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### Sportisation and values of competition : the case of yo-yoing

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# **Sportisation and values of competition: the case of yo-yoing**

**Senior Thesis  
Kwong Ho Wang, Danny  
Supervised by Professor Satoshi Araki**

**Abstract**

Yo-yoing was a popular pastime in the 90s. It has now developed as a sport with standard rules. This research locates competitive yo-yoing within the sociology of sports, specifically, it builds on the lifestyle sports literature. I understand yo-yoing as a lifestyle sport, serious leisure, and subculture. I argue that competition is a site of meaning-making in competitive yo-yoing and delineate the community's response to sportisation through interviews with 15 yo-yo players in Hong Kong and an examination of a Netflix documentary on yo-yo. The findings suggest 2 implications: a re-visit to the anti-competition discourse among lifestyle sports, and, a hierarchical understanding of the serious leisure practitioners. It presents competitive yo-yoing as an interesting case for the study of lifestyle sports.

**Keywords**

Yo-yoing, lifestyle sports, serious leisure, subcultural capital, Hong Kong

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Satoshi has provided a considerable degree of autonomy for me to dive freely into the subfield sociology of sport. At the same time, he guided the thesis carefully when it was the very beginning, by suggesting how should a new field be approached from scratch. Particularly, his detailed comments on my first draft were promising, though he constantly emphasized that his comments as humble suggestions, told that 'I do not need to follow if I do not find them useful'. However, his comments were indeed insightful and helped to improve my thesis a lot.

I would also like to thank the Hong Kong yoyo community, a family that accompanied my formative years as a subcultural person. It is a fascinating and inclusive community that I identify with. Along with various contests we have been to, both local and overseas, friendships developed and extended beyond yo-yoing. Without their voluntary participation in my research, shared with me their invaluable insider knowledge of the sport, the empirical grounding of this research would be weak.

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All in all, the completion of this thesis symbolically serves as a finale of my formative years as I categorized it as a period of exploration. It is a blessing to write this thesis, and most importantly, to be at Lingnan. I am keen to see what the future may hold.

## Ch.1 Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

*On a Saturday night, yo-yo players gather and play yo-yo at the City University of Hong Kong. They find themselves sharing the corridor side by side with dancers, both groups practice with loud music. A dancer approaches the yo-yo group saying, 'can you lower the volume, please'. This kind of 'diplomatic' communication oscillates between the two groups. When it is nearly twelve at night, the security guard comes to the corridor, asking them to leave unless someone is a student there.*

This ethnographic description portrays how yo-yo players meet before 2019. The Hong Kong yo-yo community has been struggling for resources and recognition. Yo-yo as a toy has been rooted in the public's mind in a way that people often regard it as a pastime, and relate it to children. While modern yo-yoing was popularized around the world in the 90s, rules and clubs also started to develop synchronously. This research aims to scrutinize modern yo-yoing as a sport/leisure activity/subculture in opposition to the general frame as a toy/pastime. In particular, I seek to explore the reasons behind yo-yo players' commitment to the sport and why it is not a mainstream thing. In this regard, I put competitive yo-yoing into the category of alternative/lifestyle sport literature (Wheaton 2013).

### 1.2. What is competitive yo-yoing

Competitive yo-yoing is a sport where players perform their sets of tricks (routine/freestyle) along with music on the final stage for 3 minutes. Evaluation of the performance is divided into two parts, technical evaluation counts the total score of tricks executed, in which positive points will be given for a successful landing of each element, negative points for any trick miss or control miss; freestyle evaluation measures the performative components of the freestyle, such as choreography and space use (IFFY 2019). A major deduction will be subtracted accordingly for any yo-yo restart, change, or detach. Competitors will be disqualified for any yo-yo flies off into the audience area or for inappropriate music use.

There are 5 playing divisions (1A-5A) and other divisions like artistic performance, Woman's Division, and over-40 in the Worlds. In the case of Hong Kong and most regions, only 1A-5A freestyle contests are held, with the 1A division being the largest group. For the sake of discussion, I use the term 'competitive yo-yoing' as an umbrella term for only 1A-5A divisions and exclude alternative divisions for two reasons: they are the major forms of participation and to narrow the discussion.

### 1.3 Thesis outline

This thesis consists of six chapters. In Chapter 2, I review the lifestyle sports literature, with a focus on the 1) current issues regarding sportisation, specifically, institutionalization and commercialization, and 2) alternative sporting values embodied in BMX and skateboarding. Chapter 3 delineates the two conceptual lenses that inform the research, namely serious leisure and subcultural capital. Chapter 4 describes the methodology and demography of the participants. In Chapter 5, I depict the findings of my interviews and combine the views with a secondary source that provides international players' viewpoints. The final chapter presents the implications of research on yo-yoing to the lifestyle sports literature. It concludes with limitations in which the chosen conceptual framework is questionable due to various alternatives that at first glance are also applicable.

## Ch.2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Locating competitive yo-yoing in the sociology of sport

Sociology of sport is an interdisciplinary field grounded in sociology, it ‘seeks to critically examine common sense views about the role, function and meaning that sport has in different societies’ (ISSA 2016). Perceiving sport as a sphere of everyday life, the sociological studies of the significance of sport could be traced back to one of the forerunners, Norbert Elias. He anchored a ‘sport continuum’ for studying sport, in which there are ‘high achievement sports, such that practiced at the Olympic games and performed by professionals as well as amateurs, and leisure sport with its two sub-divisions, spectator sport and active leisure sport” (Elias 1971).

It has been observed that there is an increasing trend of the types of non-traditional achievement sports. Various labels such as action sport, extreme sport, alternative sport, whiz sports, etc. have been coined to describe these sports as opposed to mainstream sports (Wheaton 2013:27). These terms are usually used interchangeably as synonyms by researchers. However, when ‘action’ or ‘extreme’ sport is employed, it highlights the riskiness of the sport in question (e.g. Palmer 2004; Atencio et al. 2009). When the term ‘alternative’ sport is chosen, it underscores the non-mainstream characteristics. Rinehart (2000) suggests that alternative sports can be loosely defined as participant controlled and directed, individually focused with less emphasis on competition than traditional sports. Moreover, an insider requirement is usually possessed by alternative sports, for the purpose of encompassing their own subculture (Rinehart 2000). While the dichotomy of mainstream and alternative is not that oppositional and, as Wheaton (2013:28) citing Atkinson (2010) suggests, the nature of contemporary sporting cultures is increasingly fluid. Thus, it should be noted that the boundaries and characteristics of lifestyle sports are becoming more negotiable and blurred (Honea 2013).

The frame of yo-yoing is multifaceted with fluid characteristics. On the one hand, the general perceptions of yo-yoing are mostly associated with toy and pastime. Players who know the history well refer yo-yo as the second oldest toy after the doll. On the other hand, modern yo-yoing is perceived as a sport/performing art that is centered around competition. I understand it as a lifestyle sport, leisure activity, and subculture. Under these categories, I employ lifestyle sport (Wheaton 2013) since it is a more embracing category that in some cases include the leisure perspective (Breeze 2013) and subculture framework (Edwards and Corte 2010). Currently, there is no academic literature about competitive yo-yoing. The word ‘yo-yo’ is often used as a metaphor for going up-and-down in other disciplines. Besides, its sibling disciplines such as kendama and juggling, together under the category of ‘skill toys’ have not been researched either. Hence, this research aims to introduce yo-yoing to the discussion of lifestyle sport and hopefully, to provide a basis for the possibility of a new realm of research on skill toys.

### 2.2 Sportisation

Sportisation refers to the process in which pastimes were transformed into more regulated and organized sports (Elias 1986, cited in Malcolm 2008:242). Originally, in his civilizing process thesis, this term entailed stricter self-control and self-discipline in sport (Malcolm 2008:242). Even though Maguire (1999:75-89) further outlined the global sportisation formation in five phases, in which the ‘standardization of rules’ and ‘the development of governing bodies” are crucial in this process, the concept of sportisation remained as a term for sports history.

Nevertheless, it has been adopted by various scholars to describe the institutionalization and regulation of different alternative sports, for instance, parkour in the UK (Wheaton 2013), skiing in polar areas (Goksøyr 2013), women's cricket (Velija 2015), and sport climbing in the Olympics (Batuev and Robinson 2019a). The original definition is limited in capturing the late-modern development of resistance sports which are presented as the alternative (Atkinson 2009). The term sportisation I refer to is in the sense of Atkinson's (2009) research on parkour where he describes it as 'the process of alternative sport forms being co-opted and incorporated into the culture of mainstream sports, becoming formalized, institutionalized, hierarchical and organized'.

### 2.3 Institutionalisation and commercialisation of lifestyle sports

Within the sportisation of lifestyle sports, institutionalisation, commercialisation, and professionalisation are the three major dimensions discussed, which are useful in dissecting the sportisation process of lifestyle sports. As Rinehart (2000:513) put, "the story of who controls the presentation of these sports is the story of the conflicts and contestation over who owns, and who will control the economics, but also the soul of these sports."

Some scholars discuss the Olympics inclusion of action sports, in which the central focus is on the consumption trend of younger viewers (Thorpe and Wheaton 2011; Wheaton and Thorpe 2019; Dillman 2010, cited in Wheaton and Thorpe 2019). They argue the inclusion from the perspective of the International Olympics Committee (i.e. attracting more audiences). Within the debate of the inclusion of action sports into the mainstream, some researchers argue for the inclusion as it raises the profile of individual athletes (Jones and Greer 2012), and challenges the gendered power relations (Wheaton and Thorpe 2018). But some researchers argue against mainstream incorporation since it 'sells out' their 'alternative' values and ideologies such as artistic significance in snowboarding (Humphreys 2003) and autonomy skateboarding (Wheaton 2013:38). It is believed that mainstream inclusion comes with the cost of sacrificing its 'soul' of uniqueness and originality (Humphreys 2003). Behind this 'selling out' notion is the resistant to the process of incorporation into the hegemony (Thornton 1995:124). Besides, it might also 'herald irreversible (and potentially negative) changes' (D'Orazio 2020). They suggest that the inclusion of lifestyle sports into the mainstream is a contested issue.

The struggle of commercialisation has been a topic of research in the field (Rinehart 2003; Edwards and Corte 2010; Wheaton 2013; Thorpe 2014). Some athletes choose to collaborate with marketing firms but in turn, commercialise their sport (Edwards and Corte 2010; Thorpe and Dumont 2019). By becoming commodities themselves, they seek a profitable career path through the process (Rinehart 2003). On some occasions like sport climbing, sponsorship and prize money are relatively low, thus sport climbers have to create their individual reputation online in order to cover the travelling expenses (Dumont 2018). Although Thorpe and Dumont (2019) have expanded the discussion to other action sports professionals such as athletes, coaches, agents, managers, administrators, journalists, photographers and other media producers, it can only be applied to sports that have already gained a certain extent of popularity and thus institutionalised.

Nevertheless, there is a gap in the current literature on the institutionalisation and regulation of niche alternative sports. The struggle for development of a marginalized lifestyle sport culture as a whole have not been explored. This research contribute to the literature on

sportisation of niche lifestyle sports. What is particularly interesting in the case of yo-yoing is its niche and marginalised status when negotiating sportisation.

#### 2.4 Alternative sporting values

Another purpose of this exploratory research is to find out the sporting values of yo-yoing. In general, the mainstream sporting culture could be regarded as a “winning at all costs” and rule-bound culture. Especially within the youth sport programs, there is a set of values and beliefs that is constituted by skills improvement, competitive oriented, and striving for promotion into elite categories (Coakley 2017:86). However, it is often not the case in lifestyle sports, in which the values embodied by participants are diverse and fluid in nature. But it should be noted that they might not be antithetical (e.g. BMX. Honea 2013), to understand alternative sporting values we need to move beyond the simplistic binaries (Tomlinson et al. 2005).

While there is no research on yo-yoing, in order to explore its sporting values, the culture of BMX freestyle and skateboarding are referenced. Palmer (2004) notes that the element of ‘risk’ is captured across extreme sports, which gives participants a living ‘on the edge’ experience. Moreover, extreme sports can be characterised by unconventional rules and counter-culture tendency (Batuev and Robinson 2019b). Although risk-taking can be recognized in both BMX (Honea 2013) and skateboarding (Atencio et al. 2009), and there are some other overlapping values under the broader conceptualization of alternative sports, the distinctive cultures of each sport will be unveiled in the following.

##### 2.4.1 Values of BMX freestyle

There are some similarities between BMX freestyle and competitive yoyoing in terms of the form. The five disciplines BMX freestyle consists, park, vert, flat, street and dirt, juxtapose with the 1A-5A divisions of competitive yoyoing. The way that BMX freestyle is evaluated aligns with competitive yo-yoing, which is scored on ‘tricks performed throughout the course, with points awarded based on difficulty, originality, style and execution amongst others’ (UCI 2017). Although perceived as an alternative sport, the relatively high level of governing and competition-focused characteristics of BMX align with the values of mainstream sport (Honea 2013).

In his PhD dissertation, Nelson (2006) gives a comprehensible analysis of the culture of BMX freestyle drawing from data collected from BMX magazines. There are at least three dimensions of the BMX freestyle culture. First, historically, it ‘is a hypermasculine world’ that is ‘at best unwelcoming and at worst hostile to women’ (97). The scarce woman participants and the sporadic pattern of woman’s coverage in related magazines has contributed to this characteristic (94-97). ‘Self-othering’ is the second characteristic. BMX freestylers consciously reject other alternative sports with proximity, including BMX racing, skateboarding, in-line skating, and mountain biking (98-102). They perceive themselves as ‘outside’, ‘alternative’, and ‘other’. As a result, the third characteristic is resistance to commodification. BMX freestylers realised that commodification by media and large companies was only a matter of time, their form of resistance is to promote ‘an ideology of supporting (often professional) rider-owned companies’ (102-105). In addition, Ding (2019) argues that family acceptance and support plays a crucial role in China’s BMX freestylers’ identity, in which winning competition is viewed as a positive value in China’s BMX culture.

##### 2.4.2 Values of Skateboarding



‘Participant control’ and ‘de-emphasizing competition’ are the two core values shared among skateboarders (Beal and Weidman 2003). Contest-oriented skateboarders have been devalued as a long-standing tradition (Donnelly 2008). Without a predetermined meaning in itself, skateboarders feel a sense of self-fulfilment through means of nonconformity that encourage creativity, self-expression, and challenging social standards (Beal and Weidman 2003). Thus, skateboarding could be regarded as an alternative sport that promotes individualism.

Besides, authenticity is another important value that determines admittance into skateboarding and constructs skateboarders’ identities. Authenticity in skateboarding could be referred to as ‘a socially constructed interpretation of the essence of what is observed, rather than properties inherent in an object’ (Gomez 2012). Thus, the physical object (i.e. skateboard) is not the focus, but it can be attributed to how people skate and the industry as a whole. There are two conceptualizations for illuminating the concept of authenticity. First, Gomez (2012) applies Sarah Thornton’s notion of subcultural capital on authenticity in skateboarding with the emphasis on the forms of attitudes and style, which is something that ‘confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder’. Second, Beal and Weidman (2003) employ a Goffmanian dramaturgy to remark that authenticity is granted in the backstage by other skateboarders. Skateboarders skate in a front region such as skate parks and streets to ‘display their back stage style and values’ (351). As they impressively continue:

‘Authenticity for skateboarders is not determined by a successful front-region performance for a general audience... Rather, authenticity is proven in the back region through an internalization and public display of the norms and values of the skateboard culture, which are really recognizable only to other experienced skateboarders. (Beal and Weidman 2003:351)

Therefore, the notion of authenticity is central to skateboarding as a subculture in which ‘authentic’ skateboarders are viewed as ‘true’ skateboarders.

### 2.5 Research significance

This research is original in 3 aspects. First, it challenges the general attribution of anti-competition, and at large, the anti-establishment tendency of lifestyle sports literature (Beal and Weidman 2003; Wheaton 2003). As I will explain in Chapter 5, competitive yo-yoing presents an opposite case study to other lifestyle sports. It is a sport that centred on competition, as a result, competition stimulates part of the sporting values of yo-yoing. Moreover, it extends the discussion of moving beyond the mainstream and alternative dichotomy (Tomlinson et al. 2005; Honea 2013; Wheaton 2013). The rejection to institutionalization or alternative co-optation to commercialization has been a topic in the lifestyle sports literature (Humphreys 2003; Nelson 2006; Wheaton 2013). Although I understand competitive yo-yoing as a subculture/lifestyle sports, it does not imply strong resistance to the establishment. Rather, yo-yo players constantly seek for institutional inclusion or at least, recognition. Therefore, researching yo-yoing might be able to challenge the long-standing views in the lifestyle sports literature.

Second, it enriches the literature on lifestyle sport in Asia. Defined by Wheaton (2013) as predominately western, some scholars note that lifestyle sport has been gaining global attention (Thorpe and Wheaton 2011; Thorpe 2014). However, the literature on lifestyle sport in Asia has been scarce (Thorpe 2014; Pavlidis and O’Brien 2017; Evers and Doering 2019). At worse, the lifestyle sportscape in Hong Kong is much more limited. Research on skateboarding in Hong Kong conducted by O’Connor (2016; 2018; Fok and O’Connor 2020) seems to be the very little literature regarding this topic in Hong Kong. As Evers and Doering (2019) points out, the limitation of research on lifestyle sport in China are conducted by non-

indigenous scholars , they remind us that the ‘accuracy of interpretation and findings’ requires indigenous scholar who knows the local culture well. Although this point of view might be a local-centric one and debatable at least, in the case of Hong Kong where the East meets West, it is worth paying our attention to the Asia contour. So, it contributes to mapping out the Asia lifestyle sportscape.

Third, competitive yo-yoing has hitherto not been studied and discussed inside or outside the academy, this paper is the first research that examines this sport. Although there is a chapter dedicated to yo-yoing in a book titled ‘Alternative Sports and Pastimes: An A-Z’ published in 2016 by Graham Lanceley, with only a 2-page long introduction to its origin, history, and contest rules, it is not an academic discussion on ‘alternative sport’. Rather, it is just a brief introduction.

### 2.6 Research questions

My aim for the project is to find out the sporting values of yo-yoing and informed by the academic perspective, to understand how yo-yo players response to institutionalization and commercialization. The following research questions are interrelated in a way to map out the sportscape of competitive yo-yoing.

RQ1) How do yo-yo players perceive the values of yo-yoing, specifically, the competitiveness, exclusiveness, and authenticity of yo-yoing?

RQ2) How do yo-yo players understand and negotiate about the sportisation (consequently it comes with commercialisation, and institutionalisation) of yo-yoing?

### Ch.3 Conceptual framework

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter depicts the two concepts being employed to the study of competitive yo-yoing, namely, Serious Leisure and Subcultural Capital. It concludes by outlining the critiques to both concepts, and hence, the rationale for perceiving them as complements to each other.

#### 3.2.1 Serious leisure perspective

The concept of serious leisure was coined by Stebbins (1982) to study people who are highly committed to leisure activities. It is defined as the systematic pursuit of a core activity that ‘people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centred on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience’ (Stebbins 2007:5). Whereas casual leisure is defined as ‘an immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable core activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it’ (Stebbins 2007:38).

This early empirical research informed the development of the serious leisure perspective (SLP) by himself (Stebbins 2007; 2020), and discussed by various scholars. Stebbins (2020) defines the SLP as the ‘theoretic framework that synthesizes three main forms of leisure’ – casual leisure, serious pursuits, and project-based leisure. Nevertheless, the project-based leisure, a less common type that is defined as a short-term or one-off undertaking carried out in free time (Stebbins 2007:43), seems to be residual to the former two forms. As Veal (2021:576) argues, the SLP should be understood as a classification system that presents a serious leisure-casual leisure continuum. Table 1 presents the summary provided by Veal (2021).

Forms			
Casual leisure	Serious leisure		
<i>Types</i>	<i>Types</i>		
Play	Amateur	Volunteer	Hobbyist
Relaxation	<i>Sub-types</i>		
Passive entertainment	Arts	Popular	Collecting
Active entertainment	Science	Idea-based	Making/tinkering
Sociable conversation	Sport	Material	Non-competitive activity
Sensory stimulation	Entertainment	Floral	Sports/games/contests
Casual volunteering		Faunal	Liberal arts
Pleasurable aerobic activity		Environmental	
<i>Distinguishing qualities</i>	<i>Distinguishing qualities</i>		
1. Less substantial than SL	1. Perseverance		
2. No career	2. Career progression (4 stages)		
3. Immediate rewards	3. Effort/training/knowledge/skills		
4. Little/no training	4. Durable benefits (9 benefits)		
5. Short-lived	5. Unique ethos (social world)		
6. Hedonic	6. Identification with activity		
7. Fleeting, mundane			

Table 1. Veal’s (2021:576) summary of key components of SLP.

Under this classification of leisure, competitive yo-yoing as a lifestyle sport, could be categorized under the form of serious leisure. Below I will explain the types of practitioners of serious leisure in details.

### 3.2.2 Serious leisure practitioners

Summarized in the above table, the concept of serious leisure can be classified as 3 types with 6 distinguishing qualities. The 6 distinguishing qualities include: perseverance, leisure career endeavour, significant effort, durable (in most cases) intrinsic outcomes, unique ethos, and lastly, identification with a pursuit (Stebbins 1982:256-258; for a detailed discussion, see Gould et al. 2008:48-51). The six distinctive qualities describe the multiple dimensions of commitment to a pursuit. While most of the research on alternative sports have been focusing on these characteristics (Breeze 2013; Lee et al. 2017; Bordelon and Ferreira 2019; Qiu et al. 2020), few attention (Russell et al. 2022) has been given to the types of participants, namely amateur, volunteer, and hobbyist. I adopt this category of participants in the research as an alternative classification to the core-periphery.

*Amateur* could be understood in the realm of professional-amateur-public system. The major difference between amateur and professional is that the professional is partly or fully dependent on the economic income from the serious leisure. So that they can devote more time to it than amateurs, who can only pursue the leisure after work (Stebbins 2007:6). Moreover, when the professionals undertake the serious leisure, the enactment must be sufficiently visible to amateurs hence they come to realize the prowess of the former (Stebbins 2007:6).

*Hobbyist* are committed practitioners who ‘frequently feel no necessity or obligation to engage in their endeavours (Stebbins 1982:259-260). Hobbyist finds their activities interesting and enjoyable primarily because of durable benefits but not of monetary interests (Stebbins 1982:260). They can be categorized into five types: collectors, makers and tinkerers, non-competitive activity participants, players of competitive sports and games, and the enthusiasts of the liberal arts hobbies which means being broadly well-read of the leisure (Stebbins 2007:8).

*Volunteers* are practitioners who offer uncoerced help either formally or informally with little or no remuneration and done for the community of the leisure (Stebbins 2007:9). The sense of volunteering is much more restricted to recurrent skill- and knowledge-based activity, in which altruism and self-interest are the two underlining attitudes that distinguish them from amateur and hobbyist (Stebbins 1982:264-265).

### 3.3 Subcultural capital

Stemmed from Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital (1984), Sarah Thornton (1995) coined the concept of subcultural capital to study the values and hierarchies of club culture. Bourdieu (1984) defines cultural capital as ‘a disposition through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture’. He observed that it is a disposition that the middle-class families cultivate their children with the linguistic and cultural competences such as literature and music taste (Bourdieu 1984). It is regarded as the foundation of ‘a system of distinction in which cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones and people’s tastes are predominantly a marker of class.’ (Thornton 1995:10) In relation to Bourdieu’s theories, subcultural capital ‘confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder’ (Thornton 1995:11). She continues that it is a subcultural distinction that can be ‘objectified or embodied’, and ‘relies on a fantasy of classlessness’ (Thornton 1995:11-12).

There have been applications of subcultural capital to lifestyle sports, such as to study the identity formations and its relation to mass media (Beal and Wilson 2004), how the media portrays authenticity of lifestyle sport (Wheaton and Beal 2003), and the middle-aged skateboarders' sense of belonging (Willing et al. 2018). In particular, subcultural capital could explain the closure of the group. In drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders, the more important characteristics are the less visible ones, such as the value system and the 'insider knowledge'. For example, in her ethnographic research on windsurfing, Wheaton (2003) contends that windsurfers' degree of commitment to the windsurfing subculture confers subcultural status to them. In other words, the very committed participants in the lifestyle sports are thus regarded as the central or core participants since they acquire more subcultural capital.

### 3.4 Serious leisure and subcultural capital as complements to each other

For the serious leisure, it is argued that it only provides a ready-made checklist that fails to offer 'causal explanation and understanding of social processes' (Veal 2021:576). Besides, the types of participants of serious leisure are mainly understood in relation to work. In line with the tradition of the sociology of leisure, the study of people's action in their free time means the study of non-work action. While some studies have shown that serious leisure redefines the meaning of work (e.g. Wheaton 2003), this perspective fails to recognize the youth aspect.

For the subcultural capital, it cannot scrutinize the group hierarchies within a subculture. The dichotomies such as the 'hip' and the mainstream implies a power hierarchy of and over the subculture. As Wheaton (2007:287) points out, the distinction from the mainstream also involves 'divisions within the culture'. The internal contradictions (Donnelly 2008:203) reveal the issue of who confers subcultural capital and the core-periphery status of participants. This is shown in Beal and Weidman (2003:340) research in which the skaters described other skaters who compete as 'assholes' and the newcomers as 'rats'. Thus, we need to ask who owns and defines the subculture and based on what qualities can s/he claim to do so.

As Wheaton (2013) suggests, these two concepts are useful conceptual tools to study lifestyle sports. Although Wheaton (2003:93-94) introduced the concept of serious leisure to her discussion of a culture of commitment, she only positioned it to the employment patterns of windsurfers. She did not explain how serious leisure can explain the group hierarchies. Respond to Veal's (2021:577) suggestion, this project aims to explore the relationship of serious leisure with subculture. I understand the concept of serious leisure as a complement to the subcultural capital regarding the hierarchy formation within a group, at the same time, the possession of subcultural capital specifies the distinction between the three types of practitioners. Therefore, when subcultural capital could explain the recognition by members of a subculture, serious leisure as a classification system provides a conceptual lens to understand group hierarchies.

## Ch.4 Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

This research was qualitative, based on open-ended interviews and supported by an analysis of a Netflix documentary on yo-yo. I then explain the rationale for confidentiality and discuss the reflexivity of research. This chapter concludes by a brief history of the development of modern yo-yoing with personal biographies of two interviewees.

### 4.2 Research design

First, semi-structured interviews with 15 Hong Kong yo-yo players were conducted during March 2022. They were recruited through convenience sampling from the Hong Kong Yo-Yo Signal group, a pre-interview survey was sent for the purposes of collecting basic demographic data and securing consent. I also described the anonymity and the purpose of research to the interviewees before the interviews along with the signing of a consent form. In such a niche community, who responded to my interview request partially signifies their active status and participation in this community. A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1) was constructed to explore the views of institutionalizing their sport and how they perceived the values of yo-yoing. All the 15 interviews were conducted in Cantonese, of which all of them were male players, ranging from 17 to 38 years old. I met with the participants in both face-to-face and online setting through Zoom and Google Meet, on average each interview lasted for one and a half hour. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. I coded the transcripts manually in Word documents for performing thematic analysis. Jayden, David, and Paul were identified as key informants to serve as the theoretical sample first. Codes, for example ‘judging system’, ‘satisfaction with contest rules’ and ‘lesson from contests’ were grouped under the theme of ‘competition values’.

Table 1. List of participants

Pseudo Name	Corresponding media invitation	Age	Years of Yo-yoing
Jayden	Yo-Yo Manga	36	25
David		37	24
Anson		37	20
Kevin	‘Hyper Yo-Yo’	32	20
Nick		31	20
Elvis		31	20
Paul		28	15
Nelson	“Blazing Teens” Series	27	14
Jackson		25	14
Eric	Post-media influences	22	8
Tommy		22	8
Harry		22	8
Ching		24	1
Isaac		17	6
Marcus		17	4

Table 1 summarizes the demography of this niche community that I collected from the pre-survey. The column title ‘Corresponding media invitation’ denotes which media drew them into yo-yoing. After the decline in popularity of comics and TV anime, the pattern of being attracted into yo-yoing was insignificant. For instance, Eric and Marcus joined in because they watched some videos of yo-yo contests on YouTube, based on its algorithm; Tommy

and Isaac encountered yo-yo randomly in real life and found it interesting. Thus, I categorized them as 'Post-media influences' in comparison to yo-yoing old days appearance in the mass media.

Second, findings were supported and contrasted by a secondary source (this limitation will be discussed in the Conclusion). I drew from an episode titled 'Yo-Yo' from the Netflix documentary 'We are the Champions' (Netflix 2020), which is currently the most detailed and widely available source that introduces what competitive yo-yoing is. It is centred on the 2019 World Yo-Yo Contest that was held in Cleveland. In this documentary, four world-renowned practitioners were involved: Steve Brown (organizer of World Yo-Yo Contest), Evan Nagao (world and United States champion), Keiran Cooper (regional champion from the United States), and last but not least, Betty Gallegos (Mexican and Woman's Division world champion).

#### 4.3 Confidentiality and Reflexivity

Gordon (2019) notes that the option of non-anonymity is not recognized in the British Education Research Association, and in some situations, respondents want to be represented in their real identities. Punch, Russell, and Cairns (2021) claim that adopting real names in their research of elite bridge community research would arouse the bridge community. Though some of my interviewees expressed that revealing their real identities is not a problem at all, by virtue of confidentiality, I have changed all my interviewees' names to pseudonyms. The real names were applied only if it is drawn from a secondary source (i.e. the Netflix documentary). To differentiate between pseudonyms and real names, the pseudonyms included only a first name like Nick and Tommy summarised in Table 1, and the full names were provided when quoting from the documentary.

As an insider-researcher (Unluer 2012), gaining access to this group, speaking the same language, and knowing the formal and informal group structure were major advantages that I enjoyed throughout my project. Having been a yo-yo player for more than 7 years, it conferred me with certain subcultural capital (Thornton 1995). My status within the group smoothed the recruitment process. However, I also experienced some disadvantages of being in the insider position. I sometimes struggled to explain some concepts that they did not familiar with. This role duality issue (Unluer 2012) that I assumed the interviewees were on the same page as I being a researcher. I tried to overcome this problem by using example for comparison to explain the concept of sportisation. Moreover, when explaining the notion of commercialization, I used the photo-elicitation method as an example of commercialization as well as to invite their opinions on it. In some occasion, the interviewees assumed that I know what they know (Unluer 2012). For instance, they expressed their views based on past events. In this regard, I asked for further information of the time, location, and the people involved. All in all, my personal relationships with the participants and my subcultural status were overall beneficial to performing the research.

#### 4.4 Contextual background: A brief trajectory of modern yo-yoing

Before discussing the sportisation of yo-yoing, an account of the trajectory of modern yo-yoing around the globe and in Hong Kong will be briefly outlined. It is under this context that yo-yo has already been framed as a toy, this image hampers the sportisation process of competitive yo-yoing.

The history of the yo-yo started as a consumer good and a promotional toy in the United States. Founded in 1947, Russell Promotion. Inc together with Duncan Toys were the two

oldest and most well-known yo-yo companies which produced and promoted yo-yo worldwide. The Russell Promotions marketing campaign aimed at promoting name brand products such as Coca-Cola by linking them directly to their promotions. The professional yo-yo demonstrators hired by Russell promoted yo-yoing worldwide under this marketing campaign. Hong Kong and Japan were also swept by this craze. Together with the yo-yoing TV cartoons and comics imported from Japan, different toy companies including Russell and Bandai began their promotion campaigns in Hong Kong. Before the advent of the smartphone, yo-yoing had a pattern of craze in Hong Kong. Most of the players still participating in this community are those who were swept by the surges of their generations. In Hong Kong, 2008 reported the end of this commercialised craze of yo-yoing after the last live-action animation series 'Blazing Teens' by China.

Two of my interviewees' yo-yoing biographies illustrate this pattern of the yo-yo craze and how the post-smartphone era newcomers joined the community. It was also due to the widespread availability of the Internet, that the community was being formed. Jayden, an experienced player in the community, remarked on how he joined this community after being swept by two waves of the craze:

*I learnt about yo-yo from a local manga called 'Co-Co' around 1997. Then, I stopped playing it when playing yo-yo was no longer a trendy thing after the serial comics ended. Later on, there was a Japanese TV cartoon called 'hyper yo-yo' being broadcasted locally in 2002, I picked it up again and gathered people in a newsgroup [predecessor of online forum] to play yo-yo in person.*

After the completion of TV cartoons, yo-yoing was no longer a trendy toy among young generation. The latecomers developed their interest in yo-yoing mainly through fickle encounters of yo-yoing on the Internet. For example, Harry explained:

*I heard about yo-yo from a TV cartoon when I was a kid. Back then, I liked it and then brought one from a stationary store, but I didn't play it seriously. It was until 2014 I found a discussion thread about yo-yo meetings on an online forum, and then I followed that thread to a Facebook page so that I learnt there were people playing yo-yo together. It felt like a lively and fun community thus I kept going out with those people to play yo-yo when I was still a 14-year-old boy.*

Under this trajectory, it is observed that the yo-yoing community in Hong Kong ceased growing after the end of the yo-yo craze. The number of latecomers was scant. Together with the dropping out of old players, the community itself is declining recently. Though there were different promotion initiatives, such as the introduction of inter-school yo-yo competition and the establishment of a performance team, the effect was trivial, and it is worsened by the pandemic. In addition, there is also a trend of ageing in this sport, and a fissure in experiences as shown in Table 1. This might lead to gaps in communication as well as in skills within the community. Therefore, it partially explains the yearning for sportisation that will be explored in the following chapter.



## Ch.5 Findings

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into 3 main bodies. I first outline that the sport is competition-centred, in which I argue that competition is a site of meaning-making. Second, the attitudes toward sportisation are elaborated and followed by the challenges and difficulties of sportisation in competitive yo-yoing. Lastly, I delineate the community's response to commercialization.

### 5.2 Competition-centred

Despite the negative connotation of competition among lifestyle sports, such as the anti-competition spirit by windsurfers (Wheaton 2003) or the de-valuing competition culture of skateboarding (Beal and Weidman 2003), competitive yo-yoing as how I termed it suggests, this sport is developed around competition. The players often talked about the contest as a natural existence, the notion of participation in yo-yoing chiefly means competing in contests. In this lifestyle sport, what needs to be challenged is the judging system but not the competition itself. For most yo-yo players, being interested in yo-yoing starts from its toy image presented on TV or in comics, where a passion for it develops through learning and then competing in contests. Marcus, a middle-skilled player, commented that the reason for being obsessed with competitive yo-yoing is because of the feeling of excitement when being on stage. He commented that the stage fright was very real: *my hands and legs were shaking, and it was excited since we wouldn't know whether tricks would be landed successfully or not. Even though I have practised a lot, there will still be chances of missing tricks.*

The sense of achievement gained when successfully learnt a new trick gives impetus to continually engage in this community. Nelson made this analogy:

*Learning new tricks gave me a sense of accomplishment. Just like playing video games, after having upgraded to a certain level, then I can go on to defeat the final boss. Yo-yoing is the same. When I have learnt enough tricks, I can participate in a contest.*

He addressed that competing in different contests is a process of personal growth:

*when you win a title, it is an affirmation of yourself. But at the same time, there are lots of failures. I believed every player has experienced slamming yo-yo angrily when practising their freestyles. It was during these moments that I understood how to deal with that bad feeling.*

This message was also delivered by Betty Gallegos in the documentary where the narrator made an analogy of bouncing back like the yo-yo. The take home lesson is more about compromising with failures in life than managing emotions. She expressed the sadness of not making into the Finals:

*When you practise something so much, practise for months, so many hours, just for one try, if you don't make it, it becomes a horrible experience [cry]. . . I get to the point where I think that if I'm doing it well, but I'm not achieving anything, then what? (Netflix 2020)*

As the organizer, Steve Brown, explained:

*Semi-finals is the point where everything gets ridiculous. It is the most fierce round of competition at any contest . . . You don't really want to be around yo-yo players between the end of the division and the time the results are announced, because everyone is absolutely terrified.* (Netflix 2020)

### 5.3 Negotiating meanings of competition

Indeed, competition is the central mode of how yo-yo is being played. However, when yo-yo players have gained enough contest experiences, they develop alternative understandings of competition, either because they have (not) tasted the feeling of winning, or of the pressure of fulfilling their life goals as they grew up. Then, winning is not a central value of yo-yo competition. Paul explained this transition:

*After 3 years of using a winning-oriented playing style in the contests, my goal was not to win it anymore . . . because I had to attend university and to work after graduation . . . it is meaningless to compete with others for the ranking.*

For elite players, even though they constantly win contests, they regarded it as just one of the indicators that defines the best player. They made a distinction between 'skilful' and 'good' yo-yo players, in which the contests can only rank the former. Jackson, an elite player, viewed the judging system of yo-yo competition as

*a school examination, just because you don't score high doesn't mean that you are a bad student, it only tells that you performed poorly in the examination. Since there are lots of variations in yo-yoing, some tricks can't really score high under the current judging system that is so finely designed, if someone plays like this [tricks with variations] and then scored zero points, it doesn't mean that he is not good.*

This distinction could be regarded as the criteria of conferring subcultural status. The notion of 'good' could be translated as 'creative' or 'originality'. In this sense, as Eric denoted "I would respect someone who is not so active but every time his presence is inspirational". In this regard, Keiran Cooper's approach to preparing the freestyle exhibited the trade-off between winning and authenticity. He claimed that reason for putting high-risk elements in his freestyle is that:

*I feel obligated to, like, push the envelope of what's possible in yo-yo, because no one else is going to go on stage and try their absolute hardest tricks and hit it flawless. I have never done it. That's actually what still drives me to keep trying it.* (Netflix 2020)

The case of competitive yo-yoing illustrates an alternative response to the competition: competition is central to yo-yo players whereas winning is not highly valued. In this way, the meaning of competition is redefined paradoxically to something other than winning.

#### 5.3.1 Self-expression

First, a common value of yo-yoing described by players is self-expression. The self, or the identity is being expressed through their style and musicality. For example, Paul explained this notion:

*When performing in a competition, the freestyle needs to match the flow of the music. It is through music that I can express myself. Like dancing and singing, it could let others feel your feeling, by performing with music.*

Yo-yo players explained that both the tricks and choice of music are vehicles for self-expression:

*In my opinion, self-expression is the core value of yo-yoing. When you were performing on stage, at the same time there were people watching you. It allowed me to show my tricks to others. This feeling of being under the spotlight is very special than playing alone or playing together casually, competition is different. (Tommy, interviewee)*

*No one wants to lose in a competition, but I wanted to demonstrate my own style, which I knew the tricks that I created were not worthy of clicks. Besides, I really wanted to use Hong Kong music on stage, because I am a Hongkonger, so I chose Canton pop for my freestyle in the World Yo-Yo Contest. (Nelson, interviewee)*

Evan Nagao, the 2018 world champion, developed a career in music and tried to introduce his identity as a musician to the audience, told that

*I dedicated my entire life to yo-yo, but this year, I'm actually trying to transition to a music career. So I'm building my own song for my routine. Sometime that nobody has done before, I think that people are going to get really excited. (Netflix 2020)*

Beal and Weidman (2003) describe that lifestyle sports provide an outlet for self-expression that embodies nonconformity value. While the development of skateboarding is associated with the punk subculture, modern yo-yoing did not keep in line with it. The sense of self-expression in competitive yo-yoing could better be understood in the realm of performing arts. Some players suggested that yo-yoing enables them to 'understand arts better'. Furthermore, Jayden suggested that there is a great affinity between yo-yoing with rhythmic gymnastics. In the language of performing arts, one of the ways that yo-yo players express themselves is through the choreography of their routines.

### 5.3.2 A unique culture of competition

Second, the unique competition culture is highly valued by yo-yo players. Many players expressed that other than showcasing their prepared routines for the contest, the thriving community aura is an important aspect of competitive yo-yoing. Eric, a core participant, told that:

*One thing that I particularly like about yo-yoing is that in a competition we are all each other's rivals, however, we will still cheer for everyone from our hearts when he is performing on stage. I can only find this feeling of both friendship and enemy in competitive yo-yoing.*

Nick added: *competitive yo-yoing is one of those rare sports that can really show friendship before the competition.*

Tommy conveyed that this kind of feeling gives him a sense of community, in which a temporary supporting group of its own was being formed during the competition, and this bonding constitutes part of the friendship among players. He expressed that:

*The feeling of being on stage and off stage is very different. When we were practicing for the same contest together, others might comment on my freestyle, give me some*

*suggestions . . . but when I was on the stage, they won't do that anymore, instead, they tried their best to show their support, like chanting for my freestyle.*

Furthermore, the cheering patterns of yo-yo competition are part of the yo-yo culture. As Paul put it:

*Non-players won't understand why we cheer together at some particular moment. It is not 'planned'. When the player performed a complicated set of tricks, we chanted because we were amazed by it. This is the culture and the embodiment of core value when yo-yo players share the same pursuit so that our reaction to others' freestyle is also the same . . . There is also something that shows the uniqueness of Hong Kong yo-yo culture, only [anonym] would shout out 'ding jyu a' (hold it up) loudly, you won't hear the same way of cheering in other places.*

To summarize, competition is perceived as the central playing mode, yo-yo players started their journey from the long sleeper to showcasing a 3-min freestyle in the competition. Though there are casual players and most of the players are discontented with the objectivity and criteria of the current judging system, yo-yo contest is nevertheless the major driving force that unites the community and advances the development of the sport. It is the main way of participation. While the 'more tricks, more points' judging system has been questioned for years, in some way or another it stimulates the searching for meanings of competition that are other-than-winning. In this regard, competition could be seen as a site of meaning-making.

#### 5.4 Yearning for sportisation

Most of my interviewees asserted that there would be positive effects if yo-yoing could be formalized as a registered association or being accepted as an extra-curricular activity, and commercialized in terms of realizing a career there. Nick argued that '*it is not about whether yo-yo players want it or not, but we must do it.*' When I asked for their opinion if yo-yoing is being institutionalized, most of them replied that it is good to yo-yoing, since there will be a lot of resources. Even though there are objection voices among yo-yo players, it is merely a non-attitude. Isaac's response is illustrative:

*I don't think yo-yoing needs to be institutionalized, this would change the nature of yo-yoing, it would become so mechanical. The essence of yo-yoing is quite free, I play it because I like it, it is not necessary to treat it like a very big organization . . . There is nothing that needs to be improved, except for the trick development and creation of more divisions, I don't think there is any problem in the current structure.*

Jackson added that it is not necessary for the local yo-yo organization to register as a legal entity:

*If we need to register as a formal society, I don't think it is necessary. What we need is just a community, so that all yo-yo players could be unified. Functioning like the native-place association (tung heung wui) would be enough, such an association could unite different people in the same region.*

This type of non-attitude is neither for nor against institutionalization, instead, it implies the two important aspects that yo-yo players are concerned about when discussing institutionalization of their sport, the fun of yo-yoing and the social bonds developed between

players. However, the experienced players are very aware of the lack of resources, thus, they admitted that this difficulty could be alleviated by formalizing their sport, either through applying for government funding or commercializing it. Paradoxically, yo-yo players seem to not care about those administrative and managerial things regarding yo-yoing. For instance, Harry observed that yo-yo players themselves focus solely on anything that is directly about yo-yoing, such as tricks, new products, and contests. But yo-yo players did not think much about the ‘other than yo-yoing stuff’ that is important to yo-yoing itself, like how to promote it. This blindness of management echoes with their non-attitude.

### 5.5 Yo-yoing and sportisation: challenges and difficulties

Unlike skateboarding, competitive yo-yoing is mainly governed by adult-led organizations globally as well as locally (Beal and Weidman 2003). As an international non-governmental organization, the International Yo-Yo Federation (IYYF) governs anything related to the World Yo-Yo Contest (WYYC). From sanctioning the most representative local contest to recruiting a pool of qualified judges (Jayden, interviewee), it aims to ‘develop, promote and organize yo-yoing as a sport and hobby at global level’ (IYYF 2012).

However, the governing function of the IYYF is quite limited. Their major responsibilities are 1) to decide who hosts the annual WYYC and 2) to coordinate among and between local organizers. Jayden, a member of the IYYF himself, noted that

*. . . one of the functions of the IYYF is to contact different countries’ organizer, and to agree on the most representative contest that the winners are qualified as seeded players. . . . The main agenda of the annual IYYF member meeting is to decide where to organize the yearly WYYC in the coming few years. The major problem is about money . . . the host city (local organization) has to bear all the expenses of it, the IYYF doesn’t have the financial aid to provide to the host city. So that when you decided to be the next WYYC organizer, you have to be self-financing for it.*

In Hong Kong, the recognized member organization is the ‘Hong Kong Yo-Yo Selection Contest Committee’. It is a partnership between the two local organizations, the Hong Kong Yo Yo Fan Club (HKYYFC) and Hereweyo. This partnership acts primarily as the representative of the Hong Kong region, hence, they run the national yo-yo contest.

The formation of this partnership was made possible in coordination with the IYYF. This partnership could be considered as one of the most significant organizational changes in the yo-yoing scene. Because of the historical reason, HKYYFC was set up earlier than Hereweyo, the former was a more mature and resourceful club than the latter. Consequently, HKYYFC had been recognized as the national contest organizer while this was not the case for Hereweyo. Along with the setting up of the IYYF, Hereweyo negotiated for the equal recognition. After rounds of coordination, the ‘Hong Kong Yo-Yo Selection Contest Committee’ finally came into force as a partnership. Nelson, an insider of this incident, recalled the partnership as something extraordinary:

*There was a moment that I felt like a ‘boom’ in yo-yoing . . . after C3yoyodesign has established itself as a globally well-known yo-yo company, in the international yo-yoing circle, some people have dual roles, they have some mutual interests privately. So that they [Hereweyo] felt that they had the bargaining power to request equal recognition.*

Therefore, those who govern the sport are local organizations from different countries, meanwhile, they are loosely organized at least in the case of Hong Kong. As noted by Wheaton (2013), these lifestyle sports organizations are more like ‘clubs’ only, they do not function formally as an organization. Below, I will depict the two major difficulties and one challenge of the Hong Kong yo-yo sportscape that hinder its path to sportisation.

#### 5.5.1 Lack of resources

The first obstacle to sportisation is the lack of resources. The Indoor venue is the most crucial resource for yo-yoing, from regular gatherings to organizing contests, this community has been struggling with it. Before the pandemic, there were various venue choices, but the only formally approved place was sports court rented from the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). However, it was not easy to reserve a desirable time slot for which most people are available to join. Indoor public spaces that allow people to gather and play yo-yo are extremely rare in Hong Kong. As one yo-yo player attempted to yo-yo in a shopping mall, soon after, there came the security guard waving his/her hand, said playing yo-yo is not allowed here since it might hit somebody who walk past. Thus, they looked for grey public spaces where playing yo-yo is not denied by the security guard. Among these were the City University of Hong Kong and one of the MTR exits in the Olympic station, where they share the space with other users, including dancers and jugglers.

Organizing a contest presents the problem of finding a decent venue. In other words, it requires various social networks and money. Since the status of the yo-yo organizations in Hong Kong is not a formally registered charitable institution under section 88 of the Inland Revenue Ordinance, it greatly limits the sourcing of venue for this informal sport. Jayden explained the experience:

*Since 2014, shopping malls stopped providing free a venue for us [to organize contest], only the charitable institutions could rent the venue for free . . . Around the same time, the criteria for booking the community centres were getting stricter, they raised it from a first-come-first-serve basis to prioritizing registered charitable organizations and limiting the available district. We can only book the Sha Tin district since we are registered as a society in Sha Tin. Because we are not a registered non-profit organization, we don't have the so-called '88 license' which has a very high threshold.*

Many players recognized the importance of formalizing their organization, but they did not actively engage in related exercises. Since most of them have full-time jobs, and the cost of formalizing the organization is too high and time-consuming, so that it would be better to not put the effort into formalizing their organization.

#### 5.5.2 Remaining niche

Although the community has been putting various efforts into promotion, it fails to attract people to commit to this sport. How we make sense of this phenomenon requires further research. The size of the community is what is at stake. According to the estimation that I asked in the pre-survey, it is estimated that there are around 50 to 200 yo-yo players in Hong Kong. However, the number of active members is much lower, there were only 33 participants in the 2019 Hong Kong national yo-yo contest. ‘There are very few people who play yo-yo in Hong Kong’ is a comment that I frequently heard during the interviews. Consequently, the small population cannot sustain the community itself, resulting in a shrinking process when yo-yo stopped appearing on mass medias, and around the same time the smartphone took up a large portion of teenagers’ leisure time. In recent years, there are

only a few newcomers who have committed to this sport. As Jayden explained the precondition of sportisation is the popularity of yo-yoing as a sport:

*Of course, many people know 'what is yo-yo', since it is the second oldest toy in the world. But if we want it to be treated like a sport, such as BMX and skateboarding, having plenty number of participants is a prerequisite.*

### 5.5.3 Who benefits and who makes the decision

Besides, there is a challenge of institutionalization stressed by some players. They are concerned about how it would be organized, which entails that there might not be effective communication within the community:

*Forming an association means establishing an authority, it greatly affects how people think. In general, it might not be beneficial to the yo-yoing community, of course, it depends on how it functions. What I care about is flexibility. (Tommy, interviewee)*

*From my understanding, institutionalization is a bad thing because it allows the minority to decide for the majority. In the end, everyone acts according to their interests, people would sacrifice the interests of the group to benefit themselves. (Elvis, interviewee)*

Kevin raised an important concern that someone might take profit from it:

*Let's say we have resolved the problem of resources, and our sport has been formalized. When it comes to this point, there will be lots of money to be processed through the association. It is possible that someone would profit for himself on behalf of the association but not contribute to the association itself. This is a real problem in which someone used the name of the association to do something that is against the goal of the association.*

Even though yo-yo players observed that there might be shortcomings of institutionalizing their sport, there is also a consensus among players on how the person-in-charge benefits:

*Profiting from any yo-yoing related project is not a problem, as long as he puts part of the money back into the development of the yo-yo community. Anyhow, he has to feed himself. (David, interviewee)*

Additionally, the power to decide the development of yo-yoing lies in those who have the resources to do so. While most of the players' careers are unrelated to yo-yoing, only those core players who work in the yo-yo industry find their interests align with the development of yo-yoing. As someone who is working in the industry, Nick explained:

*No one can agree or disagree with it [institutionalization], it is a thing of the majority's decision. Whether it will remain underground or develop to mainstream depends on the efforts of thousands of yo-yo players worldwide, we are not adequate to judge whether it is right or wrong.*

### 5.6 Response to the commercialization of yo-yoing

The 'selling out' ethos is stemmed from the punk subculture. According to Humphreys (2003), they 'reject widespread commercial co-optation' because it goes against the philosophy of freedom of expression in every aspect. Thus, the meaning of selling out is two-

fold: selling out their sport for money and selling out the soul of their sport. While commercialization has become a crucial element in the sportisation process, and some athletes pursue a career in their sports through this way (Thorpe and Dumont 2019), this argument has become untenable.

Almost all players expressed that there is no such risk of ‘selling out’ the sport in the case of competitive yo-yoing. By using a photo-elicitation method, I showed to my interviewees two recent photos of two French yo-yo players, Quentin Godet and Williams Thamrong, who collaborated with the Nike Dunk campaign. This is the typical case of commodification of a sport. Although those two photos featured them ‘doing it’ (Wheaton and Beal 2003), yo-yoing in both photos are peripheral to the sportswear advertised in the campaign. Surprisingly, the responses were overall positive. Most of the interviewees regarded it as ‘cool’ given its mainstream appearance. The only concern of this form of commercialization is whether it could successfully promote the sporting image of yo-yoing. Jackson suggested that *‘it feels a bit like a tool to sell the products of the advertisement, but yo-yoing was not being understood.’*

Nonetheless, the insufficiency of resources that has been haunting the community is yet resolved by the current tiny scale of commercialization. Other than people who are working in the yo-yo industry, the number of players who can sustain their living from it is extremely limited. Perhaps it is a step forward to the sustainability of the sport that was once actualized. As Elvis addressed this issue: *“yo-yoing actually started as a mega-commercial project, but right now it is completely uncommercialized, everyone is suffering from the lack of resources, everyone is either paying for participating in contests or paying for organizing contests.”* When the existence of the community has been a pressing issue, commercialization prevails over the so-called selling out of the soul of yo-yoing.



## Ch.6 Discussion and Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

Competitive yo-yoing is a rare and interesting case study to examine the lifestyle sports. My purpose of conducting this research was to find out the values of yo-yoing and how yo-yo players respond to institutionalization and commercialization. In this final chapter, I will comment on the implications and conclude by addressing the limitations of this research.

### 6.2 Rethinking the notion of competition in lifestyle sports

This project supports the argument that the dichotomy of mainstream and alternative is overstated (Honea 2013:1258). The case of competitive yo-yoing demonstrated a generally positive attitude towards competition in a lifestyle sport. As a central form of yo-yoing, competition crystalizes some of the values of this sport. Perhaps the case of competitive yo-yoing juxtaposes with the case of BMX regarding their respective trajectories. Modern yo-yoing was first developed as a commercial project in the America and later on, swept the globe intentionally. By massive promotion and organizing contests all over the world, the popularity of yo-yoing grew, peaked in the 90s. The difference may lie in their roads of 'mainstreaming'. BMX gained significant popularity 'due in large part to media coverage of made-for-television events like the X Games and the Gravity Games' (Honea 2013:1259). However, the popularity gained by modern yo-yoing turns out to be haunting its development. The then yo-yo producers, who popularized yo-yoing, took tremendous economic advantage of its popularity but they did not develop it as a sport seriously. The representation of yo-yoing as a 'toy' has been implanted in the heart of the most people. How current yo-yo players revive the yo-yoing as a sport becomes a question of how to change this seemingly static disposition of the mass.

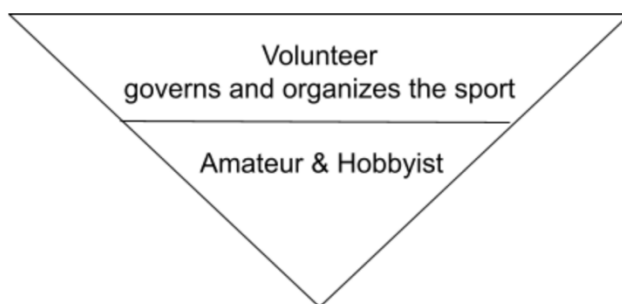
Align with mainstream sports, yo-yo players emphasize a lot on competition. However, the reason for competing is not so about winning. Instead, competition allows players to present their unique choreographed freestyle, which is an opportunity to express oneself and to demonstrate creativity. Besides, competition is also a site of culture. I suggest this term to rethink the notion of competition only limited to alternative sports. The meaning of competition to mainstream sports like running or ping pong are no doubt to win. This apparently association of competition with winning is hence decomposed by the case of competitive yo-yoing. Thus, competition in lifestyle sports could be understood a site of culture. I suggest that competition is not so antithetical to the nature of lifestyle sports. As I shown in competitive yo-yoing, its unique culture of competition can (re)produce a community. Yet, it is largely subcultural since its values could only be recognized 'in the eyes of the relevant beholder' (Thornton 1995). Still, as a subculture, the anti-competition ethos was once portrayed as a resistance to the mainstream. Respond to Honea (2013) call for moving beyond the alternative-mainstream dichotomy, I suggest that the lifestyle sports researchers should also rethink the hostile relationship between lifestyle sports and competition.

6.2 Symbiotic relationship between lifestyle sports and its agents of commodification The triangular classification of amateur-hobbyist-volunteer by Stebbins (2007) prompts the evaluation of the relationship between lifestyle sports and its agents of commodification. In competitive yo-yoing, volunteers are those who manage and organize the sports so that it can remain as a system either formally or informally. The contributions by the volunteers are the linchpin of the community as a whole. For most of the cases, volunteers are themselves involve in the yo-yo industry in some way or another, who are also members of the current

yo-yo organization(s) Their dual roles in the sport allow them to participate as volunteers on the institutional level. On the other hand, the amateurs and hobbyists (especially in the type of collectors) are those who support the sport financially. On the road to professionals, amateurs devote passion and money to the sport accordingly. The professionals are those who receive sponsorship(s), and possibly, commercial opportunities. Accordingly, volunteers and professionals are the agents of commodification in the case of competitive yo-yoing, who profit from the sport by contributing to it. While it is suggested that the types of serious leisure practitioners are a triangular classification (Stebbins 2007), I argue that in the governance of a sport, it is rather a top-down model in which the volunteer locates at the top of the group hierarchies, and amateur and hobbyist locate at the same bottom level of the hierarchies (Figure 1) based on the respective subcultural status.

Accordingly, this view supports Wheaton's (2013) observation that yo-yoing revolves around the consumption of a commodity. While it is often the case for other sports to maintain a symbiotic relationship between the media (e.g. Beal and Wilson 2004; Stebbins 2007; Honea 2013), yo-yoing is of no exception displaying this symbiotic relationship between its agents of commodification, which largely refer to individual players and historically, yo-yo producers.

Figure 1. The top-down model of the types of serious leisure practitioners



### 6.3 Group hierarchies within a subculture

The players suggested that the status was conferred mainly because of commitment, from innovation of the trick diversity to contribution to the community. While it is argued that subcultural capital cannot differentiate hierarchies within the group, still, the different types of practitioners does not suggest a scale of commitment that could be measured properly. In competitive yo-yoing, volunteers are the ones whose main responsibility is to govern and organize the sport, it does not imply any superior status. It only classifies the hierarchies of practitioners under the institutional arrangement. Most of the types of commitment earned different degree of subcultural capital. To understand the formation of hierarchies more precisely, I found that the concept of 'temporal capital' is quite useful. Also drawing on Bourdieu's cultural capital, O'Connor (2017:5) introduces the time dimension to his research on middle-aged skateboarders as 'the way we understand and imagine time as a resource in everyday life'. Despite the relative objectivity that temporal capital claims in relation to subcultural capital, it is only one way to measure the commitment to the sporting subculture. It does not fully capture the process of conferring status. Temporal capital should be

combined with other indicators in order to grasp a detailed group hierarchies in how status is conferred.

#### 6.4 Conclusion

I conclude this thesis by addressing to the following limitations. First, speaking methodologically, all secondary sources from the global yo-yo community mainly came from North America. It should be noted that those players who appear on media are either world or regional yo-yo champions as the reason that they were interviewed. Thus, their opinions mainly represent the elite and core players' perspectives from the globe.

Second limitation rests on the first one, whether my research on the Hong Kong yo-yo community is an idioculture (Fine 1979) or a tribe (Maffesoli 1996) rather than a subculture is not verifiable. Fine's notion of idioculture of small group's interaction largely coincides with the niche yo-yo community in Hong Kong. Moreover, the theoretical framework of tribes ostensibly fits into the case of yo-yoing, which are groups 'without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form' (Maffesoli 1996:98). Furthermore, the broader debate of the post-subcultural critique was not discussed in this project (Wheaton 2007). Future research should address to this lens and clarify the conceptual difference between subculture, idioculture, tribes, and neo-tribes (Bennett 1999).

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## Appendix 1

### **Interview guide**

#### Part 1: Warm up

1. Can you share your experience of yo-yoing?
2. How do you position yourself within the yo-yo community?
3. What is your role(s) in the yo-yo community

#### Part 2: institutionalization and commercialization

1. Are you aware of the Tokyo Olympics? Can you share your thoughts on the inclusion of new sports? (surfing, skateboarding, BMX freestyle, climbing)
2. Do you think that it is a good idea to include yo-yoing into Olympics?
3. How far do you think yo-yoing is from being included into Olympics?
4. How do you view about the current yo-yo organization and its functions?

Sportisation refers to the “process of alternative sport forms being co-opted and incorporated into the culture of mainstream sports, becoming formalized, institutionalized, hierarchical and organized” (Atkinson 2009).

Based on this definition,

5. Do you think that institutionalization of yo-yoing can bring more benefits than drawbacks?
6. How commercialize do you think yo-yoing is?
7. After looking at these two pictures, what is your thoughts? (IG pictures of Nike sport wear featuring yo-yoing players from France)
8. Do you think that commercializing yo-yoing is a good thing or not?
9. How do you view of the future of competitive yo-yoing?

#### Part 3: Sporting values of competitive yo-yoing

1. What keeps you playing yo-yo?
2. What does yo-yoing bring to you?
3. What do you thing is important to regard someone as a good yo-yoer? >style?
4. Do you think that yo-yoing is a sport? On what basis?
5. If you have to use other words other than ‘sport’ to define yo-yoing, what is/are your choice(s)?

(Competition)

6. How do you think about the competition?
7. Why do you compete? What are you striving for?
8. Do you think that competition is important to yo-yoing?
9. Is there any other thing that is (also) important to yo-yoing?

(Participant control)

10. To what extent do you think that you can decide how to play yo-yo?
11. To what extent do you think that yo-yoing is controlled by someone else?

(Consumption)

12. What brands do you think that have some sort of relationship with yo-yoing?
13. Yo-yo company collaborates with other brands?



(Masculinity)

14. In your opinion, what is the reason for the lack of female players?
15. Do you think that yo-yoing embodies masculinity?