NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX INTERPLAY OF IDENTITY AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY WITHIN THE DIVERSE RUNNING COMMUNITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Rowena Nery Monte[i]
Department of Human Kinetics,
College of Arts and Sciences,
University of the Philippines Los Baños,
College 4031, Laguna,
Philippines

Abstract:

The surge in recreational running has strengthened community ties within the sport. This paper examines how runners form and express their identities through personal narratives influenced by motivations, social interactions, and existing social structures. Identity formation among runners is shaped by individual goals and social influences, with some driven to improve themselves while others seek to avoid peer judgment. Age differences also impact how runners develop their identities, with younger and older runners adopting varying approaches based on their life stages. Although many begin running alone, they often join groups that foster a sense of belonging; however, the loss of these groups can lead to feelings of isolation. Advancements in technology, such as running apps and social media, have enhanced connections among runners. While running is generally accessible, cultural, economic, and natural capital factors affect each runner's experience and highlight the diversity within the community. Societal expectations, particularly regarding gender roles, influence runners' choices and can create a hierarchical division in their identities as they navigate the balance between running and family responsibilities. The paper emphasizes the complexity of identity in recreational running, illustrating how personal experiences intertwine with broader social and cultural dynamics.

Keywords: sociology of running, motivation, identity formation, social dynamics, social stratification

[i] Correspondence: email rnmonte@up.edu.ph

1. Introduction

In recent years, recreational running has surged in popularity as a preferred leisure activity for many individuals. This trend is particularly evident on social media platforms, where fitness enthusiasts frequently share their experiences on Strava, a widely used app for tracking outdoor activities. Strava allows users to record their runs and rides through GPS technology, providing a comprehensive overview of their performance metrics. When users post their activity summaries, they often include vital details such as the distance covered, total moving time, elevation gain, average speed, calories burned, and even the carbon emissions they've offset by engaging in eco-friendly modes of exercise (Ratliff, 2024).

The motivations behind these posts can vary significantly. Some individuals seek to broadcast their achievements to a broader audience, celebrating personal milestones and inspiring others. Others may use the platform as a tool for accountability; sharing their progress creates a sense of commitment to their fitness goals, driven by the internal pressure to consistently update their followers on their journey. This desire for accountability fosters a unique social dynamic around running, transforming it from a solitary pursuit into a communal experience.

Moreover, running has evolved beyond just an individual effort. Many enthusiasts find joy in sharing the activity with friends or participating in group runs, amplifying the social aspect of the sport. Whether posting solo achievements on social media or bonding with companions during a run, individuals increasingly use running to connect and create shared experiences with others. This blend of personal fitness and social interaction highlights how running has become intertwined with community building in today's digital age.

The number of runners has risen during the COVID-19 pandemic (New Research Reveals Running Boom During COVID-19 Pandemic | Press-Releases | World Athletics, n.d.). An expansive survey conducted across ten distinct countries revealed that 40% of the participants identified themselves as runners, showcasing a significant interest in this popular form of exercise. Delving deeper into their habits, it was found that 30% of these self-identified runners run at least once a week, indicating a consistent commitment to maintaining their fitness through regular physical activity.

The demographics of the running community were notably balanced, with 53% of respondents being male and 47% female. This near-even split reflects the widespread appeal of running across genders.

An exciting trend emerged when participants were asked about their running habits concerning the ongoing pandemic. Over one-fifth of respondents noted that they are running more frequently now than they did prior to the pandemic. This increase in activity suggests that many individuals have turned to running as a source of comfort, stress relief, or a means of coping with the challenges presented by the pandemic. Furthermore, a significant number expressed a solid intention to maintain this elevated

running frequency even after the pandemic has ended, indicating a potential long-term shift in lifestyle and fitness enthusiasm.

Recreational running, defined as running for leisure, with or without a competitive component, has increased over the years (Scheerder, Breedveld, and Borgers, 2015). Multiple internal and external factors significantly influence an individual's motivation to run. Internally, people in good health might be driven by personal ambitions—such as improving endurance, enhancing mental well-being, or preparing for competitive events. This intrinsic motivation often stems from a desire to achieve individual fitness milestones or enjoy the process of running itself.

On the other hand, external factors also play a crucial role in shaping one's goals. For instance, societal pressures can lead individuals to pursue running as a means of weight loss, primarily driven by the desire to attain a body image that aligns with conventional standards of attractiveness. This societal influence highlights the complex interplay between personal aspirations and the external validation one seeks from peers, media, and cultural norms.

Reaching these goals takes more work. An individual's determination or willpower does not solely determine success in running; environmental elements—such as access to safe running paths, community support, availability of resources like running clubs, and even local weather conditions—can either facilitate or hinder progress.

With the growing trend of recreational running, especially in urban areas, emphasizing the social dynamics at play becomes increasingly important. Factors like community engagement, participation in organized races, and the shared experiences of training with others can significantly enrich one's running journey. Understanding these social contexts helps illuminate how and why individuals motivate themselves and persist in their pursuit of running, making it essential to consider these variables for a more well-rounded perspective.

2. Objectives of the Study

This paper presents a compelling analysis of the factors driving the increasing popularity of recreational running through a literature review. Synthesizing insights from various studies will uncover significant trends and patterns illuminating this vibrant activity. The findings will culminate in a conclusion reflecting on this research's broader implications.

The study will focus on three pivotal questions:

1) What motivates individuals to engage in running?
2) How do social dynamics within the running community develop and change?
3) How do social structures influence the experience of running?

This paper will tackle these questions and provide a persuasive narrative that highlights recreational running's transformative power for individuals and communities.

3. Review of Related Literature

3.1 Identity Formation of Runners

How does one become a runner? The journey often begins with a personal motivation that stems from within. Many individuals are drawn to running because of its numerous health benefits, manifesting in tangible and observable ways. For instance, weight loss is a significant outcome for those who may have been overweight before starting their running journey. A study conducted by Koplan in 1982 highlighted that weight loss is one of the most common results experienced by beginner runners. Furthermore, this research uncovered an interesting correlation between running and smoking cessation; many runners reported a reduction or complete elimination of cigarette consumption.

The benefits of running extend beyond mere calorie expenditure. Regular running has been shown to enhance respiratory health, as runners often find themselves less inclined to smoke due to an increased awareness of their physical well-being. When motivation comes from an internal desire to improve one's health, recreational runners often prioritize their physical condition and actively pursue running to achieve their goals.

Moreover, significant research indicates that even modest weight loss can have profound effects on health; for example, Blackburn's 1995 study demonstrated that a reduction in body weight by as little as 5% can substantially lower the risk of obesity-related disorders, thus illustrating the powerful impact of running on overall health.

However, the benefits of running extend well beyond physical health. While the health advantages represent the most visible effects of the activity, running also serves as a form of physical capital that can yield social gains. Many runners enter a community or network that fosters connection, support and shared experiences, further enriching their lives in ways that transcend physical fitness. This blend of individual health improvement and social interaction forms a holistic foundation for the pursuit of running as a lifelong activity. Malchrowicz, Malchrowicz-Mośko, & Fadigas (2018) conducted a comprehensive study highlighting the significance of maintaining physical condition and overall health among runners. Their research surveyed a wide range of age groups, specifically focusing on those aged 25 and under, 26 to 35, 36 to 50, and 51 to 70. Notably, the oldest age bracket (51-70) emphasized the importance of physical health and conditioning more than the younger participants, suggesting that the values associated with fitness may evolve with age.

Furthermore, the study uncovered a strong correlation between the experience of intense emotions and participation in marathons across all demographics surveyed. For younger runners, particularly those in the youth category, the joy derived from completing their runs was profound. They felt fulfilled during and after their running sessions, often sharing these emotions with peers, reinforcing their positive experiences. Additionally, younger runners were motivated by a desire to integrate socially with others and to seek recognition from their peers, demonstrating that social dynamics play a crucial role in their running experiences. Conversely, older participants also

underscored the importance of social interactions and community connections within their running routines, highlighting that running provides a platform for friendship and camaraderie.

Moreover, younger age groups expressed a keen interest in cultivating a passion for running, indicating that this activity promotes physical health and catalyzes personal development and social engagement. The findings suggest that running offers substantial social benefits and is a powerful motivator for individuals of all ages. Ultimately, running contributes positively to their self-esteem and emotional well-being.

A previous study indicates that the primary motivation behind recreational running is the desire for a challenge. This pursuit serves as a means of physical exercise and fosters a profound sense of achievement and personal growth within individuals (Clough, Shepherd, and Maughan, 1989). The research specifically targeted marathoners and half-marathoners, suggesting their motivations might differ significantly from those of casual runners due to their commitment to physical activity as a central lifestyle component.

Participating in marathons involves extensive preparation and training for these more competitive runners, distinguishing their experience from recreational runners who run more sporadically. The structured nature of marathon training emphasizes fitness, mental resilience, and goal setting. This preparation cultivates a sense of self-fulfillment, as each milestone in the training journey reinforces the runners' determination and commitment to personal improvement.

Thus, the underlying motivation for participating in these events is deeply rooted in an internal drive—the desire to challenge themselves and break through perceived limitations. This intrinsic motivation elevates running from a mere recreational activity to a vital aspect of their identity, contributing significantly to their overall well-being and self-perception.

De Castro Alcantara, Silva, De Barros Villas Boas, and Campos' study (2023) delves into the intricate relationship between consumption patterns and personal identity. It highlights how an individual's economic resources deeply influence consumption, leading to diverse consumption behaviors across different demographics.

The research focuses specifically on runners in Brazil and uncovers both immediate and extended consequences of their involvement in the activity. In the short term, runners benefit from enhanced connections with nature and opportunities for social interaction, which foster community ties and promote mental well-being. These immediate rewards create a fulfilling running experience that resonates with their lifestyle.

On a more profound level, the long-term implications of running significantly enhance the quality of life for these individuals. They report a boost in motivation and a more precise alignment with personal values, such as freedom, happiness, and pleasure. Through their commitment to running, participants construct their identities, seeing it as a transformative journey that embodies both short-term joys and long-term personal growth. Thus, the identities of these runners are intricately woven from the experiences

and values cultivated through their engagement with the sport, reflecting a holistic view of consumption that extends far beyond mere economic expenditure.

For some runners, a lack of interest and understanding of the sport can significantly shape their motivation through external regulations and the various factors that impact their participation in running activities (Koronios, Psiloutsikou, and Kriemadis, 2017). This suggests that external influences, such as the attitudes of others toward an individual, play a crucial role in inspiring a deeper awareness and appreciation for running.

The interview questions designed for this study emphasize this point, asking participants whether "*People I care about would be upset with me,*" "*I think others would disapprove of me if I did not,*" and "*People around me reward me.*" These questions illustrate that an individual's motivation to engage in running can be heavily swayed by social perceptions and the potential for critique or acknowledgment from their community.

This awareness underscores the notion that motivation is not solely rooted in biological or physiological factors but is intricately intertwined with societal values regarding personal characteristics and behaviors. For instance, Singh (1993) conducted research showing that the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) significantly influences perceptions of female attractiveness. In his study, college-aged men and men aged 25 to 85 preferred women with a lower WHR, associating it with healthiness and reproductive fitness. This societal preference has broader implications, particularly regarding how women perceive themselves and their bodies. The prevailing beauty standards often highlight a conventional ideal prioritizing fitness and attractiveness, which can drive women to engage in activities like running to conform to these societal expectations.

While these external factors undeniably impact participation, it is essential to note that the decision to partake in recreational running is not always made in pursuit of societal approval. Individuals may find motivation in the numerous benefits that running provides, such as improved physical health, mental well-being, and personal achievement. These intrinsic motivations can be equally powerful, driving individuals to embrace running for its rewards, independent of external validation.

Demographic characteristics play a significant role in shaping an individual's motivation to run. A study conducted in Poland revealed notable differences between male and female runners regarding their reasons for participation. For men, competitive factors were predominant; they were often motivated to compete, improve their performance, and achieve recognition within the running community. This competitive drive aligns well with traditional notions of masculinity and social engagement in sports. In contrast, women tended to approach running from a more personal and introspective perspective. Their motivations often revolved around building social connections, psychological coping mechanisms, finding a sense of purpose in life, and enhancing self-esteem. This suggests that for women, running serves as a means of self-exploration and emotional well-being rather than merely competition.

Age also emerged as an influential factor in shaping these motivations. The study found that as individuals got older, the emphasis on personal goal achievement,

competitive pursuits, and external recognition tended to decrease. Younger participants often displayed a stronger inclination toward competition, while older individuals were more likely to prioritize personal satisfaction and the intrinsic rewards of running.

This gender-based distinction highlights the broader implications of encouraging running across different demographics. While competitive elements and social recognition may draw men in, women often value the individual benefits and social connections that running provides. Thus, understanding these differences can help tailor running programs and initiatives to better meet the diverse needs of both male and female runners.

For many individuals who choose not to participate in marathons, the desire to achieve personal goals often serves as a key motivator for engaging in running. A study by Gerasimuk, Malchrowicz-Mosco, Stanula, Bezuglov, Achkasov, Swinarew and Waskieewicz, (2021) highlights that older individuals who refrain from marathon participation place significant importance on self-esteem as a crucial factor in their decision-making process.

Kazimierczak, Dabrowska, Adamczewska, and Malchrowicz-Mosko (2019) conducted an extensive investigation into the effects of modern ultramarathons on runners, revealing that for many participants, the choice to run in marathons stems from a profound need for social integration. Runners reported that participating in these events fulfills their aspirations and fosters a sense of community. The atmosphere during marathons allows contestants to share emotions and collective experiences, enriching their connections with one another. This communal aspect significantly enhances their identification with running, transforming a solitary activity into a shared journey where camaraderie and support flourish among participants. In a comprehensive meta-synthesis conducted by Hall, Rhodes, and Papathomas (2021), the experiences of ultra-runners. Those who faced running-related injuries were explored in depth. The discussion began by contrasting how traditional distance runners perceive their identities. According to Hockey (2005, as cited in Hall, Rhodes, and Papathomas 2021), these athletes often define themselves through "*physical endurance, stoicism, competitiveness, agility, and lean and strong bodies*." In marked contrast, ultra-marathoners exhibit a unique approach to self-identification that diverges from physical attributes and revolves around their responses to pain and discomfort.

For ultra-runners, pain becomes a performative element intertwined with their identities, a crucial aspect of their athletic experience. This perspective suggests that enduring pain is not merely a challenge to be overcome; instead, it is a reinforcing element of what it means to be an ultra-runner (Lev, 2019, as cited in Hall, Rhodes, and Papathomas 2021). Consequently, many ultra-runners express a solid aversion to withdrawing from running events, seeing such withdrawals as a significant departure from their identity.

This focus on pushing personal limits distinguishes ultramarathoners from other endurance athletes, who might have differing narratives of extreme perseverance. However, it raises an important point: a runner's self-conception is intrinsically linked to

their active participation in the sport. Therefore, any long-term cessation of running—whether due to injuries or other circumstances—can provoke a profound identity crisis for those who define themselves as runners.

Ultramarathon runners often seek meaning in their physical pain. In some cases, individuals continue to run despite injuries, motivated by a desire to understand the underlying causes of their discomfort or assess the potential consequences of pushing through the pain. This experimentation with pain management can manifest in creative coping strategies. For example, one participant indicated they would "drag themselves along" despite feeling significant pain or intermittently slow down or stop to gauge whether the discomfort would subside.

According to research by Philippe, Rochat, Vauthier, and Hauw (2016, as cited in Hall, Rhodes, and Papathomas 2021), the experience of pain can be a critical factor in the decision to withdraw from an ultramarathon. The withdrawal may stem not solely from the physical sensation of pain but also from the overwhelming feelings of loss of control and unfamiliarity with one's body. This sense of cumulative stress, heightened by exacerbating injuries, further complicates the participants' experiences and decisions regarding their participation in these grueling events.

Hockey (2005, as cited in Hall, Rhodes, and Papathomas, 2021) examines the concept of a runner's identity as a complex and evolving relationship between the individual and their social environment. This identity is not static; it emerges through interactions with others and is influenced by various social dynamics. Many runners, especially those in the ultrarunning community, have a sense of self intertwined with ideals often associated with middle-class values, such as mental toughness, perseverance, and the ability to endure physical challenges.

As a result, runners actively cultivate and strengthen their identities by sharing and crafting personal narratives. These narratives affirm their integration into the running community, reinforcing their belonging and shared values. Within this framework, runners may utilize multiple stories about their experiences—be it triumph over physical obstacles or camaraderie shared with fellow runners—to maintain their membership within these social groups.

Interestingly, many runners seek advice and support from their peers rather than professionals in the medical field. This preference stems from a belief that ultrarunning is a unique endeavor requiring a specific understanding that outsiders, including medical practitioners, may lack. In this context, their shared experiences and collective knowledge create a sense of trust and understanding among runners.

Through this community-based support, runners often demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of pain and injury. These shared experiences bolster their physical endurance and contribute to developing new narratives that reflect personal growth and collective identity within the ultrarunning sphere. In this way, the identities of runners are continually reconstructed through the interplay of their experiences, beliefs, and the stories they tell, solidifying their place within the running community.

Ronkainen and Ryba (2012) explored the intricate relationship between religion and the sport of running, focusing specifically on the spiritual dimensions that endurance running can embody. Their research aimed to unravel how distance runners articulate and integrate discourses surrounding sport and spirituality in a way that ascribes existential significance to their running experiences.

They meticulously analyzed content from the Finnish runner's magazine Juoksija from 2001 to 2010 to conduct their study. Using discourse analysis, four distinct themes emerged, each highlighting various aspects of the runners' experiences and perceptions. The first theme centered on running as an object of love. Within this theme, they found that the motivations driving individuals to take up running and the reasons for their continued participation after retiring from competitive sports varied significantly among athletes. For instance, one former athlete expressed a profound, existential longing for running, declaring they would continue as long as they lived, viewing the sport as a testament to their existence. In contrast, another retired athlete remained deeply engaged in related activities, such as strength training and speed work, paralleling the training regimens of active runners.

The second theme delved into the significance of the soul in human life, revealing that the pursuit of performance in competitions often came at a high personal cost for some athletes. Some runners reported sacrificing meaningful relationships—even their sense of self—on the altar of competitive achievement. This illustrates how the desire to attain peak performance can overshadow personal connections and inner well-being.

The third theme addressed the notion of the runner's invisible inner life. This theme emphasized that many aspects of a runner's journey—such as their rationale for starting to run in the first place—remain largely unknown to those outside the sport. Additionally, the nuanced experiences that shape a runner's mental resilience, including various challenges posed by environmental factors like weather and terrain, are often overlooked. The magazine featured insights from two writers who acknowledged the cultural expectation that active athletes should subject themselves to extraordinarily intense training regimens, leading to a disparity in understanding among non-runners. One author poignantly articulated the alienation felt when others failed to comprehend his dedication to running in the years following his competitive career.

The final theme explored how some contributors to the magazine viewed their engagement in the running as a means of acquiring essential life skills that remained elusive in other domains. Several authors articulated that running served to satisfy their competitive instincts, offering a duality of experiences where both positive and negative lessons were learned. Notably, some reflected that the tremendous sadness associated with running was not linked to defeat but rather to the experience of being unable to run. In their comprehensive analysis of the magazine content, Ronkainen and Ryba (2012) concluded that most runners did not categorize their experiences as inherently spiritual. This lack of spiritual connection might be rooted in the cultural context of Nordic societies, where such concepts may hold less significance. Only a handful of respondents framed their experiences within a Christian context. In contrast, others approached them

through an existential lens—this latter perspective often emerged more prominently among seasoned runners and former athletes.

Ultimately, this research illuminated the positive transitions following a distance runner's competitive career, suggesting that the sport continues to play a central role in their lives. The study demonstrated that a runner's identity transcends physical abilities, revealing itself on a deeper, existential level that resonates profoundly with the individual's running experience.

3.2 Social Dynamics of Running

Many individuals embark on the journey of running, influenced by various societal factors and a desire for social integration. This unique blend makes running a personal endeavor and a communal activity. For many, the urge to lace up their running shoes stems from external motivations, such as societal pressures or the desire to connect with others.

Moreover, organized sports events allow runners to engage in friendly rivalries, fostering a sense of competition and camaraderie. These events enable participants to interact with like-minded individuals who share similar goals and passions, enriching their running experience. Such interactions can lead to lasting friendships and a supportive community, further enhancing the appeal of running as a social activity (Kazimierczak, Dąbrowska, A., Adamczewska, K., & Malchrowicz-Mośko, 2019).

Hitchings and Latham (2017) conducted an in-depth exploration of the social dimensions surrounding running activity. They identified a key factor contributing to the social nature of running: its perception as a practical and effective form of exercise. Unlike many organized sports with stringent rules and guidelines, running is characterized by its inherent flexibility. This lack of rigid structures creates an inclusive environment where individuals feel free to participate in a manner that suits them best, whether through varied pacing, techniques, or even routes.

This openness encourages a diverse demographic to engage in running, from seasoned athletes to casual joggers. The broad appeal of running fosters a sense of community as individuals from different backgrounds and skill levels come together, fueling a rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives. This diversity not only enhances the social fabric of running but also impacts individual choices—participants often adapt their running styles based on the tolerances and preferences of fellow runners.

Furthermore, the authors highlighted that running typically occurs in social settings, where individuals may encounter fellow runners and those engaged in disparate activities nearby. This situational context provides a perfect backdrop for interaction, as runners have various opportunities to connect, share experiences, and establish camaraderie. Whether through friendly competition or mutual encouragement, these interactions enhance the overall running experience, reinforcing its status as a compelling social activity. In essence, running is a dynamic platform for building social networks, illustrating the intricate ways physical activity can intertwine with community and interaction.

A comprehensive study focused on Black Girls Run!, a prominent national running group dedicated to Black women, reveals significant insights into how such groups influence their members' psychological and behavioral dimensions. Over 14 months, participants reported a notable enhancement in their sense of connection to the group. This finding aligns with previous literature, which argues that membership in organized groups significantly bolsters one's identity related to that group, enhancing both psychological and behavioral engagement (Lock, Taylor, Funk and Darcy, 2012, as cited in Wegner, Jordan, Funk, and Clark, 2016).

Further analysis within the study indicated that members experienced a yearly increase in their psychological involvement during running events. This trend suggests that the organization's impact extends beyond fostering camaraderie; it encourages members to engage in physical activity more frequently. Particularly compelling is the observation that these positive shifts were especially pronounced among individuals who had not identified as runners before joining Black Girls Run! In contrast, those already experienced runners displayed a degree of independence and may have had less need for a support network to reinforce their running identity.

This observation is consistent with existing literature (Jun, Song, Yang, and Youn, 2012, as cited in Wegner, Jordan, Funk, and Clark, 2016), which posits that heightened organizational involvement often leads to more robust identity affirmation. Individuals report feelings of self-verification and a profound psychological connection to their peers, which correlate with increased physical activity levels.

Moreover, the findings suggest a direct relationship between psychological involvement in the group and a positive shift in participants' running behaviors. Specifically, the more significant the emotional and social connection members felt toward Black Girls Run!, the more critical their increased running-related activities. This underscores the vital role that such organizations play in motivating Black women to pursue physical fitness, mainly through running.

Wegner, Jordan, Funk, and Clark (2016) highlight the intricate dynamics of group membership and its beneficial effects on new and seasoned runners after joining the organization. Overall, the analysis underscores the positive implications of belonging to a supportive community like Black Girls Run!, which enhances social bonds and champions significant increases in physical activity among its members.

One significant effect of socialization on runners is how they learn from one another, particularly in navigating the challenges inherent in their running experiences. A study by Lev (2019) delves deeply into the relationship between runners' experiences of pain and the euphoric state known as "runners' high." This phenomenon is connected to the theoretical framework in Becker's seminal work, "Becoming A Marihuana User" (1953, cited in Lev, 2019). According to this framework, runners learn to identify and master specific techniques that enable them to fully experience the positive effects of running, including transforming pain into a form of pleasurable sensation.

Lev's ethnographic research spanned three years and involved observing two distinct running teams. Through this immersive approach, key conclusions emerged

about how runners experience the "runner's high"—a euphoria often achieved only through socialization and support within a running peer group. Participants conveyed that for novice runners, successfully converting the sensation of pain into pleasure plays a crucial role in their ability to endure longer distances. This transformation allows them to overcome the mental and physical barriers that hinder their performance.

Moreover, the study highlights that beyond simply familiarizing themselves with the fundamental dos and don'ts of running, one of the most beneficial aspects of social dynamics in running is the cultivation of a comprehensive appreciation for all dimensions of the activity—pain included. This deeper understanding is often gleaned from the insights and experiences of more seasoned runners, who impart valuable knowledge about embracing the struggles and joys that accompany distance running. In this way, the socialization process not only enriches the runners' experience but also fosters resilience, enabling them to tackle the intimate challenges of their sport with newfound motivation and enthusiasm.

Yang, Ju, and Tian (2022) conducted a comprehensive study exploring the dynamics of urban running groups and uncovered several vital benefits these communities offer their members. Participants reported experiencing a profound sense of pleasantness and relaxation during their runs, which serve as a refreshing escape from the pressures and responsibilities of daily life. Beyond physical activity, these groups foster opportunities for social connection, enabling individuals to expand their networks and meet new people with similar running interests.

Furthermore, members of these running communities often exchange valuable information regarding running techniques, optimal routes, and local events. This collective knowledge enhances their running experience and contributes to personal growth as they learn from one another's insights and experiences. The interactions within these groups facilitate the organization of running events and the sharing of competition information, thereby strengthening community ties.

As digital technologies have evolved, the socialization of running has also transformed. Now more than ever, runners can leverage platforms specifically designed for their activities, such as Strava, to connect with fellow enthusiasts. In a related study by Franken, Bekhuis, and Tolsma (2023), it was found that one of the app's features—offering "kudos" or virtual applause for a runner's achievements—significantly boosts motivation. This concept parallels the familiar reactions on social media platforms like Facebook, where peer validation can foster a sense of accomplishment (What Is Kudos? 2023).

In practical terms, this phenomenon translates into the real-world practice of validating individuals and acknowledging their positive actions through genuine compliments. When runners receive kudos for their activities through the app, it encourages them to run more frequently as they seek further affirmation and appreciation. This dynamic demonstrates that the kudos function within the app acts as a form of social support, validating their efforts and affirming that they are on the right

track. Consequently, this encourages individuals to persist in their running endeavors, reinforcing the interconnectedness between social validation and motivation in fitness. Strava, primarily known for fostering connections among its users, has also emerged as a powerful tool for motivating individuals to increase their running activity. This motivation stems mainly from the app's self-tracking features and its integration of game-like elements that enhance user engagement. As a result, Strava has developed into a vibrant arena where various social dynamics surrounding the sport of running can flourish.

However, user experiences with the app differ widely. A study conducted by Littlejohns, Gouthro, and Dickinson (2019) interviewed nine long-distance runners based in the UK who utilized tracking technologies and participated in online communities. The findings revealed that while some individuals prefer to observe and gather information without actively engaging—essentially "lurking," others are more participatory. This tendency to engage or abstain from interaction often hinges on the runners' geographical locations and relationships with fellow runners.

Interestingly, although a segment of users turn to the application for social interaction, the research underscored that the primary motivation for using Strava lies in information acquisition. For many, the app is a valuable resource for tracking performance and gathering insights rather than just a platform for social engagement.

Pedersen, H., Pedersen, L., and Thing (2018) conducted an insightful study on a subset of runners called "Serious Runners." This group comprises individuals who commit to running at least 40 kilometers per week, demonstrating a strong dedication to improving their performance. The researchers noted that these runners often participate in group activities, revealing a complex interplay between the desire for personal freedom and individuality in their athletic pursuits and the security, shared identity, and sense of belonging that group running provides.

This duality highlights how the nature of running evolves into a socially dynamic activity, transforming the runners' experience and their interactions with one another. Pedersen, H. Pedersen, L., and Thing (2018) build on the earlier work of Hitchings and Latham (2017), offering an updated perspective that underscores the communal aspects of running. Within these running communities, such as those formed by Serious Runners, the experience of running as a group can introduce certain expectations or regulations, which the runners navigate to maintain their sense of individuality.

Furthermore, a related study by Evans, McLaren, C., Budziszewski, and Gilchrist (2018) emphasized the positive effects of group participation on participants' sense of group membership. Their findings indicated that individuals who engage in both formal and informal running groups consistently report a stronger sense of running identity and enhanced running behavior. This suggests that the experience of being a runner is significantly reinforced when individuals are part of a communal environment where fellow runners actively support and affirm their identities. Thus, the research illustrates a notable relationship between group membership and personal identity, demonstrating how communal ties can enhance the experience and self-perception of runners.

A recent study by Ohlendorf and Anders (2022) delved into the experiences of women who identify as fat or do not conform to conventional ideals of an athletic physique. The research focused on how these women construct their identities as athletes while participating in running and other athletic activities, often in the face of body-related barriers.

Employing narrative analysis, the study examined the stories of 19 women runners from North America. It revealed four prominent themes: reclaiming the body, reclaiming health, creating a safe space, and envisioning a future. Each narrative highlighted how these women sought to redefine their relationship with their bodies and roles as athletes.

A crucial aspect of their journeys was the presence of an inclusive running community that recognized and valued diverse body sizes and paces. This supportive environment was instrumental in fostering their persistence in running, ultimately enabling them to complete races. For these women, running served not only as a physical activity but also as an act of resistance against societal definitions that equate athleticism with being thin or fit, thereby excluding a range of body types from the narrative of what it means to be an athlete.

The findings highlighted the importance of community and belonging, illustrating how an individual's sense of group identity—distinguishing between in-groups and out-groups—can significantly influence their motivation to participate in running. By embracing diversity and celebrating various body shapes and abilities within the running community, these women found the encouragement and acceptance necessary to pursue their athletic goals. This study emphasizes the transformative power of solidarity and support in helping individuals overcome societal challenges and embrace their identities as athletes. While group membership typically offers numerous advantages, the positive experiences associated with being part of a group can be significantly affected when that group undergoes changes or ultimately disbands. In running groups, membership fosters a sense of belonging that is intertwined with developing a collective exercise identity. This phenomenon allows runners to feel a strong connection not only to the group itself but also to their identities as exercisers. Research by Kullman, Semenchuk, and Strachan (2023) underscores how this sense of inclusion can enhance motivation and enjoyment in physical activities as members share goals, challenges, and achievements.

However, the disbandment of such groups can create profound challenges for individual members. In a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with running group participants in Canada, respondents expressed feelings of loss and disorientation when their groups dissolved. Many runners reported difficulty adjusting to training in isolation, having previously relied on their groups' communal support and accountability. The need to thrive independently can feel overwhelming, leading to a struggle to maintain motivation and engagement in their running practices.

Despite these challenges, many of the interviewees exhibited remarkable resilience. Their prior experience of camaraderie and support within the group positioned them as "optimally situated" to adapt and continue their running journeys.

Even in the face of the group's disbandment, these runners demonstrated a determination to keep the group's spirit alive, often by seeking new social connections or finding creative ways to integrate their running practice into their lives. This resilience underscores the complex interplay between group membership and individual identity in exercise, revealing how past positive experiences can empower individuals to navigate the transition and continue pursuing their passion for running.

3.3 Social Stratification on Running

Engaging in running as an activity involves a conscious decision on the part of the individual, alongside the necessity to access a suitable spatial environment where this activity can take place. A comprehensive study by Deelen, Janssen, Vos, Kamphuis, and Ettema (2019) delved into runners' preferences concerning various environmental characteristics they seek in a running venue. Key findings reveal that vibrant, green running routes and well-maintained, comfortable running surfaces are paramount to the intrinsic experiences of all runners. Additionally, less experienced runners identified the presence of vehicular traffic as a significant barrier that adversely affects their running performance and overall enjoyment.

The study by Hinch and Kono (2020) further examines the influence of location on runners. For sports tourists, particularly those participating in ultramarathons, the appeal of running events is closely tied to the natural landscapes surrounding these venues. Such an environment is compelling, luring runners away from urban centers and into more remote, picturesque areas. During the events, these locations transform into popular tourist attractions.

One notable theme from Hinch and Kono's research is runners' deep appreciation for the sublime beauty of their surroundings, particularly during training camps. This admiration not only enhances their training experience but also reinforces the positive connotations associated with the landscape. Moreover, the dynamics of sports competition are intertwined with the location itself, shaping how various aspects of the event are perceived and interpreted.

The setting also plays a crucial role in fostering social connections, providing opportunities for celebration and camaraderie among participants. In addition, the location becomes a vital aspect of runners' identities, often prompting introspection about one's sense of self and the environment.

These findings highlight the strong correlation between runners and their environments, encapsulated in place identity. However, it is important to note that the economic capital associated with sports tourism may create disparities among runners. While some individuals may reap the benefits of these enriched experiences, others may need help to engage fully or appreciate the advantages such events and locations offer, leading to varied personal experiences within the running community. Running is not merely a physical activity; it encompasses a nuanced understanding of engaging in the act effectively. This understanding represents a specific kind of cultural capital, which pertains to the knowledge and social skills necessary to navigate the world of running.

Consequently, acquiring this cultural capital often requires a foundation of economic capital, as only some have equal access to the resources needed for safe and effective running.

This disparity creates a hierarchy among runners. For instance, ultramarathoners inhabit a unique realm within the sport that demands physical endurance and immense mental resilience—qualities that can be described as bodily capital. The rigorous demands of ultramarathon running mean that it is not an activity everyone can partake in, regardless of motivation or interest. As explored by Kazimierczak, Dąbrowska, Adamczewska, and Malchrowicz (2019), the elite nature of this sport underscores the distinct differences in capacities among individuals.

Research conducted by Mutz and Müller (2021) further emphasizes that sports attract individuals with above-average cultural capital levels. While running might initially seem straightforward, it involves specific requirements to ensure safety and enhance performance. For instance, specialized running shoes, appropriate athletic clothing, and essential accessories significantly optimize one's running experience and minimize the risk of injury.

Moreover, the advent of technology has introduced various applications designed to complement the running experience. These applications, accessible through smartphones and other devices, offer features that enhance performance tracking, provide coaching tips, and foster a sense of community among runners. While some individuals may view these technological enhancements as non-essential, they create varying levels of advantage and opportunity within the running community. Ultimately, access to these tools can influence a runner's experience, connecting them to a broader network and offering insights that might improve their overall performance and enjoyment of the sport.

The stratification of runners extends beyond mere material attributes to encompass the complex intersectional roles they occupy, particularly highlighting the multifaceted demands of running as an activity. It requires substantial time, resources, and a deep commitment. For many women, gender roles often create significant pressures, compelling them to balance domestic responsibilities with their passion for running.

In a comprehensive study conducted by Darroch and Hillsburg (2017), which focused on mothers returning to running post-childbirth, it became evident that the identities of these women were often in conflict. They experienced a competing desire between their roles as mothers and as athletes. The study showcased the critical influence of external support systems, including spouses, families, and sponsors, in shaping their decision-making regarding whether to prioritize running or motherhood.

A profound sense of guilt also marked the emotional landscape of these women. This "mother guilt" arose from their perception that engaging in competitive running demanded a degree of selfishness—a commitment of time that conflicted with their identity as selfless caregivers prioritizing their children. Despite this inner turmoil, many mothers recognized that their involvement in running and competition could be a

powerful form of empowerment. Their return to the sport became a personal endeavor and a means to enhance their identity as mothers, allowing them to reclaim a sense of agency.

In his study of women runners, Skinner (2015) further explored this dynamic, uncovering parallel insights. Much like the findings of Darroch and Hillsburg, participants reported feeling the pressure of "mother guilt," which significantly impacted their development as runners. The time constraints imposed by domestic responsibilities often limited their ability to engage in extensive training, pushing many to focus on shorter distances rather than ambitious marathon events.

An intriguing theme from Skinner's research highlighted how these women's deviation from conventional running identities fostered more positive experiences. By rejecting the pressure to conform to established norms within the running community, they found a sense of liberation that enhanced their overall experience and solidified their connection to the sport. This exploration underscores the intricate interplay of identity, societal expectations, and personal fulfillment within the realm of female runners.

In a comprehensive study conducted by Appleby and Fisher (2009), a unique exploration into the lives of elite female runners who re-entered high-level competitions after pregnancy was undertaken. This study revealed a profound transformative journey as these athletes navigated the intricate balance between their identities as mothers and their dedication to athleticism. Through in-depth interviews with the participants, three major themes emerged that encapsulated their experiences: the acceptance of social stereotypes surrounding motherhood, the active resistance against these stereotypes, and the negotiation of a new athletic identity.

The first theme centered on "being present" and the personal sacrifices that come with it. The prevailing social stereotypes regarding what constitutes a "good mother" create unrealistic expectations for women post-pregnancy, which significantly influences how the athletes perceive their responsibilities both during and after childbirth. Within this theme, the subtheme of "being present" highlighted mothers' pervasive guilt when they could not fulfill all their responsibilities due to their rigorous training schedules. Many expressed their concerns about being physically absent during critical moments in their child's life, leading them to shorten training sessions or set aside ambitious goals in favor of spending more time with their families.

Another critical subtheme that arose was the necessity of making sacrifices, such as altering training regimens to accommodate their new responsibilities. Participants noted that they often omitted some aspects from their training, like weightlifting or flexibility exercises, to prioritize their roles as mothers over their athletic aspirations. This juggling act inevitably weighed heavily on their mental and emotional well-being.

The second central theme was the athletes' resistance to societal stereotypes of motherhood. This resistance manifested through their passion for running, which they emphasized as an essential source of personal pleasure and pride.

Despite the challenges posed by the demanding responsibilities of motherhood, these women disclosed that the joy of running was integral to both their happiness and

that of their families. They recognized that their engagement in the sport provided personal fulfillment and a beneficial outlet for stress relief.

Interestingly, the nature of how they approached running transformed significantly after pregnancy. Initially, they may have viewed running mainly as a means of conditioning and competition, but many expressed that their motivations shifted after childbirth. They began to see running as an enjoyable, almost therapeutic activity, marking a significant evolution in their relationship with the sport. This dual identity as both mothers and athletes became a complex yet rewarding part of their lives, highlighting the intricacies and challenges of balancing these roles while reaffirming their commitment to motherhood and athleticism.

Running has become a source of self-pride for many women, even as pregnancy is often viewed as contrary to the ethos of the running community. This perception stems from a belief that motherhood and athletic success rarely intersect. However, those who continue to run after giving birth often describe their experiences as personally fulfilling and richly rewarding.

A significant theme that emerges from their experiences is the evolution of their identities as both mothers and runners. Initially, these women understood their identities as runners independent of their roles as mothers. However, upon entering motherhood, they found that this new aspect of their lives distinguished them within running and non-running circles, garnering respect and admiration for their athletic achievements.

Interestingly, some participants noted that their identities as runners became less central to their self-perception. Motherhood granted them a broader, multidimensional view of themselves, enhancing their overall quality of life and, in some cases, even their performance as athletes. They reported feeling less pressure to meet performance benchmarks, which may be linked to a shift in how they viewed their runner identities.

Moreover, many women desired to serve as role models for their children, underscoring the importance of physical activity. They recognized that their experiences as runners could inspire their children to appreciate an active lifestyle. This melding of motherhood and running transformed their perceptions of themselves, leading them to a deeper appreciation for various aspects of life outside athletics.

Previously, many of them had identified solely as runners, often allowing their athletic achievements to define their self-worth. However, the demands of motherhood revealed the complexities of their identities and shifted their perspectives. Additionally, societal expectations regarding women's domestic roles can place additional burdens on female athletes, who already face significant time commitments in training. This juxtaposition further complicates their experiences as both mothers and athletes as they navigate the expectations placed upon them in each realm.

Businesses significantly influence individuals' motivations for running and other fitness activities. Research conducted by Cunningham and Woods (2011) highlights a compelling link between consumer beliefs and the core values promoted by fitness clubs. Their study revealed that fitness clubs emphasizing the health-related benefits of regular

exercise tend to foster a more positive attitude among individuals than those focusing primarily on aesthetics, such as enhancing physical appearance.

This finding suggests that for many individuals, the desire to improve overall health and well-being may outweigh concerns about physical attractiveness when participating in fitness activities, including joining a gym or running club. This underscores the idea that business institutions provide services and shape perceptions and attitudes toward fitness and health.

Moreover, the commodification of health—where health improvements are marketed as products or services—further encourages people to engage in fitness activities. This approach can vary widely among individuals, as personal motivations and definitions of health may differ. Ultimately, the influence of businesses extends beyond mere fitness solutions; it plays a pivotal role in how people initiate and sustain their running practices, highlighting the complex interplay between commerce and personal well-being.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex sociological dimensions of running, illustrating that it extends beyond a mere physical activity to become a significant component of personal development and social interaction. Participants often indicated that their motivations for running were deeply entwined with shared experiences within running communities. Research shows that social factors can significantly influence individual behaviors and motivations in sports (Gherardi & Perrotta, 2020). This aspect underscores the importance of community in shaping self-identity; while personal motivation is essential, the social context plays a crucial role in driving individuals to engage in running.

The study also found that societal norms are pivotal in shaping running behaviors. Many participants reported that the informal guidelines established by running groups could have both beneficial and detrimental effects. Belonging to a running group fosters a sense of security and belonging, as discussed by Hurd, McCarthy, and Koneche (2013), who noted that social support within sports communities enhances participants' experiences. Conversely, the pressure to conform to group norms can stifle individuality, aligning with social identity theory that suggests group dynamics can create situational pressures (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Furthermore, solitary running was recognized not as a negative experience but as an avenue for fostering independence and personal freedom. This notion aligns with the views of Foster, Barnett, and Hargreaves (2013), who argue that individual activities can enable self-exploration and motivate individuals by providing a space free from external expectations.

Additionally, the influence of local authorities in creating conducive running environments was significant. Participants noted that access to safe spaces for exercise and organized community events enhanced their engagement in running, which is

consonant with findings by Raco (2013) on the importance of urban planning in promoting physical activity.

The discussions also highlighted the impact of societal expectations, particularly regarding gender roles. Many female participants highlighted how traditional norms could create barriers while simultaneously unveiling new motivations to engage in physical activity post-pregnancy. This phenomenon aligns with the insights from Dyer and Smith (2014), indicating that societal pressures can shape participation patterns in sports.

Lastly, private businesses were acknowledged as influencers of runners' motivations through sponsorships and specialized gear. Research by Gibbons (2015) illustrates that commercial factors can significantly inspire engagement in physical activities. These findings underscore the intricate interplay between individual agency and societal influences in running, indicating a rich area for further exploration of how these social factors actively shape personal health and fitness journeys.

5. Conclusion

People participate in running for a myriad of reasons, which can typically be categorized into internal and external motivations. For many individuals, internal motivations stem from a desire for personal growth and fulfillment. This often translates to a quest for self-improvement, where running becomes a meaningful challenge, allowing them to push their limits. These runners find joy in setting personal goals, tracking their progress, and enjoying the accomplishment of overcoming obstacles.

On the other hand, some individuals may feel compelled to run due to external pressures, such as societal expectations or the influence of their social circles. For these runners, the motivations can be less about personal satisfaction and more about fitting in or seeking approval from others. This external validation can diminish the intrinsic joy of running, leading to a more negative experience. Consequently, this highlights the importance of placing the self at the center of one's identity as a runner. Focusing on personal motivations rather than external validation is crucial for a fulfilling running experience.

Furthermore, research has indicated the positive benefits of participating in running groups. These groups create a community where members can share their experiences, resources, and knowledge, enhancing their running journey. However, joining a group also comes with trade-offs; the personal freedom initially drew individuals to running may need to be adjusted as they learn to navigate the diversity of skills, preferences, and goals among fellow runners.

Despite these challenges, group running has significant advantages. Group dynamics can provide motivation, accountability, and social support, ultimately promoting the maintenance of running as a regular activity. Within these groups, members often have different levels of experience and ability, leading to varied running experiences. This diversity makes it essential for runners to share information, tips, and

resources, thereby maximizing both personal growth and the collective benefits of the activity.

In summary, understanding the underlying motivations for running can enhance one's experience, whether driven by personal aspirations or external pressures. Acknowledging the balance between individuality and community support can enrich running and its social and individual benefits.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author unequivocally asserts that no conflicts of interest are associated with this research or manuscript. There are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be perceived as compromising the integrity or objectivity of this work. This unwavering commitment to transparency guarantees that the findings and conclusions are grounded solely in the data and rigorous scientific principles, ensuring they remain free from external biases.

About the Author(s)

Rowena Nery Monte is an Associate Professor at the University of the Philippines Los Baños, where she immerses herself in the multifaceted realms of Recreation and Leisure, Wellness, Cultural Heritage, and the Performing Arts. With an impressive academic background that includes advanced degrees from the prestigious University of the Philippines Diliman, her research delves deeply into the intricate relationship between leisure activities and overall well-being. Monte's work illuminates the psychological and sociological dimensions of recreation, illuminating how individual desires and societal influences shape leisure experiences. She meticulously explores critical themes such as motivation, satisfaction, and the dynamics of social interactions, providing a comprehensive understanding of how leisure impacts our lives. Beyond her role as an educator, Monte is actively engaged in vibrant academic collaborations that enrich her research endeavors and foster meaningful discussions surrounding the significance of leisure and wellness in contemporary society. Her dedication to these fields reflects her commitment to enhancing the quality of life through a deeper appreciation of leisure's vital role in personal and communal well-being.

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