

MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

WHY YOU BOUGHT IT:  
HOW INFLUENCES TO BUY SPORTS PRODUCTS FROM PERSONAL NETWORK  
MEMBERS DIFFER BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND IN-PERSON SETTINGS

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The Major Research Paper is submitted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Professional Communication

Ryerson University  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

August 6, 2014

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## Abstract

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This major research project explores the extent to which normative and informational influences exerted by core and significant ties differ between social media and in-person contexts. Specifically, it focuses on how such influences persuade recreational athletes to buy sports products. Though normative and informational influences from a variety of personal ties have been studied in online and offline settings, they are seldom explicitly compared and contrasted. Moreover, recreational athletes and sports products have never been the subject of such studies. Based on qualitative interviews with six recreational athletes between the ages of 18 and 30, this study uses a content analysis with open coding to identify significant themes. The findings indicate that although in-person normative influence to buy sports products is easily identifiable, normative influence on social media is more difficult to detect. Yet regardless of the context, normative influence is powered by one's desire for inclusion into a group. On the other hand, informational influence in the form of product recommendations does not differ between the examined settings. Thorough recommendations are more sought after than pithy ones, experts challenge recommendations and those who do not know much about a given product will seek information from experts. However, the findings also indicate that informational influence in the form of observation and analysis is preferred in offline situations compared with online ones. It is therefore clear that separate facets of normative and informational influence each present unique similarities or dissimilarities between in-person and social media settings.

## Acknowledgements

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Starting, let alone finishing, this major research project would not have been possible without the guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Jeff Boase. His support allowed me to research topics in which I am greatly interested and ensured that writing this paper was an enjoyable process. I would also like to thank Dr. Ava Cross, my second reader, for her feedback. Finally, I owe thanks to my parents for their constant encouragement throughout the duration of this master's program.

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## Introduction

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Athletes face a variety of sources that persuade them to buy sports products. Marketing campaigns brandish videos, images and information of these items on a variety of platforms. At times, professional athletes actively endorse such merchandise. They can do so by simply using them on stages, such as televised games, that millions of consumers view. Friends, neighbours, co-workers and family members also have the ability persuade recreational athletes who they frequently contact to buy certain sports products. Though existing scholarship examines this phenomenon in relation to items such as food, clothing and personal hygiene (Bayus, 1985), sports products have been ignored. This major research paper thus explores the influences that compel recreational athletes to buy certain sports products. Specifically, it investigates how influences exerted by people who regularly communicate with a recreational athlete differ between social media and in-person contexts.

There are two general ways in which one can describe a sports product. First, it can be understood as equipment that is necessary to play a game or engage in athletic activity. For example, a cyclist needs a bicycle and a hockey player needs a pair of skates. Second, it can be understood as athletic paraphernalia that is worn or displayed. Such items are often purchased to show support for a specific team or athlete. A Toronto Raptors fan would, for example, wear a jersey or hang it on a wall in his or her home. This study is concerned with both of these types of products.

Influence to buy products can be exerted in different in-person and social media settings. This project pertains to the following in-person scenarios: athletic activity, such as a game; face-to-face communication, such as a conversation; and the simple act of observation, such as seeing people use or wear an item. Social media, on the other hand, are online platforms that generally

have consistent features (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Users create new virtual content, often by sharing media and messages on their public or semi-public profiles. Users who know each other outside of social media can follow and receive updates about the creation of this content, though some sites “help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities” (boyd & Ellison, 2008).

This project explicitly focuses on two social media platforms: Twitter and Facebook. Both platforms allow users to make profiles and post visual media, such as photos and videos, along with text. These services are provided in a variety of languages (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Seward, 2009). Though they are similar in these respects, there are also some basic differences between them. Twitter is a microblogging website, in that it limits users to posting messages that are only a maximum of 140 characters. These pithy entries can be made with various technologies, such as Internet browsers and mobile phone applications (Seward, 2009). Initial messages are called “tweets.” Messages that respond to tweets and form multi-way dialogues are called “@replies.” Facebook does not have these character-based constraints. Users can post initial messages in the form of status updates and posts to other users’ “walls,” which appear on individual profile pages. Based on individual privacy settings, certain users can or cannot reply to these messages by directly commenting on them. Facebook also has a feature to let users enhance their profiles with applications, which are often games that can only be played through the platform (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The rationale for focussing on Twitter and Facebook will be explained in the **Method** section and, henceforth, the term “social media” will explicitly pertain to these two platforms.

The reason for focussing on recreational athletes lies in the fact that they are a seldom-studied group. In the field of communicative influence, this demographic – which can be

understood as people who play a sport or engage in athletic activity for fun, without guidance from a coach or governance from a revenue-generating league – has been completely ignored. Of course, pressures to succeed burdened by professional and college-level athletes have been studied (Evans, Eys & Wolf, 2013). However, if social influences from coaches and teammates in youth soccer has been a target for scholarly study (Wood, 2011), why should recreational athletes be ignored? Moreover, why should pressures to succeed as opposed to pressures to buy products be the sole focus of athletic literature about influence? The originality of this study partly lies in its attempts to fill these gaps in scholarship.

This major research project is also original because it fuses three areas of communication scholarship that are often separately examined in marketing literature: (a) influence, (b) personal networks and (c) consumer purchasing habits. In an industry context, it is imperative for professional communicators, especially product marketers and advertisers, to understand the relationship between these three areas to maximize the effectiveness of the messages that they disseminate. In a scholarly context, this project's research illuminates how the power of an individual's social circle to persuade him or her differs between in-person and social media scenarios. This major research project is therefore important to, and innovative in, both the academic and professional studies of communication.

## Literature Review

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This literature review has three purposes. First, it explores key terms that are central to understanding this paper's primary research: (a) core and significant ties, (b) normative influence and (c) informational influence. These key terms are examined in both in-person and social media contexts. Second, it discusses gaps in existing literature pertaining to the key terms. Third, it presents two research questions that guide this major research paper in an attempt to fill these gaps.

### *Core and Significant Ties*

Core and significant ties can be seen as similar because they are comprised of comparable groups of people with which one is typically in frequent contact. To study the characteristics of core and significant ties in the United States, Boase, Horrigan, Wellman and Rainie (2006) surveyed 2,200 Americans over the age of 18 from February 17, 2004 to March 17, 2004. Boase et al. (2006) define a core tie as a person with which one has a close relationship, as a mean of 35 per cent of Americans' core ties are immediate family, 19 per cent are other family members and 24 per cent are friends. Significant ties, meanwhile, can be understood as people outside the ring of core ties within one's social network (Boase et al., 2006). However, significant ties are similar to core ties in that they do not encompass one's acquaintances or people with which one is unfamiliar. A mean of 18 per cent of Americans' significant ties are non-immediate family members and 24 per cent are friends (Boase et al., 2006). Therefore, core and significant ties are similar because they are statistically comprised of people with which one would theoretically be in regular contact.

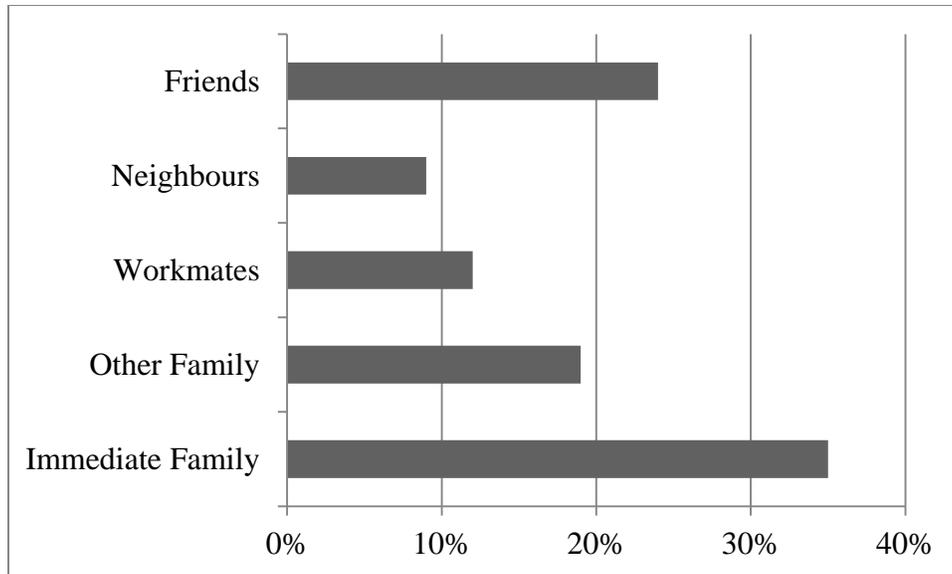


Figure 1: Groups that account for Americans' core ties, as measured in percentages (Boase et al., 2006).

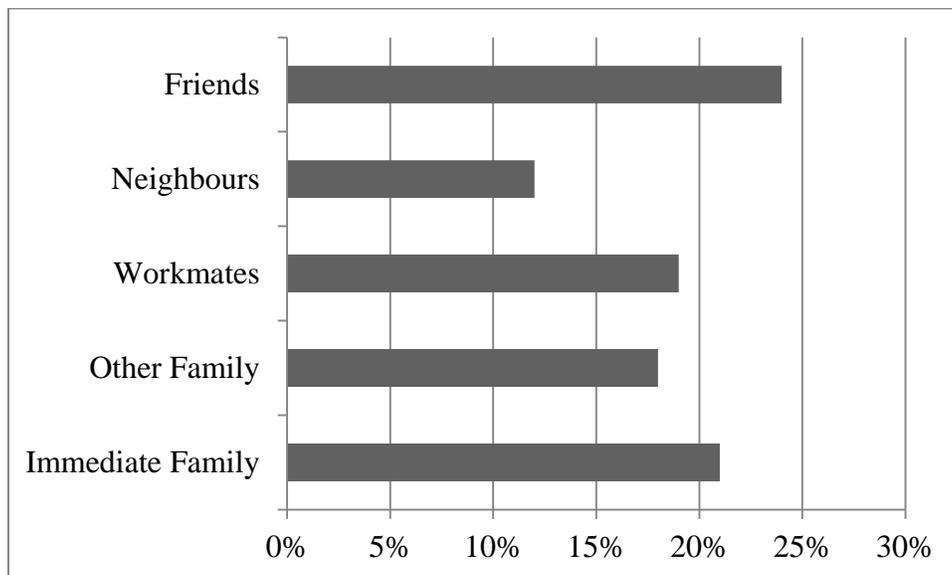


Figure 2: Groups that account for Americans' significant ties, as measured in percentages (Boase et al., 2006).

The concept of active ties further explains the level to which one is in contact with his or her personal network members. Boase (2008) defines active ties as core and significant ties who one contacts at least once a week. Americans have a mean of 51 active ties – 24 core ties and 27 significant ties. Americans contact 17 active ties each week in person, 12 by landline phone, 10 by mobile phone and 10 by email (Boase, 2008). Boase (2008) suggests that in-person contact is

generally made when active ties are physically close. Moreover, Wellman and Wortley (1990) point to frequent telephone contact between two people as a sign of an active tie relationship because phoning someone is a completely voluntary act that implies a desire for two-way communication. The same can be said about sending and responding to emails. The literature therefore suggests that one largely defines his or her core and significant ties by frequent contact.

High frequency of contact, in combination with duration of contact, has also been used to define the relationship of strong ties. Strong ties are similar to active core and significant ties in that they are defined as ties, often friends and family members, who one regularly contacts (Granovetter, 1973). Recurrent contact was linked to duration of contact by Marsden and Campbell (1984), as they explored the findings of three surveys performed in different cities. As respondents were asked to identify their three closest friends and describe the features of these friendships, frequency and duration of contact were found to be positively related to tie strength. In fact, the results from the survey conducted in Detroit revealed that duration of contact was “by far” the most powerful indicator of a strong tie relationship (Marsden & Campbell, 1984). McFadyen and Cannella (2004) subsequently stated that relationships deepen as members of a dyad spend long periods of time communicating with one another on a regular basis. This is linked to the two-sided nature of relationships, in that two people may not have the same perception of their relationship strength. However, partners spending long and frequent – as opposed to long and rare – periods together indicates that they mutually consider one another to be strong ties (Marsden & Campbell, 2012). Therefore, high frequency and duration of contact can be used to characterize the relationship of strong ties.

Though existing literature has not thoroughly explored duration of contact in online contexts in relation to tie strength, frequent contact has been used to define the relationship of

strong ties on Facebook and Twitter. To explore how online strong tie relationships are characterized by frequent contact, Jones, Settle, Bond, Fariss, Marlow and Fowler (2013) surveyed more than 750 Facebook users and asked them to identify their closest friends in real life – who are often categorized as either core or significant ties (Boase et al. 2006) – who had accounts on the social network. In the six months prior to the survey, participants had posted on close friends’ walls a mean of 7.01 times. Moreover, they sent a mean of 27.37 private messages and commented on the friends’ posts 37.51 times (Jones et al., 2013). Significantly less contact was made between participants and the Facebook friends whom they did not describe as close friends in real life. Participants wrote a mean of 0.32 wall posts, sent 0.64 private messages and made 1.99 comments on posts (Jones et al., 2013). Frequent contact made with core and significant ties occurs on Twitter, as well. Baatarjav, Amin, Dantu and Gupta (2010) identify two types of followers that Twitter users have: (a) followers who have sent messages to said users and (b) followers who have not. Close friends and family members are the most prominent group that falls under this first type of follower (Baatarjav et al., 2010). This means that communication between two Twitter users is more likely to occur between core and significant ties. There is therefore a positive correlation between frequent contact and core and significant tie relationships on Facebook and Twitter.

Additionally, the more someone communicates with a strong tie in offline settings, the more the likely the two are to interact in online settings such as social media. Physically meeting with kin or friends on a weekly basis is likely to result in online interaction. Meeting with kin or friends less than once a week, however, means that less virtual communication will occur (Penard & Poussing, 2010). This shows a positive correlation between individuals establishing a strong tie relationship and investing time in online settings to maintain or intensify this

relationship (Penard & Poussing, 2010). Regular online interaction can maintain previously-built tie strength if two people cannot frequently meet due to circumstances such as job constraints or transportation issues (Penard & Poussing, 2010). To intensify tie strength, strong ties thus see the Internet as a medium built for convenience. They use it to bolster weekly contact by communicating at any time and any place, at their leisure (Penard & Poussing, 2010). Regular offline contact therefore leads to consistent online communication among strong ties.

This process can also occur in reverse. That is to say, online interaction between core and significant ties can result in more common face-to-face communication. Such recurrent offline contact can occur even if tie strength between two people was developed on the Internet (Chen, 2013). This notion is exemplified by Wojcieszak (2009), who studied the interaction and resulting offline group activities of an online neo-Nazi discussion board. As Nazism is widely condemned, users join these types of discussion boards to – possibly for the first time – express their beliefs to others who generally agree with them. By frequently discussing political opinions to those who maintain largely similar ideas, Wojcieszak (2009) asserts that users begin to see each other as significant ties. Moreover, the results of the study indicate a positive correlation between participation in offline group activities and frequently logging on to the forum to communicate with these newly-developed ties. For example, almost 40 per cent of users volunteered for a neo-Nazi cause and 50 per cent went to a rally (Wojcieszak, 2009). The establishment of these online relationships and corresponding offline group activities can thus be explained by the notion that recurrent online communication with core and significant ties leads to frequent offline interaction with them (Chen, 2013). In fact, 31 per cent of Americans report that the Internet has increased the number of their significant ties, whereas only two per cent claim that it decreased them. Similarly, 28 per cent say that online activity has raised their

amount of core ties and a mere one per cent maintains that this number has been lowered (Boase et al., 2006). Core and significant ties are therefore largely defined by frequent contact, as habitual online interaction is positively correlated with regular offline communication.

### *Normative Influence*

Core and significant ties also have the ability to exert normative influence in real and virtual settings to pressure others to buy a product. Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1989) define normative influence as a tendency to conform to the expectations of others. This can occur in two ways. First, people gain a desire to enhance their personal images by emulating a group with which they wish to identify. A person thus adopts the opinions or behavior of this group. Second, people want to comply with the expectations of others. They do this to achieve rewards or avoid punishments (Bearden et al., 1989). Shukla (2012) examined the first way one is susceptible to normative influence by surveying more than 500 people in malls in the United States and United Kingdom about their views and habits of buying luxury goods. Luxury goods can be understood as items that are hard to obtain and bring the owner comfort (Shukla, 2012). The desire to gain personal pleasure and present oneself as a member of a high social group were reasons why American and British consumers bought luxury goods. Moreover, these consumers intended to buy luxury goods that would make a good impression on such social groups when worn in face-to-face conversations or other in-person meetings. Shukla (2012) therefore presents evidence that normative influence affects individuals who, in offline settings, wish to conform to groups that denote favourable social status.

The work of Evangelista and Dioko (2011) asserts that similar normative influence from individuals who one regularly contacts can encourage him or her to engage with a new brand. This argument is based on results of an in-person questionnaire given to more than 950 tourists

from 30 countries as they visited the Macau. The participants were asked why they were interested in the inherent tourism brand of, and ultimately decided to tour, the Chinese region. The results indicate that the surveyed tourists wanted to visit Macau in an effort to conform to groups that had already explored the region (Evangelista & Dioko, 2011). This is largely because by experiencing what a brand has to offer, one gains social approval and an innate level of status in the eyes of those who have an existing relationship with the same brand (Keller, 1993). Moreover, participants listed the most prominent sources of normative influence as friends and family members (Evangelista & Dioko, 2011), who are frequently categorized as active core and significant ties in that one contacts them at least once a week (Boase, 2008). Essentially, participants wanted to conform to their ties by visiting Macau. It is therefore evident that normative influence can lead one to join a group of core and significant ties that has experienced a certain brand.

Huang, Phau and Lin (2008) explore the second way that one is susceptible to normative influence, which can occur because of pressure to meet the expectations of ties to earn rewards or avoid punishments. They surveyed more than 450 Taiwanese parents about their animosity towards buying products manufactured in China and Japan – two countries with which Taiwan has historically been at conflict. The majority of those surveyed said that they try to avoid buying or displaying products from either country (Huang et al., 2008). This is because Taiwanese animosity against China and Japan manifests itself as people join together to form an “in-group.” The in-group discriminates against the minority “out-group,” whose members buy Chinese and Japanese products. To evade scorn and punishment from ties belonging to the in-group, people avoid purchasing such products and subsequently displaying them (Huang et al., 2008). By dodging expression of its opinion about these products, the out-group further strengthens the

stance of the majority in-group (Noelle-Neumann, 1986; Price, Nir & Cappella, 2006). As a result, the possibility of social abuse for vocal members of the out-group through total ostracism, for example, is amplified. The punishment is thus much harsher than simple exclusion from a group of friends defined by using a specific product, as explained by Evangelista and Dioko's (2011) findings pertaining to the first type of normative influence. Similarly, the reward is much greater since those who remain silent do not receive such abuse from the out-group (Huang et al., 2008; Price et al., 2006). Opportunities for rewards and fears of in-person punishment can therefore cause one to succumb to normative influence.

Often, in in-person settings, individuals can be exposed to normative influence through group discussion or one-on-one conversations with different people. This idea is exemplified by Werner, Sansone and Brown (2007) who held guided group discussions about non-toxic products relevant to teenagers, such as environmentally-friendly air fresheners for cars, with 26 high school classes. By analyzing the pre- and post-discussion opinions of the students, it was found that many of them altered their stances on non-toxic products to conform to the ideas of their peers. As these peers asked questions and demonstrated their ideas pertaining to the issue, students were able to deduce a predominant group opinion on which they could base their own (Werner et al., 2007). This is because people act under normative influence in open discussions by monitoring those around them to infer what the social norm is and conform to it (Lewin, 1952; Werner et al., 2007).

It is also possible to be susceptible to normative influence in a similar manner on online discussion boards, according to Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen (2009). For normative influence to occur in this type of virtual setting, information about the opinions held and favoured by other board members must be accessible. This can occur in two ways. First, there must a sense of

recommendation consistency, as different members endorse the same product. Recommendation consistency is apparent in consumer discussion boards when multiple customers review or comment on the same product and express similar opinions (Cheung et al., 2009). Second, these recommendations must be consistently rated by other users. Facebook posts and comments, for example, are rated through “likes” from other users. It thus follows that reviews with a high rating score from multiple members can be seen as a source of positive normative influence. As the result of rating and recommendation consistency, a group opinion emerges (Cheung et al., 2009). Therefore, if these two prerequisites are met, one can be prone to normative influence on online discussion boards.

It can also be understood that consistent online ratings, recommendations and simple expressions of beliefs from core and significant ties encourage one to adhere to the prevailing group opinion. This is largely the result of the frequent contact that one has with his or her core and significant ties. Due to this frequent contact, a strong mutual identification develops (McFadyen & Cannella, 2004). This promotes the establishment of jointly-held opinions, which partially occurs through the regular transfer and acceptance of information in any setting that allows for communication. Essentially, an individual will generally identify with the opinions that a person who he or she is close with expresses (McFadyen & Cannella, 2004). Consistent ratings and recommendations given by core and significant ties, which allow normative influence to manifest itself online, therefore encourage people to support the apparent group opinion. Discussion board users are therefore susceptible to normative influence from core and significant ties.

It follows that users have been shown to adopt the prevailing group opinion of their online peers, including core and significant ties. Price et al. (2006) examined 60 online forum

discussions about the tax plans offered by opposing United States presidential candidates Al Gore and George Bush. People who participated in these forums were subsequently surveyed. It was determined participants were not likely to express favourable views toward one candidate in discussions in which the group opinion supported the tax plan of the other candidate (Price et al., 2006). This was largely because the apparent group opinion influenced “individual participants’ own expressions during the online deliberations.” Essentially, participants gradually began to express views that coincided with the normative opinion, even if they were not vocal upon initially joining the discussion (Price et al., 2006). The concept of normative influence therefore indicates that people will begin to express, as well as hold, the same beliefs as the majority of their fellow online forum participants.

### *Informational Influence*

Core and significant ties can also encourage an individual to buy an item by acting as a source of informational influence. Bearden et al. (1989) define informational influence as “the tendency to accept information from others as evidence about reality.” Similar to normative influence, this occurs in two ways. First, someone can make inferences by observing others and thus discerning information from their actions (Bearden et al., 1989). Essentially, it is possible to judge the merits and shortcomings of a product by watching it in use. Second, someone can simply acknowledge information from others as fact (Bearden et al., 1989). This information is typically found in the form of product recommendations and detailed expressions of product-related opinions. By accepting both types of informational influence, one increases his or her knowledge about a given item and thus feels capable of making an informed purchasing decision (Bearden et al., 1989). However, the literature overwhelmingly focuses on the latter type of informational influence rather than the former. When applied to consumer behavior,

informational influence therefore generally dictates that a person may decide whether or not to buy a given product based on the product recommendations to which he or she is exposed (Bearden et al., 1989).

Park and Lessig (1977) concentrated on the first type of informational influence to determine the extent to which students and housewives allow groups and individuals to impact their product purchasing behaviour. They posit that this form of informational influence “requires no actual interaction between the (participating) individual” and other parties. That is to say, one does not have to converse or communicate in a synchronous manner with the party that exerts such informational influence to be susceptible to it. Rather, one simply examines, analyzes and comes to conclusions about the actions or habits of the source of information. For example, one may prefer a certain brand of car because the person he or she examines and judges owns the same brand (Park & Lessig, 1977). However, the person who exerts this informational influence must be seen as a credible source (Park & Lessig, 1977). In online settings, too, the source of information, such as visual media or text messages, must be seen as trustworthy for someone to accept and internalize the information (Cheung et al., 2009). Due to frequent contact, the literature (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973; McFadyen & Cannella, 2004) asserts that strong ties are largely seen as valid sources of information and are therefore capable of exerting this form of informational influence. Above all, the information that one infers from these ties is seen as valuable and reliable (Rogers, 1995). The research therefore indicates that one can observe and interpret the actions of core and significant ties to gain information about products.

Literature that focuses on the second type of informational influence indicates that regular in-person communication partly characterizes the ability of one’s strong ties to offer

influential information (Brown & Reingen, 1987) that can make one decide whether or not to buy a product (Bayus, 1985). Face-to-face verbal recommendations from strong ties have been shown to encourage Americans to buy a wide-range of products, such as food, clothing, razor blades and dental products (Bayus, 1985). This is largely because one perceives his or her strong ties as credible and trustworthy. Their recommendations carry little risk (Rogers, 1995).

Conversely, people question the credibility of weak ties, which can be understood as ties which one does not frequently contact (Granovetter, 1973), due to rare or inconsistent interaction (Rogers, 1995). Following this notion, Brown and Reingen (1987) determined that one values referrals given to him or her by strong ties by surveying students of three American piano teachers. The students revealed that information given to them by these ties was more influential than information given by weak ties when choosing a teacher. This is because the recommendations from strong ties directly led to the participants selecting an endorsed piano instructor, whereas the recommendations from weak ties were largely ignored (Brown & Reingen, 1987). When contrasted with the ineffectiveness of such influence from seldom-contacted weak ties, the potency of in-person informational influence from one's strong ties is hence largely the result of regular communication.

Similarly, to determine how different sources of informational influence affect which brand of car Chinese-Americans prefer to buy, Wu (2011) conducted live surveys with 150 Chinese-Americans who own or rent vehicles. Core and significant ties play strong roles in influencing the respondents' decision to buy a given brand of car, as 63 per cent cited friends' recommendations as important. Moreover, 45 per cent listened to family suggestions and 35 per cent heeded the words of colleagues (Wu, 2011). Contrarily, respondents did not often value informational influence from sources with which they were not in frequent contact. Only 26 per

cent took information from advertisements into consideration, whereas a mere eight per cent credited sales people for purchase decisions (Wu, 2011). Informational influence from frequently-contacted core and significant ties is therefore important when a consumer considers buying an item.

However, having prior knowledge of cars was the second-highest response behind friends' opinions. That is to say, Wu (2011) notes that 62 per cent of respondents relied on prior knowledge when deciding to purchase a new car. Moreover, respondents ranked prior knowledge as the most important source of information, ahead of friends' opinions and family suggestions. This notion is explored by Adjei, Noble and Noble (2010), who assert that in online consumer discussion boards people are less likely to seek information from fellow board members if they view themselves as experts. Essentially, if board members think they know enough about a product to make an informed decision about buying it, they will not seek informational influence from others. On the other hand, consumers with little knowledge about a product tend to value information provided by users on an online forum (Adjei et al., 2010), which can be sometimes considered active core and significant ties (Chen, 2013; Wojcieszak, 2009). The degree to which consumers seek and value informational influence thus depends on their levels of prior product knowledge.

Yet whether or not one considers him or herself an expert, informational influence from core and significant ties on discussion boards is valued more highly than messages from commenters with whom one does not frequently communicate. This is because one judges the value of informational influence in both discussion forums and in-person settings by message content and whether or not the message comes from a reliable source (Cheung et al., 2009). If the message contains important facts or persuasive arguments, one is more likely to believe it than a

poorly-composed message. People also value thoughtfully-composed messages because the sources of such messages are seen as educated and authoritative (Cheung et al., 2009).

Essentially, the more reliable the source, the more likely one is to follow the message. Of course, one generally sees his or her strong ties as reliable due to high levels of frequent contact (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973; McFadyen & Cannella, 2004; Rogers, 1995). This explains why one values informational influence from people he or she regularly communicates with more than such influence from unfamiliar people or anonymous commenters (Cheung et al., 2009).

This ability of core and significant ties to successfully recommend a product through regular online discussion or in-person communication can also be applied to Twitter and Facebook. This notion is partially exemplified by Forbes and Vespoli (2013), who interviewed more than 200 people who purchased a product based on a recommendation that they read on social media. Facebook and Twitter were the platforms most frequently used to get product recommendations, as 59 per cent of respondents bought an item because of a Facebook post and 37 per cent made purchases after reading a tweet. However, 52 per cent of respondents under the age of 22 stated that they used Twitter to get the bulk of their product recommendations.

Though not explored by Forbes and Vespoli (2013), it is probable that many of these recommendations came from core and significant ties. Whereas the practice of following accounts on Twitter that are based around 1,000 kilometres away from one's own location is common, an average of 39 per cent of the accounts one follows are managed less than 100 kilometres away (Takhetejev, Gruzd, & Wellman, 2012). Since social media use is positively related to forming discussion networks with core and significant ties who one regularly contacts (Chen, 2013; Jones et al., 2013; Baatarjav et al., 2010), the majority of these geographically-

close accounts likely to belong to such ties (Takhetejev et al., 2012). The logic of following core and significant ties on Twitter also applies to Facebook. This is because one of the principle reasons why users join the social medium is to follow users who they already know (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Therefore, product recommendations received by respondents of Forbes and Vespoli's (2013) survey were likely partly from core and significant ties.

Moreover, Wang and Chang (2013) conducted a similar study and found that people value product recommendations on social media from strong ties more than ones from anonymous sources or people with which they are unfamiliar. Recommendations from strong ties encouraged a greater number of purchases among those studied (Wang & Chang, 2013). This follows the idea that informational influence from strong ties can lead to product purchases (Brown & Reingen, 1987), as such ties can be seen as reputable sources of information (Cheung et al., 2009; Rogers, 1995). It is thus clear that one's core and significant ties are similar, as regular communication with them on Twitter and Facebook can influence decisions to purchase a product.

### *Gaps in Literature and Research Questions*

Despite a wealth of information, there remain apparent gaps in literature that attempts to discuss normative or informational influence in online or offline settings. For example, the powers of normative and informational influence are typically studied in either, as opposed to both, online or offline contexts when it comes to product recommendations from strong or core and significant ties (Adjei et al., 2010; Evangelista & Dioko, 2011; Huang et al., 2008; Shukla, 2012; Wu, 2011). In some cases, this is due to limitations pertaining to when certain articles were published. For example, Park and Lessig (1977) could not have explored how informational influence from observing others use products develops on social media. This, unfortunately, is

still a gap in scholarly study. Moreover, literature (Forbes & Vespoli, 2013; Wang & Chang, 2013) that explores the impact of Twitter and Facebook on product purchases does not make explicit links to normative or informational influence. Therefore, there is no critical comparison between social media and in-person settings about how either type of influence from core and significant ties affects recreational athletes.

Sports products, such as equipment and fan paraphernalia, have also not been examined under the lens of ties or influence. However, products relating to food, beauty, hygiene and household necessity have been (Bayus, 1985). This lack of scholarly study exists despite the fact that sports and athletics have been studied in marketing, communication and sociological capacities. In fact, large sports organizations have been shown to impact ideas present in civil society (Seippel, 2008) and capably harness online media in public relations efforts (Woo, An & Cho, 2008). Meanwhile, it has been determined that both amateur and professional athletes are compelled to win events and train harder due to teammates' influences (Evans et al., 2013). Even influences exerted upon youth soccer players have been studied in this manner (Wood, 2011), yet recreational athletes remain an unexamined demographic. This major research paper therefore present the following research questions to address these gaps in literature:

*Research Question 1:* To what extent does normative influence from recreational athletes' core and significant ties differ between in-person and social media settings when deciding whether or not to buy sports products?

*Research Question 2:* To what extent does informational influence from recreational athletes' core and significant ties differ between in-person and social media settings when deciding whether or not to buy sports products?

## Method

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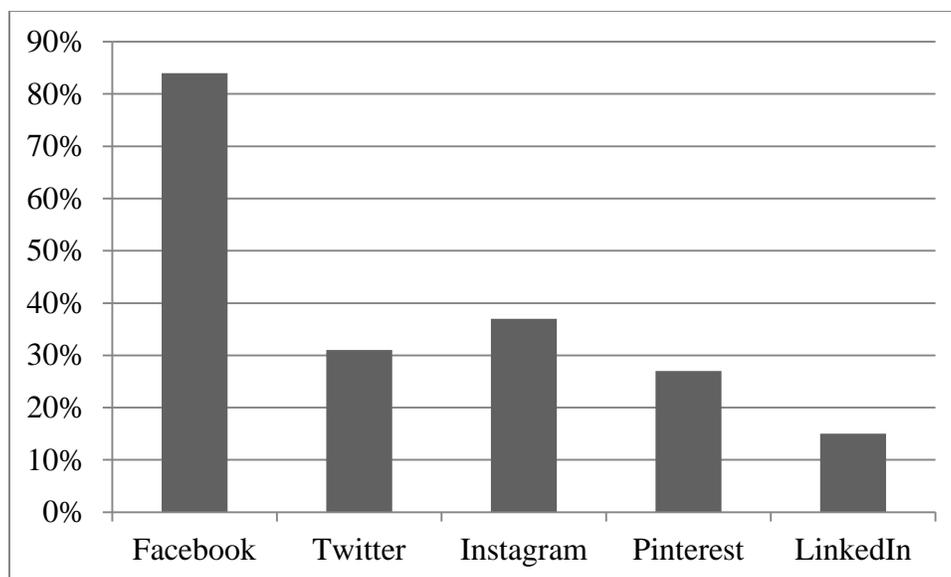
### *Sampling*

Recreational athletes between the ages of 18 and 30 were targeted to participate in this study. These athletes, as opposed to amateur or professional ones, are part of sports teams or groups that do not belong to a governing league or organization that generates revenue. Rather, they simply play for personal enjoyment and do not have coaches or managers. Because of this, consent other than that given by the athlete was not needed to conduct the study. They were also targeted for their potential to speak about a wide-range of products. Whereas people who are simply fans of certain sports may only buy items such as team-branded jerseys and other apparel because of their interest in a professional team, recreational athletes can purchase these items as well as products they use to play, such as shoes, gloves and other equipment.

Four male participants were recruited, who were an approximate average age of 22 years old. Two female participants were also recruited. They were also an average age of 22 years old. The targeted age group is appropriate because it has made up the bulk of respondents in previously-conducted surveys that connect product purchases to social media posts. For example, the average age of Forbes and Vespoli's (2013) respondents was 28. Likewise, almost 80 per cent of the participants in Wang and Chang's (2013) study were between 21 and 30 years old.

Recreational athletes also had to have an account on either Facebook or Twitter, or both. Facebook and Twitter were targeted for two reasons. First, they are popular social media, as 84 per cent of adults in the United States between the ages of 18 and 29 had Facebook accounts in 2013 (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Twitter is the third most popular social medium in this demographic behind Facebook and Instagram. Thirty-one per cent of Americans in the age range are users (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Second, studies (Forbes & Vespoli, 2013; Wang & Chang,

2013) point to Facebook and Twitter as media which allow users to influence others to buy products. Based on previous research, recreational athletes between the ages of 18 and 30 who had Facebook and/or Twitter accounts were thus ideal participants. As the targeted group is narrowly-defined and only six participants were recruited, this major research project could be considered a pilot study to guide future research.



*Figure 3: Percentages of American adults between the ages of 18 and 29 who used a given social medium in 2013 (Duggan & Smith, 2013).*

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Recreational athletes were recruited to participate in qualitative interviews. They were selected based on a method of convenience, as I approached people who I knew participated in recreational sports. A snowball sampling technique was then used, in that I asked these people to refer me to another recreational athlete willing to be interviewed. Before the interviews started, I explained terms that are central to this project's research questions in simplified fashions to participants. For example, I described core and significant ties as immediate family members, non-immediate family members and friends – who can be neighbours and co-workers – with whom one communicates at least once a week (Boase et al., 2006; Boase, 2008). Normative

influence was explained as a group norm among these ties. Informational influence was defined as such a tie either directly or indirectly communicating information about a product (Bearden et al., 1989). After giving these descriptions, I encouraged participants to ask me questions.

Each interview then began with the same question: “Have you ever seen a message on a social medium, such as Twitter or Facebook, which recommended you or other users buy a certain sports product?” Depending on if the answer was “yes” or “no,” I asked a different set of prepared questions, which can be found in **Appendix 2**. The four affirmative responses led to a set of questions that mostly focused on social media settings and incorporated questions about offline experiences. The two negative responses, on the other hand, led to a set of questions that largely concentrated on in-person settings. However, all the questions related to how core and significant ties influence interviewees to buy sports products. They were therefore clearly linked to the research questions. As answers to interview questions became repetitive and themes became evident, no additional participants were recruited after the sixth interview was completed.

To uncover the seven emerging themes, a content analysis with open coding was performed on all six transcribed interviews. Three themes pertaining to normative influence were illuminated and four themes focusing on informational influence were established. An individual theme is made up of three to four findings and each finding appears at least once in two separate interviews. However, the majority of findings can be found multiple times in three to four interviews. Examples of these findings, as found in the interviews, are in **Appendix 1**.

To answer the project’s research questions, a four-step analysis was performed in the **Findings and Discussion** section. First, the individual themes are sorted into two groups based on the research question – and hence type of influence – to which they pertain. Second, the

individual themes are summarized. This is done by dissecting the unique findings belonging to a theme and explaining how they illustrate a level of similarity or dissimilarity between influence exerted by core and significant ties in social media and in-person settings. Third, these explanations are supplemented with brief explorations about how the themes compare and contrast with the relevant literature. Doing so provides supplement framework to critically assess the themes in relation to the paper's research questions. Finally, a summary of the main and original results is presented.

## Findings and Discussion

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*Research Question 1:* To what extent does normative influence from recreational athletes' core and significant ties differ between in-person and social media settings when deciding whether or not to buy sports products?

### *i) In-person normative influence from acceptance*

The *in-person normative influence from acceptance* emerging theme indicates that, due to apparent normative influence exerted in in-person contexts, one will buy a sports product to earn a sense of acceptance from his or her core and significant ties. This sense of acceptance comes from (a) *jealousy*, (b) *a desire to fit in* and (c) *a sense of fandom*. *Jealousy*, for example, can be demonstrated by a participant who said that he was envious of his friends' new hockey pads because his were old. He states that his jealousy forced him to purchase new pads because "if you see your friends having all new equipment and you're using ... old pads or something, you're going to want to take a look at new stuff." Buying the pads resulted in his symbolic inclusion into a group of friends who all used the product. Similarly, the *desire to fit in* finding is exemplified by one participant expressing the fact that he bought a certain brand of hockey gloves simply because his friends used the same one. He explained that he would "see lots of people wearing the Bauer gloves I have before I bought them ... No matter what the function was, I just thought they looked sweet and I saw all these people wearing them." This participant said that witnessing so many teammates use the product "brainwashes you into thinking you need (it)." As another participant explained:

It's definitely a mob mentality. So, if every (core and significant tie) is using a certain product, you kind of start feeling left out if you don't have it. And so, a lot of the time you will buy things because they are in trend and multiple people are using them. You want to be able to stand in a group with them and not stick out like a sore thumb because you're the only one not using this product.

Although they did not express a sense of jealousy, the participants were still driven to buy products to conform to core and significant ties who grouped together based on their use of a specific item.

Though the participant who bought the gloves was a child at the time, another participant said that he bought a product a few months before participating in this study to show that he was a fan of a certain football team. He said that “my brother has an old 1980s (Seattle) Seahawks jacket. So I realized out of everyone I knew, I was one of the only ones who didn’t have any kind of gear.” He added: “I went out and bought a hat.” In this context, *fandom* is similar to a desire to fit in, but explicitly pertains to items from professional sports teams as opposed to equipment needed to play a game. He bought the item because, through in-person encounters with friends and family members, he realized that he was the only one among these ties who did not own a team-branded product. Another participant said that he often feels excluded when core and significant ties go to professional hockey games involving the Toronto Maple Leafs: “I’ll hear (them) bragging about going to the game ... That evokes an emotion in me that tells me I want to go to the game.” Essentially, these participants remedied their senses of being left out by buying a product that represented the team in question. It is therefore clear that, due to easily-detectible group norms in in-person interactions, participants purchased sports-related items to earn acceptance from groups of core and significant ties.

The theme thus reinforces theories put forth by Bearden et al. (1989). Specifically, it demonstrates how people purchase products to enhance their personal images in offline settings. By doing so, they believe that they can gain acceptance into a group to which they wish to belong. In this case, the groups are core and significant ties that either play the same sports as participants or cheer for the same team. Acceptance is earned by using sports products that

coincide with the group norm. Similar results were found by Shukla (2012) and Evangelista and Dioko (2011), who explored how the pressures of normative influence encourage individuals to bolster their reputations to be included in a given group. Often, these groups are defined by the simple fact that each of its members has used a specific item or relied on a designated brand. Hence, the only way to successfully enter the group is to experience the item or brand (Evangelista & Dioko, 2011). As previously indicated, this notion was demonstrated by participants acknowledging that they felt excluded and subsequently purchasing products. Therefore, as both the literature and emerging theme suggest, people are susceptible to normative influence exerted in in-person settings to achieve a feeling of inclusiveness.

*ii) Normative influence from social media posts*

The *normative influence from social media posts* emerging theme indicates that social media users can identify sources of normative influence and seek acceptance by conforming to them. They do so by identifying common opinions that their core and significant ties express through posts, which can be understood as original messages – not replies or comments. This emerging theme is thus largely composed from the ideas of (a) *consistent media* and (b) *collective opinion*. The *consistent media* finding specifically refers to the action of posting original images and other media to Facebook and Twitter. In the case of sports products, multiple participants stated that their core and significant ties would post images that they captured of tickets to professional sports games and usable products, such as shoes. For example, one participant said that these images made her “see everybody start buying (the product) and using it.” Others stated that their core and significant ties displayed a clear, positive group stance about a product solely by posting multiple images of it. For example, a participant noted that seeing such posts “almost plants a seed in your head ... You see (the images) and you begin to say ‘oh,

that must be something good.” Moreover, they felt a need to adhere to this collective opinion by seriously considering buying the item. One participant mentioned that by identifying a positive group perception about a product “you’ll think ‘okay, well I should hop on that (buy the product), too.’” This finding therefore coincides with the literature (Bearden et al., 1989; Evangelista & Dioko, 2011; Shukla, 2012), in that participants felt pressured to buy sports products to earn a feeling of inclusiveness from a group of core and significant ties.

Similarly, the *collective opinion* finding indicates that participants identified clear group beliefs about products by reading posts that had no accompanying media. This feeling of normative influence arises when multiple core and significant ties post their opinions about a product they use or have tried. One participant explained that this is most evident when a new product is released. He stated that the posts will collectively communicate “an overall positive reaction and a lot of enthusiasm, or a backlash against something.” Regardless of the tone, such posts demonstrate a prevalent group opinion. Another participant explicitly linked the identification of collective opinions on social media with purchasing a product: “When a bunch of people post ‘I just bought this jersey and it was a great deal’ ... I may never have even known that (the jersey) existed and bought it.” Therefore, this finding indicates that participants can capably identify a group’s perception of a product and readily conform to it.

These *consistent media* and *collective opinion* findings thus reinforce theories about online normative influence espoused by Cheung et al. (2009). Specifically, the findings support the notion that the ideas of one’s core and significant ties must be readily available for him or her to identify a collective opinion. Identifying this collective opinion allows one to be susceptible to normative influence (Cheung et al., 2009). With numerous social media posts containing similar

opinions and original images, participants can easily identify the presence of normative influence to buy sports products on social media platforms.

The final finding that helped form this theme was labelled as (c) *testing*, and further indicates that participants recognize the persuasive characteristics of normative influence on social media with regard to purchasing sports products. Participants expressed the idea that by seeing numerous posts containing images and opinions, they felt as if multiple core and significant ties had tested and subsequently enjoyed the product. As one interviewee explained, “everyone else is the guinea pig and it’s likely that they’re using (the product) ... (this will) definitely persuade me to think (the product) is better and try it.” Therefore, as one’s core and significant ties exhibit the fact that they have used a product, he or she will feel more inclined to try it. Hence, this sort of exhibition through social media posts encourages conformity. This further coincides with the results of previous studies, which concluded that people engage with certain brands to gain social approval among core and significant ties who have used them (Evangelista & Dioko, 2011; Huang et al., 2008). This finding and theme therefore indicate that social media users can easily identify and conform to normative influence exerted by core and significant ties through posts.

### *iii) Uncertain normative influence from social media comments*

Acting as a contradiction to the idea that normative influence can be clearly exerted on social media platforms, the *uncertain normative influence from social media comments* emerging theme alludes to the idea that certain factors hinder the power of such influence in online settings. Specifically, it indicates that social media comments, which can be understood as replies to original posts, have the potential to demonstrate that a group opinion on a given sports-related item does not exist. The theme emerged as a result of three findings: (a) *inconsistent*

*opinions*, (b) *arguments* and (c) *few ratings*. First, participants said that their core and significant ties comment on posts about sports products by offering *inconsistent opinions*. For example, if a post gives a positive opinion about an item, comments may offer numerous negative ones. These inconsistent opinions emerge about both equipment and products related to professional teams. One participant recalled a post from a friend about tickets to an Ottawa Senators game. A Toronto Maple Leafs fan commented by saying there was no point to seeing the rival team play: “There was a guy who ... basically said ‘no, I’m not going to a Senators game. I see no purpose in attending their games.’” Due to such contrasting views, a group norm can be difficult for social media users to detect.

Second, one’s friends tend to delve into *arguments* on social media as a result of the aforementioned inconsistent opinions. For example, if one user posts a message about buying a jersey, others will comment by offering conflicting views. Heated debates, characterized by multiple core and significant ties argumentatively responding to each other’s comments, thus begin. One participant even went so far as to say that, in his experience, people argue about sports and athletic products on social media for the sole purpose of arguing: “It depends on your friend group. If you’re posting something and they having contrasting interests, you’re going to get (into arguments).” When it comes to sports products that pertain to professional teams, another participant said that he believes promoting teams that he supports and commenting negatively about other teams is an important part of being a fan. He explained that “one person will post something and then their friends will be like ‘this players sucks’ or something to that effect ... It’s always just an obvious fact that any team that is not the team you like is terrible.” It is clear that such unsolved arguments that are the product of this mentality eliminate collective group opinions.

Third, there are *few ratings* on social media comments through “likes,” “favouriting” or a similar form of endorsement. Due to this lack of endorsement, one participant said he found it difficult to understand what the general opinion about a given product was. He said, quite simply, that posts and comments about products “need the ratings ... especially good ratings.” This is because even if an argument were to occur, the general opinion could be determined by which comments were endorsed by core and significant ties (Cheung et al., 2009). Moreover, he admitted that he does not rate anything, which is “a huge problem” because “that’s what people need to buy certain things.” Therefore, this emerging theme indicates that the presence of normative influence may be hard to detect on social media.



*Figure 4: A post and the subsequent comments on Facebook. On Twitter, a post is considered an initial tweet. Comments are “@replies” to the tweet.*

The theme thus somewhat contradicts Cheung et al.’s (2009) expectation that normative influence can effectively manifest itself online. Whereas Cheung et al. (2009) state that users expressing similar opinions about the same product is a form of normative influence, such consistency cannot exist if one’s Facebook friends and Twitter followers constantly bicker in sports-related discussions. Moreover, the literature (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Chen, 2013; Cheung et al., 2009) states that consistent endorsement from one’s core and significant ties indicates a group opinion and thus forms normative influence. However, a group opinion cannot develop if users do not endorse comments on social media. Furthermore, the theme denotes a

departure from Price et al.'s (2006) ideas about online conversations. Whereas the research about political discussion boards reveals that users will not typically voice an opinion that goes against the established group norm, this is not the case for sports product discussions on social media. Perhaps this is due to the fact that people express opposing views in such a free manner that prevailing common beliefs can never be established. Regardless, this emerging theme thus indicates that, in the case of sports products, it is difficult for normative influence to develop in social media settings.

Finally, the theme demonstrates dissimilarity between social media and in-person normative influence. The literature (Evangelista & Dioko, 2011; Huang et al., 2008; Shukla, 2012; Werner et al., 2007) suggests that conversation and interaction in in-person settings can allow normative influence to develop. This is because face-to-face interaction with groups and in one-on-one scenarios allows someone to determine a collective opinion about a given issue or product and, in turn, be influenced by it (Werner et al., 2007). In addition, the first emerging theme (*in-person normative influence from acceptance*) points to the idea that participants can clearly notice normative influence by identifying group norms in in-person settings. However, the aforementioned findings that make up this theme indicate that it is not possible to sense this influence in social media conversations – made up of posts and comments – about sports products. The emerging theme therefore exhibits a level of difference between how clearly someone can detect normative influence in social media and in-person conversations.

*Research Question 2:* To what extent does informational influence from recreational athletes' core and significant ties differ between in-person and social media settings when deciding whether or not to buy sports products?

*i) Informational influence from in-depth knowledge*

The *informational influence from in-depth knowledge* emerging theme demonstrates commonalities shared by recommendation-based informational influence in online and offline situations. Regardless of the setting, the theme indicates that a core or significant tie must demonstrate thorough knowledge about a sports product for informational influence to be effective. Participants indicated that such a tie must communicate at least one, or a combination, of (a) *specific information*, (b) *statistics* and (c) *relevant experience*. When reading or listening to product recommendations, participants indicated that they desire *specific information* as opposed to general statements. As one participant explained, "if you just say 'this jersey's awesome and you should buy it,' I'd say 'you didn't tell me anything about the jersey.'" The participant who said this also pointed out that recommendations based solely on opinion without some degree of factual support are ineffective. In fact, he stated that to be convinced to buy an athletic item "it would be nice to know the specifics about its features."

This need for detail indicates that one might seek *statistics* in recommendations from core and significant ties. For example, one participant pointed out that when deciding whether or not to buy a product associated with a professional sports team, his friends on Facebook would cite relevant statistics about that team. Specifically, he explained that his core and significant ties would discuss "winning streaks, losing streaks, who's on a point streak. Everybody in this group of friends seemed to know what they were talking about." Another participant said that she looks for statistics from core and significant ties about which athletes are using a given product and

what results they have yielded with said product: “They’d have to give me some sort of statistic about the product ... A reference such as ‘(a certain athlete) used it and this happened.’” Though participants did not explicitly correlate learning about statistics to purchasing products, the literature (Bearden et al., 1989) indicates that internalizing such information has the potential to do so.

Similarly, participants indicated that the core or significant tie who recommends them products must have *relevant experience* with said product. A participant who plays rugby said he will only listen to recommendations from such ties who play rugby or American football, which he considers to be similar sports. Similarly, a participant who plays defence in hockey stated that he values the opinions of such ties who are also defencemen: “It’s nice to hear from someone who plays your position and how it worked for them rather than someone who is in a completely different situation.” Essentially, he desires information from those who may have faced similar in-game experiences as he has. As participants gave examples of the importance of ties having in-depth product knowledge, it is clear that sources of informational influence must be detailed in both social media and in-person scenarios.

Therefore, this emerging theme corresponds with Cheung et al.’s (2009) assertion that informational influence, regardless of the setting in which it is found, is more effective if it is developed through the presentation of facts as opposed to generalized statements that express a like or dislike for a product. This is because thoughtfully-composed messages are seen as more legitimate, and thus authoritative, when compared to quickly-composed messages (Cheung et al., 2009). In this case, quickly-composed messages can be seen as those which favour general statements over specific information and ignore the presentation of statistics or experiences. Essentially, this emerging theme indicates that for informational influence pertaining to sports

products to be effective, recommendations on social media and in face-to-face encounters must be built on detailed information.

*ii) Resistance of informational influence due to expertise*

The *resistance of informational influence due to expertise* emerging theme exhibits an aspect of informational influence that is shared between social media and in-person settings: the idea that individuals will resist such influence to buy a certain sports product if they consider themselves an expert about it. This theme thus corresponds with literature (Adjei et al., 2010; Wu, 2011) that states that people will not seek or rely on informational influence from core and significant ties if they already have an understanding of a product that they intend to buy or have bought. This is because they believe that they have already internalized the information that is necessary to make an informed decision (Adjei et al., 2010). The similarity between social media and in-person scenarios on this topic is evident due to four findings, which are (a) *online debate*, (b) *online rejection*, (c) *offline debate* and (d) *offline rejection*. When participants felt as though they had a detailed understanding about a product, they generally said they would *debate* social media reviews and recommendations from core and significant ties about said product or items that are similar. For example, one participant stated that he debates a friend whenever he posts a personal review about a product to reach a mutual agreement about it: “He’ll put up a post about something and then we’ll debate the merits of it and go back and forth.” Similarly, participants will not typically acknowledge other users’ comments about product reviews and recommendations. As one participant said, “most of the time when I’m reading (these types of) comments, I’m just sort of skimming through them.” This *rejection* of informational influence sources also stems from the idea that participants view themselves as experts and therefore do not need to seek information from core and significant ties (Adjei et al., 2010).

Similarly, in offline settings such as face-to-face conversations, participants who claim to be experts about a product say that they generally *debate* with and *reject* the views of those who exert informational influence. One participant, for example, said that he always rejects recommendations from a friend who discusses a certain type of mountain bike pedals: “We all have some different personal preferences on the way we set up our bike ... He can go on and on about how great clipped-in pedals are and it’s kind of like trying to sell ice to an Eskimo.” His core and significant ties’ attempts at using informational influence are hence rendered ineffective. Another participant said that she likes to debate with those who recommend her products because she believes it helps both parties gain a greater understanding of the given item. She explained that when an in-person recommendation that she questions is given to her, she argues “because you’re interested in (the product) ... you’re not going to find out more about the product and new products unless you have a discussion about it.” Debate and eventual rejection of others’ opinions thus results in a stronger expertise about the item in question. In the case of sports products, the participants make it clear that in any setting they will resist informational influence in the form of recommendations if they consider themselves to be an expert about the given product.

### *iii) Seeking experts if not an expert*

Although prior knowledge may be an important factor when deciding to buy a new item (Wu, 2011), the literature (Adjei et al., 2010) also states that consumers with little knowledge of a product will seek informational influence from those who they consider to be experts. Experts are often considered to be those who appear educated and authoritative through the communication of detailed recommendations. They are thus seen as, above all, reliable sources of information (Cheung et al., 2009). As the literature suggests (Brown & Reingen, 1987;

Granovetter, 1973; McFadyen & Cannella, 2004; Rogers, 1995), frequent contact typically encourages one to view his or her core and significant ties as these reliable sources of information.

The *seeking experts if not an expert* emerging theme thus explains that when participants do not know much about a sports product that they wish to buy, they seek information on social media and through in-person interaction with ties that they consider to be experts. Experts must (a) have an element of athletic *similarity* with those who seek their influence, (b) display their active *involvement* with the sport for which the product is used and, as a result, (c) have the *trust* of the people to whom they recommend the product. The *similarity* finding indicates that participants must have a slight sense of rapport with experts, built on the fact that they both play the same sport. Quite simply, one cannot be an expert about a product used for a sport in which he or she does not participate. Though multiple participants expressed this idea, one interviewee concisely explained that an expert, in a basic sense, is “someone who takes athletics seriously and whether or not I can see some crossover between the sport they’re playing or I’m playing.” Interviewees hence indicated that they must have similar athletic interests and experience with a core or significant tie to seek his or her knowledge about an athletic item in in-person and social media contexts.

However, simply playing a given sport may not always be enough to successfully recommend a product as an expert. This is because the *involvement* finding dictates that to be an expert, one must actively compete using similar products and be up-to-date with relevant brand- or item-related innovations. One participant, for example, said that she actively seeks advice from tournament champions in her sport when she wants information about a product that she does not know well. Such a person must be “actively competing ... who’s in the (tournament)

scene and is on trend with the product.” A level of *trust* is thus reached when one feels the expert has demonstrated adequate knowledge about a given product. As one participant explained, “you feel like (the expert) can know more about the product than you’d know.” Contrarily, another interviewee quipped that he would not trust “some guy I met at a bar who may just be spouting off, not knowing what he’s talking about” because he has not communicated his knowledge of, and involvement in, a certain sport. These three findings support the literature, as they point to the idea that people seek others who they view as reliable and knowledgeable to act as sources of informational influence. As this search for experts occurred on social media and in in-person contexts, the emerging theme demonstrates a level of similarity between informational influences found in the two settings.

*iv) Informational influence from performance*

Though the literature – and previous emerging themes – typically defines informational influence as recommendations and detailed expressions of opinions, Bearden et al. (1989) and Park and Lessig (1977) state it can also be the process of making inferences and reaching conclusions by observing others. When applied to consumer products, this sort of informational influence can be understood as analyzing an item’s merits and shortcomings to gain information about it (Bearden et al., 1989). Once the necessary information is gained, a consumer can make a decision about whether or not to buy the product in question. As the literature generally does not focus on such informational influence in online situations, there have been no scholarly attempts to make conclusive findings about how its characteristics differ depending on the setting in which it is found. This deficiency was briefly explained in the **Literature Review** section. However, this form of informational influence on Twitter and Facebook must be in the form of

videos and pictures. Such visual media are the only methods one has to view, and therefore create first-hand judgements about, a given product.

However, the *informational influence from performance* emerging theme illustrates a difference between social media and in-person settings, as participants seem to more readily accept this type of informational influence from core and significant ties in in-person settings. This original theme is comprised of three findings: (a) *visible function*, (b) *improved performance* and (c) *questionable media*. *Visible function* is explained by the fact that numerous participants indicated that seeing friends and family members use a product in in-person contexts has encouraged them to buy said product. For example, one participant said he would be “more likely to go out and spend my money on one of those select few (bicycle tires) . . . simply because I know five or six guys I ride with on a frequent basis all have the same tire and it works.” He essentially said that he had seen the item successfully work on numerous occasions, witnessed its merits and thus gained the information that is necessary to make a purchasing decision. Similarly, the *improved performance* finding demonstrates that, when it comes to buying sports products, participants rely on informational influence in the form of making inferences from the actions of core and significant ties. This finding also exclusively pertains to in-person settings. Multiple participants said that they frequently judge the performances of strong ties. This is exemplified by one participant, who is a horseback rider: “If I can see (the product) in an offline setting being used, I can judge if (a friend) uses it and it seems to be working really well.” Often, if such a tie’s performance is visibly improved, the participants would attribute it to a new product. As one participant alluded to, this only applies to athletic activities that rely on a “tool,” such as a stick or racket:

If I’m playing hockey against a (friend) and he has an unbelievable shot, and I had a wooden stick whereas he had a really nice composite (stick), I would consider

(the stick to have enhanced his performance). It's basically whether or not there's some kind of tool that I could conceivably believe is enhancing his performance.

The finding therefore illustrates that participants draw information about a given product by viewing their core and significant ties use it.

These findings thus correspond with ideas put forth by Park and Lessig (1977).

Participants said that they did not have to develop a two-way dialogue with the source of informational influence to conclude whether or not a product should be purchased. Rather, they merely had to witness sports products being used to discern the information that was necessary to make original judgements when it came to buying them or not. As participants indicated that the visible function and improved performance findings only pertain to in-person settings, a difference between informational influence exerted by core and significant ties in online and offline settings was demonstrated.

The preference for first-hand examination of a product over seeing it in a virtual setting is further enforced by the *questionable media* finding. Participants were quizzical about how much information they could discern from simply viewing a product on a social medium in the form of original media such as videos and pictures. Participants expressed this view while simultaneously contributing to the visible function finding. One participant said, for example, that "a picture can show you certain things, but being able to see (the product) in kind of an offline setting will definitely persuade you more ... because it's actually physically in front of you." Essentially, participants could not reliably judge a product's positive and negative attributes by viewing a video or picture. They thus felt that visual media typically posted to Twitter and Facebook could not communicate information that one would typically take into account when making a purchasing decision. Therefore, according to participants, a social media post from a core or significant tie that solely contains a picture or video cannot effectively exert

informational influence compared with seeing the same product being used by these ties in offline settings. The emerging theme thus demonstrates a difference between informational influence found on social media and in in-person settings.

### *Summary of Results*

The emerging themes about normative influence indicate that some of its elements are consistent and others are different between in-person and social media settings. For example, participants' answers denote that group norms were evident in in-person scenarios but somewhat difficult to notice on social media. Participants describe that group norms among core and significant ties can be clearly detected in in-person settings, such as games, practices and even by monitoring team-branded apparel that core and significant ties wear. Clearly-detectible normative influence in these in-person situations is demonstrated by the first emerging theme, which explains how participants buy sports products to achieve a sense of acceptance from groups of ties. As the second emerging theme explains, group norms can also be detected through social media posts. Similar to the first theme, participants alluded to the idea that they conformed to these obvious norms to achieve a sense of acceptance. However, the third emerging theme states that these norms become cloudy by reading replies to, and follow-up comments about, initial posts. The emerging themes pertaining to normative influence therefore exhibit two key findings. First, normative influences to buy sports products on social media and in in-person contexts are both powered by one's desire to be included in a group of core and significant ties. Second, the two settings differ based on the clarity of normative influence. Specifically, the influence is more noticeable in in-person contexts compared with social media settings.

The second group of emerging themes points to the idea that informational influence in the form of product recommendations from recreational athletes' core and significant ties does not differ between in-person and social media settings when deciding whether or not to purchase a sports item. This notion is illustrated by three themes. First, regardless of the setting, a core or significant tie must demonstrate in-depth knowledge about a sports product when recommending it. Second, in both online and offline settings, participants stated that they resist informational influence if they consider themselves to be experts about the product. They debate and, in some cases, ignore recommendations about products. Third, when participants did not feel as though they were knowledgeable about a product, they sought experts both online and offline who could give recommendations. As these three themes indicate that multiple aspects of informational influence are present in different settings, they dictate that such influence from core and significant ties does not differ between social media and in-person settings.

However, the fourth emerging theme indicates that informational influence in the form of making inferences from the actions of core and significant ties does, in fact, differ in terms of reliability between social media and in-person settings. That is to say, participants questioned the ability of online images and other virtual media to capably communicate the merits and shortcomings of a given sports product. Contrarily, participants readily judged the merits and shortcomings of products when they saw them used in non-virtual settings. Based on the information drawn from these first-hand, in-person judgements and analyses, they alluded to the idea that they were comfortable making a decision about whether or not to buy a product. Therefore, there is an evident difference in terms of reliability between social media and in-person scenarios pertaining to this type of informational influence.

## Implications for Professional Practice

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The results of this study have numerous implications for professional communicators. Specifically, they affirm the need for certain practices in sports product marketing, advertising and public relations. Based on the findings that relate to normative influence, it is clear that industry professionals should not solely target a narrowly-defined audience. Rather, a relatively broadly-defined audience or multiple narrowly-defined audiences should be exposed to promotional efforts. For example, a company that promotes skating equipment should disseminate messages to both males and females that represent different age groups or other demographic classifications. This is because participants indicated that purchases were partly driven by a desire to conform to core and significant ties. Quite simply, if a greater number of people use a specific product, there is a better chance that athletes will be exposed to such ties who use it. There is therefore a higher probability that athletes will purchase the product in an effort to earn a sense of acceptance. This concept is explained in the *in-person normative influence from acceptance* emerging theme. Though the power of this type of normative influence may not be as evident on social media as in-person settings, the results demonstrate that targeting large or multiple audiences would benefit sports product promotion.

This study also yields three results that demonstrate how professional communicators should harness informational influence to market sports products. First, marketing campaigns should include detailed information as opposed to ambiguous statements. The rationale for doing so is found in the *informational influence from in-depth knowledge* and *seeking experts if not an expert* emerging themes. As numerous participants suggested, exposure to brief and questionable opinions did not entice them to make purchases. This is partly because individuals who do not know much about a product often look to credible sources to learn about it. Participants sought

detailed recommendations built on factors such as statistical information. It thus follows that comprehensive promotions of a sports product should include details such as the number of professional athletes who use it.

Second, the results partially confirm the need for a common practice in sports public relations: endorsement from professional athletes. When participants did not have adequate knowledge of a product, they said that they relied on experts to provide their thoughts. This is also demonstrated in the *seeking experts if not an expert* emerging theme. Though these experts were core and significant ties, the findings still demonstrate that athletes require trustworthy sources of information to make purchasing decisions. A professional athlete who uses, and has success with, a product should certainly seem like a credible expert. He or she could endorse the product by discussing it in in-person scenarios or posting information about it on social media. This is because the results demonstrate that recreational athletes look for displays of expertise in both of these settings. Therefore, the study shows that professional endorsement remains a worthwhile endeavour.

Finally, marketing campaigns should, in some capacity, provide visual examples of the product in action. The reason for doing so is found in the *informational influence from performance* emerging theme. As multiple participants indicated, they judge the merits and shortcomings of products by watching them in use. Companies who are confident in their product should therefore show athletes utilizing it in different situations through methods such as live demonstrations. Unfortunately for these companies, participants indicated that they did not readily infer information about a product when they saw media depicting it posted to social media. Perhaps advertisers and marketers could overcome this hurdle by distributing comprehensive, as opposed to short, videos. Regardless, showing the product in use could

encourage consumers to develop positive perceptions and possibly decide to make purchases. The results of this study thus provide three important implications about how professional communicators can effectively exert informational influence when promoting athletic items.

As the results of this major research paper demonstrate, it is possible for sports product marketers, advertisers and public relations practitioners to harness the power of normative and informational influences. Though some of the aforementioned tactics do not aim to influence audience members through core and significant ties, they still have the potential to encourage purchases. Whether or not these tactics positively correlate with increased sales will, as always in professional practice, largely depend on the abilities of the teams who use them.

## Limitations and Future Research

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### *Limitations*

Despite the wealth of literature about ties and influences – as well as the participants' abilities to answer my questions in a detailed manner – this major research paper has several limitations. First, the small sample size of interviewees means that it is problematic to state that findings truly encompass the thoughts and experiences of recreational athletes ages 18 to 30. A larger sample size, in addition to a random sampling method to reach diverse participants, would have provided a more accurate representation of the targeted population. Perhaps a quantitative method, such as surveys, would be more effective than interviews to collect relevant data from a greater number of diverse participants within this population in future related studies.

Second, the findings are restricted to the data that corresponded with the examined literature. That is to say, emerging themes had to explicitly pertain to normative or informational influence administered by core and significant ties to ensure the study was tightly-focused. Because of this, an opportunity to discuss product pricing was ignored. Though un-prompted, some participants occasionally referenced how the price of products played a role in their decisions to buy them. Despite this, the absence of a discussion about price did not affect the quality of the results. Each emerging theme contained findings that effectively contributed to overarching discussions about how normative or informational influence from core and significant ties differed between social media and in-person settings.

Third, and finally, there are numerous limitations inherent to the self-reported data that qualitative interviews uncover. For example, participants may not have remembered certain experiences that happened in the past, such as buying a specific sports product after witnessing a core or significant tie gain an improvement in performance because of it. Due to an inability to

completely recall past events, participants could have also falsely attributed buying a sports product to the influence exerted by someone else. These limitations are made more problematic by the fact that, in this case, I could not independently verify the information that was given to me. This is because participants are the sole sources who can recount their unique experiences. The self-reported data must therefore be taken at face-value.

#### *Directions for future research*

Despite its original conclusions, I believe that the small sample size on which this project's findings were based best allows it to serve as a pilot study. In fact, there are numerous directions that future research endeavours could follow. They could, for example, slightly alter this study's sampling. How professional athletes – or even just sports fans – experience influences on social media and in-person could be investigated. Key terms in the research questions could also be changed. For example, investigators could seek to determine the extent to which influences exerted by weak ties, as opposed to core and significant ties, differ between social media and in-person settings. The outcomes from such changes would supplement this major research project's results while yielding new findings.

Furthermore, subsequent studies could aim to fill the gaps in this one. As previously mentioned, participants indicated that price also played a part in their sports product purchasing decisions. Books and journal articles about consumers' perceptions of price could be combined with scholarly works about influence and network theory to form the literature review necessary to support such a research project. Moreover, this major research paper's participants did not discuss a specific aspect of normative influence: the desire to conform to group norms to obtain rewards or avoid punishments. This deficiency is unfortunate, as one can easily theorized how it is relevant to sports. Perhaps a participant bought a hockey stick used by teammates to score

more goals and thus be rewarded with increased playing time. Not buying the stick could have resulted in less time on the ice. These examples clearly illustrate that new studies could build on this project's original findings by addressing its gaps.

Future research projects could also set a more ambitious goal: determine which setting or influence most effectively encourages people to buy sports products. Research with this purpose would benefit product marketers and advertisers, as it would partially establish where, and which types of, messages should be sent to their audiences. Of course, there is an inherent difficulty in such a study that must be overcome to reach worthwhile results. This is the question of correlation versus causation. Did the given influence or setting genuinely cause participants to buy products or is it merely correlated with purchases? However, a research project of this nature still has the potential to reach original and worthwhile conclusions.

## Conclusion

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The goal of this major research project was to determine the extent to which normative and informational influences to buy sports products from core and significant ties differ between social media and in-person settings. The findings of this research indicate that individual facets of each type of influence have unique characteristics that are either similar or dissimilar between the two settings. In terms of normative influence exerted by core and significant ties, group norms were evident in in-person settings, which led to recreational athletes saying that they bought products to earn a sense of acceptance. Participants also sought a feeling of inclusiveness by recognizing group norms that emerged from social media posts. The clarity of group norms was not always as evident on social media compared to in-person settings, however. Though participants explained that they can detect common opinions by reading posts, such as status updates, they were muddied through comments, which are subsequent posts that respond to these updates.

Furthermore, participants indicated that informational influence in the form of product recommendations was largely the same between the examined settings. The effectiveness of such recommendations is powered by the communication of detailed information. Recommendations that are brief, as opposed to thorough, were ineffective in the eyes of the participants. In addition, one's expertise about sports products, or lack thereof, has similar effects on online and offline activity. If one is an expert, he or she will typically debate and ignore recommendations. If they are not knowledgeable about a product, they will seek recommendations from a core or significant tie that is. On the other hand, the power of informational influence in the form of observing others was questioned on social media. Original videos and pictures were thought to be poor demonstrators of a product's merits and shortcomings. Contrarily, this type of

informational influence was used by participants in in-person settings that allowed them to clearly examine a given product and make their own judgements about it.

These unique findings help solve ambiguities that one can infer from preceding scholarly works. By clarifying such deficiencies, this major research project can benefit readers from both industry and academia alike. The project's original contributions to consumer, influence and personal network scholarship are thus threefold. First, normative and informational purchasing influences had not been compared and contrasted between social media and in-person settings. Second, such influences had not been applied to the seldom-studied realms of sports products and recreational athletics. Third, the concept of core and significant ties had not been so explicitly involved in the exploration of influences in these settings prior to this study. This project therefore contributes to the growing library of academic literature that bridges real and virtual contexts to better understand their relationship. As social media and other online platforms grow, so too should this library.

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## Appendix 1: Codebook

Category name	Example	Findings in category
Normative influence from acceptance	<p>Jealousy: "... if you see your friends having new equipment and you're using crappy old pads or something, you're going to want to take a look at new stuff."</p> <p>Fitting in: "... I'd see lots of people wearing the Bauer gloves I have before I bought them ... No matter what the function was, I just thought they looked sweet and I saw all these people wearing them."</p> <p>Fandom: "... my brother has an old 1980s Seahawks jacket. So I realized out of everyone I knew, I was one of the only ones who didn't have any kind of gear."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jealousy</li> <li>• Fitting in</li> <li>• Fandom</li> </ul>
Normative influence from social media posts	<p>Consistent media: "There's a lot of stuff that you'll see people will post a picture of and you'll see everybody start buying it and using it. You'll think 'okay, well I should hop on that too.'"</p> <p>Collective opinion: "... it'll either be an overall positive reaction and a lot of enthusiasm or a backlash against something that they perceive as too much, too fast."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent media</li> <li>• Collective opinion</li> <li>• Testing</li> </ul>

	<p>Testing: "... it's kind of like everyone else is the guinea pig and it's likely that they're using it and sometimes you can see their results, sometimes you can't ... if I just see it more often, it'll definitely persuade me to think it's better."</p>	
<p>Uncertain normative influence from social media comments</p>	<p>Inconsistent opinions: "There was a guy who ... basically said 'no, I'm not going to a Sens game. I see no purpose in attending their games.' It was a lot more crude than that, but you get the gist."</p> <p>Argument: "... you'll always get arguments about the product (depending on your 'friend-group') ... That said, I think it's natural that in social media, people argue for the sole purpose of arguing."</p> <p>No rating: "I don't remember actually going online to rate anything, and that's a huge problem ... that's what people need to buy certain things."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inconsistent opinions</li> <li>• Argument</li> <li>• No rating</li> </ul>
<p>Informational influence from in-depth knowledge</p>	<p>Specific information: "If you just say 'this jersey's awesome and you should buy it,' I'd say 'well, you didn't tell me anything about the jersey.'"</p> <p>Statistics: "They were talking about winning streaks, losing streaks,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific information</li> <li>• Statistics</li> <li>• Relevant experience</li> </ul>

	<p>who's on a point streak. Everybody in this group of friends seemed to know what they were talking about.”</p> <p>Relevant experience: “I want somebody's opinion who's in my position, so another defenceman ... it's nice to hear someone who plays your position and how it worked for them rather than someone who is in a completely different situation than you.”</p>	
<p>Resistance of informational influence due to expertise</p>	<p>Online debate: “... he'll put up a post about something and then we'll debate the merits of it and go back and forth.”</p> <p>Online rejection: “Most of the time when I'm reading (these types of) comments, I'm just sort of skimming through them.”</p> <p>Offline debate: “... you'd want to rebuttal because you're interested in (the product) ... you're not going to find out more about the product and new products unless you have a discussion about it.”</p> <p>Offline rejection: “ ... we all have some different personal preferences on the way we set up our bike ... he can go on and on about how great</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online debate</li> <li>• Online rejection</li> <li>• Offline debate</li> <li>• Offline rejection</li> </ul>

	clipped-in pedals are and it's kind of like trying to sell ice to an Eskimo."	
Seeking experts if not an expert	<p>Similarity: "... it's basically someone who takes athletics seriously and whether or not I can see some crossover between the sport they're playing or I'm playing."</p> <p>Involvement: "... somebody who's actively competing ... someone who's in the scene, someone who is on trend with the product."</p> <p>Trust: "You definitely have faith in the expert ... you feel like they can know more about the product than you'd know based on just looking at it."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Similarity</li> <li>• Involvement</li> <li>• Trust</li> </ul>
Informational influence from performance	<p>Visible function: "I'm far more likely to go out and spend my money on one of those select few rather than anything else the market has to offer, simply because I know five or six guys I ride with on a frequent basis all have the same tire and it works."</p> <p>Improved performance: "If I'm playing hockey against (a friend) and he has an unbelievable shot, and I had a wooden stick and he had a really nice composite (stick), I would consider that ...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visible function</li> <li>• Improved performance</li> <li>• Questionable media</li> </ul>

	<p>there's kind of like a tool I could conceivably believe is enhancing their performance.”</p> <p>Questionable media: “... a picture can show you certain things, but being able to see (the product) in kind of an offline setting will definitely persuade you more ... because it's actually physically in front of you.”</p>	
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## Appendix 2: Interview Questions

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The following is a general set of questions that I posed to interview participants. However, as is natural in in-depth qualitative interviewing, I asked multiple unscripted follow-up questions when I saw fit. These follow-up questions were explicitly based on the same subject matter as the scripted questions. That is to say, the questions focused on the relevant ties, influences and sports products. They therefore allowed me to better address my research questions, as I discovered important information while coding the six transcribed interviews.

### *Opening Question*

- Answer “yes” or “no” to the following question:
  - Have you ever seen a message on a social medium, such as Twitter or Facebook, that recommended you or other users buy a certain sports product?

### *Follow-up Questions if the Answer is “Yes”*

- Tell me about your relationship with the poster with regard to how frequently you’re in contact with him or her.
- Tell me about the level of expertise the poster seemed to have on the product.
  - How detailed was the comment in regard to describing why people should try the product?
  - Approximately how many comments, “likes,” “shares” or “retweets” did the original post receive?
- Describe the comments made by other users on the post.
  - How detailed were these comments?
  - Describe the comment that made you consider buying the product the most.
  - Tell me about your relationship with the commenters with regard to how

frequently you're in contact with them.

- Describe any comments that expressed the opposite opinion as the original poster about the product.
  - How detailed were these comments?
  - Tell me about your relationship with the commenters with regard to how frequently you're in contact with them.
- How does seeing the poster use the product in offline settings, such as a game, make you consider buying said product?
- Tell me about how seeing multiple people use the same sports product influences your consideration of buying it.
- Tell me about what factors can make you feel pressured to buy a sports product.
  - Describe how these factors differ between social media and in-person settings.
- Tell me what you think of sports product recommendations about products that you consider yourself an expert on.
  - How does your expertise influence what you value in a sports product recommendation?
  - Tell me about how your relationship with the person recommending the product you're an expert on influences your decision about whether or not to buy it.
- Tell me about you how feel upon seeing your core or significant ties post about the same sports product on a social medium, even if the post is simply an image or brief statement about a product.
  - Describe how seeing these ties post about this product influences whether or not you want to buy it.

- Describe the comments on these types of posts.

*Follow-up Questions if the Answer is “No”*

- Tell me about what you value in sports product recommendations that are made in an in-person setting, such as team practices and face-to-face conversations.
  - How heavily do you consider buying a product that’s been given a valuable recommendation like you’ve just described?
  - How does your relationship with the person who’s recommending the product influence your decision to purchase?
- Tell me what you think of sports product recommendations about products that you consider yourself an expert on.
  - How does your expertise influence what you value in a sports product recommendation?
  - Tell me about how your relationship with the person recommending the product you’re an expert on influences your decision about whether or not to buy it.
- Tell me about how seeing someone who is enjoying using a sports product influences your consideration of buying it.
- Tell me about how seeing multiple people use the same sports product influences your consideration of buying it.
- Tell me about what factors make you feel pressured into buying a sports product.
- If applicable, tell me about you how feel upon seeing your core or significant ties post about the same sports product on a social medium, even if the post is simply an image or brief statement about a product.

- Describe how seeing these ties post about this product influences whether or not you want to buy it.
- Describe the comments on these types of posts.