RUNNING EVENTS IN A CRISIS CONTEXT: A SPORT CONSUMER MARKETING PERSPECTIVE

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REMARKS

The reader is informed of the following:

- The thesis is structured in the form of three articles. Article 1 is presented in Chapter 2, Article 2 is presented in Chapter 3, and Article 3 is presented in Chapter 4.
- To ensure consistency in referencing, the Harvard referencing style is applied throughout the thesis.
- A reference list is provided at the end of each chapter. As this study is a PhD written by article, each article contains its own reference list. For this reason, Chapter 1 and Chapter 5 also include a reference list at the end of each. Where three or more authors have been referenced in Chapter 1 as "*et al*", Chapter 5 continues with the use of "*et al.*" for those authors from the beginning of the chapter.
- The article-based nature of this thesis requires that sufficient information be provided in each article for it to be read as a stand-alone document, as well as part of the thesis. This inevitably results in some duplication of key information mentioned in different parts of the thesis. This duplication of information is most notable in the literature that contextualises the research problem and relevant theory, along with information about the methods used, the main findings and contribution of the study.
- Based on the Sport Experience Framework by Funk (2017), the word *sport*, rather than *sports,* is used throughout the study to ensure consistency.
- The prescribed and signed declaration regarding plagiarism is included in Appendix G.

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In conclusion: "…let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." (Hebrews 12:1)

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY AND ETHICS STATEMENT

Declaration of originality

I, Bianca Lizelle Frost, declare that this thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree PhD in Marketing Management at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me at this or any other tertiary institution.

Ethics statement

I, Bianca Lizelle Frost, have obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable ethics approval. I declare that I have observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's *Code of ethics for researchers* and *Policy guidelines for responsible research*.

BFrost

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sport events have become a global phenomenon accessible to a large mass of consumers and considering the intense economic impact of sporting events, sport consumption experiences have raised the specialist's interests. The study of sport consumer behaviour has yet to be realised and to add to this field, it is important to explore topics that are specific to sport consumption as unique experiences. Sport is one of the main areas of life that was affected by the COVID-19 crisis declared as a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation in March 2020. The pandemic has altered traditional aspects of consumer behaviour, including participation in sporting events. There is limited academic understanding of how active sport consumers, such as participants of running events, may have been impacted by the disrupted status quo.

The primary aim of the overall study was to explore marketing aspects related to running events from a sport consumer's perspective across various phases related to the COVID-19 crisis. This exploratory study investigated various knowledge gaps in sport consumer behaviour and considered sport consumers' emotional and behavioural responses during the prolonged crisis through the lenses of eudaimonistic identity and brand love theory. The empirical investigation of the study was comprised of three separate research articles and overall a mixed method approach was employed. The first two articles employed qualitative netnography to explore dimensions of self-expressiveness and dimensions of brand love via authentic electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) among an online running community. The Comrades Marathon, one of the world's oldest and largest ultramarathon events hosted in South Africa, was used as case study.

Prior to COVID-19, a thematic analysis of text-based statements showed that running event participants frequently communicate self-expressive dimensions, namely, perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and perceived importance of event participation within their online communications. The results suggest that marathon running events have potential to provide eudaimonic consumption experiences, which have benefits for the sport consumer in terms of enhancing subjective well-being (SWB) through event participation, as well as for the sport organisation regarding increased social media communication about the event brand. During COVID-19, reduced opportunities for self-expressiveness due to restricted event participation, resulted in negative emotions and reduced SWB. The findings show that sport consumers coped with negative emotions by engaging in alternative consumption behaviours, such as garden running challenges and increased social media communications, which included nostalgic conversation.

Brand love is also relevant in a crisis context considering the proposed enduring effects of brand love. The results of the content analysis from text-based statements among the online community showed that dimensions of brand love were evident in eWOM, including crisis-related outcomes. Also, the significantly higher percentage of positive eWOM statements (as opposed to negative eWOM) indicated that brand love can be sustainable during a real-life crisis. Nevertheless, negative eWOM about aspects related to the event organisation's crisis response strategy was also evident. It is suggested that event organisations should not only rely on brand love during a crisis but also consider implementing effective crisis response strategies should a crisis situation arise in future.

The inability to stage physical events during the pandemic due to event restrictions rapidly pushed events online. The study thus also explored the potential market for virtual sport events as a prominent phenomenon that was spearheaded and identified potential market segments with intentions to partake in VREs in future. The third article employed a quantitative methodology to identify market segments with future virtual running event (VRE) participation intentions, based on an adapted Sport Experience Design (SX) Framework that related to the sport user and (virtual) sport event context. The findings indicated that four SX factors, namely, hedonia, perceived psycho-social risks, price and VRE preferences may explain future VRE participation intentions. The market segment with the highest VRE participation intentions indicated the highest levels of hedonia from VRE participation and was comprised mostly of casual leisure event participants who were female. The segment displaying the lowest VRE participation intentions were mostly serious leisure runners, male or female, with the lowest levels of hedonia derived from VRE participation during the pandemic.

Apart from the theoretical contributions, this study provides managerial insights and recommendations for sport event markers when developing marketing event strategies in future. Marketers should recognise their unique potential to provide sport consumers with meaningful consumption experiences that ultimately enhance SWB. This is most relevant considering the third sustainable development goal (SDG) that focuses on promoting "good health and well-being" among all members of society. Eudaimonic consumption experiences induced by self-expressive consumption experiences, can generate desirable outcomes for event organisations, particularly in terms of content creation on social media, positive eWOM about event experiences and event brand love. Marketers should also give heed to the unique characteristics of the various sport consumer market segments that exist for traditional, virtual or hybrid event formats going forward.

This study contributes methodologically to sport marketing literature by employing a netnographic approach not commonly utilised in either a sport marketing or crisis context. Deeper insights could be obtained from eWOM, both inductively and deductively, into 'lived' experiences during a period of restricted event participation. Furthermore, the application of a CHAID analysis technique, which is a more sophisticated market segmentation tool, has hardly been used in sport-related research.

As with all social science research, this study is not without its limitations. One of the main limitations of the study is that only active sport event consumers involved in running events are considered. Future research could explore dimensions related to self-expressiveness, brand love and virtual event intentions in other sport or event consumption contexts that may have been impacted by the pandemic. The study is also limited by the research methods employed. For the first two articles, the results could be verified by means of triangulation by employing other qualitative techniques as well as quantitative methods. The current study is also limited to the SX factors explored in the current study and there may be other relevant SX factors that have not been explored in terms of future VRE participation intentions.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

The key terms that are utilised in this thesis are defined below. These terms are listed in alphabetical order for ease of reference.

Active sport consumers: As opposed to passive sport consumers, active sport consumers are "sport participants who actively engage in various sporting activities (e.g., indoors and outdoors) in the form of organised or unorganised sports" (Cho, Oh & Chiu, 2021:1745).

Brand love: Brand love is defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular brand" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006:81).

Brand defence: Brand defence refers to "a state of positive word-of-mouth attributions, in which consumers in close consumer-brand relationships or brand love defend the brand from any criticism" (Dalman, Buche & Min, 2019:87).

Brand trust: Brand trust refers to a consumer's belief that a brand can perform its claimed functions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Casual leisure: Casual leisure is described as an immediate, somewhat short-lived, and pleasurable activity that is intrinsically rewarding, and can be enjoyed with little or no special instruction or training (Stebbins, 1992).

Comrades Marathon: The Comrades Marathon is an ultramarathon event of approximately 89 kilometres (about 50 miles) which is run annually in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa between the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg (Comrades Marathon Association, 2020).

Compensatory consumption: Compensatory consumption is defined as "the focus upon, deliberation about, acquisition and use of products in response to a deficit triggered by perceived needs and desires that cannot be fulfilled directly" (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018:97).

Consumer behaviour: As a sub-discipline of marketing, consumer behaviour explores psychological and physical factors that influence an individual's decision-making, to explain or predict behaviours (Funk, Alexandris & McDonald, 2016a; Funk, 2017; Holbrook, 1987; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010).

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease is an infectious disease caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2 virus), commonly referred to as COVID-19 (World Health Organisation, 2022).

Crisis: A crisis is defined as a ''a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organisation's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat'' (Coombs, 2007:164).

Crisis Response Strategy (CRS): An organisation's CRS refers to what an organisation does and communicates after a crisis has hit (Coombs, 2007).

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM): Electronically delivered statements (positive or negative) about a product, service, brand or experience made by potential, actual, or former consumers (Kim & Johnson, 2016; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004).

Eudaimonia: Eudaimonia is a meaningful type of happiness defined as a "subjective state that arises when individuals are engaged in activities to further their best potentials, with the nature of those activities differing from person to person" (Waterman, 2007:291).

Garden running: Garden running activities or challenges refer to individuals running laps within limited spaces in and around their places of residence, such as in their gardens and driveways, under strict lockdown restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Happiness: Happiness is when individuals evaluate for themselves the degree to which they experience a sense of wellness in terms of "optimal psychological experience and functioning" from engaging in certain activities, also referred to as subjective well-being (SWB) (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2008:1; Diener, 1984).

Hedonia: A type of happiness that can be derived from a consumption experience in the form of pleasure and fun and is more short-term in nature (Gaston-Breton, Sørensen & Thomsen, 2020).

Hope: A positive phenomenon with its key purpose being the avoidance of despair and "permitting the individual psychologically to bypass ongoing unpleasant or stressful situations" (Korner, 1970:1).

Marathon: A marathon running event is a foot race that covers 42.195 kilometres (26 miles 385 yards) and is usually run as a road race (World Athletics, 2021).

Nostalgia: Nostalgia refers to seeking a connection with something in the past that is now gone (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2020).

Online brand community: An online brand community consists of a group of individuals with common interest in a brand or activity, who communicate with each other electronically (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).

Participatory sport event (PSE): A PSE is an open-entry event, such as a running event, where the focus is on promoting participation and engagement rather than the significance of the sporting outcome (Coleman & Ramchandani, 2010; Crofts, Schofield & Dickson, 2012).

Self-actualisation: Self-actualisation refers to the achievement of one's potentials and based on Maslow's need theory of human motivation, self-actualisation is at the highest level (Maslow, 1968).

Self-concept: Self-concept refers to an individual's beliefs about the self and consists of self-image (actual or ideal) and social self-image (actual or ideal) (Sirgy, 1982; 1985).

Self-expressiveness: Consumers engage in self-expressiveness when they purchase products or engage in consumption experiences that reflects their self-concept (Morgan & Townsend, 2022; Waterman, 1990, 1993).

Self-brand expressiveness: Self-brand expressiveness refers to a consumer's perception of the degree to which the specific brand enhances the consumer's social self and reflects the inner self (An, Do, Ngo & Quan, 2019; Karjaluoto, Munnukka & Kiuru, 2016).

Self-realisation: Self-realisation is a process of reducing the gap between the actual self and the ideal self which is achieved through opportunities of self-actualisation (Bosnjak, Brown, Lee, Yu & Sirgy, 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Serious leisure: Serious leisure refers to "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skill, knowledge and experience" (Stebbins,1993:3).

Social listening: A process of monitoring digital conversations to understand what consumers are saying about a brand or organisation online (Reid & Duffy, 2018).

Social media: A group of Internet-based applications that allows users (or consumers) to create and share content by interacting with one another (de Vries, Peluso, Romani, Leeflang & Marcati, 2017).

Sport consumer: Sport consumers (or sport users) are those who "select, purchase, use and dispose of sport-related products and services to satisfy needs and receive benefits" (Funk, 2008:6).

Sport consumer behaviour (SCB): The actions performed by sport consumers in terms of searching for, participating in, and evaluating sport activities that they believe will fulfil their needs (Baker, Jordan & Funk, 2018).

Subjective well-being (SWB): SWB is when individuals evaluate for themselves the degree to which they experience a sense of wellness in terms of "optimal psychological experience and functioning" from engaging in certain activities, often referred to as happiness (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2008:1; Diener, 1984).

Traditional event: Traditional or 'live' events are described as "happenings at which people come together physically to celebrate a significant occurrence" (Richards, 2022:1).

Virtual event: A virtual event refers to a web-based event that involves people interacting in virtual environments rather than in physical places (Gottlieb & Bianchi, 2017).

Virtual running events (VREs): In this study, a VRE refers to a virtual running event that does not make use of specific mobile applications and is delimited to an organised race that can be run (or walked) from any location (e.g., on the road, an outdoor trail or treadmill). Participants register for the event online, pay an entry fee, complete the distance and upload their finishing time (Helsen, Derom, Corthouts, De Bosscher, Willem & Scheerder, 2021).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are applied in this thesis (presented in alphabetical order):

Abbreviation	Meaning
ASA	Athletics South Africa
AVE	Average Variance Explained
CHAID	Chi-Squared Automatic Interaction Detector
CMA	Comrades Marathon Association
CRS	Crisis Response Strategy
EFA	Exploratory factor analysis
eWOM	Electronic word-of-mouth
PSE	Participatory sport event
SATT	South African Travel & Tourism Sector
SCB	Sport consumer behaviour
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SWB	Subjective well-being
SX framework	Sport Experience Design framework
VRE	Virtual running event
WHO	World Health Organisation
WOM	Word-of-mouth
WTTC	World Travel & Tourism Council

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CHAPTER 1: CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective sport marketing begins and ends with the consumer, and understanding sport consumption experiences are critical to effective marketing and design (Byon, Yim & Zhang, 2022; Choi & Choi, 2019). Sport consumers are inclined to satisfy their inherent needs and seek rewards from the sport consumption experience (Ha & Stoel, 2009; Mudrick, Sauder & Davies, 2019). To understand sport consumer behaviour (SCB) as a phenomenon, academic inquiries draw upon a multi-disciplinary approach, particularly from social psychology and marketing (Funk, 2008). As a sub-discipline of marketing, consumer behaviour mainly explores psychological and physical factors that influence an individual's decision-making, to explain or predict behaviours (Funk *et al*., 2016a; Funk, 2017; Holbrook, 1987; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010). SCB as a discipline is developed from the general field of consumer behaviour (Funk *et al*., 2016a; Terason, 2021). SCB has emerged as its own subset of consumer behaviour in sport management based on the assumptions that sport has unique characteristics and can offer unique consumption experiences (Funk *et al*., 2016a).

The consumption of sport differs from other forms of consumption as it takes place in different degrees, with the levels of emotion and depths of association exceeding other types of consumption (Kruger, 2015). Studying consumption in the context of sport behaviour thus requires research distinct from other pleasure-seeking consumption experiences (King, Kahle & Close, 2011). It is important that SCB researchers consider these characteristics to provide sport organisations with actionable recommendations (Funk, 2017).

SCB is concerned with an action performed in searching for, participating in, and evaluating sport activities that sport consumers believe will fulfil their needs (Baker *et al*., 2018). SCB is also often described as the process through which consumers gain an experience with sport (Baker *et al*., 2018; Funk, Lock, Karg & Pritchard, 2016b). Sport consumption comprises physical participation as well as viewing sport through live attendance or via media platforms (King *et al*., 2011). A prominent focus of SCB research is sport consumption which tends to be varied and has been studied widely (Baker *et al*., 2018; Funk *et al*., 2016a). Various topics relevant to sport consumption have been investigated, such as the consumption of sport media (Fujak, Frawley, McDonald & Bush, 2018; Funk *et al.,* 2016a), sport merchandise (Kim & Trail, 2010), hospitality service (Mudrick *et al*., 2019), and sport tourism (Gammon, Ramshaw & Wright, 2017). The eminent link between motivation and consumption behaviours is a significant part of SCB studies and has been researched extensively (Kurpis & Bozman, 2011).

Several authors have aimed to segment sports consumer markets through behaviouristic segmentation based on motivations and it has been noted that at least 32 distinct theories have already been applied to explain sport-related behaviour (Roberts 2001; Kurpis & Bozman, 2011). Sport participants' behaviours in outdoor and adventure activities is another popular topic that has been explored in SCB (Weed, 2006; Weed, 2009). Lately, research on consumer behaviour has started to focus on the effect of sport and leisure experiences on happiness (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Lundberg & Andersson, 2022).

It has been stated that the study of SCB "has yet to be fully realised" and that the special characteristics of sports consumption separate it from mainstream theories of consumer behaviour (Funk, 2017; Kruger, 2015). To add to the field of SCB, it is important to explore topics that are specific to sport consumption as unique experiences to enhance knowledge in this field (King *et al*., 2011:10). SCB research continues to grow in popularity and sophistication (Funk *et al*., 2016b). The increasing volume of literature on sport event experiences is significant, given the accelerated growth of the sport industry (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Terason, 2021). Today, consumers are increasingly investing more in experiences than material possessions (Roto, Bragge, Lu & Pacauskas, 2021; Yang, Zhang, Wang, 2022). As such, experiences are a growing field of research (Roto *et al*., 2021).

Sport event consumption experiences have raised the specialist's interest, given the intense economic impact of such events since it has become a global phenomenon accessible to a large mass of consumers (Gârdan, Gârdan, Andronie & Dumitru, 2020). Sport event experiences take place against a background that is suitable to provide an intense experience (Gârdan *et al*., 2020). Some of the unique characteristics of sport experiences relate to the uncertainty of outcomes, sport intangibility, its inconsistent nature and that consumption mostly takes place in the presence of other sport consumers (Funk, 2017; Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick, Funk & Karg, 2014). From a managerial perspective, the role of the sport organisation is to enhance sport consumer interactions to provide an optimal consumer experience (Funk *et al*., 2016a).

It is well known from marketing research that purchases can explain happiness (Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009) where consumer happiness represents the "pleasures individuals draw from exchanging their money for goods and services" (Desmeules, 2002:4). Experiential purchases can be more correlated with overall happiness than material purchases (Nicolao *et al*., 2009). Given the experiential nature of event participation, it is pertinent to explore factors that may influence the state of happiness with the "purchase" of a sport event experience (Theodorakis, Kaplanidou & Karabaxoglou, 2015). Literature has consistently shown that

happiness with an experiential purchase is related to happiness with life (Theodorakis *et al*., 2015). In this regard, Theodorakis *et al*. (2015:90) state that "consuming a sport event experience can be embedded within the realm of positive psychology and well-being of a sport event participant".

In leisure studies, active sport participation is described to evoke emotional responses that contribute to a meaningful life with effects on happiness (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Bailey & Fernando, 2012). Sport consumption experiences elicit a range of positive (e.g., pleased, happy, energetic, confident) and negative emotions (e.g., discouraged, frustrated, upset, angry, irritated, sad) (Kim, Magnusen & Lee, 2017) and the direct link between emotional and behavioural responses of consumers is most evident (Kümpel & Unkel, 2017; Prayag, Hosany, Muskat & Del Chiappa, 2017). Sport events are thus a fruitful avenue for exploring links with consumer subjective well-being (SWB) considering the high levels of emotion stimulated through these events (Filep & Laing, 2019; Garner, Thornton, Lou Pawluk, Mora Cortez, Johnston & Ayala, 2022).

A range of scholarly discussions have alluded that happiness with purchases should be a goal of marketers and that creating opportunities to enhance SWB through consumption, such as sport event participation, is important (Garner *et al*., 2022; Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, Lyubomirsky, White & Lehman, 2002; Theodorakis *et al*., 2015). If marketers can better understand the types of happiness sport consumers seek through their event consumption experiences, they can concentrate on offering these desired outcomes in future event experiences. Running events offer participants a certain sport experience and are relevant as consumers are consciously seeking more meaningful experiences, which can potentially be provided through sport event offerings (Choi & Choi, 2019; Hosany & Witham, 2010).

White and Yu (2019) state that a eudaimonic perspective of well-being does not attract sufficient attention in sport consumer literature, despite its promise in related fields. There is evidence that participation in activities that are predominantly intense and challenging, such as endurance sport events, may lead to higher levels of eudaimonia (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Løvoll, 2019; Su, Tang & Nawijn, 2020). Marathon running events have become increasingly popular in the last decade (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Qiu, Lin & Zhou, 2019; Terason, 2021). It is thus relevant to explore eudaimonia as a meaningful type of happiness that may be derived from a marathon event consumption experience.

According to eudaimonistic identity theory, self-defining activities induce self-expressiveness, which is likely to enhance SWB (Sirgy, Lee, Yu, Gurel-Atay, Tidwell & Ekici, 2016; Waterman,

1990, 1993; Waterman, Schwartz & Conti, 2008). Marketing literature has indicated that self-expressiveness is one of the main motivators for content creation on social media (de Vries *et al*., 2017; Morgan & Townsend, 2022). Self-expressiveness has also been proposed as a significant predictor of brand love (An *et al*., 2019; Aro, Suomi & Saraniemi, 2018). The concept of brand love posits that consumers have love-like feelings for brands and is a topic of interest to both researchers and practitioners considering proposed enduring effects of brand love for organisations (Gumparthi & Patra, 2020). Positive eWOM is suggested as an overarching enduring effect of brand love and is particularly significant as eWOM created by consumers is often perceived as being more credible than other marketing communications efforts (Dalman *et al*., 2019; Wallace, Buil & de Chernatony, 2014).

Unfortunately, sport is one of the main areas of life that was severely affected by COVID-19 considering its social, economic and consumer well-being impacts (Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022; Helsen *et al*., 2021). The rapid spread of COVID-19 globally posed challenges to healthcare systems and numerous strategies were put in place to reduce the spread of the virus (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2021; Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021). International borders were closed, and various phases of lockdown were implemented with social distancing restrictions (Perold, Hattingh & Bruwer, 2020). All physical activities that typically take place in groups were initially banned (Lippi, Henry, Bovo & Sanchis-Gomar, 2020). Mass sporting events were commonly referred to as "superspreaders" of the virus and major sporting events, including high-profile marathon running events, were postponed, or cancelled for the first time in decades (Weed, 2020; Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021).

Negative emotions are likely to arise in situations where individuals cannot lead 'normal lives,' such as with the lockdown restrictions during the initial phases of the pandemic and marathon event cancellations (Cho *et al*., 2021; Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Consumers often cope with negative emotions by engaging in alternative (or compensatory) consumption behaviours to enhance SWB (Cho *et al*., 2021; Koles *et al*., 2018). Social media is also recognised as a coping mechanism during times of crisis, particularly during COVID-19 as a limited means to connect with others (Hutchinson, 2020; Wolfers & Utz, 2022). The current study thus explores the potential reduced SWB regarding restricted event participation during phases of COVID-19 from a self-expressiveness perspective.

Brand love also holds much relevance in a crisis context, and it has been proposed that brand love has the potential to negate the negative effects of a brand crisis (Ali, Dogan, Amin, Hussain & Ryu, 2021; Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012; Kang, Slaten & Choi, 2021; Zhang, Zhang & Sakulsinlapakorn, 2020). There are, however, inconsistencies in brand

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love literature regarding the enduring effects of brand love (Zhang *et al*., 2020) and warrants further investigation in the current study considering the real-life crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic initiated an increasing demand for virtual sporting challenges that could meet the health and safety restrictions imposed by the pandemic (Agini & Di Stefano, 2020; Maditinos, Vassiliadis, Tzavlopoulos & Vassiliadis, 2021; Raimondi, Lawrence & O'Reilly, 2021). Sporting organisations rapidly began to offer virtual event alternatives to replace their traditional events (Miles, 2016; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022). Projected to be a legitimate future segment of the sport event industry (Agini & Di Stefano, 2020; Kim, 2021; Raimondi *et al*., 2021; Richards, 2022), the current study explores future intentions to partake in virtual running events (VREs) considering SWB elements and the virtual sport crisis context.

Research that focuses on SWB has primarily been linked to health and social benefits in that happiness makes people healthier, reduces the chances of illness and contributes to higher levels of work productivity (Lee & Hwang, 2018). Exploring aspects related to SWB are relevant not only to health professionals, but also for sport markers and practitioners who offer these experiences. Sport experiences may evoke certain emotions and may play a key role in realising desirable organisational outcomes, such as achieving consumer satisfaction (Oliver, 1993), spreading positive electronic word-of-mouth communications (eWOM) (Choi & Choi, 2019; Holbrook & Hirschman 1982; Holbrook, O'Shaughnessy & Bell, 1990; Mesch & Manor, 1998), creating strong positive emotions for brands (Carol & Ahuvia, 2006) and stimulating future intentions to reengage with a consumption experience (Lazarus, 1991, 2001; Cho *et al*., 2021).

Emotional and behavioural outcomes of event consumption experiences are beneficial to marketers and relevant to a million-dollar sport industry (Kümpel & Unkel, 2017). Also, it is not known how restricted event participation may have impacted consumers' emotions and behavioural responses during the crisis period. (Tull, Edmonds, Scamaldo, Richmond, Rose & Gratz, 2020). Hence, support is provided for the overall research study.

The remainder of the chapter will address the problem statement, research aim and objectives, and provide an overview of running events and the crisis context of the study. The theoretical underpinning of the research is explicated, and a summary is provided of the theoretical framework, methodology and the academic and managerial contributions of this study are noted. The chapter concludes by providing an outline of the study.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

A review of literature has shown that understanding sport consumers' experiences are essential to creating effective sport marketing strategies and design (Byon *et al*., 2022; Choi & Choi, 2019; Cho *et al*., 2021). SCB literature has shown that a direct link exists between the emotional responses and behavioural outcomes of sport consumers (Kim *et al*., 2017; Prayag *et al*., 2017). It is well known that understanding consumer emotions from sport consumption experiences are important, nevertheless, there are still many gaps in SCB research from a marketing perspective that have not been considered. Our knowledge of the field has been challenged given the effect that COVID-19 has had on the psyche of consumers (Tull *et al*., 2020). Gaps in the existing knowledge base not only consist of previously studied topics that now must be investigated through a different lens, but also novel phenomena emerging from the disrupted status quo.

There is limited sport SCB research in the field of marketing that has explored dimensions of self-expressiveness, as a precursor to SWB, based on eudaimonistic identity theory (Waterman, 2011). Also, although self-expressive consumption is one of the main motivators for consumers to create content on social media, there is a dearth in literature that explores dimensions related to self-expressiveness from a sport consumption experience, such as a marathon running event, via authentic eWOM (de Vries *et al*., 2017). This gap widened during the pandemic when sport event participation was restricted worldwide (Weed, 2020; WHO, 2020). This implied restricted opportunities to engage in self-expressive sport consumption activities and thus potential reduced SWB. It is not known how active sport event participants may have responded (or 'coped') during the early phases of lockdown with event restrictions and the inability to engage in running events and as a regular consumption activity during 'normal' circumstances (Cho *et al*., 2021). Social media is often used as a coping mechanism (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). However, it is not known whether and how the lost opportunities for self-expressiveness from sporting event participation may have been translated into eWOM.

Consumer research has shown that self-expressiveness through consumption is a significant predictor of brand love (An *et al*., 2019; Aro *et al*., 2018). Brand love can be most valuable for organisations considering the benefits often associated with such, particularly positive eWOM, as a proposed enduring effect of brand love (Amaro, Barroco & Antunes, 2020; Dalman *et al*., 2019; Wallace *et al*., 2014; Zhang *et al*., 2020). There is limited research that specifically explores *event* brand love. Also, there are inconsistencies in brand love literature regarding the proposed enduring effects of brand love within a crisis context (Vafeiadis, Bortree, Buckley, Diddi & Xiao, 2019). It is not known whether consumers' views of event brands may have

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changed when considering an event organisation's CRS during the prolonged crisis context of the current study.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hastened the shift of leisure experiences from physical to digital environments (Richards, 2022). A key issue going forward concerns intentions to partake in VREs in future. VRE participation intentions have not been explored based on a (virtual) Sport Experience (SX) Framework that considers factors related to the sport user (i.e., SWB elements and perceived risks of COVID-19) and sport context (i.e., event attributes, perceived price and virtual event benefits as opposed to traditional event participation). Also, no study has considered whether specific market segments exist based on the aforementioned factors.

Considering the research gaps which have been highlighted in the above problem statement, the overall aim of the study and research objectives are presented next.

3. STUDY AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of the overall study is to explore marketing aspects related to running events from a sport consumer's perspective across various phases related to the COVID-19 crisis.

The following secondary objectives support the overall aim of the study:
1. To determine main themes in eWOM among marathon runners prior to and during three initial phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation (Article 1, Chapter 2)
2. To explore the extent to which dimensions of self-expressiveness feature in main themes in eWOM of marathon runners prior to and during three initial phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation (Article 1, Chapter 2)
3. To explore dimensions of event brand love and marathon runners' responses to an event organisation's CRS in eWOM during a prolonged crisis (Article 2, Chapter 3)
4. To determine the extent to which positive eWOM, as an overall enduring effect of event brand love, is sustainable during the crisis (Article 2, Chapter 3)
5. To explore what SX factors relate to the sport user and virtual sport context that may predict future intentions to partake in VREs (Article 3, Chapter 4)
6. To categorise sport users into market segments based on relevant SX factors and VRE participation intentions (Article 3, Chapter 4)

In the three chapters that follow Chapter 1, the objectives are addressed. For each individual article, separate research questions address the main aim and objectives of the overall study as outlined above. Specifically, Chapter 2 is formulated as Article 1 (Objectives 1 and 2),

Chapter 3 is formulated as Article 2 (Objectives 3 and 4), and Chapter 4 is formulated as Article 3 (Objectives 5 and 6). Chapter 5 concludes and summarises how each article contributes to the overall study aim and objectives.

4. BACKGROUND TO RUNNING EVENTS AS SPORT CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES AND THE CRISIS CONTEXT

This section provides a brief background to consumer behaviour from a sport perspective, running events and the crisis context. The relevance of exploring running events in a South African context is considered and the various phases of COVID-19 as investigated in the current study are presented. The Comrades marathon is also introduced as the case study (i.e., for Articles 1 and 2, refer to Chapters 2 and 3).

4.1. Sport consumer behaviour and running events

Consumer behaviour emerged as a sub-discipline of marketing in the early 1980's (Funk, 2017; Holbrook, 1987; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010) and mainly explores psychological and physical factors that influence an individual's decision-making, to explain or predict behaviours (Funk *et al*., 2016a; Funk, 2017; Holbrook, 1987; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010). More specifically, consumer behaviour has been defined as "the totality of consumers' decisions with respect to the acquisition, consumption and disposition of goods, services, activities, experiences, people and ideas by (human) decision-making units over time" (Hoyer, MacInnis, Pieters, Chan & Northey, 2021:4). In a sport context, consumer behaviour is concerned with an action performed in searching for, participating in, and evaluating sport activities that sport consumers believe will fulfil their needs (Baker *et al*., 2018). Sport consumption is most often understood as the process of gaining an experience with a sporting activity, for example, participating in (or attending) a sporting event (Baker *et al*., 2018; Funk *et al*., 2016b). In this study, the consumption experience refers to participation in a running event.

Sport consumers are those who "select, purchase, use and dispose of sport-related products and services to satisfy needs and receive benefits" (Funk, 2008:6). In general, sport consumers can be classified into three categories: 1) active sport consumers are those sport participants who actively engage in organised and/or unorganised sport activities; 2) passive sport consumers are individuals who spectate and support sport events; and 3) sporting goods consumers are those who purchase products with sport-related aspects or purposes (Funk *et al*., 2016a; Shank, 2015; Smith & Stewart, 2014). The focus of this study is on active sport consumers, specifically, runners who are participants in running events.

Participatory sport events (PSEs) are 'open-entry events' (Crofts *et al*., 2012:149) where the focus is more on promoting participation and engagement rather than the significance of the sporting outcome (Coleman & Ramchandani, 2010; Helsen *et al*., 2021). Both elite and non-elite participants can participate in PSEs, however, most participants in PSEs are non-elite. Running, as a participatory sport, has been growing internationally as a trend where individuals engage in running events not because of the competitive aspect, but rather for health, leisure and adventure (Malchrowicz-Mośko & Poczta, 2018). In this regard, sport consumers partake in sporting events, such as running events, to satisfy their inherent needs and seek rewards from the sport consumption experience as leisure activities that enhance consumer (or participant) well-being (Mudrick *et al*., 2019).

Sport consumers may partake in events as a form of casual or serious leisure consumption activity. *Casual leisure* is described as an immediate, somewhat short-lived, and pleasurable activity that is intrinsically rewarding, and can be enjoyed with little or no special instruction or training (Stebbins, 1992). In contrast, *serious leisure* is, "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skill, knowledge and experience" (Stebbins,1993:3). Serious leisure differs from casual leisure in that serious leisure involves not only hedonic experiences (in the form of fun and pleasure) but may also have potential to create eudaimonic consumption experiences (as self-expressive activities) in which consumers derive meaning from the consumption experience (Stebbins, 1993:3).

Marathon running as a serious leisure activity has become increasingly popular (Qui *et al*., 2019). A *marathon* running event is defined as "a foot race that covers 42.195 kilometres (26 miles 385 yards) and is usually run as a road race" (World Athletics, 2021). A marathon event derived its name from a small village, namely Marathon, situated near the sea in the rural Athens area, about 26 miles (i.e., about 40 kilometres) from Athens. A famous Greek soldier, Philippides, ran the legendary 26-mile run from the scene of the battle in Marathon to Athens to announce the defeat of the invading Persians. He died shortly after completing his mission as a result of exhaustion, possibly due to the fact that he had run 150 miles from Sparta the previous day (World Athletics, 2021). To celebrate the achievements of Ancient Greece, the organisers of the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 created the marathon race to be just over 40 kilometres. Later the distance was extended to the imperial measurement of 26 miles at the 1908 Olympic Games in London. The official distance was extended by another 385 yards when the starting line was pulled back so that it could be seen by the children in the Royal Nursery at Windsor Castle, still finishing in front of Queen Alexandra at

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the White City Stadium in West London. In 1921, the marathon distance was standardised at 26 miles 386 yards (i.e., 42.195 kilometres) (World Athletics, 2021).

Articles 1 (refer to Chapter 2) and 2 (refer to Chapter 3) of this study focus on marathon running as a serious leisure consumption experience to explore dimensions of self-expressiveness and event brand love, respectively, from the sport consumer's perspective regarding their marathon event participation experiences. Article 3 considers both casual and serious leisure running event participants who participated in a VRE during the COVID-19 period.

4.2. Running events in a South African context

The African continent is comprised of many developing nations and it has been argued that sport tourism, particularly sport events, can make a significant contribution to economic development in Africa (Mckay, McEwan & Baker, 2019; Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2018). The significance of the tourism industry in South Africa which includes sport tourism, is evident in both the social and economic value it creates for consumers, continually improving the lives of millions of people, not only in South Africa, but also on the African continent and around the world (Mckay *et al*., 2019; Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2018). According to the World Travel & Tourism Council's (WTTC) Economic Impact Report (2022), it is predicted that the South African Travel and Tourism Sector (SATT) will play a vital role in the economic growth of South Africa over the next 10 years with an estimated average annual growth rate of 7.6%, which is far greater than the country's overall economic growth rate of 1.8%. There is also an expectation that by 2032, approximately 800,000 jobs could be created by the SATT sector (WTTC, 2022).

Running events on both a large and small scale should be encouraged to stimulate the economy (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2019; McKay *et al*., 2019). Smaller running events hold opportunities for establishing tighter social ties with the local community and larger scale events can attract thousands of people to a host destination (McKay *et al*., 2019). South Africa hosts a large variety of marathon events annually, with the event calendar showing a marathon almost every weekend across different provinces of the country (Runnersguide, 2020). South Africa is also host to several world-renowned marathon running events, including the Comrades, Two Oceans and Cape Town marathons. These events attract tens of thousands of runners, both locally and internationally, with positive economic impacts on the provinces of Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Western Cape respectively (Saayman & Saayman, 2012; Fairer-Wessels, 2013).

Today participation in sport events has become an important part of many people's lives and marathon running as a leisure activity has globally seen tremendous growth during the past decade (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Maditinos *et al*., 2021 Qiu *et al*., 2019). With health and physical activity becoming increasingly important, such growth is not surprising (McKay *et al*., 2019). The sport and events industry are one of the main areas of life that was severely impacted by the COVID-19 crisis (Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022). The current study thus explores running events within this crisis context with relevance to the South African sport event industry.

4.3. Phases of the COVID-19 crisis and impact on the sport events industry

A crisis is "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organisation's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" (Coombs, 2007:164). The sport event industry rapidly changed during COVID-19 (Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022) and is used as the crisis context in the current study. Given the unique circumstances of the crisis, the impact of COVID-19 related to running events is explored across various phases as the crisis unfolds.

Coronavirus is an infectious disease caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2 virus), commonly referred to as COVID-19 (World Health Organisation, 2020). COVID-19 was first reported as a pandemic in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. By 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). The rapid spread of the disease worldwide posed challenges to healthcare systems and resulted in many governments implementing emergent policies and strategies to reduce the spread of the virus (Gössling *et al*., 2021; Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021). International borders were closed, various phases of lockdown were implemented, and social distancing restrictions were imposed globally (Perold *et al*., 2020).

Major sporting events, including high-profile marathon running events, were postponed or cancelled for the first time in decades (Weed, 2020). Due to COVID-19 measures, organisations began to transform their traditional or 'live' events into virtual offerings as event alternatives and the sport event market experienced a rapid growth in VREs (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021). The significance of road running events in South Africa provides support for exploring the impact of COVID-19 during various phases in a South African context as the situation unfolds. The timeline and phases of COVID-19 explored in the study are graphically depicted in Figure 1.1 and referred to in the overall study.

Figure 1.1: Timeline and phases of COVID-19 related to running events

PHASE A	PHASE B	PHASE C	PHASE D	PHASE E	PHASE F	PHASE G
Prior to COVID-19 (01 January to 15 March 2020)	COVID-19 emergent in South Africa - all running events suspended for 30 days (16 to 27 March 2020)	Stringent lockdown in South Africa (no outdoor excercise permitted) (28 March to 30 April 2020)	Lockdown restrictions eased with limited outdoor excercise permitted and Comrades event cancelled (01 to 31 May 2020)	Increased offering of VREs as traditional event alternatives (outdoor excercise permitted within curfew times) (June 2020 - September 2020)	Traditonal running events in South Africa to resume under strict COVID-19 conditions (October 2021)	Offering of VREs & traditonal running events under COVID-19 conditions (November 2021)

Note: The COVID-19 related phases are relevant to the sport event industry in a South African context.

The three articles that comprise the overall study are investigated across the various COVID-19 related phases, shortly prior to and then during the real-life crisis as the situation unfolds. Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2) takes place during Phases A to D, shortly prior to COVID-19 and during the initial phases of the crisis with restricted event participation. Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3) takes place during Phases B to D, when all events were suspended and during various phases of lockdown. Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4) takes place during Phases E to G when sporting event alternatives, such as VREs, grew exponentially as runners were permitted to run outdoors again after stringent lockdown restrictions were eased and traditional running events were offered under strict COVID-19 protocols.

4.4. COVID-19 and the Comrades marathon as case study

On Sunday, 15 March 2020, the President of South Africa announced that a National State of Disaster was declared (ENSafrica, 2020). Consequently, all sporting events in South Africa were cancelled for a period of 30 days. At this point, with much uncertainty about the future of COVID-19, the Comrades Marathon Association (CMA) announced that they would communicate their decision to postpone or cancel the Comrades Marathon (hereafter referred to as Comrades). On 17 April 2020, the CMA announced that the event would be postponed, with the new date to be confirmed (Ray, 2020). On 14 May 2020, one month prior to event date, the CMA, together with Athletics South Africa (ASA), announced the decision to cancel. Although no refunds were given, South African athletes were compensated by receiving their Comrades 2020 runners' T-shirt (branded by the apparel partner), goodie bag, and Comrades runners' 2020 badge, whereas international entrants were given the opportunity to defer their entries to the next Comrades event.

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Upon announcement of cancellation, Mr Aleck Skhosana, president of ASA, stated that cancelling what would have been the 95th edition was a long and arduous decision. He explained that it would have been premature to rush into an outright cancellation sooner considering the event's rich history, powerful nation-building attributes, contribution to society and immense economic impact (Laelowerveld, 2020). It was, however, the best decision to cancel the event to ensure the health and safety of all involved (Laelowerveld, 2020). On 18 May 2020, the CMA announced that they would be hosting their inaugural virtual race, namely, 'Race the Comrades Legends' on 14 June 2020. This was the same day that the traditional event was to take place. Entries were free to all South Africans who entered and qualified for the 2020 event. Online Comrades brand communities engaged with each other on social media platforms, such as Facebook, to openly express their opinions regarding the event postponement, cancellation and compensation offered to event entrants (Prado-Gascó, Moreno, Sanz, Núñez-Pomar & Hervás, 2017; Thorpe, 2017). Valuable insights could be gained by 'listening' to these online conversations as a form of feedback regarding participants' responses to the CMA's CRS.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK GUIDING THE STUDY

This section provides the theoretical framework that guides the overall study. The theoretical underpinning that supports the constructs investigated in the study related to emotional and behavioural outcomes, both prior to and during phases of COVID-19, are discussed. Following this discussion, a graphical summary of the overall outline of the study is provided (refer to Figure 1.2).

5.1. Defining SWB and happiness in sport consumption

Marketing scholars have begun to reflect on the significance of contributing to overall societal well-being, which ultimately benefits the well-being of consumers (Garner *et al*., 2022; Theodorakis *et al*., 2015; Varey, 2013). The term well-being refers to "optimal psychological experience and functioning" (Deci & Ryan, 2008:1). When individuals evaluate for themselves the degree to which they experience a sense of wellness from engaging in certain activities, this is referred to as SWB (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Diener, 1984). There is still much debate as to the exact meaning of the term SWB in consumer behaviour studies. Although an incomplete list, Table 1.1 provides a list of models that illustrates the wide range of terminology and conceptual confusion in well-being research (Goodman, Disabato, Kashdan, & Kauffman, 2018).

Table 1.1: List of SWB models conceptualised over time

SWB models	Description
Hedonic model Bradburn (1969)	The hedonic balance model suggests that well-being is maximised by a high ratio of positive to negative affect.
Tripartite model of SWB Diener (1984)	Diener's tripartite model of SWB model adds to Bradburn's (1969) emotional focus by including a cognitive component based on the degree to which one's life is viewed as satisfactory or close to ideal.
Model of psychological well-being (PWB) Ryff (1989)	Ryff's model of psychological well-being (PWB) postulates six dimensions that are drawn from the philosophical traditions of ancient Greeks and psychological theories from humanistic, existential, and developmental traditions. PWB captures six components that are proposed to generate positive functioning, namely, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, autonomy, purpose in life, and personal growth.
Combination model (Diener & Ryff's SWB dimensions) Keyes (1998)	Offering additional breadth, Keyes (1998) combined Diener's SWB dimensions with Ryff's PWB dimensions. Keyes (1998) proposed a third distinct type of well-being, namely, social well-being. This was, however, not widely accepted given that one of the PWB dimensions is about the depth of one's social relationships.
Three types of well-being (similar to Diener & Ryff) Compton (2001)	Compton (2001) identified three types of well-being, identifying them as SWB, personal growth, and religiosity; using terminology similar to Diener (1984) and Ryff (1989) but with different connotations.
Flourish model Seligman (2011)	Seligman (2011) developed his own model, which he labelled 'Flourish', and identified five components of well-being, namely, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (often referred to as the PERMA model). Seligman (2011) prosed that each of the five components are intrinsically rewarding, representing worthwhile ends for doing anything and that together, the combination of these five indicators of well-being give rise to human flourishing.

Taken from: Goodman *et al*. (2018).

The debate on SWB could perhaps be best explained by Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern and Seligman (2011:97) who stated that "just as we do not have a single indicator telling us how our car is performing (instead, we have an odometer, a speedometer, a gas gauge, etc.), we suggest that we do not want just one indicator of how well people are doing". This may be the reason why the term SWB has been applied in various ways in sport studies (Lee & Hwang, 2018; Sirgy *et al*., 2016).

In a serious leisure sport context, the concept of SWB has been explored to indicate individuals' affective and cognitive evaluations of the overall quality of their lives (Diener, 2000; Lee & Hwang, 2018). Sato, Jordan and Funk (2015) studied the concept of SWB among distance runners to determine the potential of long-distance running events to promote event participants' life satisfaction. Lundberg and Andersson (2022) investigate event experiences among sport event participants where the concept of SWB is viewed as maximising one's

feelings of happiness. When assessing the concept of SWB in this way, the term SWB is used interchangeably with the term *happiness* and thus maximising one's well-being, refers to maximising one's feelings of happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The focus of the current study is to explore happiness from running event participation and thus the concept of SWB is adopted from the approach taken by Lundberg and Andersson (2022).

It is acknowledged that SWB is complex and comprises far more than only happiness, nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, SWB is described as an individual's own evaluation of the degree to which they experience a sense of wellness in terms of "optimal psychological experience and functioning" from engaging in certain activities, also referred to as happiness (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2008:1; Diener, 1984). Maximising one's well-being in the current study thus refers to maximising one's feelings of happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

According to Aristotle, happiness is the only thing that people want for its own sake, making it the highest of all achievable things (Garner *et al*., 2022; Veenhoven, 2015). Positive psychology indicates that for many individuals, their goal in life is simply to achieve happiness (Kaufman, 2018; Veenhoven, 2015). Marketing is essentially about satisfying consumers' wants and needs (Kotler, 2011; Lefebvre, 2013). It is thus important that marketers consider the types of happiness consumers desire through consumption experiences (Garner *et al*., 2022).

Types of happiness

Positive psychology literature distinguishes between two types of happiness that consumers can derive from a consumption experience, namely, hedonic (short-term, pleasure-based) and eudaimonic (long-term, meaning-based) (Gaston-Breton *et al*., 2020). With hedonic consumption, consumers seek instant gratification from consumption (Diener & Seligman, 2004) whereas eudaimonia is associated with personal meaning and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Su *et al*., 2020). Although many activities may be hedonically enjoyable, not all activities lead to eudaimonia (Waterman, 2005). Eudaimonia is defined as a "subjective state that arises when individuals are engaged in activities to further their best potentials, with the nature of those activities differing from person to person" (Waterman, 2007:291).

Sporting events, such as endurance events, provide opportunities for individuals to achieve their potentials and based on Maslow's need theory of human motivation, self-actualisation is at the highest level (Maslow, 1968). There is evidence that participation in activities that are

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predominantly intense and challenging, such as endurance sport events, leads to higher levels of eudaimonia (Su *et al*., 2020). Marathon running has become increasingly popular as consumers are no longer satisfied with the short-term excitement of casual leisure, but increasingly seek deeper physical and mental experiences (Qiu *et al*., 2019). Thus, the current study explores marathon running events from a eudaimonistic perspective.

5.2. Eudaimonistic identity theory

The usefulness of applying a eudaimonistic perspective to marketing research to obtain insights into consumer choices based on the types of happiness consumers seek today, is increasingly evident (Stebbins, 2016; Sirgy & Uysal 2016; Little, Salmela-Aro & Phillips, 2017; Mugel, Gurviez & Decrop, 2019; Su *et al*., 2020). Despite the existence of many other well-being theories, such as self-determination theory, the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, the theory of human flourishing, meaning and purpose in life theory, theory of positive mental health and need hierarchy theory (Sirgy & Uysal, 2016), eudaimonistic identity theory is the theoretical underpinning used to guide the exploration of SWB in the context of the current study. Eudaimonistic identity theory is most appropriate considering the self-expressive perspective of the current study, as well as the limited exploration of eudaimonic well-being in SCB literature (White & Yu, 2019). According to eudaimonistic identity theory, engaging in self-defining activities that induce self-expressiveness, is likely to increase SWB (Sirgy *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 1990, 1993; Waterman *et al*., 2008). Research that explores dimensions of self-expressiveness, as a precursor to SWB, related to a sport event consumption experience is scant and thus one of the key focus areas of the current study.

5.2.1. Dimensions of self-expressiveness

According to identity theory, the 'self' is defined as the "the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies" (Stryker & Burke, 2000:284), whereas the self-concept refers to an individual's beliefs about the self (Sirgy, 1982, 1985). When consumers purchase products or engage in consumption experiences that reflect their self-concept (i.e., who they are or would like to be), this allows them to express themselves (Morgan & Townsend, 2022; Waterman, 1990, 1993). In the context of this study, self-expressiveness refers to the extent to which sport consumers think that participating in sporting events, such as marathon running events, is an important part of their self-concept (Sirgy *et al*., 2016).

Eudaimonistic identity theory posits that a sense of meaning is fostered when the individual can express their true self (Waterman *et al*., 2008). From a sport leisure context, four dimensions related to participation in leisure activities enhance the likelihood of self-

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expression, including, self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and perceived importance of the activity to the leisure consumer (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Brown, 2007; Waterman, 2011). If sport consumers experience dimensions of self-expressiveness and increased SWB through participation in marathon running events as meaning consumption experiences that express the self-concept, they are likely to tell others of their experiences, particularly via eWOM (Aro *et al*., 2018; Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Prado-Gascó *et al*., 2017; Thorpe, 2017).

5.2.2. Self-expressiveness and restricted event participation

Negative emotions are likely to arise in situations where individuals cannot lead 'normal lives', for instance with the adoption of lockdown measures and event cancellations during the initial phases of COVID-19 (Cho *et al*., 2021; Smith & Lazarus, 1990). This study proposes that the potential loss of opportunities for self-expressiveness through restricted running event participation, may have resulted in reduced SWB. Consumers often cope with negative emotions by engaging in alternative (or compensatory) consumption behaviours to enhance SWB (Cho *et al*., 2021; Koles *et al*., 2018).

Compensatory consumption is "the focus upon, deliberation about, acquisition and use of products in response to a deficit triggered by perceived needs and desires that cannot be fulfilled directly" (Koles *et al*., 2018:97). Compensatory consumption can occur in different ways to generate positive emotions. Negative emotions trigger social media use and is often used as a coping mechanism during crisis situations to seek social support, improve stress-induced negative emotions, and to evoke problem solving (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). There is evidence that stress triggers social media use in general, but even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). It is thus appropriate to explore potential reduced SWB from restricted event participation via social media (eWOM) communications.

Self-expressiveness is often suggested to be a significant precursor of brand love (An *et al*., 2019; Aro *et al*., 2018) where brand love refers to the strong positive feelings individuals hold toward certain brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Brand love literature shows that positive eWOM is a common behavioural outcome of brand love (Bairrada, Coelho & Coelho, 2018; Bae, Lee, Suh & Suh, 2017; Wong, Lai & Tao, 2020). Brand love is also relevant during a brand crisis considering the proposed enduring effects of brand love (Ali *et al*., 2021; Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012; Kang *et al*., 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2020).

The current study thus also explores dimensions of event brand love in eWOM and sport consumers' responses to an event organisation's CRS during the pandemic. The exploration of event brand love in the current study is guided by the brand love prototype.

5.3. The brand love prototype as theoretical underpinning

Research shows that love is a psychological process that can occur not only for people, but also ideas, activities and objects (Ahuvia, Batra & Bagozzi, 2009). In this regard, brands are also often loved (Batra *et al*., 2012). Brand love refers to the strong the positive feelings individuals hold toward certain brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). As a marketing concept, brand love is defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular brand" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006:81). Brand love is relevant in marketing today considering several desirable organisational outcomes often associated with such, particularly, positive word-of-mouth proposed as an enduring effect of brand love (Dalman *et al*., 2019; Wallace *et al*., 2014). The current study explores the potential of event brands to be 'loved' brands and dimensions of brand love that may be relevant for an event organisation.

Brand love can be viewed as an emotion, which is short-term and episodic, or a relationship that can last for decades (Batra *et al*., 2012; Kennedy & Guzman, 2020). This study takes the latter view considering the nature of endurance sporting events (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017; Voigt, Howat & Brown, 2010). Although brand love theory, such as Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1986) that focuses on interpersonal love has been extensively applied in consumer research (Palusuk, Koles & Hasan, 2019), brand love is different to 'human' love. Hence, brand love is most often studied as a prototype which consists of a list of attributes that consumers typically associate with a specific concept, for example, passion-driven behaviours, positive attitude valence and long-term relationships (Fehr & Russell, 1991; Bairrada *et al*., 2018). The brand-love prototype is used as the theoretical underpinning to explore dimensions of event brand love in this study.

5.3.1. Dimensions of event brand love

The dimensions of brand love in the current study are drawn from the brand love prototype and include two common antecedents of brand love, four general outcomes and given the crisis context of the study, two crisis-specific outcomes are included. The antecedents of brand love include self-brand expressiveness (An *et al*., 2019; Aro *et al*., 2018) and brand trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016; Matzler, Grabner-Kräuter & Bidmon, 2008). Four general outcomes are memorable experiences (or nostalgia) (Aro *et al*., 2018; Cho, Ramshaw & Norman, 2014; Ramshaw & Gammon, 2020), interest in the well-being of the brand (Aro *et al*., 2018), repeat purchases (Aro *et al*., 2018) and explicit declarations of

love for the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). For the crisis-specific outcomes, literature shows that when consumers love their brands, they will often experience anticipated separation anxiety should the brand cease to exist (Batra *et al*., 2012). Consumers will also often defend the brand in a crisis (Dalman *et al*., 2019). Hence, anticipated separation anxiety and brand defence are considered as the crisis-related outcomes. All these dimensions of brand love are explored in eWOM of running event participants of a high-profile marathon brand.

5.3.2. The relevance of brand love during a crisis

Brand love is relevant in a crisis context, and it has even been suggested that brand love has the potential to negate the negative impact of a brand crisis (Ali *et al*., 2021; Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012; Kang *et al*., 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2020). There are, however, inconsistencies in brand love literature regarding the enduring effects of brand love (Kang *et al*., 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2020). An organisation's CRS refers to what an organisation does and communicates after a crisis has hit (Coombs, 2007). Negative eWOM related to an organisation's CRS intensifies the impact of a brand crisis on consumers' perceptions of the brand and its reputation (Khan & Sukhotu, 2020). Positive eWOM, however, is proposed as an overarching enduring effect of brand love (Dalman *et al*., 2019; Wallace *et al*., 2014). The current study thus explores positive eWOM as a potential behavioural outcome of brand love during the crisis in relation to an event organisation's CRS during unfavourable circumstances. In this way, this study explores whether the proposed enduring effects of event brand love may have been sustainable during a real-life crisis via authentic eWOM communications.

5.4. Social media communication (eWOM) and the crisis context

Social media refers to a group of Internet-based applications that allows consumers to create and share content by interacting with one another (de Vries *et al*., 2017). Advanced technologies today enable sport consumers to share their sport consumption experiences rapidly and inexpensively via online platforms (Prado-Gascó *et al*., 2017; Thorpe, 2017). Electronically delivered statements (which can be positive or negative) about a product, service, or brand made by potential, actual, or former customers (Kim & Johnson, 2016; Hennig-Thurau *et al*., 2004) are referred to as eWOM communications and can take place via social media platforms. An online brand community consists of a group of individuals with common interest in a brand or activity, who communicate with each other electronically (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).

Although the precise meaning of the terms may differ, the term user-generated content (UGC) is often used interchangeably with eWOM when UGC is brand-related (Kim & Johnson, 2016;

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Smith, Fischer & Yongjian, 2012). As a more trusted source within a consumer's personal network, eWOM is relevant for organisations as it greatly influences consumers' decision-making and consequently product sales (Basuroy, Chatterjee & Ravid, 2003; Godes & Mayzlin, 2009). As previously noted, when consumers engage in self-expressiveness through consumption activities, they are likely to communicate their experiences via social media (Aro *et al.*, 2018; Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Prado-Gascó *et al.*, 2017; Thorpe, 2017). Also, consumers who love their brands are likely to share their positive attitudes towards the brand via positive eWOM (Aro *et al.*, 2018; Batra *et al.*, 2012). This study proposes that self-expressiveness and brand love through marathon event consumption experiences are likely to be communicated within online brand communities as an authentic behavioural outcome of such experiences.

The early stages of the pandemic brought about a rapid rise in social media communication as many turned to these platforms to keep themselves informed and to connect with others in unique circumstances (Hutchinson, 2020; Wolfers & Utz, 2022). This further supports the relevance of exploring emotional and behavioural outcomes among active sport event consumers that may have resulted from restricted event participation, potential event cancellations and organisational responses during the crisis period. Furthermore, positive eWOM is a proposed overall enduring effect of brand love and is most suitable to explore via authentic eWOM (Dalman *et al.*, 2019; Wallace *et al.*, 2014).

The prolonged circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic radically changed the sport event market (Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022) and the lack of research on virtual sporting event alternatives was prompted during this time (Hacker, Vom Brocke, Handali, Otto & Schneider, 2020; Westmattelmann, Grotenhermen, Sprenger & Schewe, 2021). It was not known to what extent virtual event alternatives could impact event participants' SWB in a virtual context as well as future intentions to partake in these events. The focus of the study then shifted to exploring virtual event experiences in the light of the pandemic and going forward.

5.5. VREs as alternative consumption experiences and future intentions

Despite the importance of staying physically active to enhance physical and mental health (Jiménez-Pavón, Carbonell-Baeza & Lavie, 2020; Simpson & Katsanis, 2020), engaging in 'normal' exercise activities with others (as one of the unique characteristics of sport consumer experiences) (Funk, 2017; Shilbury *et al.*, 2014) rapidly increased the risk of spreading infections during the pandemic (McCloskey, Zumla, Ippolito, Blumberg, Arbon, Cicero, Endericks, Lim & Borodina, 2020). With most sports events cancelled, organisations searched for alternative solutions and the inability to stage physical events suddenly pushed events

online (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Richards, 2022; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022). The pandemic brought about a rapid rise in VRE offerings (Helsen *et al*., 2021). Due to their marginal significance prior to COVID-19, virtual running events have not been explored extensively in scientific research (Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022).

A virtual event is described as a web-based event that involves people interacting in virtual environments rather than in physical places (Gottlieb & Bianchi, 2017). The concept of virtual events, however, is broad and can be applied in various ways dependant on whether they make use of mobile applications (Helsen *et al*., 2021). The current study explores VREs as those that make use of mobile applications where participants register online, complete the event, and upload their finishing results afterwards (Helsen *et al*., 2021). In this sense, it is the event participant who needs to create their own experience and the physical consumption experience is not entirely within the organisation's control.

Although perceived virtual event experiences have in general been found to be lower than traditional event experiences, together with reduced levels of satisfaction and intentions to return, when compared with experience of traditional events, the prolonged crisis forced many people to change their habits and partake in these events as alternative event offerings (Richards, 2022). Although virtual events cannot replace a traditional 'live' event experience, the pandemic may have created a 'window of opportunity' for incorporating innovative technology and offering hybrid event experiences (for sport and various other types of events) in future (Hacker *et al*., 2020; Richards, 2022; Tyre & Orlikowski, 1994). It has also been suggested that the growth in platforms supporting digital events during the pandemic may have significantly enhanced the offering of hybrid event formats in future (Richards, 2022) and it is "very likely that virtual and physical PSEs will be offered alongside one another in the near future" (Helsen *et al*., 2021:17).

It is relevant to identify what factors may predict intentions to partake in VREs beyond COVID-19 (Maditinos *et al*., 2021). The current study considers the elements of SWB as the type of happiness (i.e., hedonia or eudaimonia) derived from virtual event experiences, as well as perceived risks of COVID-19 that may impact future intentions to partake in VREs (as a potential behavioural outcome). Based on the SX design framework (Funk, 2017), it is not only factors that relate to the sport user that influence a sport experience but also the sport context (in this case virtual sport context) that may aid in achieving organisational objectives. Therefore, virtual event attributes that are within the organisation's control, such as price and other tangible aspects are considered. It is not known whether there may be different market

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segments, based on these SX factors, with future intentions to partake in VREs. This is also investigated in the current study.

Based on the above discussion, the current study explores across various phases related to the real-life COVID-19 crisis and from a sport consumer's perspective, the extent to which dimensions of self-expressiveness and event brand love may feature in eWOM, potential reduced SWB from restricted event participation and sport consumers' responses to such, potential enduring effects of brand love considering an event organisation's CRS, and SX factors that may predict future VRE participation intentions as well as potential market segments with VRE participation intentions.

Figure 1.2 provides an overall summary of the study and outlines the three articles that comprise the study, the phases related to COVID-19 during which each article took place, the dimensions/factors explored, and potential emotional and behavioural outcomes investigated in the overall study.

Figure 1.2: Framework to guide investigation based on SCB and COVID-19 phases

Article (Chapter)	* Phases of COVID-19	SCB topics investigated	Emotional outcome	Behavioural outcomes
Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2)	Prior to COVID-19 (Phase A)	Main themes in eWOM	SWB (eudaimonia as type of happiness)	eWOM
	During COVID-19 (Phase B, C & D)	Dimensions of self-expressiveness	Event brand sentiments	
Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3)	During COVID-19 (Phase B, C & D)	Dimensions of brand love	Enduring effects of brand love	eWOM
		Event organisation's CRS	SWB (hedonia/ eudaimonia) & perceived risk (sport user)	
Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4)	During COVID-19 (Phase E & F)	**SX factors relating to VRE participation	Potential reduced SWB (event restrictions)	Future intentions (VRE participation)
		Market segments based on **SX factors	Emotions related to past VRE participation experiences for different consumer segments	

*Refer to Figure 1.1; **SX factors include factors that relate to the sport user and (virtual) sport context

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6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for a research project highlights different options available to a researcher, specifically in terms of sampling, data collection and data analysis techniques (Bryman & Bell, 2014). The researcher needs to assess the most appropriate options available within the context of the study as the general approach in conducting the research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). This study took place across three phases (presented as Articles 1, 2 and 3) and the methodologies are presented for each of the respective phases. Each of the three articles explored different gaps in SCB research with consideration of the crisis context during phases of COVID-19. The research paradigm and design, target populations, sampling plans, methods of data collection, measures and methods of analysis are provided in the sections that follow. Ethical issues in the research are also addressed.

6.1. Research paradigm and design

The research philosophy or epistemology considers what should be regarded as acceptable knowledge in a specific discipline (Bryman & Bell, 2014). It is argued that social and behavioural studies, such as the current study, will benefit most from research that applies a combination of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms (Weed, 2011). Such a combination can be found within the paradigm of pragmatism (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

Pragmatism ascribes to the philosophy that the research question should drive the methodology and that it is best served by integrating methods within a single study, including both qualitative and quantitative techniques, to gain a more thorough understanding of a phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Pragmatism enables a researcher to use qualitative research to inform the quantitative portion of a study (and vice versa) and to combine the "macro and micro levels" of a research issue (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Weed (2011) highlights the increasing use of combining a diverse set of methods and techniques to be most useful within the sport research field. **A pragmatic paradigm** was thus deemed appropriate for the overall study and to explore the topic under investigation.

The research design is a framework or blueprint for conducting the marketing research project (Malhotra & Birks, 2007:64). It specifies the methods and procedures for collecting, processing, and analysing data to answer the research question (Bryman & Bell, 2014; Malhotra, 2010). The research design provides evidence for the authenticity, trustworthiness, reliability, replication, and validity based on the research question or main purpose of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Research designs can be exploratory, descriptive, or casual (Malhotra, 2010). The overall study applied an **exploratory** and **descriptive** research design.

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Exploratory research is appropriate when more information is required about a problem, opportunity, or phenomenon (Wiid & Diggines, 2013). In this study more information was required about the research problem as well as the extended gaps given the novel crisis and unprecedented circumstances surrounding the context of the study. The overall study was also descriptive in nature as the aim of the overall study was not to explain or confirm any of the relationships (Malhotra, 2010).

In marketing research experimental, cross-sectional, longitudinal, case study and comparative designs are often applied (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Cross-sectional studies represent a snapshot of the variable concerned at a given point in time where the sample of elements are representative of the target population (Wiid & Diggines, 2013). For this study, all three articles (refer to Chapters 2, 3 and 4) were **cross-sectional** as data was collected from running event participants at a single point in time during phases related to COVID-19. All variables were observed without influencing them (Wiid & Diggines, 2013). Data used in cross-sectional studies can be either qualitative or quantitative depending on the research question (Bryman & Bell, 2014). A **mixed methods** methodological approach (that captures both qualitative and quantitative data) was applied in the overall study.

Qualitative research concerns "exploring issues, understanding underlying reasons and motivations" (Wiid & Diggines, 2013:59). Articles 1 and 2 (refer to Chapters 2 and 3) employed a qualitative approach as there was a need for a more in-depth understanding of the gaps identified in SCB literature and relatively little was known about the phenomenon investigated within the crisis context (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam & Tisdall, 2015; Pizzo, Baker, Jones & Funk, 2021). With quantitative research, the aim is to determine the relationship between an independent and dependent variable in a population utilising statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques (Wiid & Diggines, 2013:59). Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4) applied a quantitative approach to explore factors (independent variables) influencing VRE participation intentions (dependent variable) and to determine whether there are sport consumer segments that are likely to partake in VREs in future.

From a theoretical perspective, theory can either guide the research project (deductive approach) or theory can be the outcome of the research (inductive approach) (Bryman & Bell, 2014). For the overall study, a **hybrid** approach was employed by combining both an inductive and deductive approach in the different phases of the study. Specifically, Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2) applied a thematic analysis by first employing an inductive (bottom-up) approach to identify general themes in eWOM. A theoretical framework guided by eudaimonistic identity theory was then applied from a more deductive (top-down) approach to explore the extent to

which dimensions of self-expressiveness featured within the main themes across the phases of COVID-19. Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3) began with a deductive (top-down) approach applying a directed content analysis based on a brand-love prototype. An inductive (bottom-up) approach was then used to further explore the general themes in eWOM related to the organisation's CRS. Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4) was deductive in that theories were applied that related to the first two articles to be tested quantitatively in a virtual context.

Table 1.2 summarises the methodological approach that was applied for each of the articles that form part of this thesis. The target population and sampling plans, data collection, measurement, and analysis techniques, are considered thereafter. This section concludes with ethical considerations.

Table 1.2: Summary of research methods applied in each article

Article in thesis	Research method	Units/ methods of analysis	Target population	*Timeline
Article 1 (Refer to Chapter 2)	Qualitative Netnography	Text-based statements (Thematic analysis)	Marathon running event participants (serious leisure)	Phases A to D (1 January to 3 May 2020)
Article 2 (Refer to Chapter 3)	Qualitative Netnography	Text-based statements (Content analysis)	Marathon running event participants (serious leisure)	Phases B, C & D (16 March to 31 May 2020)
Article 3 (Refer to Chapter 4)	Quantitative Online survey, self-administered questionnaire	Responses relating to SX factors from questionnaire (CHAID analysis)	VRE participants (casual and serious leisure participants)	Phases E & F (15 September to 31 October 2021)

*Refer to Figure 1.1

6.2. Target populations and sampling plans

In the overall study, two different target population groups of runners, as active sport event participants, were considered. A sample is a subset or some part of a larger population that is selected to participate in a research project (Malhotra, 2010). A sample was drawn from the target groups as it would have been impossible to collect information from all individuals in either population group (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). Budget and time constraints also contributed to the inability to collect data from all members for both population groups (Zikmund & Babin, 2010). The characteristics of the sample were used to make inferences about the target population (Malhotra, 2010; Zikmund & Babin, 2010). When samples are properly selected, they give results that are reasonably accurate (Zikmund & Babin, 2010) and if the elements of a population are relatively similar, then only a small sample is necessary to accurately portray the characteristic of interest (Zikmund & Babin, 2010).

A sampling frame represents the elements of a target population and consists of specifications, such as a list of elements that identify the target population (Zikmund & Babin, 2010). In this study, no sampling frame was available and there was no probability that a single case had an equal chance of being selected from an entire population across all three articles (Cooper & Schindler, 2011:384). A **non-probability** sampling technique was thus utilised for all three articles in this thesis as described below.

6.2.1. Articles 1 and 2

For Articles 1 and 2 (refer to Chapters 2 and 3) members from an online Facebook community of marathon runners, as serious leisure participants, formed the target population. Marathon events hosted in South Africa require participants to be a minimum of 20 years of age (Athletics South Africa, 2015). Therefore, respondents in this group were above the 18-year-old requirement in terms of conducting ethical research. **Purposive sampling** was employed and data was collected from a single online community (Kozinets, 2015; Xun & Reynolds, 2010). The 'Comrades Marathon 2020 Down Run' Facebook community group was selected as this was a temporary group for anyone with intentions to partake in the 2020 Comrades event. At the time of study, just over 23 000 members belonged to this online community. A single-case study was deemed suitable to provide insights into these sport consumers' emotional and behavioural responses during a real-life crisis as the situation unfolded (Creswell, 2013). The Comrades Marathon, hosted annually in South Africa, was used as case study considering that this is one of the world's largest ultramarathon events that was affected by the crisis (CMA, 2020).

6.2.2. Article 3

For Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4), individuals over the age of 18 years, who had previously participated in a VRE as serious or casual leisure event participants during COVID-19, were included in the target population. A **convenience** sampling technique was used as this technique is most useful to reach a large target sample (Isaac, 2020). A sample size of 1017 useable responses were realised to identify what SX factors, that relate to the sport user and virtual sport context, may predict future intentions to partake in VREs and to categorise market segments based on these SX factors.

6.3. Data collection and measurements

As indicated in Table 1.1 above, a variety of research methods were applied in this study. The measurement instruments that were used for the analysis in the three articles that form part

of this study thus differ. The measurement efforts per article, as they appear in the study, are described below.

6.3.1. Qualitative data (Articles 1 and 2)

For Articles 1 and 2 (refer to Chapters 2 and 3), netnography was applied as a qualitative research methodology for online research (Kozinets, 1997). Netnography was originally developed in response to consumers' increasing use of the Internet (Kozinets, 1997) and in today's environment netnography is more relevant than ever before (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Rokka, 2010). Netnography, based on an ethnographic research approach, is an established research technique that has been developed to study and understand consumption-related aspects of consumers' lives online (Kozinets, 2002, 2006; Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2014; Mehta, Sarvaiya & Chandani, 2022).

Although some researchers regard netnography to be synonymous with other online techniques (such as digital ethnography, online ethnography, virtual ethnography and cyber-ethnography) (Grincheva, 2014), the more established view is that netnography is a distinct research method, which has its own set of methodological guidelines (Caliandro, 2014; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). According to Kozinets (2010), when studying an online community, a 'pure' netnography is complete within itself and does not require additional off-line ethnographic research. With netnography, a 'significant' amount of data collection "originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet" (Kozinets, 2015:79).

Netnography has many advantages over traditional ethnography. Netnography is faster, more affordable, more naturalistic, it can be unobtrusive, and it allows continuing access to informants in a particular online situation (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Kozinets, 2015). Importantly, netnography provides researchers with insights into emotions and naturally occurring behaviours (Kozinets, 2015). The Internet is also often used as a tool for recommendations or warnings for other consumers (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Furthermore, respondents' potential shyness or social anxiety is minimised compared with traditional ethnographic approaches (Wu & Pearce, 2014). Despite these advantages, netnography is not without its limitations. Some of the main concerns relate to the authenticity and quality of the data material (Xun & Reynolds, 2010). Also, netnographic findings cannot be generalised to consumer groups outside of the online platforms or communities studied (Kozinets, 2002). A further issue is the continuing debate regarding ethical issues (Rokka, 2010). These limitations were, however, addressed in the research design for the current study.

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Mehta *et al*. (2022) pointed out that a netnographic approach was a most suitable fit to receive natural responses from online communities regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to social distancing restrictions. This further supports the netnographic approach in the current study to explore active sport consumers' emotional and behavioural responses to restricted traditional event participation. Facebook was selected with a large user base of approximately 1.82 billion daily active users (Facebook, 2020). Previous research confirms the usefulness of gathering consumer data from Facebook posts for marketing purposes as deeper insights can be gathered from consumer-created content (Grewal, Hulland, Kopalle, & Karahanna, 2020; Mehta *et al*., 2022).

To address the objectives of the study and to answer the research questions in Articles 1 and 2, data was collected from social media posts of an online Comrades running community during phases related to COVID-19. Only text-based posts were gathered, and no demographical or personal information was recorded to ensure respondent anonymity. The data collection was unobtrusive, and data was 'extant' (i.e., created independently without any interventions by the authors) (Mehta *et al*., 2022).

All text-based posts and comments to these posts were recorded verbatim for a period of five months. The five-month period allowed for insights to be obtained in the period shortly prior to COVID-19, and then during the initial phases of COVID-19 as the crisis was unfolding (refer to Phases A to D, Figure 1.1). The text-based content was initially 'copied and pasted' into a Word document. A process of **raw peeling and data debris cleaning** was used to compile the dataset, on which the analyses were conducted (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Comments to posts were only included where these provided insight into the research questions. Comments that only contained words, for example, "yes", "no", "agree" or "disagree", were excluded. The researcher manually examined all the text-based posts and eliminated those which were not relevant to the research questions under study (e.g., posts related to general lockdown comments, COVID-19 and sport-related news articles, safety-related aspects regarding crime in South Africa and any celebrity news). Also, any additional information captured that could identify the respondents was removed. The text-based content was split into one- or two-sentence long units and recorded as such in an Excel spreadsheet.

For Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2), the text-based content resulted in 2677 text-based units for analysis. The text-based units were first captured together in a single spreadsheet. The text-based content was then also divided into separate Excel data sheets according to the phase during which the posts were collected (refer to Phases A to D, Figure 1.1). For Article 2, only the text-based posts during the initial phases of COVID-19 (refer to Phases B to D, Figure 1.1)

were considered within the crisis context and resulted in 2454 text-based units for analysis (refer to Chapter 3 for further details).

With qualitative research, various *themes* are identified, analysed, organised, described, and reported upon within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000:362) define a *theme* as "an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole". Themes are identified by "bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone" (Nowell *et al*., 2017). A theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, rather it captures whether something is important in relation to the overall research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once identified, themes are seen as noteworthy concepts that link substantial portions of the data together (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000; Nowell *et al*., 2017). A theme may be initially generated inductively from the raw data or generated deductively from theory and prior research (Boyatzis, 1998).

Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2) applied an automated *thematic analysis* by means of an inductive text-analytics tool (Leximancer, Version 5.0) to identify main themes in eWOM of marathon runners prior to and during three initial phases of COVID-19. A deductive thematic analysis was then applied to explore dimensions of self-expressiveness from the main themes in eWOM prior to and during the COVID-19 phases.

For Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3) a directed *content analysis* was utilised to identify themes related to dimensions of brand love in eWOM during the crisis period. The coding instrument comprised a code sheet and a code book (refer to Appendix A) that was used to code and analyse dimensions related to event brand love in eWOM among marathon runners. An inductive analysis was used to determine runners' responses to the event organisation's CRS from main themes in eWOM related to the CRS. To determine the enduring effects of event brand love, all statements were then classified into positive, negative and neutral eWOM.

6.3.2. Quantitative data (Article 3)

For Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4), data was collected by means of an online survey hosted on the Qualtrics platform. Links to the survey were posted on social media pages of running-related organisations after permission was obtained (refer to Appendix F for an example of a permission letter). This method was suitable given the virtual context of the study and considering that members of these online communities already have a vested interest in the activity of running. Data collection took place between 15 September and 31 October 2021

(Phases E and F, refer to Figure 1.1) and a final sample of 1017 useable responses were obtained.

The self-administered structured questionnaire mostly made use of established instruments that were drawn and adapted from the existing literature review. As there were no existing scales for some of the variables explored due to the specific crisis context, some of the scales were self-developed. Table 1.3 below summarises the measurement scales that were utilised for the questionnaire regarding future VRE participation intentions. All scales were sliding scales from 1 to 100 as this allows detection of subtle differences in response patterns (Imbault, Shore & Kuperman, 2018). Factors related to the *sport user* and (virtual) *sport event* context were investigated based on an adapted SX framework developed by Funk (2017). Sport market segments with intentions to partake in VREs in future were then categorised based on these SX factors.

Table 1.3: Measurement scales for questionnaire

Variables	Items	Measurement scale	Reference
SPORT USER			
Self-expressiveness	8 items	Sliding scale from 1 to 100 where 1= 'strongly disagree' to 100= 'strongly agree'.	Adapted from Sirgy *et al*. (2016); Waterman (1990).
Hedonia	9 items	Sliding scale from 1 to 100 where 1= 'strongly disagree' to 100= 'strongly agree'.	Adapted from Babin, Darden & Griffin (1994).
Perceived risks of COVID-19	11 items	Sliding scale from 1 to 100 where 1= 'strongly disagree' to 100= 'strongly agree'.	Adapted from Matiza & Kruger (2021).
SPORT CONTEXT (VIRTUAL)			
*Event novelty	Single item	Sliding scale with 1= 'not at all important'; 100= 'extremely important'	Adapted from Skavronskaya, Scott, Moyle & Kralj (2019).
*Event brand prestige	2 items	Sliding scale with 1= 'not at all important'; 100= 'extremely important'	Adapted from Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar & Sen, (2012).
*Cause-related event participation	Single item	Sliding scale with 1= 'not at all important'; 100= 'extremely important'	Adapted from Filo & Coghlan (2016).
*Event memorabilia	3 items	Sliding scale with 1= 'not at all important'; 100= 'extremely important'	List of memorabilia offered in traditional running events.
Perceived price	3 items	Sliding scale with 1= 'strongly disagree'; to 100= 'strongly agree'.	Adapted from Zhong & Moon (2020).
VRE preferences	8 items	Sliding scale with 1= 'definitely not a reason' to 100= 'definitely a reason'.	Statements formulated by the researcher based on a review of literature (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022).
Future intentions	3 items	Sliding scale of 1= 'extremely unlikely' to 100= 'extremely likely')	Adapted from Sharmaa & Klein (2020).

*Event Attributes (Event attributes comprised event novelty, brand prestige, cause-related participation, and event memorabilia)

Self-administered questionnaire design

Prior to completing the online questionnaire, respondents were provided with the purpose of the study and estimated duration to complete the questionnaire. Participants were also assured of their confidentiality and the anonymity of their responses. Upon providing consent, respondents were directed to the start of the questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised six sections (refer to Appendix B):

1. Section A comprised two screening questions that asked participants to indicate firstly, whether they were 18-years or older and, secondly, whether they had participated in a VRE during the COVID-19 crisis period.

2. Section B consisted of questions that asked respondents about their general running-related behaviours to be able to explore the respondent profile (e.g., participated in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19, participate in events mostly as a runner or walker, frequency of running per week, most preferred event distance, and whether they were a member of a formal running club).

3. Section C related to questions regarding the sport user (based on the SX framework). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they experience SWB (i.e., hedonia or self-expressiveness) from participation in a VRE. Perceived risks of COVID-19 related to event participation (including traditional and virtual events) were also included here.

4. Section D comprised questions related to the (virtual) sport context (based on the SX framework). Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of certain event attributes in VRE participation. They were also asked to indicate price perceptions and preferences to partake in VREs considering the benefits related to virtual events (e.g., convenience, cost, choice to run with friends or alone, and fears of spreading or contracting COVID-19 from traditional event participation).

5. Section E requested respondents to indicate their future intentions to partake in traditional running events together with VREs in future.

6. Section F asked respondents to indicate their age and gender.

Pilot study

A pilot study or pre-test is a test of the design of the data-gathering instrument developed for the research (Quinlan, Babin, Carr, Griffin & Zikmund, 2015:279). A pilot study was carried out using a small number of respondents similar to the actual respondents in the study (Quinlan *et al*., 2015:279). The pre-test was carried out to determine how participants would respond to the questionnaire to identify potential errors before the data collection commenced. The questionnaire was tested for meaning, question sequence, continuity, flow, length, and time it took to complete the survey (Cooper & Schindler, 2011:359). After being reviewed by

three experts in the field, a few adjustments were made to the questionnaire (regarding the sequence, flow and timing). Thereafter, a link was posted on social media platforms of two formal running clubs. After 40 completed surveys were received, the link to the survey was closed and the responses were reviewed by the researcher. One minor adjustment was made to ensure a better 'flow'. The link to the survey was then opened again and another 20 surveys were reviewed. It was not necessary to make any further changes and the link to the survey was then posted on other running-related organisations' social media platforms to expand the reach (Cooper & Schindler, 2011:85). The number of responses included in the pilot study was suitable, as according to Cooper and Schindler (2011:85), a pilot group may range from 25 to 100 subjects.

6.4. Data analysis

The data analysis approach for each of the three articles are described in this section. This study employed two of the most common analysis methods applied in netnographic research, namely, *thematic analysis* and *content analysis* (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2) analysed the data by means of a thematic analysis, and Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3) applied a content analysis.

As noted earlier, for qualitative research, themes can be generated following an inductive or deductive approach that informs how the themes are theorized (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al*., 2017). With an inductive analysis, the process of coding does not try to fit the data into pre-existing coding frames or the researcher's analytic preconceptions and is thus data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al*., 2017). With a deductive analysis, the analysis is driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytical interest. Although a deductive approach may provide a more detailed analysis of some aspects of the data, it tends to produce a less rich description of the overall data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis involves the coding and categorising of a data set for emerging patterns and themes (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). To yield meaningful and useful results when applying a qualitative methodology, it is important that the study is conducted in a rigorous and methodical manner (Nowell *et al*., 2017). Nowell *et al*. (2017) explain that while each qualitative research approach has specific techniques for conducting, documenting, and evaluating data analysis, it is the individual researcher's responsibility to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. A rigorous thematic analysis can produce trustworthy and insightful findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness, Nowell *et al*. (2017) highlight several ways in which researchers can create trustworthiness through the various phases of thematic analysis. These include: 1)

familiarising yourself with your data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) debriefing and naming themes; and 6) producing the report. The way in which these criteria were addressed to ensure rigour and trustworthiness in the current study is described next.

6.4.1. Article 1 (Qualitative thematic analysis)

Being a member of the online community, the researcher was familiar with the data and nature of conversation. Nevertheless, being a member of the population does present concerns (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). These challenges were overcome by means of an automated text analytics tool for the initial analysis and secondly, through verification by means of inter-coder reliability. First, a text analytics tool (Leximancer Version 5.0) was used to identify main themes. The analysis was automated and data-driven to reduce researcher error. Meaningful insights could not be gathered from all the concepts that were automatically generated and the researcher then delved deeper into the data to obtain a more meaningful interpretation of the findings. The main themes were revised by the researcher and their existence was verified by four experts in the field.

Based on the revised themes, a deductive approach was then utilised to identify to what extent dimensions of self-expressiveness featured within the main themes. A second round of inter-coder reliability confirmed the existence of the self-expressive dimensions as generated from the literature review. A detailed report of how the data was analysed for Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2) to address aspects of rigour and trustworthiness is provided in the thesis.

6.4.2. Article 2 (Qualitative content analysis)

As a member of the online community the researcher had a prolonged engagement with the data. The concerns addressed in this regard were overcome by means of a directed content analysis (generated by the literature review), as well as inter-coder reliability by calculating Krippendorf's Alpha (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Directed content analysis was employed to analyse the data by means of a deductive approach. Existing theory was used to create theoretically derived codes and to determine how and when these applied to the text (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Filo & Coghlan, 2016; Mayring, 2000). In a content analysis, reproducibility is the most effective measure to determine reliability (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). To evaluate inter-coder reliability, Krippendorff's alpha was used as it is suitable for multiple coders and dichotomous nominal data (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; Neuendorf, 2002). The final coding team consisted of four experts covering the field of sport, marketing and tourism who analysed the data guided by a codebook and coding sheet (refer to Appendix A). A sample of 120

statements (approximately 15% of the total sample) were randomly selected according to the pre-determined codes and was acceptable to represent the items under study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

An inductive analysis, where codes were generated using a bottom-up approach, was used to analyse statements relevant to the organisation's CRS (Filo & Coghlan, 2016). The main topics and data extracts were reviewed by the leading researchers for overlap and homogeneity (Filo & Coghlan, 2016). The researchers met to review the main topics and confirmed the frequency counts in each category until in agreement.

All statements from the directed and inductive analysis were then classified according to positive, negative and neutral eWOM categories. This was done mainly to determine the overall percentage of positive and negative statements following a previous study that measured eWOM based on positive and negative messages (Eliashberg & Shugan 1997). The four research experts reviewed and confirmed the frequencies of all the statements classified into categories or positive, negative or neutral statements.

6.4.3. Article 3 (Descriptive and inferential quantitative data analysis)

The data from the self-administered questionnaire was analysed using SPSS (version 28), a statistical software suite developed by IBM for data management (Pallant, 2016). First, **descriptive statistics** were used to describe the sample and results of each question.

Validity refers to the "degree to which the measure of a concept reflects that concept" (Bryman & Bell, 2014:379,382). An **Exploratory Factor Analysis** (EFA) was performed to determine the dimensionality of the scales developed for the questionnaire and establish convergent validity. Methods applied were Principal Axis Factoring and Oblique rotation (Promax and Kaiser Normalization) (Kline, 2011; Costello & Osborne, 2005). Firstly, to determine data suitability, Bartlett's test of sphericity (significant at 0.05 or smaller) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (exceeding 0.6) was applied (Pallant, 2016). Factors with Eigenvalues exceeding 1 and factor loadings above 0.40 were retained (Nusair & Hua, 2010).

Reliability refers to the "degree to which a measure of a concept is stable" (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2014:619). Reliability of the newly formed factors was assessed through Cronbach's alpha test (above 0.6 regarded as acceptable) (Kline, 2011) as well as Composite Reliability (CR) (with CR values above 0.7 being excellent). Discriminant validity of the newly formed factors was assessed through the Average Variance Explained (AVE) which compares

the amount of variance captured by a construct to the amount due to measurement error (levels above 0.5 are considered acceptable, while those above 0.7 are considered excellent) (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2019).

Chi-Squared Automatic Interaction Detector (CHAID) is an exploratory statistical method introduced by Kass (1980) that has benefits over other more commonly used statistical techniques considering that it is nonparametric and nonlinear and can overcome drawbacks of regression analysis that mostly uses intra-group variability (Önder & Uyar, 2017). Factors resulting from the factor analysis were used to perform a CHAID analysis to determine whether distinct market segments exist based on those factors. Future intentions to partake in VREs were included as the dependent variable, and the independent variables were based on factors related to the sport user and virtual sport context. The Decision-Tree programme of SPSS (version 28) was used to produce a decision-tree model (refer to Chapter 4).

6.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are essential when conducting marketing research. Researchers should not exploit the public under the pretence of marketing research (Zikmund & Babin, 2010).

6.5.1. Articles 1 and 2

For articles 1 and 2 (refer to Chapters 2 and 3) approval to conduct the research was obtained from the institutional Ethics Committee (protocol number EMS034/20) (refer to Appendix C). Consent was also obtained from the administrators of the Facebook Group before data collection commenced. Where direct quotes were used, respondents were contacted individually via the online platform (refer to Appendix E for an example of consent via Facebook Messenger) (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When analysing data from Internet-mediated research, such as social media platforms, the issue of ethics and analysing people's personal information is acknowledged (Saunders *et al*., 2016). No personal or demographical information was included in the data collection process as the aim of Articles 1 and 2 was merely to analyse themes in eWOM to provide insights into emotional and behavioural responses of the target population shortly prior to, and during phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation.

6.5.2. Article 3

Approval was again obtained from the Ethics Committee (EMS163/21) (refer to Appendix D). Respondents were provided with a background to the study and requested to indicate their

consent to voluntarily participate (refer to Appendix B for the questionnaire). Respondents were informed of their right to anonymity, confidentiality, and that they could opt out at any point without any negative consequences.

7. STUDY CONTRIBUTION

This research study aims to make theoretical, practical, and methodological contributions to the field of SCB. The impact of COVID-19 on running event participation and event restrictions make an important contribution to understanding consumer behaviour within a unique crisis context. The main contributions this study sets out to address are outlined below.

7.1. Theoretical contribution

This study sets out to contribute to the dearth in literature that explores running events from a eudaimonistic lens. Eudaimonistic identity theory has scarcely been applied in a sport marketing context that explores dimensions of self-expressiveness from running event participation as a precursor to SWB (refer to Article 1, Chapter 2).

No previous studies have specifically explored dimensions of self-expressiveness from participation in running events via authentic eWOM. The current study explores four specific dimensions of self-expressiveness, namely, self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and perceived importance of participation in a marathon running event. This study will shed light on the extent to which event participants communicate self-expressive dimensions related to sport event participation via eWOM, which can be most beneficial for sport marketers (refer to Article 1, Chapter 2).

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst to expand research on SCB and this study responds to the call to further explore sporting events within the crisis context (Cho *et al*., 2021; Shipway & Miles, 2020). This study is one of the first to explore self-expressive dimensions related to sport event participation shortly prior to, and then during three initial phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation. This study also contributes to SCB research by exploring emotional and behavioural responses related to restricted event participation and will provide insights in this regard. Furthermore, this study will shed light on the role that social media plays both in 'normal' circumstances and as a proposed coping tool during a crisis (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). Thus, it contributes to SCB literature within a crisis context (refer to Article 1, Chapter 2).

The study addresses another gap in sport marketing literature by exploring the potential of sport event brands to become 'loved' brands. In this study brand love is explored from the sport consumer perspective through self-expressiveness from the sport event participation experience, which may lead to love for the event brand (refer to Article 2, Chapter 3).

Crisis management literature frequently utilises fictitious scenarios of crisis situations (Vafeiadis *et al*., 2019). A unique contribution of this study is that brand love is explored during an actual period of a real-life sustained global crisis and captures authentic consumer responses during this time as the crisis unfolds. Brand love can play an important role within a crisis context (Zhang *et al*., 2020), however, there are inconsistent findings regarding the proposed enduring effects of brand love (Vafeiadis *et al*., 2019). Hence, the current study contributes to sport marketing literature by exploring these inconsistencies during a real-life crisis (Vafeiadis *et al*., 2019) (refer to Article 2, Chapter 3).

Although some aspects related to VREs have been considered prior to COVID-19, the increased offering of VREs during the pandemic has expedited the need for increased research on virtual events (Raimondi *et al*., 2021; Richards, 2022; Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021; Wreford, Williams & Ferdinand, 2019). The findings of the current study will contribute to an underexplored area of VRE experience research. Most studies that investigate virtual event experiences focus on events that make use of technological applications (Helsen *et al*., 2021) whereas the current study explores VRE experiences without the use of such applications. The current study contributes to the body of knowledge on VRE participation experiences where essentially it is the sport consumer who creates their own experience. In this case, the event experience cannot be directly controlled by the organisation, such as with a live event, conference, or concert where everything happens within a certain timeslot with everybody attending at the same time (refer to Article 3, Chapter 4).

The current study also contributes to knowledge on virtual sport event participation by exploring various SX factors that relate to the sport user and sport context, based on an adapted virtual SX framework that has not previously been explored in 'virtual event' literature (refer to Article 3, Chapter 4).

Finally, past research studies have proposed that VREs should be offered alongside traditional events in future (Raimondi *et al*., 2021; Wreford *et al*., 2019). However, no research has specifically considered who these participants are and what consumer segments are most likely to partake in VREs in future. This study will identify whether distinct segments exist with intentions to partake in VREs.

7.2. Practical contributions

Marathon running has become increasingly popular as a form of serious leisure (Qiu *et al*., 2019). Self-expressive consumption experiences induce emotional and behavioural outcomes which are beneficial to marketers and relevant to a global sporting industry (Kümpel & Unkel, 2017). The findings of the current study will indicate whether marathon runners engage in running events as self-expressive (meaningful) consumption experiences. This is significant for marketers as studies have shown that meaningful consumption experiences may impact future intentions to engage in repeat participation (Zhang, Wu & Buhalis, 2018). Individuals who have positive attitudes towards the event brand may be more willing (have higher intentions) to engage in repeat participation (Aro *et al*., 2018).

The current study also contributes to sport marketing research by examining whether self-expressiveness from event consumption experiences may lead to strong positive emotions towards the event brand in the form of event brand love often argued to be a key contributor in developing a competitive advantage for sport marketers (Bae *et al*., 2017; Bairrada *et al*., 2018). The findings of the study will further indicate the extent to which self-expressive consumption activities may result in positive eWOM communication as an authentic behavioural outcome.

Destination brand love research shows that when consumers feel that they can still experience something new from visiting the same destination in the future, they would want to visit again (Aro *et al*., 2018). The same may hold true within the context of marathon running events in that no one marathon event will generate the exact same experience as another. Sport consumption experiences are unique as the outcome of sport events are not always predictable and there are usually other participants who form part of the experience (Funk, 2017; Shilbury *et al*., 2014).

This study also has implications in terms of addressing gaps in SCB during a unique crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted practically every sporting event world-wide (Maditinos *et al*., 2021) and the current study contributes to SCB within this crisis context. The findings of the current study will shed light on various emotions experienced as a result of restricted event participation as well as behavioural responses to such. The findings will provide insights for sport marketers should similar crisis situations occur in future.

VREs became increasingly viable during the pandemic and are projected to be a legitimate future segment of the sport event industry (Raimondi *et al*., 2021). It is thus significant to explore factors that may predict future VRE participation intentions, as well as gain an

understanding on which market segments would be most viable for sport marketing practitioners to consider when designing events in future. The findings of the current study will shed light on specific sport marketing segments that marketers should consider when designing virtual running events in future, whether as an event alternative or as a hybrid addition to the traditional event experience.

7.3. Methodological contributions

With reference to Articles 1 (refer to Chapter 2) and 2 (refer to Chapter 3), dimensions of self-expressiveness and brand love are most explored via quantitative research methods (e.g., Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016). Rarely have these dimensions been explored qualitatively via authentic eWOM as a proposed behavioural outcome (Bairrada *et al*., 2018; Bae *et al*., 2017; Wong *et al*., 2020). This study contributes to sport marketing literature by applying a netnographic approach to analyse the data which has been generated by the consumer with limited interference from the researcher (Kozinets, 2002; Rageh, Melewar & Woodside, 2013; Thanh & Kirova, 2018). The netnographic data could be analysed both inductively and deductively to provide additional insights into SCB related to the dimensions explored in the current study (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al*., 2017). The novel approach of exploring the dimensions across various phases related to the pandemic may also reveal the identification of trends and changes in consumer behaviour as the situation unfolds.

A further significant contribution of the overall study is that a CHAID analysis (as a decision-tree technique) will be applied to identify potential market segments with intentions to partake in VREs (refer to Article 3, Chapter 4). A CHAID analysis is an established method used to identify market segments that has rarely been applied in SCB studies (Doyle, Kunkel & Funk, 2013; Valek, Lesjak, Bednarik, Gorjanc & Axelsson, 2015). A CHAID analysis is more sophisticated than other market segmentation techniques (e.g., a cluster analysis) and it will provide more detailed groupings with hierarchical rankings (Doyle *et al*., 2013). In this regard, additional insights into the differences that may exist between the segmented groups will be obtained (Doyle *et al*., 2013). The current study thus contributes to CHAID analysis methods literature within a unique sport marketing context.

8. CHAPTER OUTLINE

This study is divided into five chapters. This section provides an overview of each chapter.

8.1. Chapter 1: Contextualisation of the study

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the entire study. This chapter highlights the context and rationale for undertaking the research, along with the study aims and objectives. A brief overview of running events and the crisis context of the study is presented. The phases of COVID-19 as investigated in the current study are graphically depicted. A literature review is provided as background to the current gaps in SCB theory as well as additional gaps resulting from the crisis as the situation unfolds. A visual summary of the theoretical framework that guides the study and theoretical underpinnings that support the study are considered. Lastly, this chapter outlines the research methodology, along with the theoretical, practical, and methodological contributions.

8.2. Chapter 2: Running through the phases of COVID-19: a self-expressive perspective on restricted event participation (Article 1)

Chapter 2 presents Article 1 which, based on eudaimonistic identity theory, explores marathon running events from a self-expressive sport consumer perspective and marathon runners' responses to restricted event participation during three initial phases related to COVID-19. The SWB effects from marathon event participation prior to, and during the crisis are also considered with potential marketing outcomes. One of the largest international marathon events, the Comrades ultramarathon event, hosted annually in South Africa, is used as context. Netnography is employed to explore authentic eWOM communication among marathon event participants over a five-month period (i.e., shortly prior to, and during the COVID-19 phases). Thematic analysis is applied by means of an automated text analysis tool to generate main themes in eWOM from general text-based statements. Dimensions of self-expressiveness, namely, perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and perceived importance of participation, are then identified from the main themes in each phase to show how SWB may have been impacted from restricted event participation and eWOM as a behavioural outcome relevant to marketers.

8.3. Chapter 3: Exploring the enduring effects of event brand love amidst the COVID-19 crisis: A social listening study (Article 2)

Chapter 3 presents Article 2 which, based on brand love theory, explores the extent to which event brand love is affected during a prolonged crisis. Dimensions of event brand love are

explored in eWOM to determine whether known desirable outcomes of brand love can be sustainable during a real-life crisis. Event participants' responses to an event organisation's CRS are also considered. The Comrades marathon is used as case study. A netnographic approach is employed to collect data over a 10-week period from an online Comrades Facebook community and content analysis (deductive and inductive) is utilised for data analysis.

8.4. Chapter 4: Who will (virtually) participate? Exploring market segments and future intentions to partake in virtual running events (Article 3)

Article 3, presented in Chapter 4, investigates factors based on a (virtual) SX framework developed by Funk (2017) that may predict future intentions to partake in VREs. These SX factors relate to the sport user (i.e., sport consumer) and virtual sport event context. The study further explores whether distinct market segments may exist with future VRE intentions based on the SX factors. Related to the sport user, elements of SWB (i.e., hedonia and eudaimonia) and perceived risks of COVID-19 are considered. For the virtual sport event context, event attributes, perceived price and VRE preferences are considered. A self-administered online survey is utilised with 1017 fully completed questionnaires to analyse the data by means of EFA, followed by a CHAID analysis, to determine whether distinct market segments may exist with future intentions to partake in VREs.

8.5. Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the study, the main findings, as well as practical and theoretical implications. A summary of the contributions of the study, its limitations, and directions for future research are also considered.

A summary of the overall study, together with the three articles that comprise the study, is presented in Table 1.4 as conclusion to Chapter 1. The three articles are investigated across various phases related to COVID-19, shortly prior to and then during the real-life crisis as the situation unfolds. As depicted in Figure 1.1 (refer to section 4.3), Article 1 takes place during Phases A to D, shortly prior to COVID-19 and during the initial phases of the crisis. Article 2 takes place during Phases B to D within the crisis and considers an event organisation's CRS during this time. Article 3 takes place during Phases E and F when sporting event alternatives, such as VREs, grew exponentially as runners were permitted to run outdoors again after initial stringent lockdown conditions.

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Table 1.4: Summary of overall study

	RUNNING EVENTS IN A CRISIS CONTEXT: A SPORT CONSUMER MARKETING PERSPECTIVE		
PRIMARY AIM	The primary aim of the overall study is to explore marketing aspects related to running events from a sport consumer's perspective across various phases related to the COVID-19 crisis.		
	ARTICLE 1	**ARTICLE 2**	**ARTICLE 3**
SECONDARY OBJECTIVES (TO ACHIEVE PRIMARY AIM)	**RO1:** To determine main themes in eWOM among marathon runners prior to and during three initial phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation **RO2:** To explore the extent to which dimensions of self-expressiveness feature in main themes in eWOM of marathon runners prior to and during three initial phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation	**RO3:** To explore dimensions of event brand love and marathon runners' responses to an event organisation's CRS in eWOM during a prolonged crisis **RO4:** To determine the extent to which positive eWOM, as an overall enduring effect of event brand love, is sustainable during the crisis	**RO5:** To explore what SX factors relate to the sport user and virtual sport context that may predict future intentions to partake in VREs **RO6:** To categorise sport users into market segments based on relevant SX factors and VRE participation intentions
CHAPTER IN THESIS	**Refer to Chapter 2**	**Refer to Chapter 3**	**Refer to Chapter 4**
TITLE	**Running through the phases of COVID-19: a self-expressive perspective on restricted event participation**	**Exploring the enduring effects of event brand love amidst the COVID-19 crisis: a social listening study**	**Who will (virtually) participate? Exploring market segments and future intentions to partake in virtual running events**
RESEARCH AIM	The aim of the study is to explore restricted marathon running event participation from a self-expressive sport consumer perspective prior to and during three initial phases of COVID-19.	The main research aim is to determine the extent to which potential event brand love is affected during a prolonged crisis. More specifically, the aim is to explore whether dimensions of event brand love feature in eWOM and whether the known desirable outcomes of brand love are sustainable during a real-life crisis considering an event organisation's crisis response strategy (CRS).	The main aim of the study is twofold: a) to identify factors that relate to a (virtual) SX framework that may predict future intentions to partake in VREs; and b) to explore whether distinct market segments may exist with the intention to participate in VREs, based on the SX factors.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS	• What are the main themes in eWOM among marathon runners prior to COVID-19? • What are the main themes in eWOM among marathon runners during three initial phases of COVID-19 regarding responses to restricted event participation? • To what extent do the four dimensions that relate to self-expressiveness feature in the main themes in eWOM among marathon runners prior to COVID-19? • To what extent do the four dimensions that relate to self-expressiveness feature in eWOM among marathon runners during three initial phases of COVID-19 regarding restricted event participation?	• To what extent do the known dimensions of brand love feature as themes in eWOM among an online community of marathon runners of a high-profile marathon event during a prolonged crisis? • What are the main themes in eWOM regarding the marathon event organisation's CRS? • To what extent do the main themes related to the brand love dimensions and the CRS reflect positive eWOM as an enduring effect of brand love during the crisis?	• What factors based on a (virtual) SX framework that relates to the sport user and sport context, may predict future intentions to partake in VREs? • Are there distinct market segments with intentions to partake in VREs based on the respective SX factors related to both the sport user and context?
METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED	• Qualitative research approach • Netnography • Thematic Analysis	• Qualitative research approach • Netnography • Content Analysis	• Quantitative research approach • Online, self-administered questionnaire (1017 useable responses) • EFA & CHAID analysis

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CHAPTER 2: ARTICLE 1

RUNNING THROUGH THE PHASES OF COVID-19: A SELF-EXPRESSIVE PERSPECTIVE ON RESTRICTED EVENT PARTICIPATION

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The aim of the study is to explore restricted marathon running event participation from a self-expressive sport consumer perspective prior to and during three initial phases of COVID-19.

Design/methodology/approach – Netnography was applied to collect data from text-based Facebook posts of an online community of marathon runners over a five-month period (i.e., shortly prior to, and then during three initial phases of COVID-19). Leximancer Version 5.0, an automated text analysis tool, was first used to generate main themes in eWOM from 2677 text-based statements. Dimensions related to self-expressiveness were then identified from the main themes in each phase. One of the largest international marathon events, the Comrades marathon hosted annually in South Africa, was used as context.

Findings – The main themes in eWOM prior to COVID-19 primarily relate to the self-concept and identification with the activity of running and marathon event participation. The achievement of running-related goals is prominent in eWOM. Marathon events have potential to enhance consumer subjective well-being (SWB), through dimensions related to self-expressiveness, namely, perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and perceived importance. Negative emotions of loss and distress from restricted event participation are evident from alternative consumption behaviours such as garden running, increased sharing of memories (nostalgia) and making plans to commemorate the event day. The findings confirm that social media is used to communicate self-expressive dimensions and used as a coping tool during crisis situations.

Originality/value – Marathon running events are explored as potential eudaimonic consumption experiences. The study is unique in that it explores dimensions of self-expressiveness, as a precursor to SWB, through authentic eWOM as a potential behavioural outcome of eudaimonia. Runners' responses to restricted event participation during the crisis are considered. Event managers could capitalise on the well-being effects of sporting events to ensure event sustainability, which also has significant societal benefits.

Keywords: *self-expressiveness, eudaimonia, restricted event participation, marathon running, COVID-19, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), social media, coping behaviours*

1. INTRODUCTION

The last decade has shown an increasing global interest in research promoting subjective well-being (SWB) among all citizens (Yang, Zhang & Wang, 2022). This subjective evaluation of one's sense of wellness refers to "optimal psychological experience and functioning" combining a "high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one's life" (Deci & Ryan, 2008:1). For the purposes of this study, the term SWB refers to 'happiness' following the approach by Lundberg and Andersson (2022) who use the terms SWB and happiness interchangeably. Maximising one's SWB is thus viewed as maximising one's feelings of happiness (Lundberg & Andersson, 2022).

Today consumers do not only seek happiness in the form of pleasure and fun from a hedonic perspective, but increasingly seek meaningful (or eudaimonic) consumption experiences which can be achieved through self-defining (or self-expressive) activities (Cai, Ma & Lee, 2020; Su, Tang & Nawijn, 2020). Activities that lead to a sense of actualising one's potentials, are known as self-expressive activities (Sirgy, Lee, Yu, Gurel-Atay, Tidwell & Ekici, 2016). Based on eudaimonistic identity theory, engaging in self-defining activities, that induce self-expressiveness, are likely to increase SWB (Sirgy *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 1990, 1993; Waterman, Schwartz & Conti, 2008). A review of literature shows the usefulness of applying a eudaimonistic perspective to marketing research (Stebbins, 2016; Sirgy & Uysal 2016; Little, Salmela-Aro & Phillips, 2017; Mugel, Gurviez & Decrop, 2019; Su *et al*., 2020).

Sport marketers have unique opportunities to enhance consumer SWB through the provision of meaningful sport consumption experiences (Mogilner, Aaker & Kamvar, 2011). White and Yu (2019) note that a eudaimonic perspective of well-being does not attract sufficient attention in sport consumer literature, despite its promise in related fields. Sport events prove to be a fruitful avenue for exploring links with consumer SWB considering the high levels of emotion stimulated through these events (Filep & Laing, 2019). The concept of eudaimonia has been explored in sport consumption activities such as team sports (Hallmann, Reuß, Sander & Bogner, 2021); adventure sports (Mackenzie, Hodge & Filep, 2021) and a variety of participatory sporting events, for example, road cycling, river swims and ski events (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020). The concept of eudaimonia has also been explored in a half-marathon and a cross-country running event (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020). Nonetheless, studies that focus on marathon running events from a self-expressive sport consumer perspective and within a marketing context, are limited.

Positive emotions are likely to arise from self-expression through consumption (Morgan & Townsend, 2022). Importantly, if these experiences are perceived to be meaningful, individuals are more likely to tell others of their experiences (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). The proliferation of new media and social media sharing have enabled sporting consumers to openly share their experiences about sporting events (Prado-Gascó, Moreno, Sanz, Núñez-Pomar & Hervás, 2017; Thorpe, 2017). Social media communication or electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is relevant to marketers as one of the most credible and influential types of consumer-generated brand communication (Karjaluoto, Munnukka & Kiuru, 2016). Exploring dimensions of self-expressiveness in consumption experiences is thus not only relevant for enhancing consumer SWB, but is also of particular interest to marketers given that self-expressiveness is one of the main motivators for consumers to create content on social media (de Vries, Peluso, Romani, Leeflang & Marcati, 2017; Prado-Gascó *et al.*, 2017).

In a sport context, four dimensions related to self-expressiveness have been identified, namely, perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and perceived importance of participation in the activity (Bosnjak, Brown, Lee, Yu & Sirgy, 2016; Brown, 2007; Waterman, 2011). Theoretically, if consumers experience self-expressive dimensions from a sports consumption experience, they are likely to communicate with others about these experience dimensions to express their self-concept (Styvén, Mariani & Strandberg, 2020).

Not all consumption experiences are equally suited to produce the same level of positive psychological outcomes (Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Stebbins, 1997a; Stebbins, 1997b). There is evidence that participation in serious leisure events, such as marathon running, where the activity is predominantly intense and challenging, leads to higher levels of eudaimonia (see Bosnjak *et al.*, 2016; Løvoll, 2019; Su *et al.*, 2020). Marathon running has become increasingly popular as a form of serious leisure (Qiu, Lin & Zhou, 2019). The dearth in literature that explores the concept of eudaimonia, with self-expressiveness as a precursor, poses a gap which warrants this investigation. The research gap widened when in March 2020, COVID-19 was identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a public health emergency (WHO, 2020). The rapid spread of the disease globally and social distancing restrictions imposed by governments, resulted in restricted sport event participation worldwide (Helsen, Derom, Corthouts, De Bosscher, Willem & Scheerder, 2021; Weed, 2020). The early stages of the pandemic also brought about a rapid rise in social media communication as many turned to these platforms to keep themselves informed and to connect with others in unique circumstances (Hutchinson, 2020; Wolfers & Utz, 2022).

Negative emotions are likely to arise in situations where individuals cannot lead 'normal lives', such as during COVID-19 when lockdown measures were imposed (Cho, Oh & Chiu, 2021). It is argued that active sport event consumers, such as marathon runners may have experienced negative emotions due to restricted event participation and potential reduced self-expression during this crisis period. When consumers experience negative emotions, they tend to revert to behaviours that distract them from those emotions (Clark & Isen, 1985). There is much evidence suggesting that negative emotions trigger social media use and is often used as a coping mechanism (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). It is not known whether and how the lost opportunities for self-expressiveness through sporting events may have translated into eWOM.

The aim of the study is to explore restricted marathon running event participation from a self-expressive sport consumer perspective prior to and during three initial phases of COVID-19.

To meet the main aim the following research questions are explored:

- What are the main themes in eWOM among marathon runners prior to COVID-19?
- What are the main themes in eWOM among marathon runners during three initial phases of COVID-19 regarding responses to restricted event participation?
- To what extent do the four dimensions that relate to self-expressiveness feature in the main themes in eWOM among marathon runners prior to COVID-19?
- To what extent do the four dimensions that relate to self-expressiveness feature in eWOM among marathon runners during three initial phases of COVID-19 regarding restricted event participation?

Although the concept of eudaimonia has been explored in endurance activities, this study seems to be the first to explore marathon running events guided by eudaimonistic identity theory, with self-expressiveness as a precursor to SWB. Furthermore, this study contributes to sport marketing and event literature as there is scant research that has explored dimensions of self-expressiveness in a sport event context via authentic eWOM communications of event participants.

The unprecedented COVID-19 crisis resulted in restricted event participation that may have resulted in various coping behaviours, including social media communications. Runners' coping behaviours during COVID-19 could be effectively explored through authentic consumer-created content by means of netnography during the crisis period (Mehta, Sarvaiya, & Chandani, 2022). Hence, a further contribution of this study is to build upon the knowledge on sport consumer behaviour by exploring dimensions of self-expressiveness during three

initial phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation and potential reduced SWB from the lack of opportunities to engage in 'normal' sport consumption behaviours.

Eudaimonic consumption experiences induce emotional and behavioural outcomes which are beneficial to marketers (Kümpel & Unkel, 2017:21) and can be a key contributor in developing a competitive advantage (Tsaur, Chiu & Wang, 2007). Some of the best experiences in different contexts have been linked to eudaimonia in the creation of meaningful consumption experiences (Knobloch, Robertson & Aitken, 2017). Exploring the effects of restricted sport event participation on dimensions of self-expressiveness is relevant to the million-dollar sporting industry not only to ensure the sustainability of sporting events for host destinations and sport marketing practitioners, but also for event participants to enhance SWB, which ultimately also aids in promoting overall health and well-being among all citizens (Cai *et al*., 2020; Filep & Laing, 2019; Knobloch *et al*., 2017; Uysal, Sirgy & Kim, 2020).

One of the world's oldest and largest marathon events, the Comrades Marathon (hereafter referred to as Comrades), is used as a serious leisure case study in this qualitative study. The pandemic in 2020 brought about the first ever cancellation of the Comrades since World War II, leading to great economic losses for South Africa as the host country (Mphahlele, 2021). The netnographic approach is justified as a useful method for exploring consumer responses to restricted participation as it allows deeper insights into 'lived' experiences during the crisis period (Kozinets, 2002; Mehta *et al*., 2022; Sthapit, 2018).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Engaging in self-defining activities, that induce self-expressiveness, is likely to increase SWB (Sirgy *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 1990, 1993; Waterman *et al*., 2008). Given the prevalent pursuits for serious leisure in recent decades (Qiu *et al*., 2019), this study focuses on self-expressiveness from a serious leisure perspective with a particular focus on marathon running events. The literature review begins with a description of the concept of eudaimonia and the role of SWB in marathon running events as a serious leisure activity. This is followed by defining self-expressiveness, and social media, whereafter the factors affecting the formation of self-expressiveness in a sport event context, namely, perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and perceived importance are discussed. A brief discussion is provided on COVID-19 and restricted event participation together with potential coping behaviours to deal with negative emotions that may have been caused by the inability to engage in running events as 'normal' consumption behaviours. The section ends off by introducing the Comrades Marathon as case study.

2.1. The concept of eudaimonia

There is still much debate as to the exact meaning of the term SWB in consumer behaviour studies. The term SWB has been applied in various ways, for example, an individual's evaluation of their overall quality of life (QOL), personal happiness and/or life satisfaction (Lee & Hwang, 2018; Sirgy *et al*., 2016). Although it is recognised that SWB is comprised of more than only personal happiness, this study adopts the approach by Lundberg and Andersson (2022) who use the term SWB interchangeably with the term personal happiness.

Personal happiness is comprised of two types of happiness which can be derived from a consumption experience, namely, hedonia and eudaimonia (Lundberg & Andersson, 2022). While hedonia is described as the pleasure aspect of well-being through pleasure attainment and pain avoidance, eudaimonia is concerned with personal meaning and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Su *et al*., 2020). Participation in sporting events, such as marathon running events, provides individuals with opportunities for self-actualisation (achievement of one's potentials) and based on Maslow's need theory of human motivation, self-actualisation is at the highest level (Maslow, 1968).

Efforts to live in accordance with the daimon and to realise one's potentialities give rise to a condition termed eudaimonia (Waterman, 1990). Self-realisation is a process of reducing the gap between the actual and the ideal self, which is achieved through opportunities of self-actualisation. Self-realisation is viewed as an important and fulfilling part of identity formation (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Løvoll, 2019; Voigt, 2017). According to eudaimonistic identity theory, individuals discover aspects of their daimon or "true self" through participation in self-defining activities, such as marathon running events, which provide meaning and direction in their personal lives (Waterman, 1993, 2011).

Past research posits that hedonic enjoyment correlates more strongly with self-determination theory (as a well-being theory) (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Deci & Ryan 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Self-determination theory specifies three basic psychological needs, namely, autonomy, relatedness and competence as minimum requirements for self-realisation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Although many activities may be hedonically enjoyable, not all activities lead to eudaimonia (Waterman, 2005). Eudaimonia is defined as a "subjective state that arises when individuals are engaged in activities to further their best potentials, with the nature of those activities differing from person to person" (Waterman, 2007:291). The theory underpinning this research study is eudaimonistic identity theory (Waterman, 1990, 1993), however, goal-setting

theory is also considered given the role that personal goals play in achieving self-actualisation (Locke & Latham, 2002; 2006).

Based on eudaimonistic identity theory, engaging in self-defining activities, that induce self-expressiveness, are likely to increase SWB (Sirgy *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 1990, 1993; Waterman *et al*., 2008). It is important to note that SWB in this regard, relates to eudaimonic happiness, as opposed to hedonic happiness, generated from the consumption experience (Lundberg & Andersson, 2022). Although hedonia is a precondition for eudaimonia, the reverse does not hold (Voigt, Howat & Brown, 2010; Waterman *et al*., 2008). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, hedonia is assumed from self-expressive activities and not investigated as a concept of its own.

2.2. Defining self-expressiveness through consumption and social media

Based on identity theory, Stryker and Burke (2000:284) describe the 'self' as being comprised of "the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies". An individual's self-concept refers to an individual's beliefs about the self and consists of self-image (actual or ideal) and social self-image (actual or ideal) (Sirgy, 1982, 1985). When consumers purchase products or engage in consumption experiences that reflect their self-concept (i.e., who they are), this allows them to express themselves (Morgan & Townsend, 2022; Waterman, 1990, 1993).

According to Morgan and Townsend (2022), self-expression through consumption is a basic human need. From this view, self-expression provides both utilitarian and hedonic benefits. Utilitarian benefits result from cognitively-driven self-expressions intended to fulfil the consumer's need to create and maintain a self-identity (Morgan & Townsend, 2022). Hedonic benefits which result from the mere act of self-expression, make the consumption experience more fun and pleasurable (Morgan & Townsend, 2022). Furthermore, this study posits that, based on eudaimonistic identity theory, when consumers engage in self-expressive activities, this is likely to enhance SWB (eudaimonia) from the consumption experience (Sirgy *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 1990, 1993; Waterman *et al*., 2008). In the context of this study, self-expressiveness refers to the extent to which sport consumers think that participating in sporting events, such as marathon running events, is an important part of their self-concept (Sirgy *et al*., 2016).

When consumption experiences are perceived to be meaningful, individuals are more likely to tell others of their experiences (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Social media has enabled sporting consumers to effortlessly share their experiences, such as marathon event experiences, to

express their self-concept (Prado-Gascó *et al*., 2017; Thorpe, 2017). Social media refers to a group of Internet-based applications that allows users (or consumers) to create and share content by interacting with one another (de Vries *et al*., 2017). This online consumer-generated communication (or eWOM) refers to electronically delivered statements (positive or negative) about a product, service, brand or experience made by potential, actual, or former consumers (Kim & Johnson, 2016; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Social media communication is relevant to marketers as one of the most credible and influential types of consumer brand communications (Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016). There is also evidence that posting content on social media about consumption experiences that are relevant to the 'self' (posting for self-expression) contributes to consumer happiness (Duan & Dholakia, 2017).

2.3. Marathon running events as a serious leisure activity and SWB

From a sport consumer behaviour perspective, SWB is an individual's evaluation of the extent to which the sport participant experiences happiness from the sport consumption experience (Frey, 2008). Sport events prove to be a fruitful avenue for exploring links with consumer SWB considering the high levels of emotion stimulated through these events (Filep & Laing, 2019). A marathon running event is a foot race that covers 42.195 kilometres (26 miles 385 yards) and is usually run as a road race (World Athletics, 2021). There is evidence that participation in activities that are predominantly intense and challenging, such as running in a marathon event, leads to higher levels of eudaimonia (Su *et al*., 2020). Marathon running has become increasingly popular as consumers are no longer satisfied with the short-term excitement of casual leisure, but increasingly seek deeper physical and mental experiences (Qiu *et al*., 2019).

Casual leisure is described as an immediate, somewhat short-lived, and pleasurable activity that is intrinsically rewarding, and can be enjoyed with little or no special instruction or training (Stebbins, 1992). In contrast, serious leisure is "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skill, knowledge and experience" (Stebbins, 1993:3). Marathon running events have the potential to offer durable benefits such as self-expressiveness, which is likely to lead to a more 'long-term' type of happiness from the consumption experience (Qiu *et al*., 2019). Casual leisure is mostly described as hedonic (i.e., pleasurable and short-lived experiences), whereas serious leisure is more eudaimonic (i.e., requires effort, training and skills enhancing fulfilment and identity-building with more long-lived experiences) (Løvoll, 2019; Voigt, 2017). Leisure activities associated with personal meaning and growth, are increasingly being pursued as consumption experiences (Su *et al*., 2020).

As noted above, based on eudaimonistic identity theory, engaging in self-defining activities that induce self-expressiveness, are likely to increase SWB (Sirgy *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 1990, 1993; Waterman *et al*., 2008). This study explores marathon running events as self-defining activities that may lead to self-expressiveness. Activities that lead to a sense of actualising one's potentials, are known as self-expressive activities (Sirgy *et al*., 2016).

2.4. Dimensions of self-expressiveness in a sport context

Eudaimonic identity theory posits that a sense of meaning is fostered when the individual can express their true self (Waterman *et al*., 2008). From a sport leisure context, four dimensions increase the likelihood of self-expression through event participation, including self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and perceived importance (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Brown, 2007; Waterman, 2011).

2.4.1. Perceived self-realisation potential

Self-realisation is a process of reducing the gap between the actual self and the ideal self, (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2008). The terms, "self", "sense of self" and "identity" can be used interchangeably as synonyms for how a person subjectively perceives who he or she is (Belk, 1988). Consumers use consumption experiences to build their self-concept, reinforce and express their self-identity, and differentiate themselves from others (Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Kleine, Kleine & Allen, 1995). When individuals perceive participation in an activity to have potential for self-realisation, such an activity contributes to self-expressiveness (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 1990, 1993; Waterman *et al*., 2008). Marathon running events provide participants with opportunities for self-realisation, of which achievement of personal goals is a key component (Sirgy *et al*., 2016).

According to goal setting theory, self-realisation involves a conscious process of setting performance levels to achieve specific outcomes (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006). The source of motivation will thus be the desire to reach a specific goal (as set for marathon running), which may lead to perceived self-realisation. Three goal types are identified based on the individual's level of control: a) process goals are the actions or behavioural strategy to be performed that are within the individual's control; b) performance goals are the individual's personal standards to be achieved that are mostly controllable; and lastly 3) outcome goals that are not fully within the individual's control (Locke & Latham, 2002). Achieving athletic goals is positively associated with re-participation (Hyun & Jordan, 2020), making it essential for event organisers to understand this aspect of sport participation.

2.4.2. Perceived effort

When an activity highly correlates with having to invest more effort into achieving important goals, there is an increase in self-expressiveness from participation in that activity (Bosnjak *et al.*, 2016; Waterman, 2011). Past research shows that increased personal effort (i.e., spending more time, energy, and money to improve skills to achieve important goals) can enhance an individual's serious leisure identity (Heo, Ryu, Yang & Kim, 2018; Qiu *et al.*, 2019). There is a direct relationship between goal difficulty, level of performance and the effort that will be exerted (Locke & Latham, 2002). Commitment is also key to achieving goals (Locke & Latham, 2006). Serious leisure participants, such as marathon runners, typically persevere in their efforts to achieve goals which are important to them despite experiencing adversity (Voigt *et al.*, 2010). Partaking in marathon running would require hours of training, knowledge and mastering of skills to successfully achieve important goals (Voigt *et al.*, 2010). Purchasing sporting apparel for marathon running event participation, is also included as effort for the purposes of this study (after Heo *et al.*, 2018; Qiu *et al.*, 2019).

2.4.3. Perceived challenge

Self-expressiveness is evident among leisure participants who perceive the activity as involving some form of difficultly or challenge (Bosnjak *et al.*, 2016; Waterman, 2011). Perceived challenge is one of the top motivators for participation in marathon running events (Hyun & Jordan, 2020). It is important to note, however, that the activity should be perceived as being moderately difficult or carry the desired perceived level of difficulty rather than perceived as unattainable (Bosnjak *et al.* 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Waterman, 1993). By investing effort in training and mastering skills, goals become more realistic (Bosnjak *et al.*, 2016) and this is key to effectively generate motivation (Locke & Latham, 2006).

2.4.4. Perceived importance of activity

Perceived importance of participating in an activity has been suggested as a significant predictor of self-expressiveness (Bosnjak *et al.*, 2016; Brown, 2007; Waterman, 2011). Serious leisure participants partake in activities that are interesting and fulfilling enough to find a leisure career therein (Stebbins, 1993). This career path in a chosen pursuit is shaped by the stages of increasing involvement and achievement (Voigt *et al.*, 2010). Individuals commit to goals they regard as important and will be motivated to continue their efforts to achieve desired goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). High levels of psychological involvement ensure engagement of the individual not only with the activity, but also the service provider or organisation along the consumption journey (Behnam, Sato & Baker, 2021).

The above four dimensions underlie self-expressiveness in a serious leisure context. The question remains - to what extent are these dimensions experienced during a period of restricted event participation?

2.5. COVID-19 and restricted sport event participation

The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to a global population's physical and psychological well-being when in March 2020, it was identified by the WHO (2020) as a public health emergency. In attempts to curb the rapid spread of the virus, social distancing restrictions were imposed by governments across the globe (Perold, Hattingh & Bruwer, 2020). This included restrictions on outdoor exercising as well as restricted event participation (Helsen, *et al.*, 2021; Weed, 2020). Few studies have yet examined the potential reduced SWB that may have been experienced due to restricted event participation and/or potential event cancellations, such as running events (Cho *et al.*, 2021).

According to Smith and Lazarus (1990), negative emotions are particularly likely to arise in response to a situation in which goals are not satisfied. It is argued that active sport event consumers, such as marathon runners who are regular participants in running events, may have experienced negative emotions from restricted event participation during COVID-19. When consumers experience negative emotions, they tend to engage in behaviours that distract them from those emotions or attempt to eliminate the source of the negative emotions (Clark & Isen, 1985). One strategy for coping with negative emotions is compensatory consumption (Cho *et al.*, 2021; Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018). Compensatory consumption has been described as "the focus upon, deliberation about, acquisition and use of products in response to a deficit triggered by perceived needs and desires that cannot be fulfilled directly" (Koles *et al.*, 2018:97). During the pandemic consumers may have coped with negative emotions through types of compensatory consumption behaviours (Cho *et al.*, 2021).

Compensatory consumption can occur in different ways, such as by generating positive emotions (e.g., sharing of past memories often termed as nostalgia) or seeking positive experiences to overcome a deficit in the fulfilment of specific needs or desires by seeking alternative means (Cho *et al.*, 2021; Koles *et al.*, 2018). *Nostalgia* is often described as seeking a connection with something in the past that is now gone (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2020). For example, when individuals are deprived of activities they normally engage in, such as running events, they may recollect their positive memories and feel nostalgic about their participation in such activities in the past (Cho, Ramshaw & Norman, 2014).

Previous studies have also indicated that negative emotions trigger social media use (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). Much evidence has shown that stress triggers social media use in general, but even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). Social media is often used as a coping mechanism during crisis situations to seek social support, improve stress-induced negative emotions, as well as to evoke problem solving (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). The manner in which active sport consumers, specifically marathon runners, may have 'coped' with negative emotions resulting from restricted event participation and potential event cancellations, is also considered in this study.

Figure 2.1 below graphically depicts the theoretical framework for this exploratory study which is based on eudaimonistic identity theory and potential marketing-related outcomes outlined in the literature review.

Figure 2.1: Proposed theoretical framework
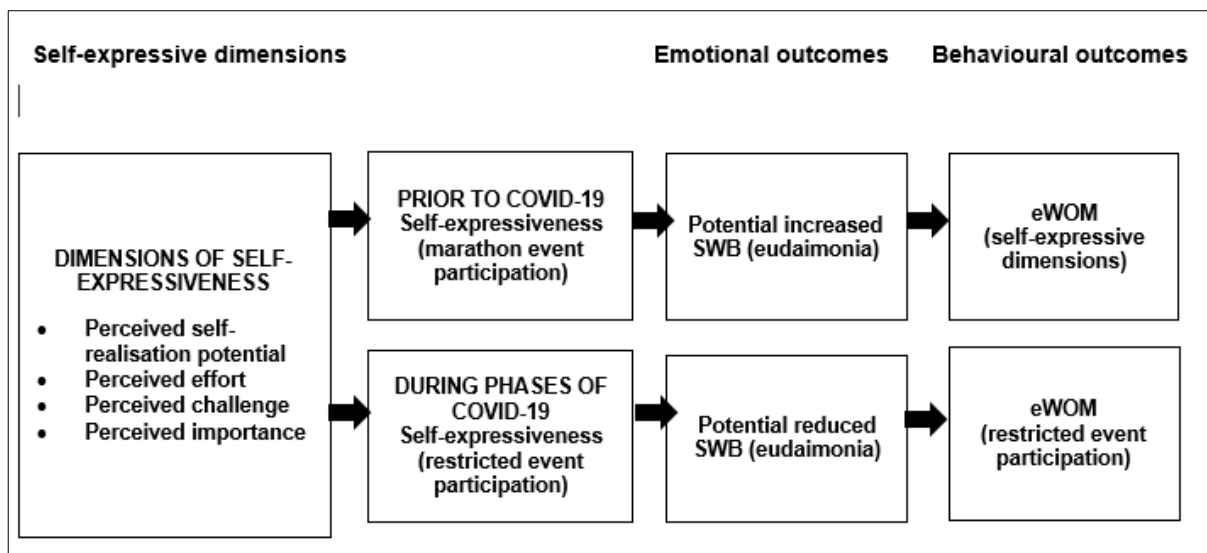
Adapted from: Bosnjak *et al*. (2016); Brown (2007); de Vries *et al*. (2017); Waterman (2011)

A brief overview of the Comrades marathon as case study for Articles 1 (refer to Chapter 2) and 2 (refer to Chapter 3) is provided next, followed by the research design employed for each of the articles that comprise the study.

2.6. The Comrades marathon as case study

The Comrades is a world-renowned marathon event that was affected by COVID-19 (CMA, 2020). The Comrades is known as the "Ultimate Human Race" and is a running event that covers at least twice the distance of a standard marathon (CMA, 2020). This event was deemed suitable as a case study because of its potential for event participants to engage in self-expressiveness through participation and the significant role the event plays in generating revenue for South Africa's economy. In 2019 (prior to COVID-19) the Comrades generated over USD43 million and created over 1,000 temporary jobs in the sector (Mphahlele, 2021). The Comrades takes place in the Kwazulu-Natal Province of South Africa between the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg. The race alters direction between the "up" run (approximately 87 km) starting from Durban, and the "down" run (approximately 90 km) starting from Pietermaritzburg. Participants must be over the age of 20 and are required to complete one of the officially recognised qualifying events. To successfully complete the race, runners must reach five cut-off points in specified times (World's Marathons, 2020). Various medals are awarded for completing the race within set cut-off times and participants receive their permanent or "green" number after successfully completing their tenth race (CMA, 2020).

With the uncertainties of COVID-19, the event was initially postponed and then eventually cancelled (Ray, 2020). Social media is often used as a coping tool and with the rapid rise in social media communications during the pandemic (Wolfers & Utz, 2022), it was fitting to explore the potential negative emotions and coping behaviours within online communities who had intentions to partake in the Comrades event in 2020. To answer the research questions and meet the main aim of the study, the research design and methods employed are considered next.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The research questions in this study are to explore the prevalence of the four dimensions related to self-expressiveness in the main themes of eWOM among marathon runners prior to, and during three initial phases of COVID-19. The aim is also to explore these active sport consumers' responses to restricted event participation as communicated via authentic eWOM. Figure 2.2 presents a framework for guiding the investigation.

Figure 2.2: Framework guiding empirical investigation
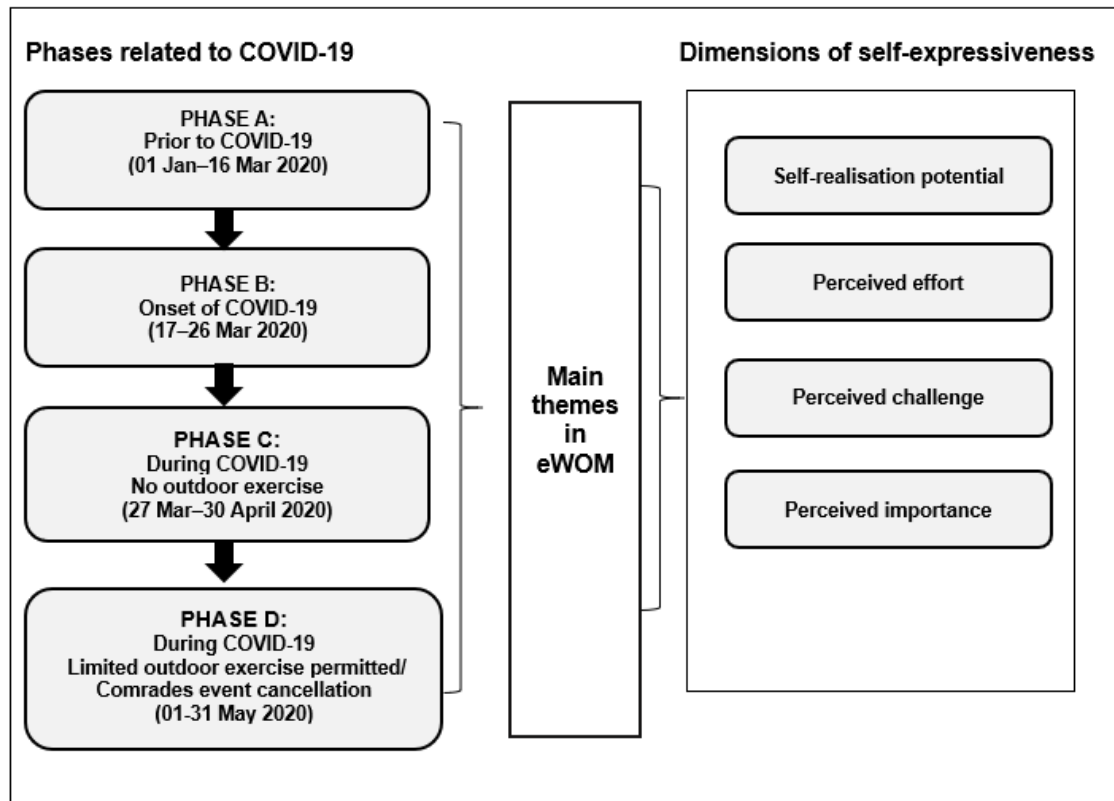
3.1. Research design

The main aim of the study is to explore marathon running events from a self-expressive sport consumer perspective and marathon runners' responses to restricted event participation during phases related to COVID-19. This study utilised netnography, an Internet-based research tool belonging to the ethnographic branch, increasingly employed in consumer research to study consumption-related aspects of consumers' lives via online social media communications (e.g., Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Kozinets, 2002, 2006, 2015; Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2014; Lugosi, Janta & Watson, 2012; Reid & Duffy, 2018).

Netnography offers several benefits over other research methods, particularly considering that rich and naturalistic data can be obtained in an unobtrusive manner (Kozinets, 2002; Sandlin, 2007; Rokka, 2010). Netnographic data excels at telling the story and assists the researcher in understanding complex social phenomena from a consumer-generated perspective (Kozinets, 2002; Rageh, Melewar & Woodside, 2013; Thanh & Kirova, 2018). Also, it allows continuing access to informants in a particular online situation (Kozinets, 2015). This study adopts netnography in the form of non-participant observation and is based on social media Facebook posts amidst a high-profile marathon running event community, shortly prior to COVID-19, and then during the initial phases of the crisis as the situation unfolded.

Although there is no one way to conduct netnography, Kozinets (2002) provides guidelines on strategies for conducting netnography (Mehta *et al.*, 2022; Sthapit, 2018). First, online communities relevant to the research should be identified, the second step involves data collection, and the third step is linked to the ethics of the researcher's role (Kozinets, 2002; Sthapit, 2018).

3.2. Sampling and data collection

Entrée means identifying appropriate online communities (Thanh & Kirova, 2018). Kozinets (2010:89) offers six criteria when selecting social media sites for netnographic research and highlights that they should be "relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data rich". Facebook, one of the longest existing social media platforms, was selected with the largest user base of approximately 1.82 billion daily active users (Facebook, 2020). Also, previous research confirms the usefulness of gathering consumer data from Facebook posts as deeper insights can be obtained from authentic online conversation (Grewal, Hulland, Kopalle, & Karahanna, 2020).

As recommended by Kozinets (2015), purposive sampling was employed, which meant concentrating on a single online community (Xun & Reynolds, 2010). The 'Comrades Marathon 2020 Down Run' was selected as the online community for data collection since active members of this group were among those with the highest intentions to partake in the 2020 event. A temporary Facebook community group is formed every year for those venturing out for the Comrades. Data was collected from social media posts among the 2020 group of runners to obtain insights into event experiences prior to, and during a time of restricted event participation.

All text-based posts were recorded verbatim for a period of five months (i.e., from 1 January to 31 May 2020). The data was collected over four specific time periods labelled as Phases A to D: a) Phase A was during the period shortly prior to COVID-19; b) Phase B took place during the emergence of COVID-19; c) Phase C was during lockdown with no outdoor exercise permitted; and d) Phase D was when daily outdoor exercise was permitted within curfew times and it was also during this period that the Comrades event was officially cancelled.

Exploring these phases allowed the researcher to monitor how the themes and dimensions of self-expressiveness emerged in eWOM during 'normal' circumstances, versus the crisis period with restricted event participation and potential reduced SWB. During the data collection period, 815 Facebook posts comprising 166455 words were gathered. The researcher examined all posts and eliminated 336 which were not relevant to the research

questions under study (e.g., news articles, general lockdown comments, safety/crime-related topics about outdoor running and celebrity news). This resulted in the inclusion of 479 text-based posts and the comments from these posts for analysis. The text-based content was split into one- or two-sentence long units resulting in 2677 text-based units for analysis.

Table 2.1 shows the phases and situation related to COVID-19 during each phase, the period of data collection and the number of text-based statements that were included in the final analysis for each phase.

Table 2.1: Phases related to COVID-19 and number of statements

Phase	Situation related to COVID-19 and sport events	Time period	Number of statements
Before COVID-19 (Phase A)	Traditional 'live' marathon events as the consumption experience	1 January to 16 March 2020	561
Phase B	During the emergence of COVID-19 (all events were initially cancelled for 30 days)	17 to 27 March 2020	493
Phase C	During lockdown with no outdoor exercise permitted (restrictions on all sport events)	28 March to 30 April 2020	1287
Phase D	During lockdown with outdoor exercise permitted between 6am and 9am (restricted sporting events/virtual events start emerging) Comrades event cancelled (on 14 May 2020)	1 to 31 May 2020	674

Note: The phases are relevant to COVID-19 as the situation unfolded in South Africa.

Given the novelty of the pandemic circumstances, it was not known what runners would be talking about within online communities regarding event participation experiences before (in 'normal' circumstances) versus the onset of the crisis. The researcher thus first explored main themes in eWOM and the prevalence of dimensions of self-expressiveness prior to COVID-19 to determine the extent to which self-expressive dimensions were communicated via eWOM regarding the event consumption experience. The main themes in eWOM and self-expressive dimensions were then explored during three initial phases of COVID-19 to explore potential reduced SWB during restricted event participation.

Pre-approval to conduct the research was obtained from the institutional Ethics Committee (protocol number EMS034/20). Before data collection commenced, consent was obtained from the administrators of the Facebook Group (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994:485; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The aim of the study was not to describe the population but merely explore the emerging themes in online conversation, therefore, no demographic nor personal information from the member's profile was recorded in the data collection and only text-based posts were included. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, details of all the phases of the research methods and data analysis are provided in detail (Sthapit, 2018).

When researchers actively enter an online community and direct communication as participant observers, they should fully disclose their identities, obtain informed consent, and conduct member checks (Wu & Pearce, 2014). However, with passive (non-participant) observers, there is no compelling need to communicate research objectives or obtain consent as these are public (sometimes anonymous) Internet media (Mkono, 2012). The passive approach of this study implied that the researcher did not interfere with naturally occurring social media conversations or influence the data in anyway (Moreau, Roy, Wilson & Duault, 2021; Sthapit, 2018). Nevertheless, ethics is much debated in netnographic research (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Of importance is the fact that the original authors are not identifiable in the final write-up of the research (Wu & Pearce, 2014). In this study all personal data that could identify individuals was removed to preserve anonymity (Mehta *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, before the findings of the study were compiled, messages were sent on the general Facebook group informing members of the study, providing details of how to 'opt out' should they not wish to be involved. For some of the more detailed (longer) quotes, individuals were contacted (via Messenger on the Facebook platform) to obtain consent to use their direct quotations in the findings.

With netnography, the researcher should ideally have some prior knowledge of the community and the nature of conversation taking place to ensure the data generated is not looked at in isolation but integrated within the context of the study (Reid & Duffy, 2018). This aids in obtaining rich nuances and deeper meaning from the data. It was thus fitting that the researcher was a member of the online group. Being a member of the population under study does present concerns (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). These challenges were overcome, firstly, by making use of an automated analysis for the initial analysis. Secondly, all revised themes and self-expressiveness dimensions were verified by four experts in the field of sport marketing and tourism to confirm their existence.

3.3. Data analysis and reliability

The unit of analysis was text-based communication considered to be a powerful tool for both prediction and gathering of consumer insights (Berger, Humphreys, Ludwig, Moe, Netzer & Schweidel, 2020). Data was examined as a complete data set rather than 'live' participation with the research subjects (Reid & Duffy, 2018). A text analytics tool, Leximancer Version 5.0 that analyses natural language text in electronic format, was used to automatically identify collections of words that co-occur frequently in the data and suggests these as potential concepts (Smith & Humphreys, 2006; Tkaczynski, Rundle-Thiele & Cretchley, 2015). This inductive identification of 'themes' through observing phenomena, analysing patterns and formulating relationships was conducted with limited manual intervention, thus significantly

reducing researcher error (Cretchley, Gallois & Chenery, 2010). Although themes were identified from the automated analysis, the researcher could not gather meaningful insights from all the concepts formed without deeper immersion into the content (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Reid & Duffy, 2018). By delving deeper into the data, the main themes were revised by the researcher and verified by the four experts with inter-coder reliability checks. The dimensions of self-expressiveness during a period of restricted event participation (including potential coping behaviours) were identified from the main themes and a second round of inter-coder reliability checks confirmed their existence.

The findings from the automated analysis that identified the main themes, and the deductive analysis that explored self-expressive dimensions related to the main themes across the COVID-19 phases, are provided next, with descriptive evidence.

4. FINDINGS

To answer the four research questions, this section first depicts the main themes in eWOM prior to, and during three initial phases of COVID-19. The four dimensions related to self-expressiveness as they feature in eWOM, prior to, and then during the COVID-19 phases, is provided thereafter.

4.1. Findings related to main themes in eWOM

This section shows the main themes in eWOM prior to, and during three initial phases of COVID-19. First, the results generated by the automated analysis (using Leximancer Version 5.0) are provided together with a brief description of the main concepts that emerged and the revised themes. A summary of the main themes across the phases (i.e., prior to and during COVID-19 phases) is then presented. The results and implications of the findings are discussed thereafter.

4.1.1. Main themes prior to COVID-19

To address the first research question, Figure 2.3 shows the results from the automated analysis indicating the main themes and concepts which emerged from 561 sample statements prior to COVID-19. Table 2.2 briefly describes the concepts (in *italics*) that relate to the automated themes and shows the revised themes by the researcher to provide meaning within the context of the study.

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Figure 2.3: Main themes prior to COVID-19 (Phase A)

PHASE A: PRE-COVID-19

1 January – 15 March 2020

Themes and number of 'hits'	Concepts related to themes
Training (84)	*training, km, race, marathon, marathons, train, mileage, sure, easy*
Running (81)	*running, year, COMRADES, comrades, day, medal, seeding, distance, line, start, doing, ran, started, novice*
Time (39)	*time, races, experience, long, pain*
Love (31)	*love, weeks, week, runners, comes*
Completed (22)	*completed, finished, number, age*
Need (20)	*need, watch, runner*
Injury (15)	*injury, days*
March (13)	*March, mind*
Finish (8)	*Finish*
Route (7)	*Route*
Down (7)	*Down*

Results are from 561 text-based statements

Table 2.2: Description of concepts and revised themes (Phase A)

Description of concepts (refer to Figure 2.3)	Revised theme
• The number of kilometres (*km*) completed for the month (*mileage*) • Importance of *long* runs and rest *days* • Avoid overtraining and *injury*, including *week*(s) of training lost due to *injury* • Training for the Comrades '*down*' run in 2020**	**Training-related**
• *Marathon* events individuals are planning to partake in as part of *Comrades training* and how expensive races have become • Recommended (*easy route*) to *qualify* and to achieve best *seeding* (starting position)	**Event participation** (other marathon events)
• Number of previous *Comrades* participated in or *novice* • Number of *Comrades* individuals have started and the number of Comrades they have *finished* & *age* when they took part • *Mileage* completed in the months prior to *Comrades* each *year*, *medal* awarded and best *times* • *Comrades experience*: emotions at the *start line*, the *pain* and describing the experience of the *long* journey	**Comrades marathon event participation**
• Running apparel recommended (e.g., products *Comrades runners need*, such as running *watches* with specific features)	**Recommended running apparel**
• *Love* for *running*; *love* for other marathon events, *love* for running apparel/brands (status that *comes* with certain brands); *love* for the feeling of *pain* and challenges of other *races* as well as *Comrades* event	**Expressions of love** (running-related)

*The concepts from the automated analysis (refer to Figure 2.3) are provided in *italics*.

**The Comrades Marathon takes places as either an 'up' or 'down' run between two cities, alternating the start between the cities.

4.1.2. Main themes during phases of COVID-19

Figure 2.4 below depicts the main themes and emerging concepts from 493 text-based statements during the onset of COVID-19. Table 2.3 provides the revised themes from the automated concepts (in *italics*) to provide meaning in the study context.

Figure 2.4: Main themes in eWOM (Phase B)

Note: Results are from 493 text-based statements

Table 2.3: Description of concepts and revised themes during COVID-19 (Phase B)

Description of concepts (refer to Figure 2.4)	Revised theme
• Whether or not individuals managed to *qualify* for the 2020 event, e.g., yes (*year, yebo, yip*) or no (*nope*) • Mention of *best seeding* and *qualifying times* • Some mentioned events they were hoping to improve *seeding* and *qualifying time*	**Qualifications** (Comrades 2020 event)
• Last *race* participated in before lockdown was to commence, e.g., *Kosmos* and *Om Die Dam marathon* • *Marathon* events cancelled due to *Corona* and *loss* of *money* from pre-entered *races*	**Event participation** (other marathon events)
• Other *cancelled races* and thus the possibility of *Comrades* being cancelled • Negative emotions regarding the event organisation's CRS related to delaying the decision to cancel and loss of *money* for entry fees and accommodation costs	**Potential Comrades event cancellation**
• Runners communicate that they will *continue* their *training* in the hope that the 2020 event could still take place	**Training-related** (continue training, hopeful for event to take place)

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Figure 2.5 depicts the main themes and emerging concepts from 1287 text-based statements during a period where no outdoor exercise was permitted to limit the spreading of the virus. The increased number of statements here provides evidence of the increased online communication during the lockdown period with much uncertainty surrounding the future of marathon events. Table 2.4 presents the revised themes from the automated concepts (in *italics*) to provide meaning in the current study.

Figure 2.5: Main themes in eWOM (Phase C)

PHASE C: COVID-19
(No outdoor exercise permitted)
27 March – 30 April 2020

Themes and number of 'hits'	Concepts related to themes
Running (146)	*running, time, runners, life, road, runner, during*
Year (106)	*year, race, Comrades, finish, start, feel, people, water*
Marathon (96)	*marathon, day, finished, ran, ultra, Marathon*
Photo (Garden run workout from running device) (91)	*photo, yard, km, easy, today, 5km, down, Covid*
Comrades (63)	*comrades, medal, love, months*
Miss (45)	*miss, need, mind*
Stay (44)	*stay, lockdown, doing, Lockdown*
Training (37)	*training, pain, train*
Soweto (29)	*Soweto, Mandela, Soweto Marathon*
Tough (23)	*tough, long*
Hot (18)	*Hot, food*
Running (16)	*running*
2km (13)	*2km*
Times (12)	*times*

Note: Results are from 1287 text-based statements

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Table 2.4: Description of concepts and revised themes (Phase C)

Description of concepts (refer to Figure 2.5)	Revised theme
• *Runners* comment on their *love* for *running* describing *running* as an essential part of *life* • *Runners* start sharing their garden *runs* • *Missing running* on the *road* and wishes that *Covid* can end so they can *run Comrades Marathon down run* and other *races* • Reporting runners for not obeying exercise regulations and urging runners to *stay* home to prevent the potential prolonging of exercise restrictions	**The importance of running** (lifestyle activity)
• Most frequent posts were about training in the garden or *yard* during *lockdown* and number of *kilometres* run (with mention of proof of *photos* from training devices) • Overall, the garden run was described as *tough* and a mental challenge (i.e., *mind*). • Describing a 5km garden run as feeling similar to running a *marathon* and a 10km run feeling like an *ultra-marathon* • Some individuals complete the challenge of running a marathon (*42.2km*) in their yard • Sharing conversations about the new "*road*" (or path) that is forming on their grass due to running laps in gardens	**Training-related** (garden running)
• Sharing aspects of races *runners miss* the most, such as the *people* and even the *pain* experienced • *Toughest* marathon races runners have participated in (i.e., *Soweto Marathon, hot, people, water, pain*) • Sharing past marathon experiences about the '*easiest' marathon* they have participated in (conclude that no marathon is easy) • Favourite *foods* after *long* runs • Negative experiences at marathon events (receiving a wooden *medal, feel,* no *water*)	**Previous marathon event experiences** (sharing memories)
• Experiencing the *start* of Comrades • Feelings before, during and after finishing Comrades	**Previous Comrades participation** (sharing memories)
• Negative eWOM about *Comrades* delaying the decision to cancel/ positive eWOM about supporting *Comrades* decision to delay cancellation • Personal *feelings* about event cancellation (sad, disappointed)	**Potential Comrades cancellation**
• *Love* for running, *love* for Comrades event, *love* for other events, *love* for *pain* experienced at Comrades and other events	**Expressions of love** (running-related)

Figure 2.6 shows the main themes and emerging concepts from 674 text-based statements during a period where outdoor running was again permitted but for limited periods of time (i.e., between 6am and 9am). It was during this phase that the Comrades 2020 was officially cancelled. Table 2.5 presents the revised themes from the automated concepts (in *italics*) to provide meaning in the context of the current study.

Figure 2.6: Main themes in eWOM (Phase D)

PHASE D: COVID-19
(Limited outdoor exercise permitted/ Event cancellation)
1-31 May 2020

Themes and number of 'hits'	Concepts related to themes
Year (194)	year, race, Comrades, comrades, marathon, money, races, virtual, doing
Time (128)	time, day, need, work, take, *love*, train, easy, sad, spirit
Running (127)	running, training, lockdown, shoes, morning, use
CMA (76)	CMA, goodie, people, event, decision
Better (62)	better, times, start, miss, body, due
Entry (61)	entry, refund, entries, shirt
Best (60)	best, finish, COVID, lost
Cancelled (25)	cancelled, medal
Mask (17)	Mask
Long (15)	Long
Athletes (15)	Athletes
Road (14)	Road
Cap (9)	Cap

Note: Results are from 674 text-based statements

Table 2.5: Description of concepts and revised themes during COVID-19 (Phase D)

Description of concepts (refer to Figure 2.6)	Revised theme
• Excitement for *running* and being able to *train* again although in *lockdown*. *Shoes* and *masks* are ready for the *morning* • *Running* with a *mask* is not *easy* • Talk about how many people or 'non-runners' have now become *runners* during *lockdown* and are out on the *roads* in the *morning* • Essential health *workers* are not able to exercise between 6 and 9am due to working hours	**Training-related** (outdoor running during restricted periods)
• What will be most *missed* about *Comrades* event (for example, the *spirit*, the *feelings* on race day at the *start* and *finish*)	**Potential Comrades event cancellation**
• Negative eWOM about compensation for cancellation (i.e., *CMA, people, event, decision, lost money, entries, refunds, cap, goodie bag, shirt*) • Positive WOM about CMA (*runners support* the *Comrades decision* to cancel the event and note that *nobody* could have foreseen it; CMA was doing their *best*) • Feelings about cancellation (i.e., *sad*) and upcoming *virtual event* • Looking forward to *better* times ahead	**Comrades 2020 event cancelation** (Emotions regarding event cancellation and the event organisation's CRS)
• *Love* for *running*; *love* the freedom of the *road*, *love* for *Comrades*, *love* for other *marathon* events	**Expressions of love** (running-related)

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4.1.3. Summary of main themes

Table 2.6 below provides a summary of the main themes in eWOM prior to, and during the phases related to COVID-19. A brief description of the main themes follows.

Prior to COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19, the main themes in eWOM relate to training for the Comrades event including aspects such as personal training goals achieved, (e.g., the mileage completed for the month), training goals still to be achieved (e.g., total mileage targeted), as well as offering training advice to runners with less long-distance running experience. Recommendations on other marathon events to partake in to qualify for the Comrades event as well as running-related apparel to achieve marathon goals was also evident. The financial costs involved in marathon event participation was also clear. The online community frequently share about their previous participation in the Comrades event, for example, their past achievements (e.g., number of Comrades participated in), the challenge of the event (e.g., number of Comrades events they have started and the number of times they have managed to complete the race in the allocated time), and Comrades experiences (e.g., emotions before, during, after the event).

From these main themes prior to COVID-19, the motivations for content creation primarily revolve around communicating aspects that relate to the self-concept (de Vries *et al*., 2017; Sirgy, 1985). Communications about past event participation and future intentions to partake in the event can be linked to communicating about the actual or desired 'self' as suggested in prior research (de Vries *et al*., 2017). When event participants contribute to these online discussions about training, opinions on qualifying marathons and past experiences, this relates to expressing the individual's social 'self' (de Vries *et al*., 2017; Sirgy 1985). These findings are supported by social media studies where self-expressive and social motives were found to be important for content creation and content contribution, respectively, on social media platforms (de Vries *et al*., 2017; Morgan & Townsend, 2022).

The sharing of information about running apparel that can help other marathon runners achieve their running goals, can be explained through a social identity approach in that when a certain social identity becomes salient in a person's self-concept, it motivates behaviours that contribute towards achieving a group's purposes and goals (Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994; Inoue, Lock, Gillooly, Shipway & Swanson, 2022). The findings show that within the online Comrades community, runners share their training and event experiences with others to assist them in achieving event goals.

Another prominent finding relates to the strong positive feelings regarding the activity of running and potential 'love' for the event brand. Positive emotions are likely to arise from self-expression through consumption experiences (Morgan & Townsend, 2022). This is significant in that consumers often express their current or desired self-identity through loved brands. (Aro, Suomi & Saraniemi, 2018; Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012).

During COVID-19

During the emergence of COVID-19 (*Phase B*) there was much evidence of anxiety in terms of whether individuals had managed to complete their race qualifiers prior to the initial 30-day running event suspension period. The mention of the last marathon they had participated in was also a popular topic. Runners indicated that they would continue their training in the hope that the event could still take place. The possibility of the Comrades event being cancelled, and the potential losses related to money already invested, such as entry fees, accommodation and transport was also evident through the negative emotions expressed in this regard.

During lockdown with no outdoor exercise permitted (*Phase C*), the importance of running as a lifestyle activity was emphasised in online communications and negative emotions of not being able to partake in their 'normal' running activities were expressed. Runners then invented their own 'garden running' activities where they would run laps in their gardens, driveways, houses and even on balconies to cover a certain distance. Their efforts, achievements and challenges related to their garden running activities were increasingly shared amongst the online community. In the absence of being able to partake in running events, memories were shared regarding past Comrades and other marathon event experiences. Again, negative emotions (e.g., sad, disappointed) were expressed regarding potential event cancellations as well as negative eWOM about the event organisation delaying the decision to cancel the event. Runners also expressed their love for running, their love for the Comrades event and even the pain they experienced when partaking in marathon running events.

During lockdown (limited outdoor exercise and Comrades event cancellation) (*Phase D*), when outdoor exercise was permitted during restricted times, there was a sense of relief and excitement of having the "freedom" to run outdoors and on the roads again. Following the announcement of the Comrades event cancellation, positive and negative eWOM about the CMA and their crisis response strategy (CRS) was apparent. Negative emotions were expressed regarding the event cancellation and memories from past participation, and what

will be most missed, were shared. In the absence of the event taking place, some runners openly expressed their love for "running" in the Comrades event.

Prior research shows that when individuals cannot engage in normal consumption behaviours they often engage in alternative (or compensatory) consumption behaviours to increase SWB (Cho *et al*., 2021; Clark & Isen, 1985). This was clear from garden running activities and newly found garden running challenges. The resilience of runners and determination to achieve important goals, even within these unprecedented circumstances, has been shown in past research which suggests that when individuals commit to goals they regard as important, they will be motivated to continue their efforts to achieve desired goals (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006).

Previous research also shows that when individuals cannot engage in their usual consumption behaviours, they often cope with their negative emotions by sharing memories of previous experiences to remember the 'happy' times (also known as nostalgia) (Cho *et al*., 2021). The findings of this study show the frequent mention of memories from past event participation in authentic eWOM during phases of COVID-19 and is supported by this notion.

Table 2.6: Summary of the main themes in eWOM related to COVID-19 phases

Main themes	PHASE A (Prior to COVID-19)	PHASE B Emergence of COVID-19 (all events cancelled for 30 days)	PHASE C No outdoor exercise permitted (strict lockdown)	PHASE D Limited outdoor exercise/ Comrades 2020 event cancelled
Training-related	**Topics related to training for Comrades event** Personal training goals achieved, such as mileage completed for the month, goals to be achieved, and offering training advice to other runners	**Continue training** Plans to continue training in the hope that the event can still take place	**Garden running** Various aspects related to garden running activities	**Outdoor running** Excitement about being permitted to run outdoors again and preparing for this (setting out clothes, shoes and even masks/buffs)
Event participation (other marathon events)	**Other marathon events** • Marathons targeted as qualifiers, advice on 'easiest' marathons to partake in to qualify/obtain best seeding (or starting position) • Costs related to marathon event participation	**Last marathon event** Runners share memories about the last marathon event they participated in prior to COVID-19	**Previous marathon event experiences** Sharing of memories about past marathon event experiences (other than Comrades)	**Potential Comrades cancellation** Sharing memories and what will be most missed regarding not being able to partake in the Comrades event in 2020
Comrades marathon event participation	**Comrades participation** • Personal goals achieved in past events (number of Comrades participated in) • Challenge of Comrades event (number of Comrades started and completed) • Experiences related to Comrades event participation (before, during, after event)	**Qualifications (Comrades 2020)** Anxiety/relief related to qualifying for the Comrades 2020 event (prior to all events being cancelled) **Potential Comrades event cancellation** Negative emotions regarding the event organisation's CRS and potential financial losses	**Memories (Nostalgia)** • Memories of past Comrades participation experiences **Potential Comrades Cancellation** • Negative eWOM about event organisation delaying the decision to cancel • Negative emotions regarding potential Comrades cancellation (sad, disappointed)	**Comrades 2020 event cancellation** • Emotions regarding event cancellation • Responses related to the event organisation's CRS
Expressions of love	• Love for running • Love for running brands • Love for pain & challenge in events (including Comrades)	n/a	• Love for running • Love for Comrades event • Love for pain experienced when partaking in marathon running events	• Love for running • Love for feeling of freedom in road running • Love for Comrades and other events
Other (phase specific)	**Recommended running apparel** Product/services to aid in achieving personal running-related event goals	n/a	**Importance of running** Describing running as an important lifestyle activity	n/a

The next section unpacks the four dimensions of self-expressiveness, namely, perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and perceived importance of event participation, as they featured in the main themes. The results are presented first prior to COVID-19, and then during the three initial phases of COVID-19 as the crisis unfolds.

4.2.   Findings related to self-expressive dimensions prior to COVID-19

This section describes how the four dimensions related to self-expressiveness feature within the main themes in eWOM prior to COVID-19 (Phase A) (refer to Section 4.1.1).

4.2.1. Perceived self-realisation potential

Perceived self-realisation potential considers opportunities for individuals to realise the best they can be, achieve important goals, feel fulfilled and build identity (Sirgy *et al.*, 2016; Waterman *et al.*, 2008; Løvoll, 2019; Voigt, 2017). Before COVID-19, opportunities for self-realisation were evident in eWOM about all three goal types (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006). *Process goals* provide opportunities for self-realisation through personal training-related goals, such as the amount of mileage targeted in the months leading up to the Comrades event. For example:

> "In February I achieved 157km but missed my target with 43 km"
> "123km....March I want to double that!"
> "Aiming to do 360km in February".

Performance goals were communicated by sharing past personal achievements in Comrades participation. Participants also often communicate their previous and desired qualifying times (to obtain the best seeding/starting position). Sample statements are:

> "I have completed 18 Consecutive Comrades Marathons"
> "Started at 53 in 2014 and completed 6. I will be going for the 7th this year."
> "I have completed only 5 and I am back this year for number 6…"
> "Last year I ran 5:35:00 G seeding; Target now is 5:14:59 F seeding"

Various *outcome goals* were also shared, such as completing the Comrades 2020 event to earn the medal or targeting a specific medal for the event. Sample statements include:

> "Which medal you wish for during the 2020 down run?"
> "Only things I want to achieve in 2020-Comrades marathon cap and medal".
> "…so, I can start my Comrades training for Silver medal".

4.2.2. Perceived effort

When an activity highly correlates with investing more effort to achieve important goals, there is an increase in self-expressiveness from participation in that activity (Bosnjak *et al.*, 2016; Voigt *et al.*, 2010; Waterman, 2005; Waterman, 2011:73). Before COVID-19, perceived effort in Comrades participation related to the effort in training, as well as the financial effort (i.e., the process toward achieving the outcome). In terms of training effort, the number of kilometres (mileage) completed for the month and injuries that often occur from high mileage training are evident. Examples include:

> "December collection 262 km for the 2020 down run"
>
> "My February was terrible due to an injury only 117km"
>
> "…now back to the roads in preparations for Comrades Marathon 2020 - Down Run"

Financial effort was evident in conversation on how expensive the entry fees of qualifying races have become. Event participants also incur other costs, such as purchasing running apparel and training devices (e.g., running watches) that can aid in achieving the outcome goal. For example:

> "Always do 1 race to qualify and train hard. Don't attend races because they expensive for nothing and I'm a shift worker"
>
> "It's becoming extremely expensive."
>
> "Already have money put aside for registration (for 2021)"

4.2.3. Perceived challenge

When leisure participants perceive a leisure activity as involving some form of difficultly or challenge, this may enhance self-expressiveness (Bosnjak *et al.*, 2016; Waterman, 2011). Perceived challenge was evident in the physical challenges posed by the event itself and the need to engage in physical training to reduce the perceived challenge. The physical challenges were expressed as part of the pain and discomfort experienced when training for and participating in the event. The event challenge was also evident in the frequent mention of how many Comrades events individuals have started but not completed to the finish. Sample statements showing perceived event challenge and training for the event include:

> "90km is not child's play. You will be in pain and you will be tired"
>
> "…it hurts a lot!! Like more than you expect or have ever felt!"
>
> "The more I trained the more I enjoyed the day"
>
> "…the more mileage I did between Jan and June the better I enjoyed my Comrades"
>
> "Even if you train there will come a point where you will be in pain. This is Comrades"

Sample statements where participants state the number of Comrades events started but not completed are:

> "…Finished 12 ...1 bail; 2 did not start; this year no 13"
>
> "…done 15 Comrades, finished 11 Comrades."
>
> "…9 finishes, 9 DNFs (did not finish)"

The findings related to the physical challenge are consistent with serious leisure theory indicating that individuals often experience fatigue and discomfort when partaking in serious leisure activities (Jones, 2000; Major, 2001; Stebbins, 1982). Scott, Cayla and Cova (2017:1) state that "painful extraordinary experiences operate as regenerative escapes from the self". Although the event experience may not only be pleasurable (hedonia), a deeper sense of personal meaning and growth (eudaimonia) comes from overcoming these challenges, especially when running this event. Participants also commented on their 'love' for the challenge. Sample statements include:

> "This will probably be the most painful thing you have ever done. It's not easy, it was never meant to be hence you will appreciate your medal. If it was easy anyone would do it"
>
> "…I just love the challenge this race presents to us runners"

4.2.4. Perceived importance

From a eudaimonic perspective, the perceived importance of participating in an activity increases self-expressiveness (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 2011). Prior to COVID-19, perceived importance was expressed in the importance of running and participation in running events.

The importance of the activity of running was expressed, for example, "running is life". Running was also described by some as a form of addiction. A sample statement is:

> "…Addiction is not for drugs only, I realised that you can be addicted to other things as well (with reference to running)".

The significance of the activity of running among these serious runners is supported by a previous study where eligible participants were serious runners, who typically exercise five to six times a week. Despite the offer of a cash reward, these runners refused to partake in experiments (i.e., with no exercising for a month) (Egorov & Szabo, 2013). Experiments were then conducted on runners who train three to four times a week. During the month of the

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deprivation, runners reported negative psychological well-being, which surfaced as high levels of anxiety, frequent night awakenings and other addictive symptoms such as salience, withdrawal, mood moderation, conflict and tolerance (Szabo, 2010).

Related to perceived importance, the findings also show that these runners are prepared to make considerable sacrifices to train for and partake in a running event such as the Comrades event. A sample statement refers:

> "…Your family must realize all parties/holidays will be determined by your racing and training program"

Finally, perceived importance of event participation was evident from frequent posts stating the number of Comrades events previously participated in as well as future intentions to partake again. For example:

> "…Finished 12 consecutively and have my green number. Took a break last year and going for number 13 this year"
> "…completed my 20th in 2019 - 20 consecutive and still going!"

4.3. Findings related to self-expressive dimensions during COVID-19 phases

The dimensions related to self-expressiveness during the three phases of COVID-19, which have been derived from the main themes (refer to section 4.1.2), together with sample statements, are presented next. The findings from the main themes are from Phase B (refer to Figure 2.4, Table 2.3); Phase C (refer to Figure 2.5, Table 2.4); and Phase D (refer to Figure 2.6, Table 2.5).

4.3.1. Self-realisation potential

During COVID-19 emergence (*Phase B*) perceived self-realisation in marathon running was evident from eWOM about past marathon event achievements. These findings show that runners communicate their self-concept through participation in such events where they can achieve personal goals that are important to them (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006; Waterman, 1993). In the absence of being able to participate in running events, runners recollected positive memories of past event experiences. For example:

> "…Township Marathon where I achieved my personal best of 3:59:36"
> "…Deloitte Challenge. New Personal Best".

During lockdown (*Phase C*) runners' need for self-realisation emerged strongly and various goals were set to be achieved through their garden running activities. Running distances were set to be achieved within limited spaces (e.g., small gardens, driveways) and many attempted to run an actual marathon distance. Some replicated traditional marathon events that would have taken place during this time of lockdown, such as the Two Oceans and Loskop marathons (i.e., alternative consumption activities) (Cho *et al*., 2021). Runners also challenged each other with new 'garden running lockdown challenges', giving a sense of purpose and instilling commitment toward the goals (Locke & Latham, 2006). These 'new' achievements were commonly shared within the online community, showing evidence of self-expressiveness from engaging in these 'alternative self-defining' activities (Bosnjak*, et al*., 2016; Sirgy *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 1993). Online engagement allowed for feedback, which also plays a key role in goal achievement (Sorrentino, 2006). Studies have also shown that posting content on social media about consumption experiences (in this case garden running experiences) that are relevant to the 'self' (posting for self-expression), contributes to consumer happiness (Duan & Dholakia, 2017). This is also most relevant within this crisis context. Sample statements include:

> "…42.2km well done. Our first backyard 42k's winner"
>
> "…I managed 50km and a few meters in time of 7 hours and 1 minute, missing the new TOM (Two Oceans Marathon) cut off with 7 odd kilometres…1173 times around the house."
>
> "…Did my 19th Loskop Marathon 800 times around the house."

Finally, when the Comrades event was cancelled (during *Phase D*), the loss of opportunities to realise personal goals came to the fore. Past research shows that participation in sporting events enhances SWB (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020). The negative emotions of disappointment and 'shattered dreams' through event cancellation show a reduction in SWB by restricting opportunities for self-realisation. Some sample statements are:

> "…I know the emotional turmoil that you go through. Deciding to run CM isn't easy now that you gone this far to materialize your dream and the disaster strikes that is devastating"
>
> "…lots of goals and dreams shattered with this decision"
>
> "…We can continue to 'dare to dream' of a spectacular finish in the Moses Mabhida Stadium in 2021."
>
> "I can't believe that no feeling of arriving at Moses Mabhida from Pietermaritzburg, the feeling of dropping tears at Mabhida, the tears of joy"

4.3.2. Perceived effort

During the emergence of COVID-19 (*Phase B*) perceived effort was again evident in the level of training as well as the financial effort for the upcoming event. Training effort sample statements include:

> "…as a novice, this is the hardest I have trained in my life, but it is what it is"
>
> "…we're all holding on to hope that this year's Comrades will take place on 14 June. We have put in hours of training and made enormous sacrifices".

Financial effort sample statements include:

> "…Comrades should make their decision ASAP! Because many of us made flight and accommodation bookings; many of us booked long time ago".
>
> "Positive side effect (of COVID-19) is now I have money to add running shoes because I don't travel to races and no races to register later in the year"

During lockdown (*Phase C*) perceived effort in terms of training remained prominent. Here much conversation revolved around which is the easiest marathon to partake in, clearly indicating that no marathon is easy and that this is mainly dependant on the amount of effort (or training) the individual has invested. For example:

> "…It's all in the training"
>
> "…The one you thoroughly prepared for"

Finally, during lockdown (*Phase D*) financial losses from event cancellation were prominent, particularly regarding entry fees for event participation. Past studies show that perceived increased effort has a positive effect on increases in SWB (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Sirgy *et al*., 2016). In terms of perceived effort, SWB is reduced due to the financial losses for many participants who invested financial effort in event participation. This sample statement supports the perceived financial effort: "…This is our hard-earned money and we also spent a lot preparing for it."

4.3.3. Perceived challenge

During the emergence of COVID-19 (*Phase B*), perceived challenge is highlighted in training-related aspects. There is a notable shift from the physical challenge (pain and discomfort) before COVID-19 to the importance of training during the emergence of the COVID-19 phase. As noted in the literature review, increased effort, such as proper training for the marathon, assists in reducing the perceived level of difficulty (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016*;* Deci & Ryan, 2008). The importance of training is depicted in the following statement:

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"…You know what I like about Comrades marathon, if you didn't train, you can't finish the race".

During lockdown (*Phase C*) when no outdoor exercise was permitted, mental challenges and training challenges, both in relation to previous event participation experiences as well as the newly adopted garden running challenges, were expressed. Mental challenge examples include:

"…During National Anthem before Comrades Marathon start, what comes in your mind? I always feel very emotional just because of the fact I could make it to the start line. It's always a tough journey."
"…Last year was my first…on race day, nothing went to plan…it is far tougher and far longer than you think. Be very conservative in your expectations"
"…I did this new route...around my house in my yard. It is as challenging as the monster race. Just this one was more challenging for the mind than it was on the body."

The above findings are again indicative of creating new garden running challenges as compensatory consumption experiences that provide participants with a challenge (Cho *et al.*, 2021). Nostalgic behaviours (i.e., the sharing of memories from past participation) and communicating about new garden running challenges can also be viewed as attempts to increase SWB during times of restricted 'normal' consumption activities (Cho *et al.*, 2021).

During *Phase C* many of the training challenges related to participants having to find new ways of training during lockdown, such as garden running. Adapting one's training indicates that individuals will seek challenges to enhance their SWB, despite uncertain and changing circumstances. For example, one individual completed the Comrades distance in his driveway to raise funds for charity. Sample statements of training challenges:

"…Discipline is what I required to complete this mammoth workout of running a whole 22KM in the yard. That's approximately 88 laps of running around the yard. This type of workout requires the mind to be fit"
"…2km feels like 10k and 5km feels like a marathon."

After the event was cancelled (*Phase D*), running was permitted for a period of three hours per day. During this period, perceived challenges were about the physical and mental challenges of their previous Comrades experiences, as well as their COVID-19 experiences (e.g., the wearing of masks when running). Sample statements of the mental and physical challenges are:

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"…Down run is only easy on your mind but brutal to the body. The 'uprun' is forgiving on the body but brutal on the mind!"

"…but to run with a mask is so difficult - it's not possible to breathe inside that thing"

4.3.4. Perceived importance

The importance of participating in the Comrades event specifically, was evident across all the initial phases of COVID-19, thus emphasising the significance of this outcome goal in the careers of many a marathon runner.

During the emergence of COVID-19 (*Phase B*) when all sporting events were suspended temporarily, the importance of event participation is evident. The anticipated separation distress triggered negative emotions which suggestively reduced SWB. Past studies have also linked anticipated separation distress as an outcome of brand love (Aro *et al*., 2018) which could explain this reaction, also leading to an increase in the importance of event participation. The importance of event participation was not only evident in the fear of cancellation, but also in the hope that the event will still take place. The sense of panic and distress that was caused due to other marathon events being cancelled (i.e., qualifiers for Comrades) also indicate reduced SWB due to the possibility of not being able to partake in the 2020 event as a result of not qualifying. Below are some sample statements highlighting the importance of the Comrades event:

"…Now fearing for Comrades 2020 (cancellation)"

"…that's gona crush my spirit (cancellation)"

"…I am hopeful and waiting for Big C to go ahead."

"…We, Comrades runners continue with our training, so that we are ready for The Ultimate Human Race."

"…So let's stay calm, get ready and run our favourite race in June."

"…Wondering what will happen with so many qualifying races being cancelled in the next 4 weeks."

"Not yet (qualified) due to injury and I'm starting to panic with all this race cancellations/ postponements"

During lockdown (*Phase C*), perceived importance of event participation was again apparent, as well as the importance of running. The importance of event participation was expressed through the fear of an imminent cancellation and negative emotions such as emotional pain. Sample statements include:

"…there's no life without comrades"

"…am broken"

"…Let's just console ourselves guys! We will not run on 14th June 2020! Painful but very true."

The importance of running as an activity came to the fore again, showing that this forms an essential part of these individuals' lifestyles. Runners found ways to continue running in private areas, such as their gardens. These garden runs can be viewed as a coping mechanism to increase SWB due to restricted outdoor running as a lifestyle activity (Cho *et al*., 2021). The element of running addiction is again evident here. Herewith a few sample statements:

"…Withdrawal symptoms from running addiction includes running around your house like a mad person"

"…I run because I love it to run. It's our lifestyle. Not because we have to train. But because we want to run"

Finally, during lockdown (*Phase D*), perceived importance was expressed in the event participation (or lack thereof), event excitement (or lack thereof), and event commemoration (honouring the event). The importance of event participation came to the fore due to the inability to partake because of the cancellation of the Comrades. It is also interesting that some negated the financial effort mentioned earlier in favour of having the opportunity to partake again in future. These future intentions to support the event could potentially coincide with event brand love as an outcome of self-expressiveness (Aro *et al*., 2018). Here are some sample statements:

"…you know it's like missing the whole season of running if you miss Comrades"

"…Feeling bad, there are no words to describe the feeling. An empty feeling of nothingness into eternity. It matters not who says what"

"It's like I'm dreaming when they say Comrades marathon 2020 is cancelled, fellow comrades make me believe"

"…Definitely I'm running it even if it's a thousand rand the entry"

The importance of the excitement surrounding the Comrades was expressed by reminiscing on what will be missed most (i.e., nostalgic behaviours) (Cho *et al*., 2021). Statements supporting the importance of the event excitement include:

"…I am going to miss the comradery at the start of comrades. Singing the national anthem, Shosholoza and listening to chariots of fire with your fellow comrades is truly special"; and

"…. I am going to miss watching the last cut-off at the stadium. Screaming and encouraging your fellow comrade is truly something special'."

Finally, some runners were making plans to honour the Comrades with special activities on what would have been 'race day'. These are also examples of compensatory consumption behaviours from not being able to partake in the actual Comrades marathon as they normally would have (Cho *et al*., 2021). The importance of event commemoration is evident in the following sample statements:

"…I will be watching a Comrades Marathon from another year"

"…I will be doing 90km training to honour the day".

These are again examples of compensatory consumption behaviours from not being able to partake in the actual Comrades marathon as they normally would have (Cho *et al*., 2021).

4.4.   Summary of self-expressive dimensions and goal-types

Table 2.7 provides a summary of the dimensions of self-expressiveness (perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and importance of participation that were evident) from the main themes in eWOM. It includes reference to the associated goal types (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006) as these are important sources of motivation and contribute to the extent of perceived self-expression.

Table 2.7: Self-expressive dimensions (and goal types) in eWOM during COVID-19

	Prior to COVID-19 (Phase A)	Phase B	Phase C	Phase D
Time period	1 Jan - 15 Mar 2020	16 - 27 Mar 2020	28 Mar - 30 April 2020	1 - 31 May 2020
Situation related to COVID-19	**Marathon running (potential for self-expressive activities)**	**Emergence of COVID-19 (all events cancelled for 30 days)**	**No outdoor exercise permitted (strict lockdown)**	**Outdoor exercise (6-9am); Comrades 2020 event cancelled**
Self-realisation potential	*Process goals* (training) *Performance goals* (personal best times) *Outcome goals* (partake in CM)	*Performance goals* (related to personal achievements in previous marathon events)	***New context (Garden running activities)*** *Process goals* (training distances completed in garden) *Performance goals* (replicate marathon events in garden runs)	Loss of opportunities for self-realisation (*Outcome goal* not achieved)
Perceived effort	Training and financial effort (to achieve *outcome goal* to partake in CM)	Potential training-related and financial losses (to achieve *outcome goal*)	Anxiety related to training efforts (to achieve *outcome goal*)	Financial losses related to event cancellation
Perceived challenge	Physical challenges related to *process goals* (training) Training (to reduce challenge) and achieve *outcome goal* (partake in and complete Comrades marathon event in 2020)	Anxiety related to challenge of achieving *process goals* (training) Anxiety related to difficulties in training in the crisis context to reduce physical challenges to achieve *outcome goal* (complete CM)	Mental challenges related to garden running (to achieve *outcome goal*) Physical challenges (running laps in confined areas to achieve distances required increased perceived physical effort)	***New context (COVID-19 outdoor running)*** New challenges related to running with a mask
Perceived importance	Importance of *outcome goal* (partake in CM) Running is described as an addiction Extreme sacrifices runners are willing to make to partake in marathon events (as the *outcome goal*)	Importance of *outcome goal* (partake in CM) evident in fears of event cancellation	Importance of *outcome goal* (partake in CM) - fear of event cancellation and continuing training despite challenges of garden running and the hope that the event could take place	Importance of *outcome goal* through expression of negative emotions from event cancellation

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At the onset of COVID-19 (*Phase B*) (refer to Table 2.7 above) when sporting events were initially cancelled for 30 days, perceived importance was most prominent in the fears expressed regarding the potential cancellation of other marathon events, and in particular, the Comrades event. Individuals indicated their intention to continue with their training efforts to meet the perceived event challenge in the hope that the event could still take place. The significance of self-realisation potential was seen in the sharing of achievements in previous marathon events during a period of restricted event participation.

During lockdown, with no outdoor exercise permitted (*Phase C*) (refer to Table 2.7), the importance of event participation was most evident as runners reminisced about past event experiences. The need for self-expressiveness emerged as runners created their own 'garden running' goals and challenges, relevant to perceived self-realisation potential. In addition to the increased physical effort required to meet these goals, runners also often expressed the mental challenges experienced in this regard. Some even replicated actual marathon events through their garden runs. It was during this phase that the highest number of text-based posts (i.e., 1287) relating to self-expressiveness were realised. This could be explained by efforts to enhance SWB as posting on social media has been found to increase consumer happiness (Duan & Dholakia, 2017). Although, it could also simply be attributed to boredom (Cho *et al*., 2021).

During lockdown, when limited daily outdoor exercise was permitted (*Phase D*) (refer to Table 2.7), the conversation shifted to this new context around the challenges related to training while wearing a mask. Again, this discomfort is endured with the bigger picture in mind of training to be able to complete the 2020 event as this is important to them (after Scott *et al*., 2017; Voigt *et al*., 2010). Finally, upon cancellation of the Comrades event, the loss of opportunities to achieve this important goal in life (i.e., self-realisation potential) was clear. This could be explained by a key finding in another study on marathon runners of the London marathon which indicated the strength of identification that participants had with the activity of running (Shipway & Jones, 2008). Losses, such as entry fees not refunded and pre-booked travel arrangements (perceived effort) was also a common topic. Individuals shared their negative emotions and extreme disappointment related to the cancellation, again reflecting event importance. Runners gained comfort when considering the possibility of being able to partake in the event again in future and engaged in nostalgic conversation related to previous Comrades event experiences. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that consumers often engage in nostalgic behaviours in attempts to increase happiness when they cannot engage in 'normal' consumption experiences (Cho *et al*., 2014; Cho *et al*., 2021; Triantafillidou & Siomkos, 2014).

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of the study was to explore marathon running events from a self-expressive sport consumer perspective prior to and during three initial phases of the COVID-19 crisis with restricted event participation. Eudaimonistic identity theory was used as the theoretical underpinning. The Comrades marathon was used as case study as a major international marathon event that was cancelled for the first time in decades as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Netnography, an Internet-based research tool (Kozinets, 2002) was employed. Main themes were identified from eWOM among an online Comrades community of runners to obtain insights into self-expressive dimensions as well as runners 'lived' experiences as active sport consumers during a period of restricted event participation.

This study advances knowledge concerning the SWB related to marathon event participation for sport consumers and potential desirable marketing outcomes that may be associated with eudaimonic consumption experiences. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic was a severe pandemic that disrupted the lives of consumers globally, the findings of this study contribute to theoretical advancements with regards to such situations, particularly restricted sport event participation and sport consumers' emotional and behavioural responses in this regard.

The results suggest that marathon running events may provide opportunities for self-expressiveness through perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and importance of event participation, that may enhance consumer SWB from participation in such events. Furthermore, the negative emotions expressed during the initial phases of COVID-19 allude to reduced SWB from restricted event participation and various coping behaviours in attempts to enhance SWB during the crisis period. The findings of this study also show support for the potential of eudaimonic consumption experiences to enhance eWOM as a credible source of consumer communication, as well as the significant role that social media can play as a type of coping behaviour during periods of crisis.

5.1. Prior to COVID-19

This section discusses the findings related to the main themes and dimensions of self-expressiveness prevalent in eWOM prior to COVID-19. The main themes during phases of COVID-19 and dimensions of self-expressiveness related to the main themes are discussed thereafter.

5.1.1. Main themes in eWOM prior to COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19 main themes in eWOM mostly concerned topics related to event participation as well as training goals. The findings of the study suggest that when activities revolve around important goals related to a consumption experience, sport consumers may communicate aspects relevant to those goals. Consumption experiences that offer individuals opportunities to achieve important goals, may aid in enhanced eWOM about the event organisation prior to, sometimes during, and after the experience. This is relevant as eWOM has potential to produce desirable outcomes for organisations, for example, credible consumer communications (de Vries *et al*., 2017) as well as positive eWOM (Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012).

It is most evident from the findings of this study that marathon runners strongly identify with the activity of running and participation in marathon events. This was also a key finding among participants of the London marathon where the salience of their running identities was enhanced by the act of travelling to and residing in London both before and after the marathon (Shipway & Jones, 2008). A key finding of the current study in a sport consumer marketing context is that marathon runners frequently communicate about aspects related to their self-concept within online communities. Beliefs about the self, termed as self-concept (Sirgy, 1985), consists of self-image (actual or ideal) and social self-image (actual or ideal) (Sirgy, 1982, 1985). Prior to COVID-19, main themes that motivated eWOM relating to the self-concept (actual self), was primarily about training milestones achieved and past event experiences, whereas the self-concept (ideal self) was mostly about training goals and future intentions to partake in certain marathon events (de Vries *et al*., 2017; Sirgy, 1982, 1985). For the social self (actual or ideal), findings showed that runners share training advice, recommend other marathons and running apparel that may help others achieve their goals. This finding is supported by past studies suggesting that when a social identity becomes salient in a person's self-concept, it motivates behaviours that also contribute towards achieving a group's purposes and goals (Turner *et al*., 1994; Inoue *et al*., 2022).

The findings of this study show from authentic eWOM communications that marathon runners express their self-concept through running activities and marathon running events (Morgan & Townsend, 2022). When consumers express their self-concept (actual or ideal), this provides meaning to life and thereby enhances SWB (Batra *et al*., 2012; Bosnjak *et al*., 2016). It is suggested that marathon running events have potential to provide eudaimonic consumption experiences through such self-expressive activities, which may enhance SWB (after Bosnjak *et al*., 2016). Providing eudaimonic consumption experiences may also produce significant marketing communication outcomes in the form of social media content creation and content

contribution to enhance organisational credibility (de Vries *et al*., 2017). Another prominent finding relates to the strong positive feelings towards the event brand, which may even predict brand love and is significant considering potential favourable outcomes of brand love, such as spreading positive eWOM and encouraging future event participation intentions (Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012).

5.1.2. Prevalence of dimensions of self-expressiveness prior to COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19 *self-realisation* was evident in eWOM about all three goal types, namely, process, performance, and outcome goals (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006). Prior research has shown that self-realisation activities that involve achieving important goals enhance self-expressiveness through feeling fulfilled and building identity (Sirgy *et al*., 2016; Waterman *et al.,* 2008; Løvoll, 2019; Voigt, 2017). This is further supported by another study about obstacle races where the focus is on eudaimonia and suggests that participants have a high SWB (i.e., eudaimonia as a deeper type of happiness as opposed to hedonia) if they feel that they make progress towards a goal (Almeida-Santana, Moreno-Gil & Andersson, 2022).

Perceived effort was high concerning training and financial investments and as indicated in previous research, when an activity highly correlates with investing more effort to achieve important goals, there is an increase in self-expressiveness (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Voigt *et al*., 2010). *Perceived challenge* was indicated by the physical challenges posed by the event itself and related to the need to increase physical effort to reduce the perceived challenge. The challenge of the event was also prominent in conversation about the number of Comrades participants have started but not finished. In 2022, after events could again be staged, of the 13213 runners who took part in the 2022 Comrades Marathon, 11709 managed to make it to the finish line (Taylor, 2022). Scott *et al*. (2017) conducted an ethnographic study to explicate how pain helps consumers create the story of a fulfilled life. They explain that overcoming challenges regarding the pain and discomfort experienced, provides a deeper sense of meaning and growth, and hence provides a more eudaimonic experience. In this study participants even expressed their 'love' for the challenge.

From a eudaimonic perspective, the *perceived importance* of participating in an activity increases self-expressiveness (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 2011). The *importance* of event participation was evident in the sacrifices individuals are willing to make to be able to partake in the event and running was even described as a form of addiction by some. Past studies on marathon runners have thoroughly explored addiction related to long distance running and indicated that symptoms such as "anxiety, restlessness, irritability, frustration, depression, guilt, tension, and discomfort, but also loss of appetite, sleeplessness,

headaches, and digestion problems" are similar to those that might follow a sudden discontinuation or decrease of drug intake (Gross, 2021:9). Running, however, is perceived by runners as a "healthier" addiction as opposed to other behaviours, for example, "Some People Smoke and Drink, I Run" as stated by a marathon runner in an ethnographic study by Gross (2021:1). Nevertheless, other ethnographic studies have also shown that marathon runners partake in such events as opportunities for self-actualisation (e.g., Leedy, 2009) as well as for physical and psychological benefits (e.g., Shipway & Holloway, 2010).

It is thus clear that prior to COVID-19, participation in the Comrades allowed participants to experience a deeper sense of meaning, and therefore self-expression. This was evident from eWOM about self-expressive dimensions such as perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and perceived importance of marathon running as well as participating in the Comrades event specifically. Some of the consequences of self-identification with the activity of running are also supported in a past study on marathon runners who identify the need for personal effort to complete the event, the perseverance of the activity (i.e., in terms of training and competing), the durable benefits (e.g., self-expressiveness) and the 'career structure', to be outcomes of identification with the activity of running (Shipway & Jones, 2008).

5.2.   During phases related to COVID-19

5.2.1. Main themes in eWOM during COVID-19

During COVID-19 emergence (before strict lockdown but when events were suspended) the main themes related to the fear of not being able to qualify for the event due to event restrictions. Another prominent topic in eWOM was that runners would continue training in the *hope* that Comrades could still take place. Past research has found that hope can be a coping mechanism, where hope is essentially a positive phenomenon with its key purpose being the avoidance of despair and then "permitting the individual psychologically to bypass ongoing unpleasant or stressful situations" (Korner, 1970:1). There was also evidence of the salience of self-identification with the Comrades running community as it was stated that, "We Comrades runners continue our training". In this sense, the focus is on individuals who define themselves in terms of the groups to which they belong ('we') rather than their own personal characteristics ('I'), similar to the strength of identification through marathon running as found by Shipway and Jones (2008).

During the pandemic, social distancing prompted sport consumers to search for and consume fitness products to compensate for the lack of fulfilment during this time (Cho *et al.*, 2021). In

this study, runners engaged in 'garden' running activities as alternative (or compensatory) consumption behaviours to compensate for the potential loss in opportunities for self-expressiveness and to increase SWB (Cho *et al*., 2021; Smith & Lazarus, 1990). During COVID-19, when the event was finally cancelled, plans were made to commemorate the day, and this can also be regarded as an alternative (or compensatory) consumption behaviour in the context of this study.

There was also much evidence of nostalgic conversation (sharing of memories) in terms of past marathon event participation. Nostalgia was found to be a coping behaviour among sport consumers during the pandemic considering the inability to engage in 'normal' consumption experiences (Cho *et al*., 2021). Although this study also found much evidence of shared memories, Cho *et al*. (2021) additionally found that boredom may have been associated with increased consumption of fitness products. Boredom, however, was not considered in the current study. This study did, however, consider the use of social media as a coping tool during the pandemic (Wolfers & Utz, 2022).

The increase in social media communication was evident in this study and is similar to the findings of previous studies which found that stress triggered social media use during the pandemic (e.g., Nabi, Wolfers, Walter & Qi, 2022; Pahayahay & Khalili-Mahani, 2022). Wolfers and Utz (2022) posit that social media can be used for three main coping strategies, including: a) seeking social support; b) to improve stress-induced negative emotions, such as distracting oneself from a stressful encounter and venting emotions; and c) to solve the stress-evoking problem. The findings of the current study showed that runners used social media as a coping tool considering all three coping strategies. Negative emotions, such as fears and anxieties regarding potential event cancellation, followed by the actual event cancellation, were evident in eWOM among the online running community. Garden running activities served as an alternative to solving the stress-evoking problem of restricted event participation amongst the online community. These garden running activities also lead to an increase in self-expressiveness (and thereby also an increase in SWB) through communicating about their garden running activities with others who could relate (Obst & Stafurik, 2010; Wirtz, Tucker, Briggs & Schoemann, 2021). Posting content on social media about self-expressive activities, in this case garden running, have also been found to contribute to consumer happiness (Duan & Dholakia, 2017; Wolfers & Utz, 2022).

5.2.2. Prevalence of self-expressiveness dimensions during COVID-19

During COVID-19 emergence, the *importance* of event participation became clear in the anxiety related to reduced opportunities to qualify for the Comrades event, the potential event

cancellation and plans to continue training in the hope that the event could take place. This may be related to the strength of identification with marathon running and the durable benefits, in this case, self-expressiveness, and the 'career structure' associated with distance running (Shipway & Jones, 2008; Qiu *et al*., 2019). The importance of achieving the outcome goal, which aligns with self-realisation was also evident (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006).

During COVID-19 with no outdoor exercise permitted, the need for self-expressiveness emerged strongly as runners engaged in garden running activities as new goals set for self-realisation. New garden running challenges were set, which required much effort (physical and mental) to complete. The importance of the outcome goal (to keep up training efforts in the hope that Comrades may still take place) and the importance of participation in other marathon events was evident through the replication of 'real' marathon events as garden runs. These experiences were shared among the online community as self-defining activities (Batra *et al*., 2012; Bosnjak *et al*., 2016), which may also have enhanced SWB during the lockdown period as Duan and Dholakia (2017) posit that posting content on social media that is relevant to the "self", contributes to consumer happiness.

During COVID-19 when the Comrades event was cancelled, the loss of the opportunities for self-realisation to achieve the outcome goal was evident (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006). Negative emotions of disappointment were expressed among the community. One runner even stated "…you know it's like missing the whole season of running if you miss Comrades". The importance of event participation, despite the high level of effort invested and challenge, was evident upon event cancellation.

5.3.   Managerial implications

The findings of this study have some important managerial implications. The results of the study indicate that sport marketers can enhance sport consumer SWB through providing opportunities for self-expressiveness. From this study's findings, it is suggested that sport marketers could capitalise on the SWB effects of sport event participation by considering the dimensions of self-expressiveness investigated in this study, namely, perceived self-realisation potential, level of effort, challenge, and importance of event participation to individuals. This is significant because consumers are increasingly seeking opportunities for self-expressiveness through consumption experiences which could be provided through sport event participation (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Cai *et al*., 2020; Su *et al*., 2020).

Marketers should consider the types of happiness and potential deeper meaning that may be derived from participation in self-defining activities such as sport events (Cai *et al*., 2020; Su

et al., 2020). Sport marketers have unique opportunities to enhance SWB through sporting events which can also result in marketing communications benefits for these organisations. The findings show through authentic eWOM that event participants frequently communicate aspects related to their self-concept from consumption experiences via social media. Sport marketing managers could enhance credible communications via eWOM through providing opportunities for consumers to express their self-concept. For example, they could create social media opportunities for sport event participants to communicate about their past experiences and future participation intentions. They could design competitions where event participants can share their event consumption experiences, encouraging further interactions with the event organisation.

Event marketers could also incorporate dimensions of self-expressiveness to deliver more targeted marketing communications when promoting events and sport apparel related to achieving important goals. For example, when promoting events, marketers can communicate about the potential of such events to achieve important goals in life that would distinguish them from other sport consumers. They can also emphasise the meaningfulness of such event experiences as self-defining activities. Sporting goods could also be marketed through messages of enhancing self-expressiveness, given the heightened understanding of these precursors to SWB.

Marketers can enhance opportunities for self-realisation in future development of sport events through incorporating various goals, or by focussing on a specific goal to be achieved as an outcome for sport consumers. These goals should require a reasonable amount of perceived effort to meet the challenge(s) to achieve the desired goal(s). Sport marketers could aim to assist individuals to achieve these goals. For example, event organisations can provide training plans on websites, recommend apparel, or host virtual sessions providing information that may assist participants to develop skills for goal accomplishments. They could also host a range of outcome goals to meet a 'larger' outcome goal. For example, they could host a series of running events where sport consumers must complete all events to achieve the larger outcome goal. Sport marketers could develop new challenges, such as those that require increased effort and perseverance (after Shipway & Jones, 2008). Sport event marketers should take cognisance of the importance that individuals place on event participation as their high level of involvement and commitment also implies engagement with the provider (organisation) along the consumption journey (after Behnam *et al.*, 2021).

Event organisations can create their own social media platforms, such as Facebook, to encourage consumer communications where consumers can share advice on how to realise

their goals. They can also make use of platforms, such as Instagram, to enhance opportunities for consumers to express their self-concept through encouraging posts that relate to achieving their event goal (e.g., posting photos of their medals or photos at the finish line) as well as the perceived effort and challenges involved in event participation. This is also relevant considering that posting content on social media about consumption experiences that are relevant to the 'self' (posting for self-expression) contributes to consumer happiness (SWB) (Duan & Dholakia, 2017).

Sport event organisations have unique potential to aid individuals in achieving long-term happiness (as opposed to short-term happiness) and to create a better society. This is relevant as the most successful organisations today are increasingly demonstrating not only financial but also societal benefits (Garner, Thornton, Lou Pawluk, Mora Cortez, Johnston & Ayala, 2022). During the crisis period, important insights were also provided for event marketers through reduced SWB from restricted event participation. The findings also indicate the strong identification with the activity of running and to the event brand through nostalgic conversations, expressing negative emotions and alternative garden running activities. Sport marketers should take cognisance of the findings, and should another crisis occur that results in restricted event participation, they could encourage positive emotions among consumers by stimulating the sharing of past experiences and creating event alternatives using insights gained from eWOM among the brand community. Importantly, participants should be afforded opportunities to share their experiences and accomplishments on social media platforms where they may experience a sense of belonging within an online community, also relevant to enhancing SWB (Obst & Stafurik, 2010; Wirtz *et al*., 2021).

Given the heightened understanding of eudaimonic consumption experiences, marketers should focus on dimensions of self-expressiveness that enhance the self-concept and positive emotions that may result from event participation. Restricted event participation also showed evidence of strong attachment to the event brand. Marketers should continue to create new opportunities for eudaimonic consumption experiences as this can not only ensure event sustainability but also aid in increasing SWB - a heightened priority amidst the uncertainties created by the pandemic (Brooks, Webster, Smith, Woodland, Wessely & Greenberg, 2020; Yang *et al*., 2022). Importantly, participants should be afforded opportunities to share their experiences and accomplishments on social media platforms where they may experience a sense of belonging within an online community, also relevant to enhancing SWB (Obst & Stafurik, 2010; Wirtz *et al*., 2021).

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study contributes to the literature in the field of SCB and event consumption experiences by addressing three main gaps. First, although the concept of eudaimonia has been explored in endurance activities, this study is one of the first to explore marathon running events from a eudaimonistic perspective, with self-expressiveness as a precursor, to understand the potential SWB benefits from marathon running event participation. This was most useful as eudaimonistic identity theory is more relevant than other well-being theories to explain serious leisure consumption behaviours (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Deci & Ryan 2000; Maslow, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2001). The findings suggest that self-expressiveness can be enhanced through perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and the importance of event participation.

Secondly, dimensions of self-expressiveness were explored via authentic eWOM communications. The main themes in eWOM prior to COVID-19 were related to expressing the self-concept in terms of frequent communication about achieving marathon goals and future intentions to partake in marathon events. The findings show that positive emotions were generated from marathon events and were perceived to be meaningful as these runners shared their consumption experiences via eWOM (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Morgan & Townsend, 2022), often regarded as one of the most credible and influential types of marketing communication (Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016). Eudaimonic consumption experiences thus also indicate important benefits for event organisations in terms of positive eWOM communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in restricted sport event participation not previously explored during a prolonged and unprecedented crisis. This study thus also contributes to a gap in crisis literature within the field of SCB through exploring the effects of restricted event participation on active sport consumers. Overall, findings indicate that COVID-19 negatively affected SWB through evidence of negative emotions expressed in eWOM about the anxiety related to the potential loss of opportunities to achieve important goals. There was evidence of engagements in alternative (compensatory) consumption behaviours to enhance SWB, such as increased sharing of memories from past event experiences (nostalgia), garden running activities and making plans to commemorate the day of the 'live' event upon event cancellation. The findings of the study indicate the importance of marathon event participation and self-expressiveness for these consumers and the potential of these events to contribute to eudaimonia as a meaningful, long-term type of happiness.

To be able to generalise findings of netnography to a particular online group or other groups, researchers should apply evaluations of similarity and employ multiple methods for triangulation (Kozinets, 2002). A limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be generalised to other groups. Future research could apply additional research techniques, such as interviews or focus groups, to further validate the findings of this study. This study was also limited to Facebook posts. Participants who utilise other social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, were not included, as well as individuals who did not belong to any social media groups. Future research could study participants who belong to other online running communities, as well as those participants who are still 'offline'.

This study was delimited to exploring dimensions of self-expressiveness in eWOM as one of the main motivators for social media content creation (after de Vries *et al.*, 2017). However, self-expressiveness has also been found to be a significant predictor of other behavioural outcomes in marketing studies, such as purchase intentions, recommendations, price insensitivity, positive WOM (online and offline) and loyalty (Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016; Saenger, Thomas & Johnson, 2013). Future studies could explore other desirable marketing outcomes of self-expressiveness from a eudaimonic perspective that were not considered in the current study. These aspects could be explored further in other sporting codes and event marketing. The potential marketing benefits associated with eudaimonistic consumption experiences can also be explored quantitatively through developing various conceptual models based on the findings of the current study.

The findings of this study are also suggestive of love for the event brand. Future research could explore the potential of event brands to become 'loved' brands when participants experience dimensions of self-expressiveness through participation in self-defining activities, as well as other types of events that provide consumers with opportunities for self-expressiveness through achieving important goals.

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CHAPTER 3: ARTICLE 2

EXPLORING THE ENDURING EFFECTS OF EVENT BRAND LOVE AMIDST THE COVID-19 CRISIS: A SOCIAL LISTENING STUDY

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The main research aim is to determine the extent to which potential event brand love is affected during a prolonged crisis. More specifically, the aim is to explore whether dimensions of event brand love feature in eWOM and whether the known desirable outcomes of brand love are sustainable during a real-life crisis considering an event organisation's crisis response strategy (CRS).

Design/methodology/approach – Netnography was employed to explore how event brand love featured in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in a crisis context. Data was collected from an online Comrades Marathon Facebook community, across a 10-week period, from the onset of COVID-19 in South Africa. Directed content analysis was used to analyse 767 text-based statements to verify a chosen set of dimensions (antecedents and outcomes) related to brand love. Of the statements analysed, 387 were directly related to opinions (positive and negative) about the event organisation's CRS and an inductive analysis was used to identify main themes in this regard.

Findings – The results indicate that the dimensions of brand love emerged in eWOM to varying degrees. Evidence of self-brand expressiveness was most prominent in eWOM. Importantly, two crisis-related outcomes, namely, anticipated separation distress and brand defence, were apparent in the findings. Although brand love has potential to negate some of the negative effects of a brand crisis, it does not inevitably have the power to negate all negative consequences. Organisations should not rely solely on consumers' love for their brands during a crisis but focus on implementing the most appropriate CRS by 'listening' to their online brand communities.

Originality/value – Limited research has considered brand love specifically for a sport event brand. Moreover, inconsistencies in brand love literature regarding the enduring effects of brand love, warrants this research. Rarely have the enduring effects of brand love been considered during an actual period of a sustained global crisis such as COVID-19, as the situation unfolded. Also, the data is explored unobtrusively, with no interference from the researcher to reflect genuine responses.

Keywords: *brand love, marathon running, event participants, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), COVID-19, crisis response strategy (CRS), netnography*

1. INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was identified as a Public Health Emergency (Perold, Hattingh & Bruwer, 2020). Given the rapid spread of the disease worldwide, social distancing restrictions were imposed globally (Perold *et al.*, 2020). Sport event organisations and administrators initially faced difficult decisions on how best to respond to the uncertainties surrounding the crisis. International sport event organisers had to decide whether to postpone or cancel events for the first time in decades (Weed, 2020). This resulted in the criticism of some major event organisations regarding the crisis response strategies (CRS) employed during the early phases of the prolonged crisis (Weed, 2020). Arguably, this brought about a new type of crisis in the form of an 'event brand crisis'.

Consumers increasingly use social media platforms as a convenient and inexpensive way to voice their disappointments, frustrations or negative service experiences (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Javornik, Filieri, & Gumann, 2020; Schaefers & Schamari, 2016; Yuan, Lin, Filieri, Liu & Zheng, 2020). It is thus proposed that evidence of the event brand crisis would be visible in the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communications among online brand communities of these events. Due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, social media communications increased significantly during the early stages of the pandemic as one of the limited means by which individuals could connect with one another (Hutchinson, 2020). In any consumer communications, negative information is often regarded as having a greater impact on evaluations than positive information (Skowronski, Donal, Mae & Crawford, 1998). Negative eWOM thus intensifies the impact of a brand crisis on consumers' perceptions of the brand and its reputation (Khan & Sukhotu, 2020). Nonetheless, it has been proposed that brand love has the potential to negate the negative impact of a brand crisis (Zhang, Zhang & Sakulsinlapakorn, 2020). It is thus significant to explore brand love during the real-life crisis to further explore this phenomenon.

Brand love is a central aim of brand managers (Amaro, Barroco & Antunes, 2020) and is defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular brand" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006:81). Brand love is beneficial for event organisations considering some of the desirable outcomes of brand love (after Pike, 2016). Brand love has been studied for popular sport brands, such as Nike (Langner, Bruns, Fischer & Rossiter, 2016) and sport event host destination brands (Aro, Suomi & Saraniemi, 2018; Amaro *et al.*, 2020). However, *event* brand love has not been considered. More specifically, brand love has not previously been studied in a high-profile sport event context, where highly involved participants are expected to be strongly attached to the brand through self-expression

(Bosnjak, Brown, Lee, Yu & Sirgy, 2016). Hence, little is known about how the known dimensions (i.e., antecedents and outcomes) of event brand love may feature in a sport event brand context.

Brand love can be most valuable to event organisations in crisis situations because when consumers love their brands, they will be more tolerant of brand transgressions or service failure (Zhang *et al.*, 2020) and will often defend the brand in a crisis (Ali, Dogan, Amin, Hussain & Ryu, 2021). There are, however, inconsistencies in brand love literature regarding the proposed enduring effects of brand love within a crisis (Ali *et al.*, 2021; Aro *et al.*, 2018; Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012; Kang, Slaten & Choi, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2020). While some studies show that brand love has positive long-term effects (Huber, Meyer & Schmid, 2015), few studies have examined whether these outcomes endure past a certain point (Amaro *et al.*, 2020). This merits the need for further research on this subject (Amaro *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2020).

Implementing an effective CRS is crucial for organisations to survive and recover from unfavourable circumstances (Rasoolimanesh, Seyfi, Rastegar, & Hall, 2021). Since a crisis response has not been explored during a sustained global crisis such as COVID-19, it is not known whether the desirable outcomes of event brand love, specifically positive eWOM, as an overarching enduring effect of brand love, may have been sustainable during the crisis. One way to gauge these impacts is by observing consumers' opinions (positive and negative) regarding an event organisation's CRS. These insights can effectively be obtained from eWOM among online brand communities (Prado-Gascó, Moreno, Sanz, Núñez-Pomar & Hervás, 2017; Thorpe, 2017).

The main research aim is to determine the extent to which potential event brand love is affected during a prolonged crisis. More specifically, the aim is to explore whether dimensions of event brand love feature in eWOM and whether the known desirable outcomes of brand love are sustainable during a real-life crisis considering an event organisation's crisis response strategy (CRS).

To address the main aim, the following research questions are explored:
- To what extent do the known dimensions of brand love feature as themes in eWOM among an online community of marathon runners of a high-profile marathon event during a prolonged crisis?
- What are the main themes in eWOM regarding the marathon event organisation's CRS?

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- To what extent do the main themes related to the brand love dimensions and the CRS reflect positive eWOM as an enduring effect of brand love during a real-life crisis?

The high-profile sport event case study used in this research is the Comrades Marathon (hereafter referred to as Comrades). The Comrades is the world's oldest and largest ultra-marathon event hosted annually in South Africa by the Comrades Marathon Association (CMA) (CMA, 2020; Scholtz, 2019). The Comrades is commonly known as South Africa's 'most beloved' race (Thomsen, 1995). The event was initially postponed and later cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19 (Ray, 2020) and little is known about how the event organisation's CRS may have affected brand love in this real-life crisis context.

Through social listening, which can be described as monitoring digital conversations to understand what consumers are saying about a brand or organisation online (Reid & Duffy, 2018), the current study explores what event participants were saying about the CMA's CRS during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis. The content of social media Facebook posts of an online Comrades community were used for analysis, following a netnographic approach. This approach was employed, as deeper insights could be obtained from authentic eWOM, including positive and negative eWOM about the brand and organisation's CRS as the situation unfolded (Grewal, Hulland, Kopalle, & Karahanna, 2020).

The academic contribution of this study lies in the exploration of *event* brand love not previously explored in brand love literature. Furthermore, an event organisation's CRS during the COVID-19 crisis and the effects on event brand love has not been explored. This study is unique in that brand love is explored during an actual period of a sustained global crisis, whereas crisis management literature frequently utilises fictitious scenarios of crisis situations (Vafeiadis, Bortree, Buckley, Diddi & Xiao, 2019). As such, this study expands on inconsistent findings on the proposed enduring effects of brand love during a real-life crisis.

Managerial implications are provided for event marketers by highlighting some of the desirable outcomes of brand love for event organisations. The exploration of positive eWOM as a proposed enduring effect of brand love provides insights on the role of brand love for organisations during a brand crisis. This study aims to better equip brand managers in the sporting realm to deal with crisis situations more effectively.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides the context of the sport event crisis and impetus for conducting the study. It also considers the relevance of exploring eWOM in crisis situations. The concept of brand love and the brand love prototype is described, and various antecedents and outcomes (i.e., general and crisis-related) are provided.

2.1. Context of the sport event crisis and impetus for the study

In the early stages of the global pandemic of COVID-19, there was an initial ban on sporting events as South Africa's government declared a National State of Disaster (Perold *et al.*, 2020). This implied that major sporting event organisers had to make decisions on whether to postpone or cancel their 2020 events. This was not an easy decision as this would be the first time in decades that these events could not be hosted (Swart & Maralack, 2020; Weed, 2020). Some major sporting events, such as the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo were initially postponed due to the uncertainties of the virus and the chance that the event could still take place (CMA, 2020; Weed, 2020). While many supported decisions to initially delay events, others accused these organisations of not taking societal health into consideration, being more concerned with their own financial or other losses related to potential event cancellations (Weed, 2020). Arguably, this was the beginning of a second type of crisis for these event organisations in the form of an *event* brand crisis (CMA, 2020; Weed, 2020).

The Comrades was deemed suitable as a case study to explore the effects of a proposed event brand crisis during COVID-19. A brief background is provided on the Comrades and the event organisation's CRS during the early phases of COVID-19.

The Comrades marathon as case study

The Comrades is an international marathon event hosted annually in South Africa. Considering the "rich race history, its contribution to society and immense economic impact", cancelling what would have been the 95th edition of the event, was a decision that could not have been taken lightly (Laelowerveld, 2020). Upon lockdown (mid-March 2020) the CMA communicated that they would inform participants on their decision to postpone or cancel the 2020 event. Although no events were permitted, the substitution process remained open. Also, there were no marathon events for participants to complete their qualifier as per the race requirements (CMA, 2020). Almost a month later, on 17 April 2020, the CMA announced that the event would be postponed, with a new date to be confirmed. This decision created much anxiety amongst event participants regarding the event potentially taking place later in the

year (during the warmer summer months) with less favourable race conditions. Also, carefully planned training schedules would need to be adjusted (CMA, 2020).

Then on 14 May 2020, a month before the event was scheduled to take place, with the country still under lockdown conditions, the CMA finally announced their decision to cancel. As per the race entry terms and conditions, no refunds were offered. However, given the considerably higher cost of race entry fees for international entrants, they received an entry into the following year's event (CMA, 2020). Compensation for national entrants included the 2020 edition of the Comrades T-shirt, badge and 'goodie bag' containing various items from the event sponsors (CMA, 2020). On 18 May 2020, the CMA announced that they would be hosting their inaugural, 'Race the Comrades Legends' virtual race, on 14 June 2020. National entrants also received a free entry into the virtual event.

The CMA's CRS arguably brought about an event brand crisis. This sentiment was validated in open communications where the CMA chairperson apologised for the anxiety that may have been caused by delaying decisions and the uncertainties involved. The chairperson stated that the CMA had taken cognisance of "the criticisms, expressions of anxiety and concerns pertaining to specific aspects, such as the cancellation of qualifying events, the substitution period, restrictions on training and entry fees" (CMA, 2020). Also, the president of Athletics South Africa (ASA) tried to explain that it would have been premature to rush into an outright cancellation sooner with the uncertainties surrounding the virus (Laelowerveld, 2020).

Event participants' responses to the CMA's CRS could be effectively gauged through 'listening' to the event brand's online communities via eWOM (Grewal *et al*., 2020; Prado-Gascó *et al*., 2017; Thorpe, 2017). Individuals engaged with each other through social media and openly expressed their opinions regarding the initial postponement of the event, the cancellation and compensation offered. Runners also commented on partaking in a virtual event, a somewhat novel concept to most runners at the time. Valuable insights could be gained by 'listening' to social media conversation and served as input to the research questions for this study (Prado-Gascó *et al*., 2017; Thorpe, 2017). Also relevant is that the Comrades is often referred to as South Africa's 'most beloved' race with implications of strong positive feelings towards the event brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Thomsen, 1995).

Event brand love is explored in this study and considers the relevance of brand love within a crisis context. Exploring event participants' sentiments to the event organization's CRS through authentic eWOM could provide valuable insights into the effects of brand love during the prolonged crisis (Dalman, Buche & Min, 2019; Wallace, Buil & de Chernatony, 2014).

There is also evidence suggesting that when consumers love a certain brand, they are more willing to spread positive eWOM about the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Karjaluoto, Munnukka & Kiuru, 2016; Wallace *et al*., 2014).

2.2. The relevance of exploring eWOM in crisis situations

New technologies and social media platforms, such as Facebook, facilitate online information sharing and social connection among consumers (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Mehta, Sarvaiya & Chandani, 2022). Consumer-generated communication (or eWOM) is often perceived as being more reliable and relevant than official marketing communications, as it is viewed as being more authentic in nature (Keller, 2013). It is also recognised that social media content generated by brand consumers play a significant role during a crisis (Nadeau, Rutter & Lettice, 2020).

An online brand community is a group of individuals with common interest in a brand or activity, and who communicate with each other electronically (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). As a more trusted source within the consumer's personal network, eWOM is relevant for organisations as it significantly influences consumers' decision-making and consequently consumer purchases (Basuroy, Chatterjee & Ravid; 2003; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

In this study, a crisis is defined as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organisation's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" (Coombs, 2007:164). A brand's reaction to a crisis should be effectively managed as consumers regularly form opinions about organisations (and their brands) based on how the organisation responds to a crisis (Vafeiadis *et al*., 2019; Yuan *et al*., 2020). To implement an appropriate and timely CRS, it is important to know what consumers are saying (positive and negative statements) about the brand during a crisis. Today this information can easily be accessed through eWOM about a product, service, or brand by potential, actual, or former customers (Allard, Dunn & White, 2020; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004; Kim & Johnson, 2016).

Consumers' negative reactions towards a brand pose one of the largest threats to any organisation. The spreading of negative eWOM, today accelerated by social media (Javornik *et al*., 2020; Kim & Johnson, 2016), can be most damaging to an organisation's reputation (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Grappi & Romani, 2015). Most studies show that negative eWOM spreads more rapidly than positive eWOM and has a stronger impact on a consumer's perception of the brand (Filieri, Raguseo, & Vitari, 2019; Herr, Kardes & Kim, 1991; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). This is significant in a crisis as consumers may change their attitudes

towards brands following a brand crisis, and subsequently communicate their negative opinions within online communities (Dawar & Lei, 2009). The marketing concept of brand love is also relevant in a crisis, and it has been suggested that brand love has the potential to negate the negative impact of a brand crisis (Ali *et al*., 2021; Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012; Dalman *et al*., 2019; Kang *et al*., 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2020). Hence, this is also explored in the current study and the crisis context.

2.3. The concept of brand love and the brand love prototype

Today, achieving liking or satisfaction is no longer sufficient to retain customer loyalty over time (Jones & Sasser, 1995) and marketers are rather encouraged to find ways to make their brands loved by consumers (Castaño & Perez, 2014; Wallace *et al*., 2014). Brand love stems from brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998; Ruane & Wallace, 2015), which suggests that when consumers have long-term relationships with brands and/or engage in self-brand expressiveness with brands, these brands offer deeper meaning (Fournier, 1998). In turn, consumers act in ways to protect and support the brand's reputation (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015; Kennedy & Guzman, 2020). As such, brand love can also affect how consumers respond to brand transgressions (Kennedy & Guzman, 2020).

Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, which concentrates on interpersonal love, has been extensively applied to consumer research (Hatfield, 1988; Palusuk, Koles & Hasan, 2019). Sternberg's theory holds that various types of love are created through three primary dimensions (Batra *et al*., 2012; Palusuk *et al*., 2019). *Intimacy* refers to feelings, thoughts and actions connected to the experience of relationship closeness; *passion* is the passionate attraction consumers feel for brands linked with romance, self-esteem and self-actualisation; and *decision/commitment* captures a cognitive perception of love (Batra *et al*., 2012; Palusuk *et al*., 2019). Batra *et al*. (2012) point out that brand love cannot be directly compared to interpersonal love, as several types of personal love, such as the romantic, passionate, and parental cannot directly be applied to study brand love. Also, interpersonal love tends to overlook the critical aspects of how loved brands become part of the consumer's identity and provides intrinsic benefits. Despite these drawbacks, Batra *et al*. (2012) note that it is still appropriate to use interpersonal relationship literature as supporting evidence for research on consumer-brand relationships.

Considering the above, brand love is often studied as a prototype approach, which involves the definition of a list of attributes that consumers typically associate with a specific concept (Fehr & Russell, 1991; Bairrada, Coelho & Coelho, 2018). Based on the brand love prototype (Fournier, 1998; Ruane & Wallace, 2015), brand love is positioned as a type of relationship

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that consumers establish with brands, comprising "multiple interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements, rather than a specific, single, transient love emotion" (Batra *et al*., 2012:6). Some characteristics of the brand love relationship prototype include a long-term relationship with the brand, where the consumer has an overall positive attitude, has a positive emotional connection, identifies with the brand, and will experience a form of negative emotional pain should the brand cease to exist (Batra *et al*., 2012). This study applies the brand love prototype as the theoretical underpinning of the study.

The dimensions of brand love in the current study are drawn from the brand love prototype, including two antecedents, four general outcomes and two crisis-specific outcomes of brand love. The dimensions of event brand love explored in the current study are depicted in Figure 3.1 and a discussion of these dimensions is provided thereafter.

Figure 3.1: Dimensions of event brand love
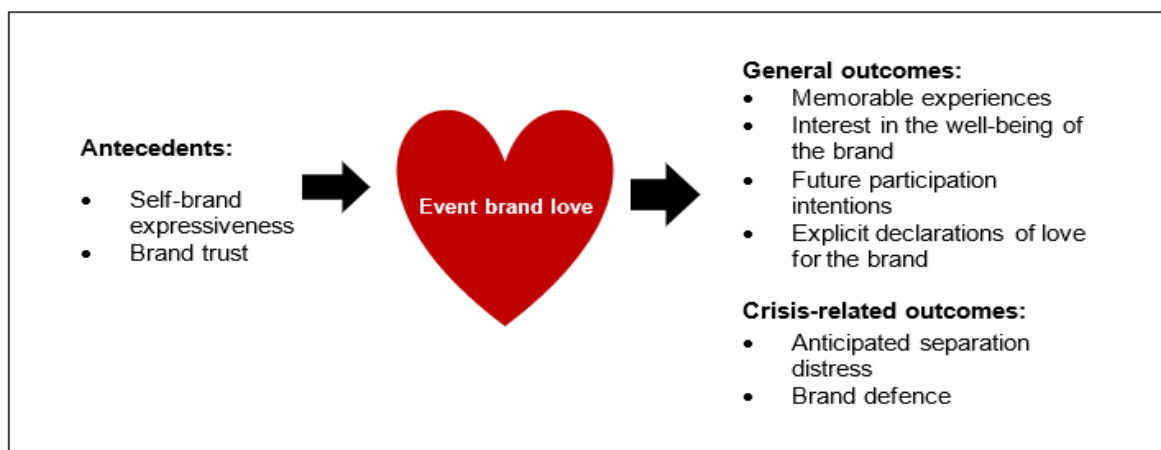
2.4. Antecedents of event brand love

When consumers love certain brands, they often use these brands to communicate aspects of the self to others (Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016), as well as their confidence (or trust) in the brand to perform its claimed functions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Evidence of self-brand expressiveness and brand trust in eWOM is thus suggestive of brand love and are explored as antecedents of brand love in the current study (Aro *et al*., 2018 Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016).

2.4.1. Self-brand expressiveness

Brands can help consumers self-express, either because the brands themselves are self-expressive or because they are associated with a desired prototypical consumer group (Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016). Self-brand expressiveness aligns with self-brand integration in the brand love prototype suggesting that when consumers frequently think about a brand, they

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often use the brand to express their current or desired self-identity, providing meaning to life (Batra *et al*., 2012). Self-brand expressiveness is frequently proposed as an antecedent of brand love (An, Do, Quan & Ngo, 2019; Aro *et al*., 2018), where 'self-expressive' refers to a consumer's perception of the degree to which the specific brand enhances the consumer's social-self and reflects the inner self (An *et al*., 2019; Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016). Brands that encourage consumers to express themselves, are most likely to be loved (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016).

Based on social identity theory, individuals use the symbolic value of brands to express their self-concepts (Styvén, Mariani & Strandberg, 2020; Taylor, Strutton & Thompson, 2012). Participants in major international marathon events, for example, the Comrades, Boston or New York Marathon, may use these event brands to support and enact their self-concept (Taylor *et al*., 2012). Brand uniqueness, defined as: "the degree to which customers feel the brand is different from competing brands" (Netemeyer, Krishnan, Pullig, Wang, Yagci, Dean, & Wirth, 2004:211), is also related to social identity theory. The Comrades brand is unique given its long-standing history, the extreme challenge the race presents, and the prestige associated with event participation (CMA, 2020). Marathon runners who express their current or desired self-identity for 'loved' event brands are likely to communicate with others about their event consumption experiences or potentially their future intentions to partake in such events to reflect their real or ideal self-concept (Batra *et al*., 2012).

2.4.2. Brand trust

Brand trust is the consumer's belief that a brand can perform its claimed functions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Brand trust is a necessary precondition for all long-term consumer brand-related relationships (Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016; Matzler, Grabner-Kräuter & Bidmon, 2008). This is in line with the brand love prototype where long-term relationships are characteristic of brand love (Batra *et al*., 2012). As brand trust is built from past experiences, it will also reflect in future brand experiences (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Brand trust is thus also an antecedent of brand love (Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016). Brand trust is reflective of strong positive attitudes towards a brand where consumers hold a high degree of certainty and confidence in their feelings about a focal brand (Batra *et al*., 2012). As such, brand trust is relevant in a brand crisis as consumers who trust the brand may infer that the organisation will correct their mistakes appropriately and keep their promises in the future (Coulter & Coulter, 2002). Applicable to this study, if participants love the event brand, they may communicate their trust in the event organisation to respond appropriately to the COVID-19 crisis.

2.5. General outcomes of event brand love

As previously noted, positive eWOM is suggested as an overarching enduring effect of brand love (Dalman *et al*., 2019; Wallace *et al*., 2014). Other managerially relevant outcomes of brand love with relevance to a sporting context include memorable experiences (or nostalgia) (Aro *et al*., 2018; Cho, Ramshaw & Norman, 2014), interest in the well-being of the brand (Aro *et al*., 2018), repeat purchases (Aro *et al*., 2018), and explicit declarations of love for the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). These proposed desirable outcomes of brand love are described next.

2.5.1. Memorable experiences/nostalgia

Although not elaborated upon in this study, satisfaction is a requirement for brand love (Aro *et al*., 2018; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Participation in activities where participants experience aspects of self-expressiveness, suggests satisfaction from participation in the activity (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Funk, Jordan, Ridinger & Kaplani, 2011; Waterman, 1990). This study assumes satisfaction from participation in marathon events as these events provide opportunities for self-expressiveness and thereby create meaningful (or eudaimonic) consumption experiences as previous literature has indicated (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Theodorakis, Kaplanidou & Karabaxoglou, 2015). Meaningful activities, such as participating in marathon events, are also memorable when these experiences aid in shaping an individual's self-concept (Guevarra & Howell, 2015).

The more memorable the brand experience, or "positive, affectively charged memories of prior brand experiences" a consumer has, the more the individual will identify with that brand (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012:410). Based on the brand love prototype, when consumers express their current/desired self-identity, this provides meaning to life and thereby enhances SWB (Batra *et al*., 2012; Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 1990). Therefore, if participants love the event brand, they may share memories of past event consumption experiences with others to enhance their "social self" and reflect the "inner self" (An *et al*., 2019; Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016; Sirgy, 1982, 1985).

Loved brands trigger memories of meaningful events and potential feelings of nostalgia in a crisis context (Aro *et al*., 2018; Cho *et al*., 2014). *Nostalgia* is described as seeking a connection with something in the past that is now gone (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2020). Nostalgia can also be linked with the future and the anxiety that something may not return, or it could also be the hope that something will return in future (Weed, 2020). In this study, if participants love the brand experience, this may result in a longing for the experience, reflecting on what 'never was' or the hope of engaging in this experience again in future.

2.5.2. Interest in the well-being of the brand

Batra *et al*. (2012) propose that brand love is different from interpersonal love (for humans) as it does not include concern for the object (Aro *et al*., 2018). However, research on destination brand love shows evidence of interest in the well-being of the destination brand, in other words, hoping that the destination will prosper and stay active because it provides work and services for the people living there (Aro *et al*., 2018). It is thus worthwhile to explore interest in well-being of the brand in other brand love contexts, such as event brand love, to expand on previous findings. If event participants love the event brand, they may express their desire for the brand to prosper because of the perceived benefits the event provides to the community, as well as the event's contribution to the overall economy.

2.5.3. Future participation intentions

Based on the brand love prototype, consumers who love their brands have an overall positive evaluation of the brand (Batra *et al*., 2012) and will be more forgiving of the brand during a brand crisis (Zhang *et al*., 2020). If individuals have positive attitudes towards the event brand, they will be more willing to engage in repeat participation in the event. This is referred to as attitudinal loyalty and is important because attitudinal loyalty can also result in behavioural loyalty (Aro *et al*., 2018). Theoretically, if event participants love the event brand, they may share their positive attitudes towards the brand, as well as future participation intentions, despite an ongoing crisis.

2.5.4. Explicit declaration of love (for the brand)

When consumers love their brands, they often openly express their love for the brand, which can easily be done via social media text-based statements, for example, "I love brand X". (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Past research suggests explicit declarations of love for a brand to be an outcome of brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Therefore, if event participants love the brand, they may openly declare their love for the brand via such eWOM statements within their online brand communities.

2.6. Crisis-related outcomes of brand love

Brand love is relevant in a crisis context, and it has been suggested that brand love has the potential to negate the negative impact of a brand crisis (Ali *et al*., 2021; Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012; Kang *et al*., 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2020). When consumers love their brands, they will often experience anticipated separation anxiety should the brand cease to exist (Batra *et al*., 2012). They will also often defend the brand in a crisis (Dalman *et al*., 2019). These desirable crisis-related outcomes of brand love are thus also relevant to this study.

2.6.1. Anticipated separation distress

Based on the brand love prototype, individuals would experience a type of emotional pain if the brand ceased to exist (Batra *et al*., 2012). In a brand context, and according to Sternberg's Triangular Theory of love (1986), passion refers to a more intense feeling for the object (or service activity) and is so intense that it creates mental distress in case of any actual or anticipated separation from the brand (Ghorbanzadeh, Saeednia & Rahehagh, 2020). Anticipated separation distress drives individuals to maintain proximity to the brand, who often feel that they are missing or lacking something when they cannot use their brands (Aro *et al*., 2018; Swanson, 2017). In this study, anticipated separation distress is relevant because during the early phases of the pandemic, the potential cancellation of sporting events (or meaningful consumption experiences) (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016), may have resulted in intense separation anxiety given the uncertainties surrounding events. Theoretically, anticipated separation anxiety regarding event cancellation suggests evidence of event brand love.

2.6.2. Brand defence

When consumers love their brands, they have a strong relationship with the brand and will be more resistant to negative information about the brand (Eisingerich, Rubera, Seifert & Bhardwaj, 2011; Swanson, 2017). Resistance to negative information is "the extent to which consumers do not allow negative information to diminish their general view of a firm" (Eisingerich *et al*., 2011:62). Also, when consumers love their brands, they are generally more tolerant of unfavourable experiences based on their high expectations about the organisation's future performance, similar to the 'love is blind' analogy (Zhang *et al*., 2020). Consumers will often defend the brand in an argument, criticism, attack, or potential threat (Wilk, Soutar & Harrigan, 2019). Brand defence is defined as "a state of positive WOM attributions, in which consumers in close consumer-brand relationships or brand love defend the brand from any criticism" (Dalman *et al*., 2019:878). Consumers who identify with certain brands, are the real brand defenders (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Brand defence is relevant in the context of this study because if participants love the brand, they should arguably be more resistant to negative information and may defend the brand in eWOM communications.

Brand love literature seems to hold varying views about brand love's role in a crisis context (Zhang *et al*., 2020). According to Zhang *et al*. (2020) there are two kinds of effects brand love may generate in a brand crisis, namely, the "love is blind" effect, and "love becomes hate" effect. This study explores which effect comes out strongest during a real-life crisis by first determining the presence of event brand love, through evidence of antecedents and outcomes of brand love in eWOM, and secondly, by identifying the main themes in eWOM regarding the event organisation's CRS. The extent to which positive eWOM as an overarching enduring

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effect of brand love is reflected in eWOM is used to indicate which effect comes out strongest. Based on the literature review, Figure 3.2 graphically depicts the framework to guide the investigation to explore the enduring effects of brand love during the crisis.

Figure 3 2: Framework to guide the empirical investigation
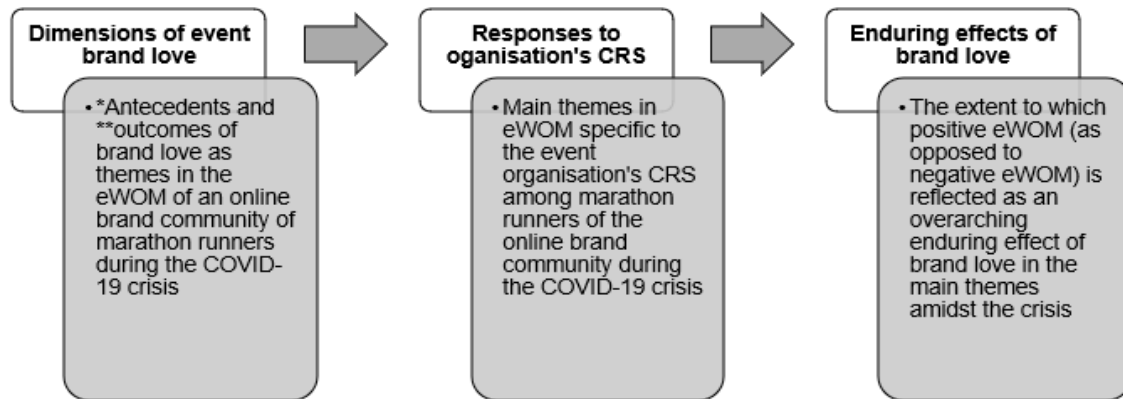
*Antecedents (self-brand expressiveness and brand trust); **Outcomes (general outcomes include memorable experiences, interest in well-being of brand, future participation intentions and declarations of brand love; crisis-related outcomes comprise anticipated separation distress and brand defence).

3. METHODOLOGY

The main research aim is to determine to what extent event brand love is affected during a prolonged crisis. Specifically, to explore whether dimensions of event brand love feature in eWOM and whether the known desirable outcomes of brand love are sustainable during a real-life crisis considering an event organisation's CRS. Three research questions are explored. The first research question is to determine to what extent known dimensions of brand love feature as themes in eWOM among an online community of marathon runners of a high-profile marathon event during a prolonged crisis. The second research question is to identify main themes regarding the organisation's CRS during the early stages of the pandemic. The third research question is to determine to what extent the main themes reflect positive eWOM as an enduring effect of brand love during the crisis.

The Comrades was selected as a case study because it is a high-profile international marathon event that was subjected to COVID-19, and little was known about how event participants may have responded to the organisation's CRS. A single-case study was deemed suitable to provide new insights on the effects of brand love during a 'real-life' crisis (Creswell, 2013). The research design and methods employed for analysis are described next.

3.1. Research design

This qualitative research study utilised netnography, an Internet-based research tool that belongs to the ethnographic branch, as an effective way to obtain insights into the effects of brand love during the real-life COVID-19 crisis (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Kozinets, 2002; Reid & Duffy, 2018). This was fitting as social media plays a significant role during a crisis (Nadeau *et al*., 2020). As with most netnographic investigations, the researcher took the role of a passive observer (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). This is considered "extant" material, created independently without any interventions on social media platforms (Moreau, Roy, Wilson & Duault, 2021).

3.2. Sampling and data collection

The first step in netnography involves "identifying the online communities most relevant to a researcher's particular research interest as well as learning as much as possible about the communities that are identified" (Kozinets, 2002:63). The usefulness of gathering data from Facebook posts has been highlighted as deeper insights can be obtained from this naturalistic online content (Grewal *et al*., 2020). Purposive sampling was employed, focusing on a single online community (Kozinets, 2015; Xun & Reynolds, 2010). An online Comrades Facebook brand community for the 2020 event, namely, 'Comrades Marathon 2020 Down Run', was selected for data collection as members of this group were among those with the highest intentions to partake in the 2020 Comrades. This online community engaged with each other via the Facebook platform and openly expressed their opinions about the organisation's CRS. Netnography effectively allowed data collection during the pandemic while social distancing restrictions were imposed (Mehta *et al*., 2022).

All text-based posts and comments to these posts were captured for a period of 10 weeks from 16 March 2020 until 31 May 2020. Data collection commenced when COVID-19 emerged in South Africa and all events were initially suspended for a period of 30 days until two weeks after the announcement of the Comrades cancellation (ENSAfrica, 2020). This enabled the researcher to monitor the event organisation's CRS as the crisis unfolded, as well as event participants' responses to such. Ethical clearance was obtained from the researcher's institution and permission was granted from the administrator of the Facebook group before data collection commenced. The data collected was used primarily to identify themes related to the dimensions of brand love and responses to the event organisation's CRS. In writing up the findings, all individuals' identities were kept confidential (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

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3.3. Data analysis and reliability

The data was recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the first phase, the material was condensed and split into short one- or two-sentence long units resulting in 2454 text-based units for analysis (Aro *et al*., 2018). These text-based units were then interpreted, firstly, in terms of the individual antecedents and outcomes of brand love from the literature review and secondly, in terms of those statements directly relating to the organisation's CRS. For the brand love dimensions 767 text-based units were included in the analysis, and 387 text-based statements were included in the analysis of the organisation's CRS. Considering that positive eWOM is proposed as an overarching enduring effect of brand love (Dalman *et al*., 2019; Wallace *et al*., 2014), all statements were then classified into three categories: positive; negative; and neutral. This was done to determine whether, in general, more statements were reflected as positive or negative to show the extent to which brand love may have been affected during the crisis.

Directed content analysis was employed to analyse the data for the dimensions of brand love as themes following a deductive approach. Existing theory was used to create theoretically derived codes and to determine how and when these applied to the text (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Filo & Coghlan, 2016; Mayring, 2000). The strength of using a directed content analysis is that this approach can support or refute existing theory in a given research context (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Filo & Coghlan, 2016). The variables used for coding in a content analysis are detailed in the coding instruments, namely, the codebook and coding sheet (refer to Appendix A). The coders used the codebook as a guide to code the variables under investigation on the coding sheet. Each text-based statement was assigned an overall value, positive '1' if the statement reflected the pre-determined code and a '0' value if the statement did not reflect the coding category (Liu 2006; Eliashberg & Shugan, 1997).

The quality of a content analysis study is largely dependent on well-defined categories to analyse the message content (Harwood & Garry, 2003). The definitions for categories were first refined by the lead researchers, who reviewed the categories for overlap and homogeneity before training the coding team (Filo & Coghlan, 2016). It was agreed that two of the initial categories be removed to focus on the most relevant aspects within the context of the study. Also, two categories were combined (i.e., *resistance to negative information* was combined with *brand defence*, as they produced similar outcomes).

There are different ways to evaluate reliability. In a content analysis, reproducibility is the most effective measure of reliability (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Therefore, inter-coder reliability, referring to the "degree of agreement between different coders", was applied (Hayes &

Krippendorff, 2007:78). Krippendorff's alpha was used as it is suitable for multiple coders and dichotomous nominal data (Hayes & Krippendorff; Neuendorf, 2002). The final coding team consisted of four experts in the field of sport tourism and marketing, who coded a sample of 120 (i.e., approximately 15%) of the statements according to the predetermined codes to determine reliability of the analysis (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). All statements were then classified into positive or negative eWOM, as per past studies that measure eWOM in two dimensions, specifically, the percentages of positive and negative messages (Eliashberg & Shugan, 1997). The researchers reviewed and confirmed the frequencies of all statements reflecting positive or negative eWOM.

Researchers differ on the acceptable level of reliability for content analysis data, though it is generally agreed that scores of 0.80 or higher are acceptable (Neuendorf, 2002). Krippendorff (2004) asserts that variables with reliabilities of between 0.67 and 0.80 should also be considered for drawing provisional conclusions. Krippendorff's Alpha values (see Table 3.1) for all dimensions of brand love fall within the range of 0,9244 and 0,9843 thus indicating high and acceptable levels of reliability for all brand love dimensions in this study.

Table 3 1: Krippendorff's Alpha values indicating coding reliability

Brand love dimensions	Theme coding	Krippendorff's Alpha
Antecedents	Self-brand expressiveness	0,9804
	Brand trust	0,9680
General outcomes	Memories/nostalgia	0,9260
	Interest in the well-being of the brand	0,9712
	Future participation intentions	0,9677
	Explicit declaration of love	0,9244
Crisis-related outcomes	Anticipated separation distress	0,9843
	Brand defence	0,9364

To identify the main themes in eWOM regarding the marathon event organisation's CRS an inductive content analysis, where codes are generated using a bottom-up approach, was used to analyse statements relevant to the organisation's CRS (Filo & Coghlan, 2016). The main topics and data extracts were reviewed by the leading researchers for overlap and homogeneity (Filo & Coghlan, 2016). The researchers met to review the main topics and confirmed the frequency counts in each category until in agreement. All statements were then further classified into positive or negative eWOM messages and confirmed by the lead researchers (Eliashberg & Shugan, 1997). The results of the analysis efforts follow, with descriptive evidence.

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4. FINDINGS

The first research question was to explore to what extent dimensions of brand love reflect as main themes in eWOM among the online community of marathon runners during the crisis. First the findings related to the extent to which the dimensions of event brand love (antecedents and outcomes) feature as themes in eWOM, is presented. The detailed findings related to each dimension of brand love is then presented together with sample statements. The extent to which these dimensions reflect positive or negative eWOM is then shown (neutral statements were excluded as they were general statements which would not have had an impact on brand love as explored in the current study). Thereafter, to answer the second and third research questions, the main topics of eWOM regarding the organisation's CRS are provided, together with the analysis of those statements that reflect positive or negative eWOM.

4.1. Frequency of dimensions of brand love in eWOM

Figure 3.3 (see below) shows the frequency counts from the content analysis of text-based statements that reflect the dimensions of brand love (antecedents and outcomes) as themes of event brand love included in the study (refer to Appendix A for detailed descriptions of the themes as the coded items). In some instances, statements could be classified into more than one coding category.

Figure 3.3: Frequency of brand love dimensions in eWOM
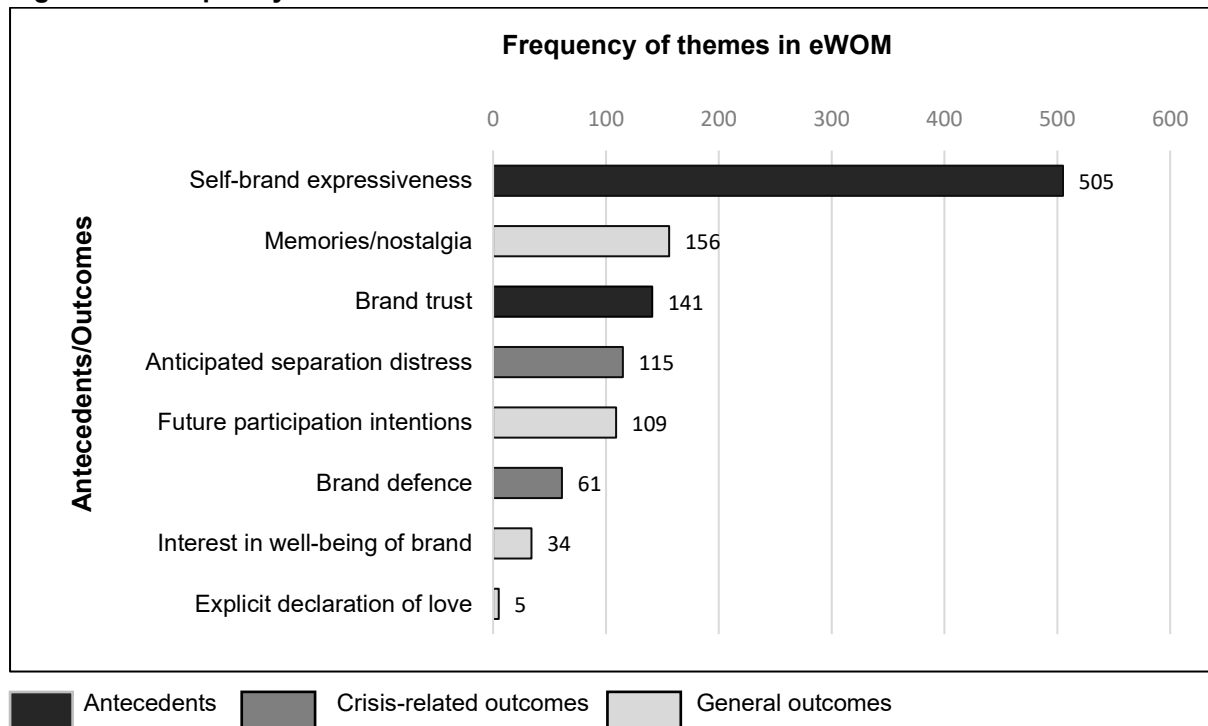
The results from Figure 3.3 show that self-brand expressiveness (n=505) was the most prominent theme in eWOM, followed by memories/nostalgia (n=156), brand trust (n=141), anticipated separation distress (n=115), and relatively high future event participation intentions (n=109). Despite evidence of negative eWOM, many individuals also defended the brand against criticism regarding the organisation's CRS (n=61). Interest in the well-being of the brand (n=34) did not feature as prominently and only a few statements were explicit declarations of love for the event brand (n=5). Previous literature indicates that eWOM about the brand is a behavioural outcome of brand love (Bairrada *et al*., 2018; Bae, Lee, Suh & Suh, 2017; Wong, Lai & Tao, 2020). The findings of the current study are thus suggestive of event brand love as various dimensions of brand love occur in authentic eWOM to various degrees.

4.2. Findings related to dimensions of brand love

The findings of the antecedents of event brand love are first presented. The findings related to both general and crisis-related outcomes of brand love are provided thereafter.

4.2.1. Antecedents of brand love

The antecedents of event brand love in this study include self-brand expressiveness and brand trust. Evidence of these antecedents as dimensions of brand love explored in the current study are presented in this section.

Self-brand expressiveness

Evidence of self-brand expressiveness was most prominent in eWOM (n=505) (refer to Figure 3.3). The findings show how event participants use the symbolic value of the event brand to communicate their self-concept (current and desired self-identity) through sharing past experiences and personal achievements (after Styvén *et al*., 2020; Taylor *et al*., 2012). The uniqueness of the event brand was also most apparent in the prestige of the brand and that it should 'stand out' from other marathon event brands. Receiving a Comrades medal is unique to accomplishments in other marathon events and this association with the event brand has been earned by the individual. Sample statements related to self-expressiveness are provided in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2: Sample statements of self-brand expressiveness

Self-brand expressiveness	Sample statements
Brand uniqueness:	"Big C shirt must have that thing you know, that intimidating thing. It must look more wow than those you get from other marathons"
Personal event experiences:	"Epic. If you have never experienced the Comrades start you have never experienced anything. Chariot of fire, Shosholoza, National anthem…"
Current/desired self-identity (sharing personal achievements):	"…running the comrades is a totally different story. I've done it four times. 3 silver and a bronze" "…its fine they can donate with our money but not a **medal!!!** That one you should work for it". "…it was cool but hard, all I wanted was to finish and have a medal to show off"

Note: Only self-brand expressiveness for the Comrades brand is included

An interesting finding was regarding the importance of the symbolic value of the event brand when runners indicated that they did not wish to be associated with (or self-express via) branded items from the 2020 event (such as the 2020 event branded T-shirt received as compensation for event cancellation) as technically, these items did not represent something that was 'earned' from completing the real challenge. Sample statements include:

"Yes, we will wear the T-shirt to show that we were just dreaming about running the race. Nothing to brag about"

"I don't think if it was me I can wear cap and T-shirt of comrade's marathon because I didn't run the race";

"…personally, I did not even expect the goodie bag because T-shirt isn't just a normal t-shirt, it's earned by sweat and blood, it would take a lot for me to wear it"

Brand Trust

Evidence of statements relating to brand trust (n=141) are depicted in Figure 3.3. Event participants communicated their confidence in the brand to perform its claimed functions despite the crisis context (corroborated by Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Brand trust was positively expressed, for example:

"We are led by people who know the story when it comes to running and I'm certified by their leadership".

Brand trust, however, did not always reflect positively, and negative sentiments towards the brand were also expressed. The credibility of the organisation to appropriately respond to the crisis was questioned as depicted in the findings. For example:

"How can I trust a Comrades Marathon entry this year if they open for next year entries?"

Other than positive eWOM as an overarching enduring effect of brand love (Dalman *et al*., 2019; Wallace *et al*., 2014), some of the desirable outcomes of brand love relevant for event managers include both general and crisis-related outcomes. Findings related to the outcomes explored in this study are presented next.

4.2.2. General outcomes

The general outcomes of brand love investigated in this study include memorable experiences/nostalgia, interest in the well-being of the brand, future event participation intentions and explicit declarations of love for the brand. The general outcomes were present to various degrees, however, evidence of these outcomes in authentic eWOM shows evidence of these behavioural outcomes of brand love.

Memories/nostalgia

The sharing of memories from past participation experiences was the second most popular topic in eWOM (n=156), particularly upon event cancellation. These nostalgic exchanges related to past event participation and what would be most missed in terms of the event experience. Some sample statements include:

"…2018 when I crossed the bridge at Moses Mabhida Stadium tears of joy went down and new energy kicked in. Wonderful memories"

"…I am going to miss the night before the race. Not sleeping the night before. No matter what time you go to bed you are going to struggle"

"I am going to miss the comradery at the start of comrades. Singing the national anthem, Shosholoza and listening to chariots of fire with your fellow comrades is truly special"

"I am going to miss watching the last cut-off at the stadium. Screaming and encouraging your fellow comrade is truly something special".

Interest in the well-being of the brand

Although to a lesser extent (n=34), there was evidence of interest in the well-being of the event brand. Considering the benefits the event provides (i.e., to participants, the community, tourism sector and the country's GDP), these findings do indicate that participants hope that

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the event will continue to prosper and be offered long into the future. Examples of such statements include:

> "...they bring tourism to South Africa which creates so many jobs and fuels South Africa's GDP"
>
> "I'd rather have CMA in a position to host future races than provide refunds and have no races in years to come"
>
> "I'm glad they are not giving refunds in order for us to have another great event next year. Plus, what comrades does for charities is phenomenal"

Future participation intentions

The findings show that individuals communicate their future intentions to partake in the event in future even considering the organisation's response to the crisis situation (n=109). An example is:

> "…Yes, I am definitely entering even if I lose my entry fees again. I will keep on supporting these events as it plays a huge part in my life".

Explicit declarations of love

Explicit declarations of love (n=5) for the event brand were least common (n=5) (refer to Figure 3.3). However, love for the event brand was still explicitly expressed as a direct portrayal of event brand love from consumer-generated content. It was interesting that where event brand love was explicitly expressed, this was often done in conjunction with love for the country. The negative impact of the CRS on brand love was apparent, yet the acknowledgement of love was still significant. Sample statements include:

> "I love Comrades. It's my favourite race in the world I love the impact it has on the local area, it's meaning to the country and for SA's place in the global running community"
>
> "Oh how I love this race and this country!"
>
> "They are really taking away our love for this event" (negative).

4.2.3. Crisis-related outcomes

The findings related to anticipated separation distress and brand defence as crisis-related outcomes within eWOM are considered next.

Anticipated separation distress

The findings (in Figure 3.3 above) indicate significant evidence of anticipated separation distress in eWOM (n=115). These statements were mostly related to the potential event

cancellation. A number of reasons for the aforesaid were apparent: a) runners were anxious that they would not be able to get an entry into the event again given the high demand to partake in the event amongst the marathon running community and the limited amount of entries; b) runners were anxious that they may not be able to qualify again (i.e., complete a marathon within a specific time) or perhaps maintain their desired seeding (starting position); and c) some may not have the financial means to enter the event again in the future. Sample statements reflecting anticipated separation distress are provided in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3:Sample statements showing anticipated separation distress

	Anticipated separation distress	Sample Statements
a)	Anxiety about not being able to obtain an entry again.	"Say they just forward our entries to the next suitable time for this down run to take place, it just makes sense other than starting to fight for slots with new entrants".
b)	Anxiety about not being able to qualify again/obtain the same seeding achieved for the 2020 event.	"…let the seedings and qualifications at least be credited to 2021". "Imagine someone qualified this year and he or she is NEVER able to do so again!" "It is hard to qualify for us slow runners. We try and qualify the year before and it doesn't look like we will get that chance this year."
c)	Anxiety of not having the financial means to partake in the event in the future.	"We talking of gardeners, petrol attendants, securities, etc. who have to work hard to get this R600." "…some people really struggle to even get that R600 to enter…You know some athletes cannot afford even a place to sleep ahead of the race. Some people sleep on the street waiting for the morning of the race to start"

Brand defence

The findings (refer to Figure 3.3) provide a reasonable amount of evidence (n=61) of resistance towards negative information about the brand with opposing statements that defend the brand. These findings are suggestive of event brand love. Sample statements are provided below:

> "For CMA it's a huge blow too for the 2020 Ultimate Human Race, they are passionate to deliver the best. With wild endless Facebook criticism CMA tried to keep the race going for 2020, CMA even considered a special 'adapted' 2020 Comrades Race, T-shirts, goodie bags were all ordered and complete, months and months of work complete in preparation of the big day"

> "I don't feel it matters. They tried hard to postpone and are trying to give back as much as they can. Being a company and not a club hosting an event with volunteers, just what they have given to thousands in their charity is camaraderie enough..."

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4.3. Findings related to positive eWOM as an enduring effect of brand love

Table 3.4 shows details of the frequency (and percentage) of statements related to the dimensions of brand love that were positive, negative, or simply neutral (general statements).

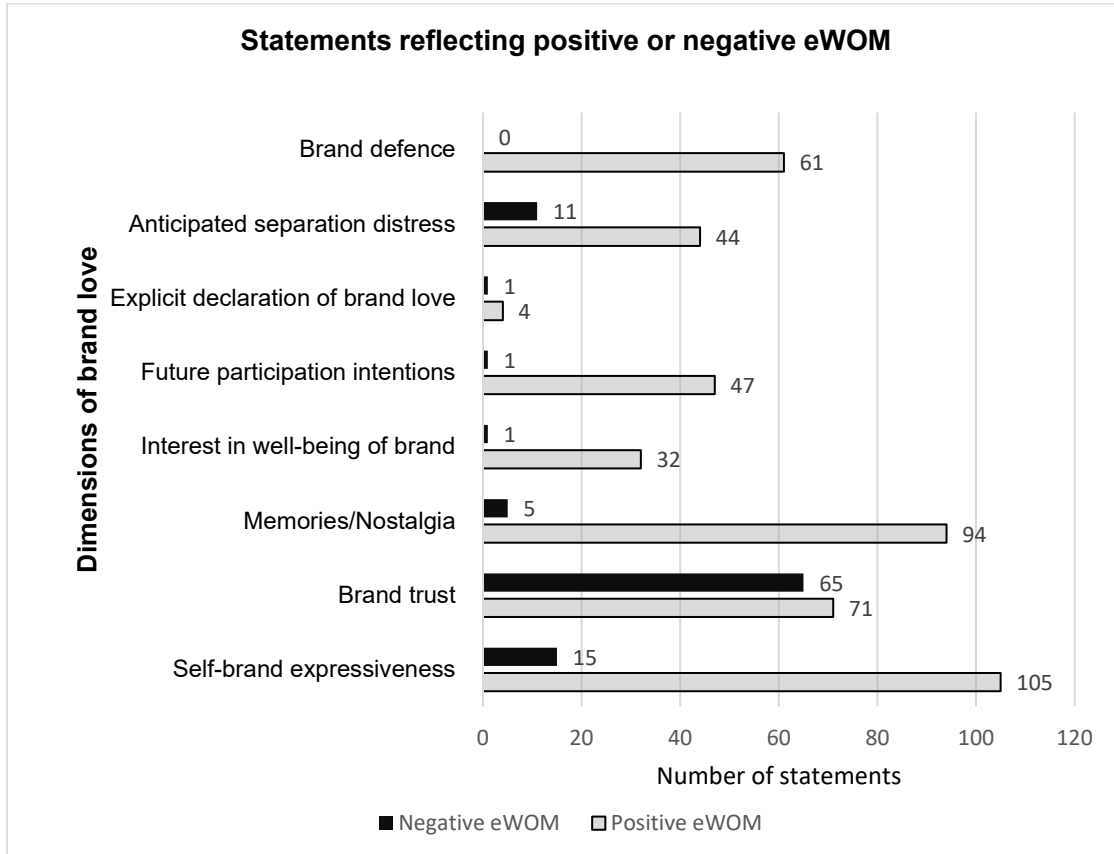**Table 3.4: Frequency of statements reflecting positive, negative and neutral eWOM**

Dimensions of brand love		Frequency (Total)	Positive eWOM		Negative eWOM		Neutral eWOM	
			N	%	N	%	N	%
Antecedents	Self-brand expressiveness	505	105	20.79	15	2.97	385	76.24
	Brand trust	141	71	50.35	65	**46.09**	5	3.55
General outcomes	Memories/Nostalgia	156	94	60.26	5	3.20	57	36.54
	Interest in well-being of brand	34	32	94.12	1	2.94	1	2.94
	Future participation intentions	109	47	43.12	1	0.92	61	55.96
	Explicit declaration of brand love	5	4	80	1	20	0	0
Crisis-related outcomes	Anticipated separation distress	115	44	38.26	11	9.57	60	52.17
	Brand defence	61	61	**100**	0	0	0	0

Note: 'N' refers to the frequency (number) of statements

Table 3.4 shows that although negative eWOM was present, a significantly higher number of statements reflected positive eWOM. This is suggestive of event brand love as an enduring effect of brand love (after Wallace *et al*., 2014). As was evident from the literature review (refer to section 4.2.2) the findings show that all statements that *defend the brand* are essentially positive. *Brand trust* was the most negatively impacted by the crisis with negative eWOM statements reflecting the highest percentage (46.06%) for brand trust.

Neutral statements are merely general statements in eWOM that were neither positive nor negative and would thus not have a direct influence on brand love as investigated in this study. Therefore, only positive and negative eWOM categories for the dimensions of brand love are graphically depicted in Figure 3.4 below.

Figure 3.4: Graphical depiction of statements reflecting positive/negative eWOM

Statements reflecting positive or negative eWOM

Bar chart showing Number of statements for each Dimension of brand love (Negative eWOM in black, Positive eWOM in grey):

- Brand defence: Negative 0, Positive 61
- Anticipated separation distress: Negative 11, Positive 44
- Explicit declaration of brand love: Negative 1, Positive 4
- Future participation intentions: Negative 1, Positive 47
- Interest in well-being of brand: Negative 1, Positive 32
- Memories/Nostalgia: Negative 5, Positive 94
- Brand trust: Negative 65, Positive 71
- Self-brand expressiveness: Negative 15, Positive 105

Y-axis: Dimensions of brand love
X-axis: Number of statements (0 to 120)
Legend: ■ Negative eWOM □ Positive eWOM

Note: Neutral statements are excluded from the above figure to show more clearly the difference between statements that were positive and negative.

It can be clearly seen from Figure 3.4 that more statements were positive than negative. The findings that relate to the brand love dimensions in Table 3.4 and Figure 3.4 are briefly considered next.

4.3.1. Antecedents of brand love

Most statements reflective of self-brand expressiveness were positive (20.79%), negative (2.97%) and neutral (76.24%). The negative statements were about not wanting to be associated with the 2020 event brand as there was no symbolic value attached to this.

Brand trust was the most negatively affected by the crisis and although half (50.35%) of the statements related to brand trust reflected confidence in the organisation to perform its acclaimed functions and respond appropriately to the crisis, the credibility of the organisation was also jeopardized given that only slightly less (46.09%) reflected negative eWOM about the CRS.

4.3.2. General outcomes of brand love

Table 3.4 shows that the sharing of memories from past event participation was an important outcome that drove positive eWOM where statements were mostly positive (60.26%) or neutral (36.54%) statements. For interest in the well-being of the brand, it is perhaps logical that most statements (94.12%) were positive in this regard. Related to future participation intentions, positive eWOM (43.12%) revealed future intentions to participate in the event and just over half of these statements were neutral (55.96%) (refer to Table 3.4). In this case, it is perhaps important to consider the neutral statements for this outcome given that these statements were often from novice runners who communicated their desire to partake in the event in future. Declarations of love for the event brand are mostly positive (80%), however, there was also evidence that the organisation's CRS may have been negatively impacting those feelings of love for the brand (20%).

4.3.3. Crisis-related outcomes of brand love

Considering anticipated separation anxiety, most of the statements were neutral (52.17%) as these were more general comments about potential cancellation, or opinions on the suggested CRS (refer to Table 3.4). Despite anxiety experienced, positive eWOM was also apparent (38.26%) with less statements reflecting negative eWOM (9.57%). For brand defence, all statements would logically reflect positive eWOM (refer to Table 3.4).

4.4. Findings related to event participants' responses to the CRS

To determine how runners responded to the event organisation's CRS, the second research question was to explore the main topics in eWOM related to the CRS. The content analysis showed that 387 text-based statements were directly related to the CRS, considering the event postponement, cancellation, and compensation offered. In introducing these findings, the relevance of exploring eWOM during a crisis, is supported by a statement by one of the members of the online community who commented, "…and I hope the officials from the CMA read the comments of the runners".

4.4.1. Main topics of eWOM related to the organisation's CRS

Table 3.5 details the main topics of conversation related to the organisation's CRS, with a brief description and frequency of statements. The findings in Table 3.5 show that the topic of *refunds* was most frequently discussed (n=95), followed by aspects related to Comrades 2020 branded items, such as, receiving the *T-shirt* and *goodie bag* (n=64). The subject of initially postponing the 2020 event and *delaying the decision* to cancel was common (n=61), as well as opinions on *deferring 2020 event entries* to another year (n=59). Opinions about
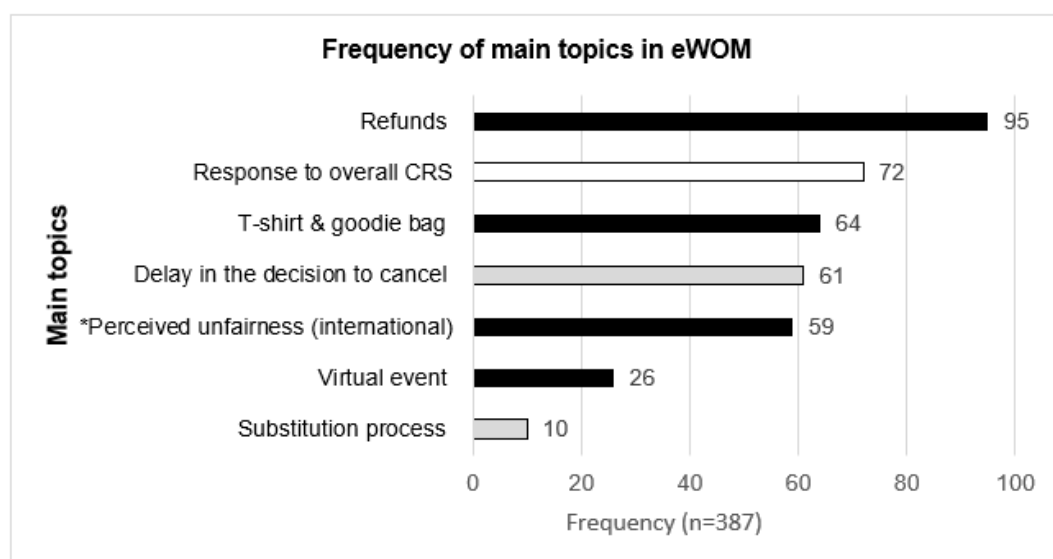
participating in the inaugural *virtual event* were shared (n=26) and the issue of keeping *substitutions* open despite uncertainty of the 2020 event taking place were also noted (n=10). The aforementioned findings are also graphically depicted in Figure 3.5 below.

Table 3.5: Main topics in eWOM related to the organisation's CRS

CRS	Main topics	Description	Frequency
Event postponement & potential cancellation	**Delay in the decision to cancel**	Support/criticism for event postponement.	61
	Substitution process	The substitution process remained open until the event was eventually cancelled.	10
Cancellation & compensation	**Perceived unfairness of international versus national entrants**	Unfairness about national versus international entrants being deferred to a future event. Comparisons were also made with other international events CRSs.	59
	Refunds	The terms and conditions of race entries state that no refunds will be offered in case of event cancellation.	95
	T-shirt & goodie bag	Comrades branded T-shirt for 2020 and goodie bag that event entrants would have received before the race.	64
	Virtual event	National entrants who qualified for the 2020 event were given free entries to partake in the inaugural virtual event, "Race the Comrades Legends".	26
Overall response	**Response to overall CRS**	eWOM about the overall CRS (postponement, cancellation and compensation)	72

Figure 3.5 below graphically depicts the main topics in eWOM conversation that were most popular during the crisis.

Figure 3.5: Main topics in eWOM related to the organisation's CRS

*Perceived unfairness related to international entrants given the option to defer their entries to the next event

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The findings related to the extent to which positive eWOM was evident (in comparison with negative eWOM) is provided in the next section. This is investigated to determine whether positive eWOM, as one of the overarching enduring effects of brand love may have been sustainable during the crisis.

4.4.2. Findings related to positive eWOM as an enduring effect of brand love

The final research question was to determine to what extent the main topics of eWOM reflect positive eWOM as a proposed enduring effect of brand love. Table 3.6 shows the frequency of statements which were positive, negative or neutral. Although not directly related to a specific aspect of the organisation's CRS, it was also noted in the findings that runners often shared opinions about the overall CRS and overall support for the decisions the organisation took. Therefore, these findings were also included in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6: Main topics related to the CRS that were positive, negative and neutral

Main topics	Frequency	Positive eWOM	%	Negative eWOM	%	Neutral	%
Delay in the decision to cancel	61	42	68.85	9	14.75	10	16.39
Substitution process	10	4	40	5	50	1	10
Perceived unfairness of international versus national entrants	59	11	18.64	30	50.85	18	30.51
Refunds	95	36	37.89	45	47.37	14	14.74
T-shirt & goodie bag	64	28	43.75	24	37.50	12	18.75
Virtual event	26	17	65.39	7	26.92	2	7.69
Response to overall CRS	72	72	100	0	0	0	0
Totals	387	**210**	54.26	**120**	31	57	14.72

The findings in Table 3.6 above show that the total number of statements that were positive (n=210) were higher than those that were negative (n=120). Although this provides support for positive eWOM as an enduring outcome of brand love, the negative effects of the organisation's CRS are also evident. Even though more statements reflected positive WOM, often negative WOM will have a greater impact on consumer perceptions, and it is important to effectively manage this negative eWOM to negate the negative effects as far as possible.

Table 3.6 shows that runners mostly *supported the decision to postpone* the event rather than cancel immediately (68.85%). The majority (65.39%) was also in favour of the *virtual event offering*. Although findings indicated satisfaction/gratitude for receiving the Comrades 2020 edition of the *shirt and goodie bag* (43.75%), negative eWOM was nearly as prominent (37.50%). The CMA was mostly negatively perceived (50.85%) for *deferring international*

event entries to a future event (whereas national runners received their T-shirt, goodie bag and free entry into the virtual event as compensation). Also, despite the race terms and conditions for cancellation, the issue of *refunds* was perceived more negatively (47.37%) than positively (37.89%). An equal number of statements (50%) showed support for or against keeping the *substitution process* open given uncertainties around the happening of the 2020 event.

The findings regarding the main topics related to the organisation's CRS that reflected positive, negative and neutral eWOM are graphically depicted below. Sample statements are provided for statements that were positive or negative. A discussion of the findings and implications of the study is provided in the section that follows.

Delay in the decision to cancel

Figure 3.6 below shows the statements that were positive, negative and neutral regarding the decision taken by the event organisation to initially postpone the event rather than cancelling sooner. Overall, event participants supported the decision to initially delay the cancellation.

Figure 3.6: Statements related to the delay in the decision to cancel
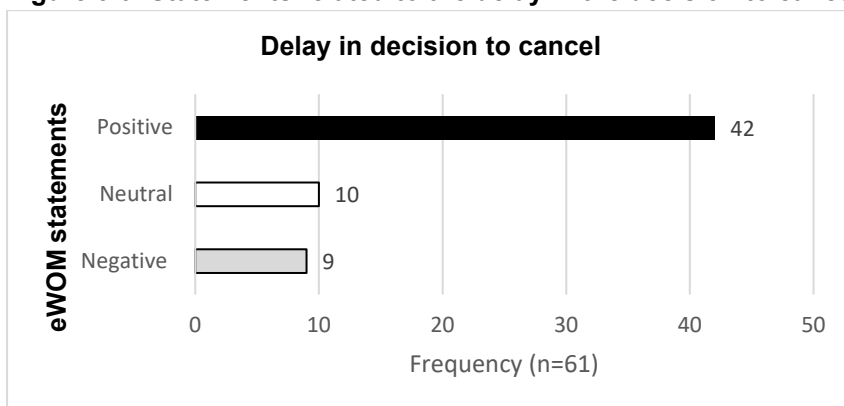
The following are samples of positive and negative eWOM statements related to participants' responses regarding the decision to delay rather than cancel the event.

Positive eWOM

"Comrades did nothing wrong. The way I see it that they were trying their best to delay as long as possible. The decision was made for them by ASA."

"So, in my view, they delicately balanced the interest of runners, which was to run on 14 June with the national interest to flatten the curve, hence follow the ASA directive until more information became available on which to base a decision"

Negative eWOM

> "I hope that in a quiet moment, CMA will reflect on a number of missteps they made along the way. They really should have taken a cue from all the marathons that got cancelled in April - how did they think the situation would suddenly become so much more favourable in less than two months that a race more than double the length could go ahead?"

Substitution process

Figure 3.7 below shows the findings of statements that related to the event organisation keeping the substitution process open until the event was eventually cancelled. Although some supported this decision, others perceived the organisation negatively in this regard. Sample statements are provided below.

Figure 3.7: Statements relating to the substitution process
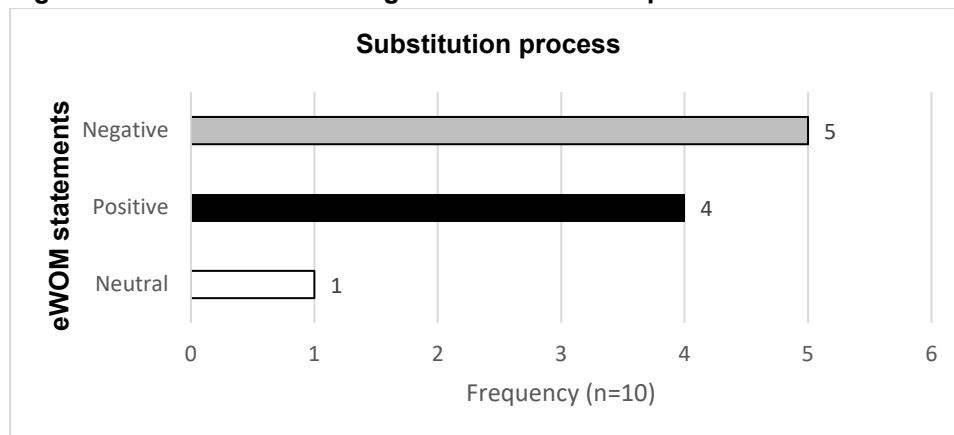
Positive eWOM

> "…If Comrades cancelled early or they did not open the subs, there would have been unhappy runners…"

> "The CMA were very clear, they set a date and said they would review the situation then. Comrades falls outside the 30-day ban, they are not going against Government precautions, they are not being defiant, they are keeping hopes, dreams and a hell of lot of hard work alive for as long as they can"

Negative eWOM

> "Prediction cancelled for 2020 after they received the last of substitution money"

> "The only thing I don't like with Comrades organizers, is to be busy making more money with substitution now"

> "Not postponing immediately, the moment the government banned anyone going for a run in the middle of peak training period seemed odd, lack of clarity on qualifying, making no adjustment to substitution process"

Perceived unfairness of compensation (international vs. national entrants)

Figure 3.8 below presents the findings for statements related to the event organisation's compensation strategy for international and national entrants. Many perceived the organisation negatively for allowing international entrants the opportunity to defer their entry to the next event, however, national entrants were not given this option. National entrants were provided with the event T-shirt, goodie bag and an entry into the inaugural virtual event, however, many would have rather had the option to also defer their entry. Sample statements are provided below.

Figure 3.8: Statements relating to perceived unfairness
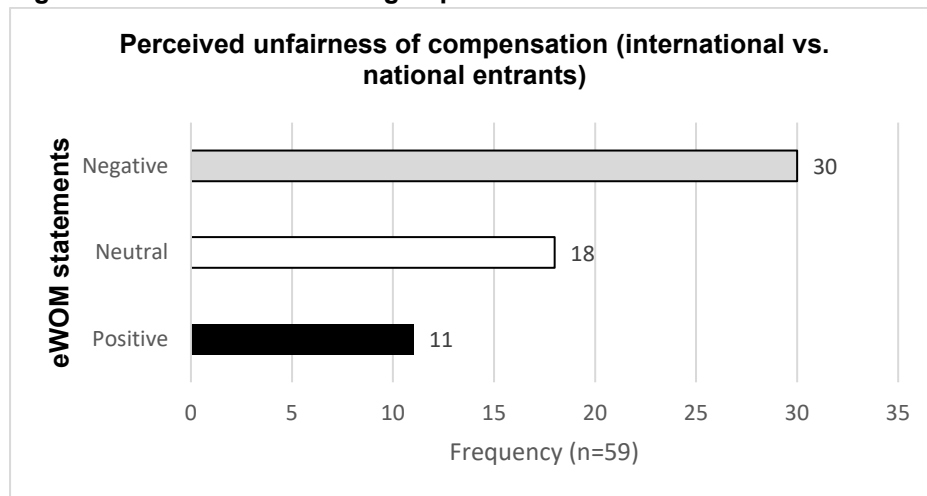
Positive eWOM

> "It looks you did not listen to them carefully R600 is a bit smaller than R3000."

> "…that's your opinion, please don't speak for all runners. I still want a t-shirt and goodie bag like normal next year thank you"

Negative eWOM

> "Failure to apply T&C's consistently to all athletes irrespective where they are from is failure to lead"

> "I think the issue of many runners is that CMA should have taken their entries to 2021 as some other international races have done"

Refunds

Figure 3.9 show that the organisation was mostly perceived negatively for not offering refunds. This was despite the race terms and conditions which stipulated that no refunds would be offered in the case of the event being cancelled. There was, however, also support for this decision indicated by those statements that were positive in this regard.

Figure 3.9: Statements relating to refunds

Refunds

eWOM statements	Frequency (n=95)
Negative	45
Positive	36
Neutral	14
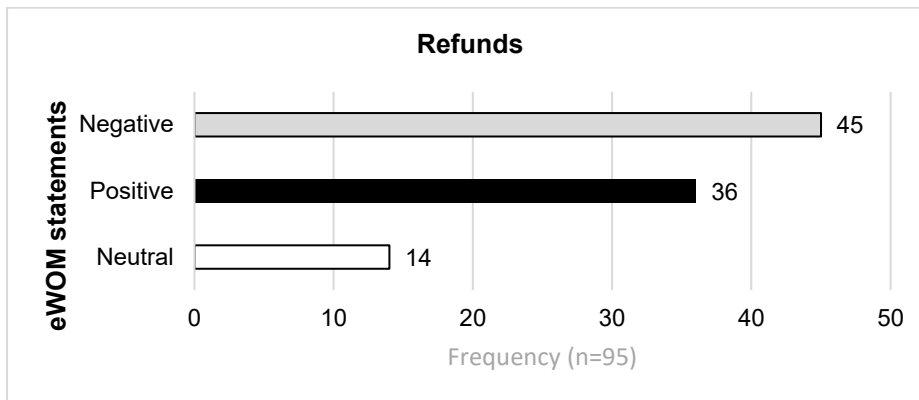
Positive eWOM

"I'd rather have CMA in a position to host future races than provide refunds and have no races in years to come"

"…the terms and conditions clearly state the refund issue. Next time before you sign or accept on online, read all the Ts&Cs before whining about things you committed yourself to"

Negative eWOM

"This not refunding of entry fees is daylight robbery!!!"

"In all fairness, they should have made people choose between a refund or a goodie bag, not necessarily a full refund but a refund"

"They don't care all that matters is the money in their pockets"

Items for compensation (T-shirts and goodie bags)

Figure 3.10 indicates those statements that related to receiving the event T-shirt and goodie bag as items for compensation. Overall more statements reflected positively, however, negative statements were almost as prominent.

Figure 3.10: Statements related to items for compensation

Items for compensation

eWOM statements	Frequency (n=64)
Positive	28
Negative	24
Neutral	12

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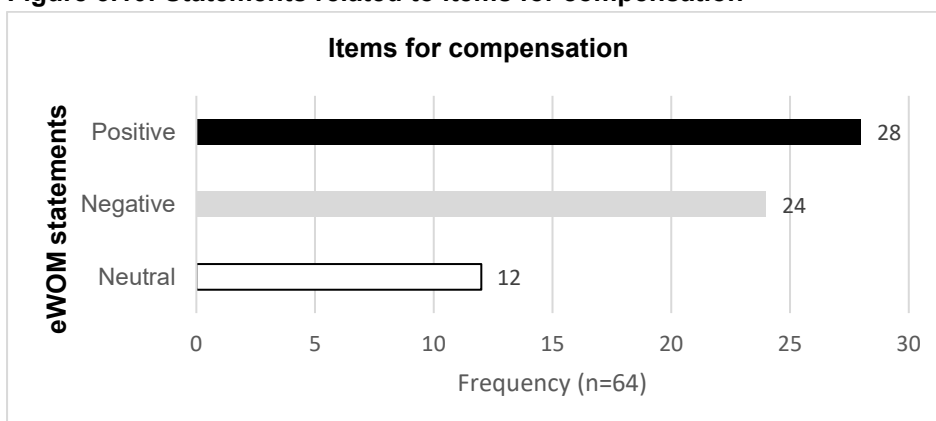
Positive eWOM

"I think it's a good gesture by the comrades association. That t-shirt will remind us of the year our dreams were taken away by the brutal pandemic but our lives were kept safe by the CMA authorities"

"…but now I want the t-shirt also because of the history that this year will have."

Negative eWOM

"…as for me I don't care how the t-shirt looks like. What does it symbolise in my life, shame of being robbed by CMA?"

"That bag and shirt - sponsored items. So, I really don't care whether I get it or not. The CMA has made their own brand cheap and furthermore so because they provide all athletes with the finisher badge"

The virtual event

Figure 3.11 shows the statements that were positive or negative regarding participation in the inaugural virtual event. In general, more statements were positive and showed interest in partaking in this event as an alternative offering during the crisis period with traditional event participation restrictions.

Figure 3.11: Statements related to the virtual event
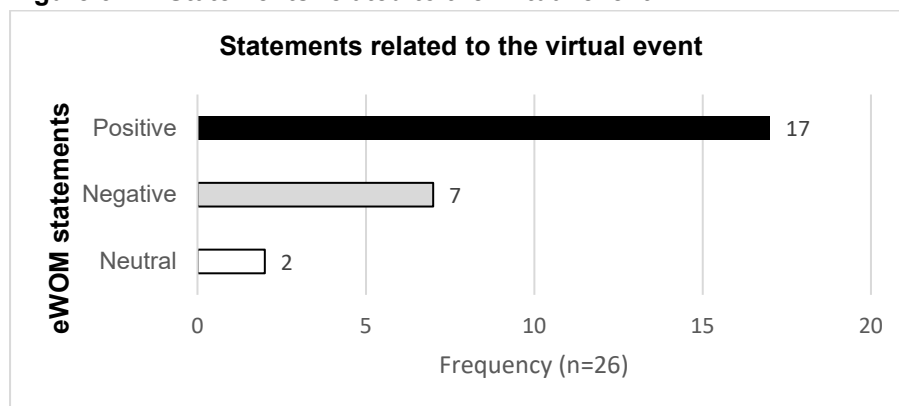
Positive eWOM

"My current motivation is the virtual runs. I'm not that motivated without races"

"I for one am still looking forward to putting my shoes on, on the 14th and heading out on the road, lockdown permitting"

"No one is forced to enter the virtual race. I have no interest in a virtual race..."

Negative eWOM

"It's a disgrace charging people to compete in this virtual race. Then when the government puts in outdoor activity restrictions they will claim they can't refund anyone and again keep the money for themselves. Pathetic!!"

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5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The main research aim was to determine to what extent event brand love was affected during a prolonged crisis. The effects of brand love during the crisis were explored by determining the extent to which dimensions of brand love (including two antecedents, four general and two crisis-specific outcomes) featured as themes in eWOM among an online Comrades brand community during the COVID-19 crisis. Event participants' responses to the organisation's CRS were then identified within eWOM communication. The extent to which the desirable enduring effects of event brand love was sustained during the crisis was then investigated by exploring the extent of positive eWOM as an overarching enduring effect of brand love despite unfavourable circumstances.

The CMA initially received much criticism for not cancelling the event sooner as well as for the type of compensation that was offered. This sentiment was confirmed in open communications by the CMA chairperson (CMA, 2020). While such negative reactions pose one of the biggest threats to any brand's reputation (Grappi & Romani, 2015), the findings of this study suggest that this can be negated to some extent by the existing brand love among consumers. It strengthens the argument that brand love is an asset, and that the desirable outcomes can be sustained even during a crisis. Overall, the findings suggest evidence of event brand love through identification of dimensions of brand love in eWOM.

5.1. Dimensions of event brand love

Self-brand expressiveness as an antecedent of brand love, was the most prominent factor driving eWOM. Communicating aspects of the 'ideal or desired self' through the event brand here, implies a special consumption relationship with unique qualities (after Ahuvia, Batra & Bagozzi, 2009; Bairrada *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012). Event participants who wish to be associated with the event brand feel strongly about the prestige this brand represents. Importantly, individuals need to 'earn' the right to be associated with this brand. Self-expression with the Comrades brand, for example, wearing a Comrades branded T-shirt, is unique in that it communicates participation in the 'ultimate human race' as a superior ultramarathon event. The organisation, perhaps unexpectedly, received negative eWOM about providing the 2020 edition of the event T-shirt as part of compensation. This is because the importance of 'earning' these rights to self-express was no longer a factor. Some individuals did not wish to be associated with an event of this stature that did not take place. Conversely, individuals also indicated that they would wear the 2020 event T-shirt as a reminder that the organisation had their best interests at heart throughout the crisis; first, through postponing to keep hopes alive; and secondly, by cancelling the event to ensure the

safety of all involved. It is important that brand managers recognise the expressive role that brands can play in the lives of individuals and take cognisance of what their brand represents and means to consumers.

Brand trust, as a proposed precursor to brand love (Batra *et al*., 2012) was evident in the findings as participants expressed confidence in the organisation's ability to respond appropriately to the crisis and potentially even 'bounce back' stronger. Nonetheless, the brand's credibility was also questioned in terms of entering future events. Although brand trust was evident, negative eWOM may imply that these individuals do not necessarily love the event brand, or do not yet have a long-standing relationship with the brand (after Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016). If event organisations desire for consumers to love their brands, it is important that they first establish a high level of trust in the organisation itself, which is normally built through the development of long-term relationships (Batra *et al*., 2012).

The most important factor that drove positive eWOM as an enduring effect of brand love (after Aro *et al*., 2018), was the *recollection of past experiences (nostalgia)*. Once consumers have had positive prior experiences, and especially also repeated, this creates a stronger affiliation with the brand and the ability to garnish positive sentiments during the crisis (An *et al*., 2019). Despite the organisation's CRS, many individuals communicated their *intentions to partake* in this event again in the future. *Interest in the well-being* of the brand did not feature strongly, however, this aspect has scarcely been considered as an outcome of brand love (Aro *et al*., 2018) – its relevance in this context could be explored further. *Explicit declarations of love* for the event brand were the least common outcome which could be attributed to topics of conversation revolving mainly around the crisis at the time.

Specifically related to the crisis, findings show that event participants experienced *separation anxiety* upon potential event cancellation. On the positive side, this is suggestive of love for the event brand (Aro *et al*., 2018). However, this may have had a negative impact on these participant's overall well-being (Cho, Oh & Chiu, 2021). The fear of possibly not being able to partake in the event again, for example, due to limited entries, limited financial means or not being able to qualify again, links to future intentions and indicates how the crisis created anxiety amongst these individuals. Not being able to partake in their 'loved' event also implied the loss of self-expression through this brand (as indicated by Aro *et al*., 2018). Importantly, there is significant evidence of *brand defence* which is most relevant in this crisis context as past studies have suggested (Batra *et al*., 2012; Aro *et al*., 2018).

5.2. The enduring effects of brand love and eWOM in managing a crisis

Findings of this study show the relevance of brand love during crisis situations as brand love may create tolerance of brand transgressions and encourage brand defence (Ali *et al*., 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2020). Despite evidence of negative eWOM, many defended the CMA's efforts to keep the race going. Several commended the CMA for trying to give back as much as they could to those who had entered for the 2020 event. Some even supported the notion of not receiving refunds to ensure the survival of the event. The organisation was also praised for playing a significant role in the lives of many individuals, and for the charities that benefit from the event.

Despite showing support for positive eWOM as an enduring effect of brand love, the presence of negative eWOM shows that event organisations cannot solely rely on brand love as it may not have the power to negate all negative effects in a crisis (Zhang *et al*., 2020). The findings of the study are similar to other social media studies in a crisis context which show that individuals often use these online platforms as a way to make their voices 'heard' (Rauschnabel, Kammerlander & Ivens, 2016), illustrated in this study with, "And I hope the officials from CMA read the comments of the runners". If event organisations 'listen' to their online brand communities and can acknowledge their presence, opinions, and suggestions, they could potentially reduce the extent of negative eWOM known to spread rapidly (Allard *et al*., 2020; Rauschnabel *et al*., 2016).

5.3. Managerial implications

To quote Nadeau *et al*. (2020:1) when they suggest "why waste a good crisis", marketing managers can learn from this case study how to offer improved strategies of their own during potential future crisis situations. First, it is important that brand managers take cognisance of the significant role that brand love can play in crisis situations. As the findings of this study show that event brands have the potential to be 'loved' brands, it is suggested that event brand marketers continually find ways to make their brands 'loved'. For this to realise, marketers should first establish brand trust among their consumers. Brand love can be most valuable in crisis situations because when consumers love their brands, they are generally more tolerant towards brand transgressions and will often defend the brand as seen in the current study (corroborating Ali *et al*., 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2020).

Secondly, regardless of the value of brand love to event organisations, organisations should still develop effective response strategies and cannot only rely on brand love during a crisis. This was seen in the negative eWOM about the organisation's CRS which is often most damaging to an organisation's reputation (Grappi & Romani, 2015). Although the CMA was

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not responsible for the COVID-19 crisis, the way they responded to the crisis resulted in their own brand crisis which spread rapidly via eWOM. While brand love did reduce the negative impact of the CRS, negative eWOM and the speed with which it spread, was quickly damaging (Skowronski *et al.,* 1998). Negative eWOM can even result in withdrawal of consumers' love for the event brand as seen in this study.

Thirdly, it is suggested that more effective responses to crisis situations can be developed by 'listening' to online brand communities (such as done in this study), when developing interventions. This can enable organisations to develop more timely responses before the brand's reputation undergoes too much damage (after Yuan *et al*., 2020). Also, by considering popular topics in eWOM, more effective crisis responses can be implemented by explaining reasons backing their decisions, as well as recognising their consumers' online presence. The importance for organisations to continuously monitor social media is corroborated by past research which notes that social media users often expect instant replies to queries, comments, or criticism they formulate on these platforms (Rauschnabel *et al*., 2016). Further, it is suggested that marketing and event brand managers continuously 'listen' to their online brand communities This is not only relevant in a crisis but is also an effective means of obtaining real-time feedback following events, which can ultimately improve the future event offerings.

Fourthly, if consumers love event brands, they often engage in self-expressiveness via these brands which may create favourable organisational outcomes, particularly in terms of spreading positive eWOM often viewed as a credible source of information (Dalman *et al*., 2019; Wallace *et al*., 2014). Brand love is also significant as it could result in spill-over effects, such as creating love for the event brand among spectators and residents of the host destination. In turn, participants and spectators may also grow to love the destination brand and return to these events in future.

Finally, event organisers need to understand the role that their event plays in the running career and overall well-being of participants. The inability to participate in running events during the crisis appears to have negatively impacted event participants' overall well-being (Cho *et al*., 2021). Offering alternative event formats, such as virtual events, could be one way of showing that the organisation cares about the well-being of its participants. Also, given the intense separation anxiety experienced from potential event cancellation in this case study, event organisations could develop communication that sets participants at ease by clearly indicating how they intend to support future participation. This will arguably further strengthen

event brand love and aid in reducing the experienced anxiety and negative effects of the crisis for the brand and its consumers.

6. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to event marketing theory as well as practice by exploring event brand love during a unique brand crisis and the suggested enduring effects of brand love. Drawing upon a brand love prototype, this study shows evidence that the known desirable outcomes of event brand love can be sustained during a real-life crisis as was evident from authentic eWOM communication. Strong feelings expressed towards the event brand provide evidence that event brand love exists (as indicated by Batra *et al*., 2012). Love for the event brand was evident in varying degrees through evidence of recollection of past event experiences, interest in the well-being of the brand, future intentions to partake in the event and even a few explicit declarations of love for the event brand (similar to Aro *et al*., 2018). Findings show the relevance of brand love during crisis situations as brand love may create increased tolerance for brand transgressions and encourage brand defence (Ali *et al*., 2021; Zhang *et al*., 2020). More statements reflected positive eWOM as an overarching proposed enduring effect of brand love (corroborating Wallace *et al*., 2014) than negative eWOM. The positive effects of event brand love are thus displayed.

Overall, the findings show how sport event brands have potential to be 'loved' brands. This is important for sport marketing and event brand managers as brand love can result in numerous desirable outcomes for event organisations, such as positive eWOM and future participation intentions that remain, despite a crisis. Finally, this study suggests that event marketers should 'listen' continually to their online brand communities to identify trends in conversation during a crisis as this may enable them to offer more effective response strategies and reduce the negative effects of a crisis (after Yuan *et al*., 2020).

Although a single case study is used, the findings of this study are not limited to a local context or a single sporting event as the global events industry has been affected and the Comrades event investigated has global participation. It is thus recognised that brand love can also be relevant to other major events, for example, the Berlin, Boston, London, New York or Tokyo marathon events.

The findings of this study may not only be relevant to running events but also other sporting codes with major events. Sport spectators' love for event brands may also be affected by an organisation's CRS. Sport event marketers within different sporting contexts should consider

the benefits of event brand love. It is acknowledged that there may be differences regarding brand love for different types of leisure events, such as more casual leisure sport events in comparison with more serious leisure events, and these aspects could be explored further.

This study is also limited to the dimensions of event brand love explored. There may be other factors, such as brand personality, level of involvement, personal event performance; and outcomes, such as willingness to invest, insensitivity to prices, or behavioural loyalty which have not been explored and can be considered in future research. Furthermore, it may be worthwhile to apply additional research techniques, such as interviews, or quantitative methods, such as a survey, to further validate the findings of this study. In addition, this study took place during the early stages of COVID-19 and only a cross-sectional perspective at that point in time was considered. Future studies could take a more longitudinal approach to determine the long-term impact of COVID-19 on future endurance sport event offerings and explore aspects of sport consumer behaviour around participation in virtual sporting events.

Findings showed that runners did not only declare their love for the event brand, but also often love for the destination brand. Future studies can investigate how the relationship between consumers' love for the event brand could impact their love for the destination brand, and how these two 'loves' are related. Also, interest in the well-being of a brand has scarcely been considered as an outcome of brand love and its relevance within other contexts could be explored further. Finally, while this study enhances the understanding of the enduring effects of event brand love during a crisis, only a single online brand community was included. Findings are thus restricted to participants who form part of the online brand community and who chose to engage on the Facebook platform. This limits the generalisability of the results to all event participants.

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CHAPTER 4: ARTICLE 3

WHO WILL (VIRTUALLY) PARTICIPATE? EXPLORING MARKET SEGMENTS AND FUTURE INTENTIONS TO PARTAKE IN VIRTUAL RUNNING EVENTS

ABSTRACT

Purpose – While sporting event alternatives, such as virtual running events (VREs), grew exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic, a key issue going forward concerns the future offering of such events. The purpose of this study is twofold: a) to identify factors that relate to a (virtual) Sport Experience Design Framework (SX) that may predict intentions to partake in VREs in future; and b) to explore whether distinct market segments may exist with the intention to participate in VREs, based on the identified SX factors.

Design/methodology/approach – The quantitative study analysed the responses of 1017 virtual running event (VRE) participants from an online survey during the COVID-19 period. EFA was conducted to identify the SX factors that may predict VRE participation intentions and a CHAID analysis was used to identify market segments with future VRE participation intentions based on the relevant SX factors.

Findings – Results show that hedonia, perceived psycho-social risks, price and VRE preferences (i.e., perceived value of VRE participation) explain VRE intentions. Ten distinct market segments were identified. The segment with the highest VRE participation intentions experienced the highest levels of hedonia, had lower perceived psycho-social risks and were mostly casual leisure, female VRE participants. The segment indicating the lowest participation intentions were mostly serious leisure runners, male or female, with low levels of hedonia derived from VRE participation.

Originality/value – This study contributes to research on the impact of COVID-19 and identified factors based on a unique (virtual) SX framework, including elements of subjective well-being (types of happiness), perceived risks of COVID-19, event attributes and perceived value (preferences) for partaking in VREs. This study is one of the first to apply a CHAID analysis, which overcomes the drawbacks of other market segmentation methods, to identify groups of people most likely to respond to VRE initiatives in future. The results allow for inferring a range of strategies and actions that sport event marketers can consider when designing sport events in future.

Keywords: *virtual running events (VRE), subjective well-being (SWB), sport experience design framework (SX), sport user, sport context, perceived risks, COVID-19, market segmentation*

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, declared as a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020) altered many traditional aspects of consumers' lives, including participation in sporting events. Hosting sport events, such as mass running events, during the pandemic increased the risk of rapidly spreading infections (McCloskey, Zumla, Ippolito, Blumberg, Arbon, Cicero, Endericks, Lim & Borodina, 2020). As a result, sport organisations were forced to postpone or cancel major traditional or 'live' events for the first time in decades (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021). The inability to stage physical events hastened the shift of leisure experiences from physical to digital environments (Richards, 2022). To realise organisational objectives, the offering of virtual running events (VREs) became increasingly popular (Helsen, Derom, Corthouts, De Bosscher, Willem & Scheerder, 2021).

There is a substantial lack of research on virtual sporting alternatives during the pandemic (Hacker, Vom Brocke, Handali, Otto & Schneider, 2020; Westmattelmann, Grotenhermen, Sprenger & Schewe, 2020). VREs have become increasingly viable during the crisis and are projected to be a legitimate future segment of the sport event industry (Agini & Di Stefano, 2020; Kim, 2021; Raimondi, Lawrence & O'Reilly, 2021; Richards, 2022). In fact, in 2021 the global virtual events market size was valued at USD 114.12 billion and is projected to grow to USD 657.64 billion by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2021). Although virtual runs are not a new phenomenon, the popularity of the concept of virtual runs grew rapidly across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic (Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022).

Despite the negative effects of COVID-19 as a prolonged crisis, consumers have also in some ways been 'forced' to change their habits and the pandemic may have created a window of opportunity for incorporating innovative technology and offering hybrid experiences in future (Hacker *et al.*, 2020; Tyre & Orlikowski, 1994). Helsen *et al.* (2021:17) contend that it is "very likely that virtual and physical PSEs will be offered alongside one another in the near future". It is thus relevant to identify what factors may predict future intentions to partake in VREs (Maditinos, Vassiliadis, Tzavlopoulos & Vassiliadis, 2021).

A virtual event is generally described as a web-based event that involves people interacting in virtual environments rather than in physical places (Gottlieb & Bianchi, 2017). The concept of virtual sporting events is somewhat broad and can be applied in various ways depending on whether participation takes place by utilising mobile applications, such as Zwift or MyTrace, or without specific mobile applications (Helsen *et al.*, 2021). This research explores VREs that

do not make use of mobile applications and where participants simply register online, complete the event, and upload their finishing results afterwards (Helsen *et al*., 2021).

Participatory sport events (PSEs) are open-entry events where the focus is on promoting participation and engagement rather than the significance of the sporting outcome (Coleman & Ramchandani, 2010; Crofts, Schofield & Dickson, 2012). Although elite athletes do take part, the majority are non-elite participants. Running as a participatory sport has been growing internationally as a trend where individuals engage in running events not because of the competitive aspect, but rather for health, leisure and adventure (Malchrowicz-Mośko & Poczta, 2018). Considering the perceived subjective well-being (SWB) effects, engaging in sporting activities, plays a central role in the lifestyles of billions of people even during a worldwide pandemic (Mehrsafar, Gazerani, Moghadam Zadeh & Jaenes Sánchez, 2020; Yeo, 2020; Yu, Mair, Lee & Faith, 2022).

This study considers past VRE experiences during COVID-19 to predict future intentions to partake in VREs. The aim is to identify whether distinct market segments exist, to provide insights for event marketers when designing future event consumption experiences. The focus of this study is more on the experience and psychological aspects of the sport consumer rather than the physical health-related benefits of sport participation (as done by Jiménez-Pavón, Carbonell-Baeza & Lavie, 2020; Simpson & Katsanis, 2020). A consumer-centred framework, namely, the Sport Experience Design (SX) framework is applied as it provides useful direction to explore how the design of sport experiences produce thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Funk, 2017).

The main aim of the study is twofold: a) to identify factors that relate to a (virtual) SX framework that may predict future intentions to partake in VREs; and b) to explore whether distinct market segments may exist with the intention to participate in VREs, based on the SX factors. Hence, the following research questions are investigated:

- What factors based on a (virtual) SX framework that relates to the sport user and sport context, may predict future intentions to partake in VREs?
- Are there distinct market segments with intentions to partake in VREs based on the respective SX factors related to both the sport user and context?

This study contributes to an underexplored area of virtual event experience research as an alternative format for providing event experiences (Wreford, Williams & Ferdinand, 2019) and addresses three main gaps. It firstly offers a novel application of the SX framework within a virtual sport event context. Secondly, research on virtual sporting events have mainly focused

on events that make use of mobile applications (Westmattelmann *et al*., 2020), whereas research on other types of virtual events (that do not utilise such applications) is scant (Helsen *et al*., 2021). Thirdly, although past research has suggested that VREs should be offered alongside traditional events in future (Raimondi *et al*., 2021), only a few studies have specifically considered who these event participants are and what sport consumer segments may be most likely to partake in VREs in future (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Mutz & Gerke, 2020; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022). The novelty of this research is also emphasised in that it is conducted amidst the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study will provide insights into VRE experiences from a sport consumer SWB perspective and highlights (virtual) event attributes and perceived benefits of virtual events that may predict behavioural intentions to partake in VREs in future. From a managerial perspective, the gained knowledge of the groups of sport consumers who are most likely to respond to VRE event offerings, can aid sport marketers and strategists when designing future event experiences, as well as contribute towards providing more focused marketing communications efforts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review begins with an introduction to virtual sporting events during COVID-19. The SX framework that guides the investigation and relates to the sport user and sport context is also presented.

2.1. COVID-19 and virtual sport events

Today it is well known that COVID-19 has affected the daily lives of consumers globally. Without initial medical solutions, governments implemented emergent policies to reduce the spread of the virus, for example, social distancing, travel restrictions and the banning of any large gatherings or events (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2021). Despite the importance of staying physically active to enhance physical and mental health during COVID-19 (Jiménez-Pavón *et al*., 2020; Simpson & Katsanis, 2020), engaging in physical exercise activities with others increased the risk of spreading infections (McCloskey *et al*., 2020). All physical activities that typically take place in groups were initially banned (Lippi, Henry, Bovo & Sanchis-Gomar, 2020). Mass sporting events, such as major running and cycling events were commonly referred to as 'superspreaders' of the virus (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021) and there became an increasing demand for virtual sporting challenges that could meet the health and safety restrictions imposed by the pandemic (Agini & Di Stefano, 2020; Maditinos *et al*., 2021; Raimondi *et al*., 2021). The pandemic was a central catalyst for change in the sport event

market when event organisations began to transform their traditional event offerings into virtual alternatives (Miles, 2016; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022).

Virtual events are not an entirely new concept and these types of events have been staged (prior to COVID-19) to incorporate running event participation from across the globe (Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022). An example of a global running event challenge is *The Wings For Life World Run* where thousands of people worldwide run at the exact same time. Each person runs as far as they can until the "catcher car" passes them (Wings For Life World Run, 2022). This event also takes place as a global fundraiser. South Africa also takes part in the *Running World Cup League* where participants run for their country. The running speed or distance is not important since the aim is to run as much as possible to help your country reach the top of the leader board. The more runs a person does (with a minimum distance of 3 kilometres), the more kilometre points their country scores (Running World Cup, 2022).

The popularity of the concept of virtual runs grew globally during the COVID-19 pandemic. A virtual event is generally described as a web-based event that involves people interacting in virtual environments rather than in physical places (Gottlieb & Bianchi, 2017). In relation to virtual sporting events, this concept is rather broad and can be applied in various ways depending on whether they make use of mobile applications or merely connect with consumers online (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Westmattelmann *et al*., 2020). Mobile applications, such as Zwift, tracks what a person does in the physical world and translates that effort into a virtual world, meaning that participants can virtually see others participating at the same time but at different locations (Saunders, 2019). With an application, such as MyTrace, individuals participate in the activity on a specified date and time with others at the same moment (often having feedback from a speaker, live leader boards and information about the surroundings as if the person had been physically participating in the event) (Helsen *et al*., 2021).

Waśkowski and Jasiulewicz (2022) describe a virtual running event as an event where runners register on the platform of the event organiser, pay an entry fee, and then cover the set distance (e.g., a marathon, half-marathon or 10 kilometres) in a specific time. The run can take place on a specific day, across a period of a few weeks, from any location and the route is optional. Unlike traditional events, there is no direct competition between the participants on a specific route.

For the purpose of this study a VRE refers to a virtual running event that does not make use of specific mobile applications and is delimited to a race that can be run (or walked) from any location (e.g., on the road, an outdoor trail or treadmill), where participants register for the

event online, pay an entry fee, complete the distance and then usually upload their finishing time (Helsen *et al*., 2021). While some virtual events require participants to upload their finishing times to create a ranking list of the finishers, this is not a requirement for all such events and this study does not distinguish between the two. Experiences are at the heart of events, and it is thus relevant to also explore experiences in a virtual event context (Biaett & Richards, 2020). The SX framework is frequently applied in sport consumer behaviour (SCB) to investigate sport experiences in traditional running events (Funk, 2017). Hence, this study applies an adapted SX framework within the virtual study context to guide the investigation.

2.2. The Sport Experience Design (SX) Framework

The SX framework proposed by Funk (2017) provides a holistic consumer-centred approach that incorporates cognitive, organisational, and physical design factors that may enhance a sport consumers' event consumption experience. This framework comprises three interrelated elements which are graphically depicted in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Elements of the SX framework

Source: Adapted from Funk (2017).

As depicted in Figure 4.1, the SX framework is comprised of three unique but related elements: a) the sport user, b) the sport context, and c) the sport organisation (Funk, 2017). The *sport user* is the sport consumer with mental processes, psychological needs, and personal characteristics. The *sport context* refers to the physical and technologically mediated environment in which the sport consumer navigates through an experience and interacts with touchpoints. The sport organisation produces the sport experience to achieve organisational goals.

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In this study, factors that relate to the *sport user* are explored in relation to SWB (types of happiness) that may be derived from an event experience (Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008; Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020), as well as perceived risks of COVID-19, given the crisis context of the study (Matiza & Kruger, 2021). For the (virtual) *sport context* VREs are considered as novel experiences as many of the traditional events were transformed into virtual offerings for the first time during this crisis (Newland & Aicher, 2018; Skavronskaya, Scott, Moyle & Kralj, 2019). Event attributes that may impact the meaningfulness of the event experience are considered and include brand prestige (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar & Sankar, 2012) and participating for a charitable cause (Filo & Coghlan, 2016). Event attributes that are within control of the event organisation, such as perceived price (Zhong & Moon, 2020) and other tangible elements that may comprise the event offering (Newland & Aicher, 2018) are also included for the sport context. And lastly, perceived benefits of virtual events (referred to as VRE preferences) in comparison with traditional event participation, are also considered for the sport context.

The *sport organisation* refers to the running event organisation that offers the VRE experience (Funk, 2017). This study considers that obtaining insights from aspects related to the sport user and sport context may aid event managers in the design of future event experiences and this may ultimately aid in achieving organisational goals.

Figure 4.2 below summarises the aspects explored in the current study, based on the SX framework, that may predict future intentions to partake in VREs.

Figure 4.2: SX Factors explored in current study
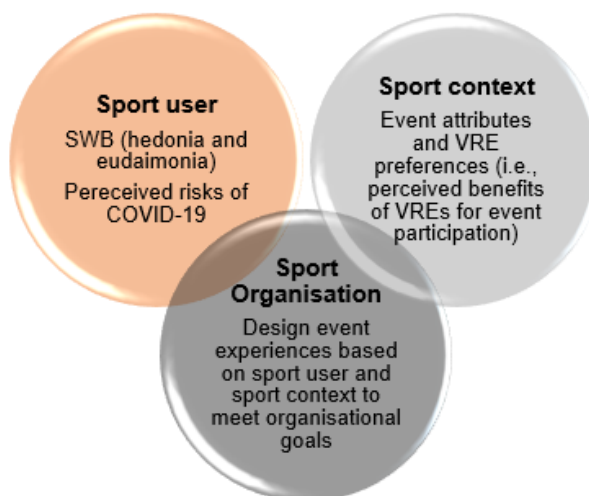
Source: Adapted from Funk (2017).

2.2.1. The sport user

The *sport user* is the consumer with psychological needs and personal characteristics that influence an individual's desired experiences and perceptions (Funk, 2017). In the SX framework, the sport consumer is referred to as the sport user (Funk, 2017), therefore, in the current study the term sport user will be used (rather than sport consumer). Aspects related to the sport user for this study include perceived SWB from VRE participation and perceived risks of COVID-19.

Perceived SWB from virtual event participation

Other than physical health-related benefits, individuals often engage in sporting activities to enhance SWB (Bosnjak, Brown, Lee, Yu & Sirgy, 2016; Waterman, 1993; Waterman *et al*., 2008). According to eudaimonistic identity theory, when consumers engage in activities that induce self-expressiveness, these activities are likely to increase SWB (Waterman,1993; Waterman *et al*., 2008). SWB comprises two types of activities that may contribute to SWB including "hedonically enjoyable activities", which lead to hedonic enjoyment alone (short-term happiness), and self-expressive activities that lead to both hedonic enjoyment and self-expressiveness (long-term happiness) (Waterman,1993; Waterman *et al*., 2008).

Past studies show that participation in leisure activities, such as skiing, dancing (Bosnjak *et al.*, 2016), music festivals (Saragih & Amelia, 2020) and glacier hiking (Løvoll, 2019), indicate varying degrees of hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonia (from self-expressiveness activities). There are also studies that explore aspects of SWB (hedonia and eudaimonia) in running event participation (e.g., Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Lee & Hwang, 2018). However, it is not known to what extent virtual PSE participants may experience the same elements of SWB from participation in VREs as with traditional events.

During the COVID-19 period, virtual events were being implemented for a wide variety of activities. As a result, a flood of new research emerged that evaluated the role of digital technologies in these new virtual offerings (Richards, 2022). Some examples include the study of virtual competitions for an elite online darts home tournament (the PDC Home Tour) (Davis, 2020), the study of experience dimensions related to online cooking classes (Seyitoğlu & Atsız, 2022) and online film event festivals (Brunow, 2020). Helsen *et al*. (2021) analysed the factors that determine participation in virtual events for real activities using an online recording platform. None of these studies, however, consider the elements of SWB (or types of happiness) that may be generated for the sport user from participation in a VRE. It is not known how VRE SWB elements equate to other virtual sport events nor have comparisons been made between virtual and traditional running events in this regard.

2.2.2. Perceived risks

Perceived risk in sport tourism (including PSEs) is related to intrinsic subjective biases that are formed by the potential negative consequences that may arise from a consumption experience (Matiza & Kruger, 2021). Virtual event participants during COVID-19 were at first predominantly driven by risk (Helsen *et al.*, 2021). Past research in sport tourism has considered different types of risks (for example, terrorism, financial, political, social, physical, psychological and health) (Matiza & Kruger, 2021). Research mostly considers *physical* risk factors that may harm or endanger tourists' health and well-being (Deng & Ritchie, 2018; Fuchs & Reichel, 2006; Yu, Li, Yu, He & Zhou, 2020). This is most relevant in a COVID-19 context.

Matiza and Kruger (2021) further posit that due to the nature of COVID-19 and its highly transmissible effects, COVID-19 may stimulate both *psychological risks* (e.g., engaging in traditional running events during COVID-19 may negatively impact the self-image and self-perception of the participant) and *social risk* (e.g., engaging in traditional running events during COVID-19 may have negative effects on how others who are close to the participant may perceive and relate to them) (Deng & Ritchie, 2018; Fuchs & Reichel, 2006). Perceived physical risk, psychological risks and social risks in event participation may influence sport users' decision-making regarding future VRE participation intention and are thus explored in relation to the sport user.

2.2.3. The (virtual) sport context

The *sport context* represents the user experience and "includes both physical and technologically mediated interactions encountered before, during, and after consumption whether during a single experience or over the duration of the relationship with the sport context or organisation" (Funk, 2017:152). The *sport context* is unique as it is essentially the individual who creates their own VRE consumption experience. Nevertheless, there are still aspects that are within the organisation's control that can enhance the virtual consumption experience, such as incorporating certain event attributes and designing the experience around the benefits of virtual events.

Event Attributes

SCB differs from general consumer behaviour given the assumption that sport has unique characteristics (Funk, 2017). These characteristics relate to the societal importance, outcome uncertainty, variability, and intense emotion embedded in the design and utility of sport experiences (Funk, 2017). Sport experiences differ from general user experiences as encounters between the sport user and service provider go beyond mere transactional

exchanges, which may contribute to meaningful event experiences (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Research shows that memorable experiences are often derived from meaningful consumption experiences (Skavronskaya *et al*., 2019). Leisure studies have shown that active sport participation in traditional sporting events, such as running events, can evoke emotions that contribute to a meaningful life and meaningful running event experiences may also create memorable experiences (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Theodorakis, Kaplanidou & Karabaxoglou, 2015).

Traditional event participation studies have shown that event attributes such as event *novelty* (Newland & Aicher, 2018; Skavronskaya *et al*., 2019); *brand prestige* (Stokburger-Sauer *et al*., 2012); and raising funds for a charity or '*good cause'* (Filo & Coghlan, 2016) may enhance the meaningfulness (and thus memorability) of an event experience. It is not known to what extent these attributes may relate to a virtual sport experience and are thus explored in the current study in the context of VRE participation.

Although physical design elements that enhance the consumption experience during physical event participation are not relevant for virtual events, other tangibles such as event memorabilia, for example, physical medals, event T-shirts and goodie bags, can aid in enhancing the overall event experience (Newland & Aicher, 2018). This can be an important part of the virtual event experience as event-branded memorabilia are often used as symbols for self-expression among participants, in other words, event brands are often used to communicate aspects of the ideal or desired 'self' when individuals realise goals that are important to them (Karjaluoto, Munnukka & Kiuru, 2016). Where event memorabilia forms part of the virtual offering, these are either delivered to participants, or can be collected from specified store outlets or pickup points (MyProCoach Ltd, 2021). The current study considers the importance of offering such event memorabilia as part of the event experience that may impact future VRE participation intentions. Another factor within the event organisation's control for virtual events is the *price* of event entry fees. Perceived price of entry fees in terms of value for money may also impact future event choices and is also considered in the current study (Zhong & Moon, 2020).

Preferences for virtual event participation

The virtual nature of a sport event alters the event offering as well as preferences for future event participation decision-making (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021). Although a virtual experience can never fully replace a traditional event experience, there are some benefits associated with VREs which may influence intentions to partake in these events in future (and beyond COVID-19) (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021). Other than preventing the spread of COVID-19 and health and

safety risks (Maditinos *et al*., 2021), VREs provide participants with *convenience* aspects, such as choosing their own start time and running route, reducing *costs* (cheaper registration fees and saving on travelling/accommodation costs) and can accommodate *individual preferences* to run alone or with friends. These factors are explored from a VRE event context which has not specifically been explored in past VRE-related research, hence, there were no existing scales that could measure these aspects at the time when this study was conducted.

2.2.4. Sport organisation

The *sport organisation* is the entity aiming to achieve its goals and objectives to be successful. The sport organisation strives to maximise profits by managing the sport context for the sport user (Pizzo, Baker, Jones & Funk, 2021). In the context of this study, the sport organisation refers to the running event organisation that offers the virtual event experience.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

To answer the research questions, a quantitative exploratory research design was followed to firstly determine what factors, based on a virtual SX framework, may predict VRE participation intentions, and secondly, to identify whether distinct market segments exist with intentions to partake in VREs based on those SX factors. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant Faculty Ethics Committee (protocol nr EMS163/21).

3.1. Sampling and data collection

A convenience sampling technique was used to generate quantitative data. This technique is most useful to reach a large target sample (Isaac, 2020). Individuals, over the age of 18 years, who had previously participated in a VRE during the COVID-19 period were included. Data was collected via an online survey hosted on the Qualtrics platform, with survey links posted on social media pages of running-related organisations after permission was obtained. This method was suitable as the context of the study took place in a virtual space and members of these online communities already had a vested interest in the activity of running. Data collection took place between 15 September and 31 October 2021 and a final sample of 1017 valid responses was obtained. This sample size was suitable for the classification analysis employed, given that Chi Squared Automatic Interaction Detector (CHAID) works best in large samples (N=1000 and above) where the power of the test is important (Mehmet & Elkonca, 2020).

3.2. Measurement instrument

The self-administered, structured questionnaire was first pre-tested among members of the target population. Participants were first requested to give their consent to participate. Section A followed with screening questions (i.e., 18 years or older; have participated in a VRE during COVID-19). Section B solicited questions that profiled respondents based on running behaviours (participated in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19; participate as runner/walker; serious/casual leisure participant based on frequency and distance of running; formal club member before COVID-19 and renewed their memberships during COVID-19).

Sections C, D and E focused on experiences, preferences, and behavioural intentions. All scales were measured using a sliding scale from 1 to 100 as this reliably allows detection of more subtle individual differences in response patterns (Imbault, Shore & Kuperman, 2018). Section C covered psychological drivers of sport users' behaviour within the context of VRE participation experiences and SWB (comprising hedonic and eudaimonic consumption experiences) (1= 'strongly disagree' to 100= 'strongly agree'). *Hedonia* was measured with nine items (adapted from Babin, Darden & Griffin, 1994) and *eudaimonia* was measured in terms of self-expressiveness from the consumption experience with eight items (adapted from Sirgy, Lee, Yu, Gurel-Atay, Tidwell & Ekici, 2016). *Perceived risks* of COVID-19 measured 11 items adapted from Matiza and Kruger (2021).

Section D focused on the sport context and measured *event attributes* considered to be most important when selecting VREs. Respondents were asked to indicate how important the specified event attributes are when selecting VREs (1= 'not at all important' to 100= 'extremely important'). Attributes included *novelty* (one item adapted from Skavronskaya *et al*., 2019); *event brand prestige* (2 items adapted from Stokburger-Sauer *et al*., 2012); importance of participating in a *cause-related* event (single item adapted from Filo & Coghlan, 2016); and event *memorabilia* (3 items were self-developed based on memorabilia commonly received at running events). *Perceived price* was measured with three items (adapted from Zhong & Moon, 2020) (1= 'strongly disagree'; to 100= 'strongly agree'). *Preferences* for partaking in virtual rather than traditional running events were measured using eight items which were formulated by the researcher based on a review of literature (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022) (1= 'definitely not a reason' to 100= 'definitely a reason').

Section E included intentions to partake in traditional events, VREs or a combination of both with three items (1= 'extremely unlikely' to 100= 'extremely likely') (adapted from Sharmaa & Klein, 2020). Lastly, respondents were asked to indicate their gender and age.

3.3. Data analysis methods

3.3.1. Descriptive statistics and Exploratory Factor Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample and results of each question. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to determine dimensionality of factors from the scale items developed for the questionnaire. Methods applied were Principal Axis Factoring and Oblique rotation (Promax and Kaiser Normalization) (Kline, 2011; Costello & Osborne, 2005). Only fully completed questionnaires were utilised, thus it was not necessary to replace any missing values. Bartlett's test of sphericity (significant at 0.05 or smaller) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (exceeding 0.6) indicated data suitability (Pallant, 2016). Factors with Eigenvalues exceeding 1 and factor loadings above 0.40 were retained (Nusair & Hua, 2010). Cronbach's Alpha tested factor reliability (above 0.6 regarded as acceptable) (Kline, 2011). Reliability was also tested using Composite Reliability (CR), with values of CR above 0.7 being excellent. AVE compares the amount of variance captured by a construct to the amount due to measurement error; values above 0.7 are considered excellent, while levels above 0.5 are considered acceptable (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2019).

3.3.2. CHAID analysis

CHAID is an exploratory statistical method (introduced by Kass, 1980) that is popularly used to conduct market segmentation studies. This analysis shows the determinants and their relationships with the dependent variable via a decision-tree modelling technique using chi-square or F statistics, Bonferroni method and category merger algorithm (Kass, 1980; Önder & Uyar, 2017). It starts by finding the independent variable that is the strongest significant predictor or best explains the dependent variable and creates the first branch. It then creates intervals that show for which values of this independent variable a subgroup exists that is homogenous, but significantly different with regards to the dependent variable from other subgroups. The main predictor variable is then split into two or more subgroups known as the initial or parent nodes. These are then split further into child nodes where applicable. Segment configuration continues until no new significant relationships emerge between the dependent and independent variables (Thomas & Galambos, 2004). CHAID has a range of benefits over other more commonly used statistical techniques (Önder & Uyar, 2017). For instance, it is nonparametric and nonlinear, and can overcome drawbacks of regression analysis that mostly uses intra-group variability (Önder & Uyar, 2017). It also provides more detailed groupings to identify market segments. Another benefit of a decision-tree is that it provides hierarchical rankings that aid in providing additional insights into the differences that may exist among the groups that are segmented (Doyle, Kunkel & Funk, 2013).

The technique has been employed in various disciplines such as leadership studies (e.g., Milanović & Stamenković, 2016); education (e.g., Önder & Uyar, 2017); medical (Lahmann & Kottner, 2011) and tourism marketing segmentation studies (Díaz-Pérez & Bethencourt-Cejas, 2016). Despite the acknowledgement that sport consumers consist of various cohorts that display diverse attitudes and behaviours towards the sport objects they support (Doyle *et al.*, 2013), the CHAID technique has hardly been used as a segmentation tool in sport-related research studies and only one study was found that applied the CHAID technique among marathon runners (Valek, Lesjak, Bednarik, Gorjanc & Axelsson, 2015).

Although cluster analysis is most frequently used for market segmentation in sport and tourism studies (e.g., Matiza & Kruger, 2021; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022), the current study applied a CHAID technique to identify market segments. The most important difference is that a CHAID technique is based on a dependent variable and one or more independent variables, whereas a cluster technique does not have a dependent variable and only the variables themselves are grouped (Kass, 1980; Önder & Uyar, 2017). This technique is thus most appropriate for the current study as the aim was to segment the market with a specific dependent variable in mind, namely, future VRE participation (Önder & Uyar, 2017). In this analysis, intention to partake in VREs was included as the dependent variable, while the independent variables (determinants) were based on factors related to the sport user and virtual sport context. All variables in this model were continuous.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Respondent profile

The final sample included 1017 completed questionnaires. Table 4.1 shows that more females (68.04%) than males (31.56%) participated in the study. Also, based on the frequency and distance of running, more individuals participated as casual (57.42%) rather than serious leisure event participants (42.58%). Most of the respondents had participated in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19 (92.13%) and more participated as runners (76.89%) rather than walkers (23.11%). More respondents were members of formal running clubs prior to COVID-19 (65.49%) and almost half of the respondents (49.66%) continued with their annual club membership during COVID-19 despite event restrictions.

Table 4.1: Respondent profile and running behaviour

Demographic profile		Running behaviour*	
Age (mean)	43 (min=19; max=77)	**Running frequency (per week)**	
Gender*		Once	11.41
Male	31.56	Twice	9.83
Female	68.04	Three times	20.16
Prefer not to say	0.40	Four times	21.53
Casual/serious leisure participant*		Five times	22.62
Casual	57.42	Six times	7.23
Serious	42.58	Every day of the week	6.19
Running behaviour*			
Running as a leisure activity		**Preferred event distance (km)**	
Yes	92.13	5km	17.60
No	7.87	10km	22.82
Participate as runners/walkers		15km	5.90
Runner	76.89	21.1km	29.50
Walker	23.11	32km	0.20
Formal running club member		42.2km	20.16
Yes	65.49	More than 42.2km	2.36
No	34.51	Did not partake in formal events	5.41
Formal running club member (during)			
Yes	49.66		
No	50.34		

N=1017; Note: All descriptives are prior to COVID-19 unless specified as during; * Indicated as a percentage

4.2. EFA results

To answer the first research question, the results from the EFA for all items are provided in Tables 4.2 to 4.7 below. The KMO values exceeded 0.6 in all cases except for price (refer to Table 4.5) and intentions (refer to Table 4.7). As these values are only slightly below 0.6, data suitability was still indicated (Pallant, 2016). All factor loadings were above 0.40 and thus considered (Nusair & Hua, 2010). Cronbach's Alpha showed acceptable levels above 0.6, confirming factor reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In the case of intentions (refer to Table 4.7), only two items loaded and, in this case, a Guttman Split-Half Coefficient of 0.6 or larger was regarded as acceptable (Benton, 2015). Reliability was also tested using Composite Reliability (CR), with CR values above 0.7 being excellent. Except for intentions (CR=0.43) (in Table 4.7), all factors showed CR values above 0.7 which is excellent. For Average Variance Explained (AVE) values above 0.7 are considered excellent, while levels above 0.5 are considered acceptable (Hair *et al*, 2019). Apart from physical risk (AVE=0.39) (in Table 4.3), all factors showed AVE above the acceptable level 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Both intentions and physical risk were retained for further analysis when considering the three reliability tests collectively (after Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 4.2 indicates the results of the scale items measuring SWB (hedonia and eudaimonia). In line with the theory, these formed two separate factors (Waterman *et al*., 2008). They were labelled accordingly and used as separate constructs in further analysis. Respondents indicated that when they participated in VREs they enjoyed the experience (mean=70.72), felt a sense of adventure (mean=65.54), and compared to other things they could have done, it

was worth their time to partake in the event experience (mean=65.47). In general, VRE participants did not indicate that VRE participation reflects who they really are (mean=48.28) or is central their identity (mean=42.53).

Table 4.2: EFA results on SWB

Elements of SWB	Mean	Std Dev	Factors	
Statements			**Hedonia**	**Eudaimonia**
When I partake in virtual running events, I enjoy the experience.	70.72	32.62	0.914	
When I partake in virtual running events, I feel a sense of adventure.	65.54	34.23	0.917	
When I partake in virtual running events compared to other things I could have done, the time I spend partaking in these events, is truly enjoyable.	65.47	32.25	0.885	
When I partake in virtual running events, I feel excited to be part of the experience.	65.38	33.39	0.936	
When I partake in virtual running events, I am able to forget my problems.	65.24	33.76	0.826	
When I partake in virtual running events I enjoy being immersed in the experience.	62.44	33.02	0.925	
Participating in virtual running events is a fun way of running.	61.48	35.42	0.833	
Participating in virtual running events is a true joy.	56.39	37.05	0.867	
Participating in virtual running events feels like an escape.	56.22	36.61	0.835	
When I partake in virtual running events, I feel a special fit (or connectedness) with the activity of running.	58.22	33.90		0.821
When I partake in virtual running events, I feel more complete or fulfilled than when I partake in most other activities permitted during COVID-19.	54.01	34.07		0.823
When I partake in virtual running events, I feel that running is what I was meant to do.	53.67	34.52		0.781
When I partake in virtual running events, I feel more intensely involved than when I engage in most other activities permitted during COVID-19.	52.56	33.59		0.788
Participating in virtual running events gives me the greatest feeling of really being alive.	51.57	36.45		0.888
Participating in virtual running events is part of who I am.	48.28	36.33		0.904
Participating in virtual running events gives me my strongest sense that this is who I really am.	48.22	36.16		0.909
Participating in virtual running events is central to my identity.	42.53	34.05		0.852
Cronbach's Alpha			0.95	0.97
CR			0.95	0.97
AVE			0.72	0.78
KMO			0.92	0.94
Variance Explained (%)			71.74	77.97

Note: measured on sliding scales for level of agreement (1= 'Strongly disagree'; 100= 'Strongly agree'); Bartlett's test of sphericity (p<0.001).

Table 4.3 shows that two factors emerged for perceived risks of COVID-19 and event participation. Matiza and Kruger (2021) identified three factors related to perceived risk of COVID-19 and travel intentions, namely, physical health-related risks, social risk and psychological risk. The first factor corroborated the factor identified by Matiza and Kruger

(2021) of physical health-related risks and was labelled as physical risks (refer to Table 4.3). The second factor in this study combined social risk and psychological risk (as identified by Matiza & Kruger, 2021) into a single factor. Hence, the second factor was labelled as perceived psycho-social risks. *Physical risks* were the highest in terms of perceived risks and respondents indicated the importance of proper sanitation and hygiene in traditional sporting events (mean=83.57), the risk of being infected (mean=57.96) and perceptions that virtual events would be a safer option for those who prefer not to be vaccinated (mean=49.49). The least important regarding perceived risks were perceived *psycho-social* risks and findings showed that participants were not concerned that participation in traditional events would negatively affect their image in society (mean=21.77), they did not feel that they would be disappointed if they were to partake in traditional events again despite the pandemic (mean=26.16), and they did not indicate that participation in traditional running events again would cause them to experience unnecessary anxiety (mean=31.28).

Table 4.3: EFA results for perceived risks of COVID-19 and event participation

Perceived risks and event participation	Mean	Std Dev	Factors	
Statements			Physical risk	Psycho-social risk
Proper sanitation and hygiene in traditional sporting events are now more important than ever.	83.57	23.96	0.726	
The risk of infectious diseases could influence my decision to rather partake in virtual running events.	57.96	35.33	0.832	
Virtual running events are a safer option for me if I prefer to not be vaccinated.	49.49	38.10	0.409	
I do not think that traditional running events can currently uphold the COVID-19 safety requirements.	46.23	34.25	0.435	
People who are important to me (friends, family, colleagues) would prefer me to partake in virtual running events (rather than traditional events) in the near future.	44.15	37.14		0.467
People who are close to me would prefer me to participate in virtual running events (rather than traditional sporting events) in the near future.	36.47	35.87		0.630
The thought of partaking in a traditional running event at present makes me feel uncomfortable.	34.27	34.37		0.825
The thought of partaking in traditional running events at present makes me worry.	33.95	34.28		0.827
The thought of partaking in traditional running events at present causes me to experience unnecessary tension.	31.28	33.54		0.904
I might be disappointed if I were to participate in a traditional running event, since the world has changed.	26.16	29.14		0.885
If I participate in traditional running events in the near future, it will negatively affect my image in society.	21.77	27.85		0.855
Cronbach's Alpha			0.76	0.92
CR			0.70	0.91
AVE			0.39	0.61

Note: measured on sliding scale level of agreement (1= 'Strongly disagree'; 100= 'Strongly agree'); KMO: 0.91; Bartlett's test of sphericity (p<0.001); Variance Explained: 61.35%.

Table 4.4 presents the event attributes that were measured using items identified by the researcher and proved to be reliable and valid. The results indicate that two factors emerged, namely, *experience* (cannot be directly managed by the organisation) and *memorabilia* (which is within the organisation's control). The most important experience attribute was that the event raises funds for a 'good cause' and contributes to the meaningfulness of event participation (mean=74.34). Event memorabilia, such as receiving a free T-shirt (mean=70.76) and a goodie bag (mean=66.65) was also important. The least important attributes related to the novelty of the event experience (mean=60.06), and the event brand prestige in terms of the brand being well-established (mean=60.39) and having a favourable reputation (mean=63.90). Although event novelty and brand-related aspects were indicated to be less important, given that the mean scores were still all above 60, these attributes could still be considered as significant.

Table 4.4: EFA results for event attributes

Event attributes (level of importance)	Mean	Std Dev	Factors	
Statements			Experience	Memorabilia
The purpose of the virtual event is to raise funds for a 'good cause' (for example, a cancer association).	74.34	29.17	0.408	
The event brand has a favourable reputation.	63.90	32.49	0.932	
The virtual event must offer a novel event experience.	60.06	31.69	0.629	
The event brand should be well-established.	60.39	33.28	0.947	
A free T-shirt is included in the entry fee.	70.76	33.65		0.988
A free goodie bag is included in the entry fee.	66.65	34.86		0.830
I receive a real (physical) medal for participation in the virtual event.	66.09	36.37		0.533
Cronbach's Alpha			0.95	0.97
CR			0.95	0.97
AVE			0.72	0.78

Note: measured on sliding scale level of agreement (1= 'Not at all important'; 100= 'Extremely important'; KMO: 0.82; Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p<0.001$); Variance Explained: 53.04%. (One item did not load: "The purpose of the virtual event is to raise funds to fight COVID-19").

Table 4.5 shows the items that formed the factor for price perceptions related to VRE participation. In general, the results indicate that VRE participants regard virtual running events as being too expensive (mean=58.32) and do not feel it is worth it to pay for an event where essentially, they need to create their own experience (mean=52.16).

Table 4.5: EFA results for price

Perceived price (virtual events)	Mean	Std Dev	Factors
Statements			**Price**
I feel that virtual running events are too expensive.	58.32	33.35	0.919
I do not feel it is worth my while to pay for virtual running events where I need to create my own event experience.	52.16	35.14	0.673
Guttman Split-Half Coefficient			0.76
CR			0.78
AVE			0.65

Note: measured on sliding scale level of agreement (1= 'Strongly disagree'; 100= 'Strongly agree'; KMO: 0.56; Bartlett's test of sphericity (p<0.001); Variance Explained: 46.34%. (One item did not load: "I cannot currently partake in any running events due to lack of finances because of COVID-19").

In Table 4.6 all items related to one factor indicating a strong association with the reasons why people will participate in VREs. The most important was saving on travelling/accommodation costs (mean=57.38), the convenience of starting time (mean=57.53) and more affordable events (in comparison with traditional events) (mean=56.03). The least important reason was that individuals prefer to run alone (mean=37.77), they are afraid of spreading COVID-19 at traditional events (mean=41.44), and they are concerned about contracting COVID-19 at traditional events (mean=42.93).

Table 4.6: EFA results for VRE preferences

VRE preferences	Mean	Std Dev	Factor
Statements			**Preferences**
Because of the convenience of selecting my own starting time of the race.	57.53	37.63	0.975
Because the virtual event saves me travelling and/or accommodation costs.	57.38	36.71	0.921
If the registration of the virtual event is more affordable than the traditional event.	56.03	36.34	0.728
Because I am able to choose my own route.	53.84	38.41	0.933
Because I have a friend(s) who will participate in the virtual event with me.	51.45	37.90	0.612
Because I am concerned about contracting Covid-19 at a traditional (or mass) event.	42.93	37.21	0.781
Because I am afraid of spreading Covid-19 to others at a traditional event.	41.44	36.73	0.922
I prefer to run alone and I can do so during virtual events.	37.77	35.71	0.528
Cronbach's Alpha			*0.92*
CR			*0.94*
AVE			*0.66*

Note: measured on sliding scale level of agreement (1= 'Definitely not a reason'; 100= 'Definitely a reason'; KMO: 0.91; Bartlett's test of sphericity (p<0.001); Variance Explained: 61.35%.

Lastly, Table 4.7 shows event participants' intentions to partake in running events in future. Participants indicated that when thinking about their future running plans, they intend to partake in *both* traditional and VREs (mean=62.06). Less indicated that they do not *only* intend to partake in traditional running events beyond COVID-19 (mean=44.65).

Table 4.7: EFA for participation intentions

Future intentions to partake in running events	Mean	Std Dev	Factor
Statements			**Intentions**
Thinking about my future running plans post COVID-19, I intend to partake in <u>both</u> traditional AND virtual running events.	62.06	35.52	**0.652**
Thinking about my future running plans post COVID-19, I intend to partake only in traditional running events.	44.65	35.27	**0.652**
Guttman Split-Half Coefficient			*0.60*
CR			*0.43*
AVE			*0.60*

Note: measured on sliding scale level of agreement (1= 'Extremely unlikely'; 100= 'Extremely likely'; KMO: 0.50; Bartlett's test of sphericity (p<0.001); Variance Explained: 42.57%. (One item did not load, namely, "Thinking about my future running plans post COVID-19, I intend to only partake in virtual running events").

The findings related to the CHAID analysis including the application, results and market segments that were formed are presented next.

4.3. CHAID analysis

The dependent variable used in the CHAID analysis was future intentions to partake in VREs. The independent variables included hedonia, eudaimonia, physical health-related risk, perceived psycho-social risk, event attributes, memorabilia, price and VRE preferences. For the purposes of identifying future intentions to partake in VREs based on the independent variables, the CHAID analysis technique was employed.

4.3.1. Application of CHAID analysis

The results of the CHAID procedure indicate that the created decision-tree model contains, within three levels of tree depth, a total of 14 nodes, of which 9 are terminal. From the initial independent variables, the final model includes four (hedonia, perceived psycho-social risk, price and VRE preferences). In other words, four variables were found to be statistically significant predictors of the intention to partake in VREs based on the values of the F statistic and corresponding p-values. The model's performance is indicated by utilising the risk estimate (within node variance) to calculate the proportion of variance explained by the model. To meaningfully interpret risk estimate with a scale dependent variable, the total variance equals the within-node (error) variance plus the between-node (explained) variance. The proportion of variance due to error (unexplained variance) is 539.063/945.132=0.570. The proportion of variance explained by the model is thus 43%. Although this indicates only a moderate amount of variance explained, the focus of the analysis is understanding the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable within the context of forming homogenous subgroups.

4.3.2. Results from CHAID analysis

Figure 4.3 shows the results of the CHAID analysis where hedonia, VRE preferences, price and perceived psycho-social risk were found to explain VRE intentions. In Figure 4.3, Node 0 (also known as the "trunk" of the tree) indicates the mean value (mean=53.36) for the overall sample in terms of VRE intentions. The best statistically significant determinant (F=117.796, df1=5, df2=1011, p=0.000) of VRE intentions was *hedonia*, indicated as the first layer of "branches". Thus, hedonia is the independent variable that best explains future VRE intentions.

For hedonia, six nodes were identified which were homogenous within each node but statistically significantly different form the other nodes (refer to Figure 4.3). Nodes 1 to 3 were terminal nodes as no further subgroups emerged from these segments, while Nodes 4 to 6 split into further subgroups. *Node 1* represented the lowest levels of hedonia (range is smaller than or equal to 13.111) and predicted the lowest VRE intention (mean=10.70). *Node 2* represented slightly higher levels of hedonia (range is between 13.111 and 31.111) and predicted higher VRE intention (mean=31.37). *Node 3* indicated yet higher levels of hedonia (range is between 31.111 and 50.000) and predicted higher VRE intention (mean=43.31).

As indicated in Figure 4.3, *Node 6* represented the highest levels of hedonia (range is greater than 85.556) and predicted the highest levels of VRE intention (mean=70.29). For the respondents in this node, the independent variable that was the strongest predictor of VRE intention was perceived psycho-social risk (F=32.362, df1=1, df2=302, p=0.000). This node (segment) split into two subgroups. Lower levels of perceived risk (range is less than or equal to 72.667) predicted higher levels of VRE intentions (refer to Node 11) (mean=73.91), while higher levels of perceived risk (range is greater than 72.667) predicted lower levels of VRE intentions (mean=58.84) (refer to Node 12).

Node 5 (refer to Figure 4.3) represented the second highest levels of hedonia (range is between 70.000 and 85.556) and predicted lower levels of VRE intention (mean=63.70) than Node 6. For the respondents in this node, the independent variable that was the strongest predictor of VRE intention was price perceptions (F=21.512, df1=1, df2=203, p=0.000). This node (segment) split into two subgroups. Node 9 indicated that lower importance of price (range is less than or equal to 36.000) predicted higher levels of VRE intention (mean=73.31), while greater importance of price (range is greater than 36.000) (refer to Node 10) predicted lower levels of VRE intention (mean=58.03).

Figure 4.3: CHAID tree with independent variables for future VRE intentions
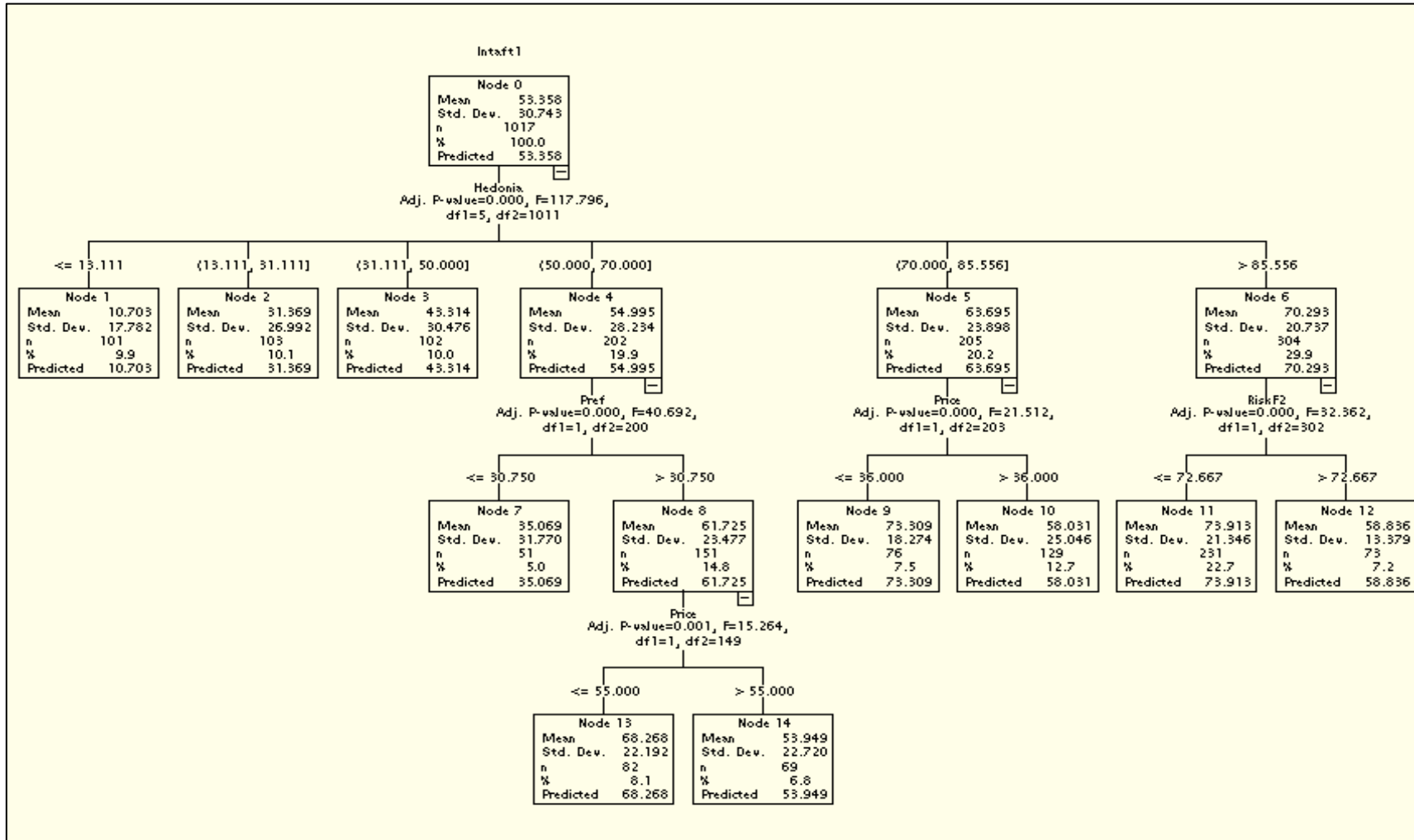
Source: Own data

Node 4 (refer to Figure 4.3) represented the third highest levels of hedonia (range is between 50.000 and 70.000) predicting lower levels of VRE intention (mean=55.00) than Node 5. For the respondents in Node 4, the independent variable that was the strongest predictor of VRE intention was the extent of preference for VREs above traditional events (F=40.692, df1=1, df2=200, p=0.000).

Node 4 split into two subgroups: Nodes 7 and 8. Node 8 indicated that higher preferences for VREs (range is greater than 30.750) predicted higher VRE intention (mean=61.73), while lower preferences for VREs (range is less than or equal to 30.750) predicted lower VRE intention (mean=35.07) (refer to Node 7). For the respondents in Node 8 (refer to Figure 4.3), the independent variable that was the strongest predictor of VRE intention was price perceptions (F=15.264, df1=1, df2=149, p=0.001). Node 8 split into two further subgroups which comprise of Nodes 13 and 14 (also known as a 'twig'). Node 13 indicated that lower importance of price (range is less than or equal to 55.000) predicted higher levels of VRE intention (mean=68.27), while greater importance of price (range is greater than 55.000) (refer to *Node 14*) predicted lower levels of VRE intention (mean=53.95).

4.3.3. Describing the segments

Table 4.8 provides an overview of the spread of the CHAID decision-tree in the form of a gains table, sorted from the node with the highest to the lowest VRE intentions.

Table 4.8: Gains summary for Nodes

Node	Number	Percentage	Mean
11	231	22.7%	73.9134
9	76	7.5%	73.3092
13	82	8.1%	68.2683
12	73	7.2%	58.8356
10	129	12.7%	58.0310
14	69	6.8%	53.9493
3	102	10.0%	43.3137
7	51	5.0%	35.0686
2	103	10.1%	31.3689
1	101	9.9%	10.7030

Node 11 represents the segment with the highest VRE intentions (mean=73.91) where Node 1 shows the segment with the lowest VREs intentions (mean=10.70). For this study, Node 13 is considered as moderate high intentions (mean=68.27) and Node 10 is considered as moderate low intentions (mean=58.03). Demographic and behavioural variables were then used (as depicted in Tables 4.9 to 4.11) to better understand the event participants within the four identified nodes (i.e., Nodes 1, 10, 11 and 13).

In Table 4.9 the results are provided that describe the participants in each node in terms of their age, gender, whether they had participated in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19, and whether they normally partake as a runner or a walker in events. Table 4.9 also indicates whether the respondents were more casual or serious leisure event participants, as well as whether they were a member of a formal running club prior to COVID-19, and if they had renewed these memberships during COVID-19.

Table 4.9: Node descriptors for demographics and running behaviours

Node	*Age	**Gender		Leisure prior (%)		Runner/ walker (%)		Casual/ Serious (%)		Club member before (%)		Club member during (%)	
		Male	Female	Yes	No	Run	Walk	Cas	Ser	Yes	No	Yes	No
1	45.02	51	50	99.0	1.0	98.0	2.0	34.7	**65.3**	**94.1**	5.9	**68.3**	31.7
2	45.53	49	54	99.0	1.0	92.2	7.8	44.7	55.3	90.3	9.7	67.0	33.0
3	43.37	35	65	96.1	3.9	85.3	14.7	43.1	56.9	79.4	20.6	54.9	45.1
7	42.80	21	30	96.1	3.9	92.2	7.8	52.9	47.1	82.4	17.6	70.6	29.4
9	40.76	11	65	84.2	15.8	61.8	38.2	73.7	26.3	38.2	61.8	26.3	73.7
10	43.17	40	89	91.5	8.5	75.2	24.8	54.7	45.3	65.1	34.9	51.2	48.8
11	42.05	47	183	86.6	13.4	68.8	31.2	68.4	31.6	51.1	48.9	43.7	56.3
12	41.91	20	52	89.0	11.0	63.0	37.0	68.5	31.5	57.5	42.5	42.5	54.8
13	40.14	20	62	89.0	11.0	59.8	40.2	**73.2**	26.8	**41.5**	58.5	**28.0**	72.0
14	42.53	27	42	98.6	1.4	81.2	18.8	55.1	44.9	69.6	30.4	46.4	53.6

*Age represents average age within Node
**Four respondents chose not to reveal their gender, gender is indicated by the number of males and females in each node

Table 4.9 shows that across all the Nodes the average age of respondents is between 40 and 45 years of age. In Node 1, male (n=51) and female (n=50) are almost equally distributed. For Nodes 10, 11 and 14 there were significantly more female than male respondents. Node 11 indicates the highest amount of female (n=183) respondents in comparison with males (n=47).

Most respondents (referring to Nodes 1, 10, 11 and 13) had participated in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19. Some of the respondents had not previously participated in running as a leisure activity, particularly in Node 11 (13.4%) and Node 13 (11%). Nodes 11 (31.2%) and 13 (40.2%) also indicated the highest number of walkers in comparison with Node 1 with only 2% of the respondents participating in events as walkers (rather than runners). Table 4.9 further indicates that for Node 1, most participants were serious leisure runners (65.2%) compared with casual leisure participants (34.7%). They were also mostly members of formal running clubs (94.1%), and many renewed their memberships (68.3%) during COVID-19 (i.e., in 2021) despite restrictions on sporting events. Node 13 showed the highest number of casual leisure participants (73.2%). A smaller number of casual runners (41.5%) were members of formal running clubs prior to COVID-19, and few (28%) renewed their memberships during the COVID-19 period.

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Table 4.10 indicates the frequency with which respondents in each node generally engage in running as a leisure activity per week. Node 1 showed the highest frequency of weekly running where participants mostly run four (28.7%) or even five times (33.7%) per week. In Node 10, participants run mostly four times per week (31%). Most individuals in Nodes 11 (22.9%) and 13 (25.6%) indicated that they run on average about three times per week.

Table 4.10: Running frequency (per week)

Node	Once %	Twice %	Three %	Four %	Five %	Six %	Everyday %
1	0	3	13.9	**28.7**	**33.7**	19.8	1
2	2.9	5.8	19.4	29.1	28.2	9.7	4.9
3	3.9	10.8	19.6	23.5	29.4	8.8	3.9
7	3.9	9.8	17.6	29.4	27.5	7.8	3.9
9	22.4	14.5	18.4	13.2	13.2	5.3	13.2
10	16.3	6.2	17.1	**31.0**	17.1	7.8	4.7
11	16.5	11.3	**22.9**	14.3	19.5	6.9	8.7
12	13.7	13.7	24.7	12.3	19.2	6.8	9.6
13	20.7	15.9	**25.6**	17.1	11.0	1.2	8.5
14	5.8	10.1	20.3	23.2	33.3	5.8	1.4

Table 4.11 indicates the preferred event distance by respondents in each node. In Node 1, the preferred running event distance was 32km (33.7%) followed by 21.1km (28.7%). In Node 10, the preferred event distance was 15km (31%). In Node 11 (22.9%) and Node 13 (25.6%), 10 km was the most preferred (22.9%).

Table 4.11: Preferred event distance (km)

Node	5km %	10km %	15km %	21.1km %	32km %	42.2km %	> 42.2km %	Did not run %
1	0	3	13.9	**28.7**	**33.7**	19.8	3.0	1.0
2	5.8	19.4	29.1	28.2	9.7	4.9	1.9	2.9
3	10.8	19.6	23.5	29.4	8.8	3.9	4.9	2.0
7	9.8	17.6	29.4	27.5	7.8	3.9	2.0	2.0
9	14.5	18.4	13.2	13.2	5.3	13.2	0	10.5
10	6.2	17.1	**31.0**	17.1	7.8	4.7	0.8	7.8
11	11.3	**22.9**	14.3	19.5	6.9	8.7	2.6	9.1
12	13.7	24.7	12.3	19.2	6.8	9.6	2.7	2.7
13	15.9	**25.6**	17.1	11.0	1.2	8.5	0	6.1
14	10.1	20.3	23.2	33.3	5.8	1.4	5.8	2.9

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The main purpose of this study was: a) to identify factors that related to a (virtual) SX Framework that may have predicted intentions to partake in VREs, and then b) to explore whether distinct market segments may have existed with VRE participation intentions, based on the SX factors. Data was collected from individuals who had previously participated in a VRE during the COVID-19 period. A total of 1017 fully completed questionnaires were used

to analyse the data by means of EFA, followed by a CHAID analysis to identify potential sport event consumer market segments with future intentions to partake in VREs. Four factors were found to be significant predictors of future VRE participation intentions, namely, hedonia, perceived psycho-social risks, perceived benefits of VREs (preferences), and price. Four main market segments were identified based on their future participation intentions.

5.1. Four main predictors of future participation intentions

Hedonia was the largest of all predictors (both sport user and sport context) of VRE intentions (the intention to return to traditional, as well as continue with virtual events). Eudaimonia (as a self-expressive element of SWB) in this study, did not feature as a significant predictor of VRE participation even though this outcome features strongly with traditional event participation (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Lee & Hwang, 2018; Stadler, Jepson & Wood, 2022; Yu *et al*., 2022). VREs can thus be seen as a fun or pleasurable addition for runners as opposed to being deeply meaningful or contributing to long-term happiness (Waterman *et al*., 2008). Hedonia or 'fun' as a primary driver for participation in virtual events is further supported by prior research among non-elite mass participatory sporting event participants where the main motivation for virtual participation is 'fun' as a significant driver of SWB (Raimondi *et al*., 2021).

Perceived psycho-social risks, also related to the sport user, played a significant role in predicting intention. These risks include being viewed negatively by other people, or the likelihood to experience negative emotions from participation in traditional events. Runners who had lower perceived risks associated with traditional events, were likely to return to traditional but also indicated that they would continue to take part in VREs. These findings contrast with another study conducted among runners in Greece which indicated that runners were concerned about the large number of participants who partake in running events and may be unwilling to participate in mass tourism events in the post-COVID-19 era (Maditinos *et al*., 2021). In the current study, physical health-related risks did not feature as an important factor predicting VRE intentions. This contradicts past findings where the main motivation for partaking in virtual events was due to high perceived risks from participating in traditional mass running events (Helsen *et al*., 2021). A reason why this may not have featured as prominently in the current study is because at the time when the study was conducted, protocol and vaccinations already featured widely, hence the severity of the negative effects of the COVID-19 virus may also have been reduced at that stage.

Related to the (virtual) sport context, *preferences* related to the perceived benefits of VREs over traditional events were a significant predictor of VRE intentions. Participants who placed higher value on the benefits of partaking in a virtual event, showed higher levels of VRE

participation in future. For instance, participants who preferred the convenience of participating in events at their own time, the reduced spending on travel and accommodation, being able to select their own route and having the flexibility of running alone or with friends were important predictors of VRE intentions. These findings are significant as Kim (2021) posits that in future, as people become more familiar with the various benefits that virtual events can provide, particularly regarding convenience and lower cost, the demand for virtual events may not disappear but rather increase or persist beyond the pandemic.

Perceived price featured as a significant predictor of intention (both as a 'child' node and a 'twig'). Where VREs were perceived as value for money, intentions to take up these events alongside traditional events, were higher. VREs are thus likely to be 'add-ons' to runners' event selection only if they are offered at lower prices. This coincides with previous studies showing people's unwillingness to even pay for virtual sport events where they create their own experience (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021).

Event experience attributes did not feature; this may be because essentially the sport user creates their own experience. Factors such as the novelty of the experience, event brand prestige and the opportunity to partake for a 'good cause' were not important predictors of future VRE intentions. It is suggested that perhaps the novelty of the virtual experience had 'worn' off after participation in the first VRE. Even VREs arranged by reputable event organisations did not feature and the opportunity to contribute to charities or raise funds were not key drivers of VRE participation. These findings are suggestive of potential differences between sport consumers' motives to partake in virtual versus traditional events and may be related to the hedonic element that came forth as the largest predictor. Traditional event participation studies show that the novelty of the experience, brand prestige and participation for charities contribute to memorable (and meaningful) event experiences (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010; Skavronskaya *et al*., 2019), though the findings of the current study did not reflect these aspects as being prominent.

Overall findings suggest that motivations for event participation may differ depending on the event format and may impact sport consumer event choices. It is also suggested that VREs do not provide participants with opportunities for self-expressiveness (as eudaimonic consumption experiences) and mostly enhances SWB as short-term hedonic consumption experiences.

5.2. Market segments

The CHAID tree consisted of 10 distinct market segments. Four main market segments are depicted in Figure 4.4. These four segments are based on the summary of gains nodes (refer to Table 4.8 above) and show valuable insights for factors predicting VRE participation intentions. It indicates the types of consumer market segments that should be considered when designing future events. They consist of the segments with the highest, moderate high, moderate low and lowest participation intentions. Based on the descriptors in each segment, those with highest intentions are labelled 'Eager Contenders'; moderate high intentions are labelled 'Benefit-Seeking Casuals'; moderate low intentions as 'Price-Sensitive Medallists'; and those with the lowest intentions are labelled 'Real Runners'.

Eager Contenders indicated the highest level of hedonia from VRE participation. This segment has lower perceived psycho-social risks of COVID-19 and are ready to resume event participation. The segment comprises mainly females, who are casual leisure participants, run approximately three times per week, partake in shorter event distances (such as 10km, 15km and sometimes 21,1km races but not further). They participate mostly as runners (rather than walkers). Although a relatively small percentage (13.4%), some participants did not partake in running (or walking) as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19 at all. The pandemic and the increased offering of VREs may have provided opportunities for 'new' casual leisure runners to emerge and as such contributed toward increased short-term happiness from participation during the unprecedented times of COVID-19. In this sense, both physical health-related benefits (creating opportunities to increase physical exercise) and psychological (short-term happiness) were provided by VREs as with traditional running events (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016). The findings for the eager contenders differ to previous virtual event participation research which found that socio-demographics, such as gender, were not found to be significant predictors of virtual event participation (Helsen *et al*., 2021).

Real Runners indicated the lowest levels of hedonia from VRE participation and were the least likely to partake in VREs alongside traditional events in future. This segment of sport users are mainly serious leisure runners, which could be male or female, who participated in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19. The majority were members of formal running clubs who run most frequently (approximately five times per week) and partake in longer distance events (e.g., half-marathon and marathon running events). Similar findings were apparent in previous research on virtual event participation during the pandemic which found that those event participants who are experienced in their sport and perform longer training sessions with higher levels of intensity (i.e., serious leisure/endurance athletes) prior to COVID-19, were less likely to participate in virtual events. These findings are also congruent

with research on marathon runners in the COVID-19 context who indicate that they will rather wait until it is safe to partake in physical races again as it is impossible to replicate the event experience in a virtual setting (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021; Helsen *et al.*, 2021).

Figure 4.4: Describing the market segments

Highest intentions	Lowest intentions
Eager Contenders **(Node 11; n=231)**	***Real Runners*** **(Node 1; n=101)**
Predictors: • Highest VRE intentions • Highest hedonia from VRE participation • Low perceived risk of resuming event participation **Description:** • More females (n=183) than males (n=47) * • Most (86.6%) had participated in running as leisure activity prior to COVID-19 • More runners (68.8%) than walkers (31.2%) • More casual (68.4%) than serious leisure participants (31.6%) • Majority (51.1%) were members of formal running clubs before COVID-19, but with less remaining members of these clubs during COVID-19 (43.7%) • Running frequency= +/-3 times per week • Prefer shorter event distances (10km, 15km; 21.1km)	**Predictors:** • Lowest VRE intentions • Lowest hedonia from VRE participation **Description:** • Almost equal gender split: males (n=51) and females (n=50) • Almost all respondents (99%) participated in running as leisure activity prior to COVID-19 • The majority were runners (98%) rather than walkers (2%) • Many more respondents were serious leisure runners (65.3%) than casual leisure participants (34.7%) • The majority were formal running club members prior to COVID-19 (94.1%) and with the majority retaining membership during COVID-19 (68.3%) • Running frequency=+/- 5 times per week • Prefer longer event distances (21.1km, 32km & 42.2km)
Moderate High Intentions	**Moderate Low Intentions**
Benefit-Seeking Casuals **(Node 13; n=82)**	***Price-Sensitive Medallists*** **(Node 10; n=129)**
Predictors: • Moderate (high) VRE intentions** • Moderate hedonia from VRE participation • Find features of virtual events attractive • Perceive events as value for money **Description:** • More females (n=62) than males (n=20) • Most (89%) had participated in running as leisure activity prior to COVID-19 • Mostly runners (59.8%); but showed the highest number of walkers (40.2%) for all segments • More casual (73.2%) than serious leisure participants • Less were members of formal running clubs before COVID-19 (41.5%) and less remained club members during COVID-19 (28%) • Running frequency= +/-3 times per week • Most preferred event distance = 10km	**Predictors:** • Moderate (lower) VRE intentions** • High hedonia from VRE participation • Perceive virtual events as pricey **Description:** • More females (n=89) than males (n=40) • Majority (91.5%) participated in running as leisure activity prior to COVID-19 • More runners (75.2%) rather than walkers (24.8%) but less than 'real' runners • Only slightly more were serious leisure (54.7%) than casual participants (45.3%) • More were formal running club members prior to COVID-19 (65.1%) compared with non-members (34.9%) and an almost even spread between club members (51.2%) during COVID-19 was indicated than non-club members (34.9%) during this time • Running frequency=+/- 4 times per week • Most preferred event distance = 15km

Note: *One respondent chose not to reveal their gender; **Refer to Table 4.8

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The **Benefit-Seeking Casuals** as a market segment indicated moderate levels of hedonia from VRE participation. For these consumers, the features of VREs are an important consideration and they perceive these events as value for money. This segment comprises the highest number of walkers (approximately 40%) for all segments and were mostly casual leisure, female participants who preferred shorter event distances (e.g., 10km races).

Finally, the **Price-Sensitive Medallists** indicated high levels of hedonia from participation in VREs. However, if the perceived price is too high, this may lead to reduced participation intention. More respondents were females who had participated in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19. A significantly higher proportion were runners (75.2%) compared to walkers (24.8%), but more were serious leisure (54.7%) than casual leisure (45.3%) participants. This segment comprised regular runners (who run approximately four times per week) with a preferred event distance of 15km.

5.3.   Managerial implications

It has been suggested that the transformation of traditional into virtual events might not be temporary and that we may now live in a "new-normal" event world (Zenker & Kock, 2020). The findings of this study also show that there are market segments which may be more likely to partake in VREs in future. It is suggested that sport event managers identify these types of sport consumer segments for different sporting events and design their future event experiences and marketing communications with these consumers in mind. It is recommended that identifying consumer segments is not only applicable to the sport event industry, but is also relevant for other virtual event contexts, such as film festivals, music concerts and conferences.

Although traditional events have now started making their comeback, consumers may have become more familiar with the benefits that virtual events provide, such as convenience and lower cost, and it has been proposed that the demand for virtual events may not disappear but rather increase or persist in future (Richards, 2022). It is acknowledged in this study that virtual events experiences can never fully replace traditional events as was found in previous studies (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Raimondi *et al*., 2021; Richards, 2022; Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021). However, it is thus suggested that virtual events are not disregarded in future by event managers and that they concentrate their efforts on discovering what marketing strategies may be more appropriate for virtual events and focus on the elements that are within the organisation's control.

The findings of this study identified hedonia (fun and pleasure) as the main predictor for VRE participation intentions. In traditional events, one may focus on hedonic and social aspects such as the joy of the competition, fun and time spent with others in marketing communications messages. However, it is recommended that with virtual events marketers rather consider those elements in marketing communications that are within the control of the organisation, such as the tangible items, the lower costs, reduced pressure in terms of competing with others in a physical race setting and the convenience benefits associated with virtual events (after Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022). This is because in this virtual environment runners create their own event experience and thus the hedonic aspects cannot fully be guaranteed by the event organiser. Past research found that introducing challenges or social interaction into virtual activities increased the likelihood of continued participation (Helsen *et al*., 2021). This study recommends that event organisations could assist virtual event participants by facilitating hedonic aspects, for example, by introducing challenges via social media platforms and encourage participants to share their experiences before, during and after the event.

The findings of this study further support the suggestion that traditional and VREs be offered alongside one another going forward (Helsen *et al*., 2021). Nonetheless, it is important to distinguish between appropriate market segments for both traditional and virtual events. For example, the findings from the current study show that serious leisure event participants are less likely to partake in virtual events, however, event organisations could expand their market share by offering virtual events alongside traditional events given that the study has identified sport users, such as female casual leisure event consumers, who have indicated intentions to partake in VREs in future. This may also encourage increased physical activity among less 'serious leisure' consumers and involve them in new virtual communities where they can engage with "similar others" and potentially create a sense of belongingness. These online communities may also engage in positive eWOM which has further benefits for event brands in terms of increasing brand exposure as well as credibility.

Marketers could also determine how to incorporate opportunities of self-expressiveness via virtual events, thereby contributing to more eudaimonic (meaningful) event experiences for these types of consumers. This may lead to increased virtual event participation by a larger population of runners if the events industry were to again be affected by a similar crisis.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on factors related to the sport user and (virtual) sport context from the SX design framework, four factors were found to be significant predictors of intentions to partake in VREs.

Application of the SX framework proved to be meaningful as these included aspects from both the sport user (hedonia and perceived risk), as well as the sport context (event attributes, including price and VRE preferences). Ten distinct market segments were formed based on these predictors and a CHAID analysis proved to be a useful segmentation tool that provides nuanced differences between segments. Four segments were described according to those with the highest intentions, moderate high, moderate low and the lowest intentions. Casual leisure participants indicated the highest intentions to partake in VREs alongside traditional events while serious leisure participants experienced the lowest levels of hedonia and are the least likely to partake in VREs in future.

Overall, the findings of the study indicate that the known benefits and marketing approaches to sport events do not necessarily feature as drivers of VRE participation. Event attributes that predict traditional event participation intentions such as a prestigious event brand, participating for charity-related causes and receiving physical event memorabilia may not be significant drivers for VRE participation. Price is also an important consideration when selecting events and higher prices lead to reduced participation intentions for certain segments. Although not all runners have high intentions to partake in virtual events in future, the findings of the study suggest that there are market segments with intentions to partake in VREs in future and that virtual events may still be in demand given the perceived benefits associated with such. Although virtual events experiences can never fully replace traditional event experiences, these could be offered alongside each other in the future (as suggested by Helsen *et al*., 2021). Richards (2022) also highlights the importance of incorporating digital technologies to offer hybrid events in future, which may aid in enhancing the overall event experience.

This study contributes to an underexplored area of virtual event experience research (Wreford *et al*., 2019). This is particularly significant given the changes in consumer behaviour resulting from the pandemic (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Richards, 2022). Sport event marketers and strategists should consider VRE offerings, based on their respective target markets, and use this information to aid in effectively planning for PSEs in the future and post-pandemic.

This study was limited to running events. Future research could explore whether the same factors predict VRE participation intentions in other types of PSEs, such as cycling, walking or triathlon events. Future research could also explore whether the same predictors hold true in VREs that make use of apps, such as Zwift or MyTrace, where the environment is simulated, and consumers do not need to create their own consumption experience. A further limitation concerns the predictors included in the current study. There may be other predictors that

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impact intentions to partake in VREs such as technological costs or other types of risks (other than COVID-19 such as safety-related aspects).

Future studies could also explore whether differences may exist with more developed versus lesser developed countries related to VRE participation. For example, in the context of developing countries, participants may not have access to Internet and other technological devices to be able to partake in VREs. Individual consumer traits, socio-demographic factors, frequency of past event participation and a range of other motivational factors are further examples of predictors that could be considered in future research. There may also be other theories, such as self-determination theory, or goal-setting theory that could be applied in a VRE context to determine future intentions to partake in VREs.

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CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

The final chapter provides an overview of how the research objectives were addressed, followed by a summary of the main findings and implications of the study. The theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions are discussed, followed by a set of recommendations to researchers and sport event marketing managers. The limitations of the study are also addressed, and suggestions provided for future research. This chapter concludes the overall study.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Understanding sport consumers' experiences are essential to creating effective sport marketing strategies and design (Byon *et al*., 2022; Choi & Choi, 2019; Cho *et al*., 2021). A review of SCB theory has indicated that there is still much to be explored from a sport marketing consumer perspective. Today, consumers are increasingly investing more in experiences than material possessions, and as such, experiences are a growing field of research (Roto *et al*., 2021; Yang *et al*., 2022). Sport event consumption experiences have raised the specialist's interest given the significant economic impact of such events since it has become a global phenomenon accessible to a large mass of consumers (Gârdan *et al*., 2020).

Lately, there has been an increase in research in the field of SCB that focuses on the effect of sport experiences on consumer happiness (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Lundberg & Andersson, 2022). This is relevant as scholarly discussions have alluded that happiness with purchases should be a goal of marketers and sport event consumption experiences have potential to enhance consumer SWB through sport event participation (Garner *et al*., 2022; Schwartz *et al*., 2002; Theodorakis *et al*., 2015). SCB literature has indicated that a direct link exists between the emotional and behavioural responses of sport consumers (Kim *et al*., 2017; Prayag *et al*., 2017). Our knowledge of the field has been challenged given the effect that COVID-19 has had on the psyche of consumers (Tull *et al*., 2020). Gaps in the existing knowledge base was thus not only comprised of previously studied topics that require investigation through a different lens, but also novel phenomena which had emerged from the disrupted status quo.

The primary aim of the overall study was to explore marketing aspects related to running events from a sport consumer's perspective across various phases related to the COVID-19 crisis.

This exploratory study utilised mixed methods and applied theories from the field of marketing and positive psychology to achieve the following objectives in support of the overall aim of the study:

1. To determine main themes in eWOM among marathon runners prior to, and during three initial phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation (Article 1, Chapter 2)
2. To explore the extent to which dimensions of self-expressiveness feature in main themes in eWOM of marathon runners prior to, and during three initial phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation (Article 1, Chapter 2)
3. To explore dimensions of event brand love and marathon runners' responses to an event organisation's CRS in eWOM during a prolonged crisis (Article 2, Chapter 3)
4. To determine the extent to which positive eWOM, as an overall enduring effect of event brand love, is sustainable during the crisis (Article 2, Chapter 3)
5. To explore what SX factors relate to the sport user and virtual sport context that may predict future intentions to partake in VREs (Article 3, Chapter 4)
6. To categorise sport users into market segments based on relevant SX factors and VRE participation intentions (Article 3, Chapter 4)

The overall study was comprised of three articles, each with its own set of research questions to address the main aim and overall objectives of the study. Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2) addressed Objectives 1 and 2, Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3) addressed Objectives 3 and 4, and Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4) addressed Objectives 5 and 6.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted practically every sporting event world-wide (Maditinos *et al*., 2021) and was thus applied as the crisis context for the overall study. The study was conducted from a South African perspective considering the significance of running events in South Africa as host to several world-renowned marathon events (Saayman & Saayman, 2012; Fairer-Wessels, 2013). The study was conducted considering the impact of COVID-19 on running events related to the South African sport event industry as the crisis unfolded.

The study investigation stretched across different phases as depicted in Figure 1.1 (refer to Chapter 1). The phases related to COVID-19 for each article are highlighted below:

- Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2) was conducted shortly prior to COVID-19 and during the initial phases of the crisis context with restricted event participation (i.e., Phases A to D, refer to Figure 1.1).

- Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3) took place during the period in which all events were suspended and during various phases of lockdown (i.e., Phases B to D, refer to Figure 1.1).

- Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4) took place when sporting event alternatives, such as VREs, grew exponentially as runners were permitted to exercise outdoors again following stringent lockdown conditions (i.e., Phases E and F, refer to Figure 1.1). During phase F (refer to Figure 1.1) traditional running events were slowly resumed but under strict COVID-19 protocols.

The next section highlights the findings related to the overall study. This is followed by the main findings from each of the articles as they relate to the overall study aim.

3. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Table 5.1 provides a summary of the main findings of the overall study. A summary of the main findings and implications for each of the three articles are discussed in more detail in the sections that follow (refer to Sections 4, 5 and 6 in this chapter).

Table 5.1: Summary of main findings of overall study

Research objective	*Phases related to COVID-19	SCB topics investigated	Emotional outcomes	Behavioural outcomes
**Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2)**				
Research Objective 1	**PHASE A** Prior to COVID-19	**Main themes in eWOM**	• Increased SWB (positive emotions from the activity of running and running event participation) • Expression of love related to running and running event participation	**eWOM:** • Self-identification with marathon event participation is confirmed in eWOM (expressing the self-image and social self-image) (as per **social identity theory**). • Main topics in eWOM related to personal marathon event participation experiences and training goals, as well as past achievements in event participation.
Research Objective 1	**PHASE B/C/D** Various phases of lockdown and restricted running event participation	**Main themes in eWOM during COVID-19 phases**	• Anticipated separation anxiety (fear) related to potential event cancellation • Negative emotions expressed regarding restricted event participation • Extreme disappointment upon event cancellation	**Coping behaviours:** • Increased social media communication (eWOM) (positive and negative eWOM about the event organisation's CRS) • Sharing memories of past event experiences (nostalgia) in eWOM • Expressions of hope that event can still take place • Garden running activities and challenges showing determination to achieve marathon goals • Commemorating the event day
Research Objective 2	**PHASE A** Prior to COVID-19	**Dimensions of self-expressiveness**	Increased SWB from participation in self-defining activity (i.e., marathon running events) that induce self-expressiveness (**based on eudaimonistic identity theory**)	Evidence of self-expressive dimensions, including perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and perceived importance was prevalent to various degrees in eWOM where self-realisation potential (to achieve important goals) was most prominent. • Opportunities for *self-realisation* evident through three goal types (**goal-setting theory**) in training and event participation • *Perceived effort* was high concerning (training and financial investments) • *Perceived challenge* was evident from the need to increase physical effort to reduce the *perceived challenge* • The *importance* of event participation was indicated in sacrifices individuals are willing to make to partake in marathon events and expressions of love for running/event participation

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Research objective	*Phases related to COVID-19	SCB topics investigated	Emotional outcomes	Behavioural outcomes
Research Objective 2	**PHASE B/C/D** Various phases of lockdown with restricted running event participation	**Dimensions of self-expressiveness**	• Reduced SWB evident from negative emotions (i.e., loss, anxiety, fear) related to restricted event participation and potential future event cancellation (outcome goal) • Reduced SWB evident from negative emotions expressed upon event cancellation	eWOM related to: • Perceived *self-realisation* potential is evident from increased eWOM about past marathon event achievements • Anxiety related to the increased *effort* due to perceived level of difficulty to achieve outcome goal is clear in eWOM • The *importance* of event participation was clear from anxiety related to not being able to qualify, fears expressed regarding potential and final event cancellation, as well as honouring the event day • Need to self-expressiveness emerged strongly as runners engaged in garden running activities and challenges, requiring much effort and was important to achieve outcome goal
Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3)				
Research Objective 3	**PHASE B/C/D** Various phases of lockdown and restricted running event participation	**Dimensions of event brand love**	Strong positive emotions for the event brand demonstrates event brand love	**eWOM** • Love for the event brand was evident regarding self-brand expressiveness, brand trust, positive eWOM and declarations of love • Specific to the crisis, eWOM indicated anticipated separation anxiety regarding potential event cancellation and upon event cancellation, many defended the brand
Research Objective 4	**PHASE B/C/D** Various phases of lockdown and restricted running event participation	**Event organisation's CRS and impact of event brand love**	Positive and negative emotions regarding the events organisation's CRS	**eWOM** • Positive and negative eWOM related to event organisations' CRS • Substantially more positive than negative eWOM statements suggest enduring effects of brand love are sustainable during a crisis • Negative eWOM shows that organisations cannot only rely on brand love but must also implement effective CRSs

Research objective	*Phases related to COVID-19	SCB topics investigated	Emotional outcomes	Behavioural outcomes
			Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4)	
Research Objective 5	**PHASE E & F** Increased offering of VREs	**SX factors relating to VRE participation (sport user)**	• Increased SWB in the form of hedonia (fun and pleasure), rather than eudaimonia (meaningful) as the type of happiness derived from VRE participation. • Low perceived risks for partaking in traditional events in future.	• Hedonia was the strongest predictor of VRE participation intentions • Perceived physical (health-related) risks related to COVID-19 was not an important predictor of future VRE participation intentions
Research Objective 6	**PHASE E & F** Increased offering of VREs/traditional events resume with COVID-19 restrictions	**Potential VRE market segments based on SX factors**	• Positive emotions (eager contenders) towards VRE participation intentions • Negative emotions (real runners) towards VRE participation	• **Hedonia** was the most significant predictor of market segments with future event participation intentions in VREs followed by **perceived psycho-social risks**, **perceived price** and **virtual event preferences** (i.e., benefits of virtual event participation such as convenience and lower costs). • Four main market segments were formed based on VRE participation intentions, namely, Eager Contenders (most likely segment with highest VRE intentions); Real Runners (lowest VRE intentions); Benefit-seeking casuals (moderate high intentions) and Price-Sensitive medallists (moderate low intentions)

*Refer to Figure 1.1, Chapter 1

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4. CHAPTER 2: ARTICLE 1 SUMMARY AND MAIN FINDINGS

The purpose of Article 1 (refer to Chapter 2) was to explore marathon running events from a self-expressive sport consumer perspective prior to and during three initial phases of the COVID-19 crisis with restricted event participation. The Comrades was used as case study as one of the world's oldest and largest marathon events hosted annually in South Africa that was affected by COVID-19 (CMA, 2020). The research questions investigated the main themes in eWOM among marathon runners prior to COVID-19 and during the three initial phases of COVID-19 with restricted event participation. The extent to which the four dimensions related to self-expressiveness featured in eWOM among marathon runners prior to and during the three initial phases of COVID-19, were then considered.

A qualitative netnography was applied to determine the main themes in eWOM of an online community of marathon runners prior to and during three initial phases of COVID-19. Data was analysed by means of an automated text analysis tool, namely Leximancer (version 5.0) from 2677 text-based statements (refer to Article 1). After the main themes were generated from the inductive thematic analysis, the main themes were revised to provide meaning within the context of the study and verified by four research experts in the field of sport marketing and tourism. A deductive thematic analysis was applied to determine the extent to which the four dimensions of self-expressiveness within a serious leisure sports context, namely, perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and perceived importance of event participation, featured in the main themes in eWOM during each phase and were confirmed by the four research experts.

The main themes in eWOM prior to and during phases of COVID-19 are first presented. Thereafter, the extent to which the four dimensions of self-expressiveness investigated in the current study were prevalent prior to and during the COVID-19 phases are provided.

4.1. Main themes in eWOM prior to COVID-19

The main themes in eWOM prior to COVID-19 (*Phase A*) primarily related to the self-concept and identification with the activity of running and marathon event participation. These findings were similar to a key finding on marathon runners who participated in the London marathon (Shipway & Jones, 2008). The current study confirmed this outcome of self-identification with marathon event participation through evidence of such in the main themes communicated via eWOM. These findings reflected common topics in eWOM under 'normal' circumstances as opposed to the crisis-context.

Online communication relating to the self-concept (including the self-image and social-self-image) (de Vries *et al*., 2017; Sirgy, 1982, 1985) was evident from main themes about training-related aspects, including personal training goals achieved, training goals still to be achieved, and offering training-related advice to other runners. Runners frequently communicated their emotions relating to past event participation experiences, in Comrades and other marathon events, as well as their accomplishments in past events and future marathon goals. The findings of the current study are congruent with past social media studies suggesting that the main motives for content creation and content contribution on social media are primarily related to expressing the self-concept (de Vries *et al*., 2017; Morgan & Townsend, 2022).

The findings of the current study further confirm findings from studies based on a social identity approach suggesting that when a certain social identity becomes salient in a person's self-concept, it motivates behaviours that contribute towards achieving a group's purposes and goals (Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994; Inoue, Lock, Gillooly, Shipway & Swanson, 2022). This was evident in the current study from recommendations on other marathon events to partake in based on their own past experiences as well as recommendations on running-related apparel that could aid other runners to achieve their marathon goals as popular topics in eWOM.

The financial costs involved in marathon event participation was also apparent. Despite the costs, these sport consumers' passion for running and participation in marathon events was clear from expressions of love related to these activities. Previous research provides evidence that consumers often express their current or desired self-identity through loved brands (Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012). The results of the current study suggest that event brands can also be 'loved' brands as sport consumers express their current self-identity (e.g., eWOM about previous participation experiences) and desired self-identity (e.g., eWOM about future participation intentions) via event brands. There was also evidence of expressions of love for certain brands of running-related apparel prior to COVID-19 which may result in significant benefits for other sport-related organisations that distribute these sporting brands.

4.2. Main themes in eWOM during COVID-19 phases

This section highlights the main themes in eWOM during the various phases related to COVID-19 (refer to Chapter 1, Figure 1.1 for the phases). The main themes are depicted in Figures 2.4 to 2.6 and Tables 2.3 to 2.5 (refer to Chapter 2, section 4.1.2).

4.2.1. During COVID-19 emergence (Phase B)

During the emergence of COVID-19, prior to lockdown but when all events had initially been suspended, the most prominent topic in eWOM reflected the anxiety of individuals in relation to whether they had completed their qualifying race and the fear of not being able to qualify for the Comrades due to event restrictions. The mention of the last marathon they had participated in was also popular. Individuals shared their negative emotions regarding potential Comrades cancellation and memories from past event experiences. Also, runners indicated that they would continue their training in the hope that the event could still take place. These findings are reflective of coping behaviours as highlighted in previous studies where individuals cannot engage in their 'normal' consumption behaviours (Cho *et al.*, 2021; Korner, 1970; Wolfers & Utz, 2022). The findings of the current study provide evidence of the use of social media as a coping tool where negative emotions were shared as well as past event experiences (Cho *et al*., 2021; Wolfers & Utz, 2022). There was also evidence of *hope* as a coping behaviour which is often used by individuals to psychologically bypass ongoing unpleasant or stressful situations (Korner, 1970).

4.2.2. During COVID-19 (no outdoor exercise) (Phase C)

During lockdown with no outdoor exercise permitted, the importance of running as a lifestyle activity was evident through expressions of love for the activity of running as well as negative emotions of not being able to partake in their 'normal' running activities. Prior research shows that when individuals cannot engage in normal consumption behaviours they often engage in alternative (or compensatory) consumption behaviours to increase SWB (Cho *et al*., 2021; Clark & Isen, 1985). The findings of the current study showed evidence of compensatory consumption in the form of garden running activities and newly found garden running challenges. Memories were also shared about past event experiences and achievements (nostalgia). In addition to engaging in nostalgic conversations, a study during the pandemic showed that sport consumers searched for and increased online purchases of fitness products to compensate for the lack of fulfilment during this time (Cho *et al*., 2021). It was suggested that these compensatory behaviours may have been related to boredom. The current study demonstrated the commitment and determination of these individuals to achieve their marathon goals that they regarded as important and were motivated to continue their efforts to achieve their desired goals.

4.2.3. During COVID-19 (limited outdoor exercise/event cancellation) (Phase D)

When outdoor exercise was again permitted, runners communicated their positive emotions about being able to run on the roads again. Following the announcement of the Comrades

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event cancellation, positive and negative eWOM about the organisation's CRS was apparent. Although negative emotions were shared regarding the CRS, some runners also openly expressed their love for the event. Memories were shared as well as what would be most missed. Runners also made plans to commemorate the day as a form of compensatory consumption in the absence of the event taking place.

4.3. Dimensions of self-expressiveness prior to COVID-19

Table 5.2 below provides a summary of the findings related to the dimensions of self-expressiveness prior to COVID-19 as derived from the main themes in eWOM among the online running community.

Table 5.2: Self-expressive dimensions from main themes in eWOM prior to COVID-19

Dimensions of self-expressiveness	Evidence from eWOM	Theme
Self-realisation potential Opportunities for self-realisation were evident through three goal types.	**Process goals** (e.g., training-related goals such as mileage targeted for the month)	Training-related goals
	Performance goals (e.g., personal achievements in Comrades and other marathon events)	Event participation (Comrades and other marathon events)
	Outcome goals (e.g., completing the 2020 Comrades event in 2020)	Event participation (Comrades and other marathon events)
Perceived effort Effort in training as well as the financial effort (the process toward achieving the outcome goal)	**Training effort** (e.g., mileage targeted for the month and increasing injuries occurring from high mileage training)	Training-related
	Financial effort (e.g., increasing race entry fees for qualifying marathon events)	Event participation (other marathon events)
Perceived challenge The physical challenges experienced as well as the challenge posed by the event itself	**Physical challenges** (e.g., pain and discomfort experienced when training for/participating in Comrades and other marathon events)	Training-related/ Event participation (Comrades and other marathon events)
	Expression of 'love' for the challenge of partaking in the Comrades event	Expressions of love
	Mention of number of Comrades events started and number managed to finish	Event participation (Comrades marathon)
Perceived importance The importance of running as an activity as well as the importance of marathon event participation.	Importance of running evident in expressions of love for running	Expressions of love
	Running is described as a form of addiction	Training-related
	Sacrifices runners are willing to make to be able to train for and partake in marathon events	Training-related Other marathon events (participation)

*Refer to Chapter 2 (Section 4.1.1; Figure 2.3 & Table 2.2)

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Perceived *self-realisation* potential from marathon event participation was evident in eWOM considering all three goal types as reflected in previous SCB studies (Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006). Achieving important goals form an essential part of marathon event participation which aids in building identity as evident in prior research (Almeida-Santana *et al*., 2022; Sirgy *et al*., 2016). Marathon running events can thus aid in enhancing self-expressiveness through event participation, which ultimately enhances consumer SWB (Sirgy *et al*., 2016; Waterman *et al*., 2008).

Perceived effort was high concerning training and financial investments, and as indicated in previous research, when an activity highly correlates with investing more effort to achieve important goals, there is an increase in self-expressiveness (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Voigt *et al*., 2010). *The perceived challenge* was indicated by the physical challenges posed by the event itself and the need to increase physical effort to reduce the perceived challenge. Past studies have indicated that overcoming challenges of experienced pain and discomfort, provides a deeper sense of meaning and growth as a more eudaimonic type of experience (Jones, 2000; Major, 2001; Stebbins, 1982; Scott *et al.,* 2017).

The *importance* of event participation was indicated in the sacrifices individuals are willing to make to partake in marathon events and expressions of love for the activity of running and running event participation. The perceived importance of participating in marathon running events increases self-expressiveness as corroborated in past research (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Waterman, 2011). The potential addiction to running is supported in prior research where long-distance runners show withdrawal symptoms that might follow discontinuation or decreased drug intake in the absence of engaging in running activities (Gross, 2021:9). Although not specifically explored in the current study, a study has shown that long-distance runners tend to admit to their addiction, however, they justify their behaviours by arguing that running is a healthy type of addiction (Gross, 2021:9).

From the above it is evident that prior to COVID-19 marathon running events serve as self-defining activities which enhance self-expressiveness through dimensions such as perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and importance of event participation. In this way consumer SWB is increased from event participation as noted in previous sport studies that explore SWB (Garner *et al*., 2022; Schwartz *et al*., 2002; Theodorakis *et al*., 2015). The current study additionally provides evidence of the aforesaid through authentic eWOM as a behavioural outcome of self-expressiveness and meaningfulness from event participation.

4.4. Dimensions of self-expressiveness during COVID-19 phases

The dimensions of self-expressiveness as derived from the main themes in eWOM are summarised across the three phases of COVID-19 in Tables 5.3 to 5.5 below. A brief discussion of the main findings during each phase is provided thereafter.

4.4.1. During COVID-19 emergence (Phase B)

Table 5.3 shows the findings related to the dimensions of self-expressiveness during the emergence of COVID-19, prior to lockdown but when all events were initially suspended for 30 days.

Table 5.3: Dimensions of self-expressiveness in eWOM (Phase B)

Dimensions of self-expressiveness	Evidence from eWOM	*Related to main themes
Self-realisation potential	Previous **achievements (goals)** in Comrades and other marathon events.	Event participation (Comrades and other marathon events)
Perceived effort	Perceived effort evident in eWOM about the intense level of **training** and **financial** effort required to partake in the Comrades event.	Training-related Event participation (Comrades event)
Perceived challenge	Evidence of the increased effort (training) required to reduce the **perceived level of difficulty** to complete the Comrades event	Training-related aspects
Perceived importance	When all sporting events were cancelled, runners shared past event participation experiences **(i.e., memories/ nostalgia)**.	Event participation (Comrades event and other marathon events
	Fear of cancellation. **Hope** that the event will still take place. **Anxiety** relating to not having completed event qualifiers (to achieve outcome goal) prior to all events being suspended.	Event participation (Comrades and other marathon events) Qualified before lockdown

*Refer to Chapter 2 (Section 4.1.2; Figure 2.4 & Table 2.3)

Perceived *self-realisation* in marathon running is evident from the increased eWOM about past marathon event achievements. This finding is supported from past studies indicating that consumers engage in self-expressiveness when they partake in consumption experiences that reflect the self-concept (Morgan & Townsend, 2022; Waterman, 1990, 1993). To achieve important goals that enhance the self-concept, increased effort, and perceived level of difficulty from participation in the activity, is required. This has also been indicated in previous serious leisure research (Bosnjak *et al.*, 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2008). The increased *effort* to achieve the outcome goal is clear in the current study as well as recognising the need to invest training effort to reduce the perceived event *challenge*. Past studies on marathon runners have alluded to the need for significant personal effort to compete in the event and the perseverance of

participants in the activity, both in terms of training and competing in the event (Shipway & Jones, 2008; Qiu *et al.*, 2019).

The *importance* of event participation was clear from evidence of anxiety related to potentially not being able to qualify for the event and fears expressed regarding potential event cancellation. The current study indicates that these runners do not partake in marathon events primarily for the hedonic pleasures but rather to achieve a sense of meaningfulness from goals that are important to them. These findings are supported from past studies in SCB among marathon event participants (Shipway & Jones, 2008; Qiu *et al.*, 2019). The findings of the current study also suggest that marathon events are meaningful activities for event participants as they frequently share past event memories within the online community (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; de Vries *et al.*, 2017; Morgan & Townsend, 2022).

4.4.2. During COVID-19 (no outdoor exercise) (Phase C)

Table 5.4 highlights the main findings related to the dimensions of self-expressiveness during a phase of strict lockdown with no outdoor exercise permitted. The findings during this phase are mainly related to their garden running activities.

Table 5.4: Dimensions of self-expressiveness in eWOM (Phase C)

Dimensions of self-expressiveness	Evidence from eWOM	*Related to main themes
Self-realisation potential	Runners' need for self-realisation emerged strongly and new goals were set through garden running activities.	Garden running activities
Perceived effort	High effort in terms of training within limited spaces and running laps to make up running distances required to continue training.	Training-related Garden running activities
Perceived challenge	Mental and physical training challenges expressed regarding training in private gardens/backyards - some runners try to replicate actual marathon events that would have taken place on those days. Runners also create 'lockdown garden challenges' amongst themselves.	Garden running activities/ challenges
Perceived importance	The importance of event participation was expressed through the fear of an imminent cancellation and running described as an essential part of these runners' lifestyles.	Importance of running (lifestyle activity) and participating in marathon events

*Refer to Chapter 2 (Section 4.1.2; Figure 2.5 & Table 2.4)

The current study showed the need for self-expressiveness emerged strongly during these unique circumstances as runners engaged in garden running activities, setting new goals for self-realisation. These garden challenges required much effort and the importance of

achieving the ultimate outcome goal (partake in the Comrades marathon in 2022) indicated that they would endure in these efforts to achieve their goal. The willingness to engage in challenges to achieve the outcome goal is corroborated from prior research on endurance event participation (after Scott *et al*., 2017; Voigt *et al*., 2010). Garden running experiences were shared among the online community which may have enhanced SWB as Duan and Dholakia (2017) note that posting content on social media that is relevant to the "self", contributes to consumer happiness.

4.4.3. During COVID-19 (limited outdoor exercise/event cancellation) (Phase D)

Table 5.5 summarises the findings related to dimensions of self-expressiveness in eWOM when limited outdoor exercise was again permitted. It was also during this phase that the Comrades event (as the ultimate outcome goal) was cancelled.

Table 5.5: Dimensions of self-expressiveness in eWOM (Phase D)

Dimensions of self-expressiveness	Evidence from eWOM	*Related to main themes
Self-realisation potential	The loss of opportunities to realise personal goals through event participation.	Potential and actual Comrades event cancellation
Perceived effort	Financial losses from event cancellation were prominent particularly regarding entry fees.	Comrades event cancellation
Perceived challenge	New challenges of trying to run outdoors with a mask.	Training-related
Perceived importance	Extreme excitement for being able to run outdoors again. Importance of Comrades participation was expressed by reminiscing about what will be most missed from event cancellation and plans were made to honour the 'race day'.	Potential and actual Comrades cancellation

*Refer to Chapter 2 (Section 4.1.2; Figure 2.6 & Table 2.4)

The importance of running was emphasised in the positive emotions expressed about being able to run on the roads again, which clearly had a positive impact on their SWB. When the Comrades event was cancelled, the loss of the opportunities for self-realisation to achieve the outcome goal was evident through the negative emotions expressed. The importance of event participation, despite the high level of effort invested and challenge, was also evident upon event cancellation. The importance of event participation was uniquely highlighted in this study as individuals made plans to commemorate the event day.

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4.5. Overall conclusion

It was evident from Chapter 2 that marathon events have potential to provide eudaimonic consumption experiences, which may enhance consumer SWB through dimensions of self-expressiveness, including self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and perceived importance of participation in the marathon event. The findings prior to COVID-19 clearly indicated that marathon events can create meaningful experiences as the online community constantly share memories and past event experiences with each other as an authentic behavioural outcome. These findings have important implications for sport marketing managers, particularly regarding the benefits of eWOM for event organisations.

Chapter 2 clearly showed that the crisis had emotional outcomes for the participants. It also led to behavioural outcomes in terms of their eWOM communications. As indicated in the aim of the study, it is important to translate these into consequences for the organisation. Events are brands and, as already alluded to in the main themes, there was much talk about the brand. It was thus prudent to explore this further by looking at exactly how the consumers felt about the actions of the brand during this time and whether the reputation of the brand could withstand the crisis. It was further evident from the main themes that negative eWOM started to emerge in relation to the event organisation's CRS.

5. CHAPTER 3: ARTICLE 2 SUMMARY AND MAIN FINDINGS

The main aim of Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3) was to determine the extent to which potential event brand love may have been affected during a prolonged crisis. More specifically, the aim was to explore whether dimensions of event brand love may have featured in eWOM and whether the known desirable outcomes of brand love were sustainable during a real-life crisis considering an event organisation's CRS.

Netnography was employed to explore the extent to which dimensions of event brand love featured in eWOM within the crisis context. The Comrades marathon event was used as case study. Data was collected from an online Comrades Marathon Facebook community, across a 10-week period, from the onset of COVID-19 in South Africa until two weeks after the Comrades event was cancelled. Directed content analysis was used to analyse text-based statements to verify a chosen set of brand love dimensions based on a brand love prototype (Batra *et al*., 2012). An inductive analysis was employed to analyse general themes in eWOM that were directly related to opinions (positive and negative) about the event organisation's CRS. Positive eWOM was explored as an overarching enduring effect of brand love (Dalman *et al*., 2019).

The effects of brand love during the crisis were explored by determining the extent to which dimensions of brand love (including two antecedents, four general outcomes and two crisis-specific outcomes of brand love) featured as themes in eWOM among the online brand community. The main topics related to the event organisation's CRS were also identified. All statements were then classified into positive, negative and neutral eWOM categories to explore the proposed enduring effect of positive eWOM within a real-life crisis.

5.1. Dimensions of event brand love in eWOM

The findings regarding the overall prevalence of dimensions of brand love in eWOM are first summarised, followed by findings related to the antecedents, general outcomes and crisis-related outcomes that were explored.

5.1.1. Prevalence of dimensions of event brand love in eWOM

The results indicate that the dimensions of brand love emerged in eWOM to varying degrees. *Self-brand expressiveness* was the most frequented dimension, followed by *memories/nostalgia*, *brand trust*, *anticipated separation distress*, and relatively high *future intentions* to partake in the event. There was evidence of *brand defence* against criticism regarding the organisation's CRS, however, *interest in the well-being* of the brand did not feature as prominently. Although only indicated by a few statements, some individuals openly declared their love for the event brand. Evidence of event brand love is thus supported from authentic eWOM as a proposed behavioural outcome of strong positive emotions toward a brand as evident in previous brand love literature (Bairrada *et al*., 2018; Bae *et al*., 2017; Wong *et al*., 2020).

5.1.2. Antecedents of event brand love

Evidence of *self-brand expressiveness* was most prominent in eWOM. As shown in literature, this is one of the main elements associated with brand love and communicates a special relationship with the brand (Ahuvia *et al*., 2009; Bairrada *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012). The current study shows that event participants feel strongly about what the Comrades brand represents and symbolises high prestige and association with something that has been earned. An interesting finding was that previous Comrades participants indicated that they would not wear the 2020 event-branded T-shirt as there was no sense of accomplishment associated with self-expression in this regard as the event did not physically take place. Conversely, some indicated that they would wear the 2020 event T-shirt in support of the organisation having everyone's best interests at heart by first postponing the event to keep

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runners' hopes alive, and secondly by cancelling the event to ensure the safety of everyone involved.

As shown in previous literature, *brand trust* is also an important element of brand love (Batra *et al*., 2012). The findings of the current study show evidence of brand trust as event participants communicated their confidence in the organisation to respond appropriately to the crisis (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Despite this, the credibility of the organisation was also questioned in terms of entering future events. As suggested by Karjaluoto *et al*. (2016) this may imply that these individuals do not yet have long-standing relationships with the event brand.

5.1.3. General outcomes of event brand love

The most important factor that drove positive eWOM was the recollection of past event experiences (nostalgia) which has been suggested as an outcome of brand love in tourism studies (Aro *et al*., 2018; An *et al*., 2019). Despite the organisation's CRS, many individuals still communicated their intentions to partake in the event in future. Interest in the well-being of the brand did not feature strongly. However, this has scarcely been considered as an outcome of brand love (Aro *et al*., 2018). Explicit declarations of love for the event brand were the least common, however, it is still an important finding as participants openly declared their love for the brand through authentic consumer-generated communication.

5.1.4. Crisis-related outcomes of event brand love

Related to the crisis, event participants expressed their *separation anxiety* upon potential event cancellation. Although this suggests love for the event brand as indicated in brand love literature (Aro *et al*., 2018), this has a negative impact on consumer SWB (after Cho *et al*., 2021). Importantly, the current study shows evidence of *brand defence*, which is most relevant in this crisis context as a behavioural outcome as past studies have also indicated (Batra *et al*., 2012; Aro *et al*., 2018).

5.2. Responses to the event organisation's CRS

To explore the enduring effects of brand love, the main topics in eWOM that relate to the event organisation's CRS were identified. Findings show that the topic of *refunds* was most frequently discussed, followed by aspects related to receiving Comrades 2020 branded items (i.e., the *T-shirt* and *goodie bag*) as compensation for cancellation. The subject of initially postponing the 2020 event and *delaying the decision* to cancel was also common in eWOM, as well as opinions on *deferring 2020 event entries* to another year. Opinions about

participating in the inaugural *virtual event* were shared and the issue of keeping event *substitutions* open despite the uncertainty of the 2020 event taking place, was also noted.

The runners mostly *supported the decision to postpone* the event rather than cancel immediately and many were in favour of the *virtual event offering*. Although many individuals were grateful to receive the Comrades 2020 branded items as compensation, negative responses were almost as prominent. The organisation was most negatively perceived for *deferring international event entries* to a future event for international entrants. Local entrants were not given this option. Despite race terms and conditions, the issue of refunds was perceived more negatively. Positive and negative emotions were expressed for keeping the substitution process open as long as possible.

5.3. Positive eWOM as an enduring effect of brand love

Positive eWOM was explored as an overarching enduring effect of brand love as proposed in past studies (Dalman *et al*., 2019 after Wallace *et al*., 2014). Following the approach by Eliashberg and Shugan (1997), all statements were classified according to whether they reflected positive or negative messages following the approach by Eliashberg and Shugan (1997). For the brand love dimensions, although negative eWOM was present, a significantly higher number of statements reflected positive eWOM (refer to Figure 3.4 & Table 3.4 in Chapter 3). This is suggestive of event brand love as an enduring effect of brand love (after Wallace *et al*., 2014). All the statements that defend the brand as a crisis-related outcome are essentially positive in nature and is an important outcome in the context of this study. Related to the main topics about the event organisation's CRS, findings indicate that overall, the total number of statements reflecting positive eWOM was still higher than those reflecting negative eWOM (refer to Table 3.5 in Chapter 3). Although the negative effects of the CRS were evident from eWOM, support is again provided in this regard for positive eWOM as an overarching outcome of brand love (after Dalman *et al*., 2019; Wallace *et al*., 2014).

5.4. Overall conclusion

Overall, the findings of the current study provide evidence through authentic eWOM that event brands have much potential to become 'loved' brands and it is suggested that event brand love is most likely to occur when individuals engage in self-expressiveness through event participation. The results indicate that the dimensions of brand love emerged in eWOM to varying degrees. There was also evidence that the enduring effects of brand love may be sustainable to a certain degree. Although brand love has potential to negate some of the negative effects of a brand crisis, it does not inevitably have the power to negate all negative consequences. Organisations should not rely solely on consumers' love for their brands during

a crisis but focus on implementing the most appropriate CRS by 'listening' to their online brand communities. This is supported by literature indicating that social media is often used as a platform for consumers to make their 'voices' heard during a crisis (e.g., Rauschnabel, Kammerlander & Ivens, 2016). This was clearly indicated in one of the open comments in eWOM by an online community member who stated, "And I hope the officials from CMA read the comments of the runners".

Up to this point, the study explored the emotional responses of self-expressiveness and brand love from authentic eWOM as a behavioural outcome during phases related to the COVID-19 crisis. Following the initial stringent lockdown period, the lockdown conditions slowly began to ease, and outdoor exercise was again permitted. With traditional mass sport events still restricted, the pandemic initiated an increasing demand for virtual sporting challenges (Agini & Di Stefano, 2020; Maditinos *et al.*, 2021; Raimondi *et al.*, 2021; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022). Now predicted to be a legitimate future sport event industry (Agini & Di Stefano, 2020; Kim, 2021; Raimondi *et al.*, 2021; Richards, 2022), it was relevant to explore future intentions to partake in VREs in future based on their virtual event experiences during the pandemic, and also to determine whether unique market segments may exist in this regard. This was explored in the final article of the thesis.

6. CHAPTER 4: ARTICLE 3 SUMMARY AND MAIN FINDINGS

During the COVID-19 pandemic the inability to stage physical events hastened the shift to virtual sporting alternatives, such as VREs, which grew exponentially (Helsen *et al.*, 2021; Richards, 2022; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022). VREs became increasingly viable during the pandemic and are projected to be a legitimate future segment of the sport event industry (Agini *et al.*, 2020; Kim, 2021; Raimondi *et al.*, 2021; Richards, 2022). The future of VREs and event participants' intentions to partake in such events going forward is a key issue that was addressed in this study. The main purpose of Article 3, presented as Chapter 4 in the overall study, was twofold: a) to identify factors that related to a (virtual) SX framework that may have predicted intentions to partake in VREs in future, and b) to explore whether distinct market segments may have existed with the intention to participate in VREs, based on those SX factors.

An adapted (virtual) SX framework developed by Funk (2017) was used to identify SX factors that relate to the sport user and virtual sport event context that may predict future intentions to partake in VREs. Related to the sport user, elements of SWB (i.e., hedonia and eudaimonia) and perceived risks of COVID-19 were considered. For the virtual sport event context, event

attributes, perceived price and VRE preferences (based on the benefits of virtual events) were considered. A self-administered online questionnaire was utilised with 1017 fully completed questionnaires to analyse the data by means of EFA. This was followed by a CHAID analysis, to determine whether distinct market segments may have existed with future intentions to partake in VREs based on the relevant SX factors. The remainder of this section describes the respondent profile and highlights the results from the EFA and CHAID analysis.

6.1. Describing the respondent profile

The final sample included 1017 fully completed questionnaires (with no missing data). More females than males participated in the study. Based on their indicated running frequency and distance, more individuals were casual rather than serious leisure event participants. The majority had participated in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19. More participants had participated in VREs as runners compared with those who participated as walkers. Many respondents were members of formal running clubs prior to COVID-19 and just less than half retained their memberships during the pandemic despite event restrictions.

6.2. Results from the EFA analysis

Scale reliability was indicated by means of KMO values (above 0.6), Cronbach's Alpha scores (above 0.6) and CR values (above 0.7), which is excellent. EFA was used to determine dimensionality of factors from the scale items developed for the questionnaire. Nine factors were formed from the EFA analysis, including hedonia, eudaimonia, physical risks, psycho-social risks, event experience attributes, memorabilia, VRE preferences, price, and future intentions.

Findings relating to *hedonia* as a type of happiness that can be derived from the consumption experience, showed that respondents generally enjoyed the VRE experience; felt a sense of adventure; and indicated that it was worth their time to partake in the event experience. For *eudaimonia* as a type of happiness, VRE participants did not indicate that VRE participation reflects who they really are or is central to their identity. Perceived risk formed two factors, namely, *physical risk* and *psycho-social risk*. Perceived *physical risks* from participation in traditional events were the highest and respondents indicated that proper sanitation and hygiene in traditional sporting events going forward was most important. Respondents also indicated that virtual events are a safer option for those who prefer not to be vaccinated. In general, perceived *psycho-social* risks of traditional event participation was low and respondents did not feel that participation in traditional events in future would negatively affect their image in society or cause them to experience any unnecessary tension. Respondents

also did not feel that they would be disappointed if they were to partake in traditional events again despite the pandemic.

Event attributes split into two factors, namely, *experience* and *memorabilia* attributes. The most important experience attribute was that the event raises funds for a 'good cause'. With regards to event memorabilia, it was found that a T-shirt and goodie bag included in the entry fee was important for participants. Receiving a physical (or real) medal was least important.

In terms of virtual event *preferences*, all items formed one factor indicating a strong association with the reasons why people will participate in VREs. The most important was saving on travelling/accommodation costs, the convenience of the starting time and that VREs are more affordable (compared with traditional events). The least important reasons were that individuals prefer to run alone, and that they were afraid of spreading (or contracting) COVID-19 at traditional events. Regarding *price*, the overall results indicate that VRE participants regard VREs as being too expensive and do not feel that it is worth their while to pay for an event where they need to create their own experience. Finally, regarding future *VRE participation intentions*, more respondents indicated that when thinking about their future running plans, they intend to partake in *both* traditional and VREs, rather than only traditional or only virtual events.

6.3. Results from the CHAID analysis

Factors resulting from the factor analysis were used to perform the CHAID analysis. The dependent variable was future intentions to partake in VREs. The independent variables were hedonia, eudaimonia, physical health-related risk, perceived psycho-social risk, event attributes, memorabilia, price and VRE preferences. The CHAID decision-tree modelling technique indicated that four of the independent variables, namely, *hedonia*, *perceived psycho-social risk*, *price* and *VRE preferences* were found to be statistically significant predictors of future intentions to partake in VREs. The CHAID analysis showed that *hedonia* was the strongest statistically significant predictor of future intentions to partake in VREs. Hedonia was split into further subgroups until no new statistically significant relationships emerged between the dependent and independent variables (Thomas & Galambos, 2004). For hedonia, six nodes were identified which were homogenous within each node but statistically significantly different from the other nodes.

6.3.1. Main predictors of VRE participation intentions

Hedonia was the largest of all predictors of VRE intentions. This finding is corroborated by previous virtual event studies which indicate that hedonia or 'fun' is a primary driver of virtual event participation (Raimondi *et al.*, 2021). Eudaimonia did not feature as a significant predictor of VRE participation although this features strongly in traditional events in a serious leisure context. (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Lee & Hwang, 2018; Stadler, Jepson & Wood, 2022; Yu, Mair, Lee & Faith, 2022).

Perceived *psycho-social risks* were also a significant predictor of VRE participation intentions. Perceived *physical health risks* due to COVID-19 did not feature in the current study and differs from previous studies amongst marathon runners during the pandemic who indicated that the main motivation for participating in virtual events was due to high perceived health risks from participation in traditional mass running events (Helsen *et al*., 2021). Furthermore, another study indicated that marathon runners may not be willing to partake in traditional mass sport events in the post-COVID-19 era as they were concerned with the large number of event participations (Maditinos *et al*., 2021).

Preferences related to virtual event benefits were a significant predictor of VRE intentions in the current study. This is corroborated by a VRE study indicating that the convenience and reduced costs related to VRE participation may in fact increase the demand for virtual events in future (Kim, 2021).

Perceived price also featured as a significant predictor of VRE intention. Where VREs were perceived as value for money, intentions to take up these events alongside traditional events were higher. VREs are likely to be 'add-ons' to runners' event selection only if they are offered at lower prices. This finding coincides with previous studies showing people's unwillingness to even pay for virtual sport events where they create their own event experience (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021).

6.3.2. Describing the market segments

An overview of the spread of the CHAID decision-tree in the form of a gains table, sorted the nodes from those with the highest to lowest VRE intentions and 10 distinct market segments were formed. For the purposes of this study, market segments were described considering various demographic and behavioural variables to better understand the consumers who form part of these segments. The overall findings indicate a future market for virtual events and that there are distinct market segments with intentions to partake in VREs in future. The findings indicated four main segments that sport marketers should consider when designing running

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events in future. They consist of the segments with the highest, moderately high, moderately low, and lowest participation intentions. Based on the descriptors in each segment, they were labelled as *Eager Contenders*, *Benefit-Seeking Casuals*, *Price-Sensitive Medallists* and *Real Runn*ers.

Eager Contenders indicated the highest level of hedonia from VRE participation. This segment has lower perceived psycho-social risks related to COVID-19 and are ready to resume traditional events. The segment comprises mostly females as casual leisure participants, who run approximately three times per week and partake in shorter event distances. They participate mostly as runners (rather than walkers). Some of these VRE participants did not partake in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19. The findings of the current study differ from other studies which indicate that socio-demographics, such as gender, are not significant predictors of VRE participation (Helsen *et al*., 2021; Waśkowski & Jasiulewicz, 2022). The current study, however, indicated that the segment with the highest VRE participation intentions were females.

Real Runners indicated the lowest levels of hedonia from VRE participation and were the least likely to partake in VREs. This segment comprises mostly serious leisure runners, which could be male or females, who run approximately five times per week, and usually partake in longer distance events (e.g., half-marathon and marathon events). These findings are corroborated by prior research where serious leisure participants indicate that it is impossible to replicate a virtual event. They would prefer to wait until traditional events resume rather than partake in another VRE (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2021; Helsen *et al*., 2021).

The ***Benefit-Seeking Casuals*** indicated moderate levels of hedonia from VRE participation. These consumers are concerned with the benefits of VREs (such as convenience and reduced costs) and perceive these events as value for money. This segment comprises the highest number of walkers for all segments and were mostly casual leisure, female participants who prefer shorter event distances.

Finally, the ***Price-Sensitive Medallists*** indicated high levels of hedonia from participation in VREs. However, if the perceived price is too high, this may lead to reduced participation intention. More respondents were females who had participated in running as a leisure activity prior to COVID-19. A significantly higher proportion were runners compared to walkers, but more were serious leisure (more regular runners) than casual leisure participants.

Overall, the current study has explored marketing aspects related to running events from a sport consumer perspective across the various phases related to COVID-19. It has highlighted various emotional and behavioural outcomes from sport event participation, such as marathon running events, which may positively impact sport consumer SWB and generate desirable outcomes for event organisations, particularly in terms of positive eWOM. The importance of event participation for these event participants was emphasised through negative emotions and coping behaviours during a period of restricted event participation. The significance of brand love during a crisis has been highlighted and market segments with future intentions to partake in VREs in future have been identified.

The overall study makes several contributions to SCB theory within a unique crisis context. Some of the theoretical and methodological contributions are considered below, followed by managerial implications and recommendations.

7. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Almost every sporting event globally was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and thus also had an impact on sport consumers, particularly participants of sport events (Maditinos *et al*., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for stimulating future research agendas for sport marketers and this overall study responds to the call to explore SCB within this crisis context (Shipway & Miles, 2020; Weed, 2020; Maditinos *et al*., 2021). The primary contribution of the overall study is to provide marketing insights into SCB, as a subset of marketing, related to running events from a sport consumer's perspective, across various phases related to the COVID-19 crisis. In this regard, the study has made several theoretical and practical contributions.

7.1. Theoretical contributions

In the last decade, marathon running has become increasingly popular as a form of serious leisure (Qiu *et al*., 2019). This study contributes to the dearth in literature that explores running events from a eudaimonistic lens. Based on eudaimonistic identity theory, which has hardly been applied in a sport marketing context, the findings of the current study show that marathon events can act as self-defining activities, providing opportunities for self-expressiveness and SWB (Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Waterman *et al*., 2008). The findings of the current study indicate that dimensions of self-expressiveness, namely, perceived self-realisation potential, perceived level of effort, perceived challenge, and perceived importance of event participation may enhance SWB from a sport consumption experience.

Another gap in SCB research is that no prior studies have specifically explored dimensions of self-expressiveness via authentic eWOM communications as a behavioural outcome of self-expressiveness. The findings of the study show that dimensions of self-expressiveness are often shared within online communities. This is important for sport marketers considering that social media communications are often regarded as being more credible than other forms of marketing communications.

This study further contributes to SCB theory by exploring restricted event participation during a unique crisis. Previous consumer behaviour studies have demonstrated how consumers often engage in compensatory consumption behaviours when they cannot engage in 'normal' consumption activities (Cho *et al*., 2021). No studies could be found that specifically explore event participants' responses to restricted event participation and potential compensatory consumption behaviours during this period. In the current study types of compensatory consumption included new garden running activities and challenges; increased social media communications about negative emotions experienced; and anxiety related to potential event cancellations. They also encouraged each other via eWOM to keep their hopes alive amidst the uncertainties of the pandemic, where hope is also considered as a coping mechanism (after Korner, 1970).

Previous sport-related research has explored brand love for popular sport brands (Langner *et al*., 2016), sport tourists' destination brands (Aro *et al*., 2018; Amaro *et al*., 2020), various sport leagues (Do *et al*., 2022) and attachment to an event brand toward nation-building for the event host country (Knott *et al*., 2017). This study contributes to brand love literature by exploring event brand love from a marketing perspective and potential desirable outcomes of such for the event organisation. The findings show that event brands have potential to be 'loved' brands and love for the brand was even openly expressed via authentic eWOM.

A further contribution to brand love literature is within the crisis context. Crisis management literature frequently utilises fictitious scenarios of crisis situations (Vafeiadis *et al*., 2019). A unique contribution of this study is that brand love is explored during an actual period of a real-life sustained global crisis and captures authentic consumer responses during this time as the crisis unfolds. Furthermore, there are inconsistencies regarding the proposed enduring effects of brand love (Vafeiadis *et al*., 2019). The findings of this study indicate that brand love can be an asset to an event organisation, particularly during a crisis. The current study showed that many individuals defended the brand and trusted that the organisation had their best interests at heart.

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It is not surprising that event experience literature is dominated by offline events (Richards, 2022). Prior to COVID-19, it had already been recommended that researchers consider expanding their interests to investigate virtual event experiences (Raimondi *et al*., 2021, Wreford *et al*., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic expedited the need for increased research on virtual events. The findings of the current study thus contribute to an underexplored area of virtual sport event experience research. Three additional knowledge gaps were addressed in this regard.

Firstly, this study explores virtual event experiences that do not make use of mobile applications. Most studies that investigate virtual event experiences focus on virtual events that make use of technological applications (Helsen *et al*., 2021). The current study thus contributes to the body of knowledge where essentially it is the sport consumer who creates their own event experience. Although a virtual event cannot replicate the 'real' experience, VRE participation in this study was found to enhance SWB. This was, however, more relevant to a hedonic perspective and VREs did not reflect as being meaningful event experiences in comparison with traditional running events.

Secondly, this study contributes to literature within the virtual sport event realm by applying an adapted (virtual) SX framework to determine future intentions to partake in VREs. This study applies a novel application of the SX framework within a virtual sport event context. The SX framework has been applied to understand sport experiences (Funk, 2017), however, at the time of study, no prior research could be found that applies the SX framework within a virtual sport event context. The current study investigates unique aspects related to the sport user and virtual sport context. The findings showed that the main factor that predicted future VRE participation intention was hedonia. The findings suggest that VRE participants may not experience the same levels of self-expressiveness (as a more meaningful type of happiness) from virtual events compared with traditional events. Virtual event preferences may also propose new market segments with preferences to partake in VRE beyond COVID-19.

Finally, although past research has suggested that VREs should be offered alongside traditional events in future (Raimondi *et al*., 2021) no research has specifically considered who these participants are and what sport consumer segments are most likely to partake in VREs in future. The findings of the current study show that although traditional events are still most preferred among sport consumers, there are specific groups of consumer segments, particularly female casual leisure sport consumers, who prefer shorter event distances and indicated intentions to partake in VREs in future. The main reasons behind intentions to

partake in VREs can be explained by the hedonic emotions experienced, preferences for VRE attributes and perceived lower price/costs to partake in virtual events.

7.2. Methodological contributions

Articles 1 and 2 applied a netnographic method to explore dimensions of self-expressiveness and brand love which are mostly investigated via quantitative methods (e.g., Bosnjak *et al*., 2016; Karjaluoto *et al*., 2016). By applying a qualitative netnographic approach to explore authentic eWOM, deeper insights could be obtained from naturalistic online data in an unobtrusive manner (Kozinets, 2002; Sandlin, 2007; Rokka, 2010). The netnographic data could be analysed both inductively and deductively (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al*., 2017). Various trends and changes in consumer behaviour could also be identified by exploring the data across various phases related to the pandemic. The current study thus contributes to sport marketing literature by means of employing a netnographic approach not commonly utilised in a sport marketing and crisis context.

A further main methodological contribution of the current study was that a CHAID decision-tree technique was used to segment VRE markets to predict future intentions to partake in VREs (refer to Article 3, Chapter 4). A CHAID analysis technique has hardly been used as a segmentation tool in sport-related research and was most appropriate for the current study as the aim was to segment the market with a specific dependent variable in mind (Doyle *et al*., 2013; Önder & Uyar, 2017; Valek *et al*., 2015). The current study contributes to sport marketing segmentation research based on CHAID analysis as a more sophisticated segmentation technique.

8. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the findings of the current study, some recommendations for sport event marketers are presented next.

8.1. Self-expressiveness in event consumption experiences

The findings of the current study suggest that participation in sporting events, such as marathon running events, have potential to provide eudaimonic consumption experiences. This is important as organisations that provide eudaimonic consumption experiences can capitalise on the well-being effects of such event offerings. In this regard, organisations can provide benefits for individual participants of self-expressive sport events through enhancing SWB (eudaimonia as a long-term type of happiness), which has been increasingly recognised as an important goal amongst marketers (as corroborated by Garner *et al*., 2022; Schwartz *et*

al., 2002; Theodorakis *et al*., 2015). Marketers that offer meaningful experiences ultimately contribute towards promoting overall well-being in society as one of the main sustainable development goals (SDGs). It is important that event marketers continue to strive to provide such experiences, considering the potential SWB effects. Hence, it is recommended that sport marketers could devise strategies to assist individuals to realise their sporting goals. In this way, individuals may perceive participation in certain sporting events as being attainable with the support of the event organisation rather than attempting to achieve unrealistic goals. For example, they can create online platforms where individuals can access training plans and advice can be shared. Event organisations can also collaborate with other sport organisations that provide sporting goods and services that can aid individuals to achieve their goals. They could perhaps host virtual seminars with give-aways. They could invite successful running personalities to provide weekly 'tips and tricks' prior to the build-up of the event. They can also facilitate social media platforms where online communities can engage with each other and are generally willing to share advice with others who 'belong' to this online community as part of their (social) self-concept.

It is further recommended that event marketers focus on incorporating self-expressive dimensions in their event offerings. For sport events, self-expressive dimensions, such as perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and the importance of event participation, should be considered in the event offering, not only from a SWB perspective, but also considering the findings of the current study where it is demonstrated that these dimensions are often communicated via authentic eWOM among online communities. Self-expressiveness is often a main reason for content creation on social media and the findings of the current study are thus corroborated by previous empirical research (e.g., de Vries *et al*., 2017; Morgan & Townsend, 2022).

Sport marketers could stimulate opportunities for self-expressiveness by creating social media challenges to encourage individuals to share emotions prior to and post event participation. Sharing experiences via eWOM have also been shown to enhance consumer SWB (Wirtz, Tucker, Briggs & Schoemann, 2021). Event organisations can benefit from increased exposure in the form of positive eWOM, often considered to be a credible form of marketing communications (An *et al*., 2019). Positive eWOM has also been shown to encourage repeat participation in events as memorable experiences (Zhang *et al*., 2018), which may ultimately contribute to ensuring the sustainability of the event, as well as enhanced economic benefits.

Focusing on self-expressive dimensions can also ensure more targeted marketing communication messages, such as emphasising the meaningfulness of participating in sport

events rather than focus on hedonic aspects. Marketing communications messages could focus on goal achievement and the prestige associated with event participation considering the high level of effort required to complete the challenge. The importance of achieving individual goals can also be a key focus of marketing communications.

The high importance placed on event participation was most evident during restricted event participation. Statements such as, "…there's no life without comrades" and "running is life", are some examples. There was also evidence of sacrifices individuals are willing to make to be able to partake in running events. Sport event marketers should not underestimate the importance of the role that they play in enhancing consumer SWB. During times of crisis, or during periods in which organisations are unable to provide 'normal' consumption experiences, it is recommended that organisations strive to provide alternative consumption opportunities that may reduce the negative outcomes associated with such. Advanced technologies can be beneficial to event marketers today in providing alternative digital experiences and can be considered in future.

The need for self-expressiveness derived from running events as consumption experiences, was most evident during the pandemic as runners engaged in various types of coping behaviours. Online communities shared memories (nostalgia) of previous event participation experiences (as corroborated by Cho *et al*., 2021). They also communicated aspects of hope regarding future participation. Should similar crisis situations occur in future or should there be periods in which event organisations are not able to offer the desired 'live' event experience, it is recommended that these organisations engage in online conversations by sharing memories of previous events on behalf of the organisation. They could also communicate messages of hope regarding future events. They can reassure sport consumers of their presence and empathise with them during such times. These online interactions may also be the beginning of building long-term relationships with their sport consumers.

Considering the importance of event participation and enhanced SWB benefits, it is suggested that marketing practitioners of PSEs carefully consider the prices for entry fees of event offerings. If events become too expensive, this may result in less people being able to afford to partake in events and thus also reduced SWB. Organisations could perhaps host competitions to win event entries or travel and accommodation packages to partake in certain events. Offering reduced prices to deserving participants may also demonstrate corporate social responsibility and inclusivity on the part of the organisation in event offerings.

Organisations that provide event experiences should not only focus on events that produce positive feelings for participants. Negative emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, discomfort) that may arise during consumption experiences may in fact be more meaningful (or self-expressive) to event participants and can result in self-brand expressiveness or even, potentially event brand love, with further favourable outcomes for organisations. Despite evidence of negative eWOM, findings of the current study indicate support for positive eWOM as an overarching enduring effect of brand love (corroborating Wallace *et al*., 2014). Even during a crisis, a stronger affiliation with the brand shows the ability to garnish positive sentiments during the crisis (An *et al*., 2019). Individuals also communicated their future intentions to partake in the event. If event marketers can determine ways in which to encourage brand love, they may also benefit from brand defence in a brand crisis.

8.2.   Event brand love

Findings from the current study show that event brands have potential to be 'loved' brands. Considering the benefits of brand love (Wallace *et al*., 2014), event marketers are encouraged to continue to find ways to make their brands 'loved'. For this to realise, marketers should first establish brand trust among their consumers. Brand trust, however, needs to be developed over time. It will benefit event organisations to devise strategies that will stimulate long-term relationships with sport consumers. For example, they could design events where participants that compete in their event several times (e.g., completing the event 10 times) could earn a special medal, or event branded memorabilia (e.g., a special badge, plaque, or jacket). Event organisations could also offer certain events as a series, for example, completing four events where each medal forms part of the building of a 'larger' medal. This can create more individual goals to be realised to form part of a larger outcome goal. Event organisations could send out regular newsletters as a reminder to participants about the brand and upcoming events. They could encourage previous participants to send in 'news' stories of their personal event experiences which can be published in these online newsletters, on the organisation's website, and/or social media platforms.

If consumers love event brands, they often engage in self-brand expressiveness via these brands and spread positive eWOM about the brand. Marketers could capitalise on self-expressiveness benefits. However, the findings of the study show that what the event brand symbolises is of extreme importance to individuals. Self-brand expressiveness needs to be warranted and in this study the event medal and memorabilia represented a sense of accomplishment and prestige. It is suggested that marketers of prestigious event brands carefully consider who they partner with in terms of sponsorships. Partnering with more price-sensitive sport brands, which are more easily accessible to individuals, may detract from the

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uniqueness of the self-expressive aspect of the event brand. Event brands could strengthen their self-expressive aspects through offering event memorabilia associated with more 'prestigious' types of sporting brands (e.g., Nike or Asics, as popular running brands, rather than generic or 'cheaper' store brands).

Notwithstanding the powerful role that brand love can play during a brand crisis, brand love cannot negate all negative effects. It is recommended that event organisations carefully consider the potential negative effects that may result from implementing various crisis strategies. It is suggested that organisations 'listen' to their online communities as a valuable source of insights into consumers' emotions during times of crisis. Marketing managers of 'loved' brands should consider the effects of potential anticipated separation distress and the negative emotions or anxiety that may be experienced when consumers do not have access to their loved brands. It is recommended that marketers engage in regular communication with their online brand communities, which can inexpensively be done via social media platforms. Marketers should acknowledge the feelings of loss and anxiety and reassure consumers that they have their best interests at heart, while devising alternative consumption strategies. Through 'listening' to their online communities during crisis situations organisations may be able to implement more effective and preferred response strategies in a more timeously manner as they have direct access to their online consumers and their opinions and suggestions.

8.3. Virtual event offerings

Findings of the current study show that hedonia, a short-lived type of happiness, was the largest of all predictors of VRE participation intentions. VREs were not indicative of offering meaningful (or self-expressive) experiences. It is thus recommended that VREs be designed and promoted as a fun or pleasurable addition for runners. This is important in that fun (i.e., hedonia) is an element of SWB, which ultimately has benefits for the overall society (Raimondi *et al*., 2021). Enhancing consumer SWB through consumption experiences is also a heightened priority among marketers today (as corroborated by Garner *et al*., 2022; Schwartz *et al*., 2002; Theodorakis *et al*., 2015).

Virtual event alternatives may not be suitable for all types of active sport consumers and organisations should continue to provide traditional event experiences that are meaningful and can generate a long-term type of happiness for event participants. It is recommended, however, that event organisations could benefit by offering hybrid events in future and by doing so also expand their market share (as corroborated by Helsen *et al*., 2021). This has also been suggested in other types of event offerings (other than sporting events) (Richards, 2022).

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Hybrid events could benefit the partners of serious leisure runners, who often travel with or support their partners to achieve their running goals, to also be part of the event experience without necessarily having to partake in the physical event.

It was interesting to note that physical health-related risks from participation in traditional running events did not feature as an important factor influencing intentions to partake in virtual events. This was in comparison to other studies during the pandemic that found health risks to be the most important factor influencing VRE participation intentions (Helsen *et al*., 2021). In fact, one of the comments from the respondents in the study on virtual events commented at the end of the survey, "I'd rather die from COVID-19 than partake in another virtual event". The current study has, however, identified various market segments with intentions to partake in VREs in future. The segment that is least likely to partake in VREs in future is the *real runners*. This segment includes serious leisure runners, both males and females, who regularly partake in long-distance running events, such as marathon events. They engage in running as an exercise activity approximately five times per week and running forms an essential part of their lifestyle. It is recommended that sport marketers do not focus on these types of active sport consumers, as they are the least likely segment to engage in virtual alternatives.

When designing virtual events (without specific mobile applications) as event offerings, marketers should consider those market segments most likely to participate in such events in future. Findings of the current study indicate that female, casual leisure sport consumers would be the most viable market segment. It is recommended that virtual events be designed for shorter event distances (e.g., 5km or 10km) as more individuals would be willing to partake in such events where they perceive the outcome goal as being attainable. It would also be important that these events are offered at lower prices than traditional events. The tangible items that are also within the organisation's control should be considered in the event offering, particularly offering items such as an event T-shirt or receiving a goodie bag. Here event organisations should consider building partnerships with other organisations who would be willing to sponsor items to place in these goodie bags as this may also create brand exposure for these organisations.

Considering the event experience aspects, the findings indicated that most people do not prefer to run on their own and considering that virtual event participants essentially create their own event experience, they could be encouraged to incorporate social aspects when creating their experience, for example, by encouraging them to partake in virtual events with friends or family. Although the event organisation cannot guarantee hedonia from VRE participation,

they could provide suggestions on ways to make the event experience more 'fun'. For example, they can suggest certain themes to dress up as or offer prizes for the 'best dressed'. They can encourage individuals to share photos of their event experiences via online platforms whereby social media content can be created for self-expression.

Event organisations could also perhaps offer suggestions of some of the most beautiful places where individuals could enjoy nature and their outdoor surroundings where they can complete the virtual event. This may contribute to a more meaningful experience. For example, organisations could have a feature on their website where individuals could search for such places across South Africa to plan their event experience.

It can also be valuable to incorporate a sense of social responsibility by supporting various charities through hosting virtual events and in this way also build up the community. Initiating fund raising initiatives for charities could additionally enhance the organisation's reputation by showing that the brand cares about the community and that they consider benefiting the community in their design of event experiences.

9. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is recognised that there are several limitations of the current study. Some of these limitations are highlighted in this section, together with some recommendations for future research.

The first limitation of this study is that only active sport event consumers involved in running events are considered. The current study does not consider participants of other sporting events, such as cycling or triathlon events. There may also be other types of event consumption experiences that were restricted during COVID-19, which may have different outcomes on consumer SWB and future intentions to engage in these virtual/alternative event offerings in future. Examples of these could include online music concert event experiences, online comedy shows, virtual conferences and virtual exhibition halls. Potential changes in consumer behaviour resulting from COVID-19 can be explored in such experience fields. These studies could also consider whether the types of happiness (SWB) derived from these online events have different outcomes in different contexts and explore future event format preferences and intentions to future intentions beyond COVID-19.

For sport events, self-expressive dimensions, such as perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and the importance of event participation have been considered. For other types of leisure activities, the self-expressive dimensions may differ

according to the context and the characteristics of the individuals who partake in those activities. Hence, further research could investigate the concept of self-expressiveness to enhance SWB from the leisure consumption experience in different contexts (other than endurance sport). Providing eudaimonic consumption experiences can also hold significant benefits for marketers promoting other types of event experiences.

A further limitation of this study is that it takes place during various 'snapshots' in time. These snapshots occur during specific periods within unique crisis-related circumstances. Hence, the findings of the study may not apply across all contexts or during 'normal' circumstances. It is suggested that more longitudinal studies be applied to confirm the findings of this study. Additionally, Articles 1 and 2 used qualitative methodologies. Future research could apply quantitative methods to verify these results by means of triangulation. Most netnographic studies combine netnography with other qualitative or quantitative methods (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Furthermore, Kozinets (2002) has suggested that researchers who seek to generalise netnographic findings could also use other methods, such as interviews, focus groups or traditional ethnographies for triangulation.

The findings of the current study show that event participants often communicate about aspects related to self-expressiveness from event participation via eWOM. It is not known, however, whether participation in self-expressive activities may lead to self-brand expressiveness through these branded activities (or events) and this could be further explored. Additionally, although numerous quantitative studies have explored self-brand expressiveness and the suggested outcome of positive eWOM (An *et al*., 2019; Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012), future research could explore the link between self-expressive consumption activities (including different sporting events) and self-brand expressiveness specifically. There may also be other moderators or mediators, such as consumption focused self-expressive word-of-mouth (CSWOM), duration of engagement in the activity or brand image that may impact self-brand expressiveness, other than engagement in the self-defining activity.

As suggested in prior research, self-brand expressiveness may result in brand love with significant benefits for organisations, including crisis-related benefits (Albert & Merunka, 2013; An *et al*., 2019; Aro *et al*., 2018; Batra *et al*., 2012). Findings of the current study suggest that when individuals engage in self-expressiveness from event participation, this may result in event brand love. It would be interesting to determine the extent to which engagement in other self-expressive consumption experiences may predict brand love for the event brands in other event contexts.

The current study investigated eWOM as authentic behavioural outcomes of self-expressive consumption experiences and event brand love. In this regard, future research could explore other potential outcomes of self-expressive consumption activities and brand love, for example, loyalty and willingness to pay a premium (Bairrada *et al.*, 2018; Carrol & Ahuvia, 2006).

It would be valuable to determine which types of event experience formats are preferred by active sport event consumers in the future (and beyond COVID-19). It could be beneficial for event organisations to offer hybrid events in future following changes in consumer behaviour due to the pandemic. It could also be of worth to determine different consumer segment preferences towards traditional or alternative event formats in future. These insights can aid event marketers in designing more effective event strategies in future as well as concentrate on more targeted marketing communications with various segments of consumers.

In the current study, VREs were limited to running events where participants register online, complete the event and upload their finishing times. Future research could utilise the SX framework adapted to a virtual environment to explore similar factors related to the sport user and sport context for VREs that make use of apps. It would be interesting to determine how these types of virtual events differ in terms of the consumer experience and future intentions to partake in these virtual events beyond COVID-19.

The concept of addiction to the activity of running was also noted in the findings of the current study. This study was limited to exploring sport consumer responses related to restricted event participation and loss of opportunities to engage in self-expressive consumption activities. Future studies could further explore consumer SWB and compensatory consumption behaviour from the angle of addiction. Finally, although this study may consider the resilience of runners and determination to continue training through garden-running activities and challenges, these compensatory consumption behaviours could also perhaps have been related to boredom (similar to Cho *et al.*, 2021) and not only the need to engage in self-expressive activities. This could also be further investigated in future research.

10. CONCLUSION

The primary aim of the overall study was to explore marketing aspects related to running events from a sport consumer's perspective across various phases related to the COVID-19 crisis. This study explored marathon running events from a self-expressive perspective and the effects of restricted event participation, the extent to which event brand love was affected during a prolonged crisis and identified SX factors that may have predicted intentions to partake in VREs for the categorisation of virtual sport consumer segments.

Using the Comrades marathon as case study, a qualitative netnography was applied to explore general themes in eWOM among an online marathon running community prior to, and during the three initial phases related to COVID-19 with restricted event participation. Guided by eudaimonistic identity theory, the extent to which these main themes reflected dimensions of self-expressiveness was explored. The findings show that marathon runners frequently communicate dimensions of self-expressiveness, including perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge and perceived importance of event participation via authentic eWOM. The relevance of achieving important goals was emphasised.

During periods of restricted event participation, there was evidence of reduced SWB through negative emotions communicated via social media. Runners engaged in various types of compensatory behaviours, such as garden running activities and recalling memories of past event experiences. Many runners also made plans to honour the day on which the Comrades 2020 event was to take place. These findings are significant as eWOM is often considered as the most credible form of marketing communications. The main themes in eWOM also indicated the strong attachment of these runners to the event brand and potential of the event brand to be a 'loved' brand, this was then further explored within the crisis context.

The Comrades marathon was again used as case study employing a qualitative netnography to explore the extent to which dimensions of event brand love may have featured within the crisis context, and whether the known desirable outcomes of brand love may have endured during this period considering the event organisation's CRS. The dimensions of brand love emerged in eWOM to varying degrees with evidence of self-brand expressiveness being most prominent. Importantly, evidence of brand defence as a crisis-related outcome was apparent. The findings show that brand love has potential to negate some of the negative effects of a brand crisis, however, it cannot eliminate all negative consequences. Hence, it is still important that organisations carefully consider how they respond to a crisis and the findings suggest that

this could be done more effectively through simply 'listening' to their online brand communities. In this way they can identify consumer needs and assure them of their confidence in the brand.

The increased offering of VREs during the pandemic raised an important question concerning the future offering of such events. Based on a virtual SX framework, factors that relate to the sport user and the virtual sport context were identified to predict future intentions to partake in VREs. Based on the identified SX factors, various consumer market segments for VREs were categorised with the intention to participate in VREs. Hedonia was the most important predictor of intentions to partake in VREs in future. Casual leisure, female consumers who prefer shorter running event distances are the most likely segment of consumers with intentions to partake in VREs. It is recommended that sport marketers consider these market segments and the potential to offer hybrid events to increase their market share and meet organisational objectives.

Although this study has made numerous theoretical, methodological and practical contributions, there is still much to be explored.

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APPENDIX A

Coding instruments (i.e., code sheet and code book) used to code variables for the directed content analysis in Article 2 (refer to Chapter 3)

APPENDIX A

CODE SHEET FOR ANTECEDENTS AND OUTCOMES OF EVENT BRAND LOVE IN EWOM

Coder ID: _____   **Number of items coded:** 120 statements

Item #	Statements from eWOM	*Self-brand expressiveness	*Brand Trust	**Memories/ nostalgia	**Interest in well-being of brand	**Future participation intentions	**Explicit declaration of brand love	***Anticipated separation distress	***Brand defence
1.									
2.									
3.									
4.									
5.									
6.									

*Antecedents of event brand love; ** General outcomes; ***Crisis-related outcomes

Code book with descriptions for code sheet

Antecedents/ Outcomes	Description	Examples of statements/posts
*Self-brand expressiveness	'Self-expressive' is a consumer's perceptions of the degree to which the specific brand enhances their social self and reflects the inner self. Brands can help consumers self-express either because the brands are themselves self-expressive or because they are associated with a desired prototypical consumer group. Individuals can use the symbolic value of sport event brands to support and enact their self-concept. Consumers often use unique brands to express their self-concept to differentiate themselves from others where brand uniqueness is "the degree to which customers feel the brand is different from competing brands".	**All statements which indicate**: • Self-identification with event brand • Current/desired self-identity (sharing personal achievements, such as number of Comrades participated in and best times) • Personal event experiences • Brand uniqueness (i.e., what makes Comrades different from other marathon brands)
*Brand Trust	Brand trust is the consumer's belief that a brand has the ability to perform its claimed functions. When consumers trust their brands, they often infer that the organisation will correct any mistakes appropriately and keep its promises in the future.	**All statements which indicate**: • Belief that the event brand has the ability to perform its claimed functions (in general) • Belief that the organisation will respond appropriately to the crisis • Belief that the organisation will correct their mistakes in a brand crisis situation • Perceived credibility of the brand
**Memories & Nostalgia	The more "positive, affectively charged memories of prior brand experiences" a consumer has, the more the individual will identify with that brand. Loved brands trigger memories of important events and also feelings of nostalgia. Nostalgia is seeking a connection with something in the past that is now gone or the yearning for something in	**All statements which indicate**: • **Memories** of prior Comrades event experiences • Positive feelings (happiness) from previous event participation • Hopes and dreams of partaking in future events (nostalgia)

	the future that 'never was'. Nostalgia can be linked with the future, being less of a loss of something that is gone, but more about anxiety or hope/dreaming that something might return in the future.	
Interest in the well-being of the brand	Although brand love is different to interpersonal love (for humans), brand love can also include concern for an object or event. Hoping that the event brand will prosper and stay active, as it provides work and services for the people living there, is reflective of interest in the well-being of the event brand.	**All statements which indicate:** • Concern for the event brand • Desire for the event to prosper and stay active in the community, also considering their contribution to charities, sport tourism, job creation and, potentially consumer subjective well-being (meaning from participation)
Future participation intentions	Consumers who love their brands have an overall positive evaluation of the brand. Willingness or intentions to engage in repeat participation may occur if individuals have positive attitudes towards the brand. Theoretically, members of the online brand community who love the brand, would share their positive attitudes towards the brand as well as future participation intentions, despite an ongoing crisis.	**All statements which show:** • Positive attitudes towards the Comrades brand • Intention to partake in future Comrades events
Explicit declaration of brand love	When consumers love their brands, they often openly express their love for the brand. Love for brands can be expressed via social media text-based statements such as "I love brand x".	**All statements including:** • Explicit declarations of love for the event brand, such as, "I love Comrades"
***Anticipated separation distress**	When consumers are passionate about their brands, they experience a more intense feeling for the object (or service activity) which is so intense that it creates mental distress in case of any actual or anticipated separation from the brand. Separation distress drives individuals who often feel that they are missing or lacking something when they cannot use their brands to maintain proximity to the brand.	**All statements which indicate:** • Mental distress (or fear) caused should the 2020 event be cancelled • A feeling of missing/lacking something if they cannot partake in future Comrades events
***Brand defence**	When consumers love their brands, they have a strong relationship with the brand and do not allow negative information to diminish their general view of a firm. Also, they will often defend the brand in an argument, criticism, attack or potential threat with positive WOM attributions.	**All statements which refer to:** • Positive attributions which defend the Comrades brand in any argument, criticism or attack regarding the CMA and their CRS

*Antecedents; **General outcomes; ***Crisis-related outcomes

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire developed for Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4)

Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent

Department of Marketing Management

Factors influencing intentions to partake in virtual running events

<u>Research conducted by:</u>
Mrs BL Frost (21065994)

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in an academic research study conducted by B.L. Frost, a PhD student from the Department of Marketing Management, at the University of Pretoria.

The purpose of this study is to understand factors influencing intentions to partake in virtual running events in future.

Please note the following:

- This is an <u>anonymous</u> **survey** as your name will not appear on the questionnaire. The answers you give will be treated as strictly <u>confidential</u> and you cannot be identified in person based on the answers you give.
- Your participation in this study is very important to us. You may, however, choose not to participate and you may stop participating at any time without any negative consequences.
- Please answer the questions as completely and honestly as possible. This should take about **15 minutes** to complete.
- The results of the study will be used for academic purposes only and may be published in an academic journal and in a condensed form in popular media. We will provide you with a summary of our findings on request.

Ethical clearance has been granted from the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences' Committee for Research Ethics (protocol nr EMS163/21). Should you have any questions or comments regarding the survey, please contact myself, Bianca Frost (bianca.frost@up.ac.za) or my supervisor Prof. Elizabeth du Preez (elizabeth.dupreez@up.ac.za).

<u>**Consent:**</u>

Please click below to indicate that:

- You have read and understand the information provided above.
- You give your consent to participate in the study on a voluntary basis.

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

---

*If participant answers '**No**" to the above – survey skips to '**End of Survey'**.
The survey ends with the message: *"We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded."*

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Section A: Screening Questions

Q1. **Are you 18 years old or older?**

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

If participant answers '**No**" to Question 1 – survey skips to '**End of Survey'**

Please note that for the purposes of this study:

- A **traditional running** event is a 'live' race that takes place in-person from a <u>specific location</u> with a fixed start and finish time. Participants usually receive their medals 'in-person at the finish of the race.
- A **virtual running event** is a race that can be run (or walked) from any location (e.g. a road, outdoor trail or treadmill), where participants register for the event online, complete the distance and then upload their finishing time

Q2. **Have you participated in a virtual running event during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

*If participant answers '**No**" to Question 2 – survey skips to '**End of Survey'**.

Section B: Respondent profile

Q3. **Did you participate in running as either a leisure (informal) or more formal (competitive) activity BEFORE COVID-19?**

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q4. **Do you participate in running events <u>predominantly</u> as a runner or walker?**

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q5. **On average, how frequently did you partake in traditional running events BEFORE COVID-19?** *(Please choose the most relevant option)*

○ Once or twice a year (1)
○ Every other month (2)
○ At least 1 event per month (3)
○ Approximately 2 events per month (4)
○ Approximately 3 events per month (5)
○ Approximately 4 events per month (6)
○ 5 or more events per month (7)
○ I did not participate in formal organised events (8)

Q6. **What was your most preferred distance (in kilometers) when partaking in traditional running events BEFORE COVID-19?** *(Please choose the most relevant option)*

○ 5km (1)
○ 10km (2)
○ 15km (3)
○ 21.1km (4)
○ 32km (5)
○ 42.2km (6)
○ More than 42.2km (7)
○ I did not participate in formal organised events (8)

Q7. **Were you PREVIOUSLY a member of a running club (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic)?**

○ Yes (1)
○ No (2)

Q8. **Are you CURRENTLY a member of a running club?**

○ Yes (1)
○ No (2)

Q9. **Prior to COVID-19, on average, how often did you run per week? (*Please choose the most relevant option*)**

- ○ Once (1)
- ○ Twice (2)
- ○ Three times (3)
- ○ Four times (4)
- ○ Five times (5)
- ○ Six times (6)
- ○ I ran every day of the week (7)
- ○ I ran every other week (8)

Section C: Sport user

Q10. **To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your virtual running EVENT EXPERIENCES during the COVID-19 time period?**

(Indicate on the slider from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree')

Note: should the slider be left at the starting point, it will be recorded as an 'unanswered question'. You should therefore please move the slider to allow for a value between 1 and 100.

		Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
		1	100
Participating in virtual running events…			
10.1	…gives me the greatest feeling of really being alive.		
10.2	…gives me my strongest sense that this is who I really am.		
10.3	…is central to my identity.		
10.4	…is part of who I am.		
10.5	…is a fun way of running.		
10.6	…is a true joy.		
10.7	…feels like an escape.		

Q11. **To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your virtual running EVENT EXPERIENCES during the COVID-19 time period?**

(Indicate on the slider from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree')

Note: *Remember to move the slider away and give a value between 1 and 100.*

		Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
		1	**100**

When I partake in virtual running events…

11.1	… I feel more intensely involved than when I engage in most other activities permitted during COVID-19.	
11.2	…I feel that running is what I was meant to do.	
11.3	…I feel more complete or fulfilled than when I partake in most other activities permitted during COVID-19.	
11.4	…I feel a special fit (or connectedness) with the activity of running.	
11.5	…compared to other things I could have done, the time I spend partaking in these events, is truly enjoyable.	
11.6	…I enjoy being immersed in the experience.	
11.7	…I feel excited to be part of the experience.	
11.8	…I am able to forget my problems.	
11.9	…I feel a sense of adventure.	
11.10	…I enjoy the experience.	

Q12. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about PERCEIVED RISKS of COVID-19 and participation in running events?

(Indicate on the slider from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree')

Note: *Remember to move the slider away and give a value between 1 and 100.*
Note: *should the slider be left at the starting point, it will be recorded as an 'unanswered question'. You should therefore please move the slider to allow for a value between 1 and 100.*

		Strongly disagree 1	Strongly agree 100
12.1	**Proper sanitation** and **hygiene** in traditional sporting events are now more important than ever.		
12.2	The **risk of infectious diseases** could influence my decision to rather partake in virtual running events.		
12.3	I do not think that traditional running events can currently uphold the **COVID-19 safety requirements**.		
12.4	Virtual running events are a **safer** option for me if I prefer to not be vaccinated.		
12.5	People who are important to me (friends, family, colleagues) would **prefer** me to partake in **virtual running events** (rather than traditional events) in the near future.		
12.6	If I participate in **traditional running events** in the near future, it will negatively affect my **image** in society.		
12.7	I might be **disappointed** if I were to participate in a **traditional running** event, since the world has changed.		
12.8	People who are close to me would **prefer** me to participate in **virtual running events** (rather than traditional sporting events) in the near future.		
12.9	The thought of partaking in **traditional running events** at present makes me **worry**.		
12.10	The thought of partaking in a **traditional running event** at present makes me feel **uncomfortable**.		
12.11	The thought of partaking in **traditional running events** at present causes me to experience unnecessary **tension**.		

Section D: Sport context

Q13. How important are the following EVENT ATTRIBUTES when selecting virtual running events in which to partake?

(Indicate on the slider from 'not at all important' to 'extremely important')

Note: *Remember to move the slider away and give a value between 1 and 100.*

		Not at all important 1	Extremely important 100
13.1	The virtual event must offer a **novel event experience**.		
13.2	The **event brand** should be well-established.		
13.3	The **event brand** has a favourable reputation.		
13.4	The purpose of the virtual event is to **raise funds** for a 'good cause' (for example, a cancer association).		
13.5	The purpose of the virtual event is to **raise funds** to fight COVID-19.		
13.6	I receive a real (or physical) **medal** for participation in the virtual event.		
13.7	A free **T-shirt** is included in the entry fee.		
13.8	A free **goodie bag** is included in the entry fee.		

Q14. **To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the PRICE of virtual running events?**

(Indicate on the slider from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree')

Note: *Remember to move the slider away and give a value between 1 and 100.*

		Strongly disagree 1		Strongly agree 100
14.1	I feel that virtual running events are **too expensive.**			
14.2	I do not feel it is worth my while to **pay** for **virtual running events** where I need to create my own event experience.			
14.3	I **cannot** currently partake in any running events due to **lack of finances** because of COVID-19.			

Q15. **What aspects of virtual running events may influence your PREFERENCES to partake in a virtual (rather than a traditional) running event in the near future?**
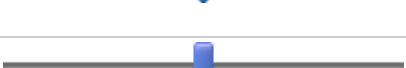
(Indicate on the slider from 'definitely not a reason' to 'definitely a reason')

Note: *Remember to move the slider away and give a value between 1 and 100.*

	Definitely not a reason 0	Definitely a reason 100

The following are *reasons why* I would attend the virtual (rather the traditional) running event in the near future…

15.1	If the registration of the virtual event is **more affordable** than the traditional event.	
15.2	Because the virtual event saves me travelling and/or accommodation **costs.**	
15.3	Because of the convenience of selecting my own **starting time** of the race.	
15.4	Because I am able to choose my **own route.**	
15.5	Because I have a **friend(s)** who will participate in the virtual event with me.	
15.6	Because I **prefer to run alone** and can do so during a virtual event.	
15.7	Because I am concerned about **contracting COVID-19** at a traditional (or mass) event.	
15.8	Because I am **afraid of spreading** COVID-19 to others at a traditional event.	

Section E: Future intentions

Q16. **What would your plans be regarding running events in future?**

(Indicate on the slider from 'extremely unlikely' to 'extremely likely')

Note: *Remember to move the slider away and give a value between 1 and 100.*

Thinking about my future running plans…

		Extremely unlikely 1		Extremely likely 100
16.1	I intend to partake **only** in **traditional running events**.		▮	
16.2	I intend to partake **only** in **virtual running events**.		▮	
16.3	I intend to partake in **both traditional mass running** AND **virtual running events**		▮	

Section F: Demographics

And lastly:

Q17. **Please indicate your gender.**

○ Male (1)

○ Female (2)

○ Other (3)

○ Prefer not to say (4)

Q18. **Please indicate in what year you were born (e.g. 1978).**

○ Please type answer in the box below (9)

[ ]

OR

○ Prefer not to say (10)

Thank you very much for your time and for participating in this survey!

🏃

APPENDIX C

Approval from Ethics Committee to conduct the research for

Articles 1 and 2 (refer to Chapters 2 and 3)

Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

Approval Certificate

12 June 2020

Mrs BL Frost
Department: Marketing Management

Dear Mrs BL Frost

The application for ethical clearance for the research project described below served before this committee on:

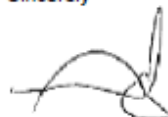| Protocol No:	EMS034/20
Principal researcher:	Mrs BL Frost
Research title:	A eudaimonistic perspective of social listening among participants in a hallmark sports event
Student/Staff No:	21065994
Degree:	Staff Research / Non Degree
Supervisor/Promoter:	
Department:	Marketing Management

The decision by the committee is reflected below:

Decision:	Approved
Conditions (if applicable):	Study is approved, however, researcher(s) need to adhere to the following condition: - Make sure not to use 'direct quotations' of participants. This is necessary in order to safeguard the anonymity of participants. If researcher(s) wishes to utilize 'direct quotations' then the relevant participant's informed consent is required.
Period of approval:	2020-07-01 - 2020-12-31

The approval is subject to the researcher abiding by the principles and parameters set out in the application and research proposal in the actual execution of the research. The approval does not imply that the researcher is relieved of any accountability in terms of the Codes of Research Ethics of the University of Pretoria if action is taken beyond the approved proposal. If during the course of the research it becomes apparent that the nature and/or extent of the research deviates significantly from the original proposal, a new application for ethics clearance must be submitted for review.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely

pp **PROF JA NEL**
CHAIR: COMMITTEE FOR RESEARCH ETHICS

APPENDIX D

Approval from Ethics Committee to conduct the research for

Article 3 (refer to Chapter 4)

Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

Approval Certificate (Amended)

27 August 2021

Mrs BL FRost
Department: Marketing Management

Dear Mrs BL Frost

The application for ethical clearance for the research project described below served before this committee on 27 August 2021.

Protocol No:	EMS163/21
Principal researcher:	Mrs BL Frost
Research title:	A marketing perspective on the participation of marathon runners during a prolonged crisis
Student/Staff No:	21065994
Degree:	Doctoral
Supervisor/Promoter:	Prof EA du Preez
Department:	Marketing Management

The decision by the committee is reflected below:

Decision:	Approved
Conditions (if applicable):	
Period of approval:	2021-09-15 to 2022-03-31

Sincerely

pp PROF JA NEL
CHAIR: COMMITTEE FOR RESEARCH ETHICS

Fakulteit Ekonomiese en Bestuurswetenskappe
Lefapha la Disaense tša Ekonomi le Taolo

APPENDIX E

Example of consent to use quotes via Facebook Messenger

(Articles 1 & 2, refer to Chapters 2 & 3)

Example of response from a member of the online Facebook community (contacted via the Facebook Messenger platform) giving consent to use quotes in the findings for qualitative data (Articles 1 & 2, refer to Chapters 2 & 3)

Hello Bianca first of all thank you for the thought and having checked my post. I am grateful and Comrades is a big brand and it means a lot to the Runners heart. I guess every Runner's Dream is to run Comrades and on my Birthday ▆▆▆▆ my wife and kinds had that surprise for me. And really it worked and how I wish I could have kept my Cake frozen to be admiring it everyday but well we had to enjoy it 😊 the same way I enjoyed at my first comrades 😊. It's through support from family and friends one gets which makes the spirt of Comradeship alive. At that moment my family thought I was crazy as I was preparing for it and that I wasn't paying much attention to them but upon getting that best birthday present ever to me meant a lot knowing that everything I did for comrades was approved by family and I had their blessings. It touched my heart and just brought back all my sweet memories of me at comrades. It's story to always tell. In support of your good work of writing you are doing please feel free to use any my picture of which you can feature me and even that of my family because they deserve to be appreciated especially my wife as it was her ideal. I consent to that. If only your work of writing is for a good noble cause. For Comrades Marathon I will support your work. Pls go ahead and let me feature as w   Whatever information you may need, I will be here to help. Thx   and I look forward to that article. My WhatsApp number ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆

Aa

APPENDIX F

Example of letter sent to sports-related organisations requesting permission to
post the link to the survey on their social media platforms
(Article 3, refer to Chapter 4)

Permission Letter

FACTORS INFLUENCING INTENTIONS TO PARTAKE IN VIRTUAL RUNNING EVENTS

House 302 Freesia Street,
Lynnwood Ridge, Pretoria

<div align="right">

Store Owner/Co-owner

Stein Steinbach
Contact number: +27 12 361 3733
Email: info@runawaysport.co.za

</div>

To whom it may concern,

A PhD student, B.L. Frost, from the Department of Marketing Management, at the University of Pretoria, will be undertaking research among runners that have participated in a virtual running event during Covid-19. The aim is to gain insights into factors influencing participation in virtual running events and future intentions to partake in virtual events.

The purpose of this letter is to confirm that permission is granted for the survey link to be posted on our electronic platforms.

The following guidelines will apply:

1. It will be an anonymous survey and no individuals' name will appear on the questionnaire. The answers provided will be treated as strictly confidential and participants cannot be identified based on the answers given.
2. Participates may stop participating at any time without any negative consequences.
3. Participants will be requested to complete the questionnaire as completely and honestly as possible and should not take more than **15 minutes** to complete.
4. The results of the study will be used for academic purposes only and may be published in an academic journal and in a condensed form in popular media. A summary of the findings will be provided upon our request.
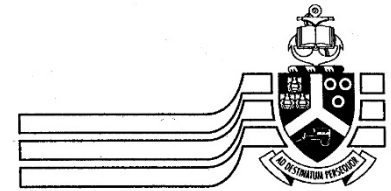
SGW Steinbach

Name

Signature

Co-owner.

Designation

17/08/2021

Date

APPENDIX G

Declaration regarding plagiarism

DEPARTMENT OF MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

University of Pretoria

Declaration Regarding Plagiarism

The Department of Marketing and Communication Management emphasises integrity and ethical behaviour with regard to the preparation of all written assignments.

Although the lecturer will provide you with information regarding reference techniques, as well as ways to avoid plagiarism, you also have a responsibility to fulfil in this regard. Should you at any time feel unsure about the requirements, you must consult the lecturer concerned before submitting an assignment.

You are guilty of plagiarism when you extract information from a book, article, web page or any other information source without acknowledging the source and pretend that it is your own work. This doesn't only apply to cases where you quote verbatim, but also when you present someone else's work in a somewhat amended (paraphrased) format or when you use someone else's arguments or ideas without the necessary acknowledgement. You are also guilty of plagiarism if you copy and paste information <u>directly</u> from an electronic source (e.g., a web site, e-mail message, electronic journal article, or CD ROM), <u>even if you acknowledge the source</u>.

You are not allowed to submit another student's previous work as your own. You are furthermore not allowed to let anyone copy or use your work with the intention of presenting it as his/her own.

Students who are guilty of plagiarism will forfeit all credits for the work concerned. In addition, the matter will be referred to the Committee for Discipline (Students) for a ruling. Plagiarism is considered a serious violation of the University's regulations and may lead to your suspension from the University. The University's policy regarding plagiarism is available on the Internet at *http://upetd.up.ac.za/authors/create/plagiarism/students.htm*.

For the period that you are a student at the Department of Marketing and Communication Management, the following declaration must accompany **all** written work that is submitted for evaluation. No written work will be accepted unless the declaration has been completed and is included in the particular assignment.

I (full names & surname):	Bianca Lizelle Frost
Student number:	21065994

Declare the following:

1. I understand what plagiarism entails and am aware of the University's policy in this regard.

2. I declare that this assignment is my own, original work. Where someone else's work was used (whether from a printed source, the Internet or any other source) due acknowledgement was given and reference was made according to departmental requirements.

3. I did not copy and paste any information <u>directly</u> from an electronic source (e.g., a web page, electronic journal article or CD ROM) into this document.

4. I did not make use of another student's previous work and submitted it as my own.

5. I did not allow and will not allow anyone to copy my work with the intention of presenting it as his/her own work.

BFrost
_____
Signature

25 October 2022
_____
Date