Expanding Institutional Boundaries and Eroding Practices: Examining the Effects of Virtual Innovations on the Sport of Cycling

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Innovation, defined as “any idea, practice or material artifact perceive as new by the relevant unit of adoption” (Zaltman et al., 1973, p. 10), can impact institutional processes, arrangements, boundaries, and practices (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Innovation has been impactful within the sport industry. It has reformed partnerships (Turner & Shilbury, 2010), changed sponsorship strategies (Dees, 2011), shaped organizational branding strategies (Balloul & Bennett, 2012), and altered organizational field dynamics (Nite & Washington, 2017). As technology advances, innovation has tested the boundaries of what we consider “sport.” For example, the emergence of eSports has the potential to alter sport paradigms (Cunningham et al., 2018; Heere, 2018). In this study, we examine how technological innovations have expanded boundaries and altered practices within the institution of cycling.

In recent years, the sport of cycling has seen an uptick in the usage of online technologies, such as Zwift, Strava, and Garmin Connect, which connect riders to online communities and riding maps across the world. With more riders engaging in online activities, the sport of cycling has seemingly shifted from primarily being an outdoor sport to being an indoor, stationary endeavor. Further, the international governing body of cycling, Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), has been working to establish rules for indoor virtual cycling competitions and an eSports World Championship. As a result, the norms of cycling, including social dynamics and practices, seem to be shifting. We seek to answer the following questions: Why have cyclists engaged in virtual cycling? How have virtual innovations impacted the social dynamics and practices of cycling? Have virtual innovations altered perceptions of what it means to be a cyclist?

We adopted a constructivist paradigm to address the research questions. We interviewed cyclists (men and women) of varying skill levels who have engaged in both outdoor (traditional) and virtual (innovation) cycling. Data analysis followed the recommendations of Gioia et al. (2012) wherein we identified first order concepts, second order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions. Preliminary findings have shown that cyclists in our study engage in virtual cycling due to safety concerns, time saving, and for improved physical performance. However, virtual cycling tends to be performed in solitude with minimal attention being paid to traditional cycling skills and social dynamics. Virtual cycling has provided safe and consistent means for physical activity but has resulted in the general decline of bicycle handling skills. As such, cyclists who primarily engage in traditional outdoor cycling have lamented the erosion of skill and social dynamics of cycling. Our research suggests that innovation may alter sport paradigms by impacting boundaries and practices of traditional conceptions of sport (see also Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).