The Participants Experience of Masses Sports Event in Pandemic Period
Taking Marathon Runners as an Example

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ABSTRACT

With the suspense of the pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020, leisure sports events are being canceled most of the time all over the world. This study used multiple methods and data to examine runners' embodiment experience, aimed at discussing the current situation about marathon runners and marathon event tourism, and figuring out the motivation of runners' activities under the pandemic through direct observation and interviews from their daily life. The results showed runners' experience in marathon training, marathon race, and stretch-out process separately, indicating that running for a marathon could decrease mental stress, and the combination of body and mind helps runners face little depression during the pandemic. This study also provides suggestions for event organizations to focus on event design and services from runners' point of view.

Keywords: Masses sports event, Marathon runners, Pandemic period, COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

Back to 2500 years ago, the marathon occurred as a historical event when a soldier called Pheidippides to pass the victory massage in Persian Wars among Ancient Greece and Persian Empire (official WA net)[1]. The first modern marathon race was in the first modern Olympic game, one year before the first city marathon race, the Boston Marathon, which is clear that the success of the Olympics gave the birth of road running.

In China, there is a great increase in marathon races in recent years. According to the data of the Chinese Athletes Association (CAA), there are only 22 certified marathon events in the mainland of China in 2011, while the number becomes 357 in 2019, one year before the pandemic of Covid-19, and the total number of marathon races reach the top 1828. The signal shows a marathon is no longer a specific event for elites or professional athletes who train a long time to achieve their personal best [2]. As a participant event, marathon races usually are held for people to involve rather than only spectate[3]. This addresses the runners' significant role for the event to exist.

Marathon is a mass sports event attracting people to take part in regardless of the races, incomes, regions, classes. The motivation of people to take part in marathon events could be distinct, while solving health problems stands for physical motive, making friends stands for social motives, and discovering the life meaning represents the psychological ones as well as self-achievement [4][5]. However, due to the pandemic of COVID-19, the world marathon majors (including Boston, Chicago, New York, Berlin, London, Tokyo) were postponed or canceled in 2020, and the London marathon was the only one open for public participants while the Tokyo marathon is limited to elites for Olympic trail (official Abbott marathon majors net)[6]. China sustains the district regulation on epidemic prevention and control, making only a total of 15 World Athlete (WA) labeled races held in 2020[1][7].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Mass Sports Event

Marathon events are usually viewed as mass sports events, abbreviated to MSE[8], and are involved in different types of runners participating. In China, there are many types of MSE with popularity in recent years, for example, the square dance was proved to increase

the positivity and decrease the effect of mental health in old women[9], yoga, tai chi, and qigong could help adults heal the health condition and chronic diseases which to be proved holistic[10]. Marathon is the symbol sports event in China since according to the marathon cycle[11], the GDP per capita of China was over 5,000 USD in 2012, and it is 2012 that is deemed as the original year of the Chinese marathon. Shipway categorized the marathon runners into 4 different types: the experienced insiders, the regular runners, the occasional runners, and the sporting outsiders[12]. It is no doubt that as the development of the marathon boom globally, more and more people try to get closer to this sport. With the development of the national fitness policy in China, the running facility is getting better and better, making it convenient for citizens to run in the community, near a public park and athletic field.

In addition, MSEs have a typical characteristic that Getz proposed the participants are the core and the necessity of the event[3]. Although the marathon could not be held without volunteers, doctors, police officers, etc, the participants, which are the runners, could not be missed. During the pandemic period, people are not allowed to travel very far, most of the time they could only travel in their province. In this case, there would be no marathon events in some small cities as marathons are usually viewed and held by the local government, who have less ability in preventing the pandemic, to organize a marathon to boom the local economy and improve the city image[13].

2.2. Participant Experience

MSE is becoming the tourism attractiveness as it not only shows the city image but also allows the participants to travel to a different destination, becoming a tourist, generating the local economy. In this way, the experience of marathon participants is similar to the experience of destination tourists. The tourist experience is making a "body turn" as social science focuses on the embodiment of human activities[14][15]. Marathon involves most parts of the body and the emotion as well, and runners may experience the iterative effect after several times of running. The experience is affected by the environment, the atmosphere, the service provided by the organizers, and also the individual body condition. However, as we do the literature review, the participant experience in a certain period, especially in the pandemic period, the marathon situation in China faces the challenges that there tend to be fewer events due to the social control policies.

There are many factors that are proved to affect participants' experience. Social and emotional research is needed in event research when exploring the meaning of participants' construction[16]. While safety, crowd density[17], comfort, space, and satisfaction[18] are the main factors proposed by many research, they usually describe the spectator events[19]. The participant's experience is always focused on satisfaction makes a lack of knowledge creation.

Above all, this study tries to make the knowledge creation in the participant experience, mass sports events in a particular period, and provide suggestions for the event design.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses qualitative analysis and comparative analysis. According to Getz et al.[3], triangulation is often applied to examine the same social phenomenon. Different methods are applied in this study to collect data. Direct observation, semi-structured interview as well as autoethnography are taken into use. Before entering the field, the author firstly joined a social media WeChat group to participate in various activities held by the runners' group, in the meantime to observe runners actions in the group during daily life in 2019, before the burnout of COVID-19. Fieldtrip was carried in Guangzhou city, China in November 2021, where there was a small-scale marathon race held by the local association. During the fieldwork, the author started to run a marathon with all the runners and observe the behavior and emotion of runners, and after the event, the author interviewed a few participants in different areas in the marathon races, for example, the dressing room, the supply station, the finish line and so on. The software of Nvivo 11.0 is used to code and analyze the experience of participants and the discrepancy of marathon participants. A total of 11 runners were interviewed and the content is up to 35,000 words.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Daily Life

For small tables, please place them within a column and a bigger table is placed in a text frame spanning to both columns. Use the Table facility available within the MSWord. The font in the row header should be bold and you can use the style available from the style palette. Running is a lifestyle for most runners and the demographic characteristics show that people aged over 40 are the main group in running the marathon. 6 out of 11 runners are amateur, and they propose that they are persisted to run at least 200 kilometers to form the habit. They believed that a marathon, taking a lot of time to train, is the best way to exercise and could not be given up as once abandoned, due to the formed running habit would not be easy to take up.

During the pandemic, I was forced to work at home and the lockdown policy made me crazy that I could only run in my neighborhood, and it made me less frustrated compared to my family (F-1). Running is

becoming a part of their daily life, as it could both refresh their mind and exercise their body, improving the positive cognition of life in a hard time. Many runners insist that the habit of long-distance running in the pandemic time gives them an exit to escape from the panic and relieve the mental stress. After the lockdown time, 2 runners pointed out that they take up running for work to avoid contact with others in the public transportation and decrease the opportunity of getting infected. In this situation, running practice becomes a communita[20], runners experience the transformation from the real self to the socially constructive individual.

4.2 Marathon Race

The fewer marathon races in pandemic time become even more popular than ever because of the runners' starvation effect. Runners are eager to participate in any activity and to formulate and regulate themselves. *There will not be any official marathon races this November and December, which makes us in a confused condition for I usually train for races. The total running distance this month is sharply decreasing to half compared to last year (M-1).* Among the 11 interviewees, 4 were female, they all thought the online marathon in sports apps is boring sometimes. *I want to run for an offline marathon rather than run in my community and keep the data in mobile phone apps (F-2).* The use of wearable watches and sports application on mobile phones controls their body condition. Runners report the worse or less efficient body condition during the lockdown time in general, but when the lockdown is over, they find a harder way and longer time to take up the habit.

The experience is embodied. Runners are very happy excited to participate in each marathon event no matter it is small-scale held by some KOLs (key opinion leaders) or large-scale held by the local government. At the starting line, they are all prepared to touch the road and feel the rhythm of their body. They listen to their heart rate, interact with different people, volunteers, pacers, doctors, etc, and are embedded in the eventscape and event atmosphere[21].

During the marathon event, runners prefer taking photos to memorize the cherished events and post photos on their social media. 3 males said that they enjoy sharing photos with others and almost do so every time they go out for a marathon event. *My friends and I even built up a WeChat group to organize some running activities in our community, and we all see each other's SNS and give likes (M-3).* Although the lack of training may cause the tiredness of body, all interviewees reposted that they felt the happiness and excitement after finishing the event. And the event is also a great opportunity for familiar runners to meet and socialize with each other. Socializing with people becomes rare in the pandemic period, fortunately, the events give

runners a chance to go out to nature and have a chance to speak with people sharing the same interest. We observe people communicating with the topics of indoor training, and gathering to range a private small-scale event.

4.3 After Race Stretch-out

After the marathon events, there will be a stretch-out time for runners to justify and modify the condition. In this stage, runners started to feel the pain of their experience and recall the whole process in the event. *I could hardly get hurt in any marathon because I do the starch-out in a scientific way (F-4).* Most runners report they are tired, painful during the event, but turned out to be satisfied, excited, and refreshed after the stretch-out process.

Runners would get back to real life after doing the stretch-out and reflect their shortage in the passing-by events. They would train for better performance for the next marathon and begin to take up a new training plan in the short future. All of the runners say their goal is not to finish the race, the event could be imperfect sometimes, but all they could do is to get back home safely. *Never let the family worry about you. They know what you are doing, they support you to do what you like, so you have to be safe and careful in return. Do not let them down(M-4).* During the pandemic period, the whole society is afraid of getting infected, runners are barely willing to add up the new risk to their life, so they would rather not participate in a marathon than put themselves in a secure situation.

5. CONCLUSION

It is apparent that runners reduce the training and slack off due to the pandemic, so they usually have to take a literally long time to pick up the running exercise as the marathon events become less and less which results in their laziness. The COVID-19 lockdown limiting runners' opportunities to run on the road makes them adjust their daily lifestyle. Daily runners once have a chance, then choose to participate in different events to refresh their minds and body. This paper aims to figure out the event experience of marathon runners in marathon races held in the pandemic period and find out the differences between experience for long-time runners' cognition of races held before and in the pandemic period.

Before the marathon, runners are likely to form good habits and training for races. In the event, runners monitor themselves and react to the body and mind. The stretch-out finally takes runners back to daily life. The main marathon organizers are commercial sports companies, who take the profit at the first goal, and

might overlook the participants' experience and lose the social responsibility. Organizers should provide services purposely in different periods in a marathon event, and make runners have a better event experience.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Xin XU takes all the responsibility in the literature review and writing process.

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