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## Tacit hierarchising in online communities of hillwalkers

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### **Abstract**

This research explores how Munro-baggers – hillwalkers aiming to climb all 282 Scottish mountains over 3,000ft – hierarchise themselves and others as serious leisure participants. This increasingly popular hobby contributes to Scotland's economy and profile, but its sparse literature insufficiently analyses the influence of Stebbins' Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP), the recent reappraisal of Serious Leisure or the influence of online communities. Therefore, we critically revisit the SLP to re-evaluate Munro-bagging. Through phenomenological interviews, we explore how Munro-baggers hierarchise each other, tacitly and otherwise, offline and online, through their activities' perceived characteristics. Ambiguities and overlaps are explored and the interplay of contexts analysed. We identify factors influencing Munro-baggers' perceptions of seriousness amongst fellow hobbyists, taxonomising participants by their perceived characteristics of seriousness. Findings suggest that they draw upon quantitative and qualitative judgments of hobby-relevant activities and qualitative judgments of certain *ad hominem* characteristics. The expansion of the pastime beyond its temporospatial boundaries into online spaces is found to influence the extent to which actors categorise or hierarchise each other and the characteristics used to do so.

### **Keywords:**

Munro-bagging, serious leisure, hillwalking, adventure tourism, mountain tourism, ethnography, netnography

## Introduction

Hillwalkers, mountaineers and climbers, who toil in pursuit of 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 1982), increasingly use the internet to immerse themselves remotely in leisure communities which would otherwise be denied by temporospatial boundaries. In this chapter, we explore a theoretical lacuna around digital mobilities as we link debates surrounding mobility studies and media communications (e.g. Hollett et al., 2017) with those discussing ephemeral ways of moving and being with social media (Møller & Robards, 2019). Exploring how physical work rubs up against the virtual, we examine online socialisation in the context of Munro-baggers, and how digital context influences their perceptions of self and each other – something neglected within extant theory. We discuss their apparently hierarchical, tacit or formal classifications and their influence upon Munro-baggers' experiences.

Munro-bagging is an expanding socio-cultural phenomenon largely neglected within academic literature. A form of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982; Stebbins, 2007; Elkington & Stebbins, 2014), it entails systematically climbing the 282 Scottish mountains exceeding 3,000 feet (914 metres) high. Over 6,000 hillwalkers have 'bagged' every summit (Scottish Mountaineering Club, 2018), 'completing' a Munro 'round' and graduating from Munro-bagger to Munroist. Several times this number are partway through (ibid). The pastime is becoming more socialised through hillwalkers' websites, enabling peer-to-peer interactivity and user-generated content. This potentially broadens Munro-bagging, breaking its location-specific, temporospatial boundaries and providing additional contexts for participant interactions, construction of self, and community formation. This research explores how Munro-baggers gauge seriousness within online communities, and connects these insights to discourses as an evolution of new directions in tourism theory and practice. Taking a pursuit which has unfolded informally online, we demonstrate empirically the complex ways in which serious leisure tourists find new meanings in space and place, expressing primal competitiveness and social connection in a virtual space. Rather than simply suggesting that online opportunities are progressive and sustainable in the new epoch of travel developments, we also acknowledge that they are confounding and fascinating, as tourists are motivated towards 'being human' in a

hybridic, computer-generated time-space configuration. We propose that a dystopia is also potentially developing, as participants elicit old behaviours by socially positioning themselves in an alternative playground, using technologies which may generate inequalities, as social orderings pervade beyond the leisure-scape.

## Review of the theory

### Extant classifications of serious leisure participants

As a progressive debate, we note several authors who have provided models of serious leisure stratification from its inception with Stebbins (2007) and the adoption of Unruh's (1980) classification of participants in social worlds – 'strangers', 'tourists', 'regulars' and 'insiders'. Building on recent conversations and acknowledging increases in online socialisation, we return to Stebbins (2017), who finds leisure behaviour increasingly complex and multi-dimensional. Lee and Ewert (2019) have reinvigorated debates around the motivations of serious leisure participants, whilst Heidari et al. (2019) have investigated leisure behaviour as a structural model of serious leisure and place attachment. Munro-bagging provides potential as a trope to understand tourism practices more broadly. Unruh's (1980) 'strangers' have little apparent understanding or appreciation of the pastime but may gain peripheral, unintended and uninterested experiences, often serendipitously. Therefore, this study explores these illusive practices where 'tourists' sporadically undertake the pastime, whilst 'regulars' make frequent Munro-bagging trips, and 'insiders' have sufficiently extensive skills, experience and networks to influence peers and access special resources – an interesting travel phenomena when extrapolated into online spaces.

Elkington and Stebbins' (2014) classification of serious leisure adherents as 'neophytes', 'participants', 'moderate devotees' and 'core devotees' differs from Unruh's (1980) taxonomy, focusing less on attitudes, more on 'career' progression. Brown's (2007) 'occasional', 'recreational', 'wannabe', 'competitive' and 'hardcore' categories reflect actors' assumed social positions, but their generic nature ignores the processes which Munro-baggers undertake, and actions observed online. Moreover, Stebbins' (2007) classifications largely overlook how leisure dynamics change over time (Veal, 2017) as actors develop.