the wider context of liquid leisure (Blackshaw 2010) resulting in marked changes in sport and leisure activities during people's lives. The mountain biking communities that user-managers are part of as mountain biking participants and engage with through their management activities are not fixed and their members change. [A lack of involvement of community insiders in formal volunteer roles further compounds the issue of sustainability at sites vulnerable to closure.](#) The responses presented by user-managers suggest a clear awareness of mountain biking as a major identity marker for some individuals whereas for others it was a liquid activity they were involved in for a limited time period often when they were young. The findings suggest a buoyant and involved local community is crucial to ensure succession of those who play key roles [and further work is required to consider the ways in which clubs and volunteers can work alongside these informal but influential social worlds.](#) Interventions linked to sport participation should recognise the legitimacy of user communities and the

role they may play in both facilitating and sustaining new engagements in addition to those of organised sports clubs.

Along with Warner (2016) we argue research should focus on how a sense of community is fostered in informal sport settings in order to improve delivery and sustainability of these sports. This will lead to policies in tune with liquid leisure context and transitory participation trends but also aim to sustain participation perhaps alongside other sports in people's lives. Recognising the informal communities which occur around lifestyle sports will also help engage hard to reach groups and allow policy to negotiate the double edged opportunities and challenges of lifestyle sports and limit the ongoing problem of short engagement as young people are more likely to continue if they feel belonging to an albeit transient leisure community.

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