

**RUNNING TOGETHER, EVEN WHEN WE'RE APART:
SEEKING COMMUNITY, BEING 'CONNECTED', AND CONSUMING TOGETHER**

by

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Abstract

This research is designed to glean insights and understandings into some of the ways that individuals seek out and experience community through sport and sporting practices. Drawing from findings yielded from an ethnographic study of the urban ‘run crew’ scene in Vancouver, B.C., this dissertation includes three distinct but interrelated case studies which each highlight how community is experienced, produced, and ‘consumed’ by runners – with a focus on both runners and running-related businesses that cater to runners. The first study focuses explicitly on the run crew scene in Vancouver, highlighting both how runners make sense of their participation and at once how this emergent subset of contemporary running culture is often linked to consumption. The second study focuses on a web-based ‘social self-tracking’ platform called Strava – an app and social network commonly used by athletes to record and share the data they produce while self-tracking. I propose that while Strava can be a source of motivation and entertainment for its users, and even help to establish or strengthen social networks, the platform invites users to adopt and adapt to technologically-mediated surveillance strategies that encourage and reward displays of bodily self-discipline. Finally, the third study examines social media content produced by run crews and Strava during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights how these local organizations and this global corporation each leveraged the technological affordances of Instagram to help maintain a sense of togetherness and connection while their members were adhering to social distancing. I propose that each functioned as cultural intermediaries with regard to the dissemination of health, physical activity, and pandemic-related information. Overall, this dissertation contributes to literatures on sport-based communities, running (sub) cultures, and digital self-tracking in the context of physical activity. Taken together, these studies offer insights into the nature and structure of community in the contemporary moment, and work to extend ways of thinking about the relationships people (desire to) have with one another, with physical activity, and with technology.

Lay Summary

This research explores some of the ways that individuals seek out and experience community through sport, using three case studies centered on adult runners in the city of Vancouver, B.C. The first examines 'run crew' culture in Vancouver and highlights how runners experience and understand these groups and consider whether and how these groups differ from other types of running groups. The second study focuses on an app called Strava, commonly used by runners. I propose that while Strava can be a source of motivation, the platform also normalizes bodily surveillance. The third study examines social media content produced by run crews and Strava during the COVID-19 pandemic and discusses how social media was used to maintain a sense of connection while social distancing. These studies offer new ways of thinking about the relationships people have with one another, with physical activity, and with technology.

Preface

This dissertation is the original independent work by the author, Jesse Couture.

This research was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at The University of British Columbia (Project title: Running together, Certificate Number H17-02787, Principal Investigator: Dr. Brian Wilson).

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For Dr. Lorne MacGregor

1 Introduction

This dissertation explores some of the ways and reasons individuals choose to seek out and participate in sport-related communities. I focus in particular on two discrete but interrelated sites of community. The first centres on running and, more specifically, the urban ‘run crew’ scene in Vancouver, Canada. In recent years, run crews have emerged as a powerful and increasingly popular presence, particularly in large metropolitan centers around the world. Described as an alternative running movement (Gearhart, 2016), run crews are said to have first emerged in New York City in 2009, but this literal and figurative movement of runners has steadily grown in popularity over the past ten years. A number of feature stories on the now-global ‘run crew’ have appeared in various running-related blog posts and industry-leading magazines, including *Runner’s World* and *Canadian Running Magazine*, yet to date no empirical research has explored this discernible trend which sees runners around the world eschewing the label of a traditional running ‘club’ for a more ethos-driven (sub)cultural experience.

Second, I turn my attention to an app and online platform called Strava, a widely used app and ‘social fitness’ platform commonly used by members of the run crew community. Described as ‘the social network for athletes’, Strava is used by millions of recreational and professional athletes alike and, over the past decade, has established itself as a global leader in a burgeoning ‘social fitness’ industry. Strava is designed, in part, to help users keep track of their physical activity, but it is also described as an online community – a place to ‘connect with friends and share your adventure’ with other users around the world (Strava, 2020). To date, limited attention has been paid to Strava in the academic literature and, to the best of my knowledge, no empirical research has engaged with Strava from an ethnographic perspective.

This dissertation is comprised of three case studies, each of which are presented in Chapters Two through Four. Though these three case studies are each unique in some ways, the general overarching questions guiding this work are as follows:

- 1. How might we make sense of the desire to seek physical interaction and networked interactivity in an age of unprecedented connectivity?**
- 2. In what ways might digital technologies influence how individuals understand and participate in sport-based communities?**
- 3. What can participation in run crew and engagement with online movement tell us about the relationships individuals (desire to) have with one another and with physical activity?**

The first of these chapters, featured in Chapter Two, explores the ‘run crew’ scene in Vancouver. Informed by a three-year ethnographic study, in this chapter I discuss the origins of the run crew movement in Vancouver and, among other things, highlight some of the experiences and attitudes of its members. Here, I highlight how participation in these recreational running communities can be experienced as exciting and empowering – while at the same time noting different ways that this social practice is wrought with contradictions. Among other things, I describe and discuss how run crew culture is linked with consumption practices and I consider some of the implications of this relationship between sport-based communities and consumption. Specifically, I discuss how the community-consumption linkage is relevant for understanding the meanings people ascribe to their participation in running and the types of engagements they have with running. I also reflect in this case on what these findings might suggest with regard to contemporary social interaction. It is worth noting ‘up front’ that this chapter, as the first of three empirically-driven chapters, is distinctly longer than those that follow. This is due, in part, to the fact that this chapter sets the foundation for the chapters that follow, as I outline, discuss and

theorize a range of the cultural features of run crews – features that I refer back to throughout the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

The second case study, featured in Chapter Three, focuses on runners' use of Strava – a popular app and 'social fitness' platform commonly used by members of the run crew community. Among other things, in this chapter I describe the rise of *social self-tracking* and offer insights gleaned from interviews with runners about the ways and reasons why they use Strava. While the study is empirically driven, I also acknowledge in this chapter some of the affective dimensions of digital self-tracking, in part, by inviting the reader to consider some of the tensions and methodological quandaries that can characterize both the practice of self-tracking but also the doing of research that does not fit squarely within an exclusively physical or digital domain. I propose that, for many runners, Strava is understood as a fun and supportive social network that many describe as playful and motivating but in so doing I also draw attention to and reflect upon some of the ways that this platform enables and effectively normalizes digital (self-) surveillance.

The case study featured in Chapter Four examines how the local run crews and Strava, each predicated on social interaction, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, a body of literature has emerged that has drawn attention to some of the ways that the pandemic has influenced sport and, too, how sporting practices might be influenced moving forward (see, for example, Donnelly, 2020; Grix, Brannagan, Grimes, & Neville, 2021; Mutz & Gerke, 2021; Rowe, 2020). Conversely, this study explores specific strategies that were used by these local groups and this global company to maintain a sense of connectedness in the early weeks and months of the pandemic. Among other things, I discuss some of the ways that Instagram was used as a channel of communication, but also how highlight how certain messages were often privileged and

(re)produced by these groups and this organization about health, about the pandemic, and about community.

This dissertation research is designed with the aim of making contributions to a range of existing bodies of literature, including sociocultural studies of community and sporting (sub)cultures, digital self-tracking and physical activity, and social media studies. There is a rich history of sport scholars who have studied sport-based communities from myriad perspectives (see Atkinson, 2008; Beal, 1995; Donnelly, 2006; Donnelly & Young, 1988; Smith & Ingham, 2003; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2004, 2013; Young & Atkinson, 2008) and, in so doing, offered nuanced accounts of why people participate in certain sporting spaces. There is also a well-established body of literature that includes studies of various aspects of running and running culture(s) (see Allen-Collinson, 2006, 2008; Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2007, 2015; Atkinson, 2010, 2015; Baxter, 2021; Griffin, 2010; Griffin & Phoenix, 2014; Shipway & Holloway, 2010, 2016). To the best of my knowledge, however, researchers have yet to explore run crews.

As I discuss in Chapter Two, run crews are a unique blend of grassroots sport groups, consumption community (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), global/online/digital community, and local/offline/physical community. In coming chapters, I will be exploring this range of features associated with run crews while simultaneously considering the theoretical and substantive relevance of crews *for thinking about the meanings of community and physical culture in the contemporary moment*. In recognizing the contemporary moment, I am referring especially here to the implications of the pandemic for running and runners – a topic I take up in earnest in Chapter Four. However, the pandemic notwithstanding, what is meant here by the current ‘moment’ refers to what others have described as a late modern or neoliberal society, characterized in part by precarity and a degree of ‘ontological insecurity’ (Beck, 1998). In his study of Canadian triathletes,

Atkinson (2008) suggested that the expansion of the triathlon community could be interpreted as “a cultural signifier of a commonly experienced...social disconnection within factions of the established Canadian middle class” (p. 166). In a similar vein, I am interested in the extent to which run crew culture might be a cultural response to feelings of loneliness and boredom, on one hand, and to an ideologically-fragmented society, on the other. Put another way, I reflect upon the extent to which shared physical and digital cultures might function as a ‘solution’ (temporary or otherwise) to a widely documented sense of disconnection (Becker, Hartwich, & Haslam, 2021, Turkle, 2011) or a lack of community in other contexts.

I suggest that there is another important contribution here because, while previous research has engaged extensively ‘running communities’ (Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2013; Smith, 1998; Robinson, Patterson, & Axelson, 2014), there is a marked absence of research that has examined how running, as a personal and social practice, is increasingly *mediated by technology*. By focusing on this topic, perhaps most notably in Chapter Three, I aim to contribute especially to a body of research concerned with digital self-tracking – an area of study that has been and continues to be the focus of much scholarly attention, both within and outside of sporting contexts. Across these contexts, sociocultural researchers have started to take seriously the ways that individuals both interact with and are acted upon by wearable self-tracking devices (e.g., Fitbits, Garmin watches, Apple iWatch) and other types of digital health technologies (Lupton, 2016, 2017, 2019; Millington, 2017; Neff & Nafus, 2016; Smith & Vonthethoff, 2017). To the best of my knowledge, however, scarce attention has been paid thus far to the *social dimensions* of self-tracking. This is notable given the proliferation of health and fitness apps and other web-based platforms that enable and encourage users to share the data produced while self-tracking. With a few notable exceptions, there has also been a relative lack of engagement with self-tracking technologies in relation to

running, specifically (see Esmonde, 2019, 2020; Lupton, 2017; Millington, 2014). This dissertation will extend this literature by considering the role(s) of self-tracking in the lives of runners, including a more specific focus on how runners use and make sense of Strava. In doing so, I reflect on some of the implications of social self-tracking in relation to the development and maintenance of forms of sport-based communities, like those related to running. I suggest that while digital self-tracking can be insightful and motivating for some runners, that the practice of social self-tracking invites us to consider questions related to digital (self-)surveillance, privacy, and the effects of rendering the active body differently visible through data. I note too how running is an activity with features that deserve attention in their own right, a point I discuss in more detail as I proceed through this dissertation.

Finally, and relatedly, much of the sociological research on running and running culture has historically been taken up in the United States and in European contexts (cf. Atkinson, 2010, 2015; Allen-Collinson, 2006, 2008; Nettleton, 2015; Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2013; Shipway & Jones, 2007; Smith, 1998; Tulle, 2007), with infrequent attention given to running culture and the experiences of runners in Canada. My proposed dissertation seeks to address this gap in the existing literature, as I consider the extent to which the Vancouver context in particular, as with other contexts, has features that are, on one hand, associated with particular modes of running culture and relationships with technologies – and on the other, are associated with more widespread and global forms.

1.1 This Document

As noted above, each of the following three chapters contain a case study that pertains to one or more of the themes, questions, and gaps in the literature noted in the previous section. What this means, too, is that each chapter contains a review of relevant literature and a separate methods,

findings, and discussion and conclusions sections of its own. In this way, while these chapters are related, each is written in such a way that it might be read on its own. As noted above, readers will notice that Chapter Two is substantially longer than Chapters Three and Four that follow as this chapter is designed to lay the foundation upon which the subsequent chapters are built. Readers will also notice that there is some repetition between the chapters, perhaps most notably in the explanations of methods, given that each was part of the same overall project. However, despite their differences in length, these chapters are designed to be read together and the studies include implicit and explicit references to one another.

In what follows, I begin by outlining the overarching methodological approach that informs this dissertation. Included here is a discussion of, and rationale for, the methods used to carry out the studies, and some of the ethical considerations of this work. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief (and admittedly unexpected) proem of sorts, in which I acknowledge and reflect upon the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on this research.

1.2 Method(ology)

In this section, I describe and discuss the overarching methodological approach that informs and guides this dissertation. I begin with a brief overview of ethnography and outline of how my paradigmatic assumptions inform and guide my research. Among other things, I discuss some of the reasons why I am drawn to ethnography as a methodological approach and highlight some of the methodological considerations and ethical commitments that have influenced this research.

1.2.1 Critical Interpretivism and (Physical) Cultural Studies

This dissertation is located within and guided by a critical interpretivist approach to cultural studies. Samantha King (2005) has suggested that a cultural studies approach to sport studies can

be generative, in part, since the former is often radically contextual but has been critiqued as lacking the methodological rigidity that often characterizes ‘traditional’ sport studies. The role of cultural studies in sport studies and physical culture, generally, has been to understand the experiences of people, groups, cultural texts, and representations, each within a broader context of political and economic structures (Gruneau, 1983; Hall, 1980; Vertinsky & Hargreaves, 2006; Willis, 1993). King (2005) explains that “cultural studies approaches to sport are distinctive” to the extent that the objects and subjects of inquiry are “always analyzed within the context of a [larger] network of economic, political, and social linkages that produce and give meaning to them” (p. 21). Cultural studies can help us interrogate and reflect upon some of the ways in and through which “sporting practices, texts, subcultures, institutions, and events... are shaped by ‘society’ and in turn shape ‘society’” (King, 2005).

Much has been written about an embodied turn in cultural studies – a moment characterized in part by more than a cursory acknowledgement of the body but, instead, by an overt – even radical – engagement with the body as a site of knowledge and as a way of knowing. Though not without some debate, there has been somewhat of a delineation in recent years between an overarching ‘sociology of sport’, which Atkinson (2011) describes as “an academically recognized and accepted disciplinary umbrella term for sociocultural researchers in the field drawing sporadic disciplinary influence from sociology, anthropology, political science, history, economics, human geography, health studies, epidemiology, media and communications, women’s studies, business and management and social psychology” and what has come to be referred to as *Physical Cultural Studies* (PCS) (see Andrews, 2008; Atkinson, 2011; Silk & Andrews, 2011; Giardina & Newman, 2011; Vertinsky & Weedon, 2017). PCS has been described as “advance[ing] the critical and theoretical analysis of physical culture, in all its myriad forms”, to the extent that PCS research is

“dedicated to the contextually based understanding of the corporeal practices, discourses, and subjectivities through which active bodies become organized, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power (Andrews, 2008, p. 54). As noted by Vertinsky and Weedon (2017):

[a] common thread running through the sociology of sport and PCS is the influence of cultural studies, not as a ‘parent discipline’ but as an eclectic field of critical, politically engaged inquiry. Whereas sociology has historically held scant regard for matters of sport and the body, cultural studies’ pursuit of the ways in which the communicative (and somatic) practices of everyday life are invested with power served to inform and to endorse social scientific studies of sport. (p. 19)

As described by Donnelly and Atkinson (2015), there are two key strands typically associated with interpretive sociology. *Hermeneutic analyses* involve the interpretation of various ‘texts’ and “message systems or signification processes – material, visual, embodied, symbolic, linguistic – developed by humans to communicate meanings to each other” and *ethnographic analyses* involves a more involved and emplaced type of research, in which the researcher “attempts to place [themselves] as closely as possible to those being studied in order to achieve the most comprehensive sense of the social formation and cultural practices under study” (Donnelly & Atkinson, 2015, p. 31). While each can offer significant insights in their own right, these two methodological approaches often also converge, particularly in the case of subcultural research. Subcultural researchers often spend a great deal of time immersed in a particular (sub)culture and, in addition to participant observation and interviews, various cultural products of subcultures are also often included as part of the analysis, in an attempt to get a more complete picture of the groups or culture(s) in question. Importantly, interpretivist accounts are never neutral or objectively ‘real’ accounts of social reality but, rather,

researchers strive to compare and interpret other people’s interpretations of the world – to make sense of how people make sense of the world. Any experience under empirical scrutiny and eventually represented in a textual document is multiply layered

by a range of subjective interpretations – giving even more credibility to the interpretivist ontological assumption that no experience can be perfectly (realistically) represented. All representations are thus narrated approximations of ‘some’ truth. (Donnelly & Atkinson, 2015, p. 35).

Put differently, critical interpretivists generally acknowledge that their contributions to the production of knowledge are not only context-dependent but are also shaped by the researcher's own positionality.

There is great value in bringing together a critical interpretivist approach with (physical) cultural studies. One of my methodological commitments is to draw attention to and emphasize the “multiple, sometimes contradictory, fluid, and even fleeting, ways of knowing” that can emerge from ethnographic methods (Thorpe & Olive, 2016, p. 126). This dissertation is a study of “social bodies and physical cultures...situated...at the intersecting vectors of power, knowledge, and identity” and, in accordance with my own onto-epistemological beliefs, it was important that I “purposefully locate and negotiate [my] researching bod[y] among [those] bodies in/of movement” under study (Giardina & Newman, 2011, p. 524)¹. Giardina and Newman (2011) invite us to consider that critical scholars

would do well to begin thinking about the research act of [physical] cultural studies as necessarily being ‘an embodied activity’ (Coffey, 1999, p. 59). To ignore such an understanding, posits Kristy Nabhan-Warren (2011) ‘is to occlude lived experience and how our bodies are epistemological sites that allow us privileged access to our interlocutor’s worlds’ (p. 378).

Donnelly and Atkinson (2015) suggest that “[c]ontemporary ‘neo-interpretivist’ researchers have diversified the form, content, and purpose of qualitative means of knowing in the wake of the relative ‘death’ of realism” (p. 36) and, with this in mind, readers will note that certain narrative

¹ Though there are a number of sections of this dissertation that are written from a first-person perspective, this is not an autoethnography. Rather, I employ first-person narrative accounts to offer the reader a ‘view from the inside’ of the research(er). This reflects a commitment to acknowledging my experiences and my bodily presence in the work.

elements of this dissertation might best be described as postmodern approaches to representation. In Chapter Three, for instance, alongside findings yielded from ‘traditional’ ethnographic methods including interviews and sustained observation, I employ (auto)ethnographic narratives as a means of weaving myself and my stories – as a Strava user, as a runner, and as a researcher – into the fold, in an attempt to create space for and give voice to some of the tensions and discomforts that coexist alongside (and at times complicate) the joys and entertainment afforded by my use of the platform. According to Smith and Sparkes (2008), “narratives are both a way of telling about our lives” but also function as “a means of knowing” (p. 18). They remind us that stories “have the potential to investigate agency and structure” by offering insights into aspects of socio-cultural life (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 18; see also Richardson, 2000).

1.2.2 Ethnography

Ethnography is perhaps one of the most well-established qualitative research methods, with a rich and diverse history spanning not only decades, but centuries; as early as Ancient Greece, researchers have sought to explore and vividly describe various cultures (King-White, 2017). Atkinson (2016) explains that the term *ethnography* “is often quite loosely applied to any qualitative research project where the in-situ observation of, and interaction with others is used to provide an inductive, detailed, in-depth description of cultural practices” (p. 49). Indeed, ethnographers are concerned with producing what Clifford Geertz (1973) famously termed ‘thick descriptions’ and, epistemologically, are guided by the belief that “theoretical knowledge about cultures is best generated by direct contact and experience with members of a culture over time” (Atkinson, 2016, p. 50).

The roots of the ethnographic tradition stem from anthropology and, as described by Markula & Silk (2011), the stereotypical anthropological ethnographer is often imagined as “a heroic male

figure engaged in an exotic, unknown, distant and dangerous field with previously unresearched ‘natives’ or dangerous criminals” (p. 161). And there is reason why this idea persists in the dominant imaginary. The ethnographic tradition is bound up with colonial enterprises to the extent that many early anthropological ethnographers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as (but not limited to) Bronislaw Malinowski (1967), were concerned with exploring and explaining ‘primitive’ cultures, but also comparing them and classifying them based on their time spent living (albeit temporarily) amongst those groups under study.

Although much of the work carried out by contemporary ethnographers has moved away from a reductionist and near-wholly descriptive approach, contemporary sociological ethnographic methods owe a lot to anthropology and also to the study of human lived experience characteristic of symbolic interactionism (Prus, 1996). As Silk (2012) explains,

[t]he groundbreaking work of Herbert Blumer, and others at the Chicago School interested in understanding different patterns of life within Chicago – from the high society of the ‘gold coast’ to the slum ghettos of ‘Little Sicily’ – and the classic works of Whyte (1943) and Becker, Geer, Hughes and Strauss (1961) developed, transformed and transcended the accepted boundaries of social science. (p. 65)

One of the things that characterizes ethnography is the researcher’s commitment to spending extensive time spent in the field (Atkinson, 2016; Hammersley, 1992; 2006; Markula & Silk, 2011). As Hammersley (2006) explains,

[f]or most anthropologists, from the early twentieth century at least until fairly recently, ethnography involved actually living in the communities of the people being studied, more or less round the clock, participating in their activities to one degree or another as well as interviewing them, collecting genealogies, drawing maps of the locale, collecting artefacts, and so on. (p.4)

An ethnographic approach emphasizes the importance of studying what people do and what people say in particular contexts. Early anthropologists would often spend at least a year in the field and, in many cases, several years. Of course, it is far less common today for ethnographers to live, day

in and day out, with those they study. Instead, many sociological ethnographers immersed in a particular group or culture observe ‘part time’; that is, they spend time with and amongst groups of people whenever or wherever they interact and meet (Hammersley, 2006). Importantly, and as I describe in greater detail below, what it looks like to spend time ‘in the field’ has changed. Digital ethnographers, for instance, can study groups and cultures from the comfort of their homes which, while by no means absolved from critiques, invites a reconceptualizing of what ‘counts’ as ethnographic fieldwork.

There is a well-established history of scholars who have used ethnographic methods to study sport, physical culture, and the body. Over the past thirty years, in particular, a number of compelling and empirically rich ethnographic projects have been carried out by sport scholars (e.g. Atkinson, 2012; Darnell, 2010; Newman, 2007; Olive & Thorpe, 2011; Silk, 2002; Wacquant, 2004; Wheaton, 2004; 2013). Atkinson (2016) suggests that one of “ethnography’s enduring contribution[s] to the study of the human condition in sport and exercise cultures (or elsewhere) perhaps rests on its foundational interest in unpacking the ways in which people “experience embodied life daily within small groups [and] institutions” (p. 50). In my view, this is among the most compelling reasons to engage with ethnography as an overarching methodology. I am drawn to the inherent and overtly subjective nature of ethnographic research and by the insights that are made possible when the researcher is openly acknowledged, interrogated, and written into the research text (Fusco, 2008). I am also drawn to the ways that skilled ethnographers can produce erudite research-driven narratives that can yield new information, or perhaps invite a rethinking or reconceptualization of existing ideas or phenomena, in ways that are relatively more accessible to a wider audience than academic circles alone. If, or when, we consider recent calls for an engaged

and engaging public sociology of sport (see Donnelly, 2015; Cooky, 2017), this, to me, is one of ethnography's greatest strengths.

Despite claims that "all ethnography is realist ethnography through the act of representational claims-making" (Atkinson, 2019, n.p.), realist ethnographies (and, by association, realist ethnographers) have been critiqued as being somewhat naïve if or when we consider that a culture or community is not wholly knowable simply by virtue of spending time in it (Hammersley, 1992). Importantly, Atkinson (2012) explains that "rather than applying theoretical assumptions a priori about the meaning, significance and experience" of any one culture or community under study, that "theorising is best accomplished via sustained engagement with actors 'out there' in one context or another" (p. 32). He further suggests that "in order to understand, translate and conceptually explain how cultures function...one needs to become a member of that culture" (Atkinson, 2012, p. 25, 36).

1.2.3 Digital Ethnography

As noted above, ethnographic research typically involves prolonged periods of time spent in the field and observation is widely understood as the primary source of ethnographic data since ethnographers immerse themselves in spaces and places where those who participate in the culture of interest meet and interact. Ethnographers document what they see, hear, think, and feel. Christine Hine (2015) suggests that since people's lives are increasingly-saturated with various forms of computer-mediated communication, and since "mediated communications are a significant part of what people do," it should be taken as "self-evident that the [contemporary] ethnographer needs to take part in those mediated communications alongside whatever face-to-face interactions may occur" (p. 3). Online ethnographies, cyber-ethnographies, netnographies, virtual ethnographies (Hine, 2000) and digital ethnographies (Pink, 2016) each share a certain

characteristic – they take place online – and while these different terms might reflect small differences in methodological approaches, they also tend to reflect the eras in which these studies were carried out.

Since the emergence of online and digital ethnographies in the late 20th century, there has often been a distinction made between online, or ‘virtual’, worlds and offline, or ‘physical’, worlds (see Boellstorff et al., 2012; Markham & Baym, 2009). However, there are a growing number of scholars who suggest that it is a mostly “unproductive abstraction to make a sharp distinction between the physical world and the virtual world” (Albrechtslund, 2008, n.p.). Postill and Pink (2012) propose that the relatively recent shift to Web 2.0 “provide[s] opportunities for rethinking internet research methodologically,” and they propose the concept of ‘ethnographic place’ is especially helpful in this regard (p. 124). Ethnographic places, they suggest, “are not bounded territories or groups/communities” but, rather, should be conceptualized as “clusters or intensities of things of which both localities and socialities are elements” (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 124). Since online social networks and other digital “technologies are often part of how ethnographic research participants navigate their wider social, material and technological worlds”, it is helpful to consider how these online milieus can be understood as one of many pieces of a larger ethnographic field (Postil & Pink, 2012, p. 124).

For many, digital ethnographic work has often been understood and described as adapting ‘traditional’ ethnographic methods to online milieus. Albeit not without controversy, online ethnography has been framed by some as a shortcut, of sorts, to the extent that massive quantities of data are at the fingertips of researchers (Kozinets, 2006). Perhaps unsurprisingly, some have drawn parallels to the so-called armchair ethnographic approach that characterized early ethnographic work, not least since researchers could, quite literally, conduct all of their research

from an armchair. Perhaps in response to this dichotomy (and the limits thereof), but also in response to the “the very real technological changes that continue to alter the ways in which we communicate”, Liz Przybylski (2020) invites us to consider how *hybrid ethnography* can be a useful conceptual and methodological approach to fieldwork to the extent that it is sensitive to contemporary ways of knowing, being, and behaving in the world.

1.2.4 Hybrid Ethnography

Wilson (2006) suggests that “a multi-site and multi-method approach is [both] sensible and desirable” when a researcher is “concerned with tracing connections/relationships between online forms of social organization...and offline interactions and action” (p. 310). As described in greater detail in Chapters Two and Three, which follow, I learned early on in my time in the field that members of the run crew community congregate in person but also routinely interact online and, thus, my observant participation transcended a uniquely physical *or* digital domain. That is, though I spent a great deal of time running and socializing with folks ‘in person’, I also (re)connected with runners online. Hine (2015) suggests that a multifaceted approach to ethnography – one that focuses both “on how lives are lived and how technologies are adopted [by] and adapted” to those people and cultures under study – is “a promising way to capture what is distinctive” about communities (p. 2).

As noted above, ethnographers have long been understood as observers, as analysts, and as storytellers. As Geertz (1973) noted, “[t]he ethnographer ‘inscribes’ social discourse; *he [sic] writes it down*” (p. 19). Of course, there is much more to it than that. As Przybylski (2020) notes, ethnographic research is relational; “texts, understandings, and records already exist through performance, embodied knowledge, and writing” and one of the things that ethnographers are tasked with doing is making sense of these, apart and in tandem, to help contextualize a particular

group or culture under study (p. 2). She explains, however, that in ways that Geertz and his contemporaries could neither have imagined nor anticipated, “[i]n the 21st century, many participants are documenting themselves” (p. 2).

This is true with video, audio, photos, and the commentary that individuals create [and it] is also true of the plethora of media and text that participants share online. No longer is it a privileged role to be the only one documenting an event, choosing what to record, and sharing details with others. (Przybylski, 2020, p. 2).

Not unlike physical or online ethnographic work, hybrid ethnographic work involves extensive participation and observation but also involves attending to (and accounting for) data that transcends (or perhaps disrupts) a distinctly physical or digital component of the culture under study. In this way, Przybylski (2020) suggests, hybrid ethnography is far from a shortcut, since the “research site has many aspects, and it takes dedicated time and attention to become an active, culturally aware participant across all of them” (p. 4).

There is great value in drawing attention to the ways that social relationships in and across online and offline spaces can share certain characteristics. As I hope to highlight in the chapters that follow, however, while communication might be ostensibly similar across physical and digital milieus, what it looks like, and what it can feel like, to know someone offline, *in person*, can look and feel quite different than knowing them exclusively online. That is, to see someone in person is (at least for the time being) distinct from seeing a digital representation of them, as reflected in an app. This is one of the many reasons why a commitment to a hybrid ethnographic approach, as described by Przybylski (2020), is a uniquely appropriate way of attending to the research questions described above.

1.2.5 Research and reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity is understood to be integral to a critical interpretivist approach and rather than an afterthought should be “the very basis by which fieldwork is done” (Nabhan-Warren, 2011, p. 384). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) offer that research is “an interactive process shaped by one’s personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity and those of the people in the setting” (p. 5). As a white, cisheterosexual, masculine presenting, educated male, for instance, it is important that I reflect upon the ways that my own experiences and social position(s) can (and no doubt do) inform and influence the way I interpret my time in the field and the data I collect. Thorpe and Olive (2016) note that researchers’ actions, and even their very presence in the field, has the ability to influence “the interactions, relationships and observations they are able to access...those that are focused on” and also, importantly, those that might be ignored or otherwise unseen (p. 133).

I am inspired too by Simon’s (2013) suggestion that researchers must attend to “the interplay between what we do know (or think we know) and what we don’t know or don’t want to know, and what we desire of and for ourselves and accept as our responsibilities” (p. 134). It is a loaded statement, to be sure, one that invites me to consider important facets of the researcher-researched relationship. I take this to mean an acknowledgement of all that which I ‘bring with me’ into my research. As noted above, this includes various subject positions and privileges, but also my prior experience(s) as a runner, my fluency in the subcultural jargon and the like. It also acknowledges the importance of being attentive to any assumptions and biases related thereto.

I know a great deal about running and digital self-tracking, both as a ‘practitioner’ myself and also as a nascent scholar who is well-versed in associated bodies of literature. If we accept, as I certainly do, that ethnographers should “arrive at their objects of study aware that they do not yet know what they do not know,” it means we accept being open to new ways of seeing and

unlearning some of the things we think we know (Boellstorff, et al. 2012, p. 32). It means being open to disrupting my preconceptions and a willingness to ‘make the familiar strange’ (Foley, 1992), even if it means wrestling with and writing from a place of discomfort. An open and ongoing reflexive engagement with the subjects and objects of my study is both what I desire for myself as a researcher and at once something that I hold to be a responsibility. With this in mind, I am inspired by Granzow and Dean’s (2016) assertion that “we are not ever fully able to see how”, in addition to that which we purport to study, “*we* are the subjects and objects of our own inquiries” (p. 91, *emphasis added*). It is, in part, by attending to these questions and wrestling with these ideas, that I have been able to reconceptualize and articulate my place within and my influence upon all facets of the research process.

1.3 Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Behavioral Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia (certificate number: H17-02787). Each of the research participants were supplied with written material that outlined the purpose of the study, the objectives, and the potential risks before participating. I emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary and that participants could refuse to partake in any part of the study and/or withdraw their consent at any time, without penalty.

1.3.1 Other Ethical Considerations

Previous studies have highlighted some of the ethical concerns that may arise in the ‘doing’ of ethnographic research (see Wilson, 2006; Laurendeau, 2011; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). Navigating issues of insider/outsider status and decisions about the extent to which my research was covert were important elements that I had to carefully consider and routinely re-visit at various

stages throughout the research process. In what follows, I discuss some of these concerns as it pertains to my proposed research.

1.3.2 Disclosure and Anonymity

This dissertation research involved prolonged time spend in the field but, as I discuss in greater detail in the chapters that follow, what ‘time in the field’ looked like varied greatly. In short, my participation and my observations took place both in-person and online. With regard to the run crew study, featured in Chapter Two, I decided early on that my disclosure would be semi-covert. I say semi-covert since I was not convinced that there was anything to be gained (and possibly something to be lost) by publically declaring that I was a doctoral researcher each and every time that I showed up for a group run². Not only would this have been disruptive but also, importantly, there is a chance that this may have risked influencing whether or how people interact with me. With this being said, I was never purposefully deceptive. That is, countless conversations took place, and it was not uncommon for conversations to segue into what I did for work, for instance. There were times when my disclosing that I was a PhD student was met with little more than an “Oh, neat.”, but there were other times when folks were more interested in learning more about what it was that I was studying, and I was always forthcoming in this regard. Admittedly, how (well) I explained what it was *exactly* that I was studying evolved slightly over time (not unlike it has in academic circles) but, importantly, I never shied away from disclosing that a central component of my project focused on run crews and Strava. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this information was often very well received by runners (who, more often than not, were also Strava users).

² This was a point I was forced to negotiate with the REB on this point. I had to make the case that this would not only risk disrupting the activity but might also compromise the integrity of my research.

As Bundon (2016) describes, there are a number of important methodological considerations about conducting research online – and these were noteworthy for me when negotiating my research in online spaces. Not unlike those who study offline groups, researchers who participate in online research environments need to consider, for instance, their level of their involvement with, and disclosure to, those they are studying. They must also make certain decisions about how (in)visible they will be (Bundon, 2016). A researcher might decide to partially or fully disclose their presence in online spaces; one might be a mere observer or, alternatively, be an observant participant (Wacquant, 2004) in the online space. Bundon (2016) suggests that for those who are already ‘insiders’ of a particular online space or community, ‘lurking’ – a term used to describe someone who “consume[s] online content...but who do[es] not themselves post comments or do anything that would alert other members of the online group of their virtual presence” – may not be a viable nor desirable option. With regard to the second study I conducted for this dissertation, on Strava and social self-tracking, featured in Chapter Three, I chose not to publically³ disclose that I was a researcher. Practically, I felt that this would risk influencing both the frequency and type(s) of interactions I might have with other Strava users online. With this being said, over the course of the research, many of the individuals who I routinely engaged with online learned of the research, whether through their own participation or simply from other conversations.

1.3.3 Insider/Outsider Research

As many have previously discussed, what is often referred to as the insider-outsider dialectic in ethnography, and the question of whether one’s ‘position’ provides a researcher with a clear (dis)advantage, has been a source of debate for many years (see Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994;

³ In the context of online interactions, publicly would mean purposefully creating a post, for instance, that ‘outs’ me as a researcher or including my institutional affiliation in my username.

Holmes, 2020). There are some clear advantages to an insider position, both with regard to gaining access to – and the ability to be seen as part of – the group(s) being studied, and also in terms of being able to ask meaningful and nuanced questions to interviewees (since the researcher likely has a degree of familiarity and a priori knowledge prior to entering the field). But there are also distinct disadvantages. Wacquant (2002) warns that ethnographers "can get so close to [their] subjects that [their perspective] ends up parroting their point of view without linking it to the broader system of material and symbolic relations that give it meaning and significance" which risks "reducing sociological analysis to the collection and assembly of folk notions and vocabularies of motives" (p. 1523).

I have given a lot of thought to my insider-outsider status since the early days of the research design, both since there is a lot to consider and also since it is not necessarily a clear cut distinction. For instance, I am a runner who chose to study a particular facet of running culture, which means that, from one perspective, I could be considered a cultural insider. I am reasonably well-versed in the language of running, for example, as well as many of the practices, rumours, trends, and historical events associated with running, both as a sport and as a recreational endeavour. These cultural elements no doubt inform and thus influence how I think, talk, and write about running, in part, since they have come to be "habitual, routine, mundane, and repeated" elements of my everyday (Boellstorff, et al., 2012, p. 31). Of course, to acknowledge this is to accept and appreciate that this level of familiarity might also render me less likely to 'see' certain things that a non-runner researcher might.

From another perspective, when I first started attending group runs in the city of Vancouver, I was the 'new guy'. I was not a member of any one running group but, as a runner, I carried some existing subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996) which might have helped to establish some credibility

(and perhaps a sense of commonality). Over the past three years, however, not only has this relationship changed but also relationships have been formed. Where once I was an outsider with ‘insider’ information (as a runner), I am now an insider with ‘outsider’ perspectives (as a researcher).

As Herod (1999) suggests, there is also an argument that a rigid binary understanding of insider *or* outsider is an artificial construct that can be an unhelpful abstraction.

if both the researcher and the interviewee are co-partners in the production of knowledge about particular events and processes, there remains the question as to whether it even really makes sense or is useful to talk about a dichotomy of ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’, particularly given that the positionality of both may change through and across such categories over time or depending upon what attributes of each one’s identities are stressed. (Herod, 1999, p. 325)

In a similar vein, Mercer (2007) has proposed that the insider/outsider dichotomy should, instead, be conceptualized as a continuum since “all researchers constantly move back and forth along several axes, depending on time, location, participants, and topic” (p. 1).

Finally, Silk (2005) suggests that doing and “writing ethnography goes beyond description and neutral representation” and that ethnographic writing often involves “reconstructions of social life that require[s] contextualization, reframing, interpretation and judgement of participants voices, actions and meanings” (p. 84). With this in mind, decisions about whose voices are included in this work, but also *how* they are included, has meant being attuned to what Palmer (2016) describes as ‘ethics in practice’, not least since these considerations “are not merely textual strategies but are political concerns that have moral consequences” (Sparkes, 1995, p. 159). Silk (2005) explains that ethnographic researchers can often form lasting bonds and friendships with the people they meet and interact with during the research process, in part, since there is often an emotional investment in these relationships. I take Silk’s caution seriously and have been and will remain committed to an ongoing relational ethics. The extent to which I will disengage fully from

the communities and the individuals that have been central to this study has yet to be seen, which makes these ethical considerations about representation ever the more significant.

1.4 Acknowledging the Unexpected

In the words of Wally Lamb (1998), I know this much is true; graduate school can be full of ‘ups and downs’. But I like to think we should expect some degree of challenge while completing a challenging degree. Some students will wrestle with the demands of coursework and others will struggle to land on an appropriate or manageable project. Some might struggle with the intricacies of research design or with decidedly more abstract questions related to onto-epistemological perspectives. However difficult each of these might be in the moment (and I want to be clear that each of these can be *incredibly* difficult in their own right), these are nevertheless examples of what might be considered expected hurdles. Sure, they might look and feel decidedly different from one person to the next, but each is more or less ‘part of the experience’.

A global pandemic is an unexpected hurdle. No, perhaps it’s more akin to a series of hurdles, each of differing heights and distances, with no clear indication about how many lay ahead. Suffice it to say that the pandemic added some challenges to my dissertation research. For example, certain elements of my data collection were interrupted. With all forms of sport and social gatherings cancelled, a central component of my fieldwork unexpectedly came to a grinding halt. A number of interviews that had been scheduled were rescheduled. Some were postponed several times, and other unfortunately ‘fell through the cracks’ altogether. I like to remind myself that these things happen in the best of times, and I appreciate that this particular moment in time (by which I mean early March through to July of 2020 – when the final parts of my data collection were scheduled to take place) was an especially stressful time for many people, who were navigating uncharted waters.

It would be disingenuous were I not to acknowledge that, in addition to some of the practical obstacles, one of the most serious impacts of the pandemic relates to my own mental health. I can say with some degree of confidence that this influenced the completion of this research more substantially than any of the other unforeseen adjustments. Some really compelling work has shed light on graduate education and mental health (see, for example, Fogg, 2009) and, similarly, with regard to early career researchers (Bunds, 2021), and there is already a substantial body of work that has highlighted some of the deleterious effects of the pandemic on mental health (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020) and on education. There is little in the way of precedent, however, when it comes to how best to navigate a pandemic whilst navigating the late stages of a doctoral degree. Even if there was, I'm not entirely convinced it would have helped. The shuttering of all on campus activity (and, thus, finding myself at greater distance from colleagues and mentors), prolonged bouts of social isolation, combined with a general malaise and heightened anxiety was, at times, nothing short of debilitating, particularly as someone who struggles with anxiety and depression in non-pandemic times. Add to this, concerns about the health and wellbeing of family members and I found that my productivity would often oscillate between bouts of binge-writing and utter apathy.

Alongside adversity, however, came opportunity. Perhaps chief among these is evidenced by Chapter Four, a wholly unanticipated component of this dissertation, but one that I feel nevertheless contributes to the project in meaningful ways. As above, the pandemic required that I adapt methodologically; some interviews were conducted online (not the type of 'face time' I was expecting to have with these folks), and my observations shifted from a hybrid 'ethnographic place' (Postil & Pink, 2012) to an exclusively digital domain. Importantly, those moments that were especially difficult to navigate, both as a nascent scholar and as a citizen of the world more broadly, were also opportunities for personal and professional growth. Of course, such a

perspective reflects a vantage point that is only made possible 'from the other side' (of the experience, not the pandemic). Put differently, I learned a lot as a result of, and in spite of, the pandemic and I am indebted to some memorable and motivating conversations with friends and colleagues who, in some of the most tumultuous and angst-ridden times, reminded me that while it can take many forms, learning is, after all, 'what it's all about'.

2 Consuming ‘crew-mmunity’: Exploring the urban run crew scene in Vancouver, B.C.

2.1 Prologue

One of the very first things I did when I moved to Vancouver in the summer of 2016 was seek out a group to run with. My partner and I didn’t know anyone in the city, and we agreed that finding a running group felt like a fun and fruitful way to meet people and explore the city at the same time. A quick search online was admittedly overwhelming; there were just so many options. We settled on a group that met relatively close to home.

We didn’t run far that first Tuesday night, and the pace was a little slower than we expected, but the people were really friendly. It felt so good to get out and explore our new city a bit. I remember thinking the group was probably catered to more of a ‘new runner’ crowd (which we were not), but it was a place to start. As we were getting ready to head back to the car, we started chatting with one of the other runners. She was great. She welcomed us to the group, and to Vancouver, and we chatted for a while about running, about racing, and about how great it was to be a runner in Vancouver. We learned that she had moved to Vancouver a few months prior, from the UK, and that she ran with this group from time to time but her ‘main’ running group met on Thursdays. She suggested that if we didn’t have anything planned, that we should come check it out. It was a bigger group, she explained, that catered to all paces, from the casual-conversational pace to the super speedy. “I think you’ll really enjoy it,” she said, “It’s an awesome crew”.

Two days later, just after 6pm, we arrived outside a storefront on 1st avenue, a couple blocks from the beach, in the heart of the Kitsilano, a vibrant neighbourhood just south of the city’s downtown core. A handful of runners were mingling on the sidewalk, smiling, and chatting amongst themselves. We were clearly in the right place. We walked past them, smiling silently, as we made our way up a short set of stairs into a beautiful boutique running store. Vibrantly coloured

apparel ‘popped’ against an all-white backdrop, though it was admittedly difficult to take it all in amid the flurry of bodies milling about in restless anticipation. No less than thirty (maybe forty?) people were in this small space; the chatter was loud, and the energy was palpable. All of a sudden, a loud voice interrupted, and the room quickly fell mostly silent, save a few whispers.

“Okay, okay, let’s get goin’!! If I can have everyone’s attention for just a couple minutes, we’ve got a couple quick announcements and then we can head out into the heat. First, as always, welcome to Flight Crew! How we doin’?! I see a lot of familiar faces this week, but there’s a bunch of new faces too, which is great. Welcome! I wanna give a quick shout-out to our friends from East Van Run Crew - I see a few of them have joined us tonight. Great to see you guys.

For those of you who haven’t run with us before, my name is Rob, and I’m one of the co-owners of Vancouver Running Company. Flight Crew meets every Thursday, right here at the shop. We are a ‘no drop’ crew, meaning no matter your pace, you’re in the right place. We’ve got this lovely team of run leaders to my right - raise your hands real quick - these folks will lead and ‘sweep’ each of the groups tonight. We’ll also have a person running mid-pack to make sure that no one misses a turn or anything. As always, we’ve got a 5 and a 10k route. For those that are new, the 5k route stays the same for each month. This month’s route heads down to the water and along Point Grey road for a nice out-and-back. The 10k group will head out over Burrard Bridge into downtown. We’re gonna do a similar loop to last week; we’ll head through the West End to Coal Harbour, over to Gastown, down and across to the seawall and back over the bridge to the shop. Lastly, for those who are interested, it’s the last Thursday of the month, which means that we’re headed next door after the run for pizza and beer - all are welcome - and, uh, I think that pretty much covers it. Be safe out there and have a great run everybody!”

Chatter erupted the moment he stopped talking. A massive crowd of people funneled out the door, down the stairs, and onto the sidewalk below. It was a lot to take in. I had no frame of reference whatsoever for the route, but it didn’t matter. I had a feeling this was exactly what I’d been looking for. Follow the leader; got it. It’s hard to get lost when you’re running with a pack of forty people through downtown, right?

2.2 Introduction

Running has been one of the most popular ways to develop and maintain health and physical fitness for well over half a century (Abbas, 2004; Bale, 2004; Chase, 2008; Millington, 2018). As a form of physical activity that can be done virtually anywhere, millions of people

around the world lace-up their shoes every day and ‘hit the ground running’ for a variety of reasons. Some run to lose weight or to help maintain a lean body, others run as a form of relaxation or as a way to spend time outside and reconnect with the natural environment (Howe & Morris, 2009). Others are drawn to running as a social practice and find that running with and among other people can be a fun and motivating way to be physically active and meet and *be* with other people in meaningful ways (Allen-Collinson, 2008; Shipway & Holloway, 2010).

In recent years, the urban run ‘crew’ has emerged as a powerful and increasingly popular form of social running, particularly in large metropolitan centers around the world. Simply put, run crews are non-competitive social running groups that typically meet weekly, often at night, and take to the streets of their city en masse. Described as an ‘alternative running movement’ (Gearhart, 2016, n.p.), run crews are said to have first emerged in New York City, in 2004, but this ‘movement’ of runners has steadily grown in popularity over the past decade. A number of feature stories on run crew have appeared in various running-related blog posts and industry-leading magazines, including *Runner’s World* and *Canadian Running Magazine*. Despite this, and to the best of my knowledge, no empirical research has explored this discernible trend in the running industry which sees runners eschewing the label of a traditional running ‘club’ for a more ethos-driven (sub)cultural experience that “marries art, music, fashion and street culture” with contemporary running culture (Kreuzer, 2013, n.p.).

Given the well-established history of social and recreational running groups, which now spans over forty years, I am particularly interested in determining what (if anything) makes run crews unique. With this in mind, this chapter is guided by two overarching goals. The first is to present findings from an ethnographic study of the urban run crew scene in Vancouver, B.C. The second is to offer some reflections on these findings and, in particular, consider how run crews

function as sites of community that are often entwined with forms of consumption. Specifically, in this chapter, I seek to answer the following research questions:

- 1. What is a ‘run crew’, and how (or in what ways) are run crews similar to or different from other types of social running groups?**
- 2. How do members of the run crew community experience and make sense of their participation in these groups?**
- 3. What does this sporting trend tell us about the role of community – and links between community and consumption – in the contemporary moment?**

In what follows, I begin by providing some background information about running in Vancouver as a way of making a case for why this is both an appropriate and unique location for considering these questions. Next, I provide a brief overview of the theoretical framework and bodies of literature that are especially relevant to this project. Specifically, I provide a brief overview of research on sport (and) subcultures and outline some important theoretical debates and perspectives on the concept of community, both within and outside of sporting contexts. Included here is an engagement with the notion of ‘consumption communities’ as a way of considering the how feelings of community are sometimes integrally tied to consumer habits and brand loyalties.

I then describe and discuss the methods that were used to carry out this study before turning my attention to some of the key research findings, beginning in Chapter Two. Included in the findings is a focus on a range of notable features of the run crew itself – including: the overall structure of the run crew community; its ethos – i.e., its underlying values and the ways in which these are understood and articulated by members of this community; the role(s) and influence of run crews in the lives of members, and; the relationships between run crew culture and local businesses. My concern in this case is on with processes and nuances of group life in run crew

communities – a focus that is informed by and justified in relation to an interpretivist tradition in sociology that is underscored by assumptions about the need to attend to the processual elements of human group life. This includes attention to the meaning-making, identity negotiation, and community-building enterprise that emerges from intra-group interactions, and the central importance of (sub)cultural activity in this context (see Atkinson, 2003; Donnelly & Atkinson, 2015; Prus, 2005).

As well as offering a rich depiction of the groups I studied, I will consider a number of similarities between run crews and other previously studied social running groups, along with some noteworthy distinctions – distinctions that might tell us something about the socio-political and socio-historical moment that the crews emerged and exist within. In so doing I will be connecting research findings with a recent history of theoretical work concerning subcultures (and its variants) into the 21st century – concentrating especially on how membership in particular group formations might be seen as symbolic and practical responses to extant social conditions, and also as reflective of how widespread marketing and consumption practices have been infused into and through communities like run crews. In line with these points, I will suggest that run crew culture in Vancouver is characterized by at least two different types of consumption: the consumption of certain goods and services, and the consumption of a particular ethos. Put differently, I will discuss how many of these communities consume in a material sense, but also how an important element of run crew culture involves an intangible symbolic consumption of community. These themes and arguments are taken up and expanded on in Chapters Three and Four as well, but in those cases with a focus on digital technology and the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noteworthy here too that my emphasis here on socio-political and socio-historical contexts where the interpretive

underpinnings of this chapter are bridged with a cultural studies orientation (see Chapter 1 for more on my alignment with an integrated ‘critical interpretivist’ approach).

2.3 Background

2.3.1 Running in Vancouver: Canada’s largest running ‘community’

The city of Vancouver, British Columbia, has been recognized as “one of the premiere running destinations in Canada” (Weiss, 2017, para. 3). The former Olympic-host city boasts over three hundred parks, gardens, and beaches, and holds the record for the world’s longest uninterrupted waterfront path, making it both a widely sought-after tourist destination and desirable home for many athletes and other outdoor enthusiasts (City of Vancouver, 2017).

Following decades of steady growth, and leading up to the pandemic, participation numbers for running events of all distances were at an all-time high in Canada. The city of Vancouver especially is home to one of the most vibrant running communities in the country, due in part to its temperate West Coast climate, which makes running outside a viable option year-round. Running races ranging from five to fifty kilometers are held throughout the year, and the Vancouver Sun Run, a ten-kilometer road race in the downtown core, ranks among the largest events of its kind in North America, with as many as sixty-thousand runners towing the line each year on the third Sunday of April. The city also has a rich running history that dates back well over half a century. Now known as Empire Fields, the Empire Stadium in East Vancouver’s Hastings Park was the site of the ‘Miracle Mile’, a ground-breaking footrace between England’s Roger Bannister and Australia’s John Landy at the 1954 British Empire and Commonwealth Games – an event that marked the first time the four-minute mile had been broken by two men in the same race.

Of course, running in Vancouver is not always competitive. Recreational running groups meet each week in all corners of the city. Some of these are training-focused groups, such as Mile2Marathon, that was founded by Olympians Dylan Wykes and Michael Woods and sees runners collectively working towards a particular goal, such as completing their first marathon. Other groups focus less on competition and structured training and more on running as a leisurely recreational pursuit, first and foremost. This study focuses on the latter.

2.3.2 The rise of the urban ‘run crew’

In recent years, run crews have emerged as an incredibly popular type of social running group, particularly in large metropolitan centers around the world. Run crews are said to have first originated in New York City, around 2004, and soon spread to other cities, particularly other major running hubs such as London, Paris, Amsterdam, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Gross, 2017). A 2017 cover story in *Runner’s World* magazine, titled ‘When Did Running Get So Rad?’, explains that

[a]s the movement grew, what differentiated crews from clubs wasn’t just where, or when, or how they ran (everywhere, often at night, uncoached) but who was doing the running. Frequently, these were men and women who didn’t fit the traditional runner profile...They were, although few probably understood it at the time, the future of running. Today, urban running crews are proliferating at a mad pace, each with its own theme (diversity, intensity, wackiness), each organizing and drawing in new members via social media (Instagram in particular), but all united across thousands of miles by their love of running. (Gross, 2017, p. 47)

In Canada, both Vancouver and Toronto have well-established run crew scenes, but this is not to suggest that crews aren’t running in other major cities such as Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa, and Montreal. Each has witnessed a surge in run crew popularity in recent years and while journalistic accounts often frame these groups as an alternative to ‘traditional’ running groups, the trend has been described as “a powerful force in driving the current running boom and re-shaping it” (Canada Running Series, 2015).

Roughly a dozen of these groups meet each week in Vancouver, and take to the streets of the city en masse. The two largest of these groups, the East Vancouver Run Crew (EVRC) and the VRC Flight Crew Run Club (FCRC), each draw large numbers to their weekly group runs, attracting anywhere from twenty to as many as eighty people on Monday and Thursday nights, respectively. It's with this in mind that I sought to fully immerse myself in the Vancouver run crew community, in part, to learn more about the running crews who are apparently "changing the culture of running, block by block, city by city, beer by hard-earned beer" (Gross, 2017, p. 62) – and to consider how my observations and interpretations compare with popular depictions of this movement of runners.

2.4 Literature Review & Theoretical Overview

2.4.1 Running as a social practice

Over the past three decades, research on running has convincingly demonstrated that it can be a profoundly meaningful part of people's identities (Smith, 1998; Major, 2001; Allen-Collinson, 2008; Tulle, 2008; Griffin & Phoenix, 2014). Running researchers have highlighted how running often transcends the physical act itself and have drawn attention to some of the ways that running can be both a sensory-stimulating and highly affective experience (Hockey, 2004; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009). To run can be pleasurable, but it can also be painful; it can be exhilarating, *and* it can be exhausting. It can be any or all of these things at various times, sometimes all in the same run.

There is a sense that running is perhaps above all else an individual act, yet previous research suggests that many people find there is much to be gained by running with others. Research on running as a social practice has highlighted how being a member of a running community can be a meaningful and identity-affirming experience (Griffin & Phoenix, 2014;

Shipway & Holloway, 2010), and also how it can be a fun and community-building social practice (Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2012). Smith's (1998) study of road runners in England was among the first to examine the dynamics of social running groups and he found that people participated in organized running groups for a variety of reasons. For some, running as part of a group was about collegiality and camaraderie, first and foremost, but for others recreational running groups were seen to afford a level of 'built-in' friendly competition, that was an enjoyable part of the experience (Smith, 1998).

As Allen-Collinson (2013) describes, the act of running with others is both a complex and learned form of social (inter)action; it is a mutually-constitutive act that involves not only a uniformity of pace and direction but also a keen sense of spatial and bodily awareness. Previous research has also shed light on how running groups can also be important sites of knowledge production and knowledge acquisition. Shipway, Holloway, and Jones (2012), for instance, have demonstrated that running groups are spaces where runners can function as what Wright (2014) refers to as 'knowledge brokers', in this case, of running-related information. Learning happens in these spaces, both directly and indirectly, whether through conversation or simply by watching what other runners (do not) do. Put another way, running groups can be understood as important biopedagogical spaces, where runners can learn about and through running, but as others have highlighted, recreational running groups can also be experienced as sites of community (Pedersen, Pedersen, & Thing, 2018).

A unique and increasingly-popular example of this is an initiative called *parkrun*⁴. Founded in England, in 2004, the organization has seen massive growth and has been the focus of a number of studies by sport and leisure scholars in recent years (Bowness, McKendrick, & Tulle, 2020;

⁴ In accordance with the official trademarked name of the organization, *parkrun* is purposefully spelled in lowercase with the words 'park' and 'run' intentionally not spaced.

Bowness, Tulle, & McKendrick, 2021; Hindley, 2020; Stevinson, Wiltshire, & Hickson, 2015; Warhurst & Black, 2021; Wiltshire, Fullegar, & Stevinson, 2017). Unlike other types of social running groups, *parkrun* is a free, timed, event that attracts participants (known as ‘park runners’) young and old, who are free to run, jog, walk, or volunteer at the weekly event. According to its website, there are now more than 7 million registered ‘park runners’ across 20 countries, an estimated 350,000 of whom participate in a *parkrun* event each week (Parkrun, 2021). The initiative is widely promoted as being tied to community health and wellbeing, and is designed to be accessible for seasoned athletes and newcomers alike. Wiltshire, Fullegar, and Stevinson (2017) have highlighted how *parkrun* enthusiasts are drawn to the collegiality of the weekly event and have described the initiative as a ‘collective health practice’ “whereby participants simultaneously enact personal body projects” all the while experiencing “a sense of being ‘all in this together’” (p. 3). This communal experience, they suggest, “enables newly active participants to negotiate discourses of embodied risk to reconcile the otherwise paradoxical experience of being an ‘unfit-runner’” (Wiltshire, Fullegar, & Stevinson, 2017, p. 3).

2.4.2 Conceptualizing community

The word ‘community’ is a conceptually ambiguous term and, by some accounts, a wholly overused one (Wilson, 2006; Turkle, 2011). Community is defined in many different ways; it can be used to describe social relationships, or as another term for one or more geographical spaces. But community also often refers to a feeling, and this is one of the reasons it continues to resonate in our lives; there’s just something about the idea of community that feels good (Bauman, 2013). As Ingham and McDonald (2003) highlight, the word ‘community’, and indeed the very idea thereof, is often used as a symbol or as a signpost of a ‘good society’. They describe how changes brought about by modernity have not only made community increasingly rare, but also incredibly

desirable (perhaps because of this apparent rareness). They further suggest that this is by no means a contemporary ‘problem’ and that Ferdinand Tonnies (1957), whose concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (community and society) “stand at the heart of sociological commentaries concerning the social costs of modernization”, lamented the loss of community well over half a century ago (Ingham & McDonald, 2003, p. 18). Not unlike Weber (1978) and Cooley (1967), each of whom viewed modernity as a threat to human relationships, Tonnies felt strongly that if a decline in community was the problem, the changing face of modernity was one of the culprits.

To be sure, this concern about the changing shape, feel, and loss of community persists to this day. For decades, researchers across a variety of disciplines have observed and lamented the erosion of community, particularly in Western society (see Ife & Tesoriero, 2006; Oldenburg, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Traynor, 2012). In his ethnographic account of Canadian rave culture, Wilson (2006) describes how the rave scene held the potential for meaningful “transcendent connections among its members” and that the profound sense of ‘communal experience’ which characterized rave and clubcultures in and around the turn of the millennium was “both empowering [and] a symbolic reaction to the ‘loss of community’ described by other sociologists as characterizing late century and post-millennium culture” (Wilson, 2006, p. 158). From another perspective, technological theorist Sherry Turkle has written at length about Western culture’s growing technological dependency and, more specifically, about the ways that human interaction is increasingly mediated through technology. As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three, Turkle (2011) suggests that one of the most serious consequences of this wide-scale modern shift is that it can negatively influence our ability to form meaningful connections with one another as we once did. To hear her tell it, unlike the warmth afforded by ‘traditional’ communities, we are paradoxically more connected and yet more alone than ever before (Turkle, 2011).

2.4.3 Subcultures (of sport) and the ‘neo-tribe’

The term subculture is often used in the context of what are known as ‘lifestyle sports’, which include the likes of skateboarding, snowboarding, parkour, rock climbing, and surfing (Wheaton, 2013). The term reflects, among other things, the way that many of these sports are associated with a rejection of the common ethos of rigid competition – and a tendency, instead, to embrace and emphasize style (Beal, 1995), affect (Evers, 2006), flow-seeking (Atkinson, 2009), and a connection to nature (Wheaton, 2013; Thorpe, 2008; 2010). There is also a rich tradition of critical sport scholars who have engaged with subcultural studies to explore different aspects of both traditional and non-traditional sport (Williams & Donnelly, 1985; Ingham & MacDonald, 2012; Atkinson, 2011; 2012; Newman, 2007; Laurendeau, 2011; Crosset & Beal, 1997). Importantly, some scholars have also criticized the way the term ‘subculture’ is often (mis)used as a ‘catch-all’ for various social groups. For example, Bennett (1999) suggests that many of the contemporary groups referred to in the literature as subcultures lack both the coherence and rigidity that originally characterized the youth subculture movement in Britain. He proposes, instead, borrowing from Maffesoli (1987) the concept of the ‘neo-tribe’ – a term that Bennett suggests is perhaps a more useful when attempting to explain and describe contemporary social groups.

Maffesoli (1987) used the term *tribus* to represent “a counterthesis to discourses of social fragmentation and individualisation” that he felt were characteristic of a contemporary moment that is characterized by a fracturing of social bonds, “as individuals become increasingly focused on self-gratification together” (Hardy et. al, 2018, p. 2). The neo-tribe has been widely associated with consumer culture and market research (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2001, 2002; Aung & Sha, 2016). Cova & Cova (2001) explain that ‘tribe’ “refers to the re-emergence of quasi-archaic values” such as “a local sense of identification...syncretism [and]

group narcissism [but that] the common denominator...is the community dimension” (p. 67). Wheaton (2007) notes that, while “it has been suggested that neo-tribal groups might include sports enthusiasts, few commentators of sport have empirically demonstrated this claim” (p. 290). She offers that some notable exceptions include work on soccer supporters (Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1999) and rock-climbers (Kiewa, 2002) – while noting that, by and large, this term has scarcely been applied to sporting groups. Importantly, Cova & Cova (2001) explain that ‘neo-tribes’ are “held together through shared emotions, styles of life” and, importantly, through their consumption practices (p. 69).

2.4.4 Subcultures of consumption

Schouten and McAlexander (1995) suggest that one of “the most powerful organizing forces in modern life are the activities and associated interpersonal relationships that people undertake to give their lives meaning” (p. 44). Their ethnographic study of Harley Davidson enthusiasts and aficionados was among the first to conceptualize what they call *subcultures of consumption*, which they describe as a useful and “yet [commonly] overlooked analytic category for understanding the objects and consumption patterns with which people define themselves” (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 44). Unlike ‘traditional’ subcultures that were the focus of much of the classical work done at the renowned Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, UK in the 1970s, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) were more interested in “identify[ing] and understand[ing] the organizing forces that people bring to their own lives through their consumption choices” (p. 43). To hear them tell it, a subculture of consumption is

a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity. (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 43)

They explain that “in choosing how to spend their money and their time, people do not conform always or neatly to the ascribed analytic categories currently proffered by academia (e.g., ethnicity, gender, age, VALS group, or social class)” but, instead, “they take part in the creation of their own categories”. Importantly, while subcultures of consumption have been taken up in marketing literature, to the best of my knowledge there has been limited engagement with this concept within critical sport studies outside of sport management literature, where the concept is used in relation to event promotion (see Green, 2001; Schwarzenberger & Hyde, 2013). I argue there is great value in doing so, not least since it offers a unique lens through which we might consider how certain sport-based communities, such as run crews, are created and sustained⁵.

Taken together, these distinct but interrelated concepts and considerations effectively ‘set the stage’ for what follows in my analysis, to the extent that each offers ways of thinking about the features of the run crew – as a (sub)culture, neo-tribe, and/or as a (consumption) community – and also what the prominence of run crew might tell us about the role of (and importance of) community and consumption in the contemporary moment.

2.5 Method(ology)

2.5.1 Ethnographic Methods

This chapter is informed by three years of mixed-method multi-sited ethnographic field work designed to help me learn more about the local running culture(s) in the city of Vancouver, British Columbia. My full-time immersion in the running community, broadly, and with a variety

⁵ It is important to acknowledge that there are *many* possible ways of thinking about and theorizing consumer culture and consumption practices under late-capitalism, as evidenced by the vast array of existing scholarship on this complex topic. My decision to focus here on ‘subcultures of consumption’ is based on the ways that it affords a unique opportunity to engage with consumer culture while at once attending to these groups, and their consumption practices, through the lens of (post-)subcultural studies.

of run ‘crews’ in the city, more specifically, allowed me to experience and interact with different elements of this sporting culture and actors as an insider.

Atkinson (2016) explains that researchers often study communities with which they are familiar, and as I note in the introduction to this dissertation, this is true of this study. I have been a runner much longer than I have been a researcher. Over the past decade, I have participated in running races ranging from 5k ‘fun runs’ to ultra-marathons and during this time I have run with different social running groups, some more or less structured than others, in different cities. In this way, this project did not involve immersing myself into a cultural world with which I am largely unfamiliar, as many ethnographers have done (and continue to do). Rather, I have been (and continue to be) what Atkinson (2012) describes as a complete participant, to the extent that I was relatively well-versed in the broader running community, of which run crews are one part, prior to my entry into the field as a researcher.

2.5.2 Observant Participation

Participant observation is widely understood as one of the primary methods used in ethnographic research, but Wacquant’s (2004) notion of *observant participation* better reflects the method used to carry out this study. To be an observant participant acknowledges and emphasizes the insights gleaned from an actively engaged view from the inside, rather than a seemingly detached ‘researcher-watching-the-researched’ perspective, which characterizes many early ethnographic studies (Silk, 2005). In this way, the researcher not only gets a sense of ‘what is happening’ in a particular culture or group, but also feels what it is like to be part of that group.

Immersion into the run crew scene meant, first, becoming familiar with the breadth of this community and, as might be imagined, this meant that I spent a lot of time running with different groups across the city, in an attempt to better understand what these groups looked like, who

participated, and how or where they ‘fit’ vis-a-vis other types of running groups in the city. Given the nature of the project, research sites included parks, pathways, patios, and busy city streets, but also restaurants, running stores, parking lots, and coffee shops. Over the course of three years, I participated in weekly group runs (often more than one in a given week) organized by various crews throughout the city, I competed in local road and trail running races, both as an individual and as part of a team, I volunteered at running races with other members of the run crew community, and participated in a host of other running-related social events including clinics, fundraisers, and dinners. Though I did not keep detailed records of exactly how many hours I spent ‘in the field’, with the above activities in mind, a conservative estimate of time allocated to in-person, research-specific, activities during this period would be upwards of 400 hours.

2.5.4 Field notes

Some of the data included in this chapter are drawn from my observations during my time in the field. Detailed field notes were kept throughout the research process. These consist primarily of observations but also include an “outpouring of memories, thoughts and words” derived from my experiences of running with these groups and my interactions with runners (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2001, p. 357). Field notes were written up as soon as possible after my time in the field, either in a notebook or on my computer. Sometimes this took place in the driver’s seat of my car, immediately after a run, and other times I would wait until I got home after a running event or social gathering. I also used voice memos on occasion (using an app on my smartphone), both for convenience's sake and in instances where my notebook or computer were not readily available.

As Thorpe and Olive (2016) explain, there are practical reasons why it can be difficult to take notes in the field. For instance, the act of pulling out a pen and notebook while running would not only have been impractical (and potentially dangerous) but, importantly, would have also

risked disrupting or otherwise influencing the moment. There were also other instances when taking notes in situ felt unreasonable. It hardly felt appropriate, for instance, to take notes when attending social events at restaurants or breweries. In some cases, I took photographs as a means of archiving and later reliving some of the experiences that characterized my fieldwork (Hill, 1991). I made a concerted effort to avoid making a particular individual the focus of a photograph without their knowledge, and instead attempted to capture a moment, a scene, or even a feeling that would serve as a helpful reminder when writing up field notes at a later time. The use of smartphone cameras is ubiquitous and thus largely unobtrusive. Group photos are often taken either before or midway through a group run and, in this way, I quickly learned that photographs are a more or less taken for granted part of run crew culture. These group photos, that are each posted to social media, serve a dual function as both digital memorabilia for the runners in attendance on any given night, but also as free promotional material that crews can (and do) use to promote their groups in online spaces. Not unlike the photographs I took in the field, these group photos at times also helped me write field notes.

2.5.5 Semi-structured Interviews

No matter how ‘active’ my participation, my perspectives and interpretations alone can only get me so far in terms of understanding what run crews mean to and feel like for other participants. With this in mind, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who claimed membership in one or more run crews in the city, in an attempt to create space for them to “tell stories, accounts, reports and/or descriptions about their perspectives, insights, experiences, feelings, emotions and/or behaviours” (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p. 103). A total of sixteen members of the running community were interviewed for this study. Interviewees included runners and run crew organizers and founders. Interviews varied in length from just over

one hour to a little more than two and half hours, and were each recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. Interviews took place in a variety of settings including a coffee shop, restaurants, the university campus, personal offices and residences. It should be noted that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that some interviews were also conducted online, via Zoom, in accordance with then-evolving institutional and public health recommendations. In light of the pandemic, I reached out to individuals I interviewed prior to the pandemic, which led to four email-based follow-up conversations which focused explicitly on the pandemic.

Each of the interviews were conducted with an interview guide that was prepared in advance. The guide contained a series of questions and related prompts, but these questions were designed to be open and flexible, knowing that new or unforeseen questions might be inspired by the conversation. The guide served in some ways as a ‘roadmap’; there were times when I would make an unplanned turn and end up a bit off course, and there were instances too when I would skip a planned stop altogether. There is little doubt that my positionality influenced both the interview and analysis. In some cases, I was familiar with the interview participants beforehand and, in other cases, my experiential knowledge of the run crew scene (and perhaps even shared experiences) enabled me to establish rapport, trust, and an understanding with my participants quickly. Giardina and Donnelly (2017) remind us that interpretive ethnographic researchers “should never lose sight of [their] critical faculties or make bold claims to knowledge simply because [they] have engaged in a particular activity” but, rather, there must be an ongoing, reflexive, consideration of the role(s) and influence of their body both in the field and, later, in the production of research-based texts (p. 9). Similarly, Holmes (2020) explains that researchers who are cultural insiders might be so close to the group or culture they study that they risk missing certain observations, or they might feel unable or unwilling to raise provocative questions (Holmes, 2020). Certain assumptions might

be made, for instance, about what the researcher (or the interviewee) knows or considers to be ‘obvious’, which might lead to a particular topic being ignored or un(der)explored, but friendships might also limit the extent to which certain questions are asked (and how they are answered). I was attentive to these concerns to the best of my abilities, both during the interviews and afterwards, as I wrote up field notes and transcribed the interviews.

2.5.6 Participant Recruitment

Following approval from the University of British Columbia’s Ethical Review Board, recruitment began in August 2019 when I created a post on Strava⁶, which included a brief overview of the study and contact information. There are clear advantages of using Strava as an initial site of participant recruitment⁷, but there are also some limitations. During my time in the field, I learned that an overwhelming majority of runners used Strava. This seemed an effective way to recruit participants from a variety of run crews in the city. Of course, the flipside of this is that runners who do not use Strava were effectively unable to see the call for participants. Moreover, the nature of the platform means that for any one user to have seen the post, they would have had to have been ‘following me’ on Strava, which also limits the reach of the call. Finally, since social network feeds are dynamic and ever-changing, to see the post in their ‘feed’ users would have had to log into the platform sometime on or around August 27th 2020, the date the post was created. Thirteen people reached out in response to the post on Strava and, of those thirteen, eight met the additional criteria and chose to participate in the study. With my consent, some participants shared my contact information with friends, which yielded three additional

⁶ Not unlike Facebook, Strava users can create text-based posts.

⁷ By the time the call for participants went out, I had been immersed in the local running community for some time and, thus, had reason to believe that Strava would be an effective and unique space for participant recruitment. Also, since an integral component of the project sought to explore runners’ use and perceptions of Strava, the decision felt appropriate.

participants. In addition, five other individuals with whom I had formed relationships with during my time in the field were also interviewed. These included other runners and also a representative for a major running brand and independent running store owner, each of which offered important insights and opinions on run crews from a business standpoint.

Taken together, the individuals whose voices and experiences are (in)directly represented in this chapter range in age from twenty-five to sixty-one. Importantly, while each of these individuals routinely participated in one or more recreational running groups at the time of the interviews, their experiences with running and their identities as runners were far from homogenous. Some participants self-identified as lifelong runners while others came to running later in life, as adults.

2.5.7 Data analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Following transcription, interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (TA), a method that is widely used in qualitative sport and exercise research that has been described as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 79). More specifically, however, I was guided by a more recent, revised and reimagined amendment of sorts to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) oft-cited and widely (mis)used approach – one that the authors now refer to as *reflexive TA* (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which is predicated on (perhaps unsurprisingly) the reflexivity of the researcher (Trainor & Bundon, 2020). As Trainor and Bundon (2020) explain, reflexivity, in this regard, “is about more than just [acknowledging] one’s positionality – it is about [understanding] the role of the researcher as an active agent in the production of knowledge” (p. 3).

Before I discuss some of the details of what data analysis looked *and felt* like in the context of this study, it is important to acknowledge that reflexive TA exists within what Braun and her colleagues (2019) describe as a ‘tripartite typology of TA’ which also includes coding reliability and codebook approaches to thematic analysis. As Trainor and Bundon (2020) rightly suggest, “[i]f the reader is unable to identify the type of TA used, how [it] was done, or the assumptions informing [the] analysis, it becomes difficult to evaluate, compare, and synthesise” the findings of the research – while also making it “very challenging for researchers to learn from the experiences of others and to collectively advance our qualitative research practice (p. 2).

These three approaches to TA differ in some important ways, perhaps most notably with regard to how a ‘theme’ is conceptualized and also by the particular methods and procedures for coding (Braun et al. 2019). A ‘coding reliability’ approach is underpinned by a (post-)positivist paradigm which places an emphasis upon reliability and research replicability and, too, where the research(er) begins with themes which effectively drive the coding process; it thus ‘speaks the language’ of quantitative analysis in ways that a truly reflexive approach does not (Braun et al. 2019, p. 847). A ‘codebook’ approach is described as sitting somewhere ‘in-between’ the former and a reflexive TA approach; oftentimes themes are predetermined and the coding procedure is still quite structured, though Braun and her colleagues (2019) explain that there is more of an underlying qualitative philosophy that underpins this approach. On the other hand, reflexive TA does not involve working through a regimented step-by-step process. Rather, it is guided at all times by an interpretivist epistemology and rests upon the researcher’s ongoing “reflective and thoughtful engagement with the data... and the analytic process” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasize that the approach is wholly unconcerned with generalizability and that such an approach, rather, is “about telling ‘stories’...not discovering and finding the

‘truth’ that is either ‘out there’ in findable form, or buried deep within, the data” (p. 591). Importantly, they stress that both the deep and ongoing reflection on the part of the researcher, and their positionality, are each “understood as a resource, rather than a potential threat to knowledge production” (p. 591)

With regard to how I carried out the analysis itself, following transcription I spent a great deal of time familiarizing myself with and ‘getting to know’ the data. Practically, this meant carefully reading and re-reading through the transcription data, “looking for what was interesting” and for “possibilities, connections (between participants, data, and existing literature), and quirks”, while making notes of things that stood out (Braun et al. 2019, p. 852). Key terms were identified and close attention was paid to those comments and perspectives that were consistent among participants, but also to those that stood out as distinct from, or otherwise inconsistent with, what I heard from others. Of course, attention was paid to what was said, but also *how it was said* (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This process involves a lot of ‘back-and-forth’, both between interview transcripts and also between transcripts and my own field notes written after each. In addition to a flurry of highlighting of seemingly noteworthy excerpts from interview participants, some of the notes that I took in the familiarization stage also involved highlighting questions that I asked during the interview that didn’t seem to ‘work’, or ones that I felt could withstand change in some way. Worth noting is that some level of ‘pre-analysis’ also occurred during the interviews themselves. Handwritten notes scribbled into the margins of my interview guide often served as analytic notations; certain words were underlined or circled repeatedly and arrows or lines were sometimes drawn between words as a way of mapping ideas and making thematic connections ‘on the fly’.

The next step of the analysis involved an open and inductive coding process. Like Trainor and Bundon (2020), I tried to approach coding “as a ‘consciously curious’ researcher” by attending

to people's stories and, importantly, by being "open to hearing (and reporting) different experiences than mine" (p. 9). I was attentive to what Braun et al. (2019) describe as *semantic* and *latent* codes; the former being those based explicitly on what was said and the latter that are decidedly more implicit, since each offered different ways of seeing the data. Themes were then actively constructed based on my multiple reads and codes and the process of deciding how best to report them (a process, to be sure, which involved many changes and revisions along the way) began soon thereafter.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the interpretations of the data in the sections that follow are one of many plausible interpretations, informed both by previous research and, of course, by my own subject position as a white, male, able-bodied, runner/researcher. The purpose of this project is not to make broad claims or widely-generalizable truths about what it feels like to participate in run crews. Rather, the findings discussed in this chapter are designed to highlight different ways of seeing and thinking about this contemporary trend and offer some reflections on what this might tell us about running as a physical, cultural, and social practice.

2.6 Findings

I begin this report of my findings by describing what I learned about the history of run crews in Vancouver – as a way of 'setting the stage' contextually for the sections that follow. Next, I describe how run crews are understood and experienced as sites of community. Here I highlight, among other things, some of the attitudes, experiences, and opinions of runners who participate in these groups. I follow this rich description of key features and perspectives of run crews with a particular illustration of some of the links between run crew culture and consumption practices. Taken together, this section will highlight key findings about and reflections on run crews as sites

of community, as sites of consumption, and as ‘consumption communities’ (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

2.6.1 Creating ‘crew-mmunity’: The origins of run crew culture in Vancouver

Linda was one of the first people I met when I first started running with Flight Crew Run Club in the summer of 2016. As one of the group’s ambassadors – a volunteer role which sees a handful of people serve as run leaders. Linda’s was among the first familiar faces that I came to recognize each week when I would walk into Vancouver Running Company (VRC), alongside dozens of other runners, in anticipation of our weekly Thursday night group runs.

Linda and I had run many miles together by the time we sat down for an interview; we had volunteered at races together and had even run as part of the same team in a 50-mile relay race in Whistler, a small town north-east of the city. We met at a small cafe and, over more than two hours, two coffees, and (at least) two ‘designer’ cream puffs, Linda told me the story of how she came to be involved in the local running community and, in so doing, offered some valuable insights into the origins of the run crew scene in Vancouver.

Linda’s roots in the Vancouver running community run deep. Over the years, she has participated in races ranging from 5k to ultramarathon distances. Her running ‘resume’ includes a number of marathons, a half dozen 50k races, and even a one-hundred kilometer trail race. But Linda was quick to note that she was a late-onset runner and that she came to running, in part, due to peer pressure but also for the social element. To hear her tell it, running with and amongst others quickly and somewhat unexpectedly became a really important part of her life. Before she knew it, she explained, she was ‘addicted’.

There were some weekends where I’d race on both days. One weekend, I remember, I did the Saturday and then the Sunday morning there were two different events so I did three races in one weekend.

Linda first became affiliated with VRC in 2015, the year it opened, and she explained that her current role builds in some ways on ‘work’ that she first started doing many years prior, back in 2010, when she first became a ‘run ambassador’ for lululemon⁸. Lululemon, which was founded in Vancouver, is perhaps most commonly associated with yoga culture, but over the past decade the company has made steady inroads into the running market and now sells a wide range of running-specific apparel while also playing host to countless running clinics and a number of running races across the country, including the now world-famous SeaWheeze Half Marathon (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014). Linda explained that, at the time, her role with lululemon was new and not clearly defined.

There was no structure on how or what that relationship looked like...they would sit there and ask you, like, “How do you want to support [lululemon]” and, like, “What kind of support do you need?”

As a result, she explained, she had a great deal of influence in terms of what this role could look like. She describes how she and the one other ambassador at the time decided that the best way to give back to the community was to start a run club. It was healthy, it was fun, and it was social, three things that she was actively looking for at the time. The run club, which became affectionately known as Run Robson, operated out of lululemon’s Robson Street storefront, I heard many stories from runners about the success the club, which hinged on its membership, and on the passion and enthusiasm that Linda brought to the group each week.

It was the vision that I wanted for a run club. I wanted it to be like a family; people that you hang out with outside of running, or people that you can train with for running, people that you travel with to go to races...We had this whole thing- no one gets left behind. You know, we always took a picture at the beginning [of each run] and it just kept growing and growing and growing.

⁸ Readers will note that, other than instances where it is used at the beginning of a sentence, the word lululemon is not capitalized. This is intentional, in accordance with the lower-case spelling used by the brand.

From what I understand, it was a relatively small group – somewhere in the vicinity of a dozen ‘regulars’ – who came together week after week and, over time, became a tightly-knit community. Linda told me that, above all else, Run Robson was fun, it was inclusive, and it was really supportive; three things she really valued, but also felt was missing in the local running scene.

2.6.2 From ‘run club’ to ‘run crew’: The spread of the lululemon approach

It struck me that there are some unmistakable parallels between the Run Robson run club, as Linda and others described it, and that which I recognized as ‘run crew’. She smiled when I mentioned it, and again when I asked if she could recall the first time she heard about run crews.

Oh, I definitely remember. I remember there was an article about run crews in- I can’t remember if it was *Impact* magazine or something, and I remember being really annoyed because I was, like, ‘*There’s no difference. It’s just we’re calling it something that sounds cooler than run club*’. At the time, I would say the landscape was a lot of clinics, a lot of Running Room clinics, for instance, where you drop in or where there’s like specific days that you run with them, but I would say it was very, like, transactional in terms of what was available. I always said that Robson is not going to be a clinic. I was like, ‘No, I want people to just come in whenever they want to and just be a part of it’ [and] it became a place where it was super inviting. It was slower - definitely not a fast group - and it was always one distance because we wanted to keep everybody together. It was always fun, and that was the atmosphere that I wanted to create. So then, yeah, this run crew thing showed up and I remember I was- I was a little put off by it. Like, it became the cool thing and I was like ‘It’s the *same!* It’s just that we didn’t call it a run crew.’

Run Robson dissolved in 2015, which, coincidentally, was right around the same time the run crew scene was beginning to take shape in the city. Many of the club’s longstanding members, including Linda, were instrumental in helping to develop (and, in some cases help organize) what would become some of the city’s largest run crews, including East Van Run Crew and the aforementioned Flight Crew Run Club. Whether the timing was simply coincidental or not, lululemon seems to have been an important progenitor of sorts with regard to the contemporary run crew scene in Vancouver. This is not to suggest lululemon has moved away from run clubs. In fact, during my time spent in the field, lululemon seemed to be increasingly woven into the fabric

of the running community in a variety of different ways. In addition to ‘reviving’ or rebranding some of their former running groups (as run crews), and creating new ones, the company also began to form connections with some of the then-still-emerging local run crews.

I remember first noticing the relationship between lululemon and FCRC during the first year that I ran regularly with the group. It stood out, in part, since lululemon was not a brand that was traditionally associated with running (unlike Nike, Adidas, Brooks, or New Balance, for example), but also since it was somewhat well-known that lululemon products were exclusive, by which I mean that lululemon products were known to only be available at lululemon stores. As I soon learned, however, there seemed to be some exceptions to this ‘rule’. I remember thinking it was interesting, but also a bit unconventional, how the group seemed to be increasingly-infused with lululemon as the years went on. It wasn’t uncommon, for instance, for a post-run giveaway “from our friends at lululemon!”, or for a run crew social event to be sponsored by the company. Notably, beginning in 2016, lululemon also started to produce exclusive custom running apparel for some of the crews in the city including FCRC, Fraser Street Run Club, and Hustle for Hops.

According to Keller (2003), cross-branding or ‘co-branding’ is a strategy used by certain brands to both to increase exposure to, and influence consumers’ perceived quality of their product. From such a perspective, that lululemon would forge these relationships with local run crews makes a lot of sense if or when we consider that it is a well-established company that, at the time, was actively trying to crack into the running market and establish itself as not only a viable, but also high quality option for runners. These cross-branding initiatives, which saw ‘VRC Flight Crew’ and the like emblazoned on lululemon technical tee shirts, worked to increase the visibility of and legitimize their product. Of course, this relationship also benefits the run crews, who are

able to offer an exclusive product to their members, many of whom presumably wear them while running and thus improving the visibility of *their* brand.

The relationship between lululemon and VRC is also unique for other reasons. Perhaps most obviously, while each is deeply invested in running, these are clearly two very different companies in many other ways. The former is a multi-billion dollar corporation, whose roots are in Vancouver but which has long since evolved into an internationally-recognized brand. The latter is an independent running store. The companies are, however, *very* close geospatially. VRC is quite literally down the street (less than 200m) from the global lululemon headquarters. It wasn't until much later, through interviews with runners and other stakeholders, that I learned that the co-owners of VRC (and, thus, the co-founders of Flight Crew Run Club) were each affiliated with lululemon in different capacities. One works full time at the company's head office, and the other was a global brand ambassador for the company. As Linda explained, the relationship is very much a reciprocal one.

[T]hey definitely see [the brand ambassador] as, like, you know, creating the trends. It's almost like they have someone they don't need to hire to create the running trends in Vancouver ... he gets to talk to all the designers and everything, and people on their running community side, and it makes sense. Like, he was doing a lot of things that, you know, he was like the first run crew and beer collaboration- he was doing all these things ahead of the curve, and I feel like lululemon feels like they're always ahead of the curve, so now they have an ambassador *in* the running community that is creating this gear for them and all they have to do is support him, and they can leverage that to their benefit.

As noted above, lululemon is known for yoga apparel and, increasingly, its technical running apparel, but it is also known for its emphasis on and support of the community; by some accounts it is a central pillar of their brand (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014). In this way, I appreciate the ostensibly similar ethos between lululemon and the run crew scene. Each is invested in creating opportunities for and promoting local communities. From this perspective, it is not entirely

surprising that the company was committed to fostering relationships with other local groups that were also invested in community-building.

Although the story of lululemon speaks to some of the roots of what was to become the Vancouver run crew scene, more importantly I think is that this history hints at some of the intriguing conceptual themes that came to the fore as I spent time within this vibrant scene, during my study. Perhaps most notably, links between running, community and consumption were striking and obvious from this history— although what remains to be explored – an exploration I take on in subsequent sections – are the nuances and complexities of these links, including aspects of the crew scene/community that make it unique from lululemon, or so it would seem from my time with members of the contemporary crew scene. I begin this exploration by engaging with perhaps the most basic question about crews, which is, what is a crew?

2.6.4 Crews – What’s in a name?

The city of Vancouver is home to one of the most vibrant run crew scenes in the country, with just shy of a dozen independently-organized groups meeting each week. Having run with other groups prior to this study, I was interested in determining whether or how run crews were any different from other types of social, recreational, running groups that have existed for decades in cities around the world. Was it simply a matter of creative rebranding or was there more to it than that?

I learned early on that the language used to describe a given group (e.g., run crew vs. run club) was more or less insignificant in terms of which groups are considered run ‘crews’ by members of the local running community. Many of the runners that I spoke with told me that, in their mind, the distinction had less to do with the name of a group than it did the ethos or ‘feel’ of

the group. As might be expected, East Van Run Crew was considered a run crew, but so too was Fraser Street Run Club, Run Distrikt, and North Burnaby Runners.

I don't really think of 'crew' and 'club' as being mutually exclusive. They're kind of interchangeable. I mean, club sounds like you have to be a member, but crew also sounds a little like it's- it's got a little bit of exclusivity to it, but it doesn't really. Not in Vancouver.
(Karen, age 49)

As mentioned above, one of the groups that I spent a lot of time with during my time in the field was VRC Flight Crew. In 2020, during the pause in light of the global pandemic, the group's name was changed to Flight Crew Run Club. At the time, I remember being confused by the decision. Why change the name of one of the most well-established groups in the city?⁹ According to an Instagram post from Vancouver Running Company, "[the] subtle change better represents the club name" and, they added, "it's what everyone calls us anyway" (Vancouver Running Company, 2020). I remember chatting one night, during a run, about the rise of run crews with a man who I guessed was around the same age as my parents. It was his first time running with EVRC and he expressed some amazement at just how many people had shown up. He was fascinated with it, as someone who had run with various groups 'long before all these crews came about'. He lived in Burnaby, he explained, a city south-east of the downtown core, and had learned about EVRC through social media. He told me that he was looking forward to a new group that was going to be starting up, on Tuesday nights, at a running store near his place. He told me that the owner of the store had been debating whether or not to call this new group a run club or a run crew, which he recognized was the 'nom du jour' and that using it might draw people in (both to the group and, at once, to his store). It seems to me that VRC's name change from crew to club and that, for some,

⁹ I later learned through interviews that when the group was initially conceived, in 2015, that it was called 'Flight Club', but that it quickly changed to Flight Crew. It's unclear whether this was in the interest of aligning itself with a larger, global, run crew scene or perhaps because for fear that it sounded a little too close to the title of Chuck Paliniuck's *Fight Club*.

this was a calculated (business) decision, both supports and challenges the idea that language matters.

2.6.6 Run crew as a site of community

Language aside, some of the runners I spoke with felt strongly that there were some clear distinctions between run crews and running clubs. I often heard that what sets a run crew apart from a running club is the social aspect. Asita (age 46) told me that, for him, run crew was about feeling like he was part of a community.

I think it shows up differently for different people but, for me, I like run crews for the social aspect. Like, if I have one in my schedule, that's my social run. It's where I want to actually talk during the run and just run super chill, make conversation, and get to know people. It's also about exposure to community. It's about sharing. I want to learn about what everyone else is doing. And I want to share what I'm doing too and, you know, hear people's stories...

...and, you know, I'm not a big drinker. So, like, even though EVRC is like- okay it's structured completely around the breweries, and that's wonderful because it actually creates the social aspect, right? Like, I would say 80 to 90% of the people who show up for EVRC, you know, stay to socialize. I see lots of people stay, like, two hours after the run. There's something to it, right?

This emphasis on the social element of run crews was echoed by nearly all of the runners I spoke with, many of whom told me that run crew was only tangentially about running; these were social groups first and foremost.

You know, we go for a five or seven k run and have a beer afterwards, and it's always the same people and it's just really great to touch base and have that, like, regular thing that you're doing as an adult... It seems to me like these are your adult friends and this is your adult lifestyle outside of work. (Taryn, age 34)

For Taryn, run crew was about connecting with others over a shared affinity (running), but it was also about making time for fun, life-enriching, social experiences amidst her busy work schedule. Running with Run Distrikt each week was a vessel through which she formed friendships and found community outside of work.

2.6.7 A Similar Product with Different Flavours?

Despite some of their espoused similarities, and the way that many runners describe a common ‘floating’ between crews, it became clear to me early on that there are also some differences between these groups, both perceived and otherwise. On a surface level, the number of runners who show up to run on any given night varies greatly from group to group. EVRC and FCRC consistently draw the largest numbers; the former typically sees anywhere from 50 to 80 runners for their weekly ‘Monday Nighter’ runs and the latter attracts anywhere from 20 to 40 runners on Wednesday evenings. On the other end of the spectrum, Run Distrikt, which also meets on Wednesdays, rarely sees more than a half dozen runners. Many of the other groups fall somewhere between these extremes. Many runners felt that *location* was a big factor in terms of how many people show up. It makes sense that crews that meet in densely populated neighbourhoods, in or around the downtown core, with easily accessible transit or good parking options, would have a higher turnout. As Sigrid told me, location can be both a draw and drawback.

I guess with EVRC we are kind of- often we’re running in the more feral neighbourhood, you know? It’s [pause] older. To me, EVRC, because of where we run it’s sort of a little bit more edgy, you know, stinkier, grosser places but it’s also kind of interesting because it’s like ‘I would never run- being a woman, I would never run there alone because it just wouldn’t feel that safe to me. But it’s kind of an interesting way to see, you know, Vancouver, warts and all, and the neighbourhoods I would never run in alone. Whereas Flight Crew, being based in Kitsilano, you know, it’s a little nicer, it’s a little cleaner. It’s a little more genteel and sanitized.

Location also matters since some crews meet at and run from the same spot each week, but others are a bit more rogue. EVRC is perhaps the best example of this. They meet each week at a different local brewery¹⁰. This link between running and beer is attractive for some, as I discuss in greater

¹⁰ By 2018, the average attendance for their group runs had gotten so large that there were only certain breweries that could accommodate them. Moving forward, they seemed to cycle through a select few locations (without any fixed schedule).

detail below, but as Colin explained, the inconsistent meeting place also requires that runners seek out the information for where to go each week.

You've gotta go on social media to find out where the run starts from. I mean, you don't see the routes, but with them you have to use social media to find out where they're running from. They usually announce it a few days before.

Practical differences aside, however, what I often heard was that what sets crews apart the most is simply *the way they feel*. As Asita (49) put it, run crews 'all have their different flavour'; what appeals to one runner might not necessarily appeal to another

They just feel different – they definitely do – even if the same people are going to the run crews. I think part of that is the vision that the leaders are creating.

I first met Asita in 2017, at a Flight Crew run. Like Linda, he has deep roots in Vancouver's running community and he similarly came to the run crew through lululemon's Run Robson run club, with which he was actively involved with for a number of years. Since then, he has run with nearly all of the crews in the city but he considers EVRC his 'home base'. It's where he volunteers his time and energy each week as a run leader. In his words, he's noticed certain distinctions between crews over the years, both in terms of *approachability and feel*.

I think Fraser Street is tighter in terms of community than EVRC. Like, they really support each other more than- I don't necessarily want to use the word cliquey for Van Run Co. but, umm, a lot of people, like, have nice outfits and all of that when they go to Van Run Co. They look like, you know, a Kits runner ... EVRC is a lot more laid back. If someone wants to show up with sweatpants and a cotton tee shirt and run, that's fine.

Fraser Street also has a kind of chill vibe to it, meaning people can show up wearing anything and it doesn't really matter. I also think you have quite a variety of people that are maybe a little bit older now, like people going on 50, 60, who show up at Fraser Street, and younger people. So there's a big age range, much bigger than EVRC and Van Run Co.

Other runners I spoke to, including some who ran near-exclusively with VRC, were candid about their perceptions. Steph has been running with Flight Crew for a number of years but she told me that it feels pretty obvious to her that, "within the broader community, VRC's definitely deemed cliquey". A lot of this, she felt, was tied to one key differentiating factor between Flight

Crew and other groups in the city. Flight Crew is based out of a store. Unlike EVRC or FSRC, Flight Crew likely wouldn't exist in the absence of Vancouver Running Company and it is difficult to deny the fact that Flight Crew has influenced the success, or at least the visibility, of the business.

I find that [Flight Crew] is not very social per se. It's very much a 'you show up, you do your thing'. Like, no one knows each other's names unless you ask for it ... people just talk to the same people ... It's very fake. They're going for a particular vibe. It's a business so I'm, like, 'I get it' but at the same time it's pushing it pretty far. It's almost like VRC is, like, the private school kids, if you were to think of high school, the private school kids that, like, paid a membership. The membership might be in the form of spending money at VRC so they look the part...Whereas EVRC is just like 'show up.'

I think a lot of the culture comes back to Rob, and it sets the tone. Like, Rob wants to be the cool kids on the block, so you get the cool kids on the block vibe. Whereas I think Ryan, from EVRC, he's more of like 'lets include everyone! Right? So it's like everyone and anyone attends everything.

I recognize here that it is one thing to recognize that there are differences across social groups, like runs crews, and it is quite another to explain these differences. I have so far suggested that differences across Vancouver crews might related to subtle and more significant differences in locations where crews meet and attract runners from. In the next section I explore the 'location thesis' in more depth by focusing more broadly on the city of Vancouver, while exploring too the related argument that what is shared amongst so many in contemporary times is a lack of (and thus interest in seeking out) a sense of community, even across differently structured crews.

2.6.7. Seeking Community and Other Explanations for Crew Membership

The features of the city of Vancouver were often referred to during conversations about how and why the run crew scene has thrived in the ways that it has (in Vancouver) in recent years. Christian (age 39) described the city as a 'mecca for outdoor activity', and spoke of how the city's temperate climate likely plays a role in why running groups of all types can and do thrive.

Sure, it rains a lot but at least it's not forty degrees in the summer and minus forty in the winter when you can't run. You can't do stuff outside. Here, the climate is relatively moderate and we can do outdoor activity all year long, right? I think that's a big draw for Vancouver, and I would say that's a big factor in why there are so many run clubs – because we can enjoy it.

The city's amenable climate was mentioned often, but runners also spoke about Vancouver in a different way. Some told me they felt the run crew scene in Vancouver was uniquely inclusive, and that, while cities like Montreal and Toronto each have a number of run crews, collaboration between crews and a sense of a local run 'crew-mmunity' was not necessarily the norm. Colin explained that the fluidity of the scene is one of the things he enjoys the most about the scene in Vancouver. "My understanding is it's not like other big cities", he told me, "No, if you go with a crew that's who you go with." This celebration of inter-crew collegiality was echoed by other runners too.

There's just so much crossover ... You see people at Flight Crew who also run with EVRC, who also run with NBR, who also run with West Van, who also run with Run Distrikt ... I've also tried, while I'm running with people, to tell them 'We're not the only game in town, you know!' (Karen, 49)

Yeah, [in Toronto], it's a bit cliquey. If you run with a run crew, you run with *one* crew and that's it. Whereas here you can, you know, every day of the week, if you want to run with a different crew, you can do that and it's totally legit and fine. (Asita, 45)

The picture painted by Karen and Asita in the excerpts above invite us to consider how, at least in Vancouver, run crew culture seems to be an example of neo-tribalism in a sporting context. Maffesoli's (1987) concept of the neo-tribe is said to represent a counter-thesis of sorts "to discourses of social fragmentation and individualisation" that are often said to characterise the contemporary moment and that have led to a fracturing of social bonds" (Hardy et. al, 2018, p. 2). The concept of *tribus*, from which the term originates, emphasizes a fluidity of association in which members of 'tribes' (in this case, run crews) can (and often *do*) belong to more than one at a time. As above, this fluidity of association is an important and celebrated characteristic of the run crew scene in Vancouver. Cova and Cova (2001) explain how neo-tribes can be comprised of

a vast heterogeneous network of individuals “in terms of age, sex, income, etc. – who are interlinked by a shared passion” but that “tribal membership does not involve set personality traits” per se, or even the same values (p. 69). Rather, members of neo-tribes are often connected by a shared experience. It seems to me that the shared passion described by Cova and Cova (2001) is somewhat self-evident in this case; people are united by and through running (and, in some cases, beer), but I also got a sense that people are passionate about *community*.

Consider, for example, Taryn (34) – a run crew member who grew up in Vancouver and came to running as an adult, after many years as an elite-level swimmer. She told me that she first got into the run crew scene via Flight Crew Run Club but moved across the city soon thereafter and, since then, had been a regular member of Run Distrikt, a small crew based out of North Vancouver. She told me she mostly loves it and, as described above, that it has become an important part of her social life. She also, interestingly, described run crew as ‘fascinating’ and alluded to sense of uncertainty with regard to its longevity – a view that aligns with the view that crews may have, for some, temporary and transient neo-tribal features. Specifically, she told me that she felt people in Vancouver yearned for a sense of connection and that sport and physical activity is one of the ways that people seek it out.

I think belonging is a Vancouver thing. Like, we seem to seek out activities for belonging... You know, it's like we all went through that really big yoga phase - and some people are really into it still but some people probably have transitioned out of yoga so, I guess, whether or not this run thing lasts forever, I dunno. I think there's always going to be something.

That run crew settings are places where people might seek out connection, and function as spaces where social networks are fostered or expanded, is insightful, not least since making friends as an adult can be difficult, as Asita explained.

Vancouver is not the easiest place to make friends. It's easy to- well, I think it's moderately difficult to break into communities, which people *can* do, but then I find it's quite surface level. It's difficult to make deep, long-lasting, relationships. It takes a commitment that a lot of people

are not willing to make. And I feel that a lot of people have made that type of relationship through running, which I think is really powerful.

This excerpt above, from Asita, is noteworthy in part because he speaks so fondly about the power of these groups as sites of meaningful connection and thus as an exception to the rule. Like Asita, Taryn emphasized that she has made great friends through run crew. She explained, however, that her experience with the tight-knit RunDistrikt crew feels distinctly different from some of her experiences at VRC.

I mean, there's only six of us. I do feel as though a number of these people have become more than just people that I just run with once a week. You know, one of the guys delivered pies to all of us during the pandemic and has been helping me with a fundraiser that I was doing. I've gone hiking with one of them. And I did hang out once outside of running with a couple of the girls from Van Run Co, but it's just such a big group, you know? I took a small break from going to Van Run Co when we moved over to the North Shore and started going back again and found that it wasn't as easy to like the girls that I considered 'my girls', you know, that I would go and see and run with. There was, like, a disconnect when I went back after having a bit of a break, because I think it's- because every new person, like, finds the ambassadors to be friendly and outgoing and welcoming, because that's part of their role. But that's it. I think, like, I don't fault them for it. I think they're lovely people, right? I hug them when I see them, but I realized, like, 'Oh, I'm not the only person that shows up every so often that thinks, like, 'Yeah, they're my best friends at Van Run Co', you know?

Among other things, Taryn touches on some of the ways that different crews in the city, each of which are ostensibly designed for similar purposes, can feel very different. There is a sense that some function or feel more like 'real' communities, by which I mean supportive and reciprocal - 'thick' communities with deep social bonds, the likes of which were mentioned by Asita. The flip side of this is that others can feel decidedly more 'thin' and, even if they look and even feel like a community 'in the moment', the bonds can feel less resilient and more contextual. In a similar vein, Steph (25) spoke of tenuous and contextual, 'single-serving', relationships that characterize, in her experience, some of the bigger run crews in the city.

If you're injured, you probably won't see these people for your injury period. So it's a little fickle that way. No one asks if you're gone. No one asks 'what happened to you?' It's a context-specific friend.

I should be clear that I am not convinced that this is (un)true of all crews, nor that it necessarily reflects the attitudes and lived experiences of all who participate therein. Rather, different perspectives are offered, on one hand, as ‘counterpoints’ to stories which paint run crews as highly-inclusive, tightly-knit, social spaces. On the other hand, this also invites us to consider, I think, how the *size* of these groups may be one variable that could influence participation and a sense of connection or feelings of togetherness. Finally, an argument could be made that what we are seeing in Vancouver – and where run crews are a particularly salient example – ‘reflects’, or is emblematic of, a larger global concern where ‘real’ community and the qualities and feelings associated therewith (warmth, trust, reciprocity) are desired (Bauman, 2001).

If we accept that part of the motivation behind participating in recreational running groups relates in one way or another to the shaping, the representation, or the (re)claiming of an athletic identity, as Shipway & Holloway (2010) and Griffin & Phoenix (2014) have each previously suggested, it seems to me that it might be useful to consider run crews through the lens of ‘aesthetic community’. Bauman (2001) suggests that

identity seems to share its existential status with beauty: like beauty, it has no other foundation to rest on but widely shared agreement, explicit or tacit, expressed in a consensual approval of judgement or in uniform conduct. Just as beauty boils down to artistic experience, the community in question is brought forth and consumed in the ‘warm circle’ of experience. (p. 65)

A lot of work goes into creating a sense of community within run crew culture. In some cases, this is little more than rhetorical, to the extent that these groups are commonly described as communities. Bauman (2001) explains that “as long as it stays alive (that is, as long as it is being experienced)” an aesthetic community is a paradox, to the extent that “it would betray or refute the freedom of its members were it to claim non-negotiable credentials” and, for this reason,

it has to keep its entrances and exits wide open. But were it to advertise the resulting lack of binding power, it would fail to perform the reassuring role which for the faithful was their prime motive for joining it (p. 65).

Put differently, if we accept the premise that some of what draws people into these groups is a desire for community, and all of the warmth and friendship that characterized its ideal form, there is little reason for groups to represent themselves as anything less, particularly in those instances (however rare they might be) when the group is attached to a business. Sure, there is no cost to join, but runners are buying into the idea of run crew as a community. Bauman further explains that an aesthetic community can sometimes be formed around a ‘one-off’ event - an all-day festival or a major sporting event, for instance - but that they can also be “formed around ‘problems’ with which many individuals are struggling separately” (2001, p. 71). If we imagine lack of community as a common ‘problem’ that urban dwellers experience, run crews might be a temporary and, importantly, non-committal solution.

this kind of ‘community’ comes to life for the duration of the scheduled weekly or monthly ritual, and dissolves again... whatever their focal point, the common feature of aesthetic communities is the superficial and perfunctory, as well as transient, nature of the bonds emerging between their participants. (Bauman, 2001, p. 66)

Ingham and McDonald (2003) remind us that “‘communities’ are not only spatial, they are temporal” – and suggest that while many indeed demand a degree of temporal commitment, without this ongoing commitment “to making and reproducing ‘community,’ it is doubtful that community, in the modern sense, could exist” (p. 25). There are clear parallels between the aesthetic community described by Bauman and the way Ingham and McDonald (2003) describe *communitas*, as a temporary form of community “in which individuals are able to rise above those structures that materially and normatively regulate their daily lives and that unite people across the boundaries of structure, rank, and socioeconomic status” (p. 26). They explain

the changes wrought by industrial capitalism do not extinguish the quest for community (symbolic or real), nor does the postmodern focus on images, heterogeneity of meaning, and the multiplicity of identity eliminate the quest (symbolic or real) for homogeneity. What they do ... is eliminate the organic, “can live your whole life in it” forms of community and produce new forms of social solidarities of coerced (for the politically and materially powerless) or preferential homogeneities. (p. 20)

One might go as far as to say that these run crews are communities “of the like-minded” or, perhaps more accurately, of “the like-behaving; [communities] of *sameness*” that are attractive, in part, because people (want to) see themselves as part of a healthy and ‘hip’ sporting collective (p. 64). While it is not my intention to dismiss or otherwise downplay the very real and rewarding relationships that some folks find in these spaces, that run crews can at once be sites of ‘bonds without consequences’ (Bauman, 2001) might *at once* be considered a drawback, such as in the stories that Taryn and Steph each tell of their experiences in larger groups, but might be also be appealing to people who simply cannot commit to much more.

It strikes me as significant that the *idea* of being part of a shared community – both locally (to the extent that various crews in the city co-exist, collaborate, and coalesce into a particular subset of the local running scene) and globally (to the extent that local run crews feel connected to others around the world) – might, in fact, be more important than the existence of any ‘real’ unified run crew community. As highlighted above, there are those who feel deeply connected to and through run crew, and this should not be overlooked. However, this is reason to consider run crew as an ‘imagined community’ whose members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1983, p. 6).

2.6.5 Perceptions of difference and questions of (in)authenticity

Many of the runners I spoke with identified certain factors that differentiated a run crew from a run club. Some suggested that the (lack of) cost to participate was an important difference – the suggestion being that clubs (running or otherwise) typically require a paid membership. While it is true that there are no fees to participate in any run crews in the city - anyone can drop in to any

one of these groups on any given night - some groups offer optional paid memberships, which are incentivized with additional perks, such as the aforementioned custom crew apparel or priority access to crew-related events. Others alluded to the (lack of) structure as a key difference. Some felt that runners who want to train for a race might find what they are looking for with a running club, whereas those who want to meet new people or just run alongside others in a fun social setting might find what they are looking for in a crew.

[I]t feels like Running Room and the running store type of store is more tailored towards, like, specific goals. If like you wanna run a half, you wanna run a full, you would join their groups for that...run crew is more social versus a run club you're going for speed...places like the [local running store], down the street, have their social runs but it's, like, they're all training for something, and it's a wild mix of ages, I wanna say, whereas like run crews are relatively younger and come with a different vibe. (Steph, age 25)

That Steph alludes to a younger demographic is interesting. Admittedly, this was something that I expected to find, in part because this is how run crews are commonly framed in media texts (e.g., *Runner's World*, *Canadian Running Magazine*, etc.). Based on my experience and observations, however, this is only 'kind of' true. What I mean by this is that there is indeed a certain youthfulness to these groups (a point I come back to below), but the extent to which these groups in fact skew younger than other types of running groups is unclear.

Colin (age 61) ran track in high school and into his twenties but he told me that he was sidelined over time by a series of ongoing injuries. By the early 1980s, he'd virtually stopped running altogether. He started back up again in 2015, when his wife registered for a local race and suggested he give it another shot. To hear him tell it, in these first few years of rediscovering his love for running, he would always run alone. What's more, his running was rigidly structured and diligently measured since it was all about optimal progressive training in preparation for one or more upcoming races. Colin told me that he first heard about run crews 'by accident', when he

attended a fun run organized by a company that he had been fundraising for “and one of the people there was with East Van Run Crew”.

...about a week later, I was cycling out to a book club meeting on the East side and I saw ‘em. I saw the run crew and I thought ‘Oh that looks like so much fun’, so I sort of started checkin’ them out, you know, where they meet up and where they run. So, I guess, the next week I decided ‘Okay, I’m just gonna go run with them.’... I’m not the most outgoing person but I felt really welcomed, and it was a fun group, and they stopped for a beer afterwards or two and so...I was hooked. I was like ‘Yeah, I gotta come back all the time.’

Fast forward a few years and Colin is not only a regular at EVRC, but you’ll often see him at other run crew meet ups across the city (almost always donning his EVRC singlet). He told me that running with EVRC has completely changed his outlook on running and that, while he continues to run on his own, “crews are just more of a modern thing” that add a enjoyable social element to his running pursuits (he trains year-round for races) but also to his life more broadly.

The idea that crews are a ‘modern thing’ became increasingly evident during my time in the field. Not only did the number of new crews in the city continue to expand, but there was also a discernable shift in the running landscape that happened in or around 2017. In short, I noticed that certain companies had started using the term ‘crew’ to describe their existing running groups. Mountain Equipment Co-Op (MEC)¹¹ is an excellent example. Perhaps recognizing run crews as a hot trend in running culture (see Shana, 2017), the company rebranded their weekly group runs, held in cities across the country, as MEC Run Crews. It is worth noting that this seemingly strategic use of the word ‘crew’ did not sit well with some of the runners I spoke with. Colin felt strongly that there was a distinction between what MEC was doing and ‘real’ run crews. “No, it’s not [a crew]”, he told me matter-of-factly. “It’s a running group, but it’s not a crew”.

Like, a crew is really, um...my take on it is they’re not a- There’s no formality. They’re not incorporated. There’s no- Like, a club, normally, I associate with paying a membership and there’s no- there’s no fees ... [MEC] is a store. It’s a commercial enterprise that does- I mean, it’s- it’s got some of the same dynamics, but to me it’s different. I mean, I’ve run with Running

¹¹ Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) is a Canadian retail outlet, founded in Vancouver in the 1970s, which specializes in outdoor gear, including mountaineering, camping, and climbing equipment.

Room and it's fine ... I think the crews get- I mean, I guess Running Room you get the same core people too. I don't know. It just seems different. There's no fees to join. You just show up and go, and it's not associated with a commercial enterprise, so it's not about the money; it's about the running and the social aspect.

There is a lot going on in this short excerpt. It seems that, for Colin, crews were defined (at least in part) by what they were not. As noted by Ingham and McDonald (2003), oftentimes how we understand and talk about community “suggests both an appeal to the included” and at once an “understanding of just who is *not* a part of our ‘community’” (p. 21, emphasis in original). There seems to be an important conceptual difference, for Colin, between what MEC (“a commercial enterprise”) represents vis-à-vis ‘grassroots’ crews. Suppose we shelve for a moment the fact that one of the largest crews in the city, FCRC, is itself housed within (and thus firmly attached to) a commercial enterprise (Vancouver Running Company), the above quote also seems to show a bit of crisis in confidence (for Colin) around the particularity of crews. That is, Colin seems to struggle at times to delineate what exactly the difference is and, at times, even seems to be met with the realization that the differences are perhaps less clear than he imagines them to be. Notably, Colin was by no means the only one who felt this way.

I would never run with MEC. I know for me, personally, it's just- I know the type of people that go¹². I'm, like, I'm just not them. (Steph, 25)

Like Colin, Steph's disavowal of MEC's running groups (and the people who participate in them) reflects a very clear conceptual ‘othering’ at play. Interestingly, she also made a point of highlighting that some of the ‘big players’ in the running industry had tried, and failed, to organize their own run crews in the city.

I think Adidas tried to make a run crew. That lived and died with the same people... I think it's the branded stuff that's failing. Nike tried to do one downtown, New Balance tried to do one downtown, and it's just, like, at that point it's too much ... It's not authentic anymore.

¹² It wasn't until I was transcribing this interview that I realized how significant this comment is, was, or could have been. That is, I immediately regretted not taking note of it in the moment and immediately following-up on it. I would have liked to learn more about what and *who* she meant by ‘the type of people that go’.

Stephanie's point here about authenticity is a really interesting one, for at least two reasons. First, it begs the question of what is meant by authenticity. Are 'corporate' crews inauthentic simply by virtue of being attached to or created by a company? Also, her suggestion that it's not authentic *anymore* seems to imply that there may once have been a time when it was. Nevertheless, like Colin, it seemed as though Steph had 'drawn a line in the sand'; corporate-driven crews were on one side and 'grassroots' crews were on the other. Second, there seems to be a somewhat rigid conceptual binary whereby local/grassroots is viewed as authentic but global/corporate is not. Vannini and Williams (2009) invite us to consider that "authenticity is not so much a state of being as it is... a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar" (p. 3). For Steph, these companies were each trying to capitalize on an emerging trend in the industry and their failure had less to do with oversaturation and more to do with the fact that they were perceived as less authentic than those that were created 'by the people'. This struck me as especially noteworthy when I learned that Steph came to run crew through RunRobson, the lululemon-produced club, which seems to me an exemplar of what she might now deem as inauthentic.

As Thornton (1995) explains, "the idea that authentic culture is somehow outside media and commerce is a resilient one" and that, "[i]n its full blown romantic form, [this] belief suggests that grassroots culture resists and struggles with a colonizing mass-mediated corporate world" when, in fact, they are often synergistic (p. 116). To extend from Vannini and Williams (2009), there is a sense that the reason these corporate-sponsored groups failed was because they did not exemplify the ideal form of a run crew, unlike those groups that had been established informally, by members of the local running community. East Van Run Crew is a noteworthy example in this regard. By some accounts, the first (and certainly the largest) run crew in the city was allegedly started by a

post on Craigslist, the once-popular online classifieds website. So the story goes, the group's founder was tired of running alone and, one night, he decided to create a short ad asking if anyone wanted to meet up for a run. To his surprise, a handful of people responded; they went for a run, and then they went for a beer. The rest is history, so they say. Whether it's the grassroots spirit or the post-run beers that continue to draw crowds as large as eighty (even upwards of a hundred) runners to EVRC runs on any given Monday night is hard to say, but the group has demonstrated great staying power in an ever-expanding market.

It seems to me that the appeal to authenticity is also interesting for another reason. Based on the alleged origins of the run crew scene, circa 2004, and on my own experiences with and as part of these social groups, the question of authenticity is a bit 'grey'. There are undoubtedly some clear similarities, most notably in terms of structure and style, between the early¹³ run crews and those that have thrived in the city of Vancouver from 2015-2020 – and an argument could be made that the rise of run crews in Vancouver has broadened or otherwise created space for different ways of being a runner. The emphasis on fun and friendships over competition and cadence is a positive shift, I think, in contemporary running culture, a culture long associated with serious training.

I am reminded that some postsubcultural scholars, such as Redhead (1990), have suggested that claims to subcultural authenticity became more or less impossible after the 1970s, in part, "because of contemporary culture's tendency to be self-referential" (Carrington and Wilson, 2002, p. 79). The run crew community in Vancouver is an exciting, empowering, and also substantial piece of the local running scene. If someone were to type 'running groups in Vancouver' into a Google search, a list of run crews is one of the first things they would find. This has led me to

¹³'Early', in this case, is meant to refer to those original run crews in New York City.

consider whether the run crew scene in Vancouver might be a somewhat diluted evolution, or revision, of its rebellious or rogue-like ‘back-alley-running’ antecedent. Of course, this is by no means a unique argument with regard to ‘origin stories’ vis-à-vis evolutions of subcultures. In his exploration of the Canadian rave scene, Wilson (2006) proposed that in its attempts to duplicate an imagined version of the British scene (which was inspired by the Detroit and Chicago scenes), the rave scene in Canada had become “more British...than the British raves ever were” (p.164). There is no doubt that some of what it has been reproduced stylistically and structurally in Vancouver takes inspiration from the alleged first run crews, and the groups also seem to be characterized by a similar ethos than those that came before, where different ‘flavours’ of running are on offer, and where fun and fashion are understood as more important than being fast. But the question of whether this the scene in Vancouver is, in fact, the same scene as that which started in NYC over a decade ago is unclear. It seems to me that, not unlike what Wilson found, there is reason to believe that what has flourished and thrived here is, rather, a stylistic echo of sorts.

2.6.9 Consumption, Youth, Class, and Crews

To this point I have considered how membership in crews might be seen as both a response to, and a reflection of, broader social conditions that have inspired a search for even temporary and aesthetic forms of community – while also recognizing some of the local conditions (in Vancouver) that may have led to particular configurations and intra-city differences among crews.

What I have not considered so far, which I will suggest is one of the central factors to consider when explaining the types of activities that underlie crews, and the identities of those seeking crew-like communities as a way of negotiating some of the conditions noted above, is social class. In this final section of this exploration of run crews in Vancouver, which includes consideration of what is reflected in and produced through the crew scene, I discuss links between

crews and class, and how these links require close attention to the consumption activities that are often woven into and taken-for-granted in the crew scene, and too how *youth and youthfulness* is integral to the crew 'brand'. In doing so, I conclude this section with an argument for considering how crews might be seen – and in some respects must be seen – as consumption communities.

This exploration of class, consumption and crews begins with a more in-depth look at the word *crew* – a term with a long history, allegedly dating back centuries. The word is often associated with ship workers, people who work on airplanes (a cabin crew), and the sport of rowing, but the most common contemporary definition refers to “a group of people associated together in a common activity or by common traits or interests” which could very well describe *any* of the aforementioned examples and, of course, the running groups in this study (Myriam-Webster, 2021). But there's also something about the term that invokes youthfulness, which makes sense if or when we consider that the term is also associated with street gangs and, of course, hip-hop culture (e.g. rap crews and dance crews) and in this way has both a bit of a deviant but also an edgy/cool connotation to it.

It is worth noting that more than thirty years before the run crew movement the term crew was tied to another group in New York City, the hardcore punk music scene. 'Youth crew' referred to a late-80s response to some of the debauchery-filled, angry, anarchist tropes that defined the hardcore¹⁴ scene at the time. Youth crew punks were straightedge, which, as Wilson and Atkinson (2005) describe, refers to “a lifestyle of rebellion against the physical excesses associated with many youth, and indeed adult, cultures in North America” (p. 292). In the context of the early 80s punk scene, this meant no drugs and no alcohol, each of which were each quite prevalent, but there was also a distinct stylistic difference between youth crews and what 'looked hardcore' in the early

¹⁴ The term 'hardcore' is used to describe both a subgenre of punk rock music that originated in the late 1970s *and* a subgenre of electronic dance music that emerged in the mid to late 1990s.

1980s. In some respects, the youth crew aesthetic was the antithesis of the leather-clad look that often characterized punk at the time.

Aesthetically speaking, [they] provoked the status quo of punk by not looking punk at all. What that did was almost get rid of the barrier to entry of punk rock in the '80s. Instead of emulating New York or British punks, they channeled who they were—punks who skated, abstained from drugs and alcohol, and were... yes... *jocks*. Let's spell this out: it wasn't common for a hardcore punk band in 1985 to wear windpants or a varsity jacket or high top Nikes or have a bleached blonde crew cut, yet alone run those all at once along with boasting a chiseled physique. (Pappalardo, 2017, n.p.)

Though the two emerged at distinctly different times, and in response to two very different things, there are some interesting similarities between the youth crew and run crew aesthetics. The youth crew 'look', which often included sportswear such as varsity jackets, quarter-length tube socks, and white sneakers, became a symbolic "stance against the violent, nihilistic, drunken mentality that was prevalent in the hardcore scene at the time" (Pappalardo, 2017, n.p.), whereas the run crew look, heavily influenced by surf, skate, and cycling cultures, was said to have started as a pushback against traditional running culture, including its style of dress.

Some of the runners I talked to felt that run crews skewed younger than other types of running groups. In my experience with these groups, a conservative estimate would be that the most common demographic would be runners aged 25-45 years old, but there were outliers on either side of this range. I would argue that this is not so much a youth subculture so much as it is a *youthful* subculture, especially when contrasted against the rigidity and seriousness of regimented training, which, as alluded to above, characterizes many running clubs. Run crews, alternatively, seem to be spaces where fun is the emphasis and a youthful exuberance is accepted and even encouraged.

Youth subcultures have often been interpreted as specific ways of working through, responding to, or resolving generational problems, "which can be traced back to the young

people's position in class hierarchy" (Jensen, 2006, p. 261). Unlike those youth subcultures commonly the focus of the CCCS-era studies, my experience with these groups suggests that participants in this sporting subculture represent a range of social classes and a variety of professions¹⁵. I vividly recall a conversation I had one night with a longstanding member of EVRC, after a particularly cold run in the rain. We were sitting in a local brewery, warming up with a few other runners and, as she looked around, she told me that one of the things she loves about these groups is that it could mask social class. She said something to the effect of, "I love it. Everyone is just wearing running gear. I have no idea if you're a bartender or a neurosurgeon. It doesn't matter here." Her point is an interesting one, to be sure, and one that resonated with me, in part, since it was something I'd considered on more than one occasion, as exemplified in the following excerpt from my field notes:

December 29, 2017

Looking around the store, I see a lot of smiling faces. I'm actually impressed with the turnout given that we're in that strange atemporal space between Xmas and New Year's Eve. Lots of chatter tonight. We all deal with pre-run nerves a bit differently, I guess, but we're all here for the same reason. No, that's hardly true, is it? I mean, sure, I love running, but I'm here as a researcher, first, at this point. This means something different for me than for Blake. He's been working so much lately, often late into the night or early morning, in a high-rise downtown. He sneaks this in when he can, but it sure isn't a priority. I expect it means something entirely different to Jess, too, who has two young kids at home. It occurred to me the other day that I have no idea who so many of these people are – what they do 'in between'. I don't see students, surgeons, accountants or immigration lawyers when I look around the room. Or maybe I do. I guess my point is that it's almost impossible to tell in this space. To my eye, it's just a room full of runners. I guess that's kind of neat.

However, it seems to me that there's a risk in suggesting that these groups can or do mask social class altogether. Such an argument seems to overlook at least two important variables. While there is no doubt some homogeneity in terms of what running apparel looks like, there are also

¹⁵ I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge a distinct methodological oversight in this regard. That is, my inattention to certain demographic markers (e.g. job, income, parental status, etc.) of my research participants effectively limits the claims that I can make.

certain cultural markers that can signify class or, at the very least, a level of ‘disposable’ income that can be allotted to running pursuits. Put simply, the latest trendy running apparel and fitness technologies come at a cost. Nuanced questions about how we understand or categorize class in the contemporary moment notwithstanding, there is a sense that economic capital can be ‘read’, to some degree, on the body. Moreover, the very fact that some folks can afford the time to participate in, or otherwise commit to, one or more of these groups week after week also reflects a schedule (or lack thereof) that is simply not representative of all people. An argument could be made that the fact that these groups meet in the evening is more conducive to a traditional ‘nine-to-five’ workday. From another perspective, however, that these groups often meet at six or six-thirty in the evening (which, for many, is dinner time) might be viewed as less conducive to runners with families and, in particular, those with small children. In this way, the timing alone might make it entirely impractical for some runners with family responsibilities to participate in these spaces.

Finally, an argument could also be made that run crews might be what Carrington and Wilson (2001) describe as an “archetypical postmodern youth[ful] formation” (para. 10). Run crew culture is described as fluid and open, as collaborative and meaningful, and these ‘communities’ are not bound by, or at least articulated in any significant way through, “the modernist structuring relations of class, gender or ethnicity” (Muggleton, 2000, p. 52). These groups not only have the ability to superficially mask social differences, as highlighted in above, but also not unlike the clubcultures studied by Carrington and Wilson (2001; 2004) and the rave culture that was the focus of Wilson (2002), these are highly style-oriented and pro-technology groups. Of course, these do not erase class but, as the excerpt above highlights, there is a sense that it might, in some cases, feel like it can. Once per week, along the sidewalks and city streets, non-running identities and social and cultural markers are masked temporarily behind the veneer of sameness. This illusion of equity

creates a sense of community that is experienced differently from one person to the next, not least since members arrive at these moments of togetherness from a variety of different social, economic, and experiential locations. With this in mind, I consider in the next section some of the ways that the run crews' cultural distinctions, hierarchies and subtle (and not so subtle) exclusions manifested in the aesthetic features and associated economic imperatives that were associated with the crew scene.

2.6.10 The run crew aesthetic and the commodification of subculture

Ingham and MacDonald (2003) explain that sport and sporting spaces have historically “existed among a vast array of cultural and political practices designed to construct boundaries around particular groups of people—to differentiate between and separate certain ‘communities’ from others (p. 21). This observation resonates with me as I consider in this section. The seemingly ever-growing expanse of vibrantly coloured running apparel lines that have emerged over the past few years in many of Vancouver’s running stores. These new offerings sit alongside the tried and true ‘old-school’ running basics. The running singlet, split shorts, and other running ‘staples’ have not gone away but a number of new brands have entered the market and now sit alongside long-time frontrunners such as Nike, New Balance, and Adidas.

Field Note entry, dated ‘Early February, 2018’

Damn, it’s packed in here tonight. A handful of regulars, lots of new faces too. I guess that’s a good thing, right? It’s wild; I used to be one of the new guys, now I barely recognize anyone. Tonight is the first time the new Nomad Run Collective is here – maybe that’s part of it (for lack of a better term, NRC seems to be an ‘anti-crew’ crew – as the name suggests. They don’t really have a ‘home’ base. Instead, as a collective, they run with different groups each week. An interesting idea, I guess? As people comb the clothing displays and check out the latest gear on the wall, I can’t help but think that he’s got a good thing going here. Run crews are good for business.

Run crew style has been described as “any type of collaboration between fashion and function” (Gross, 2017, n.p.). Many of the runners I spoke with described a quintessential run crew ‘look’ that borrows from skate, surf, and cycling cultures. What I heard most often was that it could be summed up as three key components: the socks, the hat, and the flair (by which I mean loud colours or designs that defy a relatively understated simplicity of ‘traditional’ running apparel). Certain brands that were once primarily associated with skate culture, such as Stance (formerly InStance), are now commonplace in running stores. At least in Vancouver, Stance socks have become a common way to express individuality. Stance’s quarter length and shin-high ‘crew’ socks¹⁶, many adorned with flashy designs and references to pop culture (e.g. Wu-Tang Clan, Star Wars, Pulp Fiction) have become a popular piece of the run crew aesthetic. So too has Ciele, a headwear company, founded in Montreal in 2014. One of its co-founders has described how he saw a gap in the market, in part, because all of the running hats on offer “had either style or technical functions but were not a blend of the two” (Mulhern, 2015, n.p.). Fast-forward a few years and the Ciele hat is widely referred to as a key fixture in the contemporary running ‘kit’ (a term colloquially used to describe an assemblage of gear worn or used by a runner or cyclist). As one runner told me, “it’s the hipster runner’s go-to piece, the Ciele”. The hats bear a striking resemblance to a cycling chapeau, thin headwear commonly worn by cyclists, with short brims that can (and are) commonly flipped up.

Of course, having a functional and fashionable running wardrobe can come at a cost. A Ciele running hat costs anywhere from forty to sixty dollars, and Stance socks anywhere from twenty to thirty per pair. Add these to the high cost of running shoes and other pieces of kit such

¹⁶ While I expect it is no more than coincidence, I cannot help but note how fitting it is that run crew participants often wear ‘crew’ socks.

as technical shirts and shorts, and the cost of running can climb quite high for a sport ‘without equipment’. To be clear, the adoption of these expensive items is by no means a requisite to participating in run crew culture, nor is this look especially prevalent in all crews. Perhaps unsurprisingly, of all the crews in the city, Flight Crew Run Club seems to buy into this dimension of run crew culture, both literally and figuratively, in ways that others do not. Not only is the group based out of Vancouver Running Company, a ‘specialty running store’ which carries these items, but the store is also located in a relatively affluent neighbourhood. As Cora (age 28) describes below, in reference to her time spent running with Flight Crew, those runners who are fully ‘kitted’ in the latest trendy (and costly) apparel have the means to do so.

If you look at the demographic of, like, who’s going to the run, it’s a lot of, like, younger adults with disposable income. Some of them have families and it’s not that they’re less included than the people that don’t have families, but most of them don’t necessarily have kids and, like, are kind of- you don’t have to pay for kid stuff and you have money to spend sixty dollars on a singlet.

The store also sells a variety of custom Flight Crew branded apparel (produced in collaboration with lululemon). As Millington (2016) suggests, fitness “is an ideal vehicle for commercialism” and the sale of stylish crew-branded apparel allows runners to ‘rep(resent) their crew’, both in person and on social media (the latter of which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four), in ways that are mutually beneficial for the runner and for the organization(s) that produce the apparel (p. 1169).

As described by many subcultural scholars, apparel can function as a form of *subcultural capital* (Thornton, 1995). As Thornton (1995) explains, subcultural capital might refer to “the knowledge of [a] scene, possession of relevant physical objects” or “appearance through style” and, in each case, displays of subcultural capital can demonstrate commitment to or “longevity of identification with the scene” (p. 90). Put differently, to acquire these particular items or to be ‘in

the know' with regard to the brands and styles that are 'in' in these spaces might serve as an important means through which some runners feel connected to a group or the scene more broadly, and might even function as a source of collective identification.

However, these unspoken stylistic distinctions can also make some runners feel uncomfortable or, worse, that they do not belong. One runner told me that some of her initial experiences with run crew left her feeling incredibly out of place and that a lot of this stemmed from the simple fact that she felt like she didn't look the part.

I was very intimidated. I'm athletic, and so I pick things up athletically quite quickly but, yeah, *very* intimidated... Like, I was the chick that showed up with, like, the really old running shoes and, like, I didn't have the cool socks that everyone was wearing. I definitely looked like somebody that hadn't gone running.

As Taryn alludes to above, her lack of subcultural capital left her feeling, to use her words, "like a fish out of water" as she quickly noticed that "there's an aesthetic dimension to it, you know, run crew." What's more, this initial experience spurred consumption.

I went and got better socks. I eventually bought running shoes at the shop because I also figured that my running shoes were causing some issues because they were so old... So eventually, I started to just, like, morph.

I still don't have a Ciele hat and I still don't wear the shin socks. And I think even- this might be weird of me to say, but even just being in the shop and having it be a small shop and, like, there were all these products that I'm not even familiar with, so I couldn't even- like, the first time I went with my girlfriend and then I eventually started bringing my husband with me. But there were times where I'd show up alone and as the two or three people that I knew weren't there, I'd awkwardly walk around and look at stuff that, like, I didn't even know what it was. Here I am, like, pretending to find this product that I really enjoyed.

Vancouver Running Company (VRC) first opened its doors in 2015 and, to hear them tell it, the vision of hosting group runs was part of the initial business plan from the start. Less than ten people took part in the first group run but over time, through word of mouth and a highly active

social media presence, VRC Flight Crew Run Club quickly grew to one of the largest running groups in the city. Worth noting is that few run crews are based out of retail storefronts. Fraser Street RC, for instance, used to meet each week in a back alley behind a founder's house, and the East Van Run Crew (EVRC) routinely changes where their Monday night meet-ups occur. While the ethos of VRC Flight Crew is overwhelmingly one of community, there is much to be gained by hosting a weekly social gathering at the store. In addition to hosting weekly group runs, VRC also plays host to a number of crew-related social events throughout the year, including running workshops and clinics. In addition to being valuable, educational, and even community building, these events bring bodies into the store. It could be suggested that the independent running store is a risky enterprise if and when we consider that they are forced to compete for business with larger corporate franchises (e.g. Sport Chek, Running Room) but also, increasingly, with massive online retailers with limited overhead. In this way, small independent stores have to find ways to create value and set themselves apart if they want to survive. It seems to me that the development of a store-based run crew is one such way.

As noted above, the run crew aesthetic draws inspiration from skate and cycling culture, but it is also infused with and influenced by 'high fashion' to a certain degree. I am not talking about Chanel running shoes or Louis Vuitton singlets but, in recent years, a number of ultra-high-end 'boutique' running brands have emerged, many of which are catered towards and popularized by run crew culture. I first heard of Satisfy in 2018, when VRC brought in a small collection of pieces in an attempt to see whether the brand would sell. The Paris-based brand has established itself as a frontrunner in the runner-chic apparel scene. The company's founder and CEO, Brice Partouche, explained in an interview that he grew up skateboarding and snowboarding and that his 'laid-back way of life' is something he is now trying to bring to running.

To me skateboarding and snowboarding isn't a sport. There's no score, it's more about a personal experience. There are no teams and it's like an ensemble of friends and culture. That's why I chose to skate as a kid and why I've now turned to running — it's not about the performance to me, it's about the experience.

Suppose we shelve for a moment the fact that Partouche seems to eschew the performative element of skateboarding and snowboarding, and that each are in fact 'scored' sports¹⁷, to hear him talk about the influences behind the brand is insightful, both because he draws parallels between running and skateboarding but also since he alludes to an experience-based ethos, where community and camaraderie supersede competition. He goes on to explain that his vision for Satisfy emerged, at least in part, as a response to the status quo.

What the big brands were doing with the performance side of things, it didn't resonate with me at all. There was no music, no art, no experience. I wanted to give running a new culture, an alternative.

To be sure, there is a serious cost to being a part of this 'alternative' running culture. A two-pack of the brand's cotton tube socks will set you back over seventy dollars, and a pair of Satisfy running shorts anywhere from \$220 to \$340. I vividly recall conversations amongst some of the runners I ran with at VRC when these pieces hit the store shelves. Some joked that 'if this [stuff] would sell anywhere, it would be in Vancouver, in reference to a large demographic with disposable income and an affinity for expensive brands, but the consensus seemed to be that the exclusivity of a brand like Satisfy was not out merely out of reach for, but also out of touch with the average runner.

Satisfy is fascinating for another reason, however, one that has less to do with its price tags and more to do with some of the 'work' that it does to frame running as an alternative, or even an 'anti-establishment, act'. A brand manifesto foregrounded on their website suggests that

[i]n the 70's, a new generation picked up running as a rebellious, anti-establishment act. They were chasing the high. Inspired by this ideal of freedom, Satisfy was

¹⁷ See, for example, the X-Games and the Olympics.

founded in pursuit of the high...Running is the vehicle. Risk and innovation are its fuel.

This idea of running as rebellious is central to some of the brand's top selling collections, including a collection so abrasively ironic that one would be forgiven for mistaking it for satire. The 'Run! Punk Run!' collection includes items such as \$105 leopard-print running hat and a variety of 'moth eaten' shirts¹⁸, some of which are adorned with a photo of Joe Strummer, the co-founder and singer from the British punk rock band The Clash. In what can only be described as a stunning example of subcultural commodification, here we have an overt appeal to punk style (a purposefully disheveled looking garment) that carries an exorbitant price tag. Suffice to say there is nothing punk about paying \$150 for a sleeveless tee shirt. It is important to acknowledge that this is by no means the first instance of punk aesthetics being embedded in high fashion. As Bolton, Hell, Lydon, and Savage (2013) eloquently describe in *'Punk: Chaos to Couture'*, a book inspired by an exhibit of the same name that was featured at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, there is sense that "punk's democracy stands in opposition to fashion's autocracy" but the fact remains that, since the 1970s, high fashion has "readily appropriated the visual and symbolic language of punk, replacing beads with studs, paillettes with safety pins, and feathers with razor blades in an attempt to capture the style's rebellious energy" (p. 10).

Perhaps even more importantly, Satisfy is an example of a brand that continues to make a concerted attempt at creating a strong ideological and material link between contemporary running culture and CCCS-era subcultures. Some have argued that run crews emerged as an 'imaginary solution' to traditional running culture, characterized by competition and structured training. But make no mistake, run crews are not deviant, stigmatized, marginalized groups akin to those doing

¹⁸ Allegedly designed for 'optimal ventilation' while running, the shirts are allegedly designed to pay homage, stylistically, to a well-worn, ragged, punk aesthetic.

research in an early subcultural tradition out of the University of Chicago, nor are they flagrantly oppositional groups in the way that Gelder (2007) and others have described CCCS-era subcultures. Having said that, not unlike the way that CCCS-era scholars described how members of subcultures resisted through rituals, practices, and stylistic choices (Hebdige, 1979) – and that these allowed for feelings of temporary empowerment through their resistive ethos and consumption patterns – certain elements of run crew culture might be interpreted as a symbolically resistive, *even if what it means to resist is often bound up with patterns of consumption*. As Hebdige (1979) suggests, any subcultural subversions of social order are quickly followed by incorporation, which can take commodity-based or ideological forms.

[T]he subversive style of the punks became a new fashion as record and fashion industries ‘commodified’ punk music and punk style. Hebdige concludes from this that ‘youth subcultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries and rejuvenating old ones’ (p. 96). (Beezer, 1992, p. 113)

It took only a few short years (a mere sliver of time in the history of running culture, as we know it) for the run crew aesthetic to be fully incorporated into the mainstream. It also strikes me as noteworthy that while the aforementioned youth crew were effectively the straightedge punks who abstained from consumption, members of run crews have often been framed in popular media accounts as ‘not your typical runners’ (see Gross, 2017), in part, for the exact opposite reason; these are runners who drink, who smoke (cannabis), and for whom consumption is often integrally linked to the experience of participation, a point I discuss in greater detail in the following section.

2.6.11 Run crews as ‘communities of consumption’

Running has often been described as a middle-class pursuit (Smith, 1998; Abbas, 2004; Tulle, 2007; Hanold, 2010). While it might instinctively be considered relatively inexpensive vis-

à-vis other forms of sport and leisure such as hockey or mountaineering, as highlighted above, the financial costs of ‘serious running’ (Major, 2001; Collinson, 2008) can quickly add up. One (or more) good pair of running shoes, some moisture-wicking anti-odour ‘technical’ apparel, and a GPS-enabled running watch (considered by many to be integral to any serious runner’s arsenal) do not come cheap, not to mention that many runners like to test themselves and compete with others by racing (Smith, 1998) which carries additional costs (registration for a marathon event seems to hover around \$200). Runners also to travel to ‘destination races’ (Abbas, 2004) or, in some cases, plan elaborate running-centric vacations (Major, 2001) which, again, not only requires the funds to do so but also a certain degree of freedom and flexibility with regard to work and/or family commitments, characteristic of what Bauman (1998) describes as a ‘global’ middle-class.

Beginning in the early days of my involvement with these groups, I was attentive to the ways that run crews interacted with one another and the ways they partnered with, or were supported by, other local businesses. I was especially intrigued by some of the different cross-promotional initiatives that seemed to characterize the scene. During my time in the field, I saw (and took part in) many different running-related social events, many of which were co-sponsored or ‘supported’ in one way or another by one or more businesses. In some cases, these were companies with large budgets and extensive histories in the running history. Nike, Adidas, and Asics have each long been affiliated with running cultures and their involvement with (and financially investment in) these events was not entirely surprising – and, as noted above, other high fashion-esque and self proclaimed ‘alternative’ running brands have moved into this consumer space in recent years too. Decidedly less expected was what might seem to be an unlikely connection between Vancouver’s run crew scene and the city’s craft beer scene.

As noted above, EVRC meets at (and runs from) a different local brewery each week and runners are encouraged to stick around after the run and socialize over one or more pints. To hear some tell it, this is great fun and goes a long way towards fostering a sense of community.

These are things that people in Vancouver love, right? Craft beer, huge; Outdoor activity/running, huge. So why not, you know? (Simon, age 35)

[EVRC is] structured completely around the breweries, and that's wonderful because it actually creates the social aspect, right? Like, before COVID, 80 to 90% of the people who would show up for EVRC, you know, stay to socialize...I see lots of people staying like two hours after the run. (Asita, age 42)

Of course, it's not hard to imagine how running groups that meet at breweries are a big draw for runners. As one runner was quick to point out, however, this link between running and beer consumption is not a new thing.

I mean, even thinking back to one of the groups that's probably been around since, like, WWII is the Hash House Harriers. They call themselves a drinking club with a running problem. So they have chapters (and I use that word loosely) all over the world and they call it running as hashing...I think the leader was called the hare and it's, like, hashing is doing the running. But I think if you get kind of lost, or if you can't necessarily keep up and you get lost, it's almost, like, encouraged or something. And then you all meet back and you have your beer. And I don't know if my memory is accurate, but I sort of feel like in the 70s, the Hash House Harriers were more prominent in Vancouver, and they'd run out of the cricket pavilion here in Brockton, and go for their run and have their beer afterwards. Of course, it was the 70s so it was mostly men running, not so many women. So it's a very, you know, testosterone environment. We'll go for the run and then we'll have our beers! I mean, let's face it, after exercise, when you've had a good hard run, if it's a hot summer day, a beer tastes really good. (Sigrid, age 49)

Runners that I spoke to had mixed feelings about the growing link between running and beer. I was not at all that surprised to learn that the very same conceptual linkage that might be really attractive to some might be entirely off-putting for others.

You don't have to [drink]. Some people don't, but I'm like- especially if you're a newbie you're like 'How do I fit in?' ... If I run with EVRC I'm obligated to buy a beer if I wanna be social and not act as a weirdo. (Steph)

As Steph touches on, here, both the structure of the group (that they run from and socialize at breweries) and the way the group promotes itself online (i.e., as drinking and running) can create an expectation that can be uncomfortable for some folks and likely dissuades others altogether. A reformed alcoholic, to name but one example, might seek community elsewhere or perhaps

(re)consider whether EVRC was the right crew for them. Put differently, that some crews that have an element of consumption 'built-in' to their runs might be fun for some and uncomfortable for others.

I do know of someone who used to go to EVRC and he doesn't go anymore. And he said, it's partly because he has an alcohol problem, and he needs to stay away. So he can't go to that- he can't go running anymore because he just needs to remove the temptation.

EVRC is by no means the only group to combine running with beer. North Burnaby Runners is a much smaller group that typically meets at the same local brewery and Hustle for Hops (or H4H as they're often referred to colloquially) is a unique example of this marriage between beer and running culture. H4H is based out of Yellow Dog Brewing, a microbrewery in Port Moody, a suburb known for its lush landscapes and, increasingly, its beer scene. Port Moody is home to what is commonly referred to as 'Brewer's Row', where five local breweries are situated along a 400m stretch of the same city street. Unlike those crews that run to or from a brewery, H4H started with the brewery and then added the running.

But the connection between beer and running has also taken other forms. In 2016, Vancouver Running Company collaborated with Postmark, a local brewery in the downtown core, for a limited run beer and, in 2018, the store collaborated with H4H (a.k.a. Yellow Dog Brewing) for a limited run beer Run to the Hills. The event included an (uncharacteristic) afternoon run at the brewery, and was attended by well over a hundred people, including members of many different crews. Suppose we shelve for a moment the fact that certain businesses (and crews!) stand to gain from these relationships (people do really enjoy them), when participation is bound in one way or another to consumption it seems to take away from one of the things that people purportedly enjoy about run crew culture – that is, that there is no cost to participate. As Steph mentioned, sure, there is no requirement to do so, but it feels weird if you don't, and I think that matters. Lastly, if

we consider the fact that many runners drive to their respective run crew meetups on any given night, there are some who might rightly draw attention to the safety or ethics of implicitly promoting alcohol consumption immediately after a run (when the body is depleted) but then getting back into their vehicles and driving home.

Beer is not the only thing that brings runners together in Vancouver. I was grateful for the opportunity to meet with Karen, the founder of the wildly popular Ice Cream and Donut Run Club (ICDRC), and discuss some of her experiences with the local run crew scene. Karen is in her early fifties and has been running with local groups in the city for many years. She came to running as an adult and for a long time it was something she did on her own or with her husband, each of whom now consider EVRC their run crew ‘home’. In 2018, she explains, she and a friend had a ‘sweet’ idea, one that started as little more than a fun hypothetical but quickly grew into something much bigger.

You know, we were talking – she runs, I run – and we were talking about how much we love ice cream and, you know, that we should go for a run and then have some ice cream. Then, I don’t know- just organically, it was ‘Why don’t we combine the two? You know, we could go for a run *and* ice cream- see who wants to come with us. We could start a club! You know, we could do donuts in the winter (because you don’t eat ice cream in the winter). And we love donuts! So, I started a club on Strava. I set up an event and thought, ‘Hey, if I could get, like, five people to come run with me I’ll consider that a success’. The first run we did was from the Welcome Parlour in North Van, and there were eight of us and I thought, ‘Wow, this is so cool!’ and it just sort of grew from that.

The Ice Cream and Donut Run Club was a near-instant hit, in ways that nobody really expected, Karen included. Over the span of only a couple months, the newly created ICDRC groups on Facebook, Instagram, and Strava each attracted a large following. To hear Karen tell it, the floodgates really opened when the group was profiled in an article published on the Daily Hive¹⁹.

[A]ll of the sudden all these people started showing up. People I didn’t know. People who found it on Facebook, people who heard about it on Daily Hive and, you know, we were seeing thirty plus people showing up for our group runs and it got to the point

¹⁹ Daily Hive is a Canadian online news source that focuses near-exclusively on covering local content in some of the country’s largest cities.

where I was having to contact the shops ahead of time to say “Hey, were gonna have like thirty plus people coming to your shop. Can you make sure you have enough for us? Can you handle us?”

Admittedly, when I first saw ICDRC on Instagram, I thought it was satire. Not only was it real but, like so many others, I soon found myself gathered outside of a downtown ice cream parlour, chatting about the unseasonably hot weather while getting unsolicited flavour combination recommendations from some of the group’s regulars.

There are a number of companies that profit from the running industry. In this way, in addition to the any psychological, physiological, and social benefits, running can also be understood as an economically meaningful practice. Perhaps most obviously, large multinational corporations such as Nike, Adidas, and Reebok each generate huge sums of money from the sale of shoes and running apparel. However, other companies also profit from running, for instance, those involved in the ever-expanding running technology sector. Companies like Garmin and Fitbit, who produce smartwatches and fitness bands, are capitalizing on runners’ growing interest in self-quantification. Relatedly, as I discuss in Chapter Three, social fitness platforms such as Strava rely heavily on user-generated data produced by its throngs of users, including members of the run crew community. On a much smaller scale, running can be meaningful to the owners of independent running stores, where running as a practice and runners as consumers each have a direct impact on their business. As highlighted above, however, other local businesses reap financial rewards from their relationships with the running communities. Local breweries, donut shops, and ice cream parlours – each counterintuitive to some respect – are not only making sales immediately after a run but are also oftentimes reaping the benefit of free promotion through the myriad social media posts created by members of the running community, a point I return to in greater detail in Chapter Four.

2.7 Discussion & Concluding Thoughts

As highlighted above, run crew is perhaps first and foremost about community; it is about celebrating (with) one another through running. In the relatively short time frame between the ‘birth’ of run crews and the success of these groups in Vancouver and elsewhere, however, there seems to have been a commodification of run crew culture in ways that were perhaps foreseeable and even unavoidable. Not unlike the idea of community, a ‘crew’ sounds like something you might want to be a part of; it sounds cool, maybe a bit edgy, and might appeal to a younger generation who may not have seen themselves in, or as part of, ‘their Dad’s running group’. What allegedly started as relatively small collectives of runners in New York City and London (c.f. Thomas, 2019) has, over the course of no more than a decade, become a central component of contemporary running culture. Run crews have gone from an alternative to the running scene to being a socially, culturally, and economically significant part of the running scene. Put another way, it has been incorporated into mainstream running culture (Hebdige, 1979)

Wheaton and Beal (2004) remind us that “consumerism is not unilaterally negative” and that “subculturalists are not simply ‘victims’ of commercialism” (p. 158). They suggest, instead, that “rather than imagining an opposition between hegemonic incorporation and resistance”, it is worthwhile to consider how cultural commodities, whether material (e.g. clothing) or conceptual (e.g. community), “are made meaningful in specific acts of consumption, [at] particular time[s] and [in particular] spaces” (Wheaton & Beal, 2004, p. 158). Based on the many conversations I had with runners, both on and off the record, there is no doubt in my mind that these individual running communities and the relationships fostered therethrough are profoundly meaningful to many who claim membership within them. That people are seeking out, creating, and feeling a part of one or more communities is a thing and lends support to a vast body of scholarship that

continues to highlight the role and significance of physical activity and sport-based communities in the lives of their participants (c.f. Brighton, Wellard, & Clark, 2020; Giardina & Donnelly, 2019; Glover & Sharpe, 2020; Fletcher, 2020). Week after week, runners come together through a shared affinity for running but, based on what I have experienced first hand and based too on what others have told me, it seems that the act of running can shift from foreground to background as friendships are formed and a sense of connectedness is made through participation in these communities. In this way, run crews are disruptive to the extent that they challenge certain prevailing discourses around physical activity, broadly speaking, and running, more specifically, and/as a relentless quest for demonstrable progress. This is not to suggest that members of the run crew community do not take running seriously or that they do not adhere to training regimes - many do - but it certainly isn't a prerequisite.

In his study of running clubs, Smith (1998) found that runners who participated in recreational running groups enjoyed the built-in competitive ethos amongst the members of the group. Among other things, the findings presented in this chapter invite us to consider that what it means, looks, and feels like to 'run together' can take different forms and can mean different things to different people. Importantly, it isn't always about competition and doesn't always have to be about getting faster or going longer. Runners that I spoke with shared stories that emphasize how participating in these groups, and in this broader 'crew-mmunity', can be fun, social, and empowering, three attributes that are important in their own right but might also be lacking in other facets of runner's lives. For some of these runners, *run crew is their social life*. Of course, this was not true of all runners. Some alluded to a superficiality of run crew relationships and spoke of contextually-specific friendships.

I propose that there are equally reasons to consider how certain elements of run crew involve a commodification of subculture. Subculture sells and if we imagine run crew as a hip, fresh, or otherwise trendy shakeup to the running industry, it becomes possible to imagine the attraction. Any difference (real or perceived) works to establish a ‘cool factor’ that’s attractive to some in ways that mainstream culture is not. Maybe it feels different than the running groups that came before it - this much is reflected in some of the stories that runners told about how and why they participate in run crews - and this is not insignificant. Importantly, what may have started as a quiet ‘push back’ against the dominant running culture has effectively become a prominent piece of the local running culture. I think it’s important to recognize that it’s not so much a question about whether this is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, so much as it just *is*.

With this being said, *context matters* when it comes to explaining the emergence and features of run crews. This is relevant when considering the emergence of the crew scene in Vancouver – a city that is largely amenable to running by virtue of its excellent ‘running weather’, but also as a city that is a destination for many; it attracts folks from all over, who do not have roots in the city, and who might thus be in search of community (no unlike myself, who found run crew less by chance that by virtue of seeking out a site of commonality. Of course, context also matters when it comes to explaining how runner understand what counts as an ‘authentic’ crew – and too the role of (and views on) consumption practices related to run crews. Corporate-driven crews were viewed differently by some runners – and may ‘act’ differently – than more local, grassroots groups (although crew members seems to still struggle with their assessments of what was considered ‘crew-friendly’, and not). This, however, sits alongside a reliance on local businesses, in other respects. Breweries, ice cream parlours, donut shops, running apparel companies, and (independent) running stores are each entangled (for better and for worse,

depending on one's perspective) with run crew culture. As above, there are reasons why it might be appropriate to conceptualize run crew culture as a 'subculture of consumption'. Importantly, this does not mean they should be dismissed as less meaningful or less powerful than communities for reasons that Wheaton has argued. *Communities of consumption are still communities* – and to those who participate within and reproduce them, these can be experienced as fun, social, supportive, spaces. The trade-off here is that, in some ways (within run crews), the consumption orientation may undermine the inclusion ideology that is so commonly espoused in the crew-community.

As noted above, we should not be surprised by the consumption component of run crew culture, nor should we consider it a 'problem' per se. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that an emphasis (whether implicit or explicit) on various forms of consumption might have some unanticipated effects. Not only might it reinforce certain forms of exclusion, it might also negatively impact the experience of those who participate. Put another way, *social class matters*. Not only does it relate directly to subcultural capital in run crews, which is one of the reasons why the consumption orientation can be said to 'exclude' in crews – recognizing that the experiences of many in the run crew scene, not to mention those who would not have chosen to enter the run crew scene, would be negatively impacted by the pressures to adopt particular (and particular expensive) run crew uniform. Add to this the fact that participation in these communities necessitates a certain amount of flexibility with regard to time, a freedom that connotes to some degree with financial stability. While these groups are free to join, there are unspoken costs that can quickly add up; running apparel is one thing, but so too is the financial freedom to participate in crew-related social events (dinners, events, races, clinics, etc.).

As evidenced above, what run crew looks like and feels like can vary and one person's experience might feel more or less supportive or superficial than another's. Run crew culture in Vancouver is intricately bound up in the creation, the promotion, and the consumption of local community. And there are many reasons to celebrate this 'shake up' to the status quo. On one hand, run crew culture should be celebrated for its positivity, and for its attempts at inclusivity²⁰, but it seems to me that there is also reason to celebrate what it might have the power to do, both *as* a community and also for the communities in and with which they interact. The run crew scene has positive impacts on the livelihood of many local business owners. Enduring partnerships have been formed and cross-promotional initiatives have been established. Not only has run crew helped connect individuals, it has also helped promote and sustain local businesses.

²⁰ Despite the rhetoric used to describe them, I am not convinced that run crews are necessarily more or less accessible or inclusive than other types of running groups. It seems to me that, were this the case, we wouldn't see the emergence of 'The Not-So Intimidating Run Club', which was started by lululemon in the spring of 2019.

3 Reflections from the ‘Strava-sphere’: Kudos, community, and (self-) surveillance on a social network for athletes²¹

3.1 Introduction

Over a decade has passed since Apple’s iconic commercial for the App Store first captured the attention of viewers around the world. The thirty second spot, which premiered in 2009, urged consumers to think of their cellular phones as more than a communications device²². The commercial featured Apple’s now-trademarked tagline, ‘there’s an app for that’, which has since become an iconic piece of pop culture. Now more than a decade since the commercial invited us to ‘think differently’ about our devices, the most popular apps continue to be those that facilitate communication²³. The ubiquity of app-based social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, has had a profound impact on the way we communicate. For many years, Facebook has been among the most widely used apps around the world²⁴. In recent years, however, the body has also emerged as a site upon which many app developers have focused their attention, and an ever-expanding catalogue of apps designed to help users keep track of their fitness and their bodies in various ways contribute to the near 160,000 different health related apps now available for download (Goodyear, Armour, & Wood, 2019).

The focus of this chapter is one particular app that has successfully managed to blur the once rigid boundaries between apps designed for communication and those designed for fitness.

²¹ The final, definitive version of this paper has been published in *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13/1, February/2021 by Taylor & Francis Ltd, All rights reserved. © [Jesse Couture]. Website: <https://www.tandfonline.com/>

²² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szrsfeyLzyg>

²³ This is an interesting ‘full circle’, of sorts, if we consider that telephones have always been about facilitating communication.

²⁴ Nearly 70% of American adults use Facebook, making it the most widely used of all social media platforms (Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan 2016). Facebook use is reportedly on the decline, however, amongst younger users who are engaging more often with photo and video-centric platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat (Anderson and Jiang, 2018).

Described as ‘the social network for athletes’, Strava is a web-based platform and mobile app used by recreational and professional athletes alike and, over the past decade, has established itself as a global leader in a burgeoning ‘social fitness’ industry. Strava is designed to help users keep track of their physical activity, but it is also a place to ‘connect with friends and share your adventure’ with other users around the world (Strava, 2020). To date, limited attention has been paid to Strava in the academic literature and, to the best of my knowledge, no empirical research has engaged with Strava from an ethnographic perspective.

This chapter is guided by three central aims. The first is to describe what Strava is, what it looks like, and what it affords its users, but also to consider what it might have the power to do. Second, I hope to highlight some of the ways and reasons Strava is used by recreational runners, a group that has been the subject of many previous studies but, with a few notable exceptions (Esmonde, 2019; 2020), has seldom been the focus of self-tracking studies. Finally, I attempt to give voice to some of the methodological tensions and experiences of doing research in ‘ethnographic places’ (Postil & Pink, 2012) that transcend a discretely online or offline field of study by weaving ethnographic field notes into the text as narrative vignettes. This ‘analytic lattice’ (Wacquant, 2011) is used to shed light on some of the affective domains of self-tracking. In so doing, I hope to draw attention to some of the complexities of doing hybrid ethnographic work (Przybylski, 2020) all the while offering additional insights into what it feels like to self-track socially. In what follows, I begin by providing a brief overview of Strava and by highlighting some of the existing literature that have informed my thinking about digital self-tracking, broadly, and Strava, more specifically. Next, I outline the methodological approach and specific methods that were used in this study prior to discussing some of the key findings.

3.1.1 Situating Strava

Strava (from the Swedish word for ‘to strive’) is a social fitness platform designed to help users to keep track of, analyse, and share their workouts online. First released in 2009, the platform supports thirty-two types of physical activity but, overwhelmingly, the two most common activities uploaded to the platform are cycling and running. Mark Gainey, one of Strava’s co-founders, explains that the idea for the platform first emerged in the mid-1990s but that he and co-founder, Michael Horvath, were unsure how to turn their idea into a viable business at the time. To hear them tell it, the platform began as a passion project inspired by nostalgia. As the story goes, the idea behind Strava was to create a ‘virtual locker room’ that would mimic the type of supportive and playfully competitive environment the two fondly remembered as varsity crew athletes at Harvard in the late 80s (Schoups, 2017, n.p.). Horvath has described how it was his teammates that often motivated him the most during his varsity career, often more than the sport itself. Strava was created with this in mind. There are many products on the market designed to help athletes get fitter, faster, or stronger. For Gainey and Horvath, Strava was about finding a way to keep people connected, entertained, and motivated in between their workouts.

Strava first launched as a browser-based platform. Users would have to physically connect their wearable tracking devices to a computer and manually upload their data to the platform. In 2011, Strava released an app-based version of the platform, which removed the need for a third-party device since users could now use their smartphones to track their workouts. Strava’s user base doubled over the next two years, and has continued to see near-linear growth in the years that have since passed. In 2017, more than one billion activities were uploaded to the platform (Strava, 2020) and an article published in Outside magazine in 2019 suggested that nearly a million new

accounts were being created every month (Lindsay 2019). Self-quantification, it seems, has gone mainstream.

3.2 Literature Review & Theoretical Overview

3.2.1 Digital self-tracking and the ‘quantified self’

In recent years there has been a proliferation of academic interest in the practice of digital self tracking. Researchers have drawn attention to questions including who self-tracks and why people self-track (Lupton, 2017; Goodyear, Kerner, and Quennerstedt, 2019) and others have highlighted some of the different ways that digital self-tracking devices are used and what it feels like to self-track (Esmonde, 2019; Fotopoulou and O’Riordan 2017). With a few notable exceptions, limited research has focused on digital self-tracking as a social practice, particularly in the context of sport and physical activity (Lupton 2017; Pink et al. 2017). As many have rightly identified, there is nothing new about self tracking (Lupton 2016; Millington 2017). What is new is the ease of self-tracking. Self-tracking is increasingly automated and, with the assistance of various ‘smart devices’ that ‘facilitate the collection of ever-more detailed personal information’ keeping track of the self has become less a task that people do and, rather, something that is done for us (Lupton, 2017, p. 564).

The term ‘the Quantified Self’ (QS) was first coined in 2007 by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly, then-editors of Wired magazine. To hear members of the QS community tell it, to self-quantify is insightful in its own right, but also serves as a meaningful way to see and measure self-improvement. As Millington (2014) suggests, “‘bettering the self’ stands as a primary reason for using health and fitness apps’ and he explains that health and fitness app adherents, many of whom routinely ‘divid[e] their bodies and habits into atomized components’, are encouraged to share

these measurements with others in ‘an assortment of online communities’ (p. 487–488). As noted by Fotopoulou and O’Riordan (2017), the sharing of personal self-tracking data can also be understood as a biopedagogical apparatus to the extent that people learn about their bodies and ‘learn to selfcare’ by using wearable self-tracking technologies (p. 54). They explain that the ‘micropractices of knowing one’s body through data regulate the contemporary fit and healthy subject’ and suggest that digital self-tracking devices, though often understood as informative and innocuous, are, in fact, normalising devices that ‘teac[h] users how to be good consumers and [proper] biocitizens’ (p. 54).

3.2.2. Health(ism) and the datafied body

Neoliberal narratives of health hold that bodily discipline is both a personal and moral responsibility. From such a perspective, those who fail to ‘appropriately’ discipline their bodies (whether through exercise or diet) are understood as less responsible than those who do. What’s more, Such an understanding of health is commonly referred to as healthism (Crawford, 1980) and it has been well-established that healthism is an important lens through which to examine people’s participation in and perceptions of physical (in) activity (see Ayo, 2012; Wiest, Andrews, and Giardina, 2015). Millington (2016) explains how healthist understandings of the body ‘helped to establish the “common sense” of neoliberalism’ during the first fitness boom of the late 1970s and early 80s, and describes how the fit body not only functioned as a status symbol, imbued with social and cultural capital, but that this mode of thinking came to influence prevailing understandings of health, as something that was ‘legible on the body’ (p. 1186).

As noted by Wiest, Andrews, and Giardina (2015), ‘there has been substantial shift in the ways that individuals are said to be uniquely responsible to pursue healthiness (in particular ways, with particular idealized outcomes)’ and remind us that ‘the relationship conjoining health

and fitness is not given' but, rather, "is a product of the historical and contextual forces that make fitness a necessary constituent of healthiness (p. 22). In the contemporary moment, routine digital self-tracking and, in particular, the use of health and fitness apps in the interest of self-discipline and self-improvement are one of those ways.). Millington (2016) explains that fitness technologies have long been promoted as a means of empowering individuals and, to this day, are routinely framed as one of many purchasable tools that people can use to 'achieve' good health. As Ruckenstein (2014) suggests that 'when bodies and lives are made more transparent, they can be better acknowledged and acted upon' and, thus, "[w]ith the aid of digital technology . . . optimisation becomes not only possible, but also desirable (Ruckenstein, 2014, p. 69).

3.2.3. Social networks and surveillance

Michel Foucault (1975) famously drew attention to the panopticon as a way of conceptualising the disciplinary society, but the extent to which online spaces can or should be considered 'panoptic' continues to be a source of debate. Over the years, there has been talk of an 'electronic panopticon' (Lyon, 1993), an 'information panopticon' (Zuboff, 1988) and a 'mobile panopticon' (Rämö and Edenius, 2008), but the very idea of digital panopticism has also been troubled due to the ways that surveillance is often understood in digital spaces. Lupton (2012) suggests that social self-tracking software complicates the idea of panopticism altogether since digital self-trackers invite the gaze upon themselves and often enjoy the surveillance from others.

But how are we to make sense of people's willing participation in their own surveillance, particularly in a historical moment in which controversies about the rise of intrusive, oftentimes state-sanctioned, forms of surveillance continue to make headlines around the world? Anders Albrechtslund's (2008) notion of participatory surveillance is helpful in this regard. He explains that online social networking is anchored in surveillance practices, but that active participation in

one's own surveillance works to challenge traditional 'top-down' understandings of surveillance and, importantly, can empower (rather than violate) those who consensually participate. There are clear similarities between what Albrechtslund describes and what Koskela (2004) calls empowering exhibitionism. Though originally developed in reference to a then-growing use of home webcams, Koskela explains that the virtual world was once imagined and talked about as a place where identities could be hidden (cf. Rheingold, 1993), but that new technologies have turned this upside down and brought the body back into focus.

Andrejevic (2002) reminds us that there is nothing particularly new about the fact that peers develop strategies for keeping track of one another and that "contemporary strategies for mutual monitoring merely rehabilitate, in technological form, the everyone-knows-everyone-else's-business world of traditional village life" (p. 481). There is a difference, however, when individuals proactively take part in their own surveillance since social surveillance can 'flatten' the power relation. He suggests that peer-to-peer or *lateral surveillance* "cannot be separated out from the regimes of governance associated with the productive management of the state" but instead "serves as a mean for offloading some of the responsibilities of this management onto the populace, whose do-it-yourself monitoring practices reinforce and replicate the imperatives of security and productivity" (Andrejevic, 2005, p. 487). Andrejevic suggests that "rather than [outright] displacing 'top-down' forms of monitoring, such practices emulate and amplify them, fostering the internalization of government strategies and their deployment in the private sphere" (p. 479). Through this lens, Strava is a clear (by)product of neoliberalism and Strava users can be understood as exemplary neoliberal citizens who publicly discipline their own bodies and support others who do the same.

Finally, digital health technologies can also be viewed through the lens of what Haggerty and Erikson (2000) describe as a ‘surveillant assemblage’. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of *assemblage*, Haggerty and Erikson (2000) invite us to consider surveillance not from a control-oriented Foucauldian or even Orwellian perspective but, rather, as one that emphasizes the interconnections – the links and ‘flows’ – between the corporeal body and technology and that draws attention to the potential commodification of ‘data doubles’ generated by the techno-body. Similarly, Lupton (2016) suggests that we are increasingly datafied and “rendered into assemblages of digital data...when we move around in spaces carrying devices” and, too, “when we use search engines, smartphones and other digital devices” (p. 4). There are parallels too between surveillant and datafied assemblages and (im)materialist and ‘new materialist’ perspectives (see Latour, 2005; Barad, 2003, 2007; Harman, 2017). In their own ways, each call for the consideration of the relationships between human and non-human objects which can each be understood as having agency, if and when we consider the various ways that each can act upon the other. The inter-actions of human and non-human objects is intriguing and is compatible with the way Lupton (2016) describes the liveliness of personal data. Recent scholarship in the sociology of sport had highlighted the value in attending to these ideas and these ways of thinking about the agency of non-human entities in relation to surveillance, fitness regimes, and digital health technologies (Jette & Esmonde, 2020; Esmonde & Jette, 2021).

3.3. Methodology

3.3.1 (Digital) ethnographic methods

This study is drawn from a larger ethnographic project on contemporary running culture(s). Methodologically, this has involved spending a great deal of time with runners ‘where they are’. I have participated in weekly group runs, competing in local races, and partaken in a host of other

running-related social events. Importantly, early on in my time in the field, I learned that Strava is one of the ‘places’ where runners routinely interact. People’s lives are increasingly-saturated with computer-mediated communication and, as Hine (2015) suggests that contemporary ethnographers ‘need to take part in those mediated communications alongside whatever face-to-face interactions may occur’ (p. 3). With this in mind, I spent time a great deal of time online, using Strava, all the while observing and interacting with other Strava users. Postill and Pink (2012) explain that ‘technologies are often part of how ethnographic research participants navigate their wider social, material and technological worlds’ and it is helpful to consider Strava as one piece of a larger ‘ethnographic place’ (p. 124).

Participant observation is widely understood as one of the primary methods used in ethnographic research, but Wacquant’s (2004) notion of observant participation better reflects the method(s) used to carry out this particular study. Over the past three years, I have self-tracked nearly all forms of physical activity; each of my runs, my bike rides, my swims, my yoga practice – even my daily dog walks – were tracked and uploaded to Strava. To participate fully in this space, however, meant more than a commitment to digital self-tracking; I also ‘followed’ (and was followed by) a number of other Strava users, many of whom I knew prior to the start of the project but others were individuals I met in the field. This commitment to a profoundly (inter)active form of data collection meant, on one hand, that my research and my researching body made the field, to the extent that I contributed (physically and digitally) to the very field that I was studying. On the other hand, it is equally important to recognize that the field made me. That is, this commitment to (social) self-tracking had a profound impact, both on my body and my attitudes toward this platform and this practice.

Detailed field notes were kept throughout the research process. These consist primarily of observations but also include an ‘outpouring of memories, thoughts and words’ derived from my experiences with self-tracking and my interactions with other self-trackers (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2001, p. 357). As Thorpe and Olive (2016) explain, it can often be difficult to take notes in the field. The act of pulling out a pen and notebook while running, for instance, would have not only been impractical but, importantly, would have also have risked disrupting or otherwise influencing the moment. For this reason, field notes were written as soon as possible after my time in the field. Digital screenshots were also used as a means of archiving certain posts, interactions, or other notable ‘moments’ observed online²⁵. Screenshots are a convenient method of capturing data but, perhaps most importantly, can help render permanent an image or an exchange that might otherwise be lost in the midst of an ever-shifting digital landscape.

No matter how ‘active’ my participation in this space, my perspectives and interpretations alone can only get me so far in terms of learning what this platform means to Strava users. For this reason, a series of qualitative interviews were conducted with runners who were regular Strava users in an attempt to create a space where they might ‘tell stories, accounts, reports and/or descriptions about their perspectives, insights, experiences, feelings, emotions and/or behaviours’ (Smith and Sparkes, 2016, p. 103). Interviews were conducted over a span of six months and took place in a variety of different settings including coffee shops, restaurants, and offices. Interviews varied in length from just over an hour to two and half hours.

²⁵ All screenshots used in this work that are not original property of the author have been reproduced with express consent of the account holder.

3.3.2 Participant recruitment

A total of sixteen Strava users were interviewed for this study. Following approval from the Ethical Review Board at the University of British Columbia, recruitment began in August 2019 when I created a post on Strava²⁶ that provided a brief overview of the study and contact information. There are clear advantages and limitations of using Strava as a site of participant recruitment. Individuals who saw the post were, by default, Strava users by default, which automatically fulfilled one of two inclusionary criteria. For a user to have seen the post, however, means they had to have been following me on Strava. Finally, since social network feeds are dynamic and ever-changing, to have seen the post in their ‘feed’, users would have had to have logged into the platform sometime on or around August 27 2020, the date of the original post.

Thirteen people reached out in response to the post on Strava and, of those thirteen, eight met the additional criteria and chose to participate in the study. With my consent, some participants shared my contact information with friends, which yielded three additional participants. In addition, five other individuals with whom I had made connections in the field each expressed interest in participating in the study. The individuals whose voices and experiences are (in)directly represented in this study range in age from twenty-three to sixty-one and represent a variety of racialised identities, sexualities, and professions. Importantly, while each of these individuals actively participated in one or more run crews at the time of the interviews, their experiences with running and their identities as runners were far from homogenous. Some participants self-identified as lifelong runners while others came to running much later in life, as adults. There was also great variability with regard to participants’ use of self-tracking devices; some self-identified

²⁶ In addition to those posts that are generated each time a Strava user uploads their physical activity data to the platform, users can also create text-based posts, similar to those found on other social networking platforms.

as diligent self-trackers (for whom physical activity was one of many things they tracked) whereas others only tracked their running.

3.3.3. Data analysis

Two methods of analysis were used in this study. Analysis of the interview transcripts were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) *reflexive thematic analysis* (RTA), as described in Chapter Two. Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016) suggest that thematic analysis 'offers a method for identifying patterns ("themes") in a dataset' and help researchers 'describe[e] and interpre[t] the meaning and importance of those' patterns (p. 191). Key terms and themes were identified and close attention was paid to those comments and perspectives that were consistent among participants, but also to those that stood out as distinct from, or otherwise inconsistent with, what I heard from others. To be sure, analysis also occurred during the interviews themselves. Handwritten notes scribbled into the margins of my interview guide often served as analytic notations; certain words were underlined or circled repeatedly and arrows or lines were sometimes drawn between words as a way mapping ideas and making thematic connections 'on the fly'.

It is widely understood that ethnographic studies involve immersion into the cultures, 'contexts, environment, situations, and lifeworlds of [its] subjects' (Altheide and Schneider 2013, 26). With this in mind, *ethnographic content analysis* (ECA) was used to examine various other types of data collected during my time in the field. As noted by Altheide and Schneider (2013), 'products of social interaction', including documents, photographs, and other types of digital communication, are ripe for interpretive analysis (p. 24). As noted above, digital screenshots were collected throughout the duration of this project to help capture particular 'moments' and interactions on social networks including (but not limited to) Strava. Analysis of these screenshots involved identifying language and imagery that stood out as noteworthy or atypical, but also that

which represented normal imagery and mundane ‘everyday’ interactions in these digital spaces. The interpretations of the data in the sections that follow are one of many plausible interpretations, informed both by previous research and, of course, by my own subject position as a white, male, able-bodied, runner/researcher who self-tracks. The purpose of this project is not to make broad claims or widely-generalizable truths about what it means or what it feels like to use Strava. Rather, the findings discussed in in this study are designed to highlight different ways of seeing and thinking about Strava and the practice of social self-tracking in the contemporary moment.

3.4 Findings & Discussion

3.4.1 Strava as site of self-tracking

Sunday, 5 August 2018

I remember being pretty resistant to it at first. Do I really need another social network in my life? The numbers are fun but it’s also the social piece, maybe more than I care to admit. I think maybe there’s a part of it that appeals to the gamer in me. Two quick taps of my finger and I’m back into this this extended community. It’s bizarre to think about, let alone write about. The seamless ‘scan-assess-compare’ happens so quickly that it’s tough to pull apart – a learned process, I guess.

There are many similarities between Strava and other popular social networks. Like Instagram and Snapchat, Strava uses a now-familiar system of ‘following’ other users. By following someone on Strava users can see and comment on the other users’ posts in a centralised ‘feed’. One of the things that sets Strava apart is the type of data that are commonly shared on the platform. Whereas text-based posts and photographs of food or family vacations might be considered the common currency of many online social networks, Strava operates near-exclusively through the sharing of biometric data. A post on Strava is generated each time an activity is uploaded to the platform (a process which is oftentimes automated), which also stands in marked contrast to other social media platforms, which require a certain degree of agency with respect to

creating a post²⁷. Since the majority of Strava users self-track with GPS-enabled devices, posts typically include maps showing precisely where a particular bout of physical activity took place (see Figure 1) in addition to other data such as distance, pace, and estimated caloric expenditure.

A single tap on any one post allows for a ‘deeper dive’ into the data; information is rendered into easy-to-read charts and colour-coded graphics which allows for quick assessments (see Figure 2). Users can also assess how their most recent activity stacks up against previous efforts and Strava’s ranked leaderboards allow users to directly compare their efforts on popular routes (known as Strava ‘Segments’) against their followers, but also against any Strava user who has ever completed that ‘segment’ before (Figure 3). Lupton (2013) reminds us that numbers are not neutral, ‘despite the accepted concept of them as devoid of value judgements, assumptions and meanings’, and it is not difficult to imagine how some of the technological affordances of Strava might be encouraging for one user but equally discouraging for another (p. 399).

A few of the runners I spoke to were quite reflexive when it came to thinking about the possible effects of being routinely exposed to other people’s data. Linda (age 45) felt that it could be good for some people but acknowledged that there are certain variables that come into play, such as a person’s insecurities and personal expectations, which might influence how they interpret, or are influenced by, other people’s data. She emphasised that the extent to which someone might feel motivated or disheartened would hinge on their self awareness and ‘how serious they take themselves’.

I totally accept that my times are not gonna be as fast as they used to be, so when I see people that are in their 20s and 30s and they’re getting faster and faster. Obviously there’s a little bit of the ‘Oh, I remember when I used to run like . . .’ or ‘I wonder if I can . . .’ and then I’m like ‘Oh, right. It hurts when I wake up’ [laughter].

²⁷ It could be argued that the question of agency is a slippery one if we consider that a user must have engaged in physical activity of some kind for it to be generated. It nevertheless seems there is a distinction to be made here.

Kris (age 38) offered a different perspective, inspired by what he referred to as the ‘social media effect’, that invites us to consider the ‘liveliness’ of the data on consumed on Strava.

I’ve read multiple articles that say the impact that social networks have on people is it actually makes them unhappy. They see these amazing pictures of everyone living glamorous lives . . . and they feel unhappy about the fact that they’re not doing it. So, if you agree to that theory, and you draw parallels to the running community and social networks like Strava . . . if you see people posting ridiculous times or going insane distances, is the impact gonna be that you feel less satisfied with your own performance?

Lupton (2016) uses the term ‘lively data’ to describe how ‘people live with, by, and through data they produce’ (p. 1). Lively data matters, she suggests, not only since it digitally represents

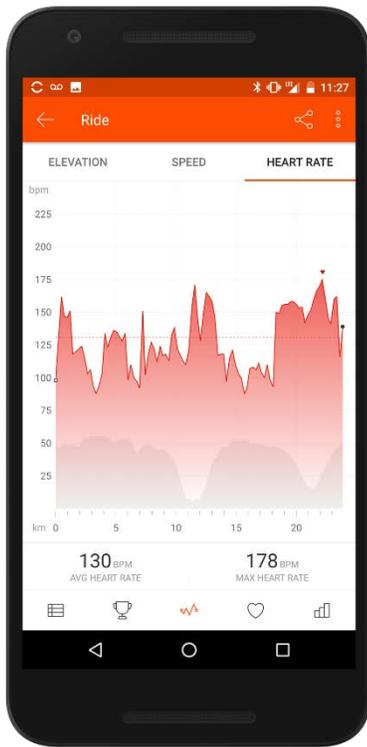


Figure 2: Strava posts are chalk full of data

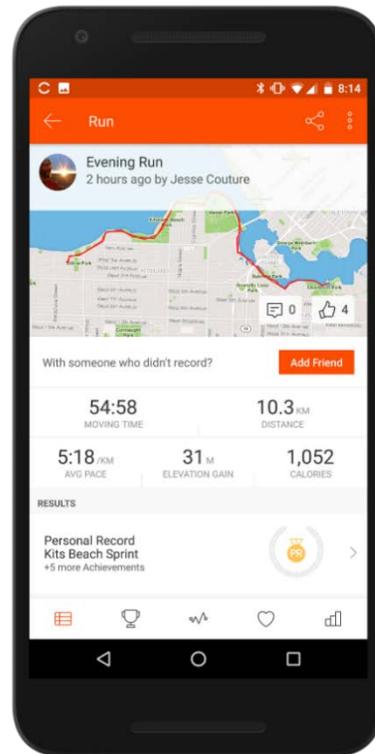


Figure 1: Strava posts include GPS maps

particular fragmented facets of human life, but also because it is increasingly social; it ‘circulate[s] and combine[s] and recombine[s] in the digital data economy’ and can come to influence people’s

lives in meaningful ways²⁸ (Lupton, 2016, p. 1-2). Put another way, data has a life of its own – it can interact with, inform, and act upon those who play no part in its creation. A Strava user might use data in particular ways during their physical activity (to monitor their pace or heart rate) or sometime shortly thereafter (to compare their efforts over time), but this very same data can have a different use value for other actors²⁹ (Millington, 2016). Another user might use the same data to learn a new running route but they might also, as Kris alludes to above, use it might also be used as a basis of comparison which have the ability to influence how users think about their fitness.

3.4.2 Strava as a site for self-trackers

van Dijck (2013) explains that from the earliest days of social media, online platforms have been presented as tools for making connections and building community, and Strava is no exception (see Figure 4). Most of the runners I spoke with told me that they used Strava, first and foremost, to keep track of their individual efforts, but the idea of Strava as a community also featured prominently in our conversations. Many runners explained that Strava has become ‘just a part of their daily social media routine’ and that, not unlike Facebook or Instagram, they would often casually open the app and quickly scroll through to see ‘if they’d missed anything’, oftentimes dolling out Kudos along the way.

As the founder of a local run club, Karina (age 51) explained that Strava was originally sold to her ‘as sort of like a Facebook for athletes’. When she first signed up, she found the personal insights interesting – she enjoyed seeing her efforts broken down in but it quickly became ‘a lot of

²⁸ Digital self-tracking data is increasingly promoted in the workplace and, in certain contexts, can influence personal insurance rates (see McFall, 2019). Self-tracking data have also played key roles in lawsuits where ‘quantified self-incrimination’ has (dis)proven claims made in the courtroom (Crawford, Lingel, and Karpp, 2015).

²⁹ While not the focus of this chapter, Strava Metro is a subsidiary of Strava that aggregates and de-identifies user-generated data and provides it to third parties such as departments of transportation and other city planning groups, ‘to improve infrastructure for bicyclists and pedestrians’ (Strava Metro 2020, n.p.).

fun’ for her to complete various monthly challenges and see other people reach for their fitness goals.

I like comparing my own efforts . . . but it is cool to see other people’s training – to see what they’re doing . . . it’s cool to see what other people are capable of . . . to read about how their run went, or their hike, or whatever it is they’re doing. It’s fun!

Similarly, Kris told me that he seldom uses ‘traditional’ social networks such as Facebook but that he increasingly spends a lot of time on Strava.

I didn’t like the content I was seeing . . . people ranting about current events- I didn’t like that at all. I like that on Strava all I see is people’s workouts . . . ‘Oh, you’re faster, you got a PR, you’re trending up’ . . . I love seeing that. I could look at that all day long.

Lupton (2012) suggests that digital self-tracking software effectively ‘reconfigures the subject of surveillance’ to the extent that it not only encourages users to surveil themselves but also encourages them to ‘invite others to do so’ (p. 11). She explains that ‘when an act of surveillance

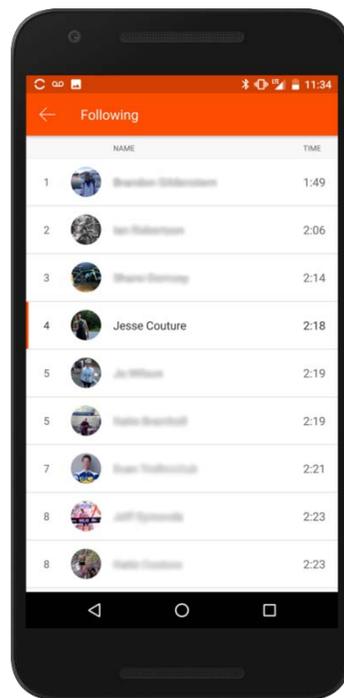


Figure 3: Ranked leaderboards on Strava

is rendered playful and willful or consenting it becomes far more acceptable than those acts of surveillance that are perceived as being imposed by others’ (Lupton, 2016, p. 85). The above

excerpts from Karina and Kris are each insightful in their own right, but also support previous studies that describe digital self-tracking as both insightful and as fun (Lupton, 2016; Fotopoulou and O’Riordan, 2017). Karina explained that the social element of Strava is a significant part of its appeal; the platform allows her to connect with, and feel connected to, people she knows and runs with offline.

Twenty years ago, to connect with someone you had to connect with them in real life. There was no other option. But people are making connections on social media. I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing . . . Like, we’re making connections and they do appear . . . real. You’re connecting with them, you’re commenting, you’re giving support. It’s good though, I think, especially for people who maybe feel like they’re alone.

Here, Karina alludes to something that technological theorists have written about at length (cf. Rheingold, 1993); digital communities such as Strava can be experienced as meaningful sites of interpersonal connection.

Strava Clubs are an immensely popular feature designed, in part, to add another layer of sociality to the platform. By joining a Strava Club, users can see, comment on, and give Kudos to other members, effectively extending their virtual social network. According to its website, there are now hundreds of thousands of unique Strava Clubs. Some are very small, and might consist of a small group of friends who train together (offline) and want a place to (re)connect online, but others are much larger. Clubs are free to join and, with a few exceptions, there are no restrictions on who can join a Club. Some Clubs are based on an affinity for a particular brand, such as the Lululemon Run Club, which has nearly 180,000 members, whereas others seem to function as virtual extensions of groups that exist offline. Karina’s aforementioned run club, for instance, meets every second Saturday and typically draws anywhere from ten to upwards of thirty runners. On Strava, however, the same group boasts a membership of nearly six hundred, including members from Canada, where the club is based, but also from Russia, Vietnam, and the United

States. As Karina suggests, some of the technological affordances of Strava might help to cultivate or maintain a feeling of connection via connectivity that might be particularly valuable for individuals who lack training partners or other support systems that are often ‘built-in’ to offline/physical sporting communities.

Monday, 21 July 2019

I’m cracked. Haven’t ran like that in weeks. I reach for my phone and fire up Strava before I even take my shoes off. Propped up against the kitchen counter, entirely unfazed by the beads of sweat dripping from my forehead down onto the orange glow of the screen, I (am) consume(d by) the data.

I PR’d that segment along Marine Drive!?! Didn’t even feel like I was pushing that hard. Kate was right. Consistency is paying off.

Single tap

Swipe up

Oh, wow! Nick crushed his long run! Sub 4:50 for 22 km? Wild.

Tap [Kudos]

Swipe up

Oh, nice! Hasan’s race went so much better than he thought it would. 41:02! I knew he had it in him.

Tap [Kudos]

***Tap [Comment]: “Nicely done, sir! #speedy 😊**

Swipe up

Another huge week for Janelle. 147 km? Who the hell has the time for that?

Tap [Kudos]

Swipe up

Looks like Lindsay and the rest of the crew had fun at the track.

Tap [Kudos] [Kudos] [Kudos]

***Tap [Comment]: “I promise I’ll make it next week! Looks like you had fun.”**

Double tap

Swipe left

3.4.3 Perspectives on privacy

Both among scholars and the broader public alike, concerns about privacy continue to be raised with regard to social networking sites (see Madden, 2012; Marwick & Boyd, 2014). Like other social networking platforms, Strava offers users some control over their privacy settings, but the platform is perhaps best understood as ‘public-by-default [and] private-through-effort’ (boyd, 2011, p. 507). Users can choose to make some or all of their activities private but, as some runners told me, this comes with a trade off since it limits some of the platform’s features, such as Segments and ranked leaderboards, which many users enjoy. For instance, users can create a custom ‘Privacy Zone’ around a particular area which limits what other users can see on the map that is included by default with each activity. Surprisingly few of the runners I spoke with had any serious concerns about privacy. Of those who did, however, a clear distinction was drawn between data privacy and personal privacy.

I have zero concerns with data about my running being online. I just don’t want people to know where my home is. (Tina, age 33)

I suppose if someone really wanted to find me they could figure it out . . . I never thought of it as a bad thing. I figure, at this point, these companies know so much about us . . . I don’t know if I stop using if it’s really gonna make a difference. (Lyn, age 42)

Now I have the privacy zones around my work and my office . . . it used to be public because the hook was that if it’s public then you’ll be on the leaderboards and all that . . . but I’ve kind of devalued that. I’m like, no, my privacy’s more important. I just don’t like the idea that someone could find out where I live and see my health data, my heart rate information, you know. I don’t want that information out there. (Kris, age 38)

Madden (2012) explains that there continues to be a polarising debate about whether or not privacy ‘can be dismissed as a relic in the information age’ and statements such as these, from Tina and Lyn, really speak to this idea of the expectation (or lack thereof) of privacy in online spaces (p. 4). Notably, other than Kris, only one of the men I spoke with used any privacy settings at all. Colin (age 61) described it as simply not something he was all that concerned with. ‘People know where I live anyways’, he told me. ‘It’s not like it would be rocket science to figure it out.’ Conversely,

all but one of the women had created Privacy Zones, most often around their homes but also around their places of work. Sandra (age 49) emphasised that she hardly used Strava as a social platform whatsoever and that this was largely tied to concerns about her own physical safety.

Being a woman, it's kind of a safety thing . . . I'm not really worried about animal predators. I'm worried about human predators.

Sandra's concerns were echoed by other women I spoke with, many of whom described having to routinely deny requests to be followed by users they did not know (oftentimes men), with several describing this as an ongoing ordeal.

I'm like, 'No, I don't know you.' I've denied them ten times but they keep trying. (Steph, age 25)

As these examples suggest, there seem to be some distinctly gendered differences with regard to both whether and how some Strava users think about data, privacy, and physical safety. As Anders Albrechtslund (2008) suggests, social networks are a 'snoop's dream'. The fact that the majority of Strava posts include detailed GPS-generated maps that show other users precisely when and where other users exercise, invites new ways of thinking about the possible implications of being 'followed' by someone online.

Thursday, 13 December 2018

I can see him from across the store. At least I'm pretty sure it's him. He's looked over here at least twice now. One of these nights I should really just go introduce myself. I don't know why I haven't. It just feels weird. I scan the room, purposefully trying to avoid eye contact. Perfect, Blake's here. I get two steps in his direction, but I'm cut off mid-step. Clearly, he decided it wasn't so awkward.

"Heyyyy! You're Jesse, right?"

"I am indeed. And you are . . . John."

*"Yeah, man. John C.! You know, from Strava!
This is weird, right? It's cool to meet you in real life!"*

*"Yeah, it sure is.
You runnin' the ten tonight, John?"*

*“Yeah, I’m feeling great these days.
What about you?”*

*“Nah, I’ve been running a lot the past
couple weeks.*

. . .but I guess you know that?”

Engulfed in the loud pre-run chatter of forty-some runners itching to head outside, we share a deafening silence. It’s the first time I’ve experienced anything like this. John and I have followed each other on Strava for well over a year. I don’t know how it happened. We must know some of the same people, but I don’t know John. I know how fast he runs. I know where he runs. I know who he runs with. I see his posts almost every day and presumably he sees mine. As we funnel out the door into the brisk winter air I can’t help but smile as I wonder how many times we’ve unknowingly ran together at one of these group runs, maybe even side-by-side in complete silence, and then gone home and given each other Kudos on Strava.

3.4.4 When data is disrupted/ive

In one of the few mentions of Strava in the academic literature, one of the participants in Pink et al.’s (2017) study of commuting cyclists who self-track said, in response to an untracked ride, that ‘if it isn’t on Strava, it didn’t happen’ (p. 8). This comment came up, in many cases verbatim, in several conversations. Most said it half-heartedly, with a smile on their face, and often only the first half of the sentence was uttered, the expectation being that I knew the rest. This is a ‘Strava-ism’ that circulates with fervour, particularly amongst runners and cyclists. Of course, the idea that a person feels they should not or cannot exercise without said activity being tracked and shared online is fascinating for at least two reasons. On one hand, a statement such as this makes clear the way that self-tracking has become so common as to have influenced ‘the stories runners tell’, both about themselves and about their exercise habits. On the other hand, it reflects a normalisation of data (over)reliance, which raises further questions about the reason(s) why people exercise in the first place. In jest or otherwise, to imply that physical activity did not happen if it was not tracked and made visible to others reflects a relationship to exercise that seems to be based less on the act of doing it than the fact that it was done. That is, there is a sense that the desire to ensure that an activity is recorded is only somewhat tied to its (in) visibility to others. Rather, it

seems that much of the anxiety around not having a particular activity recorded stems from a concern that it might influence the ‘big picture’ when it comes to the data or, put differently, that the data would no longer faithfully represent all that had happened.

Saturday, 4 January 2020

I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it. I really do. But the hard truth is that I'm also increasingly uncomfortable with it. I worry about my reliance on it. It would take me no time at all to find out how fast Jay and I ran on that 'stupid cold' Thursday night back in December. I could find out exactly how miles I banked in the lead-up to my first ultra, or what my average cadence is on a quick 5km. But there's nowhere I can find out when I seem to have decided that I'm okay with it telling me if I had a good run. That's the part that bothers me. I worry that it's changed how and sometimes even why I run. I mentioned to K. last night that when this is all over I might try to start running 'naked' again. No watch, no tracking – completely technology free. She smiled and told me she'd believe it when she sees it. Fair enough. So will I.

During my time spent using Strava, I observed countless instances of users ‘calling out’ their self-tracking devices, the GPS satellites, or Strava itself, for distorting or somehow sullyng the data (see Figure 6). In these cases, either the title or description section of an activity-based post was used to help justify to any potential onlookers what the data ‘said’. To be sure, these attempts to discredit the data seem to sit in a bit of an uncomfortable tension with the ways that, in other contexts, the data are more or less taken as the ‘truth’ of what happened, as exemplified by the aforementioned desire to have all activities tracked so as to have a complete and ‘accurate’ representation of a user’s training. Also intriguing was the ways that pain and ‘suffering’ were represented on Strava or, more precisely, how the word suffering and other language used to connote pain is used by some Strava users. Atkinson (2015) explains that sociological literature on pain and injury in sport has often highlighted how ‘athletes generally avoid, disavow or privately manage . . . forms of suffering’ (p. 100). Based on my observations, this is not always

the case on Strava. This is a space where self-imposed ‘suffering’ is lauded or, at least, where discursive representations thereof are celebrated and, in some cases, rewarded with more comments and Kudos from other users. To be sure, this is hardly the norm, and I not convinced that Strava is best understood as a ‘pain community’ comprised of users with a ‘penchant for self-imposed agony [that] binds them together’ (Atkinson, 2008, p. 166). Rather, this is a space where

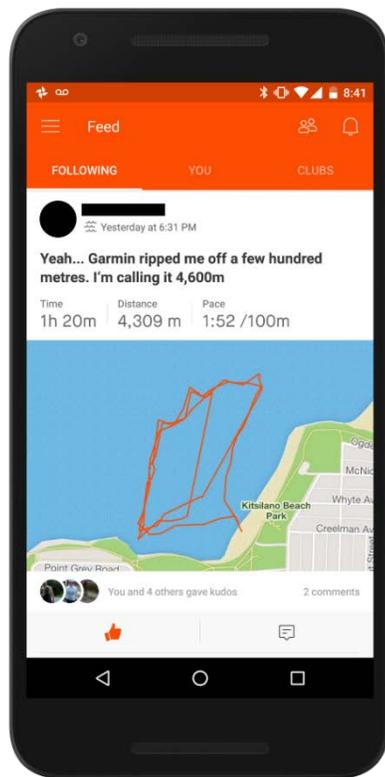


Figure 5: Technology 'fails' are often identified by Strava users in the title of their post

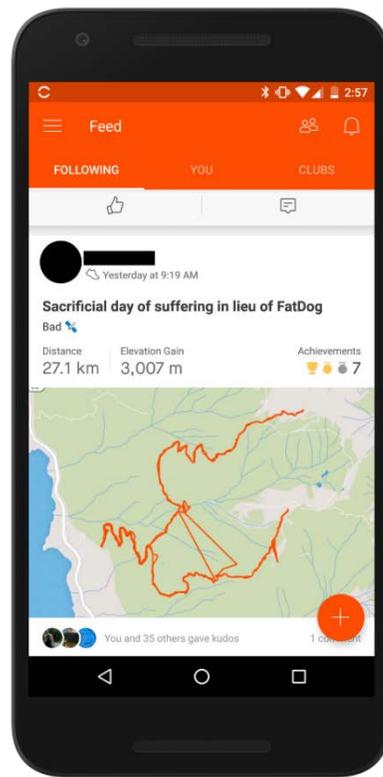


Figure 4: Evocative language is commonly used by Strava users

feats of athleticism are discursively constructed as gruelling, as painful, or as ‘sufferfests’ (see Figure 8 & 9). Of course there is no way of knowing the extent to which an activity was, in fact, painful. Strava users cannot see the activity unfold in ‘real time’, but instead are presented with insights (in the form of data) and highlights (in the form of photos and user descriptions) after the fact. Sandra (age 49) felt that Strava could be very empowering for some people, but felt strongly that much of this empowerment was tied to a feeling of validation from other users.

I think with Strava, it's the humble brag . . . 'Oh, I'm training for this race. Look at this 30k run that I did in the mountains with, like, 2000ft of elevation . . . You wanna show off your badassery.

To use Sandra's language, the rhetorical use of evocative language seems to reflect a purposeful framing of the self in such a way that demonstrates to others how much their body can endure. Strava is a site where feats of athleticism are shared, but also a stage upon which individual actors can curate and perform the athletic self (Goffman, 1959). Both the attempts to justify 'incorrect' data and the purposeful framing of activities in particular ways are each impression management strategies which are insightful in their own right but also align well with previous studies on social media use amongst athletes (Smith and Sanderson, 2015).

The boastful behaviour that Sandra describes above might be read as egotistical in other contexts or as an outsider looking in. I vividly recall the first time I overheard a runner describe Strava to an inquisitive friend as an acronym for 'Socially **TR**acking **All Vain Activity**'. Indeed, there seems to be a socially-sanctioned level of acceptable narcissism in this space and the same can be said of exhibitionism. That people want to share with others that they are achieving their goals makes sense and, as highlighted above, some Strava users enjoy seeing their friends' progress. From another perspective, the desire to post with regularity might also be read as a way of routinely re-affirming and showcasing personal responsibility when it comes to health. To be active on Strava demonstrates a steadfast commitment to an ongoing self-improvement 'project'. Strava is quite literally a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1975) that represents, reifies, and perpetuates neoliberal narratives about the body as an ever-unfinished 'work in progress'. As Andrejevic (2004) suggests that 'in a climate of perceived risk' it is not uncommon for individuals to adopt and make use of technologies 'that correspond with an ideology of "responsibilization"' and this is particularly apt when it comes to thinking about Strava (p. 479). This is a site where fitness is quantifiable and where health is understood as both something to be achieved but also

something to be enacted and shared. Strava invites us to consider how health and fitness are no longer legible exclusively on the body but also from a distance, behind the warm glow of a screen.

3.5. Conclusion

Hine (2015) questions whether ‘the internet [has] strengthened, enriched, or challenged our sense of community’ and, while I cannot say with any degree of certainty, it seems to me that it has changed it in some ways (p. 1). In this chapter, I have sought to highlight some of the ways that Strava is used and experienced by recreational runners, who invite us to consider not only how sharing data while self-tracking can be fun and empowering but also how it can be experienced as an important and interactive site of community.

This study responds to a call made by Pink et al. (2017) for ‘focused and in-depth investigation into the human experiences, routines, improvisations and accomplishments . . . which implicate digital data in the flow of the everyday’ and, in so doing, adds to an ever-expanding body of research focused on digital self-tracking in the context of sport and physical activity and builds upon previous critical studies of recreational running cultures. Further, by drawing attention to some of the ‘behind the scenes’ negotiations that can accompany the doing of ethnographic research, this study adds to a rich body of work that highlights the lived experiences of ethnographers of sport and physical cultures. Given its global popularity and its support of a wide range of physical activities, future studies might seek to examine how Strava is used in other sporting contexts since these might vary, in some important ways, from the findings discussed here. Moreover, this study focused exclusively on the attitudes and experiences of current, habitual, Strava users, each of whom reside in a large urban city in Canada. Studies that examine some of the reasons why people stop using Strava would help us to better understand the role(s) and influence that digital health technologies might have on people’s relationship to data and, too,

their participation in sport and physical activity. There is also much to be learned about the experiences of Strava users in rural areas and other geographic locales and, in particular, about the extent to which the networked connectivity afforded by Strava might, as one user in this study suggests, have the ability to influence feelings of connectedness to a larger global community. It seems to me that this is a particularly salient avenue of inquiry in the current moment, not least since the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the ways that individuals are encouraged to stay connected while adhering to social distancing regulations.

Lupton (2016) suggests that ‘research into people’s use of digital technologies for recreation’ can offer valuable insights into ‘the pleasures, the excitements and the playful dimensions of digital encounters’ (p. 710). There is still much to be learned about the many different ways that people engage with and understand digital health technologies such as Strava. It is hoped that this study sparks conversation, stimulates new ideas, and inspires further research on digital self-tracking as a meaningful and increasingly-social practice.

4: Stay safe, stay connected: Social running groups and a ‘social network for athletes’ respond to the COVID-19 pandemic

4.1. Introduction

Beginning in mid-March 2020, the world came to a standstill when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The effects of the pandemic have been far-reaching and, to hear some tell it, have irrevocably changed many facets of daily life. Following a period of speculation and great uncertainty, nations around the world soon began to impose rigid restrictions on travel and on everyday social interactions in an attempt to curtail the spread of the virus. As noted by Evans et al (2020), “the global response [to the pandemic] prompted the almost total shutdown of competitive sport at all levels”; sport mega-events around the world were postponed, including the European Football Championships and the Olympic Games, and professional sports leagues faced a number of challenges, with some opting to postpone the start of their seasons and others choosing to significantly restructure their seasons. Malcolm and Velija (2020) suggest, due to its “global reach, number of deaths, and [its] impact on more globally interconnected, powerful, Western nations,” that the pandemic will have “a larger impact on sport than any of the previous health crises of this century, or indeed before” (p. 29).

Drawing from findings from the larger ethnographic study on running and community that informed other chapters in this dissertation, in this chapter I engage with the results of an analysis of social media content produced during the ‘early days’ of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are two parts to the research I conducted on this topic for this chapter. The first explores how some of the recreational running groups featured in Chapters Two and Three responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights – with a focus on some of the social media-related strategies used by these groups to maintain a sense of camaraderie and community at a moment when practicing

social distancing unexpectedly became the ‘new normal’. The second engages with some of the content produced by Strava during this same time frame. As an online social network designed to foster connections between athletes around the world (see Chapter Three), I was interested in Strava’s response to the pandemic, including the type of narratives that were emphasized and reproduced, particularly with regard to exercise and health. In each case, I discuss how social media were used to maintain a sense of connection during a time of great social disruption and consider also how consumption of certain brands, products, and ideas were framed as worthwhile and responsible. Both the recreational running groups and Strava alike promoted the use of digital platforms as a way of maintaining connection while forced to be apart. Both entities also, implicitly and at times explicitly, supported the idea that social media were useful as forums for knowledge mobilization (i.e., about health promoting and pandemic-appropriate behaviour) during the then-still-evolving COVID-19 crisis. As I will show, it was clear that social media were used in these ways during the COVID-19 crisis. Of course, and while social connections through Strava will be considered in their own right, it is highly relevant in this context that the Strava platform is itself a branded platform – and that the connections that form and are promoted in this context are always in some way tied to corporate interests and incentives. The central importance of this point is explored throughout this chapter too.

This chapter builds upon chapters two and three of the dissertation – chapters that discuss some of the ways that runners seek out and participate in physical and digital sporting communities – in part by considering themes from these other chapters within a unique moment in history where the foundations of many aspects of community building that have been taken-for-granted in contemporary times have been disrupted and altered. Put another way, by considering these running and social media-related themes of community during this time of crisis, it would seem

that we might be well positioned to learn new things about running culture and its relationship with social media. With these aims in mind, the following questions guide this study:

- 1. What were some of the strategies used by run crews and Strava to maintain a sense of connectedness and community during the early months of the pandemic?**
- 2. To what extent was the COVID-19 pandemic talked about by these locally and globally-oriented organizations, and what role did these groups (try to) play as it relates to knowledge dissemination regarding the pandemic?**
- 3. How might the responses by run crews and Strava be explained?**

In what follows, I begin by providing some background and context, first, about the pandemic and, second, about the urban run crew scene in Vancouver, Canada, and Strava, a ‘social fitness’ platform commonly used by members of the run crew community (see Couture, 2021). Next, I provide a brief outline of research that has drawn attention to sport and COVID-19, and by describing some of the ways that social media has been considered with regard to communication. Here I also provide a conceptual and theoretical framework that guides this study, drawing particular attention to the concepts of brand community, cultural intermediaries, and a theory often described as ‘crisis capitalism’ (Klein, 2007). Following, I describe the methods that were used to collect data for this study prior to discussing some of the key findings. The report of key findings includes a discussion of how social media posts created and shared by run crews and by Strava helped to promote a sense of optimism, hope, and connection at a time of great uncertainty and fear and, at once, share important health-related information and promote responsible behaviour with regard to slowing the spread of the virus. More specifically, I describe how both these organizations – locally and globally oriented, respectively – functioned as cultural intermediaries with regard to the COVID-19 crisis and, in so doing, reflect upon the role(s) and influence of capitalism during times of crisis. Finally, I conclude the chapter by suggesting some areas for future study and by offering some brief reflections on the role of running crews and Strava moving

forward, post-pandemic, in light of the cultural leadership both played during the pandemic. This chapter invites us to consider some of the different roles of online social networks at times of great social disruption and at once works to highlight some of the ways that locally and globally oriented sport-based organizations make use of, and incite (inter)action through, digital channels.

4.2 Background and Context

4.2.1 COVID-19: A (very) brief overview

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a novel coronavirus that primarily affects the lungs and respiratory system. The pathogen, known as ‘severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (aka. SARS-CoV-2), is characterized by loss of smell and taste, high fever, and a dry cough and reports suggest that what makes the virus particularly dangerous is that a large number of carriers can be asymptomatic. Unlike previous pandemics, such as HIV/AIDS, the disease is not associated with specific stigmatized social practices such as sexual behaviour or drug use, nor is it confined to a particular geographic region (Lupton, 2020). Rather, COVID-19 spreads much more quickly and far more indiscriminately, in part because the virus is airborne. What this means is that the virus can be spread inadvertently from one person to another (or from one person to many) through coughing or breathing, or by touching objects where infectious particles may have settled and can remain contagious for some time (World Health Organization, 2020). The origin of the virus is said to have emerged in Wuhan, China, in December, 2019 (see Burki 2020), but by March 2020, over 100,000 cases had been reported globally, at which time COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency of international concern (Ratten, 2020). By October 2020, global cases had skyrocketed to well over 40 million with over one millions deaths reported worldwide (Evans et al. 2020). Due to the many risks associated with transmission of the virus, people were encouraged to stay home (often for weeks or months at a time), to work from home,

learn from home, and to be extra diligent about personal hygiene. Though not without its fair share of debate, wearing a mask in public became part of the new normal, and people were encouraged to limit their social interactions with others outside of their ‘bubble’ (a term commonly used to describe immediate family members or a select group of friends with whom you reside). Due to the ease of transmission, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on all social institutions. Schools around the world, from elementary through to post-secondary, were forced to adapt to online learning, religious gatherings were restricted, and the sport sector all but came to a complete standstill. There was a sense that sport being cancelled or indefinitely postponed was a pivotal moment that served as a clear indication of just how serious this crisis truly was.

4.3 Literature Review & Theoretical Considerations

4.3.1 COVID-19, Sport, and Physical Activity

Over the past year, a body of research has emerged which has sought to highlight some of the ways that sport and physical activity have been (and will near-inevitably continue to be) influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Donnelly, 2020; Evans et al, 2020; Grix, Brannagan, Grimes, & Neville, 2020; Lupton, 2020; Skinner & Smith, 2021). According to Rowe (2020), there are those who have even joked about “an epidemic of discourse”, to the extent that we have witnessed a huge spike in the number of “pandemic-themed conferences, journal special-issues” and books, which of course makes sense, he explains, not least if or when we consider that sociologists – those who purport to study the ‘science of society’ – cannot (or rather *should* not) simply ignore what is arguably one of the greatest health crises of our time (p. 705).

The cancellation of sport during the pandemic garnered enormous media attention, both positive and negative. As some have highlighted, however, the decision was made most often in the interest of safeguarding athlete health (Mann, Clift, Boykoff, & Bekker, 2020). Since March

2020, researchers have reflected on the economic impacts of shuttering sport around the world (Dašić, Tošić, & Deletić, 2020; Drewes, Daumann, & Follert, 2020), discussed the implications of postponing the Olympic Games in Tokyo (Boykoff & Gaffney, 2020; Sato, Oshimi, Bizen, & Saito, 2020) and some of the problems and opportunities of ‘spectatorless sport’ (Horky, 2020; Mastromartino, Ross, Wear, & Naraine, 2020), and explored some of the physical and mental health costs associated with putting a halt to child and youth sport (Drummond, Elliott, Drummond, & Prichard, 2020).

To hear some tell it, not only has COVID-19 changed the way that health care is provided, but “it has also upended the way consumers approach physical activity” (Nenhuis, Greiwe, Zeiger, Nanda, & Cooke, 2020, p. 2152). Gierc and her colleagues (2021) explain that a large number of studies conducted over the past year that have examined physical activity and sedentary behavior during COVID “demonstrated consistent declines in physical activity” during the initial lockdown phase, what they describe as one of the inadvertent consequences of federal and provincial-level public health protocols (p. 2). Others have pointed to a rebound, of sorts, as the pandemic wore on and as people sought out new ways of staying active at or around their homes, not only for their physical health but also since it helped distract some from pandemic-induced anxieties. From Zoom-based yoga classes to ‘exergames’ (cf. Millington 2014; 2015), research has effectively demonstrated how many people, faced with restrictions on in-person interactions, looked to digital technologies as a way to help them stay fit and maintain a sense of connection with others.

Millington (2016) proposes that we are now in the throes of what he describes as a ‘second fitness boom’. He explains that while there are some similarities between the second boom and the first (which occurred in the 1970s and 80s) to the extent that each is marked by the wide-scale adoption of fitness technologies, the second boom, is also characterized by data intensity and

networked interactivity, each of which influences the “communities with which fitness participants can [and do] interact” (Millington, 2016, p. 1193). Cycling-based platforms such as Zwift, for instance, a platform that allows users to cycle on their own bikes from the comfort (and safety) of their own living room, had been gaining popularity even prior to the pandemic, but recent reports suggest that 2020 was a record-setting year (Collins, 2021). Not unlike Strava, in certain respects, many of these new interactive fitness platforms use real-time health data and oftentimes ‘communicate’ with other wearable devices to give users detailed insights into their workouts, but also “provide a social connection with friends and other users of the platform” which allows for friendly competition and social interaction (Nenhuis et al. 2020, p. 2152).

Garfin (2020) describes that the use of digital technologies increased substantially during the pandemic. Whether this meant mindlessly scrolling through social media, or engaging with other apps, such as games or at-home workouts, Garfin (2020) highlights how digital technology was an important coping tool for many people during the pandemic. The uptake of digital fitness technologies in particular, which can afford interaction with others in real time and a variety of health-based metrics, continues to grow year after year. Companies like Peloton and Zwift each saw record-shattering surges in users during the pandemic. The former saw sales surge by over 170% (Valinsky, 2020) and the latter saw monthly subscriptions nearly double in 2020 (Collins, 2021). As these findings suggest, despite the wide-scale shuttering of nearly all forms of organized sport, and with various restrictions in place with regard to in-person social interaction, one of the places where many athletes continued to interact during the pandemic was online.

4.3.2 Considering connection via connectivity

Beginning in the late 2000s, the popularity of social media platforms (SMP) grew very quickly. Some suggest that one of the most distinguishing and attractive features of SMPs relates to the ways that they “provide the facilities whereby people buil[d] and/or sustai[n] networks of friends and connections on an unprecedented scale” (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2018, p. 147). Indeed, the contemporary moment has often been described as a ‘culture of connectivity’ (van Djick, 2013) and that, among other characteristics, there is a seemingly ever-growing “industry-inflected *imperative to connect* on particular platforms” which both informs and guides consumer behaviour and also generates specific types of value³⁰ (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2018, p. 147, *emphasis in original*).

Much has been written about the relationships people have with technology. As described in Chapter Three, Sherry Turkle (2011) suggests that our desire and propensity for ‘constant connectivity’ can have unanticipated effects on certain aspects of our lives. Among other things, Turkle has critiqued our growing reliance on technology and argues that we are all too often substituting ‘real’ (offline) interactions with shallower (online) interactions and that we often present ourselves online in ways that are distinct from who we are ‘in real life’. Such a perspective has been described as *digital dualism*, whereby the physical self and the virtual self are conceptualized and talked about discrete and, oftentimes, where one is said to be privileged over the other (Jurgenson, 2011). Banks (2012) suggests that not only is this somewhat theoretically muddled (even contradictory) but also is empirically unsubstantiated, pointing to countless studies that have highlighted how web-based interactions can be profoundly meaningful (see, for example, Baym, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2015). Rather, he suggests that the relationships

³⁰ This ‘moment’ and the culture described here reflects a particularly privileged one, most characteristic of the Global North.

we curate in online spaces are anchored in offline spaces and interactions. In reference to the title of one of Turkle's (1984) books, he explains his position as follows:

There is no 'second self' on my Facebook profile- it's the same one that is embodied in flesh and blood. I might make myself look better than I really am, I might even lie, but how is this categorically different than my choice of clothing, the bumperstickers on my car, or a cheesy Hallmark greeting card? You might consider Facebook, bumper stickers, clothing, and Hallmark to be shallow modes of expression, but then deal with all of these symmetrically. What is the underlying social ontology that produces these things? A symmetrical approach, one that looks for antisocial tendencies in digital as well as nondigital technologies, will bring you to radically different conclusions. (Banks, 2012, para. 4).

Central to Turkle's (2011) thesis is that we are paradoxically never alone (to the extent that we are seldom more than a couple of 'clicks' or 'taps' away from social interaction) and yet we are more alone than ever. To hear her tell it, our hyper-connectivity has rendered us more disconnected from one another and we are losing the capacity for solitude (Turkle, 2017). Hers is a disheartening thesis that, at times, invokes an Ellulian (1954) level of technological determinism, but she is by no means alone in questioning what might be lost amid our hyper-connected ways of being in the world (see Harris, 2014). Banks (2012) suggests that "we must fight the urge to be techno-utopians as much as we should avoid Turkle's digital dualism", adding that "the internet is not a monolith and we cannot theorize it as such" (para. 6).

In Chapter Three, I made the case that certain online spaces, such as Strava, can function as virtual extensions of physical groups and that, in lamenting our growing technological (co-)dependence, Turkle risks overlooking some of the ways that being 'alone together' might not (or, rather, *should* not) always be reason for concern. Digital technology can and does afford a sense of connection via connectivity and instances, however symbolic or fleeting they might be, where the feeling of togetherness are afforded by technology should be appreciated for what they are. With of this in mind, it seems to me that in the context of a global pandemic, when many feel more

alone and disconnected than ever before, there is reason to explore some of the possibilities afforded by our socially networked lives.

At the same time, of course, alongside increased attempts among many to find a sense of community in ‘branded’ online spaces comes opportunities for entrepreneurial activity. That is to say, crew members and Strava participants are both communities of consumption ‘captive’ target audiences. I explore the notion of consumption community in the next section, followed by a discussion of what it means to be a cultural intermediary. In doing so, I foreshadow my findings pertaining to the role that Strava and run crew leaders appeared to play (and clearly tried to play) during the pandemic, and how these efforts might be seen, on one hand, as legitimate community-building and support-offering activities (see my response to Turkle, above) – at the same time as they are inseparable from profit-seeing and in some respects alienating and exploitative (see below).

4.3.3 Consumption communities, brand community, and representational sport

As discussed in Chapter Two, the concept of community is commonly used and, at once, a complex social phenomenon. McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, (2002) propose that, at their core, “communities tend to be identified on the basis of commonality or identification among their members”, whether this means a particular neighbourhood “an occupation, a leisure pursuit, or devotion to a brand” (p. 38). First proposed by Daniel Boorstin (1974), the concept of a *consumption community* was used to help describe a type of invisible community that is “created and preserved by how and what [people] consume” (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 89). Building on prior critiques of modernity that lamented the loss of ‘traditional’ community, Boorstin offered that “in the modern era of high mobility, people look not only to neighbourhood as a basis for feelings of community but also to communality of consumption behaviour (e.g.,

drinking the same brand of beer)” (Friedman, Abeele, & De Vos, 1993, p. 35). Put differently, consumption communities are formed around certain brands and models of products that people purchase and use. The concept is intimately related to what others have since described as *brand community*, which refers to “specialized, non-geographically bound communit[ies]” that are “based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Schouten & McAlexander (1995) profiled one such community in their now classic study of Harley-Davidson enthusiasts, whom they describe as a group of disparate individuals who are symbolically united by a shared affinity for one particular brand.

In the context of sport, research that has drawn attention to brand communities have typically been considered from sport management and sport marketing perspectives and, more often than not, seem to conceptualize brand community as near-synonymous with fandom and associated acts of consumption. Naraine, Pegoraro, and Wear (2021), for instance, recently examined how the Toronto Raptors’ use of the #WeTheNorth hashtag became an important strategy in the digital promotion of the team. Among other things, they highlight how the team effectively used the hashtag to create brand community and, at once, gain insights into certain segments of users. Importantly, they suggest that while sporting communities are dynamic, and consist of athletes, regulatory bodies, and corporate sponsors, “fans account for the vast majority of these communities” (Naraine, Pegoraro, & Wear, 2021, p. 630).

Ingham and McDonald (2003) suggest that consumption communities are an integral component of *representational sport*. Worth noting is that Ingham and McDonald suggest that sport is either recreational *or* representational. Recreational sport they describe as akin to participatory sport, whereas representational sport

refer[s] to organized competitive sports (amateur or professional) that in various ways act as what Emile Durkheim (1965) called representation collectives, signifiers of wholeness, ways in which the group conceives of itself in its relations with objects that affect it, and sources of solidarity. (Ingham & McDonald, 2003, p. 17)

In this way, representational sport is most explicitly tied to fandom, not unlike the ways that brand community has been taken up in recent years. Sports fans are understood as members of a particular representational sport ‘community’ and members of these communities might feel viscerally attached to, or outwardly display an affinity for, a certain team or a certain athlete and might even “introject the ‘representation’ into their self-definitions” (Ingham & McDonald, 2003, p. 17). Put differently, their fandom can become part of who they are or how they describe themselves (e.g., “I’m a Washington Mystics fan!”). Like brand communities, representational sport communities “do not necessarily inhabit a shared geophysical space” but, rather, can and do interact in “distantiated relational space”, oftentimes through communications technologies made possible by our increasingly “media-saturated, virtual society” (Ingham & McDonald, 2005, p. 17).

With these studies in mind, it seems to me that these theories about community, as it relates to and informs consumption practices, might be especially fruitful ways of thinking about some of the strategies adopted by run crews and Strava alike during the pandemic. During the early weeks and months of the pandemic, one the primary ways that ‘followers’ of each were encouraged to stay connected was, in part, through consumption practices.

4.3.4 Cultural intermediaries and consumption

Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012) explain that, while the concept has been critiqued as a “descriptive catch-all for seemingly any creative or cultural occupation or institution” and that this has diluted the term and given rise to complaints that it risks being little more than an “analytically-

neutered...conceptual muddle”, the concept of *cultural intermediaries* is nevertheless really “good to think with” (p. 551). They explain that the term has been used to explore how symbolic value is produced and how certain practices are involved in the promotion of consumption (Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2012). Simply put, cultural intermediaries are involved in the construction of value, in part, by mediating how certain goods, practices, people, or ideas are framed (Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2012).

The concept was initially developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) who used the concept to refer to professionals who have a key role in the reproduction of consumer economies (p. 326). Since then, and in light of perhaps then-unforeseeable technological advances, the concept has been broadened to include other actors and, nearly a decade ago, Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012) went as far as to pose the question of whether we are *all* cultural intermediaries now, in part, by drawing attention to the ever-evolving producer-consumer matrix that characterizes the contemporary moment. They suggest that, from an empirical perspective, some of the important questions to consider with regard to the framing of goods and ideas relate to (a) what is being framed; (b) how it is being framed; and (c) for whom it is being framed, since each of these offers important contextual specificity (p. 554). They explain that one of the key things that “differentiates cultural intermediaries from other actors involved in framing goods are their claims to authority” and, importantly, they describe how “the bases for that authority will reflect the specific stocks of professional and cultural capital and subjective dispositions and preferences that cultural intermediaries have at their disposal” (p. 554).

There is great value, I think, in considering how both run crews and Strava, despite their differences, might each be understood as cultural intermediaries. As I discuss in greater detail

below, not only was each actively involved in the framing of certain topics and ideas (e.g. health and physical activity during the pandemic), but each also relied upon and (re)produced certain claims to authority. Importantly, the discursive strategies employed by each were often linked to, and used to promote, material (goods) and symbolic (ideas) forms of consumption.

4.3.5 ‘Disaster capitalism’: Crisis as an economic opportunity

The concept of *disaster capitalism* is often used to refer to one or more ways in or through which those in power (namely large multinational corporations) often stand to profit from disasters. At its core, disaster capitalism or ‘crisis capitalism’ is the idea that a particular moment of crisis can be (and is often) used to sell a scared, anxious, or otherwise panicked population on the necessity of one or more products or ideas. Naomi Klein (2017) explains that what she calls ‘the shock doctrine’ “has been a silent partner to the imposition of neoliberalism for more than 40 years” and suggests that not only are ‘shock tactics’ – political strategies often used in times of crisis – commonly used, but they also tend to follow a similar pattern:

wait for a crisis...declare a moment of what is sometimes called ‘extraordinary politics’, suspend some or all democratic norms – and then ram the corporate wishlist through as quickly as possible. (para. 4)

Of course, this can take many forms. A shock tactic response to an economic crisis might mean pushing through massive bailouts for banks, for instance, under the pretense that the alternative is nothing short of unimaginable catastrophe – that to *not* do so would threaten the lives and/or livelihood of many. In *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), Klein highlights how ExxonMobil profited from the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and describes how “the brutal tactic of using the public’s disorientation following a collective shock” (in this case the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001) was used “to push through radical pro-corporate measures” (Klein, 2017, para. 3).

More recently, Klein has suggested that ‘coronavirus capitalism’ operates in much the same way. Not unlike previous global crises, she suggests, the COVID-19 pandemic has been “a catalyst to shower aid on the wealthiest interests in society, including those most responsible for our current vulnerabilities, while offering next to nothing to most workers and small businesses” (Democracy Now!, 2020, n.p.). It seems to me that there is great value in thinking about COVID-19 through the lens of disaster capitalism, since it invites us to explore and interrogate some of the impacts of and responses to COVID-19, but, as Adams (2020) rightly suggests, to do so meaningfully requires that we first ask some difficult questions, for example, about what exactly constitutes a disaster. Put differently, (how) is COVID-19 a disaster?

Some experts have suggested that we are experiencing not one, but two disasters. There is the virus, and then there is the societal reaction of bringing our entire fiscal and economic infrastructure to a near complete standstill. (Adams, 2020, para. 7)

The extent to which we agree that the pandemic is itself a disaster or whether we merely deem the (lack of) response thereto a disaster is secondary to the fact that to *consider* it conceptually affords an opportunity to discuss ‘coronavirus capitalism’. It is not hard to imagine, for instance, that the pandemic was financially lucrative for companies like Purell and Zoom, what with the former being in unprecedented demand and the latter which quickly (and, by some accounts, unexpectedly) became synonymous with online video-conferencing. Moreover, as described above, though the pandemic meant a near-complete shutdown of organized sport at all levels, other facets of the sport industry thrived during the pandemic. A noteworthy example is the cycling industry, which has yet to catch up from the spike in demand for bikes and bike-related accessories in 2020. But there are also less blatant instances of coronavirus capitalism, as I suggest below. That is, while there is great value in considering the types of messages that were (and continue to

be) shared by different organizations about ‘appropriate’ responses to the pandemic, it is also worth reflecting upon who stands to benefit from these messages, in what way(s), and to what effect?

Taken together, the diverse bodies of literature and theoretical considerations outlined above coalesce in some meaningful, if perhaps unexpected, ways. The COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt been a disruptive force, in a number of respects. Communities have been fractured, reconfigured, and reimaged and, in response, many have looked to online spaces as both viable and safe spaces where connection is possible. While there are undoubtedly positive elements to this networked interactivity, there is also reason to take seriously the ways that communities or groups that assemble around, or are otherwise inextricably linked to, certain brands and consumption interests might at once be ripe for exploitation. At a moment characterised by civil disruption and ongoing uncertainty, the role(s) of cultural intermediaries is complex; they can be helpful but they can also be informed, in whole or in part, by their own self-interests. There is a history of ‘support meets exploitation’ when we consider aforementioned examples of crisis capitalism. It is hoped that by drawing attention to some of the ways that corporate interests can intersect with and inform consumer behaviour, this case study invites us to consider how something as ‘simple’ as searching for community in, or sustaining community through, online spaces can also be bound up with capitalism in potentially meaningful ways.

4.4 Methods

As noted earlier, this study is drawn from a larger ethnographic project on contemporary running culture, which has involved spending a great deal of time with members of the local run crew community ‘where they are’. As described in greater detail in Chapter Two, I was a complete participant (Thorpe & Olive, 2017) in the run crew scene for over three years. What participation

looked like varied from one week to the next. As described in previous chapters, I routinely attended running-related events, but my participation also transcended physical spaces since I learned early on that one of the places runners ‘are’ is online. Postill and Pink (2012) explain that digital technologies “are often part of how ethnographic research participants navigate their wider social, material and technological worlds” and it is helpful to consider online social networks as sites that exist within and as part of a larger ‘ethnographic place’ (p. 124). What this meant for me, methodologically, is that throughout my time in the field, I was attentive to (and participate in) different online spaces where runners interacted. I joined run crew-related Facebook groups and I ‘followed’ (and was followed by) members of the run crew community on Strava and Instagram. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus my attention on some of my observations of Instagram during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4.1 Instagram as a ‘site’ of research

In recent years, an ever-expanding body of scholarship has focused on digital qualitative methods (see Bundon, 2016; 2017; Hine, 2017; 2020; Pink, 2012) and, specifically, on social media-based research (see Burgess, Marwick, & Poell, 2018; Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017; Snelson, 2016). Among other things, researchers in these fields have invited us to consider both the affordances and, too, the practical complexities of doing research in online spaces. Instagram is perhaps the most widely known visual SMP in the world, with recent estimates suggesting that over one billion users engage with the platform each month (Statistica, 2021). Laestadius (2018) explains that using Instagram (as) data can be especially insightful for qualitative researchers but also highlights some of the logistical considerations that researchers must (or, rather, should) attend to as part of their data collection and analysis. For instance, decisions about how best “to

combine visual imagery with captions, hashtags, and comments” – what might be considered the language or ‘currency’ of Instagram – in traditional academic outputs are worthy of consideration, so too are questions around ethics (Laestadius, 2018, p. 573). For instance, decisions about what type(s) of Instagram data is represented, and how, matters if we consider that ethnographic research is characterized by relationship-building and trust. Both the extent to which, and how, an individual or an organization is framed by the researcher can have lived effects, both for the researcher and for the research participants. There are also questions that arise about what it means to archive (and thus render permanent) images or other posts that were designed to be temporary³¹.

Moreover, boyd (2010) has suggested four key affordances of using Instagram as a ‘site’ of research. First, they explain that Instagram affords persistence to the extent that it enables and “encourage[s] its users to capture what may have been previously ephemeral moments in their lives through mobile photography [and] it renders these images even more persistent and enduring by posting them to Instagram's servers” (Laestadius, 2018, p. 578). This is meaningful for researchers to the extent that it can be both a rich and stable source of data. Second, Instagram affords a unique visibility of content (boyd, 2014). Instagram accounts are public by default and the terms and conditions (to which so many of us frantically accept without reading). Another affordance relates to the replicability of user-generated content. As Laestadius (2018) explains, the fact that Instagram posts can be screen-captured can facilitate analysis, even if the original post is removed³². Importantly, the platform affords a high level of searchability; the ability to sift through

³¹ One of the most widely used features of Instagram is ‘Instagram Stories’. Users can create a post that includes any combination of text, photos, or videos and the content is ‘live’ for others to view for 24 hours before it disappears. (as opposed to a regular Instagram post which remains on the platform).

³² It seems to me that there are additional ethical considerations that should be taken into account with regard to using content that has been purposefully removed.

massive amounts of content, whether by user name, hashtag, or location, can each be valuable for the researcher. Laestadius (2018) also adds that Instagram affords a high degree of *interpretability*.

Since Instagram, unlike Twitter and Facebook, requires each post to have an image or video attached, Instagram posts are almost inherently rich from the perspective of data analysis. Rich data are so valued in qualitative research because they ‘afford views of human experience that etiquette, social conventions, and inaccessibility hide or minimize in ordinary discourse’ (Charmaz, 2015, p. 62). Instagram's emphasis on image creation yields this rich and, in turn, also highly interpretable data that are well-suited for qualitative research. (Laestadius, 2018, p. 578)

4.4.2 Data collection

As above, throughout the duration of the ethnographic project I was highly attentive to the ways that social media were used by members of the running community. Some run crews are more active than others on social media. As described in Chapter Two, some of the run crews in the city use social media as their primary source of communication. Knowing where to go to on a given Monday night to run with East Van Run Crew, for instance, required that I follow them on social platforms. On the whole, run crews in Vancouver each have an active social media presence. Photos from weekly group runs are posted online, runners are ‘tagged’, and it was not uncommon for group members to communicate through these channels.

Beginning in March 2020, the rapid spread of COVID-19 generated a lot of activity on social media and, with in-person meet-ups all paused indefinitely, I became increasingly attentive to the ways that run crews were responding to and talking about the pandemic in online spaces. I began using digital screen-captures as a means of archiving certain posts, interactions, or other notable ‘moments’ I was observing online with regard to the pandemic. As described above, screenshots are a convenient method of capturing data but perhaps most importantly, they can also help render permanent an image or an exchange that might otherwise be lost in the midst of an ever-shifting digital landscape. What this looked like in practice varied from day to day. Data collection was

often messy and unplanned. I took ‘screenshots’ on my phone and on my laptop and, over time, had amassed a folder full of observations, not knowing at the time whether or how they might ever be used³³.

4.4.3 Data analysis

It is widely understood that ethnographic studies involve immersion into the cultures, “contexts, environment, situations, and lifeworlds of [its] subjects” (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 26). Photographs and other types of digital communication, including social media posts, are ripe for interpretive analysis. As outlined in Chapter Three, digital screenshots were collected throughout the duration of this project to help capture particular ‘moments’ and interactions on social networks. *Ethnographic content analysis* (ECA) of social media has become increasingly common in recent years as a way of examining sets of images (see Seo, 2014; Vis et al., 2014; Kharroub and Bas, 2015; Thelwall et al., 2016). It can help researchers “document and understand the communication of meaning, as well as to verify theoretical relationships (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). As noted in Chapter Three, ECA is a reflexive, interpretive, circular, and ongoing process which involves moving ‘back and forth’ in the data, reading and re-reading social media posts and other screenshots as and after they were collected, engaging in constant comparison and assessment while familiarizing myself with and writing about the data. Analysis of screenshots involved identifying language and imagery that stood out as noteworthy or atypical, but also identifying that which represented normal imagery and mundane ‘everyday’ interactions in these

³³ When I first started paying attention to pandemic-related posts, it was not with this chapter in mind. I was merely paying attention to what was going on, what was being said, and by whom; it was simply part of my then-firmly-entrenched ethnographic habits and observations. Put differently, the data which informs this chapter was not part of the original (research) plan. In fact, it was not until many months into the pandemic that the decision was made to explicitly engage with this content. Ethnographic research involves a lot of ‘moving pieces’. In addition to documenting the mundane ‘everyday’ experiences, ethnographers (and, really, all researchers) need to adapt to and take note of novel situations. For reasons that seem more than a little self-evident at this point, the pandemic was a novel situation.

digital spaces. Altheide and Schneider (2013) suggest that while certain categories or themes might initially guide an ECA, others are expected to emerge over the course of the research. In this case, the data with which I was working quite literally continued to grow as the pandemic wore on. For the purposes of study, I have limited my findings to include data ‘collected’ between March and August 2020, the six-month period immediately following the declaration of the global pandemic. The decision to limit the observations to this period of time was two-fold. First, I was interested in the acute responses to the shuttering of in-person run crew meetups. Second, beginning in the fall of 2020, there was a short-lived return to in-person running as provincial restrictions were loosened, only to be tightened again shortly thereafter in response to a ‘second wave’ of infections.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the decisions about which posts were deemed ‘noteworthy’ are inherently subjective and, too, the interpretations and discussion of the data in the sections that follow represent only some of many plausible interpretations. The particular interpretations I offer are informed both by the larger project of which this component is one part, and too by my own subject position as a runner-researcher who is not only well versed in running culture, but also with some of the intricacies and social conventions of the digital technologies discussed herein.

4.5 Findings

In this section, I begin by providing some contextual information about the shuttering of sport during the pandemic, with a particular focus on running, in an attempt to ‘set the stage’ for a more nuanced discussion of two particular ‘cases’ which follow. The cancellation of sport in light of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that local run crews were unable to meet in-person as usual. As described in Chapter Two, these are highly social groups and I was interested in how these groups would respond to pandemic-imposed restrictions. With this in mind, in the first ‘case’ I discuss

some of the strategies that were used by run crews to maintain a sense of connectedness during this time of social disruption. Among other things, I draw attention to some of the messages that were (re)produced by these groups about physical activity, about health, and about the pandemic and in so doing offer some reflections on the affordances of social media as a site of sociality and as a tool for knowledge-mobilization.

In the second ‘case’, I describe some of the messages and initiatives created by Strava, a popular social fitness platform described in Chapter Three, during this same time frame. To be sure, Strava was not impacted by the pandemic in the same way(s) as other sport-based organizations, including run crews. In fact, reports suggest that Strava users uploaded nearly *double* the amount of outdoor runs from April to June 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (Snider-McGrath, 2020). Put differently, while the pandemic disrupted nearly all facets of daily life in 2020, and derailed the bulk of the sporting landscape, there is a sense that it was nothing short of excellent for a company like Strava, who not only saw a 33% increase in overall use in 2020 (again, over the year prior) but, importantly, the company was well-positioned to emphasize the role and significance of its service (Pez Cycling News, 2021). At a time when people were told to stay home and exercise alone, it could be said that Strava was a uniquely safe sporting space where athletes could continue to interact, compete, and find motivation from one another.

4.5.1 Prelude: “Please, stay home (unless you’re exercising).”

There was widespread uncertainty about how serious a threat the novel coronavirus was in the early days of the pandemic, and how long day-to-day life would be disrupted as a result. Messages quickly spread about the importance of being vigilant with regard to personal hygiene and people were encouraged to practice social distancing, a phrase that has since become entrenched in the contemporary vernacular. The overarching message was to stay home if and

when possible. By late April, it had become increasingly clear that the disruption to everyday life would not be as short-lived as some had initially imagined.

The response to the pandemic was relatively swift in Canada, particularly when contrasted against the tumultuous state of affairs in other Western countries. In Vancouver, nearly all of the public sport and recreation facilities, including fitness centres, public pools, hockey rinks, golf courses, sports fields, and community centres were shut down indefinitely by the end of March in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus. The closures came amid growing unrest and uncertainty amongst Canadians, in part since there were some inconsistencies with regard to what was considered safe when it came to exercise. Then-general manager of the Vancouver Park Board, Malcolm Bromley, insisted that it was healthy to be outside and suggested that asymptomatic Vancouverites could and *should* continue to use the city's green spaces (McElroy, 2020). Other members of the Vancouver Park Board spoke out about their concerns about running in particular, in light of concerns about 'slipstreaming', which was used to describe the spread of aerosol microdroplets (see Robinson et al., 2020). In a Tweet on April 8th, Park Board member, John Coupar, called this a serious issue and that social distancing guidelines only work "while standing or walking...not running" (Coupar, 2020). Meanwhile, Dr. Bonnie Henry, B.C.'s provincial health officer urged people to spend time outside, since it was good for mental and physical health, but emphasized that social distancing was incredibly important to avoid the likelihood of transmission. She explained that

The risk that somebody who is sick spreads this virus from coughing or sneezing outside and you walk by them very quickly, even when it is within six feet, that risk is negligible... Please, go outside. Go outside with your family, but stay away, keep your distance. Smile, talk to your neighbour, wave to them, be supportive of each other, but do it in a way that maintains that distance. (CBC News, 2020)

These mixed messages about what was safe and, too, about the relative risk of running vis-à-vis other forms of physical activity led to an uncomfortable tension. As uncertainty loomed, there was a discernable moral panic around running and runners which led to reports of shaming and public lambasting of runners elsewhere, many of whom were denounced as reckless and selfish (see Palus, 2020; Russell, 2020).

4.5.2 The rise of virtual running events: Networked competition and camaraderie

According to Malcolm and Velija (2020), one of the most significant ways that the pandemic impacted sport is through its wide-scale suspension, which, as above, was designed to limit the spread of infection. Not unlike other sporting events, spring running races were immediately cancelled due to growing calls for precaution, and it soon became apparent that races throughout the summer and into the fall would also be rescheduled or cancelled as well. In response, the running community was forced to adapt to new social distancing recommendations and public gathering restrictions. Stories soon emerged about runners who were replacing cancelled events with their own challenges, many of whom were learning to negotiate how to keep running under stringent government-mandated ‘lockdowns. Reports of a runner in France who allegedly ran a marathon on his 23-foot balcony drew international media attention (Kim, 2020), as did the story of a runner in China who purportedly ran fifty kilometers around his living room coffee table (Zhou, 2020).

These exceptional stories aside, beginning in April, many running race organizers across the country and around the world began to introduce ‘virtual racing’ options for would-be participants (see Brady, 2020; Ewing, 2020). The idea behind these events was that it might simulate the competitive camaraderie that characterizes traditional in person events and at once would allow runners an opportunity to run ‘together’ symbolically in spite of the pandemic.

Runners were encouraged to record their solo ‘races’ using various digital technologies and were often encouraged to upload their data to online leaderboards to validate their times. Of course, virtual races are not new. In fact, they have been around for many years, but the spike in virtual events brought on by the pandemic was truly unparalleled. For many runners, competition and measurable improvement is important, and these events allowed folks to channel their angst and frustration into something meaningful and maintain a sense of connection with the larger running community (Hambleton, 2020). For organizations that were unable to host events in person, a virtual event not only allowed organizations to offer something (rather than nothing) to folks who had already registered for a race, but also afforded an opportunity to recoup some of the expected revenue from race entry fees. Alongside virtual ‘replacement’ races, a host of other original virtual events also emerged in the first half of 2020. Gary ‘Lazarus Lake’ Cantrell, who is perhaps most famously credited as creator of the Barkley Marathon³⁴, challenged runners from around the world to run a ‘virtual’ 1000km race across the state of Tennessee. Runners could chip away at the distance over four months, from May through to the end of August, and were encouraged to document the ups and downs of their ‘relentless forward progress’ (cf. Powell, 2011) via social media. All told, nearly 20,000 participants took part in the event.

Events such as these, that leveraged a combination of social media platforms and digital self-tracking technologies, allowed runners around the world to ‘make up for’ planned races that were cancelled, but also afforded them an opportunity to (re)connect with others and take part in events that bring people together, in the name of fun and competition, at a time when prolonged

³⁴ The Barkley Marathon is an ultramarathon held each year in Frozen Head State Park, near Wartburg, Tennessee. The now-infamous event is ‘roughly 100 miles’ (the distance changes slightly from year to year) and was first held in 1986. To this day, the event is widely recognized as amongst the most gruelling in the world, with fewer than twenty runners ever reaching the finish line.

periods of social isolation were the norm. Even when forced to be apart, people found ways to run together.

4.5.3 Stay active, stay connected, and support local: Run crews respond to the COVID-19 pandemic

Not unlike other types of social communities (e.g. church groups, book clubs, sports teams), the local run crews that were central to my research were unable to operate as they typically would in light of the pandemic. As described in Chapter Two, VRC Flight Crew Run Club (FCRC) is one of the largest run crews in the city and were among the first to go public with their decision to cancel their weekly group runs. An Instagram post, dated March 12th, includes a message of cautious optimism at a time when the magnitude of the pandemic had yet to be fully realized.

For the first time in our existence, we are making the decision to cancel our Thursday Flight Crew runs and Sunday trail runs for the foreseeable future. We will make an assessment weekly and communicate via social and email newsletter how we plan to move forward.

Keep running, keep smiling, keep doing your part, and we'll all come out of this together. (Vancouver Running Company, 2020)

Similar posts from other groups in the city began to appear in the days and weeks that followed, in each case encouraging members of the running community to stay positive during this unexpected disruption. Like FCRC, We Run Surrey Crew (WRSC) used Instagram to communicate with its members and described their decision to suspend their group runs in a post that same week. In it, they encouraged their members to stay positive during this 'strange and unsettling time' but also to keep running as a healthy outlet.

It is in difficult times like this that we can truly benefit from the mental clarity and peace of mind that running or any exercise can induce. It can help us stay positive, healthy, and grounded. However, we understand that this is a challenging time for everyone, and we have to do what we can to keep our friends, family and neighbours healthy by temporarily changing our day-to-day routines as we confront the

unexpected. So for the next few weeks, we've decided to go on a temporary hiatus and we're going to be spending a lot more time apart than usual.

So what can we do for the time being? Aside from the necessary social distancing, washing our hands, and keeping our homes clean, what can we do for our mental state? We encourage you to use this downtime to pick up a new skill, refresh some ones, and continue to seek growth... Things will be a little uncertain for a while, but we want you to know we are all going to get through this together. (We Run Surrey, 2020)

Hutchinson (2020) explains that the use of social media increased dramatically during COVID-19, as people took to various online platforms to stay connected with one another and keep themselves informed about the rapidly evolving global crisis. It has been widely established that social media can be a significant tool in the development and maintenance of public relations. Social media can create and expand social networks, it can help maintain and strengthen existing relationships and, importantly, its multidirectional interactivity allows individuals and groups alike to unite around certain causes or initiatives through collaboration (Briones et. al, 2011). As above, East Van Run Crew (EVRC) announced midway through March that 'business as usual' was cancelled. Their first post to address the pandemic-related pause features a sombre-toned black and white photograph of a lone runner making his way up and over a partially enclosed pedestrian bridge, a bridge that would be immediately recognizable to many members of EVRC as it is often traversed by throngs of runners on any given Monday night group run. In addition to announcing the suspension of in-person runs, the caption that accompanies the image is a noteworthy example of some of the ways that run crews began to leverage social media to invite and incite digital (inter)action between members.

Pause. We're moving EVRC Monday Nighters to a unique space for the next little bit.
#virtualEVRC

Stay active, snap a photo, support a favourite brewery (or local business), show the horns, tag @eastvanruncrew & we'll share!

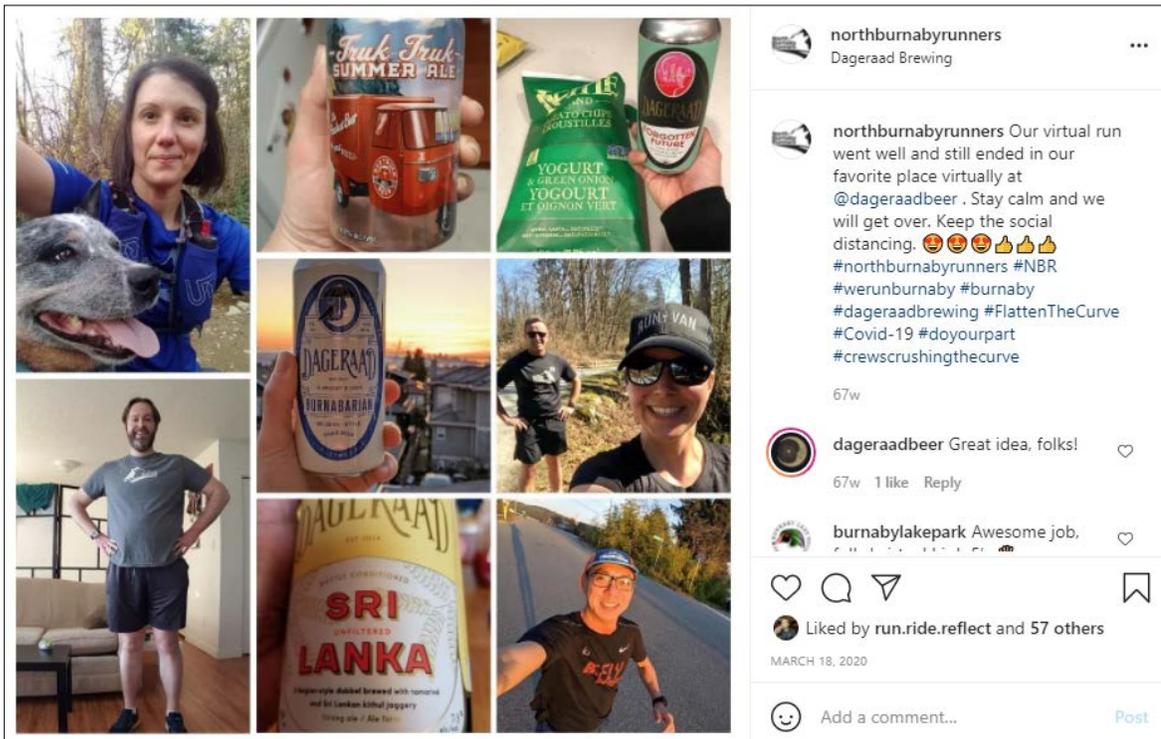
It's not ideal but completely possible to keep our community connected with the help of a digital lens. If you have any questions (or just need to chat), shoot us a comment or DM. Take care, help others, and stay positive. (East Van Run Crew, 2020a)

Couldry and Kallinikos (2017) suggest that, rather than simply map or reproduce a social reality that exists 'out there' in the world, social media can help to create a particular social reality



Figure 7: Runners were quick to engage with calls for online interactivity

Figure 6: Member photos were often shared by run crew accounts



“by providing the means through which real persons qua users [can] perform activities of very particular kinds that have largely been incited by social media platforms themselves” (p. 157). Like other groups, EVRC encouraged its followers to keep running, but also invited them to stay connected with one another digitally, and offered explicit examples of how to do so. It didn’t take long for members to connect with the message; photos quickly began to flood the group’s social platforms in the days, weeks, and months that followed. The group’s Instagram Stories³⁵ were chalk full of images shared by members who answered the call by taking sweaty selfies either before, during, or immediately after their runs. As requested, these photos would typically include one or more hashtags, including **#virtualeVRC** and **#HornsOut** (a reference to the group’s mascot, a bull), and would often feature runners in their crew-branded apparel. These strategies effectively formed both a digital and perhaps even an emotional connection between their users, who were navigating unfamiliar territory.

As above, EVRC also encouraged their followers to continue supporting local businesses. As described in Chapter Two, there is a firm link between run crews and various forms of consumption. Prior to the pandemic, for instance, EVRC would typically start and finish their weekly group runs at a local brewery. And they were not alone in their call for continued support of local businesses. Members of other crews for whom a post-run pint was often a key part of the social experience, would post images of themselves out for run and their post-run beer, as a show of solidarity with the crew and as evidence of continued support of the local breweries they would typically frequent as a group. North Burnaby Runners, for instance, would often meet at Dageraad Brewing. A post by the group, shared to Instagram on March 18th, featured a collage of runner-

³⁵ Instagram Stories are temporary posts that disappear after 24-hours. Since it was launched in 2016, the platform has seen a steady rise in user engagement with the feature and they are widely used to increase or promote engagement with a brand or account (Cooper, 2020).

submitted photos during and post-run, in which Dagaraad beer was quite literally the centrepiece (see Fig. 2). Similarly, the Ice Cream and Donut Run Club, a crew that is inextricably linked to consumption, also encouraged members to continue supporting local businesses.

Monday is our club's 2nd anniversary. Before COVID, we were trying to plan a fun way to celebrate, but this pandemic has other plans for us all.

In lieu of a celebration together, this weekend, go for a run, walk, hike, bike ride, or paddle. Wear your ICDRC shirt and/or your Ice Cream or Donut @goodr sunglasses, enjoy an ice cream or donut at a local shop, and tag us in your pic.

Show us where you're staying active and treating yourself afterwards.

Show us some donuts and ice cream! 🍩🍦

We're getting closer to being able to run together again. Stay tuned.

Stay active and stay healthy!

We love you! 😊😊😊

**#icecreamanddonurunclub #willrunforicecream #willrunfordonuts #covid19
#pandemiclife #lifeinthetimeofcorona #runnersofvancouver**

(Ice Cream & Donut Run Club, 2020)

Though originally associated with Twitter, hashtags are now ubiquitous on virtually every social media platform and, in recent years, have even trickled into contemporary speech (see Scott, 2018). As a type of metadata, hashtags serve a number of functions. First and foremost, these digital 'tags', which are "marked with a # symbol and include a word, initialism, concatenated phrase, or an entire clause" are effectively used to link 'like with like' (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 275). In this way, they allow for streamlined searching of digital content. Were I to search for **#shoes** on Instagram, for example, the results compiled will include all content that contains this particular hashtag in the post.

Zappavigna (2015) explains that metadata have "a long history in the domain of information management" but suggest that "this is the first historical period where we see it so closely tied to

enacting social relations” and, specifically, where they also function as “a social resource for building relationships and communities” (p. 274). Put differently, in addition to their practical search-related functionality, hashtags allow individuals or organizations to associate (or, rather, digitally link) itself with a product, event, idea, or social issue³⁶. Whereas a hashtag like **#running** or **#runner** might be used by any number of users on any given day, in a variety of contexts, to ‘tag’ any or all digital content that is running-related, a purposefully unique hashtag such as **#virtualeVRC**, as referenced above, is decidedly less likely to be found by chance but, rather, “invok[es] the possibility of an ‘imagined audience’” for whom the phrase is meaningful in some way (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 275).

4.5.4 #CrewsCrushingTheCurve: Leading a response to a moving target

Harris-Ali and Kurasawa (2020) explain how social media platforms were instrumental in the spread of COVID-19-related information *and* misinformation. They even refer to a ‘coronavirus infodemic’ that beset online platforms and worked to increase public confusion about who and what sources were reliable and trustworthy, particularly in the early weeks and months of the pandemic. Facebook and Twitter, in particular, each came under fire for not being vigilant enough with regard to taking appropriate action against potentially dangerous pseudoscientific claims that, to hear some tell it, were spreading faster online than the virus was on the ground (Brindha, Jayaseelan, & Kadeswara, 2020). As noted above, many of the run crews in Vancouver encouraged their followers to keep running, to stay positive, and keep connected using digital platforms and, in many ways, these messages are not altogether surprising. These are groups that are predicated on shared experiences of physical activity and there was no way of knowing in these early days just how long these social groups would be forced to stay physically apart. Less

³⁶ There are few hashtags, in recent memory, which gained as much traction online as #BlackLivesMatter.

anticipated was the way that many of the posts created and shared by run crews included messages that encouraged adherence to and respect for COVID-related public safety recommendations.

Not long after their first missed ‘Monday Nighter’, EVRC shared a follow-up of sorts to their call to action from the week prior (see Fig. 3). The post contains two photographs, one atop the other, each taken in the same location and from nearly the same vantage point. In many ways, the photograph on top bears an uncanny resemblance to an annual elementary school class photo; runners are staged in rows, with some crouched down in the middle row(s) and others seated in

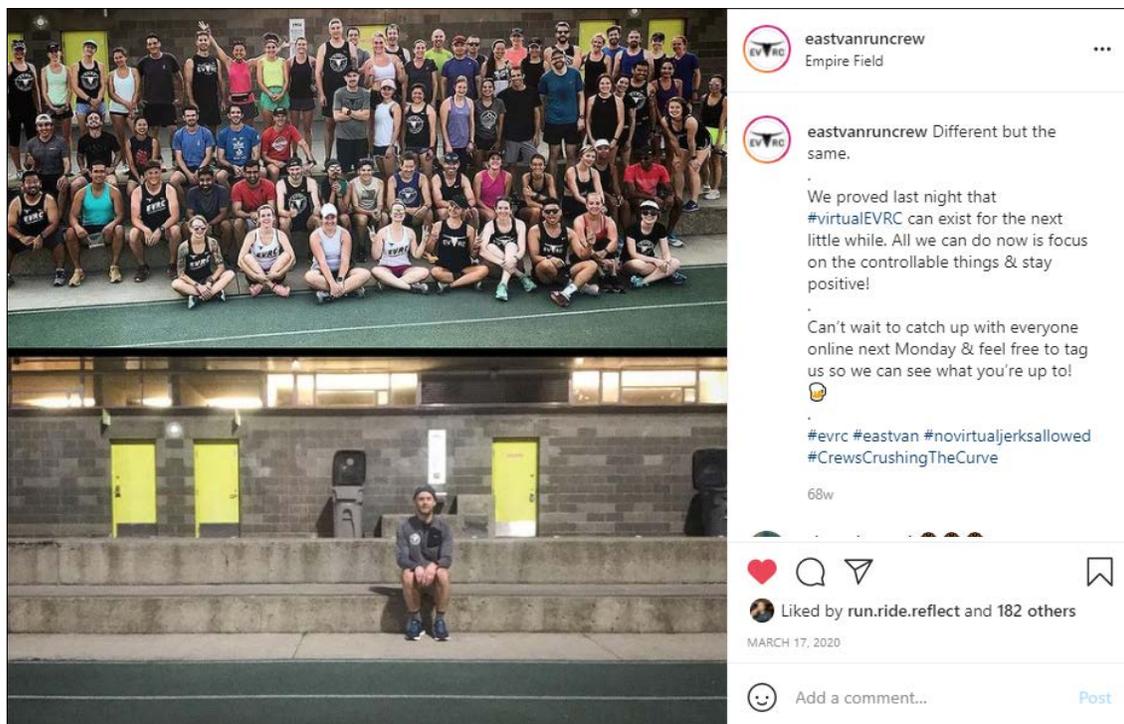


Figure 8: An Instagram post from East Van Run Crew in the early days of the pandemic

front of the rest. This style of photograph is common amongst run crews, who often regroup midway through a run to snap a quick photo to commemorate the evening. Over sixty runners are smiling for the camera in the top photo, not an uncommon turnout for one of their Monday night runs. The second photograph features only one person, seated alone along the very same ledge that the group of sixty stood only a few weeks prior. The caption concludes with a series of hashtags,

including **#evrc** and **#novirtualjerksallowed** – a play on the group’s unofficial motto, ‘No Jerks Allowed’ – but another is included here that soon came to be used by many (if not all) of the crews in the city. The hashtag **#CrewsCrushingTheCurve** quickly started to be included across a variety of posts created by run crew accounts. Based on my observations, this hashtag was not limited to crews in Vancouver but, rather, extended to a larger global run crew community. In addition to the possibility that it may have fostered a sense of symbolic unity amongst crews, it is important to consider how the use of this and other COVID-related hashtags (e.g., **#DoYourPart**, **#FlattenTheCurve**, **#StaySafe**), both by run crews and members of the run crew community more broadly, served another purpose. Unlike crew-specific hashtags such as **#virtualEVRC** or **#FlightCrewSupportsYou**, each of which was designed as a way of showing solidarity with specific groups, this particular hashtag also did important conceptual work by framing this collective segment of the running community as making responsible decisions with regard to health and consciously ‘doing their part’ to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

In late March, EVRC shared a post on Instagram in which they provided a list of recommendations for runners to follow when it came to running during the pandemic, which, as mentioned above, was somewhat controversial in light of evolving science, and conflicting recommendations. Playfully titled ‘EVRC’s Fast and Rigid Rules to Not be a Jerk’, the post begins by encouraging readers to get outside for a run, but to do so on their own, and to be mindful of where they run, avoiding local ‘hot spots’, and to be aware and respectful of social distance. The post also encourages their thousands of followers to show their appreciation for local healthcare workers by joining the orchestrated applause each evening at 7pm, and to check in often with friends and family members.

This lifestyle is something we’re going to have to get used to for the foreseeable future, so it has to be something sustainable. Yes, do get out and exercise, but think

hard about what possible transmission vectors you might be creating. The better we all are at social distancing the better we'll all be and the sooner we can get back to cruisin' and drinkin' together!

Feeling bummed? Us too! That's normal. Send us a message if you want to chat about absolutely anything. (East Van Run Crew, 2020b)

Notably, in addition to urging folks to be mindful and respectful of provincial health guidelines, the group also normalized, and opened the door, for conversations about mental health, one of the now well-documented side effects of social isolation (Kumar & Nayar, 2021; Rajkumar, 2020).

As described above, the shuttering of sport at all levels and the cancellation of running events opened the door for a variety of virtual events and challenges. Not unlike race organizers, some run crews leveraged runners' willingness to keep running and stay connected by creating various opportunities to engage with one another online. Some groups leveraged then-increasingly popular video communication platforms such as Zoom to hold virtual meetups online, which offered runners an opportunity to connect in 'real time', but there were also a number of different interactive initiatives orchestrated by run crews in which physical and digital cultures converged in unique and exciting ways. For example, beginning in April, FCRC started to create and promote a weekly running route (using Strava) and would sharing the route through various social media channels and through their weekly subscription-based newsletter. The idea behind the initiative was two-fold. Not only would it would provide runners with ideas about where to run but not unlike those 'calls to action' highlighted above, runners were also encouraged to take photos of themselves somewhere along the route, tag @vanrunco and use the hashtag #FlightCrewSupportsYou in their post as show of solidarity with other members. In this way, FCRC members could each run the same route over the course of a week and, though not physically running the route together, there was a concerted attempt at creating a symbolic type of togetherness.

Other activities designed to keep people entertained (perhaps even distracted) during the pandemic include ‘Isolation Run Bingo’, created by Ridge Meadows Run Crew. A bingo card featuring sixteen squares, each containing a different task for runners to complete, was posted to Instagram. The first to complete a ‘blackout’ (completing all the tasks) would get a prize. Examples of these small feats include running without headphones or without checking their stats (e.g. speed, distance, cadence, etc.), running in a mismatched outfit or crossing the street to avoid contact with another person. Along these same lines, EVRC designed an elaborate multiple month-long scavenger hunts that were wildly popular. Like the aforementioned bingo, the scavenger hunts involved completing a list of tasks while on the run and runners would have to take photographic ‘evidence’ and share it to social media. The group also often included additional weekly challenges to their Monday night #virtualEVRC runs. The ‘Dungeons and Dragons run’, to name but one example, had willing participants ‘spice things up’ by rolling dice to determine how far and in which direction they would run.

Arriagada & Ibanez (2019) suggest that “in today’s media landscape, brands are capable of reaching out to consumers and becoming part of their everyday lives” (p. 93). It could be said of the examples highlighted above that members of the run crew community often functioned as unofficial brand ambassadors in the early weeks and months of the pandemic. Not only do these attempts to keep members engaged and connected to the group reflect a commitment on the part of the group organizers, who are volunteers, but it also goes a long way towards maintaining a *brand community* (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2011). Many posts were promotional, in one or more ways. Some promoted a particular crew and, in some cases, they promoted other brands (local breweries, ice cream shops, running stores, etc.).

The term *self-branding* has been used to describe a distinct and noteworthy shift in the ways that individuals, and in particular workers, are increasingly encouraged or otherwise compelled to promote themselves or their product online (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Scolere, Pruchniewska, & Duffy, 2018). As Scolere and her colleagues (2018) explain, both the curation of one's own online content and, too, the purposeful engagement with other brands and other people through various social media channels, is increasingly framed as more or less 'compulsory'. To hear them tell it, "from physicians to financial planners, educators to gig economy participants, workers of all stripes are encouraged to promote themselves with gusto" (Scolere et al., 2018, p. 1). This discernable shift, they suggest, reflects the ascent of what has been described as an 'attention economy' (Bueno, 2016) and a 'digital reputation economy' (Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2010) "whereby users are compelled by neoliberal regimes of self-governance to devote time, energy, and human capital to fashioning the self" in particular ways (Scolere et al., 2018, p. 1). On one hand, this is a matter of impression management – a technologically-mediated 'presentation of the self' (Goffman, 1959). On the other hand, and as Hearn (2010) suggests, there is value in thinking about self-branding as "a form of affective, immaterial labor that is purposefully undertaken by individuals to garner attention, reputation, and potentially, profit" (p. 427).

A number of studies in recent years have framed online social networking as a form of labour "despite (or perhaps because of) the emphasis on sociality and relational practices" (Scolere et al., 2018, p. 2, see also Duffy & Hund, 2015; Scolere & Humphreys, 2016). Arriagada & Ibanez suggest that "an individual that considers work not a threat to freedom, but rather as an essence for self-realization (Miller & Rose, 1990)" sees social relations as intimately connected to the production of value (see also Gandini, 2016).

When the self is treated as a brand and amplified through digital communication platforms like YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook, the guiding ethos is ‘authenticity,’ indeed central to digital communicational practices (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2013a). For instance, users present themselves through social media profiles as they ‘really are’, feeling empowered as a result of communicating their crafted identities (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Social media platforms are a crucial component of crafting these visible self [*sic*], connecting private and public performances, blurring the boundaries between personal and commercial communications (Banet-Weiser, 2012). (Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020, p. 3).

To be sure, there is a distinct possibility that certain runners, who, prior to the pandemic served as official ‘ambassadors’ for run crews, may have agreed to promote the group in different ways online as part of their role. This makes sense if or when we consider that many run crews are what Nieborg and Poell (2018) refer to as platform dependent. As noted above, and in Chapter Two, many run crews rely heavily upon social media as a (if not *the*) primary channel of communication and (self-)promotion. The ambassadors are, however, an exception to the rule and it seems that many runners were more than willing to do this work for free.

There are certainly distinctions to be made between individuals who are purposefully creating content in the interest of making money, such as entrepreneurs or contracted content creators, and those, like the runners highlighted above, who do this work without any financial incentive. That is, that which they stand to gain from leveraging the affordances of social media to help promote a crew or a local business is decidedly more symbolic than those who rely on social platforms as a potentially revenue-generating channel. This is not to suggest, however, that their engagement is purely altruistic. Though self-branding is most often discussed in relation to financial capital, it seems to me that to brand one’s self in particular ways – for instance, as physically active, or as someone who supports local businesses – might be viewed as differently rewarding. I propose that there are symbolic connections created here that are less about economic capital and more about creating or perhaps establishing social or subcultural capital (Thornton,

1996). Each time a runner purposefully produces, shares, re-posts, or otherwise amplifies run crew-related content, not only do they promote these groups and any other businesses that might be ‘tagged’ in the post for free, but they also produce the ‘athletic self’ (cf. Norman & Toll, 2020). Not only does this link them (both digitally and conceptually) to these running communities, it also situates them within an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of people ‘in the know’. It might be free labour but, for some, this may well be rewarding enough.

4.5.5 Respect the rules, listen to the experts, and show #SOLOdarity: Strava responds to the COVID-19 pandemic

As described in Chapter Three, Strava is a wildly popular social fitness platform used by millions of people around the world to share their digital self-tracking data. In addition to its flagship app, self-described as the ‘social network for athletes’ (see Couture, 2021), Strava curates a blog called *Strava Stories* on its website and also maintains an active presence on other social platforms including Instagram and Facebook. Perhaps unsurprisingly, beginning in April 2020, the blog featured a number of posts related to the pandemic. With gyms and other fitness facilities closed around the world, many of the posts created and shared by Strava during this time offered readers tips for doing workouts at home, posts focused on exercise and mental health, and posts highlighting how other folks were navigating the pandemic. ‘Light Behind Lockdown’ (Strava, 2020d) was originally published on Strava Stories (the company’s blog) in early May 2020 and was subsequently shared on other social media channels, including Instagram. The post is centered on a visually-captivating photo essay enriched with short stories of how twenty-one cyclists from different parts of the world were each adapting to various states of lockdown. The opening paragraph describes the project as follows:

Produced by Spanish photographer Albert Gallego, a.k.a. “Brazo de Hierro”, the striking images show the cyclists’ ‘dream caves’, lit only by the orange glow from their TVs and computer monitors. The photos are an intimate portrait into the subjects’

home in a time when video calls put many people's personal belongings on display. They show a love-hate relationship, where pedaling becomes a metaphor for daily life – reduced to tiny circles, confined to home. Pedaling to preserve physical and mental health while the world outside turned upside down. Pedaling to preserve a dream of outdoor rides, when the orange glow of real sunshine warms the skin and coffee with mates punctuates a day of adventure. (Strava, 2020d, para. 1)

The images included in this particular post are indeed engaging, and purposefully so. That is, it seems to me that stories like this make sense or, rather, might be expected for at least two reasons. On one hand, stories of resilience in the face of adversity are humanizing stories – these are stories that might offer a sense of comfort for some during a time of great uncertainty, particularly for those who are navigating unprecedented physical and social isolation. Simply put, while these stories might be read as motivating, or even inspire some readers to action, they also serve as reminders that in this moment, when we are forced to be ‘more alone’, Strava can help us ‘be together’. On the other hand, in an ‘attention economy’ (Skågeby, 2009; Bueno, 2016), keeping consumer-users on their site for as long and as often as possible, by creating and *sharing* timely stories, may very well be a calculated business decision. That is, any perceived benevolence aside, the extent to which these stories might be emotionally valuable to consumer-users sits alongside the fact that they might also lead to literal monetary value, should a non-Strava user decide to engage with the platform as a result.

As highlighted above, at-home fitness saw a massive spike in uptake during the early months of the pandemic (Mutz & Gerke, 2021). Malcolm and Velija (2020) suggest that various states of social ‘lockdown’ “justified the suspension of many social ‘duties’ – such as going to work, to church, or visiting family” but explain this was also oftentimes “accompanied by increasing social pressure to regulate one’s body” in socially appropriate ways and that “coach[ing] one’s body...became a major theme of lockdown society” (p. 31). Left to their own ‘devices’ at home, “people were presented with two diametrically opposed embodied outcomes” of the

pandemic, either “extreme fatness or fitness” (Malcolm & Velija, 2020, p. 31). Hyperbolic binary aside, for a company like Strava, which is nothing if not for people’s commitment to physical activity and, more specifically, their penchant for using digital fitness technologies to track and share those activities online, there is a sense that while decidedly awful in so many ways, the pandemic also presented an unprecedented opportunity to double-down on its value, not only as a channel of communication, but also as a source of motivation at a time when many people were filled with angst-induced apathy.

It seems to me that there is a distinction to be made here between what Klein (2007) and others have described as a relatively nefarious corporate opportunism in the face of (or as a response to) global disaster or economic crisis. Make no mistake, however; the pandemic was highly profitable for Strava. Not only did the company see a massive surge in subscription rates during the pandemic, with some estimates suggesting that roughly 2 million new accounts were created every month in 2020 (Etherington, 2020), but the company also secured more than \$100m in late-stage funding (Hansen-Gillis, 2020). A year-end press release published on Strava’s website explains that user engagement reached an all-time high in 2020. In it, they suggest that while competition looked distinctly different from years past, the pandemic “didn’t stop athletes from pushing themselves to new personal bests and competing against each other virtually” (Pez Cycling News 2021, para. 5). The post also includes a statement from Strava CEO, Michael Horvath, who alludes to some of the ways the platform kept users physically and digitally active during the pandemic.

During a challenging year, it has been a privilege to connect athletes to what motivates them and help them find their personal best. Community members shared more than a billion activities including nearly 400 million photos with each other, from solitary virtual marathons and Everesting bike rides to midday walks while working from home. And through it all, athletes from around the world cheered each other on,

proving that every effort counts and people keep people active. (Horvath, as cited in Pez Cycling News, 2021, para. 4)³⁷

As above, throughout the pandemic, Strava has used its own platform and other social media channels to communicate with their users and other followers. Perhaps due to its photo-centric nature, Instagram was often the platform of choice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, beginning in March, many of Strava's posts on Instagram began to address the pandemic, oftentimes at length.

Many of you, from all around the world, have been asking us how to approach being active during these very challenging times. As part of our commitment to serving athletes, we're doing our best to respond and help. Like always, when we have hard choices to make, we look to our values and core beliefs:

We believe that being active is good for people.

It's good for our mental and physical health in so many ways, especially in times of stress. If you're like us, and we know you are, it's tied to our sense of identity and happiness, and is a source of routine and calm when we need it most. We've asked athlete and epidemiology researcher Dr. Megan Roche to help us understand a bit more about being an athlete these days, and hope [her answers](#) give you some clarity and comfort.

Our community standards are rooted in safety and respect.

That's respect for yourselves, each other, and local laws and customs. Your safety and health, and that of the people around you, are of paramount importance – that's always been our point of view and remains so now. If local government and health officials are asking you to change your way of being active, please follow their instructions to the letter, both for your well-being and your community's. If you feel that taking a break from being active would benefit you or those you love, please do. We'll see you on the other side of that break when you're ready.

Staying connected now matters, now as much as ever.

Whether you're able to work out now or not, we believe that we can all play a part in helping each other get through this. We've seen some heartwarming posts lately in our feeds from athletes offering support and resources, or posts asking for advice that athletes have helped to answer, or inspiring indoor uploads from athletes dedicated to their sport even though they can't get outside. If you can be there for your community on Strava during this time, we encourage you to go for it...better to help too much than

³⁷ In a stunning example of the oftentimes fleeting nature of data, the report referenced here and above was temporarily available during December 2020 and January 2021, after which the annual Year in Sport Report is no longer viewable. Pez Cycling News (2021) reproduced the bulk of the narrative that was contained therein.

not enough. And a bit of advice that we feel is never a bad idea: Reach out often to those you love and let them know you care.

Just like you, our ways of life are changing every day, and we are working hard to adapt in the best interests of our athletes and our employees. We're in this together, we are committed as ever, and will do everything in our power to take care of one another.

- The Strava Team (Strava, 2020d)

There is a *lot* going on in this post, which was cross-posted to Instagram, Facebook, and Strava respectively. As might be expected, Strava begins with an acknowledgement of the uncertainty and unease of the moment and by reminding readers that exercise, in addition to being healthy, can be an effective coping strategy during times of stress. They also emphasize their role as a more than simply an app; to hear them tell it, they are a community and, in the absence of physical interactions, being and staying connected *online* can help mitigate some of the feelings of disconnection so many are experiencing *offline*. Put differently, there is an appeal here to the value of Strava as a support(ive) network during the pandemic and that members can and should lean on one another during this time. Importantly, there is also an *appeal to expertise* here, to the extent that they refer to Dr. Megan Roche³⁸. Appeals to expertise are not uncommon tactics used by corporations to legitimize a particular stance or product. Millington (2009) highlights, for instance, how expert voices (in this case, product and software developers) were used to help explain and justify the role and use of Nintendo's Wii and Wii Fit platforms. It seems to me that in this case, however, the appeal to Dr. Roche's credibility is multilayered. While her qualifications as an epidemiologist lend credibility to her opinions as highly educated, the fact that she is also identified as an athlete could very well be a purposeful strategy in its own right, one that confirms

³⁸ In the original post, the underlined text above is hyperlinked to a Q&A with Dr. Roche, titled 'How to Approach Being Active During the COVID-19 Crisis', in which she answers a number of questions that Strava had reportedly been receiving from its users about exercise during a pandemic.

for the reader that she is also ‘one of us’, a subtle but significant nod to a shared subcultural capital with the anticipated audience.

Not unlike the aforementioned run crews, Strava also advocates for the *respect of the rules*, including local bylaws, restrictions, and health guidelines. They encourage readers to think about

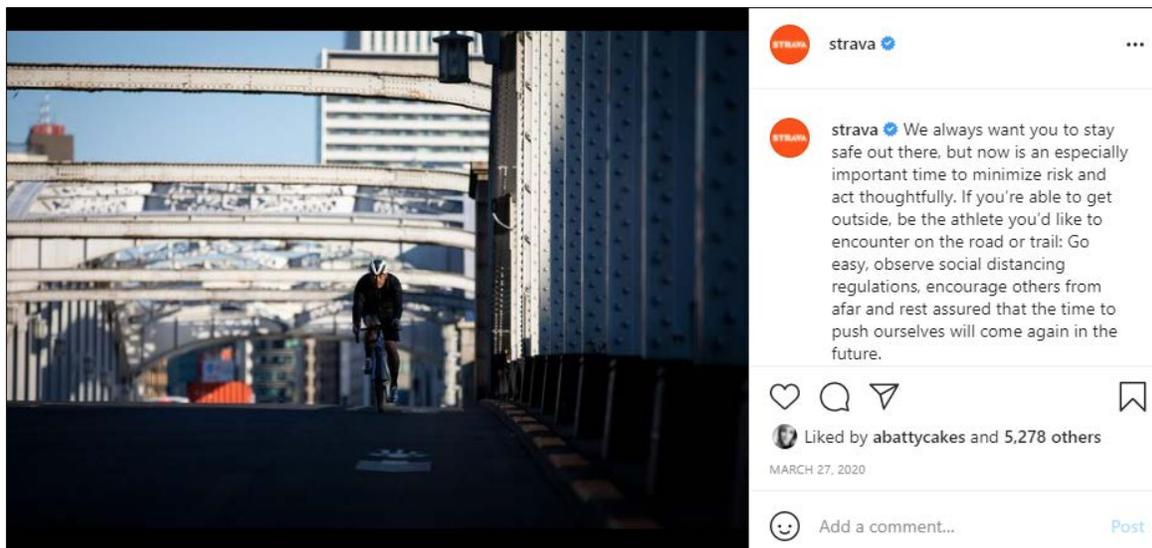


Figure 9: Strava emphasized respect of others and respect for local health guidelines

health in ways that transcend the individual. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a lot of the content they produced from March through May, in particular, really emphasized this point. Many posts featured images and stories of athletes on their own, each adapting to various states of lockdown. They often urged their followers to be especially mindful and respectful of others during this time, to “be the athlete you’d like to encounter on the road” (Strava, 2020b). With this in mind, there was also often *an appeal made to a shared pandemic experience* amongst Strava users in many of the company’s posts. On one hand, this makes sense if we consider that users might share certain habits. On the other hand, this appeal to commonality – and not simply a ‘We’re all in this together’ but, rather, a ‘If you’re like us, *and we know you that you are*’-type of language – is assumptive almost to the point of prescriptive. When juxtaposed against calls for being mindful, this

homogenizing of people’s lived experiences sits in a bit of an uncomfortable tension alongside research that continues to highlight, for instance, the ways in which the pandemic was not (and is not) experienced the same by all people. Specifically, research continues to demonstrate how BIPOC and other systemically marginalized communities are disproportionately affected both in terms of access to health care and job security but also in terms of violent acts of racism (see Bowleg, 2020; Kantamneni, 2020).

As alluded to above, Strava not only has an active social media presence but also invites and enables its users to share their Strava activities on other social platforms. Hashtags like **#GiveKudos** often appear in Strava posts and on Strava-related posts on other platforms such as Instagram. Like run crews, in the early weeks and months of the pandemic, Strava encouraged its users to include certain hashtags, including **#runningalonerather**³⁹, in their posts or activities



Figure 10: Strava launched a number of initiatives including the #SOLOdarity challenge

to connect with (or perhaps *feel connected to*) other users around the world and the company

³⁹ While I cannot say with any degree of certainty, I expect the blatant similarity to Turkle’s (2011) work is purely coincidental.

introduced a #SOLOdarity challenge designed to get people moving and keep people motivated. Not unlike the example highlighted above, there is an appeal made here to a shared sensibility – that a collective ‘we’ is experiencing something difficult – and there is, of course, some truth to that. This post not only frames physical activity as worthwhile and athletes as healthy, responsible, people. Of course, it makes sense that Strava would cater to its ‘base’; surely there are marketing teams whose jobs are tied to purposefully using evocating language that invites and inspires action and at once affirms the behaviour of its users. But a post like this also lacks nuance in a number of key respects. Perhaps above all else, in its call to collective action it ignores and thus effaces the ways that carving out time for exercise every day for a month is not only a ‘challenge’ for many folks under normal circumstances (and is bound up with social position and class to the extent that an abundance of ‘free time’ is a luxury not afforded to all), but also impractical when contrasted against some of the other potentially more pressing issues including loss of income as a result of the pandemic and childcare. It could be said that the above examples of how Strava responded to the pandemic are more or less expected responses. Not only did they emphasize how their product could help people stay healthy, mentally and physically, but also stay connected. Importantly, the pandemic provided a unique opportunity for the company to position itself as more than a social fitness platform and, instead, emphasized its role as a supportive community, at a time when other forms of community were unexpectedly displaced or otherwise disrupted.

4.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of social media channels during times of global unrest, and at once provides some insight into how relationships, both personal and professional, are created, curated, and consumed using social media – and the complex

relationships between corporate entities and the (sport) communities that connect around brands and cultural messaging.

Conceptually, this study offers insights that differ from prior research in two ways: First, it invites us to consider how locally and globally-oriented sport organizations can each function as cultural intermediaries at a time of global crisis. Specifically, the study highlights some of the complex ways in which run crews and Strava each (re)produce certain messages about health, encourage material and symbolic consumption in the interest of maintaining community, and at the same attempt to foster a sense of connection amongst their followers. Second, this study broadens the definition of brand community to include groups previously overlooked by existing research (i.e. grassroots sport organizations) and emphasizes the significant role(s) of social media within these communities as integral to the establishment and strengthening of each *as* brand communities.

It is important to note that while the strategies outlined in this chapter are each interesting in their own right, they are not altogether unique. Previous research has drawn attention, for instance, to some of the ways that sport-based organizations and individuals alike can play an important role in promoting recommended public health initiatives to various communities (see, for example, Markula & Chikinda, 2016). What's more, in the absence of live sport during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hayes (2020) explains that a number of sport-affiliated organizations used digital methods to promote positive messages and encourage exercise. For instance, both the Australian Olympic Committee and the British Olympic Association each developed campaigns in 2020 designed to entertain and motivate would-be spectators by leveraging some of the bi-directional affordances of social media platforms including Instagram and TikTok. The former launched a campaign called **#LikeAnOlympian** that “focused on inspiring Australians to ‘train

like an Olympian at home’ and aimed to encourage people to stay fit and inspired through at-home workouts” and the latter developed the **#IsolationGames** with a similar intent (Hayes, 2020, p. 2).

More notably, and as I suggest above, I think there is the value of considering how run crews, individual runners, and Strava might each be understood as cultural intermediaries – and how their role as cultural intermediaries was perhaps elevated, illuminated and apparently embraced through, and because of, the pandemic. Linking this observation back to earlier observations of run crews as brand communities (see Chapter 2), I point back here to Arriagada and Ibáñez’s (2019) suggestion that cultural intermediaries play an important part of what they describe as ‘communicative value chains’ – chains that are created and strengthened from the creation of ‘branded content’ and consumption experiences on digital platforms. With this in mind, it could be argued that social media platforms such as Instagram and Strava, each of which serve as ‘sites’ of connection and interactivity, function as spaces in and through which communicative value chains are created and reproduced, but also that run crew accounts, individual runners, and Strava each function as cultural intermediaries to the extent that each frames certain products and practices as desirable, on one hand, and certain behaviours and ways of thinking as responsible, on the other. Put differently, it is not difficult to imagine run crews and runners as market actors and, as described in the findings, there is a promotional element to the ways in which these actors ‘cooperate’, self-present, and cross-promote on social media platforms. The object of promotion is not always tangible. For instance, though beer, donuts, and branded apparel are each clear examples of tangible items that are imbued with value and, it could be argued, social capital, the promotion of community is decidedly intangible. Importantly, certain ideas about the importance of each can shape or influence how consumers think of brands and, importantly, but also shape consumers’ taste and consumption choices (Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2014).

In addition to cementing links between running and beer, many of the posts created by run crews and Strava worked to promote and legitimize certain ideas with regard to the coronavirus – a leadership role that further entrenches the cultural authority of intermediaries. Among other things, I highlighted earlier how Strava made appeals to expertise and authority in some of the content they produced in the early weeks and months of the pandemic and, not unlike run crews, the company encouraged its more than one million followers on Instagram (and its tens of millions of users) to respect local laws, health guidelines, and other people during this time. As a globally recognized brand with a massive user base, not only is this message spread widely, but also possibly quite influential. That is, Strava has both professional and cultural capital and the way(s) that they frame the COVID crisis – both as difficult and disconcerting, but also as a serious health threat – is significant if or when we consider the magnitude of their imagined audience, who might be influenced by, identify with, or ‘buy into’ their messages regarding health, exercise, and the pandemic. Notably, the findings from this study also highlight a noteworthy onto-political paradox of sorts, introduced by social running groups during a global pandemic. As groups for whom coming together in person, as a community, was at least in part about reaping certain health benefits (let’s call it immunity), run crews in Vancouver responded to the pandemic by suggesting that one of the single best things their members could do for the safety and wellbeing of their community is to *not* come together. These groups ‘came together’ differently at the onset of the pandemic; they came together online, and they functioned as a united front that promoted the idea that best course of action was a lack of physical interaction.

To the extent that these particular activities enhanced the brand appeal of Strava and run crews – and that the ‘opportunity’ to show this kind of profit-associated leadership emerged because of the pandemic – it is reasonable here to revisit Klein’s notion of ‘crisis capitalism’. I

suggested earlier that there is a distinction to be made here between what Klein (2007) and others have described as a relatively nefarious corporate opportunism in the face of (or as a response to) global disaster or economic crisis – and the activities observed in this study. Certainly, I would suggest that although leaders of run crews may have benefitted financially and with brand recognition by adopting a role of cultural intermediary – it is important also to remember that many of these groups maintain a grassroots and locally-focused orientation, and that the leaders themselves may be legitimate members of the groups they are selling their brand to.

On the other hand, and as noted above, the pandemic was highly profitable for Strava. I think it would be valuable here to link Klein's notion of crisis capitalism with Andrejevic's (2013) to better understanding some of the ways that exploitation are furthered through social media – through corporate ownership and control of user generated data. While I suggested earlier that many Strava users profoundly enjoy the platform and the extent to which Strava users are being exploited is a matter of debate, there is no mistaking the value added to Strava due to the company's ambitious and profit-oriented endeavors that were themselves a response to the opportunities of crisis.

Future studies might look to explore, whether or how the pandemic influenced people's use of digital fitness technologies. On one hand, there is a temptation to think that, for some, the use of digital fitness platforms - whether this be Strava, Zwift, Peloton, or any number of other apps designed to help motivate and connect users through online channels - might continue to grow in popularity, in part, due to the convenience of at-home workouts but also due to lingering anxieties about COVID-19. On the other hand, I will be curious to learn whether we will see a significant decline in the popularity of these platforms as people flock back to in-person spaces. Future work might also look to further explore the relationships between sport and crisis capitalism

and, in particular, the influence of various kinds of profit-driven organizations including (but not limited to) social networks.

5: Conclusion

“It used to be that people were born as part of a community, and had to find their place as individuals. Now people are born as individuals, and have to find their community.”

Bill Bishop (2009)

There’s an old bulletin board affixed above the desk in my office. Pinned to the bottom left-hand side is a hand-written note (in my handwriting) with a version of the above quote hastily penned in red Sharpie on a lime green piece of paper⁴⁰. My guess is that it has likely been there since sometime in early 2017, when I first started to imagine this project. The desk sits next to a large window and the blinds are often left open, which has meant that the handwriting has faded over time, from the sun, unlike the significance of the quote. It struck me as compelling when I first stumbled across it – jarring even – and I’ve come back to it many times over the course of this dissertation.

Of the many insightful exchanges that occurred on the day that I defended my dissertation proposal, one in particular challenged me to (re)consider the extent to which this project was about running. I recall, in the moment, being taken aback by the question and having to quell an almost visceral urge to say, “Well, *of course* this is about running.” Sure enough, both the ensuing conversation and too the subsequent experience of carrying out the research led me to revisit (on more than one occasion) the extent to which this was, in fact, the case. Sure, running features prominently in this dissertation and is admittedly a common ‘point of departure’ with regard to how I talk about the work, particularly in non-academic settings. Not unlike running, I often

⁴⁰ The version in question is markedly similar, but was included in an ‘experimental trend forecast’ by an art collective called K-HOLE, who published a “parafictional piece of market research” designed in the likeness of market research reports that are often “commissioned by businesses to help them anticipate changes in consumer taste” (Net Art Anthology, 2021, n.p.). There was no attribution to Bishop (2009), but the message is effectively the same.

wrestled with whether or how this research is about digital self-tracking but have since come to reconceptualize the role(s) that each has played in this project. This is a dissertation about community. Running culture and digital self-tracking are each avenues through which I have been able to explore some of the ways that people are finding and experiencing community in the contemporary moment.

Of course, the contemporary moment alluded to here is somewhat unique. I would be remiss were I not to acknowledge that this is a moment unlike any that I have previously experienced – an enduring moment, one that seems to oscillate between progress and regress. We are quickly approaching the two year mark of the pandemic and, in ways that were (at least by some accounts) unforeseeable at the time, the outlook remains decidedly unclear. What is clear is that the precarity of this ‘moment’ in time has likely changed some things and, at once, has revealed others. On one hand, it seems to me that the pandemic may have a lasting impact on how we think about health and hygiene. There is also a chance that it might not. On the other hand, the pandemic has also revealed the significance of our social networks, both online and off. Alongside, and despite of, an ever-present politically-charged conversation about rights, freedoms, and bodily autonomy (conversations, to be sure, that are both complex and at times contradictory), there also seems to have been a renewed sense of appreciation for the role and value of experiencing things together – of community. Stories have emerged over these past trying years of resilience and incredible support of, with, and through communities. It is not altogether difficult to imagine that being forced to be apart might have made experiences of togetherness feel even more significant than before.

It has been said that our world is increasingly fragmented (Crehan, 1997). Over the past century, scholars and other writers have lamented the dissolution of ‘traditional’ communities,

which, to hear some tell it, have been “shattered [and] consumed by the metropolis” (Secomb, 2000, p. 133). This dissertation sheds light on some of the ways that individuals are not only seeking out and experiencing community in the contemporary moment, but also how they are actively creating it. Among other things, this research draws attention to some of the ways that community as an experience, and community as an idea, is leveraged by different actors in ways that benefit participants and at once can (and does) generate profit. The findings yielded from this dissertation suggest that not only do people desire community, but that sport-based groups and practices are one of the places that people look to fulfil this desire. Importantly, this research draws attention to the ways that *community is far from monolithic; it is multifaceted, complex and at times even contradictory*. Not only that, but as described in Chapters Two and Three, respectively, what it means and looks like to participate in sport-based sites of sociality can vary greatly. Even in instances where individuals are ostensibly participating in them in similar ways, community is not experienced uniformly.

The communities that I spent time learning more about for the purposes of this dissertation *give meaning to people’s lives*. Both run crews in the city of Vancouver – local groups that gather weekly, run together and often congregate afterwards over a pint – and Strava, a global network of fitness enthusiasts – are each meaningful social networks in and through which people are connecting with others and (albeit in decidedly different ways) learning about *and through* their active bodies. At the same time, it is clear that capitalism continues to exert a profound influence on both the formation of sport-based communities and, too, on the experiences of those who claim membership within them. As discussed in Chapters Two and Four, these communities are each bound up in consumption practices; from post-run beers to branded apparel and cross-promotional initiatives, these are communities with both subtle and explicit imperatives to consume.

This research also challenges certain prevailing polarized views on the promise of, or the ‘problems’ with, social media. Put differently, many of the findings and arguments featured in this dissertation work to destabilize attempts to frame social media use as simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’. *Social media is far from monolithic* and, rather, is nuanced, contextual, and interactional. Just as there is risk in blindly embracing all facets of our increasingly technological-mediated lives, so too are there risks in overlooking some of the ways that technology is changing not only how we communicate, but also how we understand and experience physical activity, affordances that were all but unimaginable in the not so distant past.

Finally, this research invites us to consider what it means and what it looks like to participate in sporting subcultures in the contemporary moment. This project supports previous work that has highlighted some of the ways that style and language are important variables with regard to participation in sporting subcultures and, in particular, perceptions of authenticity. But this work also builds upon existing understandings of subcultural capital, in part, by highlighting the influence of digital platforms and the role of online interactions in relation to sport-based communities. In so doing, this work works to conceptually destabilize a longstanding binary understanding of sport-based communities as either physical *or* digital.

5.1 Research Contributions

This dissertation stands to make substantive, methodological, and theoretical scholarly contributions. One main substantive contribution of this work relates to the empirically-based findings on urban run crew culture and a popular ‘social fitness’ app called Strava. Taken as a whole, findings from this research contribute to a well-established body of scholarship on running from a sociocultural perspective by highlighting runners’ attitudes towards and experiences with

run crew culture and self-tracking. This research supports previous studies on recreational running groups and at once extends this literature by contributing novel findings about a discernible trend in contemporary running cultures, which has yet to be the focus of academic inquiry. Running scholars have previously highlighted how recreational running groups are important sites of motivation and collegiality and have drawn attention to some of the ways that recreational running groups can be spaces where individuals learn about and through their bodies. This research supports and builds upon these previous findings by highlighting runners' experiences in these groups and by discussing how fitness technologies are woven into the fabric of, and thus mediates, the experience of running together.

This work also contributes to a nascent and very much still-growing body of research on the practice of digital self-tracking in a sporting context. More specifically, this research produced findings that emphasize how runners think about, interact with, and experience social self-tracking technologies in ways that prior research in this area has not. Notably, as discussed below, the term *social self-tracking* was developed to describe and discuss some of the implications of purposefully sharing the data produced by self-trackers. It is hoped that these insights into a particular subset of contemporary running culture will inspire future research (ideas for this are outlined later in this section), not least since the industry now sits at the precipice of a new (post)pandemic era, but also since the sporting landscape is increasingly mediated by technology. Both within and outside of sporting spaces, networked interactivity (Millington, 2014; 2015) is the new normal and there is still much to be learned about the role(s) and potential influence of digital self-tracking platforms such as (but not limited to) Strava.

Methodologically, this dissertation contributes to a rich and well-established body of ethnographic research in sport and at once to a body of literature on digital qualitative methods.

Specifically, this work attends to and makes visible some of the complexities of doing physical cultural studies *and* digital ethnographic research. In this way, the project makes a methodological contribution to thinking about what it means to do ‘hybrid ethnographic’ (Przybylski, 2020) research, to the extent that what I have done in the studies contained in this dissertation cuts across and challenges a binary understanding of fieldwork as either online or offline. To borrow from Laurendeau (2011), I attempt to “illustrate the messiness of the research enterprise”, in part, by attending to and creating space for some of the methodological and embodied tensions that can characterize the ‘doing’ of ethnographic research that takes place within and across physical and digital milieus (p. 3). This is perhaps most evident in Chapter Three, where I purposefully weave my voice and some of my experiences as a runner-researcher into the narrative. Smith (2017) suggests that “narrative inquiry [i]s a methodological contingency for physical cultural studies” and that “stories are a crucial means and medium of performing agency” to the extent that they can “provid[e] insights into how people shape physical cultures” and, I would add, experience and makes sense of them (Smith, 2017, p. 505-506). With this in mind, the (auto)ethnographic vignettes included in this particular chapter were designed to offer an additional ‘layer’ of findings, as a way of ‘seeing’ and understanding both the object of the study (Strava) and some of the experiences of one of its subjects (me).

Finally, there are theoretical contributions stemming from this research, the first of which pertains to the term *social self-tracking*. People self-track for a variety of reasons, and often do so alone, but the act of self-tracking can be understood as social in multiple respects. To hear Lupton (2018) tell it, the data we produce while self-tracking is ‘lively’ to the extent that it and circulates and (re)combines as part of a much larger data economy. Among others, she attends to the

sociomaterial dimensions of self-tracking and suggests that data are social to the extent that they interact with other data and, at once, act upon users. The findings highlighted in Chapter Three focus instead on what it can do, and what it can feel like, to purposefully share data that is derived from one's self-tracking habits. The term social self-tracking is used to describe the phenomenon best exemplified in Chapter Three, whereby individuals are compelled to share the data produced while self-tracking with others. To be sure, previous research on digital self-tracking has alluded to this practice and drawn attention to some of the ways and reasons individuals are drawn to share, but this work names and critically considers this practice and invites us to reflect upon some of the implications thereof.

Another theoretical contribution of this dissertation relates to Sherry Turkle's (2011) 'alone together' thesis. As highlighted in Chapters Three and Four, there are instances where our heightened connectivity and networked interactivity (Millington, 2015) can enable or otherwise facilitate new, exciting, and potentially empowering ways of being with, or feeling connected to, one another. In each of these chapters, I have drawn attention to and challenged Turkle's thesis, in part, by proposing that the affordances of technology, including our digitally-mediated interactions, are complex and contextual. That is, rather than lamenting our technological dependence, there is value in approaching technologically deterministic arguments with caution, not only since there is much to be gained (and still much to be learned) by attending to the opportunities afforded by technology vis-à-vis communication but also since, as evidenced by some of the findings in Chapter Two, to focus squarely on moments in which we are 'alone together' online risks overlooking the fact that even some of the most well-intentioned sites of offline sociality are not guarantors that we will not be 'together alone'.

One of the key theoretical contributions of Chapter Two stems from my consideration of the ‘kind’ of (sub)cultural formation that run crews are. I propose that while crews ‘borrow from’ and share certain elements of other formations over time, they are also a unique contemporary phenomenon in a number of ways. These are overwhelmingly (though not exclusively) grassroots groups that are wrought with contradictions. For instance, run crews are local *and* global; the run crew scene in Vancouver exists within (and, I argue, has been influenced by) a larger global run crew-mmunity. These are inclusive *and* exclusive groups; crews are free to join and ‘open to everyone’, although there are certain elements of run crew culture, including style of dress and other consumption practices that can be exclusionary. There is a neo-tribal (Bennett, 1999) element to the run crew scene, whereby members can freely ‘float’ between groups and yet there are also instances of great crew loyalty. Run crew is offline *and* online. Members of the run crew community routinely interact and (re)connect with one another through various online platforms and, in this way, participation in this physical cultural community transcends a uniquely physical *or* digital space.

Towards the end of Chapter Two, I reflect upon whether the run crews in Vancouver are the ‘same’ as their progenitors in New York – whether they are ‘authentic’ to those early crews. In this context, I argue that the extent to which this is true is, in fact, less important than what their popularity (prior to the pandemic) can tell us. Put differently, what does the success of run crews mean? Perhaps most obviously, the prominence of run crew culture suggests that these groups offer something that other types of running groups do not. Surely, there are some who would argue that the distinction comes down to the laid back *laissez-fair* ethos of these groups, that the emphasis on fun (and, in some cases, beer or donuts) is distinct from the ‘old school’ running groups which, while oftentimes incredibly social, both have been and continue to be performance-oriented. But I

propose that the popularity of run crews might also be read as a distinct (albeit familiar) physical culture that is especially congruent with, and perhaps even emblematic of, the moment in which it has thrived – one that is characterized, among other things, by economic uncertainty, precarious working conditions, and fleeting interactions. In the absence of paid memberships and structured, progressive, programs, runners are absolved of the responsibility for sustained commitment. While some runners identify as a member of a particular group, the fluidity of inter-group participation means that runners can pick and choose where and when they run from week to week, since crews meet in different parts of the city on nearly every night of the week.

Another significant theoretical contribution of this work lies in Chapter Four's pairing together of concepts that have previously not been explored in tandem. Specifically, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of *cultural intermediaries* was placed in conversation with *crisis capitalism* and *brand community* in an attempt to help conceptualize the political economy of run crews and Strava. Much of the previous work on cultural intermediaries is focused on brands and advertisement, whereas in this work I 'think with' the term (Maguire & Matthews, 2014) in an attempt to highlight how certain ideas, in the case about health, COVID-19, and exercise, are privileged and reproduced, and to what effect. This study yielded insights into how local/grassroots and global/corporate organizations can each function as cultural intermediaries in times of crisis which is insightful to the extent that it allows us to see what types of messages were produced at this time but also, importantly, invites us to consider *why these messages* and strategies were employed, and to what end. There is a sense that while run crews (whose accounts are managed by volunteers, not unlike the in-person meet ups) were doing what they could to maintain a sense connection amongst their members, Strava's communication at this time was an example of 'opportunistic benevolence'. As above, it is possible that, for many, Strava was, in fact, a valuable

resource during this time, and perhaps a source of motivation, but the logic of Strava's behaviour and messaging also transcends these potentially positive effects.

Finally, this research also contributes substantively to an ever-growing body of literature related to sport and the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other things, this work provides insights into some of the ways that social media were leveraged during the pandemic. Another relatively simple yet important conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that social media should continue to be regarded as important 'sites' of inquiry for sport scholars, both since these are increasingly prevalent channels of communication and too since they can invite and inspire meaningful (inter)action. Moreover, I hope to have offered new ways of thinking about the link(s) between crisis capitalism and sport while also reemphasizing a nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of sport-based communities. That is, while communities can be understood as meaningful groups that interact, support one another, or share an affinity for a particular activity, they can also be a captive audience that can be marketed to.

5.2 Future Directions

The findings from this research offer insights into complex social phenomena. This dissertation is local in scope and yet both run crew culture and Strava are global in their reach. Future studies might look to explore run crew cultures in other locales; comparative studies might be worthwhile to the extent that they might yield nuanced insights about the extent to which this trend in running culture looks and feels similar across different cultural and geographical contexts. It seems to me there might also be great value in attending to run crew culture with a particular focus on gender, sexuality, and race, none of which is emphasized in this research.

There is also much to be learned about Strava and techno-dependence in the context of sporting cultures. While an argument could well be made that there is value in studying other sporting contexts vis-à-vis Strava (e.g., how cyclists, CrossFit, or yoga enthusiasts use the platform), it seems to me there is also great value in further studies about the affordances of Strava from a corporate perspective – that is, studies that seek to learn more about how companies might use the platform in new or unexpected ways. To decenter individual users' experiences and instead focus more squarely on the affordances of the platform might broaden how we think about the platform by drawing attention to how the platform operates as a site of economic opportunity.

Finally, if we accept the premise that the COVID-19 pandemic will have lasting and far reaching impacts on the sporting landscape, future research that focuses on some of the different ways that running cultures, broadly, and runners more specifically might each be influenced by the pandemic is also warranted. Rowe (2020) suggests that there is no way of knowing “what the post-pandemic order will look like” but that “[w]idespread diagnoses declare, not least among ‘moral entrepreneurs’ (Becker, 1963), that there can be no return to pre-pandemic conditions” (p. 1). There is little way of knowing what the future of recreational sporting practices will look and feel like in a post-pandemic world and studies that attend to the lived experience of athletes navigating the oft-cited ‘new normal’ will be worthwhile, but so too will studies that effectively trace new trajectories for recreational sport.

5.3 Postscript: A slow & measured return to running together

At the time of writing, nearly all of the run crews have returned to in-person group runs for a second (and, in some cases, third) time⁴¹, while others are still holding off. A number of groups

⁴¹ As the rates of infection and hospitalization surged during the second and third ‘waves’, some of the groups that had started back up in the summer months paused yet again. Some have yet to return in anticipation of a seemingly immanent ‘fourth wave’.

returned to in-person runs during the summer of 2020, once the initial round of provincially mandated restrictions were lifted. East Van Run Crew’s widely anticipated return involved a labour-intensive coordination of several small ‘pods’ of runners, each taking to the streets in groups of six or less⁴² rather than their usual ‘critical mass’ of runners which often saw upwards of eighty. In addition to new physical configurations, runners were required to pre-register online to secure their spot and were encouraged to bring a blanket and a beverage to socialize “from a distance” after the run. Other crews, including Ice Cream and Donut Running Club, North Burnaby Runners, We Run Surrey, and Run Distrikt also started back up around the same time. Compared to most, Run Distrikt’s Wednesday night runs looked more or less the same, since their group was seldom larger than six prior to the pandemic. Like EVRC, they implemented new COVID guidelines that required runners to each sign a release form that acknowledges the risk of COVID-19 transmission, thus absolving the group of any responsibility. They also encouraged those in attendance to respect social distancing by running six feet apart as best they could.

Only time will tell whether these groups will ever feel as they once did, or if the pandemic has irrevocably changed the social running scene in Vancouver. It might look similar, from the outside looking in, and the return to routine social interactions might be welcomed by many (though I hesitate to say ‘with open arms’), but the future of running together might also be met with new and perhaps unanticipated anxieties – related to personal space and vaccinations, on one hand, but also the very real global health crisis, on the other, which is far from ‘over’ but, rather, continues to (quite literally) evolve – that might influence what these groups feel like. Gone are the massive groups that characterized some of the larger crews; gone, too, are the handshakes and hugs, and the sweaty post-run high-fives. In their place are smaller groups who, while excited to

⁴² In accordance with the provincial health orders at the time.

run together again, are negotiating a ‘new normal’, not only in terms of running as a group but also social interactions more broadly.

We are not yet post-pandemic. Is it possible to imagine that one of the long term ‘side effects’ of COVID-19 will be an even stronger or renewed desire for community? Perhaps platforms like Strava will continue to see a growth in use, as people look to stay connected and even compete with others ‘at arms length’. Alongside a long list of idiosyncratic behaviours, runners are often described known as tenacious, as driven, and as capable of overcoming adversity. From such a perspective, I think there is reason to be hopeful. As I describe in Chapter Two, there are elements of what is currently known as ‘run crew’ that borrows from and builds upon that which came before it. Were I to hedge my bets, I expect that things might change yet again. Run crew as we know it (or, rather, as we *knew* it) will likely adapt. I feel pretty confident that running will continue to bring people together, and that regardless of the shape they take or the language used to describe them, these groups will continue to provide something meaningful to the members who create and sustain them.

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