Factors Leading to Increased Marathon Participation & Use of Social Media

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Introduction

Over a hundred thousand people participate in marathons every year all across the world. The number of marathon and half-marathon finishers has dramatically increased (9%) in 2010 from the previous year (RunningUSA, 2011). Since 1980, there has been a 255% increase in the number of United States marathon finishers and 32% increase in the number of marathon events since 1985. Much of the literature related to marathon events use quantitative methods to examine motivation and satisfaction gained from running. However, little research has been conducted regarding marathon participation. Therefore, there is a need to better understand how runners first find out about races and the sources used to gain information about an upcoming race. Furthermore, the impact of social media outlets on race participation also needs to be investigated. Marathoners use Facebook to communicate with friends and receive inspiration to finish a race (Webley, 2010). Typically, Facebook has been shown to enhance relationships that were formed offline (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007), but it has also been shown that event organizers use the social network sites (SNS) to communicate with past and current participants while marketing and promoting the event to new racers (Webley, 2010)

Previous research has found personal accomplishment, competition, health and fitness, social influence, stress relief, and personal growth to be primary motivations for participation in marathon, half-marathon and long distance running (Filo, Funk & O'Brein, 2011; Scott & Solomon, 2003; Ogles & Masters, 2003; Ogles & Masters, 2000; Clough, Sheperd & Maughan, 1989; Carmack & Martens, 1979). Even though the internal motivators for marathon running have been explored, there is limited research that identifies the specific attributes of a race that make it appealing to runners. The present study has two purposes. First, to determine which media outlets are most utilized to find out about the specific attributes of a race such as new races and/or race details. The second is to explore factors that effectively lead to participation in

a specific event. Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G) was used to understand where runners first found out about a race and the preferred outlets for gathering information about a race. Push Pull Theory (PPT) was used to understand the potential marathoners' factors that result in race participation. U&G assumes that people are active in the surveillance process of gathering information (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). People are aware of their needs and are capable of deciding what media outlets will best fill them. Additionally, the theory states that people can provide adequate recall about their previous behaviors. Thus, runners will be able to reveal where they first heard about an event or be able to affirm why they participated in a specific event. Using this theory, participants were asked to identify where they first found out about races and what mediums were preferred to gather race details. PPT was also utilized to understand the internal (push factors) and external (pull factors) that play a role in the decision to participate in a race (Uysal & Jurowski, 1994). While push factors for marathon racing have been explored, and mentioned previously, pull factors (escape, rest, prestige, relaxation) have only been researched in respect to travel behavior. The present study seeks to understand the external factors that also lead to race participation.

Method

Due to the lack of information in the literature on this topic, qualitative research was used in this study since it allowed the researcher to understand what factors make an experience significant (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Thirteen individuals in the running community were recruited from the researcher's personal Facebook page for the present study. Accordingly, a total of thirteen semi-structured interviews were completed with eight female and five male runners living in a southwest city of the United States.

Results

The analysis of the interview responses identified six information resources where the participants first heard about a new race. The first and most common resource was word of mouth. All thirteen participants indicated that they usually first heard about a new race from other runners. Typically, they heard about new races when they were participating in group runs or running with a friend. Some runners might post a comment or a status update on Facebook to share about the specific race which they have participated in or right after they just finished. When the participants referenced Facebook in this manner, they referred to hearing about the race first from another person, thus in this case, Facebook was more likely to be used as the medium in which the information was communicated. The internet was the second most common place to find out about a new race. Search engines such as www.runnersworld.com or www.marathonguide.com were preferred since these sites enabled the runner to search by event location and time of the year. Other search engines such as www.getsetaz.com, www.imathlete.com, www.mapmyrun.com and www.active.com (Active) were also chosen as good resources for finding out about upcoming events. Interestingly, once the search engine was used to find out about the new race, participants typically went directly to the event's website for more information about the event. In other words, once they happened to see something about an event online from Facebook or another source, they were more likely go directly to the race website for further information. Participants concurred that the race website was also the preferred medium for finding out about the race course, elevation levels, pictures from past races and other event details. The participants mentioned that they would not go on Facebook intentionally to look for new races, but if they found that a friend has posted something about a

race they completed or were training for, they would leave a comment or "like" the post. Facebook would be looked at, only if the event did not have a web page or it could not be found through the search engine. The present study discovered that Facebook could play an intermediary role between the runner and the race website and that it may be a good avenue for runners to understand what others have experienced at a race.

Consistent with the past research, three primary push factors emerged from the interviews. Accomplishment was the primary factor identified in all thirteen interviews. Under this motive, subjects used "pain", "punishment", "sweaty", "smelly", and reaching a certain number of races to describe their accomplishment. Usually, these words are perceived negatively and not used to describe accomplishment. However, these participants felt accomplished when they pushed their mind and body past a point of comfort. Second, the interviewees enjoyed the sense of community that running provided. When participants got together with their running companions on the weekend for long runs, this was their opportunity to spend time with friends. Physical benefits were the third most prominent reason to continue running for five of the interviewees. Weight loss and "staying in shape" were mentioned as key benefits to running. Many of them had either lost weight or had a family member that lost weight through running.

Location was selected as the crucial pull factor for these participants when deciding whether or not to participate. Location was referred to in two ways. First, if the race was close to home and convenient, they were more likely to participate because they were already in the area. Local races such as the Thanksgiving Day 10K's were preferred since they were convenient for the holiday. Second, location was referenced in terms of a vacation option based on the destination. The race became an excuse for the runner to take a trip with their family when the event is out of state or not easily accessible from home. If the runner were to travel outside of their local area, the race would need to be in an attractive location and/or somewhere they had always wanted to go. The prestige and the costs of attending the race were also identified as a key pull factors. The New York Marathon, Chicago Marathon, and the Boston Marathon have been the three most prestigious races in the US (RunningUSA, 2011) and also mentioned by all interview participants. Because entry is only possible through a race lottery or qualifying, the interviewees felt they must participate in these events if they got in. These races were also preferred to others because runners would not normally ever be able to run through those streets had they not participated in the event. The cost of the event was chosen as another factor that encouraged race participation. All of the participants preferred to take part in races that were scenic and well known, but due to the high costs of travel and race entries, they would participate in events close to home. Even though the participants felt that local races were not nearly as exciting as destination events, these races were cheaper than traveling all over the country. Interestingly, the medal and t-shirt earned at most races, were not driving factors for participation. The participants collected them to remember what they accomplished, but they were not driving factors to register. The Disneyland Marathon and the Nike Women's Marathon offered unique finisher medals and were mentioned as an "exception to the rule" for normal race participation. Specifically with the Disneyland race, the location and the unique Mickey Mouse medal were driving factors for two runners because the course allowed participants to run through the "happiest place on earth." The Nike Women's Marathon awarded a race specific Tiffany necklace to all finishers. In this instance, runners must earn their Tiffany necklace rather than going to the store and purchasing one.

In conclusion, despite the advances in technology and the push to use the Internet to promote and attract new participants, runners still preferred the standard word of mouth referrals

to media sources when finding out about new races. Once the runner was aware of the race they were more likely to go to the event's website to fulfill their need for the information about the event. If the event seemed to meet a psychological or physical need for the participant, they were more likely to participate. As the results of the study indicate, location was the primary pulling factor that influenced race participation. More specifically, if the event is held in a desirable or convenient location, more runners are more likely to participate. Event managers should focus on creating an enjoyable experience for current runners because word of mouth is such an important factor in race participation. Facebook and other forms of social media are inexpensive ways to promote an event however it is best used when the participants are talking positively about the race.

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