

ORIENTEERING AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

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Abstract: *Orienteering is a unique sport that combines physical endurance, cognitive skills, and navigation in natural and urban environments. Beyond its athletic aspects, orienteering functions as a social phenomenon that fosters community building, environmental awareness, and lifelong engagement in physical activity. This paper explores the social dimensions of orienteering, including its role in education, health promotion, and social integration. By analyzing existing literature and case studies, we highlight how orienteering contributes to personal development, teamwork, and inclusivity. The study also discusses the sport's impact on different age groups and its significance in modern society. Additionally, the report presents the results of a survey exploring attitudes towards orienteering as a social phenomenon, offering valuable insights into the public perception of the sport and its broader social implications.*

Key words: *orienteering, social phenomenon, sports culture, sports community, social integration*

INTRODUCTION

Orienteering is a sport that combines physical endurance, navigational skills, and rapid decision-making in a variety of natural and urban environments. Although it is often perceived primarily as an individual physical activity, orienteering has strong social characteristics. It brings together people of different ages, genders, and social and professional backgrounds, creating conditions for active communication, cooperation, and the formation of long-term social relationships. Through shared training and competition experiences, participants develop a sense of belonging and mutual support, which strengthens community ties and promotes social inclusion and equality (Vladimirov, 2025a; Vladimirov, 2025b). The arena, being the most visible and socially interactive space in an orienteering event, directly shapes both athlete experience and the public image of the sport (Sirakov & Minoiu, 2025).

Numerous studies highlight the positive impact of orienteering on participants' psycho-emotional and psycho-physical well-being. Structured training programs for adolescents, students, and adults contribute to improved emotional balance, reduced stress levels, and enhanced overall quality of life, which in turn leads to higher personal satisfaction and social adaptability (Galan et al., 2016; Blagii et al., 2018). These communicative and health-related functions position orienteering as an effective means for personal development, social integration, and the cultivation of a positive sport culture.

In recent years, orienteering has also undergone significant transformation due to the integration of modern technologies. The use of GPS tracking systems and specialized analytical software has fundamentally changed the training and competition process, enabling detailed evaluation of route choices, technical performance, and decision-making errors. At the same time, these technological innovations have increased the attractiveness of the sport for spectators by allowing live broadcasting and in-depth visual analysis of competitions. As a result, orienteering is evolving from a relatively closed sporting discipline into an appealing media product, supporting its popularization and attracting new participants (Sirakov & Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2016; Sirakov & Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2019; Sirakov & Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2021). Despite these advancements, research among elite orienteers confirms that a high level of physical fitness remains a key prerequisite for maintaining technical accuracy and effective decision-making under competitive load (Sirakov & Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2018; Minoiu & Minoiu, 2019).

Beyond its technological and physical dimensions, orienteering represents a powerful environment for cognitive and personal development. Regular training, particularly focused on technical skills and map interpretation, has been shown to positively influence mental processes such as attention, spatial thinking, and the ability to make rapid decisions in stressful situations (Zsheliaskova-Koynova, 1993; Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2020; Batista et al., 2021; Robazza et al., 2018). The unique combination of

intense physical effort and complex cognitive activity makes orienteering not only a competitive sport but also a valuable educational tool. Its application in school and university settings supports the development of essential life skills among young people and students, including problem-solving, autonomy, responsibility, and resilience (Sirakov & Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2019; Vaskan et al., 2019; Sirakov & Ivanova, 2023; Sirakov, Ivanova & Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2023; Baytaş et al., 2024). Evidence from Bulgarian university orienteering further supports the role of the sport as a stable social and educational environment. Long-term analyses of national university championships demonstrate that sustained institutional engagement in orienteering contributes not only to competitive success, but also to the formation of cohesive student communities and enduring athlete involvement over multiple academic cycles (Sirakov, 2025).

In this context, the present study aims to examine orienteering as a social phenomenon by presenting empirical data obtained through a survey among active participants in the sport and by outlining its role in socialization, community building, and sustainable engagement in an active and healthy lifestyle.

METHODS

The study was conducted using a structured online survey targeting individuals who practice orienteering from different age groups and levels of experience. A total of 280 respondents participated in the study, including both athletes with many years of competitive experience and recreational participants.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions, incorporating both multiple-choice items and statements evaluated using a five-point Likert scale (from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”).

The main objective of the study was to examine social attitudes and perceptions toward orienteering, with a particular focus on:

- the degree of perceived sense of belonging to the sporting community;
- the social interactions arising from participation in the sport;
- the perceived impact of orienteering on personal and social development;
- opinions regarding the promotion and social accessibility of the sport.

The collected data were analyzed quantitatively and presented through charts and figures illustrating trends in the social aspects of orienteering.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study confirms that orienteering is perceived by participants not merely as an individual sport, but as an activity with a clearly pronounced social dimension. One of the most strongly emphasized aspects in the survey was precisely the social function of the sport. Nearly three quarters of the respondents reported that through their participation in orienteering they had established meaningful new social connections, while almost another quarter fully or partially supported this statement. Only a very small proportion of participants were uncertain or did not perceive a link between orienteering and social bonding (Figure 1). This indicates that the sport not only motivates participation through physical activity but also plays an important role as a social platform that fosters interpersonal communication and a sense of belonging.

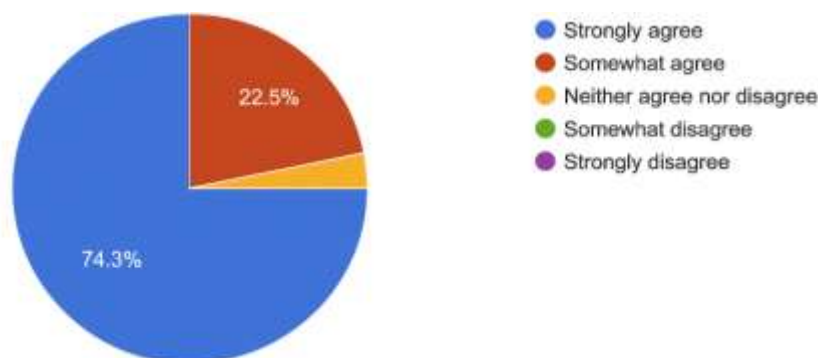


Fig. 1 Do you believe that orienteering helps you create new social contacts?

The results of the survey confirm that orienteering is perceived by the majority of participants not only as a sport, but also as a social practice that promotes communication, inclusion, and personal development. From the very beginning of the study, a clear tendency emerged to view orienteering as an open and inclusive environment. More than half of the respondents fully agree, and nearly one third partially agree, with the statement that there are no cultural or social barriers in the sport (Figure 2). This indicates that orienteering is perceived as an accessible and equitable space for interaction, in which participants share common values regardless of social, ethnic, or cultural differences.

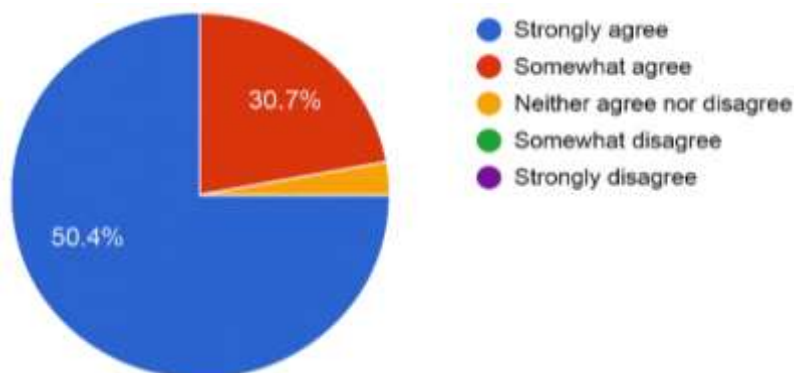


Fig. 2 Do you agree with the statement that there are no cultural and/or social barriers in orienteering?

This openness is further confirmed by attitudes toward socialization. Almost all respondents – 77.1% fully and 21.1% partially – believe that orienteering contributes to socialization among those who practice it (Figure 3). This demonstrates the sport's significant role in building a sense of community and a supportive social environment.

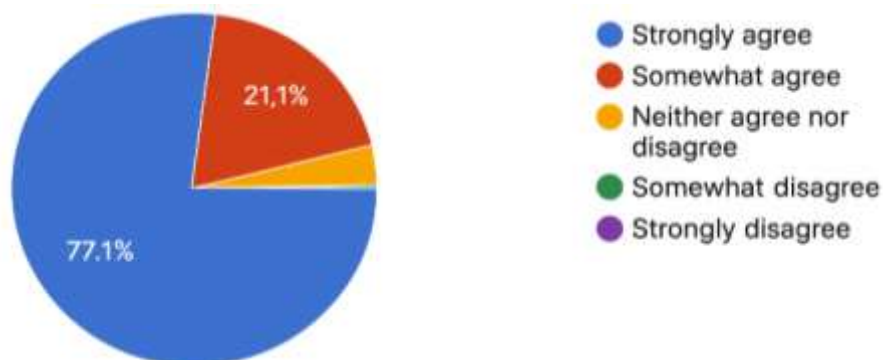


Fig. 3 Do you agree that orienteering contributes to socialization among people who practice it?

A similar trend is observed in the assessment of the accessibility of orienteering. A total of 72.9% of respondents fully agree and 21.4% partially agree that the sport is suitable for people with differences in ethnicity, gender, age, or physical abilities (Figure 4). This result emphasizes that orienteering provides one of the few platforms where equality is not merely a theoretical principle, but a lived experience.

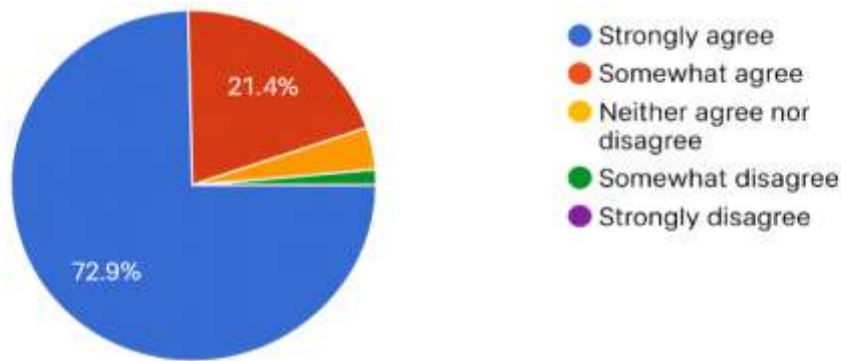


Fig. 4 Do you consider orienteering accessible to people with differences in ethnicity, race, gender, age, or physical abilities?

Regarding the perception of orienteering as a socializing activity, responses are nearly unanimous – 77.9% fully agree and 21.1% partially agree that the sport fulfills such a function (Figure 5).

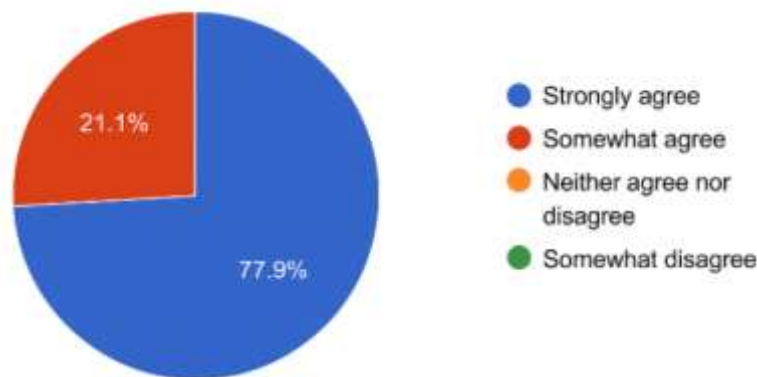


Fig. 5 Do you consider orienteering to be a socializing activity?

Even more noteworthy are the results of the following question, which examines the place of orienteering in comparison with other socializing activities (Figure 6). Approximately one third of respondents rank orienteering as the most important socializing activity in their lives, while an additional 40% place it in second position. This suggests that for many participants, orienteering occupies a leading role in their social lives, serving not only as a form of physical activity but also as a primary means of communication and shared experience.

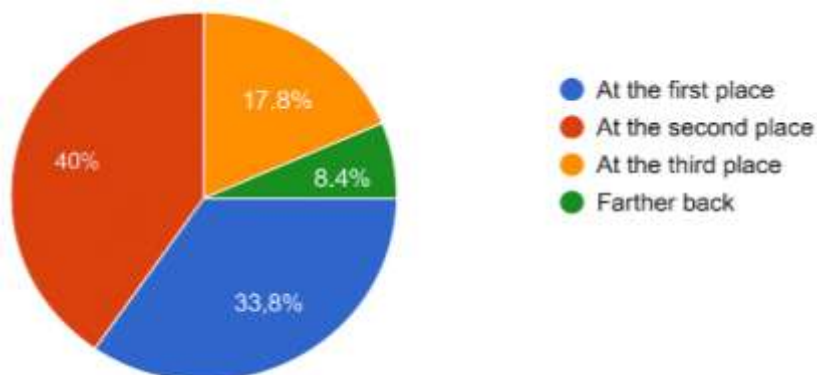


Fig. 6 If you consider orienteering a socializing activity, where does it rank in importance compared to other socializing activities in your life?

Finally, respondents demonstrate a high level of agreement with the idea of including orienteering as a mandatory component of physical education curricula in schools (Figure 7). More than 60% fully support this proposal, while nearly 28% partially approve it. This reflects an understanding that orienteering has not only physical, but also educational and social value, which can be effectively utilized in the school environment.

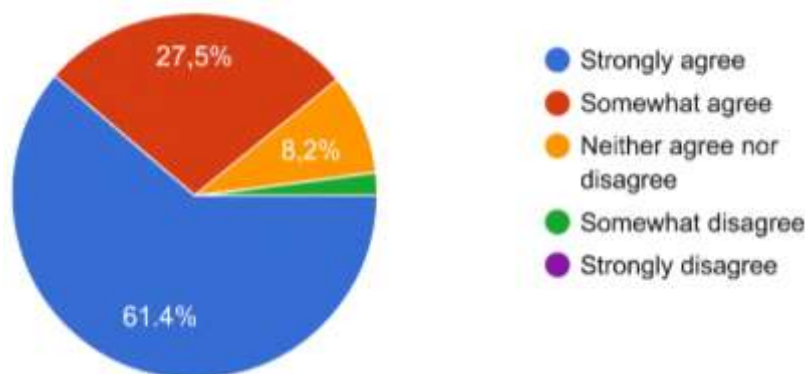


Fig. 7 Do you think that orienteering could be included as a mandatory content area in school physical education programs? (Currently, it is an optional component.)

CONCLUSION

The results of the survey clearly demonstrate that orienteering is far more than a sport – it represents a social phenomenon that fosters communication, inclusion, and social connectedness among people from diverse backgrounds. Participants perceive orienteering as an inclusive, friendly, and accessible environment that supports the development of social capital and long-term interpersonal relationships.

Based on the data, it can be concluded that orienteering possesses significant potential as a tool for social integration and education through movement. Its more active inclusion in school curricula, along with improved media visibility, could expand its impact and strengthen its role as a socially meaningful form of physical and social activity.

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