

Trail Running: Exploring South Africa's Serious Leisure Economy

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Abstract

A health-conscious mindset has grown rapidly among South African middle-class consumers. This can be seen by their embrace of sports watches, reward-based programmes, and participation in organised leisure activities such as cycling and running. Within this context, trail running is becoming increasingly popular; however, research on the nature of trail running in South Africa is limited. A theoretical understanding of the relationship that participants have with trail running, specifically the applicability of the serious leisure framework, could provide valuable insights into this emerging market. This study incorporated an exploratory case-study design. Quantitative data was collected using purposive sampling and an online survey to determine if trail runners undertook the activity as leisure careerists or not. The level of seriousness of respondents was measured using the six characteristics of serious leisure as defined in the Serious Leisure Inventory Measure (SLIM). The main findings were that many trail runners meet all six of the characteristics of serious leisure. 'Perseverance' and 'Career' followed by 'Effort' and 'Identity' were the most important factors to the trail runners. Motives of 'Fun' and 'Sense of achievement' were more important than 'Fitness' or 'Social factors', however. 'Sense of achievement' and 'Social' correlated the most strongly with respondents' overall level of seriousness in the sport. Income impacted on motivations, however, with wealthier people more likely to report that they participated for Fun. In terms of gender, women were more likely to report that trail running boosted their self-image. In addition, trail running forms part of the serious leisure economy, as participants are prepared to spend substantial sums of money on related equipment and participation in events. This study provides valuable insights for marketing and design of trail-running events and contributes to the gap in the literature on serious leisure in South Africa.

Keywords: Trail running, serious leisure, serious leisure inventory measure, South Africa

Introduction

Concerns regarding health, wellness and fitness are common among South Africa's growing middle class, in line with international trends (Sweeney, Wilson, Zarrett, Van Horn & Resnicow, 2020). As a result, they have embraced sports watches and reward-based programmes such as Vitality points. Participation in organised sport and leisure activities focusing on physical health, is on the rise. While road running and cycling is well established in South Africa, most notable is the rise in popularity of trail running (Christie, 2016). This is true internationally, with the trail-running market estimated to be one of the fastest growing in the sports and leisure industry (Alexandris, 2016). Consequently, South Africa has seen a

proliferation of new trail-running events in recent years (McKay, McEwan & Baker, 2019). Many of these are destination events, where a key aspect of the appeal is running a race within, or at, a specific destination (such as a well-known nature reserve). Destination trail-running events, therefore, lie at the intersection of the sport, leisure and tourism industries (Donaldson, 2018).

In practice, trail-running events held in scenic or iconic locations attract ‘running tourists’. Although these trail races are small events (due to entry limits) they are akin to festivals, and can grow the local tourism economy and attract future visitors, specifically to small towns and remote areas close to key features such as national parks (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2019; Marumo, Lubbe & Pelsler, 2015; Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2018; Perrin-Malterre, 2018; Rogerson, 2014, 2016). Promoting and growing the trail-running event industry is no easy task, however (Perić & Slavić, 2019). Trail running typically has a much smaller market than road running, due to its non-urban nature and other factors such as the necessity for specialised apparel, the need to limit the number of participants and high race entry fees (which leads to a higher cost of participation when compared to road-running events). This has led to trail running garnering a reputation as an exclusive and elitist activity. High costs, specialised technical equipment, shoes and apparel, alongside the need to commit to extensive, hard, physical training, as well as travel, mean that this unique mixture of tourism and sport only attracts those who are committed to the sport and have considerable disposable income.

On this note, there is limited research on the nature of trail running in South Africa and the characterisation of the local market (McKay et al., 2019). Thus, a theoretical understanding of the relationship participants have with the sport, and their motives for participation, would provide valuable opportunities for the growth of the trail-running tourism industry. Such an understanding will enhance trail-running event management and marketing, enabling the industry to grow. In that regard, this study elected to explore the sector from the perspective of serious leisure, as there is a gap in the literature regarding the applicability of this framework to trail running (Fairer-Wessels, 2013). The serious leisure framework is a descriptive construct of characteristics, and as such it identifies serious participants.

The serious leisure framework was first conceptualised by Stebbins (1982), and further refined over the past three decades (Gould, Moore, McGuire & Stebbins, 2008; Stebbins, 1992, 2007). It describes and characterises a serious and committed relationship between a participant and a chosen leisure activity. Recent research in mountain biking by Moularde and Weaver (2016) found that iconic destination events allowed participants to further their serious leisure careers by engaging with the unique subculture of the sport. The characteristics of serious leisure (see Stebbins, 1992), can also be used to gain an understanding of the motivation behind participation in destination events. Given the specific characteristics of long-distance trail running it could be viewed as a serious leisure activity. This research, therefore, explores if long-distance trail runners meet the characteristics of the serious leisure framework, using the six characteristics of serious leisure, measured with the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (SLIM) (Romero, Iraurgi, Madariaga & Gould, 2020). If it is a serious leisure activity, then it could support travel to destination events. Thus, the study explores the link between SLIM scores and the factors that motivate these runners to invest time, money and effort to participate in destination events. This knowledge will provide valuable insight for the design and management of successful events.

Literature review

Leisure activities are defined as non-work activities that people engage in during their free time, where there is no obligation to participate. Thus, people chose to use their abilities and resources to participate, usually for personal satisfaction reasons (Stebbins, 2007). In terms of

this definition, participation in recreational trail running is a leisure activity¹. Research on long-distance road running has typically focused on the physical impacts (Burr, Drury, Phillips, Ivey, Ku & Warburton, 2012; Holt, Lee, Kim, & Klein, 2014), motives for participation (Kruger & Saayman, 2013; Ogles & Masters, 2003; Ogles, Masters & Richardson, 1995) and the demographic profile of participants (Hoffman & Fogard, 2012; Kotzé & Visser, 2008). The studies that have included demographic and socio-economic status, observed age, gender, education, income and marital status, although typically race/ethnicity is not recorded (David & Lehecka, 2013). Eren (2017) proposes that the nature of modern non-active work leads individuals to seek challenging leisure activities such as long-distance running, in order to express themselves. Consequently, some scholarly work has been undertaken on serious leisure in long-distance running (Fairer-Wessells, 2013; Qiu, Tian, Lin & Zhou, 2020).

The term ‘serious leisure’ was first conceived by Robert Stebbins during his long-term study of leisure activities and the relationships that people have with them. Stebbins (1992:3) defined serious leisure as follows: “The systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling and where ... participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience.” This contrasts with ‘casual leisure’, which is defined as “an immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short lived pleasurable core activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins, 1997:18). On a scale from ‘Casual’ to ‘Serious’, the serious leisure framework defines the characteristics of highly committed individuals. Six distinct characteristics distinguish serious leisure are: (1) Perseverance of participation despite constraints; (2) Committed effort to practise the activity and acquire skills; (3) Advancement through a career, marked by stages of achievement or involvement; (4) A unique ethos and social world (i.e. a subculture); (5) A social identity linked with the activity, which gives participants a sense of belonging; and (6) Durable benefits for participants, including self-esteem and self-image.

In order to operationalise and measure the theoretical framework, Gould et al. (2008) developed the serious leisure inventory and measure (SLIM), in order to test and measure each of these six characteristics, using 54 items. In further work, Gould, Moore, Karlin, Gaede, Walker and Dotterweich (2011) demonstrated acceptable model fit and reliability, using the 54 items in a 18-factor SLIM, which simplified the questionnaire by finding one best performing item per factor. These items form 18 statements used to measure serious leisure in respondents. The 18 factors as they relate to the six characteristics are detailed in Figure 1.

Thus, the serious leisure framework is a descriptive tool used to distinguish the nature of leisure involvement, based on the characteristics of those who seriously engage in a leisure activity. As such, it identifies and describes serious participants. As early as 1980, Altheide and Erdwin (1980) identified the seriousness with which some individuals engage in the leisure activity of running, and noted the associated feelings of self-accomplishment. Shipway and Jones (2007) and Shipway, Holloway and Jones (2012) also applied notions of serious leisure and social identification to long-distance running, and found that the level of social identification that participants had with the activity was linked to many of the serious leisure characteristics, namely the unique ethos of the subculture, committed effort, perseverance of participants, durable benefits and career progression. Thus, a specific running identity is created. Ogles and Masters (2003) suggested that as long-distance running has particularly high potential costs compared to other leisure activities (due to the commitment of months of training) participants are likely to be highly involved. This could also be true for trail running, although this is not yet reported in the literature. By linking serious leisure and sport, various

¹ Official trail races have low prize monies and even podium finishers are considered amateur athletes. Some top achievers, such as South African Ryan Sandes, can run full time due to attracting sponsorships, but none are paid to race.

studies have identified the serious leisure framework as a suitable means for understanding the behaviours of sport enthusiasts, and thereby ‘serious’ sport tourists (Gibson, 2004; Green & Chalip, 1998; Green & Jones, 2005). Green and Jones (2005) found that travel to destination events provides serious leisure participants a means to either construct or confirm a leisure identity; a setting to interact with other likeminded people and celebrate the unique ethos and social identity of the activity. Additionally, it is a way to climb the serious career ladder or signal their career stage to others.



Figure 1: The factors of the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure. (Source: adapted form Gould et al., 2008).

As a result, ‘iconic events’ are notable destination events that have gained status within the subculture of that sport. Iconic events are, therefore, those with great symbolic value, providing participants with opportunities to engage with others who have a shared ethos. Their iconic status may be derived from size, prestige, or uniqueness (Getz & McConnell, 2014). Unlike sport fans, ‘active sport tourists’ are those who travel to participate in their serious leisure activity (Gibson, 2005). Gibson further used theories of involvement to understand the

motivation and travel behaviour of these tourists. Likewise, McGehee, Yoon and Cárdenas (2003) compared highly-involved and medium-involved runners. They found highly-involved runners take more overnight trips to participate in events than medium-involved runners. Highly-involved participants usually spend more money and time on their activities than those who are less involved. Getz and Andersson (2010:472) found that travel and spending habits change “over time to include more specialized equipment and more unique and self-fulfilling experiences”.

Moularde and Weaver (2016) explored mountain biking (MTB) as a serious leisure activity. They found that the career stages of a serious leisure participant can be identified. Importantly, travel to MTB destinations was linked to career development and identity formation. That is, participation in iconic MTB destination events allows participants to further their serious leisure careers and engage with the subculture. In agreement, a study by Getz (2008) proposed that those involved in serious leisure may develop ‘event-travel careers’, taking part in more and more destination events as their involvement in the sport increased. Thus, increased ‘seriousness’ changes the motivating factors of participants, whereby they begin to value opportunities to fulfil higher-order needs. This would include changing travel preferences and patterns, especially willingness to travel long distances to organised events. Getz and Andersson (2010) even claim that an event-specific career ladder, where individuals specifically seek out destination events to develop their serious leisure career, may evolve.

Bosnjak, Brown, Lee, Yu and Sirgy (2016) developed and tested a model of self-expressiveness in sport event tourism, namely the extent to which a participant feels that an activity reflects their personal identity. Their study - of dancers attending a dance festival and skiers engaged in skiing activities - found self-expression is dependent on perceived effort, perceived importance and perceived difficulty/challenge, which together creates potential for self-realisation. In terms of motivations for participation in destination events, a study by Green and Chalip (1998:275) of an American football event found that participants used the event to engage with the community and celebrate their subculture. This allowed them to fulfil the Identification and Unique ethos characteristics of the serious leisure construct. The authors suggested destination events are an “occasion to celebrate a subculture shared with others from distant places”. On this basis, they found the location of the event may be of less importance. Thus, studies have shown that sport events allow serious leisure sports people to fulfil several of the serious leisure characteristics. Many sport events sustain at least three characteristics of serious leisure, namely: (1) Perseverance despite constraints; (2) Committed effort to practise and acquire skills; and (3) Advancement through a career, with stages of achievement or involvement. In terms of behaviour, this is measured in terms of frequency of participation, monetary investment, distance travelled to events, purchase of equipment and gear, and memberships of sport clubs.

In terms of motives, a number of studies have considered involvement and motivation in runners (Bond & Batey, 2005; Masters & Ogles, 1995; Ogles & Masters, 2003). David and Lehecka (2014) found that long-distance running is less competitive when compared to other endurance sports, as competition is not the main reason for engagement in the activity. In line with this, Ogles and Masters (2003) found personal reasons (personal achievement, self-esteem and the opportunity to challenge oneself) dominate over social or competitive reasons. Fitness and physical health benefits of exercise are another key motive, particularly for those new to the sport. A study on the motives of Comrades Marathon runners found that achievement, commitment and socialisation were the key motives for participation (Kruger & Saayman, 2013). Further, they concluded that the motives for participation differ per event, and that different groups of participants have different motives. Therefore, participants should not be treated as a homogenous group for the purposes of event design and marketing. Despite this

Funk, Toohey and Bruun (2007) found that gender and cultural background did not affect the level of involvement of participants in organised marathon events.

Methodology

As the nature of long-distance trail running and participant motives is a new area of study for South Africa, it was appropriate to make use of the case study method within an exploratory study (Saunders & Lewis, 2012; Zikmund, Babin, Carr & Griffin, 2013). In terms of shortcomings, this design cannot offer theory confirmation (Gerring, 2004). The study used quantitative methodology. As such, the generalisation of results should be interpreted with caution, based on the sample size and the sampling method employed. The serious leisure inventory and measure has operationalised the theory of serious leisure and so was used here (Stebbins, 1992; Gould et al., 2008).

For the purposes of this study, the population were individuals who self-declared themselves as long-distance trail runners living in South Africa. The population is estimated at between 5 000 and 10 000 individuals. The study elected to focus on long-distance trail running, defined as 'over 21 km' (see McKay et al., 2019), due to the level of fitness and training required to complete such a distance off-road, which means that participants are less likely to be casual runners. Purposive sampling was used, with an online survey posted to Facebook community groups dedicated to long-distance trail running in South Africa ('South Africa Trail Running'² and '#TeamTrail #LoveTrail'³). Together they have roughly 3 000 members. These online communities are typically made up of actively engaged individuals who have self-selected as interested in trail running. In order to mitigate the risk of a homogenous sample (of only active Facebook users), respondents were asked to share the online survey with their other long-distance trail-running friends and networks. The total number of respondents was 118. Note that targeting online communities may have resulted in response bias. Those with lower-end computer equipment and low income are less likely to have participated (Blair & Czaja, 2005).

The research questions were as follows: (1) Can long-distance trail running be deemed a serious leisure activity? To this end, level of experience, years of involvement and event participation were used to establish if these participants undertook the activity as serious leisure, alongside the use of the SLIM framework; and (2) What are the key motives for participation in trail-running destination events? Motives were explored along with travel behaviour and participation in destination events. The questionnaire comprised of sections covering the following: (1) Characterisation of a respondent's relationship with long-distance trail running, and their spending behaviour related to long-distance trail running and events; (2) Characterisation of the respondent according to the factors of SLIM (Gould et al., 2008); and (3) Motivations for participation in events.

The level of seriousness of respondents was measured with questions based on the six characteristics of serious leisure as defined in the 18-Factor SLIM (Gould et al., 2011; Gould et al., 2008). Cronbach's alpha was used in order to assess the reliability of the SLIM measurement instrument for the responses, as well as the SLIM's measures for the *Career* and *Benefits* characteristics, as these were measured based on more than one item. The 18 items are given in

² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/SATrailRunning/>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/teamtrail.lovetrail/>



Table 1. In line with (Gould et al.) 2011 and Gould et al. (2008) each statement was assessed using a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = ‘Do not agree’ and 7 = ‘Totally agree’. Using a five-point Likert scale where 1 = ‘Not a contributing factor’ and 5 = ‘A major factor’, the questionnaire also asked questions relating to *Fun, Fitness, Sense of Achievement* and *Social* (time spent with the trail-running community). There were two open-ended questions. Respondent answers were coded based on the key themes that emerged with the number of occurrences of each theme determined.

Table 1: Best performing factor items for the serious leisure inventory and measure (SLIM).

Serious leisure characteristic	Serious leisure factor	Statement
1. Perseverance	Perseverance	I overcome difficulties in trail running by being persistent.
2. Personal effort	Effort	I try hard to become more competent in trail running.
3. Career	Career progress	I feel that I have made progress in trail running.
	Career contingencies	There are defining moments within trail running that have significantly shaped my involvement in it.
4. Identity	Identity with pursuit	Others that know me understand that trail running is a part of who I am.
5. Unique ethos	Unique ethos	I share many of my trail-running group’s ideals.
6. Benefits	Self-enrichment	Trail running has added richness to my life.
	Self-actualization	I make full use of my talent when trail running.
	Self-expression abilities	I demonstrate my skills and abilities when trail running.
	Self-expression individual	Trail running for me is an expression of myself.
	Self-image	Trail running has improved how I think about myself.
	Self-gratification satisfaction	Trail running provides me with a profound sense of satisfaction.
	Self-gratification enjoyment	Trail running is enjoyable to me.
	Re-creation	I feel revitalized after trail running time.
	Financial return	I have received financial payment as a result of my trail-running efforts.
	Group attraction	I enjoy interacting with other trail-running enthusiasts.
Group accomplishments	I feel important when I am a part of my trail-running group’s accomplishments.	
Group maintenance	It is important that I perform duties which unify my trail-running group.	

(Source: adapted from Gould et al., 2011:338).

Results

Table 2 details the long-distance trail-running behaviour of the respondents. Most rated their level of experience as either intermediate (46.6%) or experienced (33.1%). Most have been involved in the sport for three to four years (30.5%). Respondents spend a lot of time engaging in the activity, with 28.0% estimating their trail running mileage for the last year as greater than 700km. In terms of event behaviour, the majority (27%) took part in more than nine race events annually, with 46% travelling further than 100 km to a race event once or twice a year. For iconic destination events such as the Otter African Trail Run, Skyrun, Ultra Trail Cape Town, The Hobbit, Rhodes Run and PUFfer, 38% had taken part in at least one of them, while 15% had taken part in two or more different events (see McKay et al., 2019). Most (70%) took part in events with friends, a partner or family, indicating that many consider the sport a social

experience, although there were times when they undertook the event alone (see Figure 2). This social aspect was well summed up by Respondent 28: “*I get as a kick from running with a group of like-minded trailies in the Magalies mountains*”. On this basis many take their sport-leisure activity seriously, supporting the SLIM results, which will now be discussed.

A Cronbach’s alpha result of 0.912 was found for the overall SLIM instrument, indicating excellent reliability. The serious leisure characteristic of *Benefits* was measured through 12 factors, and had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.877, indicating good reliability. The characteristic of *Career* gave a low alpha of 0.486, based on career progress and career contingencies. The responses indicate high levels of agreement with the six characteristics of serious leisure (see Table 3). *Perseverance* and *Career* were the two characteristics that were the most strongly agreed with, followed by *Effort* and *Identity*. The characteristics of serious leisure with the lowest levels of agreement, although still higher than neutral (4.0), were *Unique Ethos* and *Benefits*. In terms of *Benefits*, respondents strongly agreed that trail running provides self-gratification in terms of enjoyment, satisfaction, re-creation and self-enrichment. As the respondents did not receive *Benefits* in terms of Financial return, it can be assumed that their leisure activity cost them money, an additional indicator of seriousness.

Table 2: Trail-running respondent responses (adapted from McKay et al, 2019).

Trail-running behaviour		n	Percentage (rounded)
Undertaken a 21 km or more race in the past year	Yes	86	73%
	No	32	27%
How do you rate your experience	Beginner	14	12%
	Intermediate	55	47%
	Experienced	39	33%
	Advanced	10	9%
Number of years as a trail runner	Less than one year	10	9%
	One to two years	26	22%
	Three to four years	36	31%
	Five to six years	24	20%
	Seven to eight years	10	9%
	More than nine years	12	10%
No of trail-running races entered each year (mean)	None	1	1%
	One or two	12	10%
	Three or four	30	25%
	Five or six	29	25%
	Seven or eight	14	13%
	Nine or more	32	27%
No of times per times you travel 100km ≥ to run a trail race	Zero	11	9%
	Once or twice	54	46%
	Three or four times	32	27%
	Five or six times	13	11%
	More than seven	8	7%



Total trail-running distance per annum (roughly)	Under 100 km	16	14%
	100 – 299 km	28	24%
	300 – 499 km	27	23%
	500 – 699 km	14	12%
	More than 700 km	33	28%

Table 3: Respondent results for the Serious Leisure Inventory Measure.

Serious Leisure characteristic Factor								Mean	Standard deviation
	1 – Do not agree	2 – Mostly disagree	3 – Partially disagree	4 – Neutral	5 – Partially agree	6 – Mostly agree	7 – Totally agree		
1. Perseverance Perseverance	0.0%	0.8%	1.7%	7.6%	22.0%	22.0%	45.8%	6.0	1.1
2. Personal effort Effort	0.0%	2.5%	9.3%	6.8%	33.9%	16.9%	30.5%	5.4	1.4
3. Career Career progress								5.7	1.0
Career contingencies	0.0%	1.7%	3.4%	5.9%	24.6%	22.0%	42.4%	5.9	1.2
4. Identity Identity with pursuit	0.0%	0.8%	7.6%	11.9%	23.7%	24.6%	31.4%	5.6	1.3
5. Unique ethos Unique ethos	0.8%	3.4%	8.5%	16.1%	16.9%	19.5%	34.7%	5.4	1.5
6. Benefits Self-enrichment	5.9%	5.1%	11.0%	22.9%	17.8%	13.6%	23.7%	4.8	1.8
Self-actualization								5.2	0.9
Self-expression abilities	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%	7.6%	13.6%	15.3%	61.9%	6.3	1.1
Self-expression individual	0.8%	5.9%	5.9%	22.9%	25.4%	18.6%	20.3%	5.0	1.5
Self-image	0.8%	3.4%	5.9%	24.6%	30.5%	16.9%	17.8%	5.0	1.3
Self-gratification satisfaction	0.8%	5.9%	1.7%	21.2%	18.6%	17.8%	33.9%	5.4	1.5
Self-gratification enjoyment	0.8%	5.1%	1.7%	12.7%	16.9%	22.9%	39.8%	5.7	1.5
Recreation	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%	4.2%	11.9%	23.7%	58.5%	6.3	1.0
Financial return	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%	5.1%	20.3%	73.7%	6.7	0.6
Group attraction	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	9.3%	2.5%	18.6%	69.5%	6.5	0.9
Group accomplishments	77.1%	5.1%	6.8%	1.7%	2.5%	2.5%	4.2%	1.7	1.6
Group maintenance	1.7%	1.7%	5.9%	13.6%	20.3%	21.2%	35.6%	5.6	1.5
	11.0%	5.9%	14.4%	21.2%	16.9%	13.6%	16.9%	4.4	1.9
	19.5%	8.5%	16.1%	18.6%	14.4%	11.9%	11.0%	3.8	2.0

(Source: Author's own).

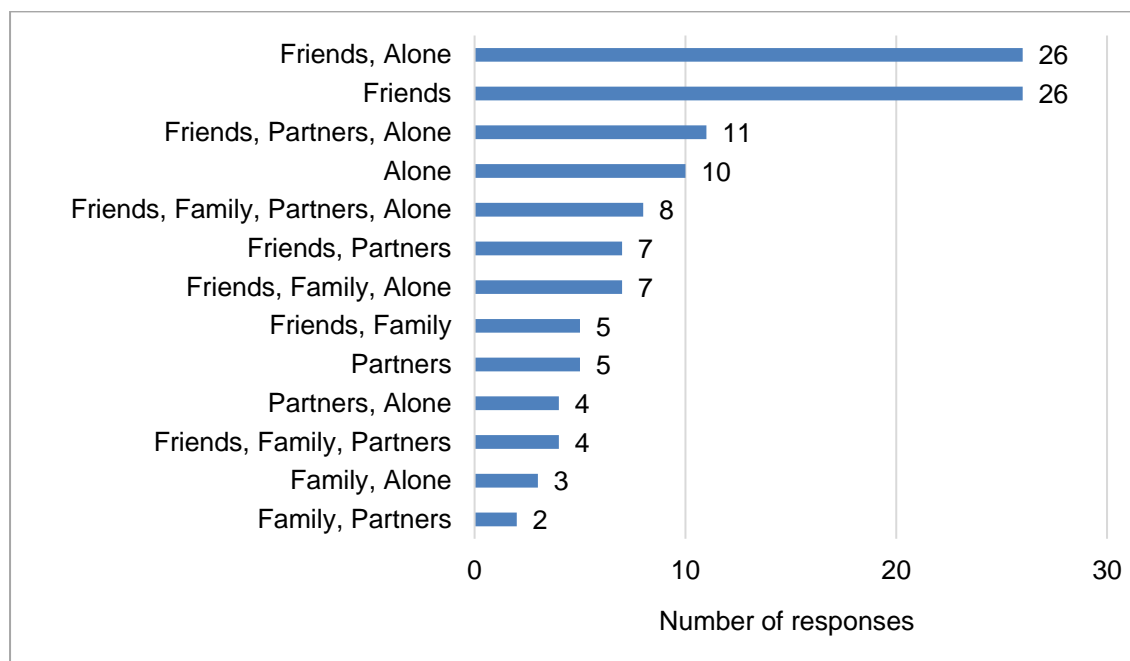


Figure 2: Participation behaviour of respondents

The Kruskal-Wallis H test showed no statistically significant difference⁴ in the overall serious leisure score between age (distribution = 0.421, median = 0.742), level of education (distribution = 0.052, median = 0.105) and income (distribution = 0.136, median = 0.078). There was also no statistically significant difference in the overall serious leisure score for years of involvement (distribution = 0.442, median = 0.323) or number of events in the last year (distribution = 0.285, median = 0.582). Regarding spending patterns, there was no statistically significant difference in the Kruskal-Wallis test in terms of the spend between different ages (distribution = 0.901, median = 0.722) and levels of education (distribution = 0.134, median = 0.412). There was, however, a statistically significant difference in the amount different income groups were willing to spend on a destination event (distribution = 0.050*, median = 0.042*). In terms of differences regarding gender, the results of an independent t-test found little statistically significant difference in between male and female respondents, except for *self-image*, where females (mean 5.9, standard deviation 1.3) derived a significantly greater benefit from self-image than males (mean 5.3, standard deviation 1.6) based on $p = 0.03$ at 95% significance. There was a statistically significant difference in the distribution (0.050*) and median (0.042*) based on events that required travel greater than 100 km. The results of the Kendall's Tau-b test showed no correlation between the serious leisure score and spend ceiling, although there was a weak negative correlation of -0.17 at $p = 0.04$ between those motivated by *Achievement* and spend ceiling. Thus, all income groups are concerned about affordability.

This is supported by the qualitative comments. Respondents noted that entry fees are expensive. For example, Respondent 56 stated, “*Trail running becomes very expensive. Luckily my husband is very supportive and help[s] me with the race entries*”, and Respondent 96 stated, “*Costs have risen astronomically so I don't enter as many as I used to*”. Some did acknowledge why costs were high: “*Some races are really expensive. I can see why – the level of organisation, health and safety etc is costly. I would love to do more but can't spend more than my monthly savings on entries*” (Respondent 42). Others noted sponsorship was an issue: “*Lack of suitable sponsorship is a contributing factor for the high entry fees – and the cause of my*

⁴ significance $p > 0.05$

not entering "away" Trails" (Respondent 105). There was also a notion that while it was costly, some race organisers may be price gouging: "Trail running is a limited field event, in exotic locations, sometimes dangerously exposed to the elements. It embraces adventure and with this comes the need for safety services (which is not inexpensive). Costs are getting out of hand. It is a sport which needs so little. The costs are creating a back-lash with the ethos of the sport being undermined as organisers start to fleece the community" (Respondent 58).

In terms of the motives for participation, Table 4 illustrates that respondents indicated that *Fun* and *Sense of achievement* were the most important, as opposed to the factors of *Fitness* and *Social* (spending time with the trail-running community). The Kruskal-Wallis H test (significance $p > 0.05$) revealed a statistically significant difference in the motive factor of *Fun* for different income groups (0.048*⁵). That is, wealthier people were more likely to enter to experience *Fun*. There was no statistically significant difference between genders, ages or education levels.

Table 4: Respondents' motivations for involvement in long-distance trail running.

Motives for participation	1	2	3	4	5
	Unimportant				Significant
Fitness	0.8%	0.8%	20.3%	45.8%	32.2%
Fun	0.0%	0.0%	4.2%	27.1%	68.6%
Social ⁶	5.9%	10.2%	30.5%	28.0%	25.4%
Sense of achievement	0.0%	2.5%	11.0%	28.0%	58.5%

Table 5 presents the Spearman's rho and significance for the motive variables. The findings show *Sense of achievement* and *Social* (time with the community) are correlated with respondents' overall level of seriousness in the sport, while *Fun* and *Fitness* were weakly correlated with seriousness.

Table 5: Spearman's rank correlation between motives and serious leisure score

Motivations for participation	Serious leisure score	
	Spearman's rho	Significance
Fitness	0.209	0.023
Fun	0.226	0.014
Social	0.396	0.00
Sense of achievement	0.443	0.00

Of those who repeatedly entered one or more of the six iconic destination events, their ranked reasons for doing so were: (1) The (scenic) route: *The route is magnificent, I love nature, this race delivers on all aspects of it. However, it is a very tough route*" (Respondent 116) and *"It's peaceful and just so much nicer than road running and sometimes seeing some animals is a bonus"* (Respondent 59). Respondent 41 specified *"scenery, beauty, accessing remote places"* as their reason to return; likewise, Respondent 58 ascribed the *"limited access, beautiful location"*; (2) Good event management: *"The Otter and UTCT are both well organised events on beautiful trails"* (Respondent 14). Respondent 2 gave the reason of *"outstanding event management"*, and Respondent 42 mentioned *"well organised, great scenery, great vibe"*; (3) The challenge/sense of achievement: *"The challenge of doing it"* (Respondent 63). Respondent 22 stated, *"Enjoyed the challenge the first time"* while Respondent 67 returned to events where

⁵ * Significant at 0.05

⁶ Spending time with family, the trail-running community, or friends.

they had “*enjoyed the challenge and event*”; (4) The community atmosphere: “*The community and atmosphere! Enjoyed the challenge the first time*” (Respondent 22) and (5) To try and improve their completion time: “*Challenging my own times*” (Respondent 108) and Respondent 74 returned, “*To better my previous time*”.

Discussion

Firstly, many long-distance trail runners in South Africa meet all six of the characteristics of serious leisure as defined by Stebbins (1992). The characteristics with the strongest agreement were: *Perseverance* and *Career*. This was consistent with surfing and surf travel behaviours (see Barbieri & Sotomayor, 2013). In terms of the 12 factors that made up the characteristic of *Benefits*, the strongest agreement was with *Self-gratification* (enjoyment) and *Re-creation*, but very low agreement with *Financial return*. Barbieri and Sotomayor (2013) also found that surfers had the strongest agreement with *Self-gratification* (enjoyment) and did not receive *Benefits* in terms of *Financial return*. In contrast, Fairer-Wessels (2013) found the strongest agreement with *Identity*, as well as with *Unique ethos* (related to the subculture influence in social identity) in her study of Comrades Marathon runners. The characteristics of serious leisure with the lowest levels of agreement were *Unique Ethos* and *Benefits*. Robinson, Patterson and Axelson (2014) found that runners who trained in a group (a running club) identified more with the *Unique ethos* of the subculture, so the lack of trail-running clubs in South Africa may be the reason for low levels of *Unique ethos* amongst trail runners. It is a far more individualistic activity. Thus, comparing the results with literature, it is apparent that serious leisure relationships differ, based on the nature of the activity. Team sports for example, showed differences in serious leisure factors. Dong, Zhang, Choe and Pugh (2013) for example, found that *Self-actualisation* was a key factor in rugby participation.

Secondly, trail running forms part of the serious leisure economy, as runners are prepared to spend substantial sums of money on related equipment and events (see McKay et al, 2019). Given that serious participants invest more time, money and effort on participation in iconic destination events, event organisers should design events to attract more of them. Participants noted that they were attracted to events for the event-specific event apparel (T-shirts), meals, accommodation, availability of emergency medical services, good event management; a community atmosphere that allows engagement with the subculture, and a challenging route. The findings hold important implications for event organisation and marketing, as many participants enter events repeatedly due to the destination itself, for the natural beauty, scenery or remoteness, an indication of a career-ladder with respect to these events. This is in line with Halpenny and Kulczycki (2016) who looked at return participation to a small-scale running event in a national park. Crucially they found that place attachment was a significant predictor for return participation, an important aspect for South African locations who wish to use destination sports events to build their tourism economy. Travelling to participate in serious leisure activities is regarded as serious sport tourism by Gibson (2005). This study confirms this with only 9.3% of respondents not travelling more than 100 km to a trail race. It can be concluded that many take their sport seriously and will regularly travel to iconic destination events. This is, in part, due to the desire to engage with the subculture and be part of the trail-running community atmosphere. It is similar to what Alexandris (2016) and Moularde and Weaver (2016) found with distance runners who travelled to events to immerse themselves in the subculture, arguing that the very nature of the event itself helped to create a distance runner identity.

Thirdly, there were no differences in the overall serious leisure scores, or individual characteristics between age groups, education level or income. This is in agreement with the work of Liu, Bradley and Burk (2016), who that found that level of seriousness of roller derby

(a team sport played on roller skates - see Mabe, 2007) did not vary with age, race or education level. Liu et al. (2016) did, however, find that level of serious leisure varied with annual income. To a small degree this may be true for this study, but a common theme was affordability concerns. Thus, event entrance costs are a factor in South African trail running. In terms of gender, women felt a stronger agreement with the serious leisure benefit of *Self-image*. This is consistent with other studies of female runners which found running enhanced self-esteem, due to improvements of the physical self, achievements and generating a sense of competence (Bond & Batey, 2005; Giorgi & Boudreau, 2010). The study did identify some nuanced differences between men and women.

Fourthly, the study found *Fun* and *Sense of achievement* to be crucial, as opposed to *Fitness* and *Social* (spending time with the trail-running community). This is different to rugby where participation *Fun* (the love of rugby) and *social* factors (making friends) were both key motives (Dong et al., 2013). Also, in a study of women climbers, Dilley and Scraton (2010) found social relationships to be a significant motive for participation. But Ogles and Masters (2003) found personal reasons, such as *Sense of achievement* (linked to self-esteem), rather than social reasons, as a common motive for marathon runners. While this study found no gender differences in motivation regarding *Fitness*, the result is in disagreement with Rouse, Ansdell, Lucas and Pritchard (2011), who found that for female ultra-runners the highest overall motivation was physical health (Shipway & Jones, 2007).

Future research focusing on novice or newly engaged participants, to identify their motives for participation, could provide valuable knowledge on how events could grow in terms of the number of participants in the sport and expand into new locations. Much more in-depth investigations into the experiences of trail runners in terms of demographics, specifically the experiences of women, may also tease out nuances in terms of the market for this kind of sporting activity.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore and understand the nature of the trail running industry and the relationship that participants have with trail running. The findings show that the activity fits the serious leisure framework, with high levels of agreement with the six characteristics of serious leisure. *Fun* and *Sense of achievement* were the most important. There was a correlation between *Sense of achievement* and *Social* and overall level of seriousness. The findings offer valuable insights for event design, namely that destination sports events should strive for runners to have a fun and enjoyable experience but also have a challenging route to generate a sense of achievement. As many runners are committed to their sport, in the context of South Africa's need to grow domestic tourism travel, hosting destination trail-running events has the potential to make an economic contribution towards small 'off-the-beaten-track' towns and rural areas. But sponsors are needed to ensure economic viability, that is, South African runners are cost sensitive. Thus, high entry costs may lead to participants entering fewer events or undertaking self-guided and supported trail-running activities. Therefore, there is a tension between covering costs and affordability. Event organisers need to ensure they do not price themselves out of the market.

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Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to French Geography and History teacher, Samuel Paty who was brutally beheaded for taking a stand for academic freedom. May your sacrifice not be in vain.

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