Chapter 2
A Network-Based View on Extreme Expedition Team Composition in Alpine Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Conceptually drawing on network theory as its theoretical lens, this study examines two prime notions of network configuration of commercial expeditions. Exploring the role of both structural holes and network closure as indicators of team configuration for those venturing out in such extreme adventure, this study clarifies the impact of social structures, network closure, and structural holes in particular on performance outcomes in the context of expedition mountaineering. Presence and bridging of structural holes did turn out to be a significant predictor for the success or failure of an expedition. The findings show network closure to significantly influence the performance of mountaineering teams that make for a successful ascent. The capacity to span structural holes, commonly portrayed as serving as an eye-opener for options otherwise not found, does not appear to assist teams that make for successful ascents, however.

INTRODUCTION

Tourist policy on mountaineering has turned towards regulating and restricting access to particular climbing routes, establishing policy to the operational side of touristic expedition mountaineering. Little is known however, in terms of academically infused policy advice, on how tourists can best pair up as they venture into extreme sport adventure, as part of a bustling, yet frequently overlooked branch of extreme sports tourism (Sharma, 2012; Neupane et al. 2021; Jones et al. 2021). Tourist governance however holds direct policy derived influence on the safety of alpine tourism, regulating and restricting access

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to particular climbing routes, establishing policy to the operational side of touristicical activity (Lai et al 2016). This chapter hence takes on a network based view as it explores an aray of network indicators as input for such alpine tourism policy, revolving around the following research question: What is the role of both structural holes and network closure as indicators of team configuration, on performance outcomes in the context of alpine expedition mountaineering safety?

With eight of the world's highest mountains in the country, Nepal is a mountaineer's paradise that in the last decades has cranked out a considerable extreme sports tourism business. The ultimate glory of mountaineering is reaching the summit of Mt. Everest, but there are numerous technical challenges l on any of the other 326 climbing peaks in the the Nepal Himalaya. The touristic draw of one of the most formidable mountain ranges in the world has not only propelled commercial expedition initiatives that gear up, co-climb and advice the sporty tourists that attempt climb historical lines set out in the Annapurna range – scaled in 1950 for the first time by a French Expedition with Maurice Herzog as leader or at Everest – first summitted by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953 with a Bristish Expedition led by John Hunt.

Yet, despite the wide draw to scale the tallest mountains on the planet, not all of these touristical climbs – often truly extreme sports endeavors – are without risks. The term for this area of tourism is commercial expedition mountaineering. Tourist policy in general, and hence also in mountaineering has tuned towards regulating and restricting access to particular climbing routes, establishing policy to the operational side of touristicical activity (Lai et al 2016). Recently, work on govenance and management of tourist destination has been callig in particular to further insights into the safety aspects of sustainable tourism policy in particular (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019; Racuh et al. 20121), part of an ongoing stream of literature in tourism governance that has highligted safety as fundamental for ongoing touristic activty in the long run (Peters and Pikkemnaat, 2006; Hall, 2019). In this particular case of expedition mountaineering, such policy, in practice, revolves around advising climbers on how to responsibly climb, for instance translating into govwernmental or commercial agencies that can help the sporty tourist navigate these areas (Albattat et al. 2021; Toanoglou et al. 2021). Little is known however, in terms of academically infused policy advice on how tourists can best pair up as they consider teaming up with others, potentially steering tourists and tourist agency climbing specialists alike in their commercial climbing attempts in a safe and resposible manner (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

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Inserting a network based view to the team configuration of commercial climbing expeditions this chapter clarifies the impact of social structures, network closure and structural holes in particular, on performance outcomes in the context of expedition mountaineering (Aalbers and Dolfsma, 2017; Aalbers, 2020). As such, this chapter revolves around the role of mountaineering team configuration as predictive of alpine expedition team succes. Drawing on network theory as its theoretical lens, and leveraging on a rich and longitudinal empirical dataset that of Himalayan mountaineering teams, we examine two prime notions for mountaineering team configuration choice. Exploring the role of both structural holes and network closure as indicators of team configuration, this chapter clarifies the impact of social structures, network closure and structural holes in particular, on performance outcomes in the context of expedition mountaineering, suggesting one more relevant than the other. We utilize a longitudinal empirical dataset that of Himalayan mountaineering teams, and examine the network configuration choices of 90 climbing teams in relation to their historical network embeddedness in the broader Himalayan climbing community.