Research Article

'Why Do People Participate in Long-Distance Running': Serious Leisure Experiences of Long-Distance Runners in Terms of Self-Determination Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the experiences of individuals who perform long-distance running as a serious leisure activity within the framework of the Self-Determination Theory. According to the theoretical framework, the aim was to understand how participation in a serious leisure activity affects the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In this phenomenological study, runners were observed in their own serious leisure area. The semi-structured interview technique was used in the study. Interviews were conducted with 15 women and 21 men, a total of 36 recreational long-distance runners, who participated in running groups in Ankara, Turkey. As a result of the participants' opinions and observations, themes were formed according to the basic concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the framework of the Self-Determination Theory. According to the opinions of participants, the effects of participation in long-distance running on the relatedness need were more prominent than other psychological needs. This study reveals that as a serious leisure activity, long-distance running provides participants with a sense of success, psychological relief, and happiness by satisfying different levels of the basic psychological needs of the participants.

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INTRODUCTION

Today, the need for leisure activities among individuals is increasing. The reason for this need is the desire to spend time in an area that is stripped of business and daily problems. Some leisure activities contribute to social life by developing interpersonal relationships. Given the personal and social benefits to individuals, leisure has profound meanings (Iwasaki, 2017).

The existence of physical, psychological, and social benefits of physical activity, such as leisure activities, was proven in many studies (Fox, 1999; Hayosh, 2017; Joseph & Southcott, 2018; Legg et al., 2017; Patterson & Pegg, 2009; Penedo & Dahn, 2005). Running as a leisure activity appears to create intense pleasure and embodied empowerment (Allen-Collinson, 2023). It has also been observed that affective interactions and performance measures can produce quite pleasurable emotions during the running experience (Jackman et al., 2023).

Nowadays, attracting attention to physical activity on social media is very easy (Cavallo et al., 2012). The number of people interested in physical activity for leisure is increasing day by day. Social media effectively directs the public and has highlighted long-distance running as an increasing trend in recent years (Norman & Pickering, 2019).

Long-distance running is very popular in Turkey in recent years through running groups. Due to this popularity, research is increasing (Çalışkan & Ardahan, 2022; Çetin & Özman, 2019; Pekel et al., 2022; Şallı, 2020; Yıldız, 2023). The high rate of access to social media helps to bring recreational long-distance runners together. These groups are attractive because of some factors, such as being organized weekly, open to everyone, and offering a social environment to make new friends.

Long-distance running events are organized on certain dates every year and are open to everyone (Runzy, n.d.). Participation conditions may vary depending on the distance, and there is also a participation fee. Marathons are held in many cities in the country and many places worldwide (UTMB, n.d.). The Istanbul Marathon had around 45,000 participants in the 42K and 15K categories in 2023 (GSM IBB, n.d.). Tokyo, Boston, London, Berlin, Chicago, and New York are the largest and most renowned marathons in the world (World Marathon Majors, n.d.). Many international racing events are held with tens of thousands of people. Regular participation in these events without any financial reward is interesting to leisure researchers (Fairer-Wessels, 2013; Hallmann & Wicker, 2012; Lamont et al., 2014; Shipway & Jones, 2007).

Leisure is defined as free or unobligated time (Leitner & Leitner, 2012) without work or performing other life-sustaining functions. The most agreed-upon meaning is that leisure is the antithesis of work (Gurbuz & Henderson, 2013). Serious leisure is the systematic pursuit of a core activity that is fulfilling. Participants find a social identity by expressing these special skills and experiences (Green & Jones, 2005). According to Stebbins (1982), who revealed the serious leisure perspective, motivation is the key to sustaining the activity.

The leisure consists of casual, project-based, and serious pursuits (Hartel, 2013). Casual leisure is defined as a short-term, satisfying activity that doesn't need preparation or special training (Gould et al., 2008). Casual leisure involves pure entertainment and satisfaction (Stebbins, 1997). Project-based leisure is short-term, uncomplicated, one-off, or rare creative activities (Stebbins, 2005). These leisure activities require skill and planning. Project-based leisure doesn't fall within the scope of serious leisure and is not expected to develop in this direction (Bailey & Fernando, 2012).

In the literature, the positive effects of serious leisure activity participation on participants are noteworthy (Chen, 2014; Heo et al., 2018; Shipway & Jones, 2007). In recent studies, the experiences of serious leisure runners have been examined in different ways. However, motivations for participation in serious leisure activities, subjective well-being, and participant characteristics are among the topics examined (Qiu et al., 2020a; Qiu et al., 2020b; Tian et al., 2020). Serious leisure activity leads to improvement and orients knowledge, skills, and experience to the activity. Six distinctive features differentiate serious leisure from other leisure types are the need to persevere, follow a leisure career, significant personal effort, several durable benefits, unique and complex ethos and social world, and a distinctive identity (Stebbins, 2018).

Serious leisure is cited as having increasing importance for leisure and is a way in which an activity can turn into a career. Individuals can turn their hobbies into careers due to their sense of devotion. Amateurs can become professionals. In fact, the emergence of some professions stems from dedication to them as leisure activities (Stebbins, 2018). Motivation is of great importance for this dedication. Neulinger (1981) has shown that intrinsic, extrinsic, and both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are effective in participation in leisure activities in the leisure paradigm. Neulinger's (1981) leisure paradigm is similar to Self-Determination Theory in terms of the effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on autonomy in individuals.

Self-determination theory (SDT) focuses on individuals' internalizing their external motivation, ensuring autonomy in their daily lives and, thus, self-regulation of their behaviors. The social-contextual environment positively influences psychological well-being and

motivation through the satisfaction of three basic needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is a person's need to control the course of their life. Competence means the need to be effective in dealing with the environment. Relatedness is defined as close, compassionate relationships with others (Deci & Ryan, 2012). The theory accepts these basic psychological needs as universal (Hennessey et al., 2015). According to the SDT, there is a continuum from non-self-determined to self-determined. Moving from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation, the fulfillment of basic needs' needs increases (Ryan & Deci, 2000). People tend to develop psychologically and act to overcome obstacles (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the basic needs of a social being. These basic needs in the SDT can be fulfilled through intrinsic motivation for serious leisure physical activity. Various studies have demonstrated that meeting basic psychological needs through physical activity has positive effects on individuals (Lee & Ewert, 2019; McDonough & Crocker, 2007; Owen et al., 2014; Teixeira et al., 2012). While there are studies in the literature examining the effects of serious leisure activity on individuals with self-determination theory, there are also studies that reveal the positive gains of regular leisure physical activities on participants. Some of these studies are seen in the paragraph below.

Lee and Ewert (2019) examined the associations between serious leisure and quality of motivation in line with the SDT among rock climbers. They have seen that motivation has positive effects on commitment, identity development, and achievement. Koçak (2016) found out that the reasons for cycling were to be healthier, stronger, happier, and overcome daily stress according to participants. Robinson et al. (2014) examined how a group of novice marathon runners entered the social world of a long-distance running community in their study. As a result, novice runners who worked with the club integrated with the values and behaviors of the social community. Fairer-Wessels (2013) examined motivation among serious leisure participants competing in the Comrades Marathon, one of South Africa's major sports events. In the research, the participants strongly identified with the activity and formed an identity. Shipway and Holloway (2010) proposed that adopting a healthy lifestyle approach with long-distance running, sports, and leisure activities contributed to both health and quality of life. In addition to studies aimed at understanding the motivations of serious leisure long-distance runners, it is understood that participants who participate in different sports activities, such as cycling and rock climbing, continue their activities with various motivational factors. This can be for reasons such as being healthy and feeling good, or it can provide results such as creating an identity and being part of a community. It is understood

from the studies that participation in regular physical activity in leisure provides positive psychological contributions to individuals and can also enable them to create a social environment.

The SDT is seen as functional in examining the physical, psychological, and social benefits provided by serious leisure physical activity for participants (Moustaka et al., 2010). The theoretical framework of the study is to discover the extent to which basic needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied in individuals who run long distances as a serious leisure activity. Despite the popularity of the topic in Turkey, there is very little in-depth research available in the literature. Besides, it examines the motivations of runners within the framework of SDT. The original value to examine the strong connection between serious leisure participation and SDT in long-distance runners whose members of different running groups in Ankara, Turkey. Thus, the aim of the study was to examine the experiences of serious leisure long-distance runners within the framework of the SDT. The purpose was to understand how participation in a serious leisure activity affects individuals' basic psychological needs.

METHODS

Participants

The study group was determined according to the maximum variation sampling method, which was chosen to include differences between participants, such as running distances or socio-cultural environments. Interviews were conducted with 36 recreational long-distance runners between the ages of 21 and 48, including 15 women and 21 men. Participants ran at least twice a week with running groups in Ankara (Table 1).

For research, connections were established with running groups in Ankara via social media. Running groups post their weekly events on their social media accounts. A direct message was sent to the running groups' Instagram accounts, and the person who manages the account was contacted. Information about the research was provided. In line with their acceptance and invitation, to their weekly events one-on-one communication was established with the participants there. Participation in the study was based on volunteerism. Before the study, permission was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Ankara University (2019, No. 122).

Data collection continued until data saturation was reached. Five different groups of individuals were included in the study, and they were identified with nicknames. All were educated and had good jobs. The running experiences of recreational long-distance runners

ranged from 3 months to 24 years. They had participated in at least two long-distance running events.

Table 1
Characteristics of Participants (n = 36)

Name	Age	Education	Occupation	Running experience	Weekly training	Weekly distance /km	Races
Selin	32	Graduated	Civil Servant	6 months	2-3 days	20 km	21K 42K
Merve	38	Graduated	Teacher	4 years	4 days	60 km	15K 38K 42K 50K 55K
Zeynep	28	Graduated	Representative	3 months	2-3 days	25 km	5K 11K
Fatma	27	Graduated	Engineer	16 years	3 days	30-40 km	11K 13K 42K 42K
Buket	34	Graduated	Civil Servant	7 months	3 days	20 km	9K 10K 10K 21K
Hatice	35	Graduated	Banker	5 months	3 days	10 km	9K 10K
Demet	48	PhD	Lecturer	2 years	3 days	20 km	7K 10K 10K 10K
Seda	28	Graduated	Physiotherapist	11 months	2-3 days	10 km	15K 21K
Nil	36	Postgrad	Student	4 years	2-3 days	10-15 km	10K 10K 10K 21K 21K
Mina	27	Postgrad	Student	1,5 years	4 days	20 km	23K 38K
Elif	25	Graduated	Psychologist	1 year	2 days	20 km	21K 21K 21K
Leyla	36	Graduated	Administrator	2 years	3 days	40 km	38K 42K
Gizem	23	Undergrad	Student	4 years	3 days	30 km	21K 21K 30K 63K
Beren	21	Undergrad	Student	6 months	2 days	10-15 km	4K 5K 5K
Duru	26	Graduated	Nurse	3 years	4 days	50 km	15K 42K
Can	30	Postgrad	IT Expert	3 years	3 days	30 km	15K 15K 21K 42K 42K
Poyraz	34	Graduated	Project Expert	5 years	4 days	70 km	15K 21K 21K 42K 42K
Mert	30	Postgrad	Student	1 year	3-4 days	40 km	15K 21K 23K 42K 50K
Hasan	35	Graduated	Officer	3 years	4 days	30-40 km	15K 21K 21K 35K 63K
Remzi	38	Graduated	Civil Servant	18 years	3 days	25 km	5K 11K
Yusuf	35	Graduated	Inspector	2,5 years	5-6 days	120-140 km	21K 37K 42K 55K 63K
Adem	34	Postgrad	Civil Servant	1 year	3-4 days	80-100 km	21K 23K 55K 119K
Tayfun	38	Postgrad	Civil Servant	3 years	6 days	10-12 km	5K 11K
Mustafa	30	Postgrad	Engineer	8 months	2 days	15 km	5K 5K 5K 5K 12K
Murat	38	Postgrad	Pharmacist	3 years	3 days	30 km	21K 38K
Selim	44	Postgrad	Pilot	20 years	3 days	45 km	38K 38K 42K
Sinan	34	PhD	Engineer	5 years	2 days	30 km	15K 21K 21K 42K
Osman	31	Graduated	Engineer	1,5 years	4 days	55 km	21K 21K 37K 38K 42K
Kadir	36	Graduated	Craftsman	24 years	7 days	100-120 km	250K 250K 250K 250K
Ali	34	Postgrad	Human Resources	4 years	6 days	80 km	42K 42K 42K 42K
Orhan	47	Postgrad	Engineer	4 years	2 days	30 km	21K 21K 42K 70K 74K
Furkan	38	Postgrad	Engineer	4 years	2 days	25 km	35K 38K 38K 63K
Arda	27	Graduated	Football player	1,5 years	2 days	10-15 km	5K 5K 11K
Sabri	30	PhD	Psychologist	1 year	3 days	15 km	15K 21K
Cemil	27	Postgrad	Engineer	3 years	3 days	30 km	21K 21K 21K

Procedures

The research was designed using a qualitative approach. A phenomenological approach was adopted to observe individuals' experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

Phenomenology was selected as the most appropriate design to answer the question: "Could participation in long-distance running as a serious leisure activity contribute to meeting the basic psychological needs of individuals of autonomy, competence, and relatedness?" The phenomenology pattern was based on the interpretative paradigm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In the research, interviews were conducted to assess the experiences of participants and to examine their perspectives in detail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The semi-structured interview technique was used in the study. While preparing interview questions, opinions of two experts working in the recreation field were obtained and some studies on the subject were examined (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Fairer-Wessels, 2013; Lamont et al., 2014; McDonough & Crocker, 2007; Öztürk & Koca, 2017; Robinson et al., 2014; Shipway & Holloway, 2010; Shipway & Jones, 2007). Interview questions were prepared to determine autonomy, competence, and relatedness and were classified according to the theoretical framework. In the study, participants were asked nine semi-structured and personal information form questions. Examples of some questions on the interview form are "How would you describe a good runner?" and "What does running mean to you?" Interviews were conducted before or after events. Appointments were made with the contact through social media, and preliminary information was given about the research. After connecting with groups, data were collected during running group activities over six months. The first author of the study conducted the interviews. Interviews lasted 26 minutes on average and were recorded, while observations and field notes were made. Field notes were taken during the running groups' weekly activity days and during the times when there were no interviews. These observations, included in the field notes, took place both in the running areas and in meeting areas, such as cafes, where they spent time before and after the run. Participants also signed an informed consent form for the research.

Participants attended long-distance running practice every week as a leisure activity. They did not neglect their activity even in winter (persevere). It was observed that the participants trained at least 2 days a week, and for some, this frequency could be 6 to 7 days (significant personal effort). They had the opportunity to create a career with the progress of their performance over time. It is understood that despite having a profession, they entered special preparation processes for race events held outside the city they live in, and after each one, they set new goals and prepared (follow a leisure career). To achieve this career, they worked hard and strived to improve their skills. They had their own social environment in the running groups, and their values were reflected in this social environment. The fact that they acted together with the running groups they were a part of during these processes, the

identities they created belonging to the culture of their own running group (unique and complex ethos and social world), and the values they had as a long-distance runner and the identity they created attracted attention (distinctive identity). All this provided them with an attractive social and personal identity. It is thought that the participants' desire to run for a lifetime stems from all those benefits they felt (several durable benefits). Due to these features, they meet the six criteria for serious leisure (Stebbins, 2018). All of these were mentioned in the researcher's notes during the data collection process. The study was designed to include participants who had participated in at least two long-distance running events and were part of a running group. However, during the research process, it was clearly understood that they had the characteristics of serious leisure participants.

Statistical Analyses

After the first author transcribed interview records, the data were analyzed with the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For thematic analysis, firstly, transcripts and field notes were organized, then initial codes were generated by hand, and after that, codes were combined with similar codes. After the first author completed the coding process, the next step was to review potential themes and define and name them (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Regular meetings were held with the second author during the process of uncovering themes. In addition to the main themes determined by the research, sub-themes are included among the findings. This is necessary for research with psychological aspects because more detailed, in-depth, and versatile results can be obtained; thus, thematic analysis was used (Doğusan & Koçak, 2021). The confidentiality principle was followed while collecting and storing all personal information. The names of individuals were kept secret, and code names were used during data analysis. The names seen in Table 1, which contain participant information, are not the names of the participants but code names. Field notes were used to double-check the codes and themes.

Some strategies were used to provide internal validity for the research. Data triangulation, adequate and appropriate participation in the data collection, researcher credentials, and expert examination strategies were used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data triangulation attempts to provide validity through the combination of observations, interviews, and field notes. A wider range of diversity was achieved by interviewing members of five different groups. The first author met with the study group for approximately six months during the data collection period, on weekly running activity days, in the areas where they held their running activities, and in café-style venues where they spent time before

and/or after the activity. Since the second author is an expert in her field, the first author and the second author regularly met to check the quality and consistency of the data with the expert examination.

External validity is related to the extent to which the results are applicable to different situations, which is related to the generalizability of the research. In qualitative research, understanding a specific situation in depth is important. To ensure external validity, the maximum diversity sampling method, which is one of the non-random purpose sampling, was chosen in our study. The validity and reliability of the research was ensured by these credibility strategies.

RESULTS

In the study, individuals who chose long-distance running as serious leisure activity provided similar opinions. As a result of the participants' opinions and observations made, themes were created according to the basic concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the framework of the SDT. The analysis results had three main themes.

Autonomous Decisions: Running as a Part of Life

The first theme examined the participants' autonomous decisions regarding running. This theme was formed because of the answers to the questions aimed at understanding the autonomous decision-making of the participants during the individual interviews.

Running responsibility

Participants emphasized that running is a responsibility in their lives to be healthy. They stated that they want to run throughout their lives and that it is a good thing for them to do. The participants made statements about running being a part of their lives. About the place of the running in her life:

> "Running has an important place in my life; for example, I come here on Wednesday evenings. Sometimes I couldn't date my boyfriend, or I couldn't spend time with my family because I come running. For example, no one can wake up early on Sunday mornings, but we go running around Lake Eymir at 8:00 a.m. (Seda)"

Fatma said about the importance of running: *"Running has a very important place in my life, as important as family or friends."* Leyla expressed her discomfort when she could not take part in running activities:

> "I look at the videos and photos of my runner friends from social media pages. I sometimes ask myself why I'm not there. This is what happens at events when I couldn't go. It would

be nice to go. I'm uncomfortable when I can't take part in training. I don't like to be absent."

For runners, serious leisure qualities such as perseverance and pursuing a leisure career are considered noteworthy.

Running for self-improvement

It was observed that the participants wanted to improve themselves until they could perform at their best, in line with their autonomous decisions. When the participants were asked about their expectations from running, the answer was "to improve myself". Poyraz stated that goals should be realistic as an amateur:

"The expectation of amateur athletes like us may be to develop within our own limits. You can display very good performances, but since you are not training and nourished like an athlete, the only goal can be set by your own development."

Elif explained her progress in running:

"For me 5K was a dream and 10K or 21K was impossible. I ran 21K three times. I ran 15K four times. It's not enough anymore and now my goal is to run a marathon in Amsterdam in October. In fact, I want to spend a little more time on planning the marathon."

The participants wanted to develop themselves to meet their autonomy needs without external expectations, pressure, or obligations. Participants stated that running is an area where they can improve themselves. The marathon event is a part of their lives, and they participate in marathon events due to their desire and enjoyment. Still, women participants especially hesitated to identify themselves as runners.

"I've been running for one and half years. I've been describing myself as a runner for the last six months because I've realized that I love it. I saw the improvement in myself. My training became more regular. I'm a developing runner. (Mina)"

"Am I runner? I don't know. It means sport for me, being healthier, staying away from negative things and relaxing. I competed in four marathon events. I always try to exceed my previous performance. I'm trying to improve myself. (Buket)"

Although the participants see running as a part of their lives, they hesitate to define themselves as long-distance runners.

Fun runners

Participants frequently expressed the phrase "I run because I enjoy it" regarding their expectations from running. In this sub-theme, what is meant by fun is that they continue their

running activity with their own autonomous decisions without any financial expectations in a professional way. They seem to have achieved a career from a serious leisure perspective, but this is seen as a career they enjoy rather than a career with financial rewards. The participants need to see running as a pleasure. Adem expressed his enjoyment while running:

> *"Especially I love running together with people, people having fun while running… I also enjoy the training I do when I train with them. They think I have fun running too. I don't get bored running in the forest for three hours thanks to them. If the person next to me can run for three hours by having fun, laughing, telling jokes, if he can do this, then it's pleasant for me."*

About the reason for running: *"First, we run to be healthy. To feel good, it seems like you are free of weight, and when you run like that, you get relief mentally. You can get rid of your troubles (Nil)."* About the happiness that running brings: *"People say that they see the expression of happiness on my face when I run. They understand that I love doing this (Demet)."*

Most of the participants ran for fun, and they did not want to participate in an activity with a materialistic aim. They also emphasized that they want running to be a platform that meets their autonomy needs but not to become a tool of necessity or oppression.

Need for Competence: Changing Meaning of Leisure

This theme was created based on questions directed to runners to reveal their perceptions of competence. An attempt was made to understand what characteristics the participants use to define a good runner and whether they believe they have these characteristics.

Being a Model Runner

When the participants were asked how they wanted an outsider to see them, they said they wanted to be seen as exemplary runners. Ali thinks that people who look from outside should take them as an example:

> *"As far as I can see from my environment, there are two kinds of perspectives. Someone says, "Why do you run? What does it mean, and especially why are you running in this cold?" There is also a group that says, "How nice! I wish I could run too." I think they should be envious; after all, we are doing a physical activity, so winning a medal is not very important."*

They stated that it is important to create running awareness for a healthy life. Mert stated that he wanted to set an example for people:

"I would like them to see us as people who can run with the right form. I wish I could run like that. After all, we are not professional runners, there are mistakes we make. I would like to be a good example by running with the right technique. Others may see it that way."

Mert both wants to set an example for people and hesitates between professionalism and amateurism. He was not sure that he ran with the right technique, which revealed questions about his perception of competence.

Although the participants generally hesitate in their perception of competence regarding professionalism and amateurism, they think that they have the competence to be an example of healthy living as leisure runners. As people running for health, they can meet their competence needs by taking a stance against other people.

Pushing Boundaries: Goals and Achievements

When asked to talk about the process of a running race, the participants first talked about their training and nutrition regimens during the preparation process, and psychologically convincing themselves that they could do it. For the participants, doing something good for themselves, setting a goal, and succeeding in the end, even if they had difficulties on the way, meant a lot. This is directly related to meeting their competence needs by seeing themselves succeeding through running.

According to participants, the most important thing in a marathon event is completing the route in a good time. They need to improve the time they ran before, even for one second, and that they push their boundaries to do the best they can, giving them a sense of success and happiness at the end of the route. Orhan expressed these feelings as follows:

"The feeling after finishing never changes. It is great pain, the pain you feel while running, fatigue, boredom, but the feeling of great accomplishment after two hours comes after it ends. You have accomplished something very difficult. It is good to have achieved something that few people in the world do, and something that many cannot do."

Feeling that they have achieved something that most people cannot achieve in the world, setting a goal and reaching it, completing the route despite all the difficulties, and physical and psychological suffering show that the participants meet their competence needs with long-distance running events.

About a marathon event process:

"There are times when I suffer on the route, but I came there for a purpose, so I need to finish it in a healthy way. When I get here, it's simple that I'm going to experience it and finish it and then go home. I don't say 'why am I here, why am I running, damn it'. Finishing it doesn't matter, but I will. Then there is happiness and fatigue. (Gizem)"

About the racing process:

"It was fun, and it was nice to see the finish line. You see that you have accomplished something, and you have done something for yourself. You get a medal, and you experience something like this in your life. You take that medal and put it in your room, and you remember it. Running is one of the points where I have lived life to the full. (Seda)"

"You're dealing with something in life. You're doing something for yourself. For your health, to make yourself happy. There has been a target set and you've made it. Life is important in such things, these things make people happy, or life is empty and has no meaning. (Zeynep)"

Nil explained how it affected people through running discipline:

I find those who run outside are very cool. It's cool. Those who see me can be envious because I have two children, I am currently writing a doctoral thesis, one of my children had a serious illness and I was running at that time. I was creating a space for myself. I see that people admire it, they say, you gave yourself space, you did well.

The participants believe a marathon is an easy way to set a goal and see what they have accomplished. Significant personal effort and several durable benefits are important for runners.

The Relaxing Effect of Running

For the question of how running made them feel, the participants used the expression "relieved" most. Participants stated that running had a relaxing effect on them, relieving them from daily stress. The relationship between relaxation and the need for competence mentioned in this sub-theme is a sense of competence that comes with the disappearance of the feeling of inadequacy they feel due to the negative emotions they experience in daily life, rather than the competence they feel on the running field. They associated this relaxing effect with the happiness hormone, therapy, and meditation. They emphasized being healthy and fit most for the physical effect of running. They stated that staying healthy had a relaxing effect on them

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throughout their lives. About the relationship between running and happiness, Merve said the following about the happiness she felt during the run:

"I am very happy when I run, I love running, but I love after running the most because there is an incredible psychological relief after the run is over. For example, if I am little bored at the beginning of the run, I will think that it wasn't that important after the run is over. You're getting rid of an incredible toxin, and the happiness hormone is secreted when people run."

In daily life, the runners turned negative feelings about their perceptions of competence when they experience stress by focusing only on the run-in leisure and meeting their competence needs. They emphasized that running has a significant impact on happiness.

Relatedness: Reconstruction of the Social Environment

Team support

The participants explained that their friendship with their running group friends was reinforced by attending racing events in other cities and spending much time together. Adem said the following about his friends waiting for him at the finish line:

"The last long distance I ran was valuable to me. There was a problem with my right knee, and I could not move anymore. Knowing that I had friends at the end made me finish about 30K on foot. If I didn't know they were waiting, I wouldn't be able to walk. It is a different feeling to know that someone is waiting there, I don't remember being so emotional in a long time, it was 120K running."

Leyla said about the influence on her motivation from her teammates:

"I'm not tired when running is over. When I come to the end, there is more energy. My motivation rises. At the end, it can be even more pleasant when my friends are waiting for me."

"The running group motivates friends. It may seem very difficult to wake up at 7:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning, but you can be motivated that you will go to breakfast together and have coffee with them after running finishes. Apart from running, sometimes we also spend time with some of the team members. We also have friends who help training. (Mina)"

The participants emphasized that this bond, which was established on a voluntary basis only without any expectations between them, is very pure and real. Here on runners, the distinctive identity and unique and complex ethos feature of serious leisure seen. The runners

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fulfilled their relatedness needs in the running social environment. It is seen that the participants have social world in the distinctive features of serious leisure.

Social runners

Participants used "social runner" when describing themselves as runners and mentioned contributions to sports tourism during their out-of-town trips for running events. Buket said about friendship in the running group:

> *"I've started to realize the things that I was troubled about were very insignificant. I'm happy now. We are together at least three-four days of the week, then we drink coffee, eat, sometimes we are involved in other plans. I'm having fun, doing sport, and relaxing. We have friends from different professions, and we have a lot in common."*

Leyla explained the effect of social media on their connections with other running groups, which is an important sharing place for running groups:

> *"I follow other running groups on social media. I have friends from there. When we meet in the run we chat. I didn't join those groups, but as far as I can see from the outside, they're nice and they've formed a bond."*

As well as Leyla, who has her group in a separate place, Elif expressed the social media influence as follows:

> *"I'm also uncomfortable when I miss training because they use social media a lot, when I see their photos, I say I wish I were there."*

The runners considered the groups were important for socialization and psychological relief.

Cemil discussed a different dimension of running. He explained the steps he took to touch others' lives, collect donations by running, and deliver them to those in need.

> *"For example, you run for an autism foundation, there is a shirt for it. At some point when you run, you see children with autism, and you feel you are doing something very beautiful at that moment."*

According to the participants, meeting the need for relatedness stands out more than the other psychological needs. The participants touched on the issue of relatedness in many points about their running experiences.

DISCUSSION

McDonough and Crocker (2007) revealed that if the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, the participants experience self-determined types of motivation and obtain more positive results. The study shows the importance of all three needs in activity motivation for adults.

Ryan et al. (2010) found that non-work activities (such as leisure, personal care, and household chores) were associated with higher positive effects and lower relative negative effects compared to negative effects in work activities. These two correlations mediate the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. According to our findings, meeting the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness through long-distance running as a serious leisure activity provided participants with many positive gains.

Autonomy

Participants emphasized that long-distance running is a leisure activity that will help increase exercise participation and physical activity participation and has the potential to be accessible and fun. According to Sands and Wehmeyer (1996), autonomy means that a person is free in their decisions without coercion. For the participants, running is an act of pleasure, and it turns into an activity with materialistic purposes if this fact changes.

Fairer-Wessels (2013) found that participants strongly identified with the activity and formed an identity. In our study, there are some gaps in defining themselves as runners, but they meet their need for autonomy by creating a special space for themselves.

In parallel with our research, Gui et al. (2019) found that if autonomy, competence, and relatedness, basic psychological needs, especially the need for autonomy, are met, it contributes to the effective well-being of people during leisure in general. Patterson and Pegg (2009) found that participation in serious leisure activities had increased effects on the development of trust, skills, and self-esteem.

Competence

According to the findings obtained from the research, the participants emphasized that running is a responsibility to be healthy in their lives. Similar to the results of our research, Koçak (2016) found that cycling caused participants to be healthier, stronger, happier, and overcome daily stress. Similar to the findings of our study, Shipway and Holloway (2010) stated that long-distance running is an integral part of an active and healthy lifestyle. Like our

study, long-distance running research revealed that participants strongly link to the activity. The fact that they constitute an example for society as people who adopt a healthy lifestyle ensures that their competence needs are met.

The answer to questions about their expectations from running was "to be able to improve myself". They talked about the continuity of development thanks to introducing new goals as previous goals were achieved. Like the findings of our study, Lee and Ewert (2019) stated that intrinsic motivation has positive personal and social effects on loyalty, identity development, and acquisition. They wanted to improve themselves in line with their inner motivation without any external expectations, pressure, or necessity.

Relatedness

According to the SDT, being in contact with the social environment, feeling a sense of belonging, and the desire to establish relationships comprise the relatedness needs of individuals (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Relatedness in the SDT occurs when the individual establishes satisfying and supportive social relationships (Deci et al., 1996). Robinson et al. (2014) revealed that novice runners who joined the long-distance running community and who worked with the club integrated with the values and behaviors in the community's social life. In our study, the participants stated that their social environment was shaped around the running group. They meet their needs for relatedness with the social environment they acquire through running. Yet, their social environment is limited to the running team due to the time they devote to the running group.

Sivan et al. (2019) saw that psychological reasons were the most prominent in a study that examined the reasons for participating in serious leisure activities. In parallel with our study, the relatedness need is more prominent than other psychological needs. Participants touched on the issue of relatedness at many points from the start to the end of the interview about running.

Limitations

The research was conducted with participants over 18 who participated in different types of long-distance running race events. Considering that there are running groups in many cities in Turkey, the research was limited to participants in running groups in Ankara. In addition, interviews were conducted with participants who participated in the event at least two days a week and at least two long-distance running race events due to the serious leisure activity. The research group was limited to those who volunteered to participate in the study.

CONCLUSION

As a serious leisure activity, long-distance running provides participants with a sense of success, psychological relief, and happiness by satisfying the basic needs in the SDTs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. External motivation sources, such as social media and friends which are effective when starting to run, transformed into intrinsic motivation as a result of happiness and relaxation felt during running. Despite being a serious leisure participant and not receiving any financial gain from running, participants had a negative perception of competence, but their belief that they would develop themselves made running an important part of their lives. According to the participants' opinions, the effects of participation in long-distance running on relatedness needs were more prominent than other psychological needs. As a result, the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness in the SDT can be met at different levels with long-distance running as a serious leisure activity. Meeting basic psychological needs with long-distance running, a serious leisure activity, can provide positive benefits for individuals. For this reason, all individuals must be directed to active serious leisure activities where they can achieve positive gains.

To sum up, as a serious leisure activity, long-distance running provides participants with a sense of success, psychological relief, and happiness by satisfying their basic needs within the framework of the SDT.

Recommendations include performing more in-depth studies about the psychological benefits of physical activity in serious leisure. Since this research was conducted only with recreational long-distance runners in Ankara, more extensive research can be conducted nationwide. Research can be conducted to determine the psychological benefits of physical activity with different serious leisure activity participants and whether the effects of participation in serious leisure physical activity vary according to age groups, such as children or older individuals.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Suggestions for implementation include campaigns organized on social media to raise awareness among families about physical activity as a serious leisure activity. Participation in physical activity as a serious leisure activity can be considered as a country and sports policy, and steps can be taken to provide individuals with leisure education from an early age. Running groups engaged in serious leisure physical activity can be encouraged and supported

in the context of efforts to popularize the sport in society. As a sports policy, programs can be developed for professional athletes and serious leisure physical activity participants.

Authors' Contribution

The second author has given the design of the manuscript, the first author, to data collecting. All authors analyzed and interpreted the data. The first author drafted the manuscript, and the second author revised it critically. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflict Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics Statement

This study was reviewed and approved by Ankara University Ethics Committee (21.03.2019, No. 122).

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