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Tourism communities and social ties: the role of online and offline tourist social networks in building social capital and sustainable practice

Abstract

Mobile connectivity enables the adoption of new ways to connect with social networks which are changing how we might, and could, seek support. In the tourism domain we increasingly blend online and offline presence to engage with social networks in the spatial location, at a distance and across time. This paper explores the forms of community that exist in physical tourism contexts, contexts not previously analysed through a community lens, and explores how mobile technology is creating connections within and beyond existing social networks. It examines how sustainable tourism can be enhanced by mobile connectivity through new space-time practices and using ephemeral interpersonal relationships to harness niche groups to create bottom-up social systems interested in sharing experiences, ideas and resources. Special attention is given to the concept of gelling socialities which proposes a less ridged network structure, and to the need to understand the increasingly liquid social dynamics of mobile social interactions. The paper adds to the theories surrounding community, social ties and tourism's value to society. It draws on data from in-depth interviews undertaken while designing and testing a collaborative travel app. It contributes to growing research into the new technologies increasingly available for sustainable tourism marketing and implementation.

Keywords: Community; social capital; social ties; mobile technology; gelling socialities; fleeting-ties

Introduction

Community focused research in sustainable tourism has been dominated by work on resident and business communities and predominantly explores the relationship between these communities, tourism development and tourists (see Choi & Murray, 2010; Tosun, 2006). More recently attention has turned to virtual tourist communities where research strands have explored interest based communities, such as couch surfing (see, for example, Rosen, Lafontaine & Hendrickson, 2011) and sharing of knowledge and tourism experiences through social media (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Aside from this, tourists and the physical contexts in which they come together have received little analysis from a community perspective, presumably because the tourism setting is considered too fleeting to constitute community in a meaningful sense. We contest this and in this paper explore how tourists form communities both in the sense of the traditional place based understanding of community (Putnam, 1995) and an interpersonal relationship based perspective where shared norms and interests create a sense of belonging (Wellman, 2001). We explore how neighbourhood arises in new ways (Kempen & Wissink, 2014) in tourism. Drawing on studies which explore whether technology has weakened, reinforced or supplemented forms of local connection (Fortunati, Taipale & de Luca, 2013; Hampton, Lee & Her, 2013; Ohnmacht, 2009; Sheller, 2004), we

argue that the rise in networked individualism (Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase, Chen, Hampton, Diaz, Miyata, 2003) has reinforced the importance of place for personal networks (Frith, 2012; Hampton 2016; Wellman et al., 2003). We explore how mobile connectivity might enhance forms of community in a tourism setting through maintaining social ties both near and at a distance, and bridging to individuals outside our social sphere, an area that has received little attention in research (Wilken, 2010). In our analysis we draw on perspectives of social capital that reflect both the view of this as a public good and Bourdieu's perspective that social capital can be exclusionary (Julien, 2014).

Contemporary thinking on sustainable tourism has largely focused on reducing the impacts of tourism while maximising benefits to sustain local communities, thus promoting inter- and intra-generational equity. In this paper, we return to Krippendorf's (1987) view that tourism should also seek to improve the tourist experience to develop the 'conscious traveller' from which there arise opportunities for more responsible tourism. We focus on the changing nature of community which affects society (Wellman et al., 2003) and, as our means of developing and maintaining social capital evolves, this has implications for social support, collective action and social cohesion (Hampton, 2016). This may enhance opportunities for sustainable tourism or give rise to less sustainable tourism practice. Many tourism contexts provide especially valuable spaces where tourists can re-visit communitarian ideals; they are semi-public places (Hampton et al., 2013) where people encounter diverse others. This has the potential to foster positive social action (i.e. social capital as a public good), but this may be limited through observation of the collective inactivity of others. Further, based on the perspective of social capital as conserving access to resources (Julien, 2014), tourism spaces may reinforce closed groups and inhibit opportunities for social support.

The ubiquity of digital technology offers particular opportunities to tourists, who are mobile in nature. The smartphone, with its logistical, relational, informational and mobile entertainment functions (Campbell & Kwak, 2011), is now used extensively in the tourism domain (Wang, Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2014). While research has focused on online sharing through review sites addressing issues of trust and the impact on business marketing practices (Milano, Baggio & Piattelli, 2011), there is a need to better understand how various communication and sharing practices offline, online and in-between are building social capital and providing opportunities to satisfy basic needs within tourism. This area is under researched, not understood and under theorised.

Taking Sheller's (2004) lead that a network might not be the most appropriate way to analyse the new "technosocialities" of mobility we explore how a more messy, gel-like metaphor, first suggested by sociologist Harrison White (1992), might offer insights into the forms of community that emerge from a tourism setting, in this case based around a campsite. Sheller (2004) uses the term "gelling socialities" to describe how mobile technology enables people to dynamically slip in and out of different social contexts from the spatial and temporal present to geographically distant social spaces. This enables communication between tourists to bridge those present and absent and provides an abstract social space in which to negotiate the exchange of information and resources, often with complete strangers, with potential to inform more sustainable practices. We illustrate how a 'gel' concept provides a novel way to understand the messiness of exchanges in real and virtual tourist communities. We argue that the network structure needs additional concepts that extend the terminology of dyads of strong or weak social ties (Granovetter, 1973). Ties may now be formed in diverse ways with the most tenuous of a connection between individuals.

This paper arose from a research project that designed, developed and deployed a collaborative travel app at a campsite to explore opportunities for more sustainable tourist travel. The wider study was interested in ways of reducing car dependence in tourism through sharing local travel and tourism information, and maximising the use of spare vehicle capacity through opportunistic lift-share and collection of shopping. Findings of the app development and testing are reported elsewhere (Dickinson, Cherrett, Hibbert, Winstanley, Shingleton, Davies, Norgate, Speed, 2015). Within the project we explored the nature of the camping tourism community, social capital and social support and how this is modified by mobile technology. The paper focuses on this and makes a theoretical contribution in three respects. First, we provide an analysis of how Sheller's (2004) gelling socialities concept offers an alternative explanation to the social network structure typically used to explain the fluid communities evolving in tourism and wider society. Second, we extend the understanding of social ties between tourists, adding a new category and exploring its role in social support and satisfying people's basic needs, a core component of sustainable development. Third, we analyse how value is exchanged and social capital built through multiple forms of tourist community interaction.

Community and social networks

The concept of community was traditionally conceived of as place related, built on physical proximity of a group of people, who engage in reciprocal arrangements (Putnam, 1995). Being part of a traditional place based community is a given and a collective endeavour. This is represented in contemporary society by the 'neighbourhood' (Kempen & Wissink, 2014). While tourism has not been previously analysed from the standpoint of more traditional, physical communities, contexts such as destinations, and especially campsite destinations, exhibit features of place based communities as people share social space and facilities. A campsite is a space that supports social interaction (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

The growth of personal mobility and digital technology has evolved the concept of community into social networks that are built around interpersonal relationships that maybe independent of spatial constraints (Frith, 2012; Wellman, 2001). Social networks are based on "networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity" (Wellman, 2001, p. 228). There are more achieved social characteristics of groups where there are shared norms (Wellman, 2001). Examples in tourism include special interest tourism, such as rock climbing communities that exchange advice, seek to share travel and organise climbing partners on and off-line. Special interest/ niche market tourism has long been recognised as a growth area (Hall & Weiler, 1992). To date there has been little analysis of either of these forms of community in tourism and yet they are integral elements contributing to tourism's sustainability.

A social network is generally described in terms of two components, a set of actors and a set of relationships connecting pairs of these actors (Tindall & Wellman, 2001). The relationship ties represent "flows of resources" (Carrasco, Hogan, Wellman & Miller, 2008, p963). Urry (2007) maintains that some periodic face-to-face contact is vital for the on-going maintenance of these ties, however, some social networks, such as interest based groups that exchange information on the Internet, never meet (Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006; Lemos, 2010). Therefore, communication, corporeal or virtual, is significant to maintain ties (Wittel, 2001) and supportive relationships (Wellman, 2001). While technology has led to more dispersed social networks, Urry (2007) suggests on-line interaction can promote more extensive local

connections and Kempen and Wissink (2014) argue the concept of neighbourhood remains important though it has to be re-imagined in more fluid terms. Mobile media has enabled more extensive interaction and realisation of opportunistic opportunities to meet through locative technology. While there is some dissent in the literature (see for example, Putnam, 2000), recent studies suggest digital technology enhances sociability and network dynamics, and there is a shift towards 'communicative sociability' (see Fortunati, Taipale & de Luca, 2013).

The ties that link the nodes in a social network were conceptualised by Granovetter (1973) as strong-tie relationships (those that are durable and involve frequent interactions with emotional implications) and weak-tie relationships (those with more informal everyday contact, for example, acquaintances from a wider leisure circle). Strong-tie relationships are associated with bonding capital which is considered important for maintaining close-knit groups, though this can exclude others (Currie & Stanley, 2008). Weak-tie relationships are associated with bridging capital which is considered important for reaching out of a close-knit group to others with different resources or new information (Granovetter, 1973). Tourism presents a space to reinforce existing (Obrador, 2012; White & White, 2007) and develop new social-ties. Digital media now plays a significant role in maintaining more dispersed strong-tie relationships and has extended our ability to develop and maintain weak-tie relationships. This has implications for our understanding of tie relationships. For instance, Granovetter (1973, p. 1361) conceptualised negligible-ties as those without substantial significance such as nodding relationships with people at work or living on the same street. By extension, negligible-tie relationships exist through social media where you may follow Tweets or 'friend' someone on Facebook where there is no prior relationship, though there is some negligible connection through a common interest or shared friend. Granovetter suggests negligible-ties may become significant in a time of need. While Granovetter's negligible-ties were conceived in an offline environment, in online environments people increasingly call on even less tangible tie relationships, such as when tourists seek advice from online review sites. These ties lack physical 'nodding' relationships, yet are influential in tourists' decision making. There is also some evidence they build social capital despite the lack of direct reciprocation (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

Our understanding of social space is also evolving (Ohnmacht, 2009). We each inhabit a range of private to public social spaces and there is a degree of disembeddedness in contemporary society as we inhabit virtual social spaces too, though these are none the less real for their participants (Wittel, 2001). For example, in tourism, Paris (2010) describes the 'virtual moorings' of backpackers who are integrated in multiple networks at home and with travellers in other places. There has also been a shift to more online interaction, even with people physically close as this avoids intrusion (Wellman, 2001). Online and offline networks may not be that different: they just represent different ways of connecting (Wellman, 2001; Wittel, 2001) as old and new technology overlaps (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014) and there is a blurring of spaces and times (Sheller, 2004). Frith (2012) has described this as 'hybrid spaces' where digital information merges with physical space. This has led some to suggest that travel research should focus on people's 'social activity space' as opposed to just their physical travel (Carrasco et al, 2008) or what Couclelis (2009) terms 'action space' to encompass communication over space-time as well as physical movement.

Social capital and social support

It is through our social networks that we build social capital, a very heterogeneous concept with a variety of different definitions (Carrasco & Cid-Aguayo, 2012; Coleman, 1988; Putnam 1995). Social capital "exists in the *relations* among persons" (Coleman, 1988, pp. S100-S101) and is derived from a combination of people, social ties among people and the benefits to be gained from social participation (Currie & Stanley, 2008).

There are broadly two interpretations of social capital. One is based on an integrative view of social capital as a collective public good (Coleman, 1988). The second is based on Bourdieu's interpretation which views social capital in more exclusionary terms as a means to reinforce relationships to conserve access to resources (Julien, 2014). Based on the first perspective, social capital arises from fulfilling mutual obligations and is built on trust, information exchange and norms of reciprocation (Coleman, 1988, p. S119). Putnam (1995), for example, views social capital as a group phenomenon related to engagement in place based communities. He argues there has been a decline in social capital due to a drop in membership of groups and organisations, an increase in individualistic activities and a greater physical dispersal of social networks (Putnam, 1995), though this view is widely criticised (Currie & Stanley, 2008). The loss of social capital found in groups has, for some, enabled liberation from local obligations and people have more freedom to organise their relationships (Portes, 1998) and build other forms of community (Ohnmacht, 2009). Bourdieu's individualist approach to social capital (Carrasco & Cid-Aguayo, 2012, p. 1067), while consistent with the development of individualised networks that are no longer contained by a community of place (Wellman & Wortely,1990; Wellman, 2001), suggests a need for both network capital (Urry, 2007) to access social capital, but also capabilities to understand the protocols to integrate and benefit from the resources available (Julien, 2014).

Social support arises from social networks and our social capital. It can be emotional and material support (Carrasco & Cid-Aguayo, 2012), which includes information as a resource (Coleman, 1988). Strong-tie relationships are associated with emotional support and ties that are most accessible tend to provide most physical support (Wellman & Wortely, 1990), for instance, through access to vehicles (Lovejoy & Handy, 2011). The network capital to access resources includes a variety of technologies (for example, cars, mobile phones, Internet access) and Julien (2014) argues some people possess digital social capital. Digital social capital is increasingly drawn on during the tourism experience and can inform tourism decisions with scope for more - or less - sustainable outcomes. Hence it is important to the discussion here.

Gelling socialities

While there has been a shift to conceptualising community in terms of individualised networks rather than groups (Frith, 2012; Wellman et al., 2003), others have questioned whether the network concept is too restrictive to understand contemporary sociality (Sheller, 2004; Wittel, 2001). Wellman's (2001, p. 227) description of network societies hints at this as he describes how "boundaries are permeable, interactions are with diverse others, connections switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies can be flatter and recursive". This presents a more fluid description of the easing into and out of social space and enabling of access to resources as people switch between multiple networks rather than relying on one (Wellman, 2001). This is extended by the use of mobile devices.

Wittel (2001) introduces the concept of "network sociality" as a contrast to community. While Wittel focuses on the largely commodified relationships observed in new media work, he argues network sociality is appropriate to other domains. Where "community entails stability, coherence, embeddedness and belonging… Network sociality consists of fleeting and transient, yet iterative social relations; of ephemeral but intense encounters" (Wittel, 2001, p. 51). This applies to more open systems of sociality such as those encountered in physical and virtual tourist spaces where relationships are revisited and reinforced in a transient social space.

Sheller (2004) goes further to suggest we should not think in terms of networks but of more fluid and contingent social space. Mobile technology has brought more open patterns of "coupling and decoupling" that range from in-depth conversation through to brief texts and beeps or vibrations that symbolise some connection to an absent other. Sheller (2004, p. 41) argues the network form limits the ways we imagine such systems on the grounds of reification of presence and absence. The dyadic linking of agents by ties at nodes ignores the increasingly mobile nature of objects, people and information. Instead mobile technology enables new kinds of structures where people can slip in and out of social contexts and roles that allow "the momentary 'gelling' of public identities and actions across dynamic social spaces and scales". Existing ties are not a prerequisite. This, she suggests, requires less mathematically precise and a more messy imagery of 'liquid social dynamics' to better understand the complexity of mobile social interactions. The concept of gelling socialites therefore contrasts with the social network model where there are established ties of varying strength between individuals. The gelling analogy helps conceptualise more generalised forms of exchange (Lampinen, Lehtinen, Cheshire, Suhonen, 2013), for example, where person to network communications no longer require formal tie relationships. Through web 2.0, tourism reviews can be shared by e-word-of-mouth, yet a tie does not need to be in place for an individual to benefit from the knowledge, nor to derive social benefits from helping others (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). A temporary tie forms and then dissolves once it has served its purpose. Gelling suggests softer and more blurred boundaries of social interaction. Tourists are now constantly in touch with many others and have access to many informational resources, therefore multiple interfaces are co-occurring. Based on Sheller's call to understand what is constrained or enabled by the new 'technosocialities' of mobility, this paper applies a gelling socialities perspective to the analysis.

Methodology

The study took place at a UK rural campsite. Camping tourism is under researched relative to its market share, particularly in Europe (EuroStat, 2016), and given the sharing of resources at a campsite, it made a good case to explore tourism communities. Methodologically this provided a natural setting in which we could focus on the emic meanings and values of participants. Based on a post-positivist perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1998), we were aware of the potential for the project's aims and research activities to influence the participants; however, we sought objectivity as far as possible. The study was exploratory and qualitative data were collected using interviews to understand tourist experiences of community, social capital and various forms of social support, including use of the collaborative travel app. The qualitative methodology was adopted since relatively little was known about people's experiences of these issues within the tourism domain.

The collaborative travel app was developed over an 18 month period through an iterative design process involving campsite tourists. The app embedded tourists into a social network

that enabled them to offer or ask for travel assistance in various forms, for example, by providing local information, lift offers and requests, and shopping offers and requests (see Dickinson, Cherrett, Hibbert, Winstanley, Shingleton, Davies, Norgate, Speed, 2015 and www.sixthsensetransport.com). The technology intervention was introduced to campsite tourists to explore the potential for collaborative travel to enhance more sustainable forms of tourism travel.

Two phases of interviews took place. The first, May to June 2012, provided contextual background on community and social support at the campsite to inform the app design. Interviews were semi-structured to guide participants through a series of questions, but providing scope to follow up emergent topics. Interviews explored: interaction with others at the campsite and beyond; current patterns of collaborative activities at home, at the campsite and in tourism more widely; scope for further collaboration; and use of mobile technology in the tourism domain, particularly in relation to social networks and the tourist experience. 15 interviews (Table 1) were conducted in this phase.

[Table 1 here]

The second phase of interviews took place during the app trial over July and August 2013. This phase of interviews focused on participants' actual experience of app use. Data for this paper are drawn from questions related to involvement in collaborative travel activities, tie-relationships and role of community and collaboration concepts in user engagement. 11 participants took part in feedback interviews (Table 2). In this second phase app users were incentivised by a £10 shopping voucher that could be spent at the campsite shop. This was appropriate due to the extended involvement of participants in app use over several days, although almost all participants agreed to take part prior to mention of the incentive. Both sets of interviews lasted on average 40 minutes.

[Table 2 here]

The study was conducted at a Dorset campsite, on the south coast of the UK. This was purposefully chosen to reflect a range of features typical of rural campsites that make up a large share of tourism accommodation in many regions of the UK and 36% of all UK bed spaces in collective accommodation in 2008 (Eurostat, 2010). The campsite is medium sized with approximately 100 pitches (see www.tomsfieldcamping.co.uk/). Tourists comprise a typical range of regular, repeat and first time visitors and encompass a range of visitor types, predominantly couples, family and friendship groups. The campsite lies approximately 5km from the seaside town of Swanage, on an hourly bus route and close to coastal walks. In addition, the campsite owners and managers had made a commitment to sustainable tourism and facilitated researchers' access to tourists. Tourists were recruited through face-to-face engagement by researchers supported by on-site posters and leaflets. The study employed a theoretical sampling strategy (Giles, 2002) to reach a diverse range of campsite tourists including different group characteristics (single campers, couples, families, friendship groups), age ranges, genders, repeat and first time visitors, and mobile technology users. It was a purposeful sampling strategy that is not representative, although it embraces the heterogeneity of campsite tourists (see Table 1 and 2). On-going reflection on who was participating led to purposeful selection of participants with different characteristics in subsequent interviews. Phase one and two interviews were brought to a close when no new concepts emerged from the data (n=26 in total).

Interviews were transcribed as soon as possible and analysis was on-going and iterative throughout the interviews with initial findings informing later interviews. The existing literature provided contrasting lenses for thinking about community, social ties and forms of social support. Each interview was considered in turn, with the whole body of text reviewed to contextualise individual perspectives and dilemmas. Data was coded on this basis and organised into themes. The final analysis stage explored each theme across both data sets to identify generic concepts, consistencies and inconsistencies.

Findings

Tourist communities

While not traditionally conceptualised as a community, tourists come together at places through a common activity focus and a degree of proximity exists among individuals. This is a temporary place based and shared interest community in the loosest sense occurring in hotels, holiday villages, clusters of second homes and other groupings of tourist accommodation on an ad-hoc basis. In camping tourism we found a temporary community, or communities, definitely exists. A campsite places people in close physical proximity where there is on-going visual contact with other tourists, a nodding relationship (Granovetter, 1973), and shared use of facilities. As Alice (2012) describes: "the very nature of camping is collaborative isn't it, because you're sharing bathrooms and a field, a home".

It is a shared social space. It creates a temporary 'neighbourhood' which is often a direct contrast to people's home neighbourhood where people may rarely see their neighbours or engage in conversation (Putnam, 1995). The concept of a geographically delineated neighbourhood is now questioned (Kaufmann, Bergman & Joye, 2004) and for many tourists the campsite represents a recapturing of the place based community they feel is lost at home, for example:

> "you help one way or another on the campsite, it seemed to be more, sort of, more friendlier on a campsite with the people you have got next to you and the people you have got in front of you, and you have like a resort, like where everybody has got a little room and … it is more, it is a more friendly environment, for kids as well." (Greg 2012)

Bauman (2000, p. 170) suggests communitarianism is an expected reaction to the "accelerating 'liquefaction' of modern life". People experience a loss of security as greater individual autonomy in day-to-day life is gained, but they experience more transient human bonds. Based on location characteristics, most campsites will attract tourists with similar interests that are afforded by the surroundings. For instance the study campsite attracts rock climbers due to the local sea cliffs. Granovetter (1973) suggests 'speciality' allows information and ideas to flow more easily and thus promotes a sense of community. Here this is evident through shared skill based leisure activities. However, as Adrian points out, this common interest is assumed, but may not be the case:

> "it's very interesting when you're in a campsite, most people forget that [a reference to stranger danger] and their kids are left to run around, run wild, enjoy themselves, and people convince themselves that because everybody's a camper they're all safe and they're all fine." (Adrian 2013)

In reality not all campers share the same purpose, for instance campers occasionally include workers living temporarily away from home, who view the campsite as a cheap alternative to bed and breakfast or other rented accommodation. While these non-tourism customers do not disturb the ambiance, they are evidence that the assumed common purpose is not shared by all. People hold idealistic communitarian ideals and, through the "myth of community solidarity" and the "desire to be similar", ignore the feelings of difference (Bauman, 2000, p180).

Proximity, on-going visual contact and the pursuance of common interests leads to a degree of informal and spontaneous interaction. Shared rhythms and routines at the campsite (Dickinson, Filimonau, Cherrett, Davies, Norgate, Speed & Winstanley, 2013) lead to patterns of encounters with others, for example, doing the washing up. The temporal duration of visits lends itself to a degree of openness as people enter a liminoid space where the rules of interaction with strangers encourage rather than prohibit interaction. Added to this, repeat visitation patterns lead to chance encounters with previous acquaintances as people form loose social ties. In some instances, prolonged stays (one month plus) and annual repeat vacation patterns lead to stronger social ties and negotiated encounters as tourists arrange stays to coincide with others.

As well as forming new and maintaining existing relationships, the campsite is a place for dispersed social networks to come together as in other forms of tourism (see for example, Obrador Pons, 2009; Urry, 2007) where interpersonal relationships influence tourism mobility (Hibbert, Dickinson & Curtin, 2013). For example:

> "Some of the group have been coming… they were climbing when they were University students, they used to be part of the climbing and pot-holing club and they used to come here a long time ago." (Judith 2013)

This convergence of strong-tie groups has implications for the campsite community as there are attempts to privatise space through corralling and cocooning activities that demark space associated with an individual or group of tents. Wellman (2001) describes the household as a node in the network that is a protected space. We see this in the grouping of tents restricting others and this reflects Granovetter's view of strong-ties leading to more closed social networks. This exclusionary tactic makes it more difficult for others to access the group resources. However, as James (an app user in 2013) put it, privacy "is hardly an issue because you can't live much less private than sort of living with people in a field". In this context tourists seek to maintain some privacy in a public setting and exhibit 'cosociating' behaviour (Simmel cited in Wilken, 2010) to manage their encounters with others.

What emerges at the campsite is a complex web of interpersonal relationships that weave together negligible social ties that link people through the physical place and a visual acknowledgement of others, through to strong social bonds that are reinforced by face-to-face meeting, which increases trust (Axhausen, 2005; Urry, 2003). People become members of multiple networks and ties in one network can bring resources to another (Wellman, 2001). These overlapping layers of networks are derived from basic spatial proximity, shared interests and strong, weak and negligible social bonds (Figure 1). For example, the rock climbers from Reading are a relatively closed, strong-tie social group reinforcing the established social network, whereas the people sharing details of local walks draw on negligible ties based on association with place and shared interest.

[insert Figure 1. Overlapping social networks of the campsite community]

In many respects this represents a form of 'homeliness' (Krippendorf, 1987) developed in a tourism setting by the active involvement of tourists. A temporary place based community arising bottom up that enriches tourist experiences and facilitates sharing of local information and access to resources with scope to embrace sustainable tourism practices.

Relational Networks and Gelling Socialities

Tourists also used mobile devices to remain connected to other social networks that interact in diverse ways with those physically present and thus blur home and away, and other more distant contexts and times (Hampton, 2016; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; White & White, 2007). Figure 2 represents three dimensions of relational connectivity relative to physical distance, strength of tie and time. For example, Ella receives a tweet from John, who is a relative stranger but part of the climbing community to which she belongs and is currently in the same destination. Similarly, Mark gains information from a stranger (June), who was a previous visitor and is now temporally and spatially removed from the campsite. There is no existing tie between Mark and June, but a shared use of the campsite Facebook page. Here tourists are collaborating and connected through 'virtual moorings' (Germann Molz & Paris 2015). Tourists also use mobiles to seek information from the wider Internet, for example, Fenella, a dog owner, sought information on dog friendly places to visit:

> "that's where it [a mobile] does come in useful, because we were looking for somewhere dog friendly to eat so I looked it up on my phone, so that was really useful… it's just like a backup thing." (Fenella 2012)

Sheller's (2004) description of gelling socialities is apt here given the communication spans local and global contexts, cannot be clearly situated in public or private space and is temporally independent. These are 'hybrid spaces' where digital information merges with physical space (Frith, 2012).

[insert Figure 2. Mobile communicative contexts at the campsite]

Tourists also maintain contact with close personal ties in other places through social networking tools and those absent may pick up communications later maintaining social ties (Humphreys, 2010). Here individuals use mobile devices to isolate themselves from the immediate social context, what has been described as 'psychic cocooning' (Wilken, 2010 p. 452). Therefore tourists are engaging in cocooning both through physical structures at the campsite and through mobile media that enables them to retreat to strong-ties with distant others. However, as Wilken (2010) has articulated in relation to urban space, the campsite tourists also draw on much weaker connections, often with strangers. For instance, a connection may be temporarily forged by a passing interest in a visitor attraction that prompted someone to write a review. These tenuous connections are not just virtual, as a tourist may gain advice from someone physically present but with whom they have had no previous social contact. A social tie can be formed temporarily by visual clues, for example, a surf board, which implies a shared interest. What emerges is a complex picture of co-dependence with others. Sheller's (2004) term 'ambage' usefully describes this slackness in what was previously considered concrete social ties. There is less certainty in social roles, "social actors are never simply one thing, but always carry with them multiple identifications and capacities to 'play' different parts at once" (Sheller, 2004, p. 48).

The ‘fleeting-ties’ that emerge present opportunities for more collective action, provide a significant form of social capital and decrease people’s sense of social isolation. This extends Granovetter’s framework of strong, weak and negligible-social ties. Fleeting-ties are impermanent, dissolving as quickly as they appear, but can be significant resource channels that imply no on-going commitment or need to build reciprocal credit. Rather like the negligible-ties or nodding relationships of place based communities that might be drawn on in time of need, fleeting-ties have no on-going connection and can be formed in temporary physical contexts, such as the campsite, or virtual contexts. For instance, fleeting-ties were mobilised during the Ash Cloud crisis, which disrupted air travel in 2010, where travellers obtained information from social media more quickly than from the airlines. As in Munar and Jacobsen’s (2014) study of tourists’ use of social media, we found participation fostered a sense of belonging.

Fleeting-ties also formed the basis of the campsite app users’ relationships. Most of the app trial participants did not know others and operated on the basis that like-minded people staying at the campsite were embedded in the social network. Therefore the social support revolved around people staying in close proximity who were strangers connected by an assumed shared interest in staying at the campsite. The turnover of tourists meant that most users had access to the app only for a few days so relatively little familiarity between users could be established. Fleeting-ties formed on an “as and when” basis. The app provided a very open system for social interaction, embedded in the campsite, where fleeting-ties could evolve into stronger-tie relationships.

Tourism and social support

Within the campsite community various forms of social support were evident. Support demanding most commitment, such as shared travel, shopping for other people or taking other people’s children to the beach, was predominantly, though not exclusively, found in groups of extended family or friendship groups. These groups exhibited a degree of organisation and made use of mobile phones to coordinate activities on and off site. Less demanding forms of social support were widespread across the campsite community and included sharing left over food, loan of equipment and sharing of local information. As Mark illustrates, local information informs travel behaviour and offers opportunities for more sustainable practice:

> “so you’re sharing stories with people about where the interesting places are to go to and how to get there and things like the bus services and how you can do walks and be picked up by the train or buses and that kind of thing” (Mark 2012)

Among app users, engagement varied. Some exhibited lurking behaviour (Suhonen, Lampinen, Cheshire & Antin, 2010) where they read messages and observed interactions but felt no compunction to respond to or post messages (10 out of the 37 users). Information sharing dominated app use, especially information about places and travel (see Figure 3). For instance, app users sought information about taking cycles on the local steam train and the feasibility of cycling to a local beach. The responses enabled non-car based trips that might be otherwise deemed unfeasible.

[insert Figure 3. Screen shot of app illustrating information sharing]

Digital technology has enabled the linking of information to specific locations which has transformed our experience of place (Lemos, 2010) and our ability to navigate (Aguiléra, Guillot & Rallet, 2012). Information is an important resource in social capital (Coleman, 1988) and the app facilitated a flow of information, which creates familiarity among users, what Humphreys (2010, p. 768) has termed a 'parochial realm'. A feature of information sharing was the desire to upload photographs. The remembered experience, often managed by photo sharing on social networking sites, is a key phase of tourism (Clawson & Knetch, 1966) and the app users readily grasped the idea of sharing information about locations. This then provides information for users in other phases of the leisure experience (see Figure 4) and Munar and Jacobsen (2014) argue community related benefits motivate users to add to the knowledge base. Information sharing requires little commitment or trust, residing in fleeting-tie relationships, however, it does provide a valuable resource to the social network and builds trust leading to social cohesion. For example, Geoff describes how you build up knowledge about other users through the information given about places they have been:

> "If they kind of posted some of their interests in things… you got to know them without kind of meeting them. So from some of their kind of tourist locations they went to, you can make general assumptions about them a little bit maybe." (Geoff 2013).

[insert Figure 4. The phased leisure experience and social media use]

App usage records indicate more offers of help in comparison to requests for help which reflects a strong desire to give rather than receive (Albinsson & Perera, 2012; Carrasco & Cid-Aguayo, 2012). Social capital assumes "obligations will be repaid" (Coleman, 1988, p. S102; Plickert, Côté & Wellman, 2007). The extensive offers of help suggest users were attempting to build up 'credit' with app use. However, exchanges facilitated by the app and fleeting-ties drawn on for information in other social media contexts do not involve dyadic relationship where A is repaid by B. Instead they are a form of generalised exchange where a user broadcasts a request to a wide network of other users and, should she receive help, she may never repay that debt of help directly to the helper. In this sense users can seek help without obligation and avoid the social awkwardness of an exchange relationship (Humphreys, 2010). However, app usage demonstrates that the norms of reciprocity persist in generalised exchange (see Lampinen et al., 2013) as Geoff elaborates:

> "a lot of people wanted to do things for other people but nobody really took them up because maybe you felt you were kind of putting people out" (Geoff 2013).

The connection to the social network is presumed and based on more abstract interaction than direct contact. Wellman (2001) describes this as a partial community. This is bound by fleeting-ties and plays on very loose social bonds, a known but unknown other at the campsite. Such bonds occur in many other contexts such as parents in the school playground. There is a presumption of trustworthy character among people staying at the campsite. Michael (an app user in 2013) describes "camping folk" as "reasonable and honest, or even if they're not, they tend to be when they're camping". This is reinforced by a sense of attachment to the campsite which reflects a neighbourhood affect, where people with positive feelings about a location and an identity associated with the neighbourhood are more likely to engage in community actions (John, Fieldhouse & Liu, 2011; Ohmer, 2010). This reflects Kempen and Wissink's (2014) view that contemporary neighbourhood must be re-imagined and has emerged in new ways.

The app provides fluid involvement in social networks, it creates a social space where people can 'lurk' or choose to offer or access resources, the social relationships are fleeting and transient involving some integration but also disintegration (Wittel, 2001). In this fluid network people are under no obligation to act and any involvement is contingent on need or whether help requests are contextually relevant. Message pop-ups and the accompanying 'beep' remind people that the social network is active and marks a connection, albeit one that may be irrelevant at that point. People can determine personal relevance and slide into or out of involvement, a slippery social dynamic with blurred boundaries. In this way the campsite app facilitates a group of collective actors "emerging situationally as action gels" (Sheller, 2004, p. 49).

The digital sociability observed in tourism depends on access to appropriate technology. Views were polarised on this topic. Some shared Joselyn's (app user 2013) view that "when I go on holiday I turn the phone off because I have it on all the time at work and so there's that, I want to be away from technology". Others felt technology was now embedded in all settings including rural campsites. As Mark (2012) commented, "walking round the campsite, there's an awful lot of people on their iPhones". Technological barriers, user preferences and the skill to adopt appropriate norms of use will differentiate access to digital social capital and has implications for access to resources and support in tourism. The study provided evidence that tourism is a place where some people desire to be immobile (Lemos, 2010) and disengage from digital technology. This represents a move to re-engage with the physical environment and those physically present.

Discussion and conclusion

Analysis of the tourists taking part in this research project illustrates the presence of various tourist communities. They are centred around place but embrace connections with individuals both present and absent through mobile technology that opens up opportunities for social support across space-time both within the temporary campsite neighbourhood and with established social networks and beyond. Mobile media alters our space-time practices and provides diverse communication contexts that enable an array of "collective identities" (Sheller, 2004, p49) to emerge. Through this, people are able to access various forms of significant support, though in some instances this is a transient connection, as there is no on-going inter-dependence, and the fleeting-ties subsequently dissolve. Meanwhile, opportunities are manifold to build social capital through shared place related experiences and the development of physical tie relationships that can be maintained in virtual spaces beyond the tourist trip.

Sheller's (2004) gelling socialities offers an appropriate theoretical lens to analyse these connections compared to the tie structure of social networks. The campsite is not a place based community in the traditional sense, as the temporal and spatial boundaries are permeable. In this it is similar to many other tourism destinations, but exhibits some aspects of community more strongly than other destinations. There emerges an array of communities into which people can tap for different purposes, both place based and interpersonal relationship based. Analysis identifies a third form of community that is neither place based nor relational. This third form of community is based around ephemeral interpersonal relationships that occur both in the physical setting and virtual exchanges, where shared norms and interests do not have time to establish. Exchanges are unreciprocated and support

can be independent of time and space. The ability to temporarily form meaningful connections that provide relevant support and then dissolve implies a less network-like structure but one that is more gel-like where the nodes slide past one another and the establishment of more concrete ties is dependent on a situated personal choice. Here individuals momentarily gel to engage in social support, such as information exchange over social media or fulfilling a shopping request using a collaborative app, without on-going contact. However, access to this support is inevitably differentiated. In the traditional view of social networks, ties represent some form of relational inter-dependence (Carrasco et al 2008). As communities shifted from place based to more personal social networks, opportunities emerged for people to feel liberated from local obligations and our analysis shows how people value less concrete ties that supply useful support, without the need to evolve co-dependence.

Granovetter's (1973) framework of strong, weak and negligible-ties can be extended by 'fleeting-ties' which emerge briefly to provide significant support at a relevant place and time, to subsequently dissolve as quickly as they appear and involve no on-going relationship. Based on this we propose a hierarchy of tie dependence. Figure 5 illustrates how our few strong-ties require much investment in reciprocal behaviour, however, the potential of many fleeting-ties can provide significant support but requires no commitment. For instance, a fleeting-tie may hold key information about travel or might be able to offer a one-off lift that would not be accessible from a strong-tie relationship. Given people's desire to avoid debt in reciprocal relationships, fleeting-ties represent a significant resource as people can otherwise seek to escape indebtedness by turning to the market (Marcous, 2009). While strong-ties require a high degree of inter-dependence and relationship maintenance the support available may be of no immediate salience and we have relatively few strong-ties. Fleeting-ties, on the other hand, are abundant and require no reciprocity making them a commitment free resource. However, the desire to reciprocate is powerful and this study shows how people are keen to offer help even in a generalised exchange system. The avoidance of a sense of debt is a powerful force that provides stability to community exchange by encouraging individuals to offer support in various forms (Gouldner, 1960). Analysis suggests the liminoid tourism setting makes people more open to these opportunities.

[insert Figure 5. Hierarchy of support seeking practices and social ties]

As society's sense of community is evolving from one less rooted in place and neighbourhood, tourism spaces provide an opportunity for people to evoke a place related community, at least on a temporary basis. It provides a social space for face-to-face meetings needed to maintain existing ties (Urry, 2007) and to develop new ties. The tourist community is to some extent idealised (Bauman, 2000), however, it is sought to achieve a sense of wellbeing where people can re-capture a sense of neighbourhood and build the social capital needed for emotional and physical support in their day to day lives. This is extended by new technologies enabling sociability. In this way tourism contributes to social cohesion more widely and meets a basic need.

From a sustainable tourism perspective, social support provided by tourist communities presents several opportunities. Information sharing has generally been analysed from a marketing perspective and social media is seen as a commercial asset (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). We have shown it also informs more sustainable tourist choices by revealing localised opportunities and sustainable travel options, though clearly it can also extend travel horizons

in unsustainable ways. Analysis shows how campsite tourists are embedded in multiple networks, which they can seamlessly slide between, with new opportunities emerging to share resources, such as cars, offering sustainable pathways. To date the dominant models of smart tourism are top down, predominantly exploited by new industries to boost trade or exploit the user. Conceptualising tourists as communities provides a new lens to analyse smart tourism. Tourism provides a space in which communities can develop and be reinforced. This contributes to sustainability through developing social capital and hence access to resources both during tourism and post the tourism experience. While policy mechanisms have struggled to bring about more sustainable behaviour, especially with respect to tourism travel (Hall, 2013), it is evident, in a small way, that tourists are reconfiguring their own actions through sharing both on and offline. Through this tourists are re-capturing a sense of place related concern that leads to more meaningful and localised tourist experiences. The tourists encountered in this study were well informed, responsive to the locality and participating in multiple social networks converging around the physical place. New social structures are emerging that are unlocking tourists from habitual practices and providing resources for more sustainable tourism destination behaviour.

At a time when dwindling public sector funds are making it difficult to manage public goods and the government is seeking to empower communities to be self-reliant this raises new research questions. For example, how can we create value in bottom-up social systems through generalised exchange and sharing across communities that adds value to the tourist experience and facilitates more sustainable practice? In addition, this paper is written at a time when new technological paradigms are emerging. For instance, there are a rapidly growing number of objects that can sense information about their location and current state, develop intelligence based on this information and share this with other objects and people through networks; this is the Internet of Things. As the datasets of objects begin to communicate with people, new forms of socialities are emerging involving things. There are opportunities to anticipate where there are underutilised resources, understand patterns of need and to access or provide resources more opportunistically. Research in this field is limited and there are opportunities to explore how a human centred Internet of Things technology can generate value through a tourism communities perspective.

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Table 1. Community and collaboration interview participants 2012 (n=15)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Mobile phone and social network use experience	Campsite visitor type
Karen	F	40s	Smartphone user; established social networks user	Family
Julie	F	50s	Smartphone user; limited experience of social networks	Single camper
Adam	M	30s	Smartphone user; established social networks user	Family
Alice	F	40s	Smartphone user; limited experience of social networks	Family
Mary	F	30s	Smartphone user; limited experience of social networks	Group
Mark	M	50s	Basic phone user; limited experience of social networks	Couple
Fenella	F	20s	Smartphone user; established social networks user	Couple
Ruth	F	30s	Basic phone user; established social networks user	Couple
Jack	M	20s	Basic phone user; limited experience of social networks	Group
Kate	F	40s	Smartphone user; established social networks user	Couple
Jeff	M	40s	Smartphone user; limited experience of social networks	Couple
Sam	M	30s	Smartphone user; established social networks user	Group
Donald	M	50s	Smartphone user; limited experience of social networks	Couple
Greg	M	40s	Smartphone user; limited experience of social networks	Family
Luke	M	40s	Smartphone user; established social networks user	Family

Table 2. App user interview participants 2013 (n=11)

Pseudonym	Age	Group characteristics	Used project or own phone	Length of stay (nights)	Active user	Repeat visitor
Judith	60s	Single but part of extended group of approx. 30 people	Project phone	6	yes	yes
Thomas	60s	Couple with nephew	Project phone	8	yes	yes
Paul	40s	Couple with 2 children	Own phone	5	yes	yes
Geoff	40s	Couple with 2 children and another family	Project phone	10	yes	no
Richard	40s	Couple with 2 children and another family	Project phone	7	yes	yes
James	60s	Couple with 1 child	Own phone	6	yes	yes
Michael	40s	Couple with 2 children and another family	Own phone	7	no	no
Susie	40s	Mother and teenage son	Project phone	7	yes	yes
Gordon	30s	Large family group – couple, baby, 2 grandmothers and 2 teenage children	Project phone	7	yes	yes
Adrian	50s	With 2 children	Project phone	8	yes	yes
Jocelyn	40s	Couple with 2 children	Project phone	14	yes	no

All interviewees were British and car users

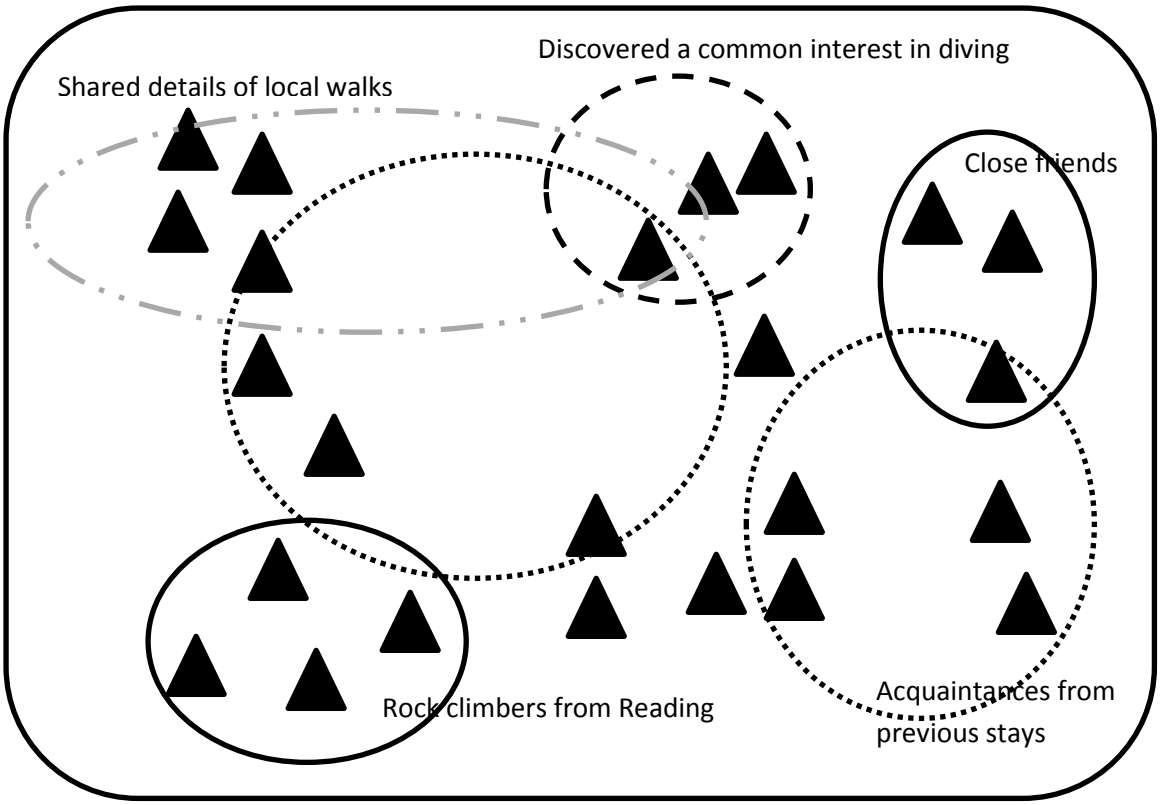

Figure 1. Overlapping social networks of the campsite community

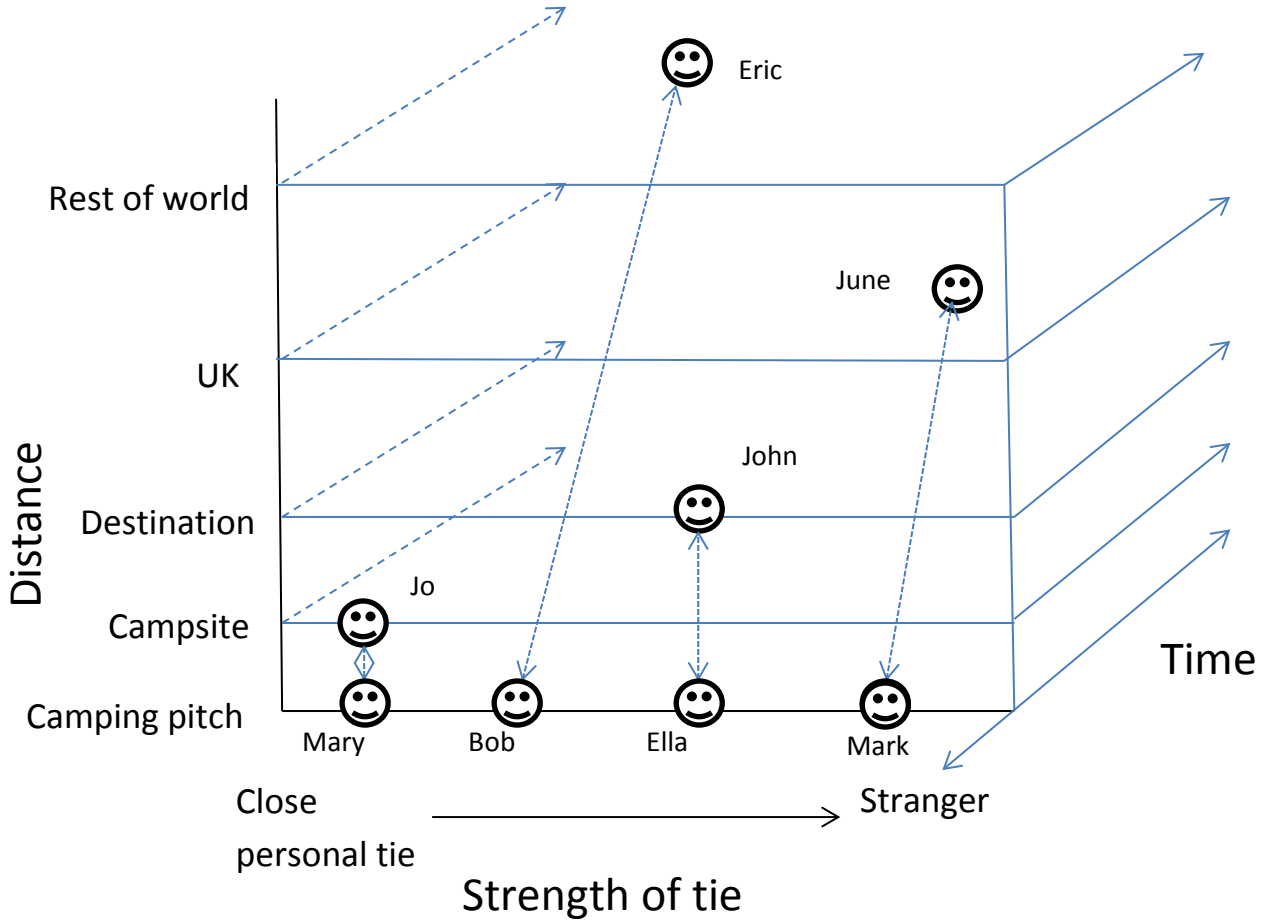

Figure 2. Mobile communicative contexts at the campsite

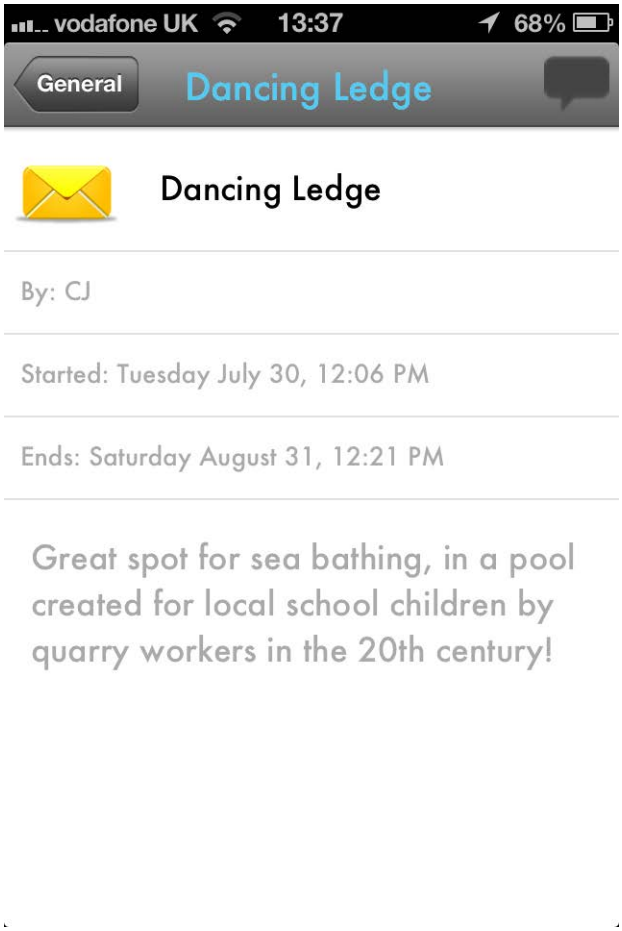

Figure 3. Screen shot of app illustrating information sharing

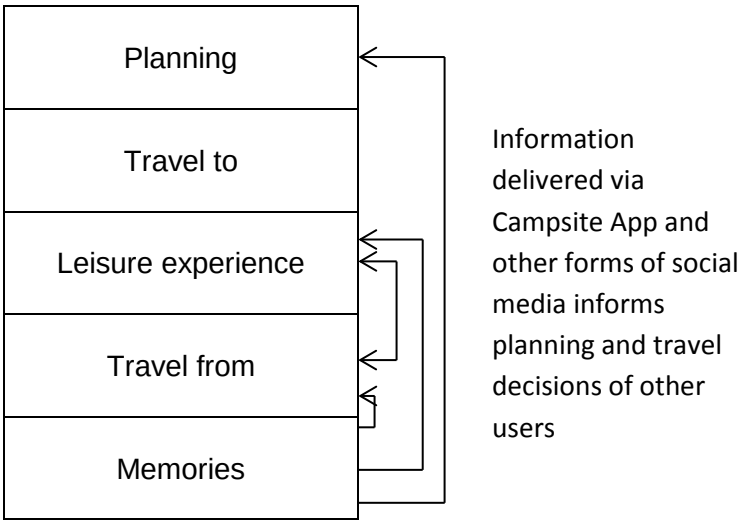

Figure 4. The phased leisure experience and social media use

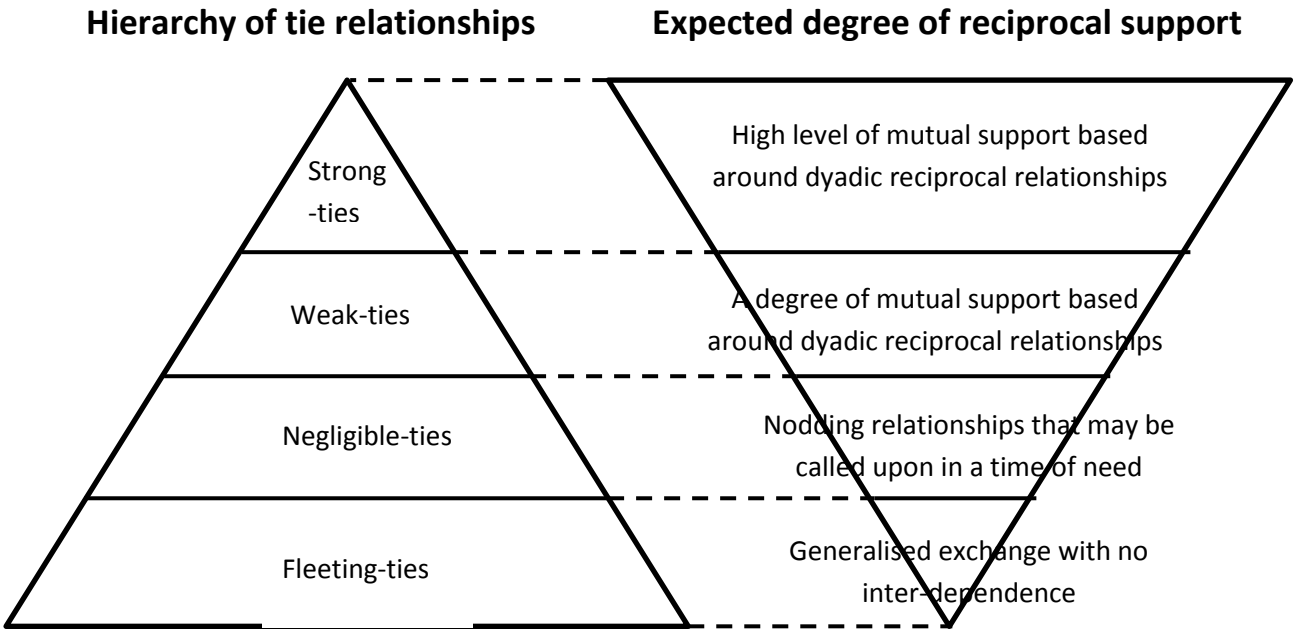

Figure 5. Hierarchy of support seeking practices and social ties