

Promoting sustained sports participation through online social networks - Does it work?

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An inactive lifestyle with less physical activity and sports has negative consequences for people's health and increasingly strains our healthcare system. Hence, the importance of research into determinants of physical inactivity and sports participation is widely recognized (see, for example, the [Dutch National Sports Agreement](#) or the alarming reports from the [World Health Organization](#)).

Current initiatives aimed at promoting an active lifestyle often take an individual-level approach. They are, for example, focused on enhancing motor skills or [self-efficacy](#). However, even if these interventions work, their positive effects often only last in the short term.

[Research](#) in health psychology has shown that sustainable changes in health behavior (e.g., smoking and alcohol consumption) depend on the approval of the behavior by the social environment and whether specific health behavior is also prevalent within the person's social network. To keep people active in the long term, researchers, professionals, and policymakers are therefore increasingly focusing on the influence of social networks.

Online Social Networks

Online social networks may be a crucial target for cost-effective [interventions](#) to promote sports participation and physical activity. Unfortunately, there is still limited knowledge on how online sports networks can be used to keep people active.

Online sports apps, such as [Zwift](#) and [Garmin Connect](#), have become immensely popular in recent years, both among beginners and professionals. These sports apps provide users with an easy way to track their sports activities and connect users through their online networking services. Users of these apps can communicate with each other, encourage one another, give kudos, or compete with each other.

We wondered whether and how people within these existing online sports networks influence each other and whether our research can contribute to the development of online social network interventions.

Social Support and Social Comparison

We [investigated](#) influence processes within [Strava](#), the largest and most well-known global online sports network. Specifically, we focused on the online Strava networks of five Dutch running clubs. We collected longitudinal data on kudos networks (who gives kudos to whom?) and running activities (how often and how long do members run each week?).

We expected that receiving kudos (a virtual thumbs-up) would motivate runners to stay active. Additionally, we expected that the activities of clubmates would serve as inspiration. Therefore, runners would tend to emulate the running behavior of their clubmates. And especially of those clubmates who run more frequently and for longer durations than the runner him/herself.

Positive and Negative Social Influence

Consistent with our theoretical expectations, we found that runners who received kudos from more clubmates were less likely to reduce their weekly running frequency and duration. This represents a form of 'positive influence.' We also observed that the running behavior of club members who exchanged kudos began to resemble each other.

However, contrary to our expectations, runners tended to come to resemble especially clubmates who ran less often than themselves. Less active running companions showed that it was acceptable to be less active, representing a form of 'negative influence.'

The Way Forward

Our research demonstrates that a focus on online social networks offers *opportunities* and *risks* for policy aimed at promoting sustainable sports participation and combat inactivity. Receiving social support, even if it's just through a virtual thumbs-up, is motivating. However, the danger is that online friends may more likely drag each other down rather than uplift each other's activity levels.

So, what might a successful online social network intervention look like according to us? We recommend sports professionals (e.g., 'Buurtsportcoaches') to use online platforms where participants can record their daily sports and physical activities. These platforms should prominently feature the more active participants over the less active ones, for example, by using virtual activity rankings. This way, we expect that good examples will inspire others more quickly, and the risk of negative influence will decrease. It is also crucial that participants can easily compliment each other for their recorded activities.

Finally, the platform should allow for inactive participants to 'poke' each other. So, in addition to kudos, the platform should have social interaction features that allow participants to (re)activate their inactive online connections.

We will take further steps to better understand the success factors of such social network interventions.

Reference

[Franken, R., Bekhuis, H., and Tolsma, J. \(2023\). Kudos make you run! How runners influence each other on the online social network Strava. *Social Networks*.](#)