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Exploring endurance running as an extraordinary consumption experience

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# The sellable self: Exploring endurance running as an extraordinary consumption experience

CARYS EGAN-WYER | DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION



## The sellable self: Exploring endurance running as an extraordinary consumption experience



In this thesis, I critically explore the ways in which people consume extraordinary experiences and what this can tell us about contemporary society. My findings question the idea that extraordinary experiences are an escape from the demands of everyday life. I show instead that social (especially neoliberal) discourses discipline endurance runners and shape the ways in which they understand and account for their extraordinary experiences.

As a research context for this qualitative study, I chose endurance running, which includes triathlon, obstacle adventure racing and ultra-distance running. Endurance running is an extreme but popular experience in contemporary consumer culture. If we don't consume

branded endurance running events, such as Ironman or Tough Mudder, ourselves, we might have sponsored a colleague or friend to run up Mont Blanc or across the Sahara desert. Few of us can have escaped the sight of people pounding the pavements or running laps in the local park, building up their stamina to compete in the increasing number of endurance running events that now take place worldwide. In this thesis, I use vocabularies of motive and Foucault's theory of governmentality to critically examine the ways in which endurance runners talk about running

A critical perspective allows us to see beyond their glossy surface of extraordinary experiences. It allows us to see beyond the romantic idea that people consume extraordinary experiences in order to escape the demands of everyday life; that extraordinary experiences are spaces of freedom. A critical perspective reveals extraordinary experiences to be spaces of discipline and productivity as well as freedom and escape and it allows us to see that neoliberal discourses influence extraordinary experiences, just as they influence other areas of social life. They influence how and why we take part in extraordinary experiences, how we talk about them and how we use those experiences to sell ourselves. We might understand extraordinary experiences as freedom, but we also feel compelled to take part in them. We might describe them as spaces where we are free from expectations, but we also quantify, objectify, and brand them so that they become productive and useful. We might think that extraordinary experiences are untouched by the competitive nature of contemporary consumer culture but somehow the urge to compete infiltrates, even there.



**SCHOOL OF  
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# The Sellable Self

Exploring endurance running as an  
extraordinary consumption experience

Carys Egan-Wyer



**LUND**  
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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*Faculty opponent*  
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# The Sellable Self

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*For everyone who has ever asked,  
“why on earth am I doing this?”*





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(Pietsch, 2015, np)

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The kinds of political analysis presented in this volume are not liable or designed to inspire and guide new political movements, transform the current agendas of political debate, or generate new plans for organization of societies. Their claim would be, at most, to help political thought to grasp certain present realities, thus perhaps providing a more informed basis for practical choice and imagination. But this would already be more than a modest service.

(Gordon, 1991, p.46)



# 1 Introduction

Green grass. Soft green grass. Mmm, looks like a great place for a short nap. Maybe if I just get a little closer.... Suddenly I realized I wasn't looking at green grass – I was falling headfirst into it on the side of a gravel road. I started gasping for air as my arms flew out, struggling to stop my body from propelling forward. I steadied myself with my poles, straightened my body, and spun around in an uncoordinated pirouette, trying to get a grasp on my surroundings. Where am I and how did I get here? It was the middle of the night and I was confused and alone. I didn't recognize the street I was standing on. Was I even on course? How long had I been 'out'? I paused and looked up at silhouette of the 3000 m peaks that surrounded me and wondered which one I had just descended. I had no clue.

I woke up an hour and ten minutes later shaking uncontrollably from the cold. I don't think it was actually cold, but I had obviously caught a major chill from running without pants on. My face was so swollen it was hard to see. [...] I shuffled on, red-faced from a creeping fever and short of breath until I reached Rifugio Cuney.

At the final stop before the descent to Oyace, I sat at a wooden table inside the bivouac and forced myself to eat a plate of pasta. Three bites. Two deep breaths. Thirty seconds of crying while resting my head on the table. Two more bites. One more deep breath. I was completely and utterly pathetic. The hosts warned me I had a fever and told me to rest, but I just wanted to push on. Actually I wanted to quit, but I knew I couldn't, so I just wanted it to be over – fast.

(Case, 2016)

You would be forgiven for imagining that Stephanie Case is a refugee fleeing for her life from some war-torn country, or perhaps an escaped prisoner, running desperately to freedom. You would be wrong though. The excerpts above are from Stephanie's blog, *Ultra Runner Girl*, where she describes her hobby: endurance running. In this book, we will explore why Stephanie and millions of ordinary people (OutdoorFoundation, 2019) regularly train for and take part in endurance running and what this phenomenon can tell us about the consumption of extraordinary experiences in contemporary consumer culture.

Ultra-distance runners torture themselves by running unbelievable distances (that typically range from 50 to 350 kilometres, but may be up to 1600 kilometres) in inhospitable locations, such as the Alps, the Sahara desert or the Arctic. The specific rules may vary but it is not uncommon for ultra-distance runners to run day and night for several days, taking only short rest breaks, while carrying all their equipment and food. There are also timed ultra-distance events in which people run as many laps of a fixed track as they can in a specified time period—from six hours to six days—while resisting the body’s need for sleep (UltraRunning, 2012).

Triathletes combine swimming and cycling with running to increase the challenge and the duration of the endurance events (Steinberg, 2011). Triathlons can range in intensity depending on the distance covered in each leg of the race—swim, bike, run. The most famous is the Ironman distance, in which participants swim 3.86 kilometres, bike 180.25 kilometres and then run 42.2 kilometres without a break, in under 17 hours. In the triple deca ultratriathlon participants start and finish an Ironman a day for 30 days. A total of 114 kilometres of swimming, 5,400 kilometres of cycling and 1,260 kilometres of running (Murphy, 2013).

In the relatively new sport of obstacle course racing (OCR), participants endure torturous obstacles that might involve plunging into icy water, dragging themselves through waist-deep mud, or crawling through burning tyres. “Electroshock therapy” is the final and perhaps most infamous obstacle in the Tough Mudder obstacle course races. In it, “mudders” must run through a field of exposed 10,000 volt live wires, falling on each other and writhing on the muddy ground as the electricity pulses through their bodies.

Obstacle course racing (OCR) is one of the fastest growing leisure activities in the world (Weir, 2011). Over eight million people across five continents have finished races offered by two of the best-known OCR brands (Coons, 2018; Dern, 2018). Ultra-distance running, and triathlon are experiencing similar booms in popularity with a proliferation in the number of experiences offered, as well as the number of participants (Cox, 2018; Finn, 2018). “The number of ultramarathons has increased 1,000% over the last decade” (Finn, 2018, np). The number of people consuming other kinds of extraordinary experience also seems to have increased in recent years, as evidenced by several high-profile stories of overcrowding on the peaks of Everest, the world’s highest mountain (Bogage, 2019; Wilson, 2019).

Extraordinary endurance running experiences sometimes last for days on end and the participants can expect to suffer fever, hallucinations, diarrhoea, incontinence, vomiting and other symptoms of bodily exhaustion and sleep deprivation. Some endurance running experiences, such as marathons, seem less extreme in comparison but still typically require participants to reshape their daily lives for extended periods of time in order to prepare their bodies for the experiences. Endurance running influences what and when people eat, how they commute, what they spend their money on, where they spend their spare time and with whom. There is no apparent need for individuals to endure this kind of suffering in contemporary Western society with all its advantages. Nevertheless, ordinary people all over the world<sup>1</sup> regularly train for and pay to take part in extraordinary and expensive endurance running experiences. We live in an age of home delivery and online shopping in which we are accustomed to seeing people seek convenience and comfort as much as possible. But we also see more and more people signing up for extraordinary consumption experiences and all that goes with them, including intense and painful training, sacrifice of free time, considerable equipment cost, travel expenses and entrance fees, as well as great risk of injury.

For the vast majority of consumers today, endurance running is not a profession; there is no apparent obligation for them to take part. There are heavy sacrifices involved for those who do take part, which include time and money spent training and participating as well as the physical toll on the body of repeated races. Their families and friends often make sacrifices too, travelling long distances to serve as support crew and sharing the financial burden. And while a moderate amount of running is beneficial to health and longevity (Morris et al., 1953), emerging data suggests that the excessive training undertaken for extreme endurance events can have long-term, detrimental effects on heart health (O’Keefe et al., 2012). Studies indicate that a considerable proportion of endurance runners would not stop running even if they knew, with absolute certainty, that it was damaging their health (Hoffman & Krishnan, 2014). So health is not the full story. Can people really think that this pain and suffering is fun? Millions of people freely choose—and pay—to experience the pain, sacrifices and indignities of endurance running. This

---

<sup>1</sup> Ironman, for example, is a global phenomenon. In the twelve month period after writing there will be at least one Ironman event in South Africa, Chile, Dubai, Philippines, Argentina, Taiwan, Mexico, Puerto Rico, China, Malaysia, Peru, Brazil, Vietnam, Japan, Ecuador, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Bahrain; 33 in Australia and New Zealand, and a further 88 in Europe (World Triathlon Corporation, 2016).

strikes me as mysterious. It feels instinctively paradoxical. Why do people choose to suffer in this way?

This question has guided my research for the last seven years. To understand how the consumption of extraordinary experiences in contemporary consumer culture might be better understood, I began by investigating the popularity of endurance running. I immersed myself in the sport and its culture. I read the books that endurance runners read, joined the online groups that they belong to and attended numerous endurance running events, as a spectator, a volunteer and even as a runner. I also listened to endurance runners and event organisers talking about endurance running and asked them to keep consumption diaries. What perplexed me was that popular discourses about endurance running only seem to tell one side of the story, as did academic accounts of the consumption of extraordinary experiences. Both the popular discourse and the academic literature focus overwhelmingly on the freedom and escape that extraordinary experiences like endurance running offer to consumers but make little or no mention of the control and discipline involved. While endurance running can certainly be experienced as liberating, that appears to be only one side of the story. Something else is going on here.



Ultra-distance races may be up to 1600 kilometres in length and often take place in inhospitable locations, such as the Alps, the Sahara desert or the Arctic.  
Image by David Mark from Pixabay





**Triathlons combine swimming and cycling with running extreme distances**  
Image by HeungSoon from Pixabay



**OCR participants endure torturous obstacles that involve plunging into icy water, dragging themselves through waist-deep mud, or crawling through burning tyres.**  
Image by Lou Blazquez from Pixabay

## A brief history of endurance running

Endurance running has a long history as a profession and as a sport. The Incas used a complicated network of highly-trained runners for communication purposes (Gotaas, 2009) while there is evidence that the ancient Greeks and Romans also trained young men in running to hone them for battle (Guttman, 1978). Between wars, physical contests such as those seen at the ancient Olympic games encouraged warriors to keep up their skill levels (Guttman, 1978). From then until the 1970s, endurance running in the affluent West was largely the preserve of athletes who participated in competitions—such as Olympic marathons. While running long distances has remained a necessary means of transport and communication in places and times where other facilities were not available, people did not generally choose to run for amusement, entertainment or for health reasons. They ran to get places, to win races and to set records. This did not really change until the second half of the 20th century.

It seems self-evident today that exercise is good for your health but the link between physical exercise and health was not reported scientifically until the 1950s when Morris et al. (1953) conducted a study to compare heart attack rates among people in different occupations. They discovered a link between a sedentary work life and various heart conditions and recommended vigorous exercise, such as swimming or playing football to improve heart health and improve longevity. A little over a decade later, doctors in New Zealand observed positive effects of running on heart health and weight problems among heart attack patients (Gotaas, 2009). Thus, the idea of running for health took off. By the 1980s, the idea had spread to the USA and Europe and running was on its way to becoming a global trend (Gotaas, 2009). It is during this period that we start to see endurance running taking on a new shape. Even if motivation for running remained health-related for many people, we saw the emergence of the annual London marathons and the massive growth in popularity of other longer-established endurance running events such as Marathon des Sables (MDS, 2018). Running became cool and celebrities, and even politicians, were regularly photographed on their daily runs. Endurance running began to be something that people did because they wanted to, not just because they ought to.





### Celebrities and politicians jogging

Left to right:

- (1) **US President Jimmy Carter jogging in 1978.** Courtesy of Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.
- (2) **Madonna jogging with entourage on tour in Italy.** Courtesy of Capital Pictures.
- (3) **US President Clinton and President Kim Young-Sam of the Federal Republic of Korea jogging around the White House track in 1993.** Courtesy of William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

Endurance running today takes a number of different, complicated and often more extreme forms than it did in the 1980s. And it is a hugely popular consumption experience all over the world, which people often spend a great deal of money in order to consume. To enter the well-known and popular city marathons, such as London, Berlin and Boston, individuals typically fundraise between £2,000 and €5,000, making up any shortfall from their own pockets. Only a handful of the fastest competitors have a chance at winning any prize money. Taking part in an obstacle course race is typically cheaper; entry to a Tough Mudder is around £100<sup>2</sup> GBP and those who complete the course with its torturous obstacles are rewarded with an orange sweatband and a plastic cup of beer. The various organisers of triathlons and ultra runs barely offer anything that would appear more enticing. “All you get for winning an ultra is the same belt buckle as the guy who comes in last” (McDougall, 2009, p.86), and the entry fees run from several hundred to several thousand pounds, depending on the location and the type of support provided. And then there is the cost of the gear required to take part. Triathlon is probably the most expensive kind of endurance running gear-wise. The Globe and Mail, a Canadian newspaper, estimated that the total cost of racing in Ironman Canada would be \$7,300-\$26,500, once equipment and training costs, race fees, travel

<sup>2</sup> Prices vary depend on the particular event, how far in advance tickets are purchased and the optional extras selected—for example, access to the course with the first wave of competitors.

and accommodation were taken into account (McAlaster, 2017). And while there is an enticing prize pot of \$75,000 on offer, “sadly, at Ironman only the entrants in the pro/elite category are eligible for the prize money. Beginners (age groupers) have no chance of winning any money” (McAlaster, 2017, np).

## **Tensions and contradictions**

When I talk about endurance running in this book, I am referring to a variety of experiences that involve running long distances, such as marathons for example. Endurance runners are the people—today, mostly amateurs—that train for and consume these experiences. In this book, I talk about the four most common forms of endurance running—(1) marathon running, (2) ultra-distance running, (3) triathlon and (4) obstacle course racing (OCR)—together under the moniker of endurance running because, even though they might incorporate other elements, such as cycling, swimming and obstacles, running extended distances is central to them all. They all involve pushing the body to endure running for longer times and distances than is comfortable and require regular training in order to ensure the body will respond as demanded. It is the time that people spend training, as well as the discomfort they endure to consume these experiences, that make endurance running an interesting and perplexing phenomenon. Endurance running is clearly a site of discipline as well as freedom. It is, therefore, a good context in which to study (critically) the contradictions and multiple facets of the consumption of extraordinary experiences. The dark sides of the experience are more visible than they might be in other extraordinary experiences.

Endurance running seems to be a site of tension and contradiction. It is partly about freedom from everyday life and escape into beautiful, natural surroundings. But it also has a less visible side, which is about compulsion, discipline and self-control. This side of endurance running is not adequately explained by existing conceptualisations of the consumption of extraordinary experiences, which emphasise freedom, escape and liminality. It is my assertion that the power relations inherent in endurance running are not adequately accounted for in existing theory on the consumption of extraordinary experiences and that we need another theoretical lens to better illuminate all sides of the phenomenon. By using only existing theories on the consumption of extraordinary experiences, it proves impossible to adequately understand and explain the phenomenon of endurance running with all its tensions and contradictions.

## Consumption of extraordinary experiences

Endurance running has been previously understood as an extraordinary consumption experience (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). The literature on the extraordinary consumption experiences concerns people who actively seek to consume unusual, memorable, dangerous, challenging and even painful experiences such as historical reenactments (Belk & Costa, 1998), river rafting trips (Arnould & Price, 1993), skydiving adventures (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993), mountain climbing expeditions (Tumbat & Belk, 2011), “the Harley experience” (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and obstacle adventure races (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). Various explanations have been proffered to explain consumers’ desire for the extraordinary.

Research into the consumption of extraordinary experiences often focuses on the purifying or restorative power of the experiences, particularly those that take place in natural settings (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013). As well as harmony with nature, ideas of personal and interpersonal growth and transformation are emphasised when accounting for the consumption of extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998). Anthropological concepts such as *communitas* (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), *liminality* (Belk & Costa, 1998), and the *dramatic* (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993) are used to explain extraordinary experiences as rituals that allow participants to transcend and escape everyday life. The logics that apply to the work-a-day world are suspended or inverted in these carnivalesque rituals (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2002b). For example, the blue-collar worker becomes the master “while the gawking middle class tourists become subservient or even obsequious” (Belk & Costa, 1998, p.234) and the “aspects of the body that cannot freely express themselves in everyday life ... find an outlet” (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017, p.11).

Extraordinary experience literature would probably explain the rise of endurance running as evidence of a greater need for escape from everyday life. Consumption scholars would suggest that endurance running is an escape from the work of maintaining a self (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017), from the stifling white collar work that has become alienating (Costas & Kärreman, 2016) and offers us little opportunity to be the dramatic heroes of our own life stories (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993). So the rise in popularity of endurance running should indicate that more people feel the need to escape from these things. This

is certainly not an unreasonable assumption. However, it overlooks an important aspect of the consumption of endurance running.

What mystified me theoretically about this explanation is that it places endurance running, and all extraordinary experiences, outside the realm of everyday life, in liminal spaces. Empirically, however, it became clear to me that endurance running does not only happen at the moment of the extraordinary experience but rather is a part of runners' everyday lives. Let us return to Stephanie, who we met when she was stumbling down a mountain during the Tor des Géants ultramarathon. Stephanie does not just show up at the start line, pay her money and consume the extraordinary experience that is the Tor des Géants. She trains daily in order to have a chance of completing the 330 kilometre course. She gets up early, goes to bed early, misses parties and watches what she eats in order to prepare for this extraordinary experience. She plans her work, her free time, her social life and her vacations around her hobby. Even when she has no access to a road or a treadmill because her work takes her to a UN compound in a war zone, Stephanie continues to train, running in frustratingly short and repetitive 1.6 kilometre circles to train for the 330-kilometre experience. This is the ordinary experience of endurance running, which places it in the realm of the everyday rather than the liminal. Here, in the everyday realm, endurance running seems more about discipline and self-control than the reflexivity, agency and transformation suggested by the consumption of extraordinary experience literature. Stephanie seems compelled to run despite her pain, sickness and desire to stop. Yet, she still claims to find endurance running experiences liberating and chooses willingly to consume them. It is this tension between liberation and compulsion that will be explored in this book. I will critically examine endurance runners' accounts in order to complicate and nuance our understanding of the consumption of extraordinary experience.

Even though it may at times seem problematic, interpreting endurance running as an example of the consumption of extraordinary experiences, as did Scott et al. (2017), offers some advantages. First, it allows us to explore the not insignificant role of the market in the rise in popularity of endurance running. Second, since the literature on extraordinary experiences is rooted in consumer culture theory (CCT), it opens up the possibility to "address the socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of" endurance running (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.868).

Understanding endurance running as an example of the consumption of extraordinary experiences, also offers an opportunity to problematise the existing literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences. There is no lack of excellent empirical research on the consumption of extraordinary experiences. But, in much of this research, the consumer seems to have considerable agency and to be quite reflexive about her choices. This no doubt relates to the postmodern underpinnings of the particular theories and concepts used in these papers (e.g. Turner, 1969, 1974), which assume the consumer to be a reflexive agent with the capacity to define herself and to shape her reality and surroundings (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Giddens, 1991). Hence, the existing theories on the consumption of extraordinary experiences explain only one side of the lived experience. The liberatory and emancipatory aspects of extraordinary experiences are well explained but the voluntary suffering less so. We have already seen hints that extraordinary experiences may not only be liberating but may also involve elements of compulsion and discipline. Adding a critical theoretical perspective can help us to better see and understand how control and freedom are combined in the consumption of extraordinary experiences. The theoretical research question that I will answer in this book is, therefore, as follows: *How can we understand extraordinary consumer experiences as sites of both freedom and control?*

## A critical theoretical perspective

In order to better theorise the consumption of extraordinary experience, I take a critical theoretical perspective on the case of endurance running. Critical Theory is not really a theory. It is instead a tradition or philosophy that was developed by a group of scholars in Germany in the 1930s, known collectively as the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 1972). Today critical theory has been taken in a number of different directions by, for example, gender, queer and post-colonial scholars (see, for example, the work of Judith Butler, Frantz Fanon or Edward Said). When I talk about taking a critical perspective, I mean that I search actively for the hidden power relations in everyday situations. I mean that I try to uncover and expose the hidden ideologies that guide or encourage us to make certain decisions or act in particular ways. Being critical means negating the ways that we usually see things in order to see them in a different light, which can reveal surprising things. For example, endurance



running is typically presented as fun, as an escape but, through a critical lens, we can see it as a space where individuals are invited to punitive self-discipline. Looking for the power relations and ideology at play can help us to understand why individuals freely, and apparently paradoxically, choose the suffering and sacrifice of endurance running. Hence a critical perspective can illuminate the less visible sides of the consumption of extraordinary experiences, such as the compulsion to take part.

Critical theory can help us to see the absurdities in things that are otherwise presumed to be good, self-evident or neutral (Alvesson & Sköldbörg, 2009). Endurance running is simultaneously absurd and completely normal in contemporary society. In this book, I explore why endurance running seems to be an obvious, or unquestioned, choice for so many people. I ponder what or who convinces them to subject themselves willingly to the privations and discomforts of endurance running, and I seek out the underlying assumptions and ideologies involved. Heeding Alvesson and Sandberg's (2011) call for research that does not just identify gaps but instead problematises the underlying assumptions in existing literature, I use accounts from Stephanie and other endurance runners to ask questions about how much free choice consumers of extraordinary experiences actually have regarding their consumption, thereby questioning the particular conception of the postmodern consumer seen in the literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences. By casting a critical eye over the particular sociocultural conditions that make endurance running seem normal or natural, we can learn something new about the consumption of extraordinary experiences in contemporary consumer culture. And by taking account of the social discourses and ideologies that structure consumers' choices, I bring back some much-needed balance to discussions about the consumption of extraordinary experience.

The literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences reviewed in this book belongs within the realm of consumer culture theory (CCT). Although there is critical (Bradshaw & Holbrook, 2008; Cova, Dalli & Zwick, 2011; Cova, Maclaran & Bradshaw, 2013; e.g. Murray & Ozanne, 1991; Ozanne & Murray, 1995; Shankar, Elliot & Fitchett, 2009) and structural work within CCT (Allen, 2002; Henry, 2005; Henry & Caldwell, 2008; Holt, 1997, 1998; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Ulver & Östberg, 2014; Wallendorf, 2001 to name just a few), critical work on the consumption of extraordinary experiences is conspicuously lacking. The primary theoretical aim of this book,

therefore, is to offer an supplementary, critical view on the consumption of extraordinary experiences to the one found in CCT canon (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Kozinets, 2002b; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017) and thereby to question the conceptualisation of consumers often found in that literature; namely that consumers of extraordinary experiences are reflexive beings with considerable agency (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). The standpoint taken in this book is that the postmodern project entered into by the pioneers of CCT appears to have failed in certain respects. Their aim, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) suggest, was the emancipation of consumers. However, the suffering and self-enslavement of consumers of endurance running hints that consumers may have become even less free. It, therefore, seems reasonable to critically rewrite this theoretical story against the backdrop of the contemporary cultural and economic imaginary.

The book also has a second, more practical, aim. By taking a critical perspective on endurance running, I challenge the popular conception of endurance running as an emancipatory activity (Inman, 2016; Meyers, 2000; Murakami, 2007). I contend that while endurance running is a source of freedom and joy for consumers, it is also the site of power relations that affect their material existence, subjectivities and bodily experiences. By presenting a critical narrative of endurance running, I hope to make endurance runners aware of those power relations and enlighten them about the choices they make. This may sound like a lofty aim but, as Gordon suggests, even just “providing a more informed basis for practical choice and imagination [...] would already be more than a modest service” (Gordon, 1991, p.46). The more we understand about why we discipline ourselves in the ways that we do, the more choice we will have about how we participate.

## About the rest of this book

The process of writing a doctoral thesis is often described as a marathon rather than a sprint. Continuing the running metaphor, my own research process has been rather like running laps. In other words, it has been circular rather than linear. My choice of theoretical lens limited and enabled methodological choices at the same time that my methodological standpoints both restricted

and rendered possible certain theoretical perspectives (Svensson, 2003, p.35). Even something as seemingly simple as the formulation of a research problem or question cannot be isolated from theoretical and methodological choices. What we understand as noteworthy, interesting, unusual or problematic is a matter of perspective and depends a great deal on the theoretical lenses we use to understand the world around us. “Finding a research question is hence to a substantial extent a result of an iterative interplay between theoretical perspective and methodological stances” (Svensson 2003, p.36). Peter Svensson’s description of an iterative and interdependent relationship between research problem, theory and methodology impeccably describes my own experience of researching and writing a thesis. Nevertheless, in the chapters that follow, I will attempt to give a linear overview of the exploratory and emergent methodological strategy that underpinned this research as well as the theoretical perspectives that emerged as relevant to understanding the project. This overview can never hope to capture the complexity and messiness of the process. I hope, however, that it allows you, the reader, to understand—if not experience—the adventure.

In the next chapter of this book, I will delve more deeply into the literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences, which was briefly outlined in this introductory chapter. I will explore the assumptions that underpin this literature and question them.

There follows, in chapter three, an overview of some of the concepts and theories that will be important in the book’s subsequent chapters. The chapter begins by giving a very brief history of critical theory. It goes on to give an overview of the critical theory of governmentality, introduced by Foucault (1991). Foucault’s ability to blend freedom and control proved extremely useful in this study, and governmentality provides a lens through which to see extraordinary experiences as sites of both freedom and control. It helps to explain why people choose to subject themselves to the discipline of endurance running and why they experience that discipline as liberating.

Chapter four is the methodology chapter. I start this chapter by presenting my overall research approach, a combination of mystery as method (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, 2011) and problematisation (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014). I then explain in detail how I collected and created the empirical material used in this study, how I analysed it, and how I used it to come up with the findings you will read later in this book. I list the specific methods used to create and

interpret the empirical material that forms the basis of this study. You will read about how I selected and contacted the individuals that participated in this study, and how we, together, produced the texts that make up the empirical research material. Before moving on to the chapters that outline my findings, I discuss ideas of trustworthiness and transferability in qualitative and interpretative research and outline some of the limitations of the particular research methods I have used.

In chapters five to seven, I present the empirical material pertinent to this study. The material has been structured according to three vocabularies of motive that emerged from the texts: freedom, achievement and competition. I present each of the respective vocabularies in its own chapter, illustrating each with stories, excerpts and images from the empirical material. In order to tell a story with the empirical material, I have taken some liberties with the way in which I present it (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014; Svensson & Stenvoll, 2013), as follows:

In chapter five, the vocabulary of freedom is presented from a fairly emic perspective. By this I mean that the words of the runners are not treated very critically. I present their motives for endurance running without questioning or interpreting them too deeply. This chapter acts as a kind of empirical baseline or a point of reference for the more critical chapters that will follow. I refer to the vocabulary of freedom in later empirical chapters to point out the differences between what endurance runners say they are doing when they run and what I think they are *really* up to, as evidenced by my critical, etic interpretations of the other vocabularies of motive that they use. Chapter five also serves a theoretical purpose. When using the vocabulary of freedom, endurance runners motivate their participation in endurance running in the same way that consumer culture theory (CCT) scholars explain why people consume extraordinary experiences. When I go on to critically question endurance runners' motives, I also question theoretical conceptions of extraordinary experiences in CCT.

In chapter six, the second empirical chapter, I present the vocabulary of achievement. Here, I begin to tell a slightly more critical story with the empirical material. I question the vocabulary of freedom intertextually by juxtaposing its claims of escape with the ideas in the achievement vocabulary. In this chapter we begin to see an unravelling of people's understanding of

endurance running as freedom. This also allows me to question CCT's theorisation of extraordinary experience as freedom.

In the third empirical chapter, chapter seven, two vocabularies of motive are presented. Although they are somewhat oppositional, the vocabularies of non-competition and competition are used simultaneously by endurance runners as they motivate and explain their participation in endurance running. In this chapter, the story is built on even deeper and more critical interpretations. By exposing the less discussed side of endurance running, I will attempt to bust some of the romantic myths around the consumption of extraordinary experiences.

Chapter eight is the discussion chapter. Here, I draw together the vocabularies of motive explored in the previous three chapters, review their intertextuality and spell out how these vocabularies help to answer my research question. In other words, I will explain how extraordinary experiences can be understood as sites of both freedom and control and what implications this understanding has for research as well as for our conceptions of self in contemporary consumer culture.

In the ninth and concluding chapter of this book, I will discuss the limitations of my study and possible avenues for future research.

## 2 Consumption of Extraordinary Experiences

This is not the first academic study of endurance running. There have been countless medical studies of endurance running in which the effects of running on various organs (Ikäheimo, Palatsi & Takkunen, 1979) and bodily functions (Nieman et al., 1989) have been measured and in which the effects on performance of external factors such as nutrition (Jeukendrup, 2011), training (Yamamoto et al., 2008) and compression garments (Dascombe et al., 2011) have been calculated. In sociology endurance running has been understood as “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 1982, 2007) and the perceived costs and benefits to the individual have been investigated (Major, 2001). Scholars have even investigated what it is like to be a serious leisure “widow”—in other words, the spouse of an endurance athlete (Lamont, Kennelly & Moyle, 2017). They found that spouses tolerated the negative effects of endurance running in their lives because of the perceived benefits to their partners’ health, happiness, and sense of achievement and self-actualisation. Some studies echo Lamont et al.’s (2017) findings that health and fitness (Major, 2001; Shipway & Holloway, 2016) and accomplishment (Major, 2001) are important in endurance running. Others have emphasised the social fulfilment (Shipway, Holloway & Jones, 2013) and spirituality (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2012) that people derive from endurance running.

Lamont et al. (2012) identified some dark sides to participation in endurance running (specifically triathlon)—for example, deterioration in familial and other relationships and neglect of responsibilities. Sociologists have identified other risks associated with endurance running, such as injury (Hockey, 2006), the psychological effects of failing to achieve goals (Major, 2001), and concerns about safety—especially for women running alone (Major, 2001). Theorists have tried to explain the phenomenon of voluntarily risk-taking using the concept of edgework (Lyng, 1990). In other words, they have argued that people voluntarily take part in risky activities, including endurance running,

because they derive a sense of escape and of power by maintaining control on the edge of an extreme situation. They experience a sense of flow, which is said to provoke a loss of self-consciousness (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). At the same time, maintaining control over one's mind and body "stimulates a heightened sense of self and a feeling of omnipotence [...] self-determination or self-actualization" (Lyng, 1990, p.857).

In consumer culture theory, endurance running has been understood as a modernist pursuit that helps people achieve emancipation in uncertain postmodern times, through discipline and mastery over oneself (Chalmers, 2006), echoing, if not explicitly drawing on, edgework theory. It has also been used in consumer culture theory as a context in which to study heterogeneity in consumption communities (Thomas, Price & Schau, 2013). Most recently, however, endurance running has been understood by consumption researchers as an extraordinary experience in which pain is an escape from the burden of self-awareness and the work of maintaining a self (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017), again echoing but not drawing specifically on the idea of edgework. In this book, I also take my departure in the idea that endurance running is an example of the consumption of extraordinary experiences. It, therefore, seems wise to begin by exploring exactly what extraordinary experiences are and how they have been studied and understood before. In this chapter I will outline previous literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences, starting with the concept of experience and its appearance in consumption and marketing studies.

## Experience

In the field of psychology, scholars have argued that experiences make people happier than material possessions (Van Boven, 2005). This conclusion draws on two lines of research. In the first, a tendency to materialism is negatively associated with psychological health and well-being (Belk, 1985; Richins, 1994, 1987). In the second, data from surveys and laboratory experiments indicate that thinking about and anticipating experiential purchases generates more positive feelings than thinking about and anticipating material purchases (Carter & Gilvovich, 2010; Van Boven, 2005; Van Boven & Gilvovich, 2003). Several possible explanations are suggested, namely that experiences are "more open to positive reinterpretations", that experiences are "a more

meaningful part of one's identity", or that experiences "contribute more to successful social relationships" (Van Boven & Gilvovich, 2003, p.1193). It has also been suggested that satisfaction with material purchases might be undermined by comparisons to other available options, to the same option at a different price or to the material purchases of other individuals whereas this happens to a lesser extent with experiential purchases (Carter & Gilvovich, 2010).

Experience first appeared in consumption and marketing studies in 1982 with Holbrook and Hirschman's seminal article *The Experiential Aspects of Consumption: Consumer Fantasy, Feelings and Fun* (1982). Until then consumption was largely understood as utilitarian and consumers were thought to make rational choices between products and services based on their use-value (Carú & Cova, 2007). How exactly consumers used or consumed products and services was largely ignored and in this sense the consumer, in econometrically- or psychologically-based models of consumption, was somewhat passive (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Holbrook and Hirschman contrast this "information processing model" (Bettman, 1979) with a more experiential view of consumption that focuses on its "symbolic, hedonic, and esthetic nature" (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p.132). In other words, they called for research that took consumers seriously as active agents in consumption.

Many marketing scholars heeded Holbrook and Hirschman's call for research that accounted for the experiential aspects of consumption. Experience became an important concept in many fields, such as the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) and experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999), and something that both consumers and marketers should strive for. Consumers want to have experiences that they can talk about and build their identities around. And marketers want to sell them those experiences rather than products, incorporating experience as a central part of their offering. In other words, marketers seek to engage consumers "in memorable ways" in order to make consumption of something ordinary into an experience and avoid the commodity trap (Carú & Cova, 2007).

Reflecting the focus on experience in marketing, consumer experience became the object of study in one field of marketing research: consumer culture theory (CCT). CCT scholars placed consumers at the centre of enquiry and looked at the ways in which they actively engaged with experiences and how they used



them—for example, to construct identity and to manage relationships ar. Early CCT work on experience demonstrated how interpretative techniques such as ethnography (Belk, Sherry & Wallendorf, 1988) and phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989) could make consumer experience more accessible to researchers. Their goal was to focus on “the complexity of people’s lives and experiences, rather than attempting to isolate those experiences “holding everything else constant”” (Belk, Sherry & Wallendorf, 1988, p.467); to replace the passive, rational consumers of traditional information-processing models with active, irrational, productive agents (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) who draw upon market resources to construct their own identities (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011).

## **Extraordinary experiences**

Consumers’ search for experiences can be traced to the eighteenth century. At that time, the romantic idea that life should be interesting, fulfilling and complete began to be popular. “Romanticism associated the search for intensive pleasure with states of extreme emotional excitement, contrasting them with the lukewarm mediocrity of daily life” (Carú and Cova, 2007, p.5). The idea of individual identity also gained in popularity in the West during this period and individuals began to see themselves as the romantic heroes of their own lives and to seek experiences in the everyday.

Extraordinary experiences, as defined by Abrahams (1986), are *extra* ordinary or marked out from the flow of ordinary, everyday life. They are distinctive experiences that are marked out from the flow of ordinary, everyday experiences. Eckhardt et al. (2015) have suggested that, in a world where the signalling ability of conspicuous luxury goods has been diluted, experiences might be considered the new (inconspicuous) luxury consumption.

A large body of work on extraordinary experiences exists within consumer culture theory (CCT). What exactly constitutes an extraordinary experience is not very clearly defined but, according to the CCT literature, they can be understood as particular types of hedonic experiences (Tumbat and Belk, 2011) that are unusual, memorable, dangerous or challenging and typically occur in a liminal space set apart from everyday life (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Kozinets, 2002b; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). They may be purifying or restorative,

particularly if they take place in a natural setting (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013). They promote personal and interpersonal growth and transformation by encouraging newness in perception (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998) and they involve high levels of emotional intensity and interpersonal connection, or *communitas* (Arnould & Price, 1993).

## The antistructure model

According to Tumbat and Belk (2011), CCT scholars have shown a particular interest in extraordinary experiences as spaces of antistructure (Turner 1969, 1974). To conceptualise extraordinary experiences as spaces of antistructure is to understand them as positive spaces of creativity and growth (Turner 1969) in which individuals can transcend and escape the burdens of everyday life (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Kozinets, 2002b; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). “Antistructure is liberating, transforming, creative, and conducive to *communitas*” (Tumbat & Belk, 2011, p.56) and most studies emphasise that people consume extraordinary experiences in order to escape structure in liminal spaces of antistructure. The word “limen” comes from Latin and means “threshold” (Ahola, 2005). Dante used the notion of liminality to describe purgatory (Alighieri, 1883; Brown, 2019) and in-between states, where transitions take place, have continued to be described as liminal (Turner, 1969, 1974). In the context of extraordinary experiences, liminal spaces are spaces that are separated from everyday life (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). They are “culturally produced time-outs that provide liberation, relief and renewal from normative constraints of everyday life” (Ahola, 2005, p.94). Liminal spaces are postmodern in nature because, within them, categories, hierarchies, statuses and roles no longer matter (Tumbat & Belk, 2011) and the logics of normal life are suspended or inverted in carnivalesque rituals (Kozinets, 2002; Belk & Costa, 1998). For example, the blue-collar worker becomes the master “while the gawking middle class tourists become subservient or even obsequious” (Belk & Costa, 1998, p.234).

Endurance running can be understood as an extraordinary consumption experience because endurance running events often appear to be liminal spaces of antistructure but it is also possible to question that characterisation. On the one hand, the spectacularly physical nature of endurance running events set them apart from contemporary daily life, for most people. Hence, they are liminal spaces. The presence and support of spectators, teammates and often competitors helping each other towards a common goal—the finish line—contribute to a sense of *communitas*. There is an element of ritual in choosing to endure the pain of endurance running. And surpassing the desire to give up when one experiences pain—overcoming a challenge—can be personally transformative. Furthermore, as Scott et al. (2017) point out in their ethnography of Tough Mudder, the corporeal pain in endurance running events makes it extraordinary as compared with everyday life for the white collar professionals that are typically the target market for endurance running events.

On the other hand though, endurance running does not only consist of extraordinary events. To focus on endurance running as an escape from the structure, roles and monotony of everyday life is to ignore the less extraordinary, more boring side of endurance running; namely, the monotonous training regime. Training for events is, for many endurance runners, a daily occurrence. It is routine and far from extraordinary. Training often entails missing out on exciting social events and time spent with friends and family. It also involves being disciplined about food and alcohol intake. Hence, while Scott et al.'s study does a good job of explaining the extraordinary, it does not adequately account for the rest of the endurance running experience—the endless, mundane self-discipline. This cannot be explained with recourse to a one-off letting-off of steam, a *moment* in which to bring back the body's corporeality, to suffer and experience the self. Nor can it be explained with recourse to Turner's (1969) ideas of antistructure and liminality. We must look for an explanation that motivates runners to submit to this regimen of discipline day in, day out for months, if not years. Not just extraordinary pain but everyday discipline; on-going, long-term discipline.

## **Questioning the antistructure model**

Scholars in fields outside of CCT have questioned Turner's characterisation of extraordinary experiences—specifically pilgrimages—as spaces of antistructure (Coleman, 2002; Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Sallnow, 1981). Eade and Sallnow (1991) argue that the structure-*communitas* dichotomy is too

simplistic to capture the complexities of extraordinary experiences. Within CCT, Tumbat and Belk (2011) have suggested, convincingly, that focusing on the liminal nature of extraordinary experiences has led us to overlook the conflict, competition and positional struggles that occur amongst the individuals that take part. Their ethnography of commercial climbing expeditions shows that extraordinary experiences do not only inspire “feelings of community and liminal camaraderie” but can also be “very individualistic and competitive” (Tumbat and Belk, 2011, p.42).

In 2011, Tumbat and Belk called on CCT researchers to take a more critical stance in their understanding of extraordinary experiences; to see them as something other than positive spaces of escape and growth. Since then, there have been critical studies of extraordinary experiences outside of CCT. For example, Keinan and Kivertz (2011) suggested that individuals choose “leisure activities, vacations and celebrations that are predicted to be less pleasurable” not because this allow them to escape from structure, roles or statuses but because they want to use their time productively, and to build a resumé of experiences or accomplishments. However, few CCT researchers seem to have heeded Tumbat and Belk’s call and the positive antistructure model has continued to be the accepted way of understanding the consumption of extraordinary experiences in CCT. This is not to say that there have not been good studies of extraordinary experiences in CCT since 2011. Scott et al.’s (2017) ethnography of Tough Mudder advances our understanding of extraordinary experiences by bringing pain, corporeality and embodiment to the discussion. Huseman and Eckhardt (2018) add the idea of consumer deceleration as a motivator for consuming extraordinary experiences. However, both still focus on extraordinary experiences as positive, liminal spaces of escape; continuing the theme of 25 years of CCT research into extraordinary experiences.

In this book, I take seriously Tumbat & Belk’s call for a critical perspective on the consumption of extraordinary experiences. I understand extraordinary experiences not only as liminal spaces of emancipation but also as spaces of discipline. As a counterpoint to the largely romantic accounts in CCT literature, I will shed some light on the dark sides of extraordinary experiences. After all, as Bertilsson and Rennstam point out in their study of branding, “if only one, positively laden story is told, it makes sense to assume that something is obscured” (2018, p.261).

## CCT's postmodern consumer

What is now called Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research was once called “postmodern” consumer research because it relies on a particular conception of the consumer and consumption. This conception is often understood as postmodern in nature because it sees culture as fragmented, complex and socially constructed and ways of living as multiple and plural (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Firat & Dholakia, 1998). CCT's conception of the “postmodern consumer” underpins the antistructure model of extraordinary experiences.

Having the ability to control one's own fate is typically associated with modernity (Firat & Dholakia, 1998). Despite this, the “postmodern consumer” of extraordinary experiences in CCT research is “a reflexive and empowered identity seeker, navigating [her] way through the plethora of opportunities provided by the marketplace.” (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011, p.383). While an extraordinary experience is occasionally described as “providing” something for the consumer, more often that experience is “used” by the consumer to “create” and produce. Consumers use extraordinary experiences to produce dramatic stories and biographical narratives (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017), to create community (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and identity (Belk and Costa, 1998), to add distinction to their experiential CVs (Keinan & Kivertz, 2011; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017), and to self-actualise, regenerate and transform themselves (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). The consumer is assumed to be an agent with the power to define herself and to shape her reality/surroundings.

The consumer of extraordinary experiences presented in CCT literature is also highly individualised. Even though descriptions of extraordinary experiences typically draw on collective ideas like liminality (Belk & Costa, 1998), *communitas* (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) and shared devotion to a group goal (Arnould & Price, 1993), the outcome of extraordinary experience is individualised and subjective; a personal trial or ritual (Turner, 1974) that typically transforms the individual (Carú & Cova, 2003). This is consistent with an understanding of individuals as sovereign consumers rather than citizens and with the principal of the freedom of the human subject (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Firat & Dholakia, 1998). “The focus on the individual is also very much in line with contemporary liberatory

ideologies celebrating the modern individual's plethora of possibilities and resonating with the prevailing mythology of self-actualization" (Askegaard & Linnet 2011, p385).

Postmodernism is described, by Firat and Venkatesh, as a philosophical and cultural movement, "a critique of modernism and its foundational domination over established constructs in consumer culture" (1995, p.239). Postmodern thinking was a way for researchers to expose the limitations of modernism for the study of consumer culture and to "offer alternative visions" of consumers and consumption in the hope of emancipating consumers. One of the main aims of Firat and Venkatesh's article is to "avoid the reductionism of all consumption into a single logic, namely, market logic" (1995, p.239) and they argue that, by placing the consumer in opposition to the producer, modernism does exactly this. Modernists conceptualise consumption as an act of destruction that creates no value. The consumer is essentially valueless according to modernist market logic. In seeking to remedy this, postmodernism, according to Firat and Venkatesh, elevates consumption to a level on a par with production, a value-producing act. Re-enchanting consumption was, hence, the aim of the postmodern consumer research project (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). A humanistic/experientialist discourse was adopted by postmodern marketing researchers, who "constructed consumers as emotional, creative, and inner-directed individuals [seeking] self-actualizing experiences" (Thompson, Arnould & Giesler, 2013, p.155). Escape, whether real or imagined, from the tyrannies of the dominant market logics was achieved by unleashing consumers' creativity and productivity, thus endowing them with the potential for transformation.

Kozinets' (2002b) study of the Burning Man festival provides an example of a postmodern (CCT) conception of consumers. According to Kozinets, consumer emancipation is "festal, performative, and communal" (2002b, p.155). The description of emancipation as "a creatively liberating disorder" and the emphasis of "a performative ethos" as a means to achieving emancipation, underline the productive nature of this emancipation. At the time when the postmodern project in CCT was in its first flush, this seemed an admirable aim. By constructing consumers not as passive receptacles of produced experiences but as active creators of their consumption experiences, consumers were emancipated from being second-class citizens of modernist market logic. Their consumption activities were conceptualised as creative rather than merely destructive (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002;

Kozinets, 2002b; Murray, 2002; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995).

## **Questioning CCT's postmodern consumer**

CCT's postmodern perspective on consumers, outlined above, has been criticised as overly individualistic by scholars who argue that consumers may not be as agentic as we have assumed. And that if we continue to rely on individualistic perspectives, we may miss other, more structural, ideological, or cultural explanations for consumer behaviour.

Are we so enamored of the empowered consumer that we dare not speak about socially structured determinisms? The call here is not to give up the study of consumer experience, but for situating acts of consumption, their motivations and consequences in a world that reaches beyond the subjectivity of the agent. What we need to include is a better understanding of the underlying ideological and mythological forces producing these subjectivities. Which forms of power produce particular forms of consumer agency? And what are the consequences for the relations between individual and society in particular contexts?

(Askegaard & Linnet, 2011, p387)

Askegaard and Linnet point out that we must not neglect context when we study consumption. They mean that we should not stop at the subjectivity of the consumer-agent but try to understand the ideological forces that produce that subjectivity; to consider what cultural, societal, economic and political conditions have produced the particular type of agency that we see. They argue that consumption can be regarded as a practice, meaning that while the individual consumer may experience her choices as free, she may not be able to easily reflect upon the societal rewards and sanctions that she has internalised and which now shape her choices. It is important, therefore, to look to structure as well as agency to explain consumption of extraordinary experiences. Applying a critical lens to the study of extraordinary experiences offers a way to explore the power of cultural, societal, economic and political expectations on consumer choice.

## **The structure agency debate in CCT**

In recent years there has been debate among Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) scholars about whether CCT research takes adequate account of structural and historical forces affecting consumer choices or whether researchers focus too much on the individual consumer and her lived experiences (Askegaard, 2014, 2015; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014; Moisander, Valtonen & Hirsto, 2009; Shankar, Elliot & Fitchett, 2009; Thompson, Arnould & Giesler, 2013). Moisander et al. (2009) point out that the tendency in CCT work to take the individual consumer as the unit of analysis emphasises the power of that individual consumer. Askegaard and Linnet add that the focus on the lived experiences of consumers means that CCT research does not take adequate account of the "systemic and structuring influences of market and social systems that [are] not necessarily felt or experienced by consumers in their daily lives" (2011, p.381). Even in CCT research that focuses on the "ideological shaping of consumer culture meanings through commercial imagery" (Askegaard, 2015, p.127), it is argued, there tends to be a focus on the strategies that consumers use to adapt cultural texts to serve their own identity projects. Hence, there is still too much emphasis on consumer agency (Shankar, Elliot & Fitchett, 2009). Fitchett et al. (2014) have argued that the very logic of CCT is neoliberal in nature, and that this necessarily leads to an overemphasis on consumer subjectivities and agency. In fact, Fitchett and his co-authors go so far as to suggest that CCT is "an inevitable consequence and reflection of the neoliberalization of culture and society" (2014, p.498).

In response to some of these criticisms, Thompson, Arnould and Giesler have suggested that CCT's "original [humanistic/experientialist] epistemological orientation has long given way to a multilayered CCT heteroglossia that features a broad range of theorizations integrating structural and agentic levels of analysis" (2013, p.149). They accuse critics of ignoring the "considerable volume of CCT research [that] has indeed investigated the historical, sociological, ideological, and institutional shaping of consumption and marketplace phenomenon" (Thompson, Arnould and Giesler, 2013, p.152). However, I do not see a great deal of evidence of this in the literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences. In fairness, much of the scholarship on the consumption of extraordinary experience that I cite in this chapter was actually written during the early days of CCT. It hence belongs squarely in the humanistic/experiential realm, a realm that can be understood as a means by



which CCT researchers built a research tradition that considered, for the first time, consumers' experiences and the ways in which they use possessions and consumer experiences to create meaning, relationships and identity. According to Thompson et al.'s reasoning, then, we should see, in more recent studies of extraordinary experience, less focus on consumers of extraordinary experiences as reflexive agents, and more focus on the normative constraints and collective determinations that are internalised by consumers and structure their quasi-unconscious needs and desires. However, in more recent work—such as Scott et al.'s (2017) study of consumers of Tough Mudder or Huseman and Eckhardt's (2018) study of consumers of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage—we see the reproduction of consumers who reflexively choose extraordinary experiences to creatively respond to and alleviate the demands of everyday life.

The critical perspective taken in this book, allows me to consider the disciplining forces of discourse and ideology on the consumers of extraordinary experiences and, thereby, to bring some much needed balance to discussions about the consumption of extraordinary experiences. In other words, this study will reveal extraordinary consumption experiences as more than the lived experiences of consumers in a particular moment. It will show them to be part of the way in which individuals govern themselves in contemporary consumer culture.

### 3 Critical Perspectives

What does it mean to take a critical perspective? There is some confusion around the term *critical*. And not without reason. In literary circles, critique is a method of disciplined, systematic study of a written or oral discourse (Literary Devices, 2019) and this meaning has been carried over into wider academic use. Academic critique is a methodical practice of doubt (Gasché, 2007) and is commonly used to describe the way in which academics question, or call in to doubt, previous literature on a subject. However, when I say that I will take a critical perspective, I do not only mean that I will be critical or sceptical towards the existing theory on the subject of extraordinary experiences. I will, of course. But I also mean that I will use critical *theory* as a way to interpret the popularity of endurance running and to better understand freedom, control, choice and compulsion in the consumption of extraordinary experiences.

This chapter begins by briefly tracing the evolution of critical theory from the Critical Theory (with capital letters) of the Frankfurt School. It goes on to give an overview of the critical theory of governmentality, introduced by Foucault (1991). Governmentality, despite my best efforts to resist it, repeatedly appeared to be an important theory in my research, since it elegantly combines freedom and control to explain why people freely choose to discipline themselves. In this study, it provides a lens through which to see extraordinary experiences sites of both freedom and control. It helps to explain why people choose to subject themselves to the discipline of endurance running and experience that discipline as liberating.

The concept of discourse is an important element in the theory of governmentality because government in liberal democracies is about shaping rationality or reason via discursive mechanisms. This theory chapter closes with a discussion about vocabularies of meaning, an analytical theory that helped me to connect consumers' individual (micro-level) accounts of

endurance running as freedom with the societal discourses that control and discipline them through that freedom.

## Critical Theory

By ‘critical theory’ we mean the tradition in social science which includes the Frankfurt school and its associated orientations and writers. The figures central to this tradition are those German (or German-born) social scientists associated directly or indirectly with the Frankfurt school, such as Habermas, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Apel and Offe.

(Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p.144)

Critical Theory is not a theory at all but rather a tradition or philosophy that was initiated by a group of scholars in Germany in the 1920s and ‘30s. Inspired by Marx, the scholars of the Frankfurt school of thought sought not to develop ideas about universal regularities and fixed patterns in social relationships and processes. Instead, they saw the task of social science as being to clarify how certain social conditions developed from particular historical and social contexts (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p.145). In other words, they saw social conditions not as inevitable but rather as “historically created and heavily influenced by ... asymmetries of power and special interests” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p.144). Instead of positivist theories that sought to faithfully represent reality, the Frankfurt scholars tried to develop philosophically-informed social theories. Critical Theory was different from traditional theory because Critical Theory attempted to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them (Horkheimer, 1972).

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school was heavily influenced by the political climate of the time in Europe and critique of authoritarianism is an important element in many of the works of the Frankfurt school (Adorno et al., 1950; Fromm, 1941). However, after Hitler’s rise to power, many members of the Frankfurt school emigrated to the United States where they were confronted with “the highly commercialised American culture” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p.147), which also left its mark on their work. Here they

published work that was critical of the type of social control that typifies capitalist society. While not as barbaric as the openly-totalitarian societies of Eastern Europe, capitalist societies with their objectification and streamlining of human desires, it is argued, may be just as threatening to freedom of thought and independent opinion (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944). Much of the critical theory that has developed since the Frankfurt school has continued to question whether the kind of freedom that appears to be central to capitalist societies—freedom of choice, of thought, of opinion—is actually freedom at all.

## **Critical theory**

While Critical Theory is often thought of narrowly as referring to the Frankfurt School that begins with Horkheimer and Adorno and stretches to Marcuse and Habermas, any philosophical approach with similar practical aims could be called a “critical theory,” including feminism, critical race theory, and some forms of post-colonial criticism.

(Bohman, 2016)

As explained by Bohman, research with critical aims but which is not part of the Frankfurt school—in other words, more recent critical work—is often distinguished from the latter by the use of lower case letters. Like its predecessor, this critical—in the broader sense—research has “an emancipatory interest in knowledge” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p.144) but its objects of critique are broader than the political conditions of the early- to mid-twentieth century. What the two types of critical theory—the Frankfurt school Critical Theory and the broader, more recent critical theory—have in common though is that they both seek to expose power asymmetries and thereby to challenge the taken-for-grantedness or common sense appearance of social phenomena. Hence, critical theory can help to explain the power relations inherent in the darker side of the consumption of extraordinary experiences.

One might reasonably question what we gain from taking a critical perspective on endurance running. Do people really need to be emancipated from an activity that they choose freely? And, even if we think they do, is emancipation even possible? In their work on surveillance, Elias and Gill (2017) point out

that the critical work is often reserved for coerced or compelled surveillance while voluntary forms are often overlooked because they are assumed to be freely chosen. But just as surveillance is “no less toxic for being freely chosen” (Elias & Gill, 2017, p.63), so discipline, even self-imposed or voluntary forms of discipline, may not be any less potent than externally imposed discipline (Elias & Gill, 2018). In endurance running, individuals are incited to punitive self-discipline while running is simultaneously and paradoxically constructed as an enjoyable escape. Even if it is apparently entered into willingly, it seems reasonable to explore critically why they freely choose to suffer in this way. From a Foucauldian perspective, power is inescapable and individuals are not free to choose whether or not to discipline themselves. However, a critical perspective may help people to better grasp the reality in which they find themselves. I would be more than happy to say that I provided “a more informed basis for practical choice and imagination” (Gordon, 1991, p.46).

By casting a critical eye over the particular sociocultural conditions that make endurance running seem normal or natural, and purposefully understanding the natural and commonsensical as absurd, we can learn something new about the consumption of extraordinary experiences in contemporary consumer culture. By using critical ideas such as negation—imagining how endurance running would look if we lived under different social conditions—we can see it in a new light, as something other than liberating. Highlighting power relations allows us to explore what compels consumers to subject themselves willingly to the privations and discomforts of endurance running. Searching out the underlying assumptions and ideologies involved in the consumption of endurance running enables us to examine how much free choice the consumers of extraordinary experiences actually have regarding their consumption and, thereby, to add a much needed perspective to the literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences—a perspective that accounts for the social discourses and ideologies that structure consumers’ choices.

Discourse and ideology are important concepts in critical theory, with some suggesting that ideology is the principle obstacle to human liberation (Geuss, 1981). Their exact nature and connection to one another has been long contested though. In line with McCarthy (1996), I understand ideologies simply as ideas, or discourses (“knowledges”, in her words) that obtain the status of common sense and then often go unquestioned by most people, most of the time. “Ideologies are absolutizing voices, passing themselves off as natural, as the only way of viewing things” (McCarthy, 1996. p.7). They are

ideas that are lived rather than thought (Althusser in McCarthy, 1996) and their connection to power discourses is, therefore, less explicit and harder to discern (for both the dominated and the dominant). “The common sense nature of ideologies makes them difficult to grasp” (Silchenko, 2017, p.22). They are “primarily located in the unsaid, or in implicit propositions” (Fairclough, 2010, p.27), and so accessing whether a particular discourse is ideological in nature is a tricky task (Silchenko, 2017). A critical perspective helps to expose, historicise and problematise ideologies (McCarthy, 1996). In short, a critical approach makes ideology visible (Fairclough, 2010).

Critical theory has itself been criticised on the basis that it is imbued with cultural pessimism (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Or, in other words, that it is based on a fundamentally negative view of society and power. While a critical project does certainly require “a *degree* of negativity” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p.159), not all critical approaches are fundamentally pessimistic. Foucault, for example, in his critical work, took pains to explain that power—the linchpin of critical theory—is not only negative. Power does not just repress, censor, mask or conceal. It is also positive and productive (Wandel, 2001). “Power produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1977, p.194). Power is more than just constraint, force or violence. It is also freedom and consent (Lemke, 2012). Hence, Foucault uses the term *power relations* to talk about power without implying negative assumptions about force, state and lawfulness. The critical concept of governmentality, introduced by Foucault and subsequently advanced by contemporary scholars (Dean, 2010; Gordon, 1991; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1996), elegantly blends together freedom and discipline to help us understand how power relations govern. It uses ideas about discourse and ideology to explain why discipline is apparently freely chosen. Foucault’s concept of governmentality is one way in which to understand power, beyond that exercised by the state, on individuals who willingly choose to be disciplined.

I would therefore propose, as a very first definition of critique, this general characterisation: the art of not being governed quite so much.

(Foucault, 1997, p.45)

## Governmentality

Foucault defined government as the “conduct of conduct” (2000). His choice of phrase neatly highlights that to conduct means both to lead others—from the French *conduire* to lead—and to behave in a certain way—*se conduire*, to conduct oneself (Skålen, Fellessen & Fougère, 2006). Government then refers to “all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others” (Rose, 1999, p.3). Rose (1999) emphasizes that government is not the same things as domination. Government is power. While domination seeks to remove the capacity for action among the dominated, government merely directs that action towards its own objectives. In his essay, *The subject and power* (2000), Foucault tells us that power is only power when applied to individuals who are free to choose how they act. Otherwise it is merely physical force or violence. Power is “actions on others’ actions” (Gordon, 1991, p.5) and presupposes agency in those that it affects.

Governmentality is the art of government through freedom. It is the exercise of power and control using a wide range of controlling techniques, many of which are not immediately recognisable as controlling. Most commonly it refers to the many ways in which individuals are inspired to willingly govern and control themselves; the control of control or conduct of conduct. Individuals in liberal democracies appear to be free to choose their own actions. However, as Foucault shows us, only certain choices appear to be viable because of various constraints—such as societal norms—which are extremely hard to perceive because they often appear to be natural, or common sense ideas. Groups that can influence what we think of as normal and natural or reasonable and rational, therefore, have great power to shape how we *freely* choose to conduct ourselves. Consider, for example, that people often strive to be fit and healthy. This seems totally normal and natural. Who would actively choose to be fat and unhealthy? Coincidentally, a healthy population and an able work force are useful resources for society and state. What we freely choose is exactly that which we have been conditioned to choose, because it also benefits, often economically, those that have the power to shape our understanding of the world. In summary, the theory of governmentality explains how subjects are *freed* to choose exactly how they wish to conduct themselves while simultaneously shaped and directed to *want* to make certain correct, good or appropriate choices.

Different, more direct forms of government have been common at different times and places (Lemke, 2012). Picture, if you will, the kind of social control historically demonstrated by sovereigns. It is typically more direct and obviously coercive than the diffuse and insidious control we see in liberal democracies today (Lemke, 2012). Since individual freedom is lauded in democracies, the state is ideologically limited in its ability to directly control individuals' actions—for example, by imposing regulations, standards and laws. Hence government must take the less obvious form of governmentality, in which control is exercised not through coercion but through freedom. Self-discipline, freely chosen, becomes the government of choice. As outlined above, this involves shaping of norms, of rationalities, of desires, of aspirations, of ways of understanding the world; creating similarities between personal ambitions and those that are prized by institutions. Individuals have a great deal of free choice but simultaneously their desires are shaped, structured and directed so that they conduct themselves in ways that reflect the ideals of those who shape opinion. Power, in contemporary democracies, is, therefore, less about conquering or possessing and more about the ability to produce, provoke and organise a population (Cova & Cova, 2009).

## **Discipline through freedom**

One could also say then that governmentality is about *discipline* through freedom. As long as individuals sufficiently internalise the correct compulsions, there is no need to explicitly dominate or control them. They will freely make morally correct and appropriate choices and control themselves. Foucault describes this moral self-control as “techniques of the self” (Rose, 1999, p.43). The work of governmentality then—the work of conducting conduct—is the work of shaping rationality (Dean, 2010). Practices of governmentality are those that “shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups” (Dean, 2010, p.20). Subjection works “through the promotion of and calculated regulation of spaces in which [free] choice is to be exercised (Dean, 1995, p.562). It is a “paradox that to make humans free it has been necessary to subject them to all manner of compulsion” (Rose, 1999, p.62) and from our earliest days as small children we are continually conditioned about what actions are good and bad, and which thoughts are acceptable and unacceptable. We understand and internalise what we are supposed to think and do to be good and responsible people, citizens, students, friends, wives, etcetera. We are, therefore, free to choose our own paths and to discipline ourselves



appropriately. Governmentality renders the government of anything or anyone possible through discursive mechanisms that represent the domain to be governed. “To govern is to cut experience in certain ways” (Rose, 1999, p.31); to actually affect the ways in which individuals see and make sense of the world. Expertise or knowledge is a means by which this can be achieved. Expertise achieves its ends through “the persuasion inherent in its truths, the anxieties simulated by its norms, and the attraction exercised by the images of life and self it offers to us” while knowledge creates an “alliance between personal objectives and ambitions and institutionally or socially prized goals and activities” (Rose, 1989, p.10).

Governmentality is hard to resist because it is hard to perceive its furtive influence. It acts upon our “intimate lives, our feelings, desires and aspirations” (Rose, 1989, p.1), which we instinctively feel are private and our own. Our private lives are not private in the sense “that they are not the objects of power. On the contrary, they are intensively governed” (Rose, 1989, p.1). “Thoughts feelings and actions may appear as the very fabric and constitution of the intimate self, but they are socially organized and managed in minute particulars” (Rose, 1989, p.1). But the subjects of governmentality do not see themselves as victims who are being surreptitiously controlled. They—we—choose what we do of our own free will and are, in many ways, unaware of the extent to which discourses, knowledge, expertise and “facts” shape our hopes, fears and desires. Governmentality may seem to be preferable to other more direct forms of domination since its normative style of control is gentler than more direct forms but the subtlety is what makes governmentality’s normative control more insidious (Gabriel, 1999). Since normative discourses “do not merely constrain but define a person” (Gabriel, 2008, p.319), the option to resist is removed or at least obscured. We feel free at the same time as we are controlled. We are free “to act upon our bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct in order to achieve happiness, wisdom, health and fulfilment” but are also compelled to do so (Rose, 1989, p.10). Not a bit of our body or soul is left ungoverned, but at the same time we have limited ability to perceive how we are controlled and, therefore, limited ability to choose to resist this control.

In the context of extraordinary experiences, governmentality provides an explanatory framework for why consumers freely choose to discipline themselves and their bodies in apparently unpleasant ways. Endurance runners may not imagine themselves to be in a Weberian iron cage—rigid, constraining, subjectifying—because they feel that they are free to choose

whether to take part or not. However, as explained by Yiannis Gabriel, the iron cage is not the only kind of cage. Consumers who want to appear normal, and to be successful in life, in work, in relationships, find themselves constrained in other kinds of cages—panopticon-like glass cages with invisible constraints—where they are constantly on show, evaluated, and where “appearances are paramount” (Gabriel, 2005, p.19). We have “a powerful illusion of choice” (Gabriel, 2005, p.9) but are convinced that some choices are more valid, appropriate or right than others and are painfully aware that our choices are visible for others to judge.

### **Biopolitics, biopower and biopedagogy**

While it is not as important as governmentality in this study, the concept of biopolitics is nevertheless worth a brief mention, not least because of its connection to bodily discipline. During his lectures at the Collège de France in 1976—prior to his lectures on governmentality, which he delivered in 1978—Foucault introduced the concept of biopolitics (Lemke, 2012) and developed his earlier ideas about the *entrepreneurial* nature of everyday life in modern societies (Fleming, 2014). Foucault suggests biopower, as a means of controlling individuals. By measuring and quantifying them, humans become “material upon which political calculation can work” (Rose, 1989). For example, statistics on births, deaths, marriages, illnesses, wealth, poverty and even diet allow the administration of life through biopolitical means. Likewise, *practices of the self*, including the measurement and quantification of the body, allow it to be governed subjectively through the production of truths (McNay, 2009; Rose, 1989). Just as statistics transformed the “unruly population [into...] a form in which it could be used in political arguments and administrative decisions” (Rose, 1989, p.6) so measuring the body makes it the domain of government.

Bringing together the concepts of biopower and pedagogy, biopedagogy is the term given by Jan Wright (2009) to “the collection of information, instructions, and directives about how to live, what a body should be, what a good citizen is, and what to do to be happy and healthy” (Drake & Radford, 2018). Biopedagogy can take more or less deliberate forms—ranging from public health campaigns to the plotlines of television programmes or advertisements—and in its less deliberate forms there is little to differentiate it from governmentality. In fact, scholars have suggested that the concept of governmentality came to replace biopolitics in Foucault’s thinking since

“governmentality seems to be closely contemporaneous and functionally isomorphic with biopolitics” (Kelly, 2019, p.np). Let us say then that biopedagogy is a specific type of governmentality, in which individual bodies are controlled not through the use of force but by the shaping of values and knowledge. Individuals learn, through biopedagogy, to make socially appropriate choices about how to discipline their bodies (Wright 2009). The concepts of biopolitics, biopower and biopedagogy are used in this book to help us understand the body as a political space.

## **Governmentality in consumer culture theory**

Governmentality has been used in CCT in order to conceptualise the ways in which consumer subjectivities are produced. In the contexts of consumer empowerment (Shankar, Cherrier & Canniford, 2006), consumer co-creation (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008) and neoliberalism (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), governmentality has been used to show that apparent shifts in power—for example, the shift of power from producers to consumers in consumer empowerment—may not be what they at first seem. New kinds of consumer—for example, empowered, creative, or responsible consumers—are not controlled less than previous consumers, rather they are subject to different kinds of disciplinary power, which operates to produce different kinds of consumer subjectivities. In other words, the empowered consumer is just one kind of consumer subjectivity. From a Foucauldian perspective, notions of consumer freedom, empowerment and responsabilisation represent “a political form of power aimed at generating particular forms of consumer life” that are both free and controllable (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008, p.163).

Giesler and Veresiu (2014) build on the sociology of governmentality to theorise the processes by which the political economy shapes responsible and moral consumer subjects. Their routine of consumer responsabilisation, known as P.A.C.T., consists of four stages/elements (personalisation, authorisation, capabilisation, and transformation). *Personalisation* redefines a social problem as one for which individuals are responsible. *Authorisation* draws on knowledge to legitimise the individual solution of the problem. In other words, expert opinion suggests that the responsible consumer is the answer. During *capabilisation*, a market for products or services that enable ethical self-management is developed thus making it materially possible for the consumer to act responsibly. When “consumers adopt their new moralised self-understandings” and are “constructed as free, autonomous, rational, and

entrepreneurial subjects”, *transformation* can be said to have occurred (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014, p.841-2). The creation of different kinds of consumer subjectivity is hence conceptualised from the perspective of the agents doing that creative work.

Askegaard and Linnet (2011) suggest that the focus in CCT on the lived experience of the consumer has been at the cost of understanding the context of context or the institutional framework in which the consumer lives that experience. The use of Foucault’s theory of governmentality in the studies named here represents a move towards redressing this balance. All three studies use governmentality to illuminate institutional frameworks in which particular consumer subjectivities are developed—the empowered consumer (Shankar, Cherrier & Canniford, 2006), the creative and docile consumer (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008), the responsabilised and moralised consumer (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). In my own study I do likewise but, while these studies focus on the people and institutions responsible for creating these subjectivities, I focus on how this subjectivisation plays out from the consumer’s perspective. In other words, I use governmentality to show how consumers’ understandings of themselves and actions upon themselves are shaped by the political economy of contemporary consumer culture.

## Discourse

In order to understand governmentality and biopedagogy, one must also understand something about discourse. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse is the mechanism by which people come to understand the world in certain ways. Discourse is a very important concept in the social sciences and has been much discussed and argued over. In this section, I will outline what I mean by discourse and how I will use the concept in this book.

Discourse essentially means language; spoken and written words. Some language is constative and can be evaluated as true or false (for example, “that grass is green”). But when the meaning of a concept is flexible or contestable, language is used to create particular meanings (Hall, 1997). People use language to interpret contestable concepts from the world around them. Groups of interpretations form discourses, which then take on the form of essential truths (Weedon, 1987). Discourses and meanings are not permanently fixed

but evolve over time and in accordance with dominant views and ideologies. And not all discourses are equally powerful. Some discourses shape meaning systems while others are marginalised. A postmodern, Foucauldian perspective on discourse suggests that truth and knowledge are plural and contextual and that they are produced through discourse. In other words, language not only describes what we think but actually induces us to think in certain ways.

An example: the concept of health is socially produced and involves a variety of linked discourses. In other words, what one should do or how one should look in order to be considered to be healthy is different in different societies and may also have changed over time within societies. When food was scarce for the majority, health was associated with fat or chubbiness (Corrigan, 1997; Eknayan, 2006). Discourses equated health with survival and positioned it in opposition to illness and starvation (Rich & Evans, 2005). In times/places of plenty, discourses of restriction became more associated with health. People should eschew certain things—cigarettes, fatty foods—in order to be discursively constructed as healthy. More recently, health discourses have become more moralistic and include an element of self-responsibility (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Rich & Evans, 2005). Health is no longer achieved merely by avoiding things but must be actively earned by, for example, exercising (Brown, 2013). We are now understood to be ultimately responsible for our own health with illness, physical or mental, often being perceived as a moral failing.

Discourses shape how we understand ourselves and the world around us (Miller & Rose, 2008). The choices we think we make freely are not really free at all because what we understand as the acceptable, normal or sane range of possible choices are shaped by discourses, which are in turn the product of hegemonic social conventions and ideologies (Rose, 1996). Discourses that teach consumers how to behave circulate all around us. They appear in social media, in discussions, in advertisements and in stories, both fictional and factual (Drake & Radford, 2018). These discourses often idealise great or good people, or characters who are successful, heroic or powerful, or all three. They take shape in stories of ideal individuals, on which we are encouraged to model ourselves and judge others.

## **Analysing discourse using vocabularies of motive**

Of course, extraordinary experiences are more than just words. They consist of physical practices, material objects and bodily experiences. However, only in a very particular discursive context do these particular practices, objects and experiences transform into achievements that we celebrate, reward and aspire to reproduce. In another, they might be the pitiable actions of a mentally ill sadomasochist. Picture a semi-naked man, freezing and alone, in a public park in the dead of winter, electrocuting himself. The physical practices, material objects and bodily experiences may be only marginally different from what people subject themselves to in obstacle-adventure course racing. But particular discourses and ideologies make one of these sadomasochists a hero, a high achiever, a future CEO! In order to explore these discourses and ideologies, I analyse talk about endurance running.

In consumer culture theory (CCT) research, discourse analysis has typically taken the form of the interpretive case method. “This mode of analysis assumes that the particular (or microlevel) case represents an instantiation of macrolevel cultural processes and structures” (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p.20; see also Burawoy, 1991). Individual, personal experiences are interpreted as “sites where cultural traditions of meaning and social value systems are enacted” (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p.20). Like Thompson and Haytko (1997), I believe that analysis of the particular can provide insight into the social. However, whereas Thompson and Haytko focus on processes, I focus on motives and rationalisations. Individual vocabularies of motive can provide insight into the societal discourses that informed them and made them a legitimate choice. In other words, what society tells individuals are acceptable motives appear in those individuals’ accounts when they rationalise and justify their behaviour.

A motive is a explanation for particular conduct. The concept of motive as a social product was developed by Mills in 1940, in response to psychology’s conception of motive as something fixed within a person. Mills argued that a sociological explanation of motive could not only consider an individual’s inner drives or needs but must also account for its social character. “The differing reasons men give for their actions are not without reasons”, he explained (Mills, 1940, p.904). In other words, when people explain why they act in a particular way, they select motives that are socially acceptable. An

appropriate motive is one that projects an acceptable self and elicits approval from others.

When people are questioned about their conduct they must explain or justify it. This, according to Mills, throws the questioned person into a moment of crisis, where she presumes that she has strayed from normative expectations. She must then call upon a socially acceptable vocabulary of motives to explain her conduct. Vocabularies of motive are the social discourses from which people draw morally legitimate excuses and justifications for their conduct (Dictionary of sociology, 2019). Different social groups are at different times characterised by different climates of opinion. Foucault would probably call these epistemes (1966/2002). The words that we use to account for our actions, our motives, are limited to a vocabulary that accords with the norms, ideologies and opinions of the group and the time. When we learn the particular conduct patterns that are appropriate for various occasions, we also learn the appropriate and socially acceptable ways to legitimate, justify and explain our actions to ourselves and others. In other words, when we learn how to do something, we also learn how to account for why we do it, in a socially appropriate way. For example, in Mohammed and Larsson's (2013) study, consumers used a particular vocabulary of motives to justify their purchase decisions. In order to avoid being seen as frivolous, some reframed expensive purchases as investments rather than expenses. This example suggests that investment is more socially acceptable than frivolity.

In the way that they analyse discourse—the interpretive case method—Thompson and Haytko (1997) assume a poststructural understanding of the world that is not uncommon in CCT research. They assume not just that language is social but also that, “through language, people engage in constructing the social world” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p.232). They assign a great deal of individual agency to the consumer, who is assumed to have the ability to pick and choose countervailing discourses in order to negotiate her life and its contradictions. From a governmentality perspective though, individual choice is structurally constrained by societal discourses that make some choices viable, rational, or virtuous and others less so. Government in liberal democracies is about shaping rationality and directing free choice via discursive mechanisms. Examining the (micro-level) vocabularies of motive that consumers use to rationalise their behaviour allows us to see the (macro-level) societal discourses that shape and direct their free choices.

In this study, vocabularies of motive provide a theoretical concept with which to structure and understand endurance runners' accounts of endurance running. When questioned about why they chose to spend a lot of time, and energy on a painful and expensive activity, endurance runners had to account for their motives. When I analysed the conversations I had with runners, I did not focus on the factual content of their accounts. Instead I examined the particular vocabularies of motive they called on to justify their actions. I looked at the wider discourses that were invoked in these vocabularies and what these could tell me about what is acceptable or normal in society. Exploring endurance runners' vocabularies of motive not only helped me to understand endurance running but also to understand a society in which endurance running is normal conduct.





## 4 Chasing Answers

Many empirical studies tend to allow little scope for critical theory or the emancipatory knowledge interest to work fully. This is because things that are simple to observe or to extract from interviews are not really what critical theory sees as an essential subject of research. Both totality and subjectivity—at least the deeper blockages in our consciousness which most urgently call for study—escape simple empirical methods. We can hardly go around asking people about the ‘psychic prisons’ or ‘false consciousness’, or about ‘communicative distortions’ and so on; nor do such things allow themselves to be readily observed.

(Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p.162)

As emphasised by Alvesson and Sköldberg, critical studies are not always compatible with traditional research methodologies. Hence, while I use empirical methods of observation in this study, I rely on innovative means of analysis, such as mystery creation (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) and over-interpretation (Svensson & Stenvoll, 2013). I am less concerned with mirroring reality than with developing new ideas. I, therefore, follow Alvesson and Sandberg’s (2014) suggestion that critical researchers should not seek methodological procedures that promise to generate accurate and objective representations of phenomena but instead should look for those that encourage new ways of thinking and understanding the world. This is different from what is often emphasised in research methodologies, “namely, procedures that enable precision in description and analysis” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014, p.2).

I also heed Alvesson and Sandberg’s call for research that does not just identify gaps but instead problematises the underlying assumptions in existing literature. I have used two methodological approaches in my research—mystery creation and problematisation—which together have allowed me to rethink the assumptions in a body of literature—that which I refer to as the

literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences. Phenomena that appear mysterious in research indicate things that cannot be explained using existing theory. Instead of treating empirical mysteries as indications of gaps in theory, I instead used them as dialogue partners with which to *problematisé* the underlying assumptions found in the literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences.

In this chapter I first explain my overall methodological strategy, which, as explained above, relies on a combination of mystery creation and problematisation. I then explain in detail how I collected and created the empirical material used in this study, how I analysed it, and how I used it to come up with the findings you will read later in this book. Before outlining my findings, I discuss ideas of trustworthiness and transferability in qualitative and interpretative research. And outline some of the limitations of the particular research methods I have used.

## Creating mysteries

In their (2007) article and subsequent (2011) book, Alvesson and Kärreman argue for the use of mystery as creative method for developing scientific theory. Using their method, researchers discover or create empirical mysteries and, by solving those mysteries, develop theoretical contributions. This method is grounded in empirical observations but differs from other grounded approaches (e.g. Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which seek to mirror reality and then fit theory to that reality. Alvesson and Kärreman argue that empirical material cannot blindly show us the way to theory because it is the product of “interpretations and the use of specific vocabularies” (2007, p.1265). Data observed by humans is, from the outset, “inextricably fused with theory” and this “has major consequences for how we consider the theory-empirical material relationship” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p.1265). Alvesson and Kärreman urge researchers to accept that empirical material is, by its nature, constructed. Instead of focusing on faithful representation, they can then concentrate on creating interesting and unusual interpretations that will lead to the generation of novel theory.

This approach to theory development centres on breakdowns. When the researcher observes things that her existing theoretical understandings have not prepared her to anticipate or expect, those theoretical understandings begin to break down. The empirical observations present a mystery that puzzles or confuses the researcher. This is the moment of interest for theory development. Instead of trying to refit the data to the theory or to refit the theory to the data, the researcher can exploit the breakdown to question theory's underlying assumptions. Instead of seeing a breakdown as a potential gap to be filled by modification of existing theory we can critically question theory itself.

The mystery as method approach relies on a light version of constructionism, sometimes called weak constructionism, in which we recognise that “something is going on out there” but also that our “frameworks, preunderstandings, and vocabularies are central in producing particular versions of the world” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p.1265). This approach also relies on serendipity, which is “the art of being curious at the opportune moment” (Merton & Barber, 2004, p.210). It encourages the researcher to actively look for things that do not work in existing theory and to construct empirical material in such a way that mysteries are created or emphasised. A hermeneutic approach to interpretation, or over-interpretation, may allow empirical material to be manipulated and interpreted in unusual ways that will emphasise paradoxes and confusion. Likewise, sampling in order to include specific or extreme cases rather than hiding them in randomness.

## **My own mystery**

My investigation of endurance running began in November 2012. At that time my focus was on trying to understand the emergence and evolution of endurance running as a market, which is an area of particular interest to many researchers in consumer culture theory (CCT). When I understood endurance running as a market, I understood endurance runners as consumers of endurance running products, services and extraordinary experiences. This seemed to make sense according to existing literature. No breakdowns yet. There was even literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences that used endurance running—specifically obstacle course racing—as an empirical context. But at this point a mystery began to take shape.

In consumer culture theory studies concerning the consumption of extraordinary experiences, the experiences are typically depicted as positive spaces of creativity and growth in which individuals are liberated from the various demands of everyday life (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Consumers are understood to freely choose from a smorgasbord of market-produced extraordinary experiences to creatively self-actualise, regenerate and transform themselves (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). This theory did not seem to explain the discipline and control that I saw when I read and listened to accounts of endurance running from endurance runners themselves. I was surprised to see individuals who seemed compelled to take part in endurance running and who sacrificed and suffered a great deal in order to do so. And even though Scott et al. (2017) consider pain and suffering in the consumption of extraordinary experiences, none of the literature I have read on the consumption of extraordinary experiences seems to explain why these apparently free and reflexive consumers seemed compelled to choose this suffering. It appeared to be a mystery.

Instead of seeing a gap in the literature to which I could contribute, by adding an incrementally different context that includes not just suffering but also discipline, I have instead taken Alvesson and Sandberg's (2014) advice and seen this mystery as an opportunity to enter a dialogue with theory on the consumption of extraordinary experience and to question some of the assumptions of that same literature. I, therefore, chose to actively focus on the parts of empirical material that were mysterious and to let the "material inspire the rethinking of conventional ideas and categories" in the literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014, p12; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). In other words, I created and cultivated mystery in order to problematise existing theory.

Later in this chapter, I will explain what creating and cultivating mystery means in practice. But first, let us talk about problematisation.

# Problematising

A methodology for theory development through encounters between theoretical assumptions and empirical impression

(Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014, p.12)

Problematisation is a strategy for critically scrutinising dominant assumptions in a field, according to Alvesson & Sandberg. To problematise is to closely examine theoretical assumptions and to question whether they are appropriate to particular empirical examples. Researchers can combine mystery creation and problematisation by using empirical mysteries as the tools with which to problematise existing theoretical assumptions. The point of problematisation is not to find a theory that represents reality or to modify existing theory or frameworks to fit a particular empirical gap. The point is to come up with some new and unexpected theory to explain the empirical mystery; one that denies assumptions and challenges taken-for-granted notions.

In their call for problematisation as a research strategy, Alvesson and Sandberg argue that a “problematizer” is not a grounded theorist who should seek to be *tabula rasa* or to completely erase her own epistemological and ontological position. Rather, she should try to unpack her own position sufficiently so that she can identify and question some of its underlying assumptions. When I began this research into endurance running, the theoretical position or standpoint with which I was most familiar was consumer culture theory. From this standpoint it was easy to see endurance runners as consumers, of extraordinary endurance running experiences, as well as goods and services. But understanding endurance runners as consumers of extraordinary experience brings with it a certain set of assumptions, ones that I unpacked with the help of the mystery that I discovered in my empirical material.

In seeking to explain the mysteries in my empirical material—of freedom and control—I mobilised the empirical material as a “dialogue partner” with which to talk to the theoretical assumptions found in consumer culture theory (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014, p.3). I entered into a dialectical interrogation between the position posited in the extraordinary experience literature (more

on the side of freedom, choice, fun and play) and other, more structural, theoretical standpoints advocated by, for example, Foucault, Rose and other scholars of discipline and control. In seeking to explain the mysteries in my empirical material then, I also challenge the extraordinary experience literature's underlying assumptions.

Throughout this process of problematising with empirical mysteries, the researcher must evaluate alternative theoretical assumptions and ask whether they are likely to generate a theory that will be regarded as interesting by the target community (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014). For this particular research there were two potential target communities: (1) scholars of the consumption, especially scholars of the consumption of extraordinary experiences, might find in this book new ways to understand their subject; (2) endurance runners might find that my research enables them to critically examine their own motivation for taking part in endurance running, to become more reflexive and to thereby increase their self-awareness—in short they might find some kind of emancipation in these pages (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014).

## On the start-line

As outlined above, I began my research into endurance running by trying to understand its emergence and evolution as a market. To try to understand what endurance running was all about, I read novels, biographies, blogs, magazine articles and academic studies about endurance running and endurance runners. I joined online fora and discussion groups about marathon running, ultra-distance running, triathlon, duathlon and the relatively new sport of obstacle course racing (OCR). I also listened to endurance runners, their friends and family, and the people that organise, work and volunteer at endurance running events. And I went along to those events, sometimes as a spectator, sometimes as a volunteer, and sometimes as a runner to experience for myself what happens there.

In line with relativistic paradigms (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 2002), I have employed human instruments, qualitative interpretative methods, and purposive sampling to highlight, rather than hide in randomness, special cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 2010). I have not tried to create theories that can be generalised to different groups or contexts—as is typical within a

positivist research paradigm—rather, I have explored how people make sense of endurance running and what it means for them. I wanted to scratch the surface of runners’ accounts of endurance running and to glimpse the motives that they themselves revealed, but of which they were barely aware, in order to identify the influence of macro-level discourses in their micro accounts. I have hence employed interviews and research diaries to gain access to endurance runners’ stories in their own words. This allowed me to explore the underlying rationalities that they use to make sense of their own particular realities; the structures that guide them when they compose and present themselves in the shared context in which we exist; and the vocabularies and discourses on which they draw in order to do so.

The empirical material that has formed the majority of the analysed material in this study is made up of:

- 14 interview texts, generated through open ended interviews with 16 research participants—approximately 463 pages of transcribed text;
- 505 diary entries from 21 participants—approximately 470 pages of written text and images gathered over a nine-month period.

These participants are all current or former endurance runners. Some of the participants are also endurance running coaches and organisers of endurance running experiences. I recruited research participants by advertising in my personal and professional networks, on running bulletin boards and in Facebook groups. I used a purposive sampling technique to select endurance runners who demonstrate different levels of commitment in different types of endurance running. In other words, people who are beginning to train for a first event have competed in one or more events, or who compete regularly in marathons, ultra-distance runs, triathlons, or obstacle course races. A snowball sampling technique was also employed; participants connected me with friends or acquaintances they thought would be willing to take part, or invited me to bulletin boards or Facebook groups from where further participants were recruited. Friends, colleagues, and even strangers, who heard about my study frequently suggested that I speak to people they knew who were involved in endurance running. After making initial contact with potential participants, I explained the nature of the study and asked if they would be willing to participate. Four participants kept diaries as well as being interviewed. The other 29 *either* took part in interviews or kept diaries.



## Research participants

**Table 1: Diarists [21]**

TRAINING FOR FIRST MARATHON	
Céline	Female, Australian
MARATHON RUNNERS	
Ashley	Male, British
Amelia	Female, American
David	Male, American
Gene	Male, British
Leon	Male, Swedish
Margaret	Female, American
Tony	Male, British
Winona	Female, British
ULTRA-DISTANCE MARATHON RUNNERS	
Barry	Male, Australian
George*	Male, Swedish
James*	Male, British (former runner, injured)
Jenny	Female, New Zealander
Katrina	Female, British
Lovisa	Female, Swedish
Matthew*	Male, American
Nils	Male, Swedish
Robin	Male, American
TRIATHLETES	
Andrew	Male, British
Ben*	Male, Danish (also marathon runner)
Bradley	Male, Swedish

**Table 2: Interviewees [16]**

<b>TRAINING FOR FIRST MARATHON</b>	
Beverly	Female, American
<b>MARATHON RUNNERS</b>	
Jack	Male, American
Shane	Male, British (also triathlete)
Wes	Male, British
<b>ULTRA-DISTANCE MARATHON RUNNERS</b>	
George*	Male, Swedish
James*	Male, British (former runner, injured)
Jackie	Female, British (also coach)
Matthew*	Male, American
Richard	Male, British (also coach)
Sara	Female, American (former runner, injured)
<b>TRIATHLETES</b>	
Ben*	Male, Danish (also marathon runner)
Clara	Female, British
<b>OBSTACLE-ADVENTURE RACERS</b>	
Angus	Male, British
<b>EVENT ORGANISERS</b>	
André	Male, Swedish (OCR organiser)
Simon	Male, Swedish (ultra-distance marathon organiser)
Paul	Male, Finnish (triathlon organiser)

\* Indicates that the individual participated *both* by keeping diaries and as an interview subject.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) suggest that the mystery methodology benefits from a research design in which the research questions and methods are not fixed from the beginning. Rather the researcher should be open to what emerges from the empirical material and willing to let unexpected results guide subsequent enquiry. Hence my research strategy was exploratory in nature and I began with a variety of additional methods for approaching the phenomenon in order to see how the mystery would unfold.

In addition to interviews and diaries, I also collected empirical material via ethnographic and netnographic observations of:

- endurance runners, organisers, volunteers and spectators at a Tough Mudder event in the United Kingdom—I worked as a volunteer at this event;

- endurance runners, organisers, volunteers and spectators at an Ironman triathlon event in the United Kingdom—I worked as a volunteer at this event;
- endurance runners and spectators at a Toughest event in Sweden—my partner participated in this event;
- endurance runners, organisers and volunteers at an ultra-distance race and awards ceremony in Sweden—I participated (ran) in this event;
- a triathlete having her bicycle custom fitted for a triathlon in the UK;
- an endurance runner being fitted for new running shoes in Denmark;
- members of *Running the World*, a closed Facebook group with 19,486 members, over a period of five years;
- members of *Idiots Running Club*, a closed Facebook group with 7,146 members, over a period of five years;
- members of *Malmö Gerillalöpare*, a public Facebook group with 1,955 members, over a period of four years;
- *Tough Mudder*, a public Instagram account with 311,000 followers, over a period of five years.

My use of such a variety of methods for collecting empirical material is not motivated by a desire to triangulate, to prove or corroborate findings, or to reach truth. Rather it is a way to reach a richer and deeper understanding of endurance running by seeing the phenomenon from different perspectives, from more angles, and through the eyes of different individuals, as Scott et al. did in their (2017) study of obstacle course racing. Alvesson and Kärreman emphasise broad and rich empirical material drawn from a variety of methods as key to successful execution of the mystery method. Breadth and richness allow the researcher to “pick up more clues on how to solve the mystery” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011 p.97-8).

In the following subsections, I will give a little more information about each kind of empirical material used in this research.

## Diaries

Individual endurance runners were asked to keep unstructured diaries about endurance running training, events, communications and purchases. I asked them to make notes when training or competing; making purchases of products or experiences; and any other time they had thoughts to share. I also prompted participants, via email reminder, to make diary entries via at approximately weekly intervals. These prompts sometimes contained a question asking about—for example, a favourite running location—and sometimes just asked them to reflect on that day or week's running endeavours. The prompts were a way to remind participants to use their diaries but many of them made frequent entries—as often as every day—as well as responding to my prompts. See Appendix A for examples of email prompts.

A smartphone application called Evernote was used to record the diary entries, which typically took the form of text, photographic images or cartoons, and sometimes included output from various wearable tracking technology, such as GPS watches or smartphone apps. The decision to encourage participants to use a smartphone app to create their diary entries was motivated by a desire to gather material from close to the moment of participation, to get “a first-person description of experience” (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989, p.133) before a great deal of reflection took place. The idea was that this would complement the interview material, which was more reflective. A smartphone is often readily available when a notebook and pencil may not be and, for many endurance runners, a smartphone is the first thing they choose to take with them on a run. Allowing participants to make unstructured entries via their own choice of media was also motivated by the hope that they would contribute data more frequently and more closely in time to the moment when they were actually taking part in endurance running. And this seems to have worked. Several runners took photos while running and commented on them in their diaries.

The majority of runners created diary entries when they were prompted by me, as well as on other notable occasions, such as competition days or events. I kept track of the entries received in a large spread sheet, an extract of which can be seen below. Some runners recorded short entries every day or at least several times a week. Some runners only managed to keep making entries for around six weeks but many kept posting for much longer and ten individuals posted for a full nine months, until I asked them to stop. Nine additional

participants agreed to keep diaries but failed to do so at all or sufficiently to be included in the study—they either submitted fewer than nine diary entries in the nine-month collection period or stopped submitting entries after less than a calendar month. I excluded those diaries from analysis because the material did not provide the depth or richness that I was looking for. See Appendix A for an excerpt of the log of respondents' diary entries.

As well as being treated as empirical material for analysis, diary entries were used alongside ethnographic and netnographic observations to improve my own understanding of how, when and why informants run, and how they consume and communicate in conjunction with their running. This knowledge informed the semi-structured interview guide for the in-depth interviews (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006).

## **In-depth interviews**

In-depth interviews were used in order to gain insights into participants' own understandings of themselves and their endurance running experiences; how they rationalise, justify and make sense of endurance running. I used semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989), to elicit respondents' endurance running stories and explanations in their own words. In this way I attempt to gain an impression of how they construct and make sense of their own and other endurance runners' behaviour, how they perceive other runners, and how they think they are perceived by other runners and non-runners. I tried to explore their reasons for running, who and what motivated them to begin and to continue running, and to understand how their endurance running career looks and feels. I employed a semi-structured interview plan, with themes rather than specific questions, which enabled an open approach to questioning. This allowed me to frame the questions according to the responses of the participant and explore topics as they arose (Ellen, 1984; Thompson & Haytko, 1997) and to let unexpected results guide subsequent enquiry (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

I used projective techniques during some interviews to help me to explore less accessible moments of endurance running. I presented interviewees with images of themselves or data from their wearable self-tracking devices (which they had provided me with via their diaries) and asked them to describe what was happening and what they were feeling at that moment. Projective techniques, such as this, have enjoyed renewed popularity alongside a general

resurgence of qualitative methods in marketing (Rook, 2006) and were used by Belk et al. (2003) to learn about consumer desire. It is not practical to conduct in-depth interviews with endurance runners while they are running but the sense of achievement experienced on completion of an endurance running event—or even a training run—may taint the entirety of a participant's recollections of that experience. It is, therefore, difficult to get answers to questions about how endurance runners feel whilst running. Projective techniques are useful in situations like this, where direct questioning may not prove fruitful (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003), and have helped me to gain an insight into what happens while endurance runners are running.

The longest interview lasted 83 minutes and the shortest 27 minutes, with the majority of interviews being between 60 and 80 minutes in duration. On several occasions, informal conversations continued after I turned off the recorder and on one occasion, I went with the interviewee to buy running shoes after we had finished talking. Interviews were recorded, with the interviewees' permission, and transcribed verbatim so as to preserve the interviewees' own meanings and the nuances of language used. The informal conversations and encounters that followed were recorded in field notes whenever possible.

My interviews could be likened to what Thompson et al. (1989) call phenomenological interviews because they were conversations that yielded a first-person description of a domain of experience. Moreover, the interviews were occasions where experiential rather than objective descriptions of a phenomenon—endurance running—were sought. In the interviews I was searching for answers to the question “why” but I did not ask that question directly. As Thompson et al. (1989) point out, direct questions about why people do things can make them feel defensive. And they do not always have access to the reasons why they do what they do. Instead, I talked with them about when and how they run and what they do when they run. Later, when I analysed runners' accounts, I looked for explanations, rationalisations and justifications for why they run. And it is here, at the analysis stage, that my conception of interviews differs from that of Thompson et al. (1989). Whereas they strive to stay on the existential-phenomenological level, limiting themselves to the lived experience, I use the concept of vocabularies of meaning to connect micro and macro discourses; to account for the why in the stories of what.

## Ethnographic & netnographic observations

Broadly speaking, [ethnography] refers to work that relies primarily upon participant observation ... and that is guided by a concern with understanding the orientations of the people studied, and locating these within local and/or wider contexts.

(Hammersley, 2010, p.np)

Ethnography is an anthropological method that is grounded in knowledge of the local, the particular and the specific (Kozinets, 2002a). It relies on the “acuity of the researcher-as-instrument” (Sherry, 1991, p.572) and is, therefore, inherently flexible and adaptable. “Netnography is ethnography adapted to the study of online communities” (Kozinets, 2002a, p.61). In this research project, both ethnographic and netnographic observations were used to form a general understanding of endurance running in its various forms and were not formally analysed and thematised. I observed and spoke to endurance runners themselves, their supporters, the organisers and the volunteers at several large endurance running events and also in various online communities. As well as my own impressions and deeper understandings of endurance running, I also took away some empirical material from these encounters.

The ethnographic material collected consisted of photos and videos taken with a Go-Pro chest-mounted camera, voice recordings made with an iPhone, auto-ethnographic video diaries made by me during and after running, and approximately 18 pages of written field notes based on my observations. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with a variety of fellow volunteers, endurance runners and spectators while I was carrying out my ethnographic observations. “Ethnographic interviews are short, in situ and impromptu conversations that take place within the constraints of the field site” (Arsel, 2017, p.8) and do not follow the more formal structure of more in-depth interviews. No interview guide was used during ethnographic interviews. I simply had quasi-natural conversations with people that I encountered about topics that presented themselves, with questions that I formulated spontaneously. Ethnographic interviews were not recorded but I documented what I could of these conversations using voice notes recorded in-situ or field notes written after the fact.

Netnographic observations were largely used for background research but when interesting or pertinent threads or discussions arose, the relevant content was saved in the form of screenshots, numbering approximately 96 pages, and was later used to supplement my analysis or to illustrate my arguments. By “pertinent” I mean threads or discussions that added depth to themes observed during more formal analysis of my empirical material.

## **Limitations**

The material and embodied aspects of running were not observed or analysed in this study. People, of course, have physical feelings when they are running. Not just pain but also embodied pleasure and emotional responses. Running can induce chemical changes in the body that lead to particular feelings, the most well-known of which is probably the sense of wellbeing that is sometimes called runner’s high (Dietrich & McDaniel, 2004). It may be difficult to articulate these personal, embodied and material experiences and, therefore, it becomes very difficult to consider them in discursive or text-based research. They would be better studied through some kind of close observation or perhaps an auto-ethnographic study like that undertaken by John Hockey (2006). However, the material and embodied aspects of endurance running are not the focus of this study, which aims to understand the discourses surrounding the consumption of endurance running and of extraordinary experiences more generally. I am, therefore, less interested in the material and embodied aspects of running than in the post-hoc explanations of the same.

The main limitation of contacting potential participants electronically is clear: those without access to email or social media, or those who do not use them often, are likely to be excluded, which potentially skews results. However, the advantages, which include the possibility to reach huge numbers of participants in diverse geographical and social situations, were felt to outweigh this limitation, especially since endurance running appears to be a more or less worldwide phenomenon.

Since endurance running does seem to be a more or less worldwide phenomenon, it was important to gather stories from runners in different geographical locations. I ended up speaking to people from eight different countries but conducted all interviews and collected all diary entries in English language. Two limitations arise from this particular situation. The first is that non-English speakers are excluded from this study. This is not an unimportant



limitation. However, while working within practical and budgetary constraints, there were few options to remedy this situation. The second limitation, I had more control over. In attempting to include a diverse group of respondents, I ensured that English was not the mother tongue of all the participants, which has the potential to limit their ability to express themselves as clearly as they would like. However, most non-native English speakers were comfortable speaking English and were used to doing so on a regular, if not daily, basis. In addition, my ability to speak Swedish was helpful to both Swedes and Danes on the rare occasions when they struggled to say exactly what they wanted. Ironically, the only interview in which I felt the interviewee and I had trouble understanding each other clearly was with a fellow native English speaker!

The quantity of respondents in this study is small when compared with other kinds of research design. This might be regarded as a limitation. However, as highlighted by McCracken, when it comes to selection of respondents, “less is more” (1988, p.17). It is more important in qualitative/interpretive research to work carefully for a longer period of time with a few people than more superficially with many (McCracken, 1988). In other words, spending nine months getting a deep insight into the experiences of 35 runners is preferable to a shorter, shallower investigation of 100. Moreover, the relatively small number of participants meant that I had the possibility to interview people a second time when there were topics that would benefit from follow-up questions. For example, I spoke to Wes before and just after he competed in his first marathon.

## Running laps

The process of analysing the empirical material that makes up this book was iterative in nature. One could liken it to running laps on a track, where one often seems to find oneself back on the start line but yet, hopefully, gets nearer to the finish point with every iteration. The theories that frame this study as well as the analytical strategy of mystery creation and problematisation evolved together during the protracted and repetitive process of analysis. That is to say that I had no fixed theoretical framework before I started to collect and analyse the material. Nor did I have a coherent analytical strategy or even a fixed research question. They emerged as I moved between the empirical material, existing theory and my own theoretical ideas, posing and answering

questions, discovering and resolving mysteries, finding and understanding paradoxes. This kind of abductive reasoning (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) does not necessarily create grand, generalisable theories but, as it turns out, is useful for questioning and reformulating the underlying assumptions of a particular domain of literature—in this case the literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

A chronologically faithful representation of the messy analytical process that created the material for this book would be tremendously taxing for the reader. Hence, I try to explain it here in a way that is understandable for those not lucky enough to be a part of the process themselves. I have been inspired by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015), who explain the process of analysing and theorising from empirical material in three stages: creating, reducing and arguing. In the following sections, I will attempt to elucidate the analytical process employed during this study under the same three headings.

## Creating

The first stages of analysing empirical data are sometimes called the discovery phase (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Swedberg, 2012). To me, this suggests that, by applying the correct analytical methods, a researcher can discover some essential truth in the material. I prefer to think of analysis, especially the early stages, as the work of creating, since it involves interpreting the research participants' texts and creating from them my own meanings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). The empirical material used in this study was created rather than discovered, since “there are as many ways of seeing the data as one can invent” (Dey, 1993, pp.110–111).

The work of creating empirical material starts even before data collection begins when the researcher makes decisions about research questions, potential respondents, and interview guides. Interpretation and analysis of endurance runners' accounts of endurance running started as soon as the first questions were asked and answered, with subsequent questions in later interviews and diaries—sometimes even in the same interview—being adjusted to follow paths of particular interest. However, the first stage of what we might call *analysis proper* could be explained as the work of reading and sorting the empirical material. In this project, the sorting started with a close reading of 463 pages of interview transcripts and 505 pages of diary entries. Close reading began with listening to recordings of the interviews and transcribing them

verbatim, and continued with subsequent readings, in which I employed a part-to-whole reading style. Part-to-whole reading is a technique in which the researcher seeks to develop a holistic understanding of each text as well as to notice similarities between different texts. Earlier texts informed later readings, and, reciprocally, later readings allowed recognition and exploration of patterns not noted in the initial analysis (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). I began to find common subject areas and repetitive themes for further investigation. Since close reading and transcription began before I finished gathering diary entries and interviewing participants, I was able to ask questions about themes that began to appear salient. Hence, the early analysis work informed the ongoing creation of empirical material and helped me to revise my ever-evolving research questions (Arsel, 2017).

Analysis continued with repeated readings and with hermeneutically inspired sentence-by-sentence thematisation of the texts. For me, to thematise is to begin to abstract from the emic meanings—described by research participants—to higher-order etic meanings (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). In practice, this meant reading each line of text and asking, “what is this an expression of?” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.87) or “what is this person really saying?” The answer to the question was recorded as a one-word theme. I searched for what was hidden within and between texts and also examined what remained unsaid, or appeared to be taken-for-granted. In this way, I have tried to avoid the kind of naïve interpretations that are sometimes associated with grounded or phenomenologically inspired studies (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

At times, when creating empirical material, I over-interpreted endurance runners’ accounts of endurance running. Over-interpretations, according to Svensson and Stenvoll (2013), are not something to be avoided in the search for disciplined, systematic and sound interpretations, even if they are often characterised as exaggerations or ideologically biased interpretations. When I talk about over-interpreting, I mean that I apply context or theory from outside the text in order to make sense of that text in novel and interesting ways. Far from being an academic flaw or a symptom of weak research (Svensson & Stenvoll, 2013, p.172), being able to interpret more than the obvious meanings in texts is an important skill for the critical researcher. Obvious or safe interpretations that directly reflect the lived experiences of consumers lead to the reproduction of normalcy whereas informed over-interpretations,

subjective and etically imposed, allow us to play with ideas about what is considered natural and question the taken-for-granted (Holt, 1991; Moisander, Valtonen & Hirsto, 2009). “Insightful interpretation” (Holt, 1991), as long as it is theoretically informed (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), is the very point of critical research.

## **Reducing**

The second stage in analysing my empirical material involved discarding some of the themes and focusing on others for further analysis—“winnowing themes to a manageable few” (Ryan & Bernard 2003, p.85). Initial thematisation had resulted in over 50 different themes. In order to reduce my empirical material, I focused first on those themes which would help to answer my empirical research question—why do people choose to suffer in this way—and then looked for mysteries (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, 2011)—in other words, questions that presented themselves and refused to be easily answered by my pre-understandings or apparent paradoxes that were not simple to resolve by applying existing theory. By trying to solve the mystery, I abductively and reflexively opened up a “dialogue between theoretical frameworks and empiric[s]” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p.1265).

Once I had opened up an interesting dialogue, I then had to close it down again in order to try to arrive at some coherent theoretical insight. Theorising is best understood as a process (Weick, 1995). To move from reducing the empirical material to developing theoretical insights, I iterated around a circular and abductive process that lasted many years. Each time I found a mystery or paradox I looked for existing theory or literature to help explain it. If it could be explained, I went back to the material and looked for different mysteries. If it could not, I explored the assumptions of the existing literature and theory to try to see why they could not explain the mystery. I looped around this process several times, adjusting my research questions, and my theoretical frameworks, with each iteration, trying to understand the accounts in different ways, and creating more empirical material to refine and shape my understanding. Potential theoretical insights were discussed formally and informally with fellow researchers throughout the process.

It was during one such discussion, that the theoretical concept of vocabularies of motive became important. It became evident during the analysis of my empirical material that endurance runners use societal (or macro-level)

discourses and ideologies to make sense of their own individual (micro-level) experiences. Vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940) provided an analytical theory with which to conceptualise the link between the emic micro-level and the etic macro-level. I organised stories, accounts and explanations into groups that seemed to share a similar vocabulary of motive and thereby reduced my 50 empirical themes to three vocabularies of motive. This did not happen immediately. I tried out lots of different themes to try to build coherent vocabularies, eventually settling on three that illustrate how, in motivating their endurance running, runners draw on societal discourses of freedom, achievement and competition. This, in turn helped me to answer my theoretical research question: *how can we understand the consumption of extraordinary experiences as sites of both freedom and control?* The analysis of the particular case can provide insights into the operation of larger societal processes (Giddens, 1984; Thompson & Haytko, 1997) because, when properly understood, micro and particular interactions, events and occurrences are “simultaneously macro and general” (Burawoy, 1991, p.273).

## Arguing

Since data alone cannot constitute a theoretical contribution (Sutton & Staw, 1995), the third stage in analysis, according to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015), is arguing for why the researcher’s particular interpretation of the material should be believable for the reader. In this book, the work of arguing will take place in the following three empirical chapters. In the singular account of endurance running and endurance runners that follows, I do not attempt to propose or prove causal connections. Instead, I focus on meanings and try to piece together interpretations from the particular empirical material I have created into theoretical accounts, which summarise *my* understanding about what is happening. Gherardi and Turner (2002) analogise this process with creating a painting (the theoretical account) from sketches (the empirical material) and emphasise that these theoretical accounts are not lists of experiences but rather one arrangement (of many possible arrangements) of *some* of the elements of those experiences that may be useful to others. This is not to imply that all possible arrangements are equally as good as one another. But, rather than judging this particular arrangement against its capacity to prove facts or to approach truth, it should instead “be judged in terms of its coherence, clarity, completeness and, above all, capacity to convince (Dean, 1999, p.17).

With this in mind, I present the story of endurance running in a particular way in the following three chapters. In each chapter, I present one of the three vocabularies of motive that emerged when I analysed endurance runners' accounts of endurance running the texts. I present each of the respective vocabularies—freedom, achievement and competition—in its own chapter, illustrating each with stories, excerpts and images from the empirical material. In chapter five, the vocabulary of freedom is presented from a fairly emic perspective. By this I mean that the words of the runners seem not to be treated very critically. I present their motives for endurance running without appearing to question or interpret them too deeply. This does not mean that I have not analysed these accounts in a critical fashion, rather that I choose to present them to you, the reader, in this way for rhetorical purposes. I do this so that this first chapter can act as a kind of empirical baseline, which I will refer to in the subsequent two empirical chapters in order to point out the differences between what endurance runners say they are doing when they run and what I think they are *really* up to. In the second of the three empirical chapters—the chapter that concerns the vocabulary of achievement—I begin to tell a more critical story with the empirical material. I question the vocabulary of freedom intertextually by juxtaposing its claims of escape with the ideas in the achievement vocabulary, which allows us to unravel the earlier conception of endurance running as freedom. In the third and final empirical chapter—on the vocabulary of competition—the story is built on even deeper and more critical interpretations of endurance runners' accounts, which might even be considered over-interpretations. By critically illuminating the darker sides of endurance running in this chapter, I attempt to bust the romantic myths around the consumption of extraordinary experiences.

I have, at times in the following empirical chapters, included quotations and ideas from outside of academia—for example, from popular culture, such as television programmes, magazine stories, or advertisements. These are not data in a traditional academic sense but are used to illustrate a point in a way that makes the reading “thicker, more colourful and hopefully more pleasant” (Ulver-Sneistrup, 2008, p.99).

The following table summarises the three vocabularies of motive that you will read about in the subsequent three chapters.

**Table 3: Summary of vocabularies of motive**

VOCABULARY	FREEDOM	ACHIEVEMENT	COMPETITION
<i>In this vocabulary, endurance running is described as...</i>	Pleasureable Emancipatory	Measured & quantified Objectified & comparable Having exchange value	Non competitive but, simultaneously, competitive
<i>And endurance runners are conceptualised as...</i>	Liberated Connected with others	Productive Efficient Successful	Enterprises competing with others in social life
<i>Discourse/ideology implicated in this vocabulary:</i>	Depictions of endurance running in popular culture suggest that running is a time off from all the things we usually worry about and a place where one can be one's true self without pretence, rules or expectation.	Neoliberalism is a political ideology that prioritises the market as an ideal model for the resolution not only of economic problems but also of social ones. In this discursive milieu, endurance running achievements have exchange value.	A discourse of sportsmanship, which makes heroes of those who sacrifice in order to help their rivals, informs the vocabulary of competition.  Endurance runners internalise an ideology of competition from dominant neoliberal discourses.
<i>Theories/literature streams that shed light on this vocabulary:</i>	Consumption of extraordinary experiences	Productive leisure Financialisation of daily life Homo economicus su cognito	Impression management Precarity of employment Entrepreneurial subjectivity

## 5 Vocabularies of Freedom

Freedom is a slippery concept. Historians of ideas have recorded 200 senses of the word, according to Isaiah Berlin. In his aptly named (1969) essay, he focuses on just two of these: positive and negative freedom. Berlin suggests that negative freedom is *freedom from* the constraints and coercion of everyday life, which impinge upon the individual's ability to feel personal liberty. Positive freedom, however, is the *freedom to* choose for oneself. Both these concepts of freedom, as well as ideas about pleasure, enjoyment, fun and escape, will be touched upon in this chapter as we explore what I call the vocabulary of freedom.

I call this particular vocabulary of motives the vocabulary of freedom because endurance running is described as something that people freely choose to do (positive freedom). They choose to do it because they want to, because running is a pleasurable and sometimes even joyful experience for them. However, the concept of negative freedom is also important in the vocabulary of freedom. Endurance running, according to runners, takes place in times and spaces that are separate from and unconstrained by the demands of work and other social expectations, such as family life, child care, etcetera. In this way, endurance running is described as a space of negative freedom (freedom from), and a time to feel liberated.

The freedom vocabulary echoes the descriptions of extraordinary experience found in CCT literature (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Like the extraordinary experiences from literature, endurance running is described as a restorative experience; one that offers a liminal space for *communitas*<sup>3</sup> with nature and with like-minded individuals.

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<sup>3</sup> I understand Turner's (1969) concept of "communitas" to mean something like *a sense of communion*. It is also described as "transcendent group camaraderie" (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993, p.11) or connecting with others through shared experiences and goals or



Freed from the shackles of everyday life and returned to their more primitive essence, endurance runners, are strong and heroic and are free to commune with others in a more honest and primal way.

## Negative & positive freedom

While non-runners often imagine endurance running to be painful, endurance runners themselves typically expressed a different understanding. A vocabulary of motives that included pleasure, enjoyment and fun was widely used by runners when I asked them why they ran. Endurance running is a time and space of leisure, clearly separate from work and other compulsory obligations, such as family commitments, menial work or chores. Running is an opportunity to get away from it all, a welcome break, an escape, and a time when one can return to a more primitive essence, commune with nature, and forget the expectations of social interaction.

Simon is a teacher, a parent to two young girls, and an ultra-distance runner. He first started running in order to rehabilitate his body from an injury. “I went to rehab a lot so I did a lot of running and all of a sudden I was up in the region of how many kilometres you need to do a week to run a marathon,” Simon told me in our interview. “Many people have this thing of one day I’ll run a marathon. And I realised, hey, now I have a chance. So I did it and [...] found a new passion.” Simon has been running ever since and now organises his own 100-kilometre ultra-distance run in Skåne (southern Sweden).

When he talked to me about endurance running, Simon often used a vocabulary of freedom. He described ultra-distance running as a joyful experience. “It just gives you basic joy I think.” And went onto explain that this joy stems from a feeling of freedom. The kind of freedom Simon talks about is negative freedom, in Berlin’s (1969) terms—freedom from the constraining and coercive effects of the everyday. When he runs, Simon is freed from the anxieties that occupy his thoughts during his daily life. He does not have to think about things that he normally feels obliged to consider, such as

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performances of a transformative nature (Arnold & Price, 1993, Turner, 1969). We will come back to the idea later in this chapter.

rearranging his home or painting the walls, but instead is free to ponder more ephemeral matters, such as “the meaning of life”. “You can think. You can ponder. You’re free to daydream. And you can actually finish your thoughts.”

I put my race on so most people [competitors] see the sunrise at one of the highest points in Skåne. And it’s just like magical. It really is. I think most people sort of think about God, religion at that moment. And that’s the meaning because they’re beautiful and you won’t go to these places in your busy city life.

(Simon, ultra-distance race organiser)

We can interpret Simon’s last sentence in two different ways. When he talks about “places” that we don’t usually go to, we can understand these places as both physical places and experiential places. Simon literally says that runners do not, as a rule, get to go to these beautiful, picturesque places in their everyday lives, that physically being there is unusual or special. However, he also seems to suggest that runners are in an experientially different or unusual place when they are consuming this extraordinary experience, a space in which they are (negatively) free, liberated from the constraints of everyday life.

The joy Simon feels when running and the love he has for this extraordinary experience can also be understood as part of the vocabulary of freedom. The enjoyment he gets from running is heavily linked to, if not derived from, the sense of freedom he experiences. When he runs, Simon feels free from the demands of regular life (negative freedom in Berlin’s terms) and free to choose to focus on himself (positive freedom). He is in a liminal space of antistructure (Turner 1969) in which he can transcend and escape the burdens of everyday life.

Simon’s feeling of being freed from the confinement of his everyday life resonates with descriptions of negative freedom (*freedom from*) found in other studies of extraordinary experience (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Kozinets, 2002b; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). For example, Schouten and McAlexander’s Harley Davidson owners also see their extraordinary consumption experience as a space of liberation, or “*freedom from* [...] the various sources of confinement

(including cars, offices, schedules, authority, and relationships) that may characterise their various working and family situations” (1995, pp.51–2, emphasis added). The Harley promises total freedom, juxtaposed with the reality of daily life, which usually represents a variety of constraints and restrictions.

Simon’s accounts also resonate with Belk and Costa’s descriptions of the extraordinary experiences of mountain men, who “form temporary consumption enclaves focused on reenacting the 1825-40 fur-trade rendezvous held in the Rocky Mountain American West” (Belk & Costa, 1998, p.218). The carefree nature of their rendezvous experience is juxtaposed with the “burdensome bureaucracy and authority” that belong in the outside world (1998, p.225); with competition for status, “worldly success”, “material achievement” (1998, p.234), “government bureaucracy, rushed schedules, and imposed obligations (1998, p.235). The mountain men seek and find freedom in the primitive nature of the extraordinary experience because they feel that freedom has “disappeared from contemporary daily life” (1998, p.230). When they adopt a carefree attitude and take part in the experience, the mountain men shut out the demands of the workaday world and feel a sense of negative freedom and escape, just like Simon does.

In the following subsections, we will discuss how both negative and positive concepts of freedom manifest in the vocabulary that endurance runners use to account for their extraordinary consumption interests.

### **Negative freedom: Liminality and antistructure**

In the CCT literature, the emancipatory and restorative nature of extraordinary consumption experiences is explained with recourse to Turner’s (1969) concept of liminality (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Liminal times and spaces are those that are demarcated from ordinary life, where normal demands and expectations are inverted or suspended, and where individuals often undergo a transformation (Turner, 1969). They are spaces of antistructure (Turner, 1969), as opposed to the everyday world, which consists of structure. Among endurance runners, there is a strong suggestion of liminality and antistructure when they use the vocabulary of freedom, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

It's very hard to find time in your life for things you do for their own sake and not for the sake of something else. I think running has become that for many people; a little corner of your lives where you can say, 'Right. Now I'm gonna do this just because I want to do it and for no other reason.

(Rowlands in Richardson, 2014, sec.[00:45:10])

In the excerpt above, Rowlands explains endurance running as a liminal moment, “a little corner” of life, in which runners are unburdened by all the constraints of everyday life. This is, in Berlin's terms, negative freedom; freedom from coercion and the need to satisfy external demands. George expresses similar liminal sentiments in the following excerpt, in which he describes the feeling of negative freedom he experiences when taking part in an ultra-distance desert run. George's negative freedom is freedom from the things he is typically coerced to do in his normal life. It is perhaps interesting to note that while some people might find the experience of walking the dog to be liberating (a negative freedom), George describes it as constraining, as something he has to do.

In the desert race, you get to the finish line, you lay down at the camp and the only thing you have to do is to recover until the next day. But if you get home, there are other things you do. Dinner with the family. Maybe you have to walk the dog in the evening.

(George, desert runner)

Rowlands and George both use a vocabulary of freedom to describe running as a liminal space of emancipation from societal norms and obligations (negative freedom). This description/vocabulary resonates with the accounts of extraordinary experiences found in the consumption literature, where the concept of liminality has been used extensively to make sense of extraordinary experiences and their transformative effects (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). In the excerpts, we see hints of endurance running as a carnival, a time out of time where social expectations are removed or at least subverted (e.g. Bakhtin, 1984; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Kozinets, 2002b; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017) and individuals temporarily find freedom or escape. This is negative freedom in Berlin's (1969) terms. But, this negative freedom opens up space

for positive freedom. The negative freedom of the liminal space allows for a positive freedom, a freedom to commune with others and with nature in a way that is impossible in ordinary life with its status rules and hierarchies. It is the subversion of expectations in liminal spaces that allows for *communitas* with nature and with others who share the experience. In the shared liminal experience people, temporarily freed from the status games and stifling norms of normal life, can make strong interpersonal connections.

In the following two sections, we will see how the *communitas* often described by scholars of extraordinary experience is also described by endurance runners when they employ a vocabulary of freedom.

### **Positive freedom: *Communitas***

“*Communitas*” essentially means a sense of communion. It is also described as “transcendent group camaraderie” (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993, p.11) and can be understood as making a connection with others through shared experiences and goals or performances of a transformative nature (Arnold & Price, 1993, Turner, 1969). *Communitas* relies on notions of negative freedom because it takes place in liminal spaces of antistructure where individuals are free from the demands of the everyday. However, to experience *communitas* is to experience positive freedom. Once they are removed from the status and hierarchy games of everyday life, individuals are free to be their true selves and to commune with each other and with nature in a raw and honest way (Arnould & Price 1993).

Several endurance runners explained to me, in interviews, that the shared experience of endurance running creates a bond or sense of community with other endurance runners. They have a shared understanding of things that outsiders think is strange or “crazy” and it is this feeling of shared experiences and communion that keeps them running.

James is an international ultra-distance marathon runner who first became passionate about endurance running when he was at school. James rediscovered endurance running when he was in his thirties after retiring from playing rugby. He started running again to keep fit and lose some weight and says that he could not stop. “I kept challenging myself to see how far I could go and, [...] aged 40, won my first international vest for [my country]”. Now closer to 50 years old, James still represents his country and is an international

champion in 24-hour running<sup>4</sup>. In his spare time, he runs in the mountains. During our interview, James explained to me that one of the things he enjoys most about endurance running is the community. The people with whom endurance runners share their extraordinary experiences support each other throughout the experience and often remain friends afterwards.

I think one of the things that stands out for me as well [...] is the sense of community. And you can do one of these runs with one person that you've never met before and you meet them on a run and then they become a sort of friend for life. I think there is a really strong community in that. [...] And I think that's a really nice aspect of the sport. I think because everybody knows what you go through and there is some pain and suffering involved and real effort of will to overcome it, everyone is very supportive.

(James, ultra-distance runner)

Extraordinary experiences create “temporary bonds of friendship with [...] strangers that are profound and intimate” (Arnould & Price, 1993, p.25). And shared edgework (Lyng, 1990), such as running together up a mountain or working a river raft through dangerous rapids, quickly creates a sense of communion (Arnould & Price, 1993). Many CCT scholars theorise this sense of communion using Turner’s (1969) concept of “communitas” (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Communitas is “transcendent group camaraderie” (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993, p.11) or connecting with others through shared experiences and goals or performances of a transformative nature (Arnold & Price, 1993, Turner, 1969).

In the case of endurance running, the sense of communitas generated in the shared extraordinary experiences may be especially strong because it also serves to separate those who have experienced them from those who have not. A lack of communitas, or shared experience, with people from outside can leave runners feeling isolated from non-runners, who are not able to understand the peculiarities of the experience. Specifically, many non-runners cannot

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<sup>4</sup> 24 hour running is a type of ultra-distance running in which competitors run as far as possible in a 24-hour period, often on a short loop of between 400m and 3km. The current record for is 304km (for men) and 252km (for women) (Runtastic Team, 2015).

understand why endurance runners willingly choose to suffer the pain and privations of long-distance running. For Sara, other endurance runners who had shared similar extraordinary experiences were often the only people who could understand her and her lifestyle when she was competing at a high level. Non-runners, who lacked the shared experience, could not understand that she had “to go to bed at 8 o'clock on a Saturday night and wake up really early.” While the extraordinary experience literature focuses on the rapprochement aspect of *communitas*, the consumption community literature also points to the exclusion or isolation that results from the feeling of being misunderstood by non-members of the community (Englis & Solomon, 1997; Muñiz Jr & Hamer, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Endurance runners could even be understood as a threatened community. Like the mac users in Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) study of brand communities, they display cohesion, trepidation, and sometimes anger at non-members who do not understand them, while also enjoying, or even revelling in their outsider status (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p.420). Simon expressed his concern that non-runners do not understand his endurance running hobby and think he is crazy for doing what he does. But his feeling of exclusion from non-runners seems to deepen Simon's sense of *communitas* within the endurance running community. Only those people with whom he has shared the extreme experience of endurance running understand on a deeper level and do not have to question his motivation or desire to run.

Well I always get the same comment: "Are you crazy?" [...] They always say the same: "Are you crazy?" And some people mean it. [...] They uh... They don't understand me. That's why I have the community. [...] That's a pretty nice feeling because you stand there before a 48-hour race and all the guys (all the 12 guys), they know why. They don't question you. [...] They don't question your motives because they're the same. And that feels good because I'm very passionate about long-distance running and I always have to explain with the friends and say, "No, no. It's not that crazy. It's not that stupid. It's not that bad." and stuff like that.

(Simon, ultra-distance race organiser)

The concept of oppositional brand loyalty, in which members of a community derive solidarity through a shared opposition to competing brands, might shed some light on this matter, even if we are talking about a community that forms around a consumer experience rather than a brand *per se*. Oppositional brand loyalty builds on the idea that consumption is used to mark one's inclusion and exclusion from various lifestyles (Englis & Solomon, 1997; Muñiz Jr & Hamer, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Hence, while community-building discourses can lead to the emergence of shared norms, understandings and identities they can also be experienced as constraining and separating a person from those outside the community (Rumelili, 2003; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). The (negative) freedom and separation *from* regular life and ordinary people serves to deepen the bonds of *communitas* that runners are (positively) *free to* form with one another.

## The role of nature in the freedom vocabulary

Physical proximity to nature is a key motif in the freedom vocabulary and contributes to both positive and negative senses of freedom. As highlighted by Simon earlier in this chapter, being outdoors and in proximity to nature emphasises the (negative) freedom and separation from everyday life and the liminal character of endurance running. Simon contrasted the joy and freedom of running with his otherwise damaging, modern, urban existence, or “busy city life” as he called it. During our interview, he described seeing the sunrise from the top of a hill as magical and went on to explain that one of the main attractions of endurance running for him is getting “out there” to “appreciate the nature”. Jackie also referred to nature, or “beautiful countryside” in her words, as a motive for running. She emphasises negative freedom when she talks about being in nature as escaping or “leaving everything behind”.

Well, you just answered one of your own questions. You asked us why we do it. Well, the more you go, the more you want to keep going. [...] Especially if you've got a nice day, you're in beautiful countryside, there's nothing better than, leaving everything behind.

(Jackie, ultra-distance runner)



The role of nature in contributing to a negative sense of freedom is well documented in studies of extraordinary experiences, such as surfing (Canniford & Shankar, 2013), adventure sports (Ray, 2009), walking in the countryside (Edensor, 2000), historical reenactments (Belk & Costa, 1998), river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993) and Harley Davidson motorcycling (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Merely being in natural or primitive settings is said to be rejuvenating (Arnould & Price, 1993) and can help to offset the negative effects of contemporary work life (Canniford & Shankar, 2013), the inauthenticity of urban life (Edensor, 2000), and the general ills of civilisation (Ray, 2009).

Nature also contributes to the positive sense of freedom experienced by endurance runners, by giving them a feeling of control over themselves. Having the power to control oneself and one's body in the face of great danger from nature is a kind of positive freedom, since positive freedom, in Berlin's terms, is about "who is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?" (1969, p.122). In the following excerpt from her blog, Stephanie's highlights the challenges of the natural environment and the endurance runner's desire to manage and control those challenges and herself.

The scraggly mountains seem to slowly stand to attention, rising in height the more they come into view while runners scan the rocky faces in the hopes of finding the elusive trail to the top. That is when the conversation between me and the mountains really begins. Sometimes they flaunt, other times they tease, and occasionally they chew me up and spit me out. [...] Nothing is certain and the only thing you can hope to control is your resolve to get to the finish.

(Case, 2018)

Theorists have suggested that consumers of extraordinary experiences might be seen as edgeworkers and this might explain the capacity of extraordinary experiences to generate feelings of freedom. Activities that can be classed as edgework share a central feature: "they all involve a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence" (Lyng, 1990, p.858). Death-defying activities, like those undertaken by skydivers (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993), are among the most obvious types of edgework. However, the *edge* or boundary that the edgeworker confronts may

take forms other than life versus death: for example, “consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity”, or control versus chaos (Lyng 1990, p.858).

Edgework theorists have posited that edgeworkers achieve feelings of freedom by entering a state of flow. The urgency of the physical work involved in responding to danger means that the individual must concentrate intensely on the present. This, in turn, inhibits the capacity for self-reflection and the endurance runner loses awareness of herself as a social actor (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). This is freedom in the negative sense proposed by Berlin (1969). However, I suggest that the challenges provided by nature are also relevant in creating a positive sense of freedom in endurance running. The challenges may appear minor, such as rain during a marathon, or major, such as the extreme temperatures during a desert run, but each will force the edge worker to test the limits of their bodies and minds. Successfully overcoming the challenges posed by nature can give the endurance runner the feeling that she herself is the source of control that determines what she does and what she is and, hence, that she is positively free (Berlin 1969).

## The freedom vocabulary in popular culture

There are many good examples of the freedom vocabulary in popular cultural representations of endurance running, such as those found in the work of Matthew Inman and Haruki Murakami. Matthew Inman is a popular blogger and cartoonist whose favourite subject is endurance running. In a series of cartoons, he tries to explain the various reasons why he takes part in endurance running. One of those reasons is to find the void. The void is described as a place where those of us who feel we have a lot of noise in our heads—thoughts, worries and anxieties about life’s varied and constant expectations—can experience quiet. The idea of (negative) freedom from social expectations or constraints through endurance running is epitomised in the idea of the void.

Maybe it’s superficial. Maybe it’s just adrenaline and endorphins and serotonin flooding my brain. But I don’t care. I run very fast because I desperately want to stand very still. I run to seek a void. The world around me is so very, very loud. It begs me to slow down, to sit down, to lie down. And the buzzing roar of the world is nothing compared to the noise inside my head. I’m an

introspective person, and sometimes I think too much, about my job and about my life. I feed an army of pointless, bantering demons. But when I run, the world grows quiet. Demons are forgotten.

(Inman, 2016)

Inman feels so strongly about the demands of social life that he refers to them as demons. And he uses the extraordinary experience of running to free himself from these demons; to press pause on the noisy, demanding soundtrack of life. This fits with Lyng's (1990) idea of endurance running as a kind of edgework that generates negative freedom through the achievement of a state of flow. Intense concentration on the present and lack of capacity for self-reflection allows the runner to lose his or her awareness of herself as a social actor and to forget the constraints of social order (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), thus leading to a pleasurable sense of escape or emancipation from the everyday.

Haruki Murakami is an author and an endurance runner who, in 2007, published a memoir in which he writes about his participation in marathons, ultra-marathons and triathlons. Like Inman, Murakami describes how he also runs long distances in order to seek the freedom of the flow void.

I'm often asked what I think about as I run. Usually the people who ask this have never run long distances themselves. I always ponder the question. What exactly do I think about when I'm running? [...] I don't think of anything worth mentioning. I just run. I run in a void. Or maybe I should put it the other way: I run in order to acquire a void. People's minds can't be a complete blank. Human being's emotions are not strong or consistent enough to sustain a vacuum. What I mean is, the kinds of thoughts and ideas that invade my emotions as I run remain subordinate to that void. Lacking content, they are just random thoughts that gather around that central void.

(Murakami, 2007, pp.16–17)

If they are lucky and achieve the state they seek, running long distances with their bodies allows Inman and Murakami's minds to stand still and empty—to become void—and to resist the thoughts and anxieties that push their way in, unbidden, when the body is less active. In this way they are, apparently, freed

from the constant demands that social life makes upon their minds. They are freed from the everyday rules that they normally have to follow and the games that they spend energy to play. There are, of course, other rules to follow during this escape. They must run. They must follow a route, maintain a pace, and usually attain a goal—perhaps a set distance or time, or both—when they run. By focusing on the physical rules and demands of the run they make normal life disappear, as with many types of play. However, instead of filling the void left behind with other thoughts, like they would when playing chess or football, these endurance runners endeavour to keep their minds empty. This is a transcendent or religious type of escapism, similar to meditation. It is a negative freedom, in Berlin's (1969) terms. A *freedom from*.

The freedom vocabulary is so prevalent in popular culture that I would argue that it represents a discourse, or perhaps even an ideology, in the running subculture. A discourse of freedom underpins the symbolism in a great deal of the advertising that seeks to make endurance running appealing. This is made quite explicit in the fictional Nike advertising campaign from the movie *What Women Want* (Meyers, 2000). In a television commercial, developed by the advertising executives in the movie, a woman runs alone on a wet road at dusk. Meanwhile, a voiceover explains clearly the imagery behind the advertisement for running shoes.

You don't stand in front of a mirror before a run and wonder what the road will think of your outfit. You don't have to listen to its jokes and pretend they're funny in order to run on it. It would not be easier to run if you dressed sexier. The road doesn't notice if you're not wearing lipstick, does not care how old you are. You do not feel uncomfortable because you make more money than the road. And you can call on the road whenever you feel like it, whether it's been a day or even a couple of hours since your last date. The only thing the road cares about is that you pay it a visit once in a while. Nike. No games. Just sports.

(Meyers, 2000)

The commercial targets women and so has a feminine slant, for example, the emphasis on lipstick, but sums up the kind of language that was invoked when both men and women in my study talked about endurance running using a vocabulary of freedom. Running, it is suggested, gives runners (negative)

*freedom from* all the things they usually have to worry about; from stultifying societal norms, games and pretence. Running is a place where one can find a freedom that is not available in real life; a (positive) *freedom to* be one's true, essential or primitive self without pretence, rules or expectations. The freedom vocabulary was the one most readily invoked by the endurance runners in this study when they talked about why they run. Its prevalence in popular culture means that it is an easy choice when runners want to convince a social audience of the acceptability or appropriateness of what they do.

## Freedom discourses & vocabularies of freedom

Through a Foucauldian governmentality lens, we can see discursive as well as phenomenological explanations for why endurance running is understood and described as a space of freedom. The discourses of freedom found in popular descriptions of endurance running are internalised by endurance runners and reproduced in their accounts of running. As people learn the physical practices of extraordinary experiences—for example, how to run long distances, or how to act like 19<sup>th</sup> century mountain men—they also learn, through the discursive representations of those experiences, how to talk about them. They learn the acceptable vocabularies of motive with which to explain what they do and why they do it. This process was highlighted by Crossley in his (2006) study of gym-goers. Crossley argues that participants *learn* that exercise is pleasurable. They “learn to frame muscular ‘burn’, stiffness, breathlessness, a pounding heart and exhaustion as ... pleasures” (2006, p.40). Like gym-goers, endurance runners *learn*, thanks to biopedagogical discourses, to focus on the pleasure or satisfaction of running rather than the exertion and effort, (Sassatelli, 2010). At the same time, they learn—from other runners, from media, and so on—the correct vocabulary with which to explain and motivate what they are doing.

Since popular representations of endurance running, like the three outlined here, frequently employ a discourse of freedom, people learn to make sense of their own experiences and to talk about them using the same kind of vocabulary. It is no surprise then that we see the freedom discourse mirrored in endurance runners' own accounts of endurance running. In their study of river rafters, Arnould and Price (1993) also observed discourses that informed participants how they should feel about the extraordinary experiences ahead of them. They referred to these discourses as “cultural scripts” (Arnould and

Price, 1993, p.24). While the form of the experience—river rafting or endurance running—might be unusual, the cultural script that accompanies the experience is not. Arnould and Price suggest that the freedom script, or discourse, is something that is actively sought by consumers in search of extraordinary experiences.

It is perhaps worth noting here that, although endurance running and other extraordinary consumption experiences are described as an escape from the stifling rules, expectations and demands of everyday life, they are, in fact subject to their own rules, expectations and demands. Extraordinary experiences might feel playful but play, in the ludic<sup>5</sup> sense at least, is also subject to rules, expectations and demands. Play only works if the players follow the rules that are necessary to sustain the liminal space of the game and to keep the real world at bay. Endurance running, too, is full of rules and expectations. For example, rules demand that endurance runners follow the designated course and do not take short cuts. There is an expectation that a runner will have trained to ensure that she is reasonably likely to complete the race she has entered without injury. To do otherwise would be considered irresponsible and would place an unnecessary burden on the race organisers and resources. The rules of endurance running might be different but they are not absent but the fact that endurance runners talk about endurance running experiences as freedom from rules and expectations is further indication that these are learned vocabularies.

## Summary and concluding remarks

The vocabulary of freedom represents how most people, especially runners but even non-runners, spontaneously describe the experience of endurance running. It is the way that endurance running is portrayed in media and advertising. And it is how most literature on extraordinary experiences has portrayed them: spaces of (negative) freedom from the demands and rules of

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<sup>5</sup> “*Ludus*, is a form of play defined by its rule-following characteristic, such as in soccer, not using the hands to score a goal, or, in chess, following the specified moves for each piece” (Kjeldgaard & Bode, 2017, p.26).

everyday life where individuals are (positively) free to commune with each other in more honest and primitive ways.

In consumer culture theory (CCT) literature, extraordinary experiences are often understood according to anthropological ideas about rituals (Turner, 1974). The extraordinary experience is a liminal spaces that is free from normal rules, like the medieval carnival (Bakhtin, 1984; Rhodes, 2001). But just because some of the norms and expectations of everyday life are flaunted during an extraordinary experience, does not mean there are no rules or expectations at all. In any subculture, there are expectations about behaviour, relationships, appearance, and so on. The 2015 Nettygate incident, which dominated running groups on social media and even made mainstream national media, highlighted expectations and norms within the endurance running subculture about how fast a runner should be and how she ought to look (Carter, 2016). Annette “Netty” Edwards was pulled out of a 20-mile race for being too slow and was allegedly told by a race marshal that the race “wasn’t for people like her”. Many people interpreted the marshal’s words as a comment on Netty’s body shape, which arguably does not look like that of a typical endurance runner. In the ensuing social media storm, Netty was alternatively hailed as an inspiration and vilified as an attention seeker. Nettygate showed us that there are indeed rules and norms to follow in endurance running, and that there are consequences for not following them. Even in the Tough Mudder endurance running event, portrayed by Scott et al. (2017) as a carnival of mud, vomiting and “grotesque realism” (Bakhtin, 1984), there are rules and norms to follow. Tough Mudder participants promise to help each other even at the expense of their own performance in the race and face social censure if they do not comply. The rules may be different but they still exist.

Even if we accept the idea of the extraordinary experience as carnivalesque, there are critical questions to be raised. The ritual of the carnival is experienced as liberation from discipline, where norms are transgressed (Rhodes, 2001). But, from a critical perspective, the carnival does not destabilise the status quo but rather reinforces it. The temporary release from discipline works as a kind of “safety valve”, which actually reinforces everyday norms and protects them from a more thorough critique (Rhodes, 2001). The temporary reprieve allows people to return to normal and things to continue as they were. Perhaps the freedom vocabulary, with which runners learn to describe their extraordinary experience, also has a carnivalesque function for endurance running. Talking

about running with a vocabulary that emphasises “pleasure, choice, agency, confidence and pleasing oneself” (Elias & Gill, 2017, p.64) obscures the self-discipline that is required from runners and frees them to discipline themselves more harshly than they otherwise could.

The freedom vocabulary represents a common sense understanding of extraordinary experience. It is hard for most of us to imagine that we might be compelled to do something that we feel we are choosing freely. The idea that someone or something could be forcing us to choose how we spend our free time seems ridiculous. It smacks of communism or totalitarianism. And we are used to understanding ourselves as free agents, like the postmodern reflexive, agentic consumer-sovereign conceptualised by CCT. Since the 19th century there has been a general *laissez-faire* attitude from the state towards leisure activities even when it became more interventionist in other areas of life. In other words, “the state might tell you what your children should learn in school; [...] force you to seek counselling if you have trouble with your family; [...] outlaw the cultivation of this or that crop in your garden, or issue a permit to indicate where you may and may not walk” (Rojek, 2009, p.55) but it typically draws the line at interfering explicitly in your free time pursuits because the freedom ideology is powerful. And, since the advent of neoliberal political economics in the 1980s, the state has actively promoted individual freedom and choice as an paramount economic and social principle (Harvey, 2005), making the idea that we might not be free to choose our consumption experiences feel perhaps stranger to the neoliberal subject than to someone from any other era.

Examining the vocabulary of freedom and its associated ideals through a critical lens allows us to see something other than the idyllic escape that runners appear to describe. Even in the vocabulary of freedom, we begin to see hints of compulsion, instrumentality and discipline in endurance running. In one of the excerpts I presented earlier, Simon described endurance running as a joyful experience. He used a vocabulary of freedom to describe how running allowed him to escape from the demands of everyday life and talked about running as being intrinsically rewarding. In the following excerpt though (from later in the same interview), it is less clear whether the joy Simon feels is intrinsic—from the activity of running itself, from the bodily pleasure, from the view, the escape, the freedom—or from the satisfaction of some extrinsic, societal demands.



100 miles is something to be proud of. [...] I think it's because the joy and, yeah, the self-satisfaction you get of doing something that is right, something you think is worthwhile. And actually doing it because there was a doubt that you could do it. Just to do something good and make it. Just basic self-satisfaction and I think that's good. And I think that drives a lot of people too.

(Simon, ultra-distance race organiser)

Simon talks about the pride he feels in completing a 100-mile (160 kilometre) race. He talks about doing something “right”, “good” or “worthwhile”. The choice of words suggests some external judge (society?) of worth and of achievement. Even when Simon talks about the “self” as the judge or measure, it is not pleasure or joy but “satisfaction” that he chooses as the qualifier. He must satisfy, rather than please, himself when he runs. It is not entirely clear in the excerpt, exactly what demands Simon is satisfying but they seem to involve stretching himself, achieving goals that he has set for himself and that he thought were unattainable. Even though he is still using the vocabulary of freedom and talking about joy, it seems less clear here that Simon is talking about running for pure, intrinsic joy. He is talking about achieving goals when he runs because this is a “good”, “right” and “worthwhile” thing to do and because society will recognise and reward him for this. Nevertheless, he seems to have trouble recognising or expressing this, perhaps because the vocabulary he has learned in order to explain his running is connected with joy, pleasure and escape from, rather than fulfilment of, societal demands.

Hardly anyone in this study talked openly about being instrumentally motivated to run. By this I mean that few people told me they ran just because they needed to burn calories and stay in shape. Fewer still said that they ran in order to brag about their achievements on social media or in real-life social situations. And no one at all said they ran just because it looked good on their CV. Nevertheless, we can see elements of instrumentality in accounts of endurance running, even when couched in the vocabulary of freedom, of liminality, of escape and *communitas*. The depiction of endurance running as joyful draws not only on discourses of freedom but also on discourses of discipline. Endurance running may not be as intrinsically rewarding as it is portrayed. The joy that runners think they get from escaping extrinsic demands, may equally derive from their satisfying extrinsic demands. This is something that will be developed in the next two chapters, in which we focus more on the role of external demands, status and discipline in extraordinary running experiences.

## 6 Vocabularies of Achievement

A norm of achievement was widely subscribed to by the endurance runners I met. And one particular vocabulary of motive reflected this. In the vocabulary of achievement, endurance running is measurable and quantifiable. The focus of endurance running and the motive for doing it are linked to specific achievements—times, distances or events, for example. In the vocabulary of freedom, endurance runners describe running for sheer joy; but in the vocabulary of achievement, motives are more concrete. There are aims and goals to fulfil and pleasure is derived from the successful attainment of goals rather than from running itself. Running becomes comparable in the vocabulary of achievement. Endurance runners objectify runs, using quantified measurements to compare their current running achievements with their own—from the past and the future—and with the achievements of others.

All the runners in this study used a vocabulary of achievement when they talked about their motives for running, often stating that they were training for an achievement in a particular event. Those achievements were sometimes tangible—for example, medals, certificates, trophies, headbands—but more often took intangible forms, such as times, records, etcetera. In this vocabulary, endurance running achievements are described as instrumental artefacts. They are used to demonstrate one's capability and are transferable into other apparently unconnected areas of life. For example, being an accomplished endurance runner apparently indicates one's competence as a leader, a manager or perhaps a management consultant. Endurance running achievements can, therefore, be seen to have exchange value.

Interestingly, the achievement vocabulary appears to contradict the vocabulary of freedom in many ways. Motives related to freedom are about escape from the very pressures of achievement, productivity and accomplishment that one often finds referenced in motives related to achievement. One explanation for this could be that when people begin to run, they learn the vocabulary of freedom and, as they progress in their running careers/move further into the

endurance running (sub)culture, they learn the vocabulary of achievement. Most did not seem to experience cognitive dissonance regarding these apparently competing vocabularies.

## The achievement vocabulary

Amelia completed her first marathon in 2011. After having her second child, she decided to compete again—this time in New York. In her first diary entries for this study, Amelia draws on both the vocabularies of freedom and achievement to talk about her running but she puts much greater emphasis on the vocabulary of achievement. In the following excerpt, she describes how she has been trying to gradually improve her fitness levels. Some elements of the vocabulary of freedom are evident—for example, she talks about feeling great and refers to nature. However, we also start to see elements of the vocabulary of achievement here. Amelia is training for a goal. She is preparing for her running season. Each time she runs she feels improvement and this seems to be a source of pleasure. The reference to feeling great does not stem from freedom or escape but rather to a sense of improving her body.

My goal for the last 6 months (after having my second daughter) has been to get in as good shape as I can at the gym, to prepare for my running season come Spring (and nicer weather). [...] That said, every now and then I go out for a run to test my fitness level. I am surprised at how, though my legs feel the impact on the ground, my heart and body feel great. With every run I've done, it's felt slightly easier.

(Amelia, marathon runner)

In the previous excerpt we saw some elements of the vocabularies of both freedom and achievement. But in the next, it is very clear that Amelia is drawing heavily on a vocabulary of achievement. In order to self-track while training for the New York marathon, Amelia used a Garmin GPS sports watch. In the following excerpt, she describes how she is motivated to run by marking her achievements—time and distance—on her Garmin and seeing her progress. Actually, tracking her improvement is more than just a motivator for Amelia. It is a necessity. It is impossible for her to run if she cannot see quantifiable

improvements in her performance. This extrinsic validation is such an important part of Amelia's running that she confesses she would stop running if her Garmin were to run out of batteries.

I can't live without my Garmin. In order to stay motivated to run I need to see my progress, and I measure this in terms of speed. As much as I wish it didn't matter, it just does. [...] Sometimes I make a conscious effort to not look at it at all, and just run for sheer pleasure, but I still need the result recorded to be able to see it at the end. [...] I have had times when my watch runs out of battery during a run, and that just ends it for me.

(Amelia, marathon runner)

In this account, we do not hear about the intrinsic pleasure of running. There is no joy in Amelia's accounts. The pleasure—or perhaps it is only satisfaction—is extrinsic. It comes from quantifying her performance and comparing it with external measures of what is an adequate achievement. Amelia does not seem to run for the joy of it, even though she tries to. The way that she talks about endurance running reveals the ways in which she understands it. For Amelia, running is inextricably linked with notions of achievement and progress. A bad measurement on her device is a bad outcome, regardless of the physical experience of the run.

I am looking at my watch constantly and stressed about my time. I always want to be under 6min/km otherwise I feel disappointed.

(Amelia, marathon runner)

Here we start to see hints of what Giesler and Veresiu (2014) call authorisation. Amelia and the other runners mentioned here draw on expert knowledge to understand what is an acceptable speed, what training they should undertake, and what their achievement goals should be. Amelia is not unique in thinking and talking about running in terms of achievement. The vocabulary of achievement was used often, by all of the endurance runners in this study when they talked and wrote about their running. Chalmers (2006) has suggested that measuring and constraining time and distance is a modernist kind of discipline. She argues that, paradoxically, by imposing their own modernist discipline on

themselves, endurance runners experience a sense of emancipation. However, among runners in my own study, achievement is not described in terms of enhancing the experience of running. Achievement seems to be more important than the experience. The vocabulary of achievement is more dominant than the vocabulary of freedom. This is in line with Keinan and Kivertz's assertion that "consumers tend to overemphasize work and production at the expense of pleasure and consumption" (2011, p.936).

The vocabulary of achievement dominates the vocabulary of freedom in the way that achievements—time, distance, or sometimes difficult terrain—actually replace the word "run" in many conversations about/accounts of endurance running. One respondent in this study notably talked about "*playing* tennis" but "signing up for a 10K" and "signing up for a marathon". He meant, of course, competitive runs that would take place over a distance of 10 kilometres and 42.2 kilometres, respectively. This probably sounds unremarkable because we are quite used to hearing running described in this way but that does not make it insignificant. We do not "play" at running or "escape" for a run. We do not head out for a run because we need a little joy. We go out because we need to train. Training has a purpose. It is part of a vocabulary of achievement. When we talk about endurance running, the achievements are more often in focus than the practice or the bodily experience. The experience of running is colonised by the vocabulary of achievement. When the vocabulary of achievement is used, good and bad runs are described not in terms of enjoyment or pleasure gained, of escape from stress or anxiety, as they would be in the vocabulary of freedom. Good and bad are measured in terms of time and distance. For example, Lucia remarked in her diary: "So actually it became a good week ending in approx. 55 [kilometres]". When asked about her most memorable running experience, Lucia did not describe the enjoyment of a running experience but the satisfaction of reaching a goal set for her by her coach: running 80 kilometres in a 12-hour ultra-distance run.

In previous literature on extraordinary experiences, achievement is conceptualised in two different ways. In one school of thought, achievement has an intrinsic purpose while in another its purpose is extrinsic (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993). In the achievement-as-intrinsic school of thought, a sense of achievement is a key part of what makes an experience extraordinary. In Carú and Cova's (2007) words achieving something is what separates experience from *an experience*. To overcome challenges and surpass one's own

expectations of one's ability, stamina, strength, etcetera is to have an extraordinary experience. Participants in extraordinary experiences describe the *communitas* and group identity that is created by working with others towards shared achievements (Arnould & Price, 1993). Achievement is also said to contribute to the ritualistic, liminal, transformative nature of extraordinary experiences.

We see this achievement-as-intrinsic school of thought in Arnould and Price's (1993) study of river rafting, for example. Chalmers' (2006) seemingly paradoxical idea of freedom through the imposition of modernist constraints also fits into this conception of achievement. Likewise, edgeworkers feel that they have complete control over their mind, body and often environment but only when in a state of flow, which occurs within boundaries with clear goals and immediate feedback on progress (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Crossley's (2006) study of gym goers explained that they felt free to be their *real* selves even while being constrained (Crossley, 2006). Freedom, it is argued, need not necessarily be seen only as "the disavowment of modernist constraints like competition, achievement, measurement, and progress" (Chalmers, 2006, p.15). Chalmers, of course, has a point. Consumers may feel a sense of freedom, or escape, by actually imposing measures and control on their leisure activities. "Fun does not derive from time spent free from all rules: indeed, it is socially organised" (Sassatelli, 2010, p.136).

In a similar argument, Melissa Gregg contends that efforts to achieve productivity are [...] prompted by nostalgia for a time that a clock or stopwatch could determine and define" (2018, p.8). Gregg is talking about knowledge workers rather than consumers of extraordinary experiences but, like Chalmers, she imagines the discomfort derived from the immeasurability of contemporary life. As an academic—a knowledge worker in a field with extremely imprecise metrics and measurements of productivity—I sympathise with this idea. I sometimes long for a job where I could clock in and out and know that I have achieved something during my work day. Instead I followed numerous suggestions for measuring input (time) instead of output since achievement (quality writing) is so vague and hard to discern. However, this kind of achievement is intrinsic in that it is about psychological satisfaction with something—work, a run, an experience. It is for internal consumption as it were. This is not exactly/only what is talked about in the vocabulary of achievement when endurance runners describe their extraordinary running experiences.

In the achievement-as-extrinsic school of thought, achievement plays a more instrumental role. The extraordinary experience is valuable because it generates a measured, objectified achievement that people can share with the world outside themselves, thereby presenting themselves as productive individuals. This school of thought is less common but is key to Keinan and Kivertz's (2011) work on the consumption of collectable experiences and can be seen, to a lesser degree in Scott et al.'s (2017) ethnography of endurance running. The majority of Scott et al.'s analysis focuses on achievement—or overcoming challenges—as a way for individuals to escape the burden of self-awareness and the work of maintaining a self. In this sense they see the role of achievement in extraordinary experiences as intrinsic. However, Scott et al. also note that runners use achievements to “construct a professional self” (2017, p18) or build an “experiential résumé” (p19) at the same time as they are supposedly escaping these kinds of demands through their extraordinary experiences. Constructing a professional self and building an experiential résumé are extrinsic uses of achievement. Scott et al. mention the extrinsic aspect of achievement as a kind of afterthought in their (2017) study of Tough Mudder obstacle course racing, while the intrinsic aspect takes centre stage. In my own study, the extrinsic aspect of achievement appears to be much more salient. In the vocabulary of motive that I call *achievement*, the pain, discomfort, and difficulty of endurance running are discursively transformed into objects of achievement that have value outside endurance running.

Through a critical lens, endurance running achievements are discursively transformed into a kind of currency, and transferred to spheres of life other than sports. They have exchange-value, not just use-value, meaning they can essentially help to buy you things; jobs, clients, and so on. Endurance running achievements are not just objects but economic objects. Endurance runners understand this and, when they are using the vocabulary of achievement, they instinctively make sense of endurance running according to an economic or financial logic; weighing up the potential return on an endurance running investment. As we will see in the following section, in the ways that endurance runners talk about quantifying, validating and valuing endurance running achievements, and in the ways that they use macro-level economic and financial discourses, there are strong hints of market ideology.

The market is a formidable ideology in neoliberal society. Alongside freedom, it is one of the most significant and influential ideas. And the two ideas are inextricably bound, with market freedoms being the harbinger of individual

freedoms. “The neo-liberal enterprise ... is concerned with the application of market rational to all walks of life” (Bradshaw, 2011, p.27). In the vocabulary of achievement, endurance runners quantify and discipline their bodies according to market-mediated measures. Their extraordinary experiences are validated and turned into economic objects of achievement via the act of paying to take part in branded, market mediated experiences. Those achievements are then imbued with exchange value and transferred to non-endurance-running realms where they are used to prove the market-worth of the holder. A market ideology seems not only to permeate the vocabulary of achievement but, by reducing human beings and their actions in terms of economic utility, market ideology also provides a specific kind of neoliberal biopolitical control.

## How achievement plays out

In the vocabulary of achievement, endurance running is understood less as a subjective experience and more as the means to produce endurance running objects—measured, quantified, comparable achievements. Runners often describe these objects in economic terms. An economic or financial discourse underpins the vocabulary of achievement, with productivity and efficiency being important concepts. This discourse shapes how endurance runners understand, justify and rationalise their consumption of endurance running experiences.

### Efficiency

When endurance runners use the vocabulary of achievement, they do not talk about enjoying a run but rather about getting the most out of it. In some cases, endurance runners go so far as to say that they do not enjoy their running experiences at all, or at least that there are significant aspects of it that they do not undertake for enjoyment but for other, instrumental reasons instead. They frequently talk about running, especially training runs, as something that must be endured in order to achieve something else; an investment that will yield a future return.

In our interview, Jack, a marathon runner, told me that he does not enjoy running in itself but only enjoys the feeling of having done it, of having



completed a run: “I don’t like any part of running except finishing” he laughed. Simon, who runs long distances every day in order to train for the ultra-distance runs in which he competes, told me that he does not actually enjoy this time spent training—he would rather spend his time doing more relaxing things—but that he endures his training in order to succeed in running competitions. In his own words, just doing things you enjoy does not “get you anywhere”. It does not yield returns.

I don't like training really. [...] I enjoy competition and um the self-satisfaction that gives but training in itself is just stressful. I really enjoy reading a book and drinking coffee but that won't get you anywhere.

(Simon, ultra-distance runner)

Leon runs shorter training runs than Simon, specifically interval training. He thinks these are boring but he does them because they provide him with results—in other words, they enable him to be a better runner. The training is an investment that yields a return.

Did some interval running for 5.8km after work [...] I really think intervals [are] the most boring form of training. But you can really see results.

(Leon, marathon runner)

Jack, Leon and Simon are clearly using a vocabulary of achievement here when they talk about their running. Here endurance running is not described as joyful, escapist, relaxing or any of the things that were motivators in the vocabulary of freedom. Using a vocabulary of achievement, endurance runners describe investing time and energy in things they do not like because they will see returns on these investments. An economic discourse frames their understandings and explanations.

In the vocabulary of achievement, endurance running is understood in economic terms. Training undertaken and pain endured are understood as investments that runners are happy to make but only as long as those investments produce sufficient returns—for example, “It’s all about

investment. Certainly, with the training, you've got to do your time. You've got to do the hours. You've got to do the miles" (Richard, ultra-distance runner and coach). The results in question, the returns on investments are endurance running achievements—in the form of finishing times, distances covered, or medals received. If the predicted return is not sufficient, the investor will sometimes withdraw her investment. "I'd rather take the decision. I pull out [...] If I saw that I wouldn't make it in 5 hours, I pulled out [...] I rather pulled out than having a marathon over 5 hours" (George, desert runner). Here we see again that economic ideals form a frame of reference by which runners make sense of and rationalise their choices.

In Tumbat and Belk's study of commercialised mountaineering expeditions on Everest, "both guides and clients also often referred to their investments or sacrifices of time and money" in order to justify their individualistic approach to climbing the mountain (2011, p.51). Tumbat and Belk suggest that this kind of thinking stems from the commercial nature of extraordinary experiences; that it is the presence of the market in the experience that accounts for the economic subjectivity among participants. I argue that market logic has permeated our thinking in many areas of life and that the tendency towards economic thinking in extraordinary experiences is indicative of a more general tendency to economic, or entrepreneurial, subjectivity.

## **Productivity**

In the vocabulary of achievement, it is not only endurance running that is subject to an economic logic. We are economic subjects applying an instrumental rationality (Kolodny & Brunero, 2018) to life in general. Free time—time not spent working—is subject to the same ideas about productivity and efficiency that are more commonly associated with work. In the following excerpts, endurance runners are talking about endurance running but their rationalisation seems to apply more widely than that. Endurance running, they seem to imply, should be efficient because all free time should be productive.

During our interview, Simon told me that his "life does not revolve around running" but that he enjoys running and does it for fun. This implies that he makes sense of his hobby using a vocabulary of freedom. Later, though, Simon implied that his free time should be productive. He explained that if he wastes a Saturday, a day when he is free from his job, not being active, he feels guilty.

If I don't run, I don't feel too good about myself. Sort of. If I would waste a Saturday when I do have the time and not [go] running, sort of, yeah, you get a bad conscience or something.

(Simon, ultra-distance runner)

Almost every endurance runner in this study expressed guilt in their running diaries and/or interviews about not running as much as they could have done, which can be interpreted as guilt about being less than fully productive. Even when Ben, a regular competitor in ironman distance triathlons, was too sick to get out of bed due to food poisoning, he felt bad about not utilising his body.

So I did not run and feel very bad about it. [...] I have been in the bed for a [w]hole weekend and not used my body at all.

(Ben, triathlete)

Those who do not use their time productively are commonly described as lazy, “couch potatoes”, or else are incomprehensible. They do not fulfil the economic ideals of neoliberal ideology and are not productive or efficient and are, hence, constructed as immoral or irresponsible. When describing his triathlon training, Shane talked about people who use their leisure time unproductively—partying and sleeping-in instead of training. For Shane, these people are understood as “not doing anything”—in other words, not being productive—and are, therefore, seen as lazy.

You set yourself a goal and once you've done the goal, you've done it. You've cracked it. [...] And you just think about other people sort of like going out at the weekends and being lazy in the mornings not doing anything.

(Shane, triathlete)

Bradley, a regular triathlete, also expressed a similar desire for productivity. In his running diary, Bradley shared with me a photograph of a beautiful lake that he had visited. In the accompanying text, he explained that he could not entertain the idea of enjoying the place without being productive. Just enjoying

the view of the lake is pointless. Life itself is pointless, according to Bradley if one is not fulfilling ideals of productivity.

And what would life be without training[?] Just lying there and watch[ing] the beautiful water? No take a 3 k swim in it!

(Bradley, triathlete)

Consider vacation time, which might be understood as the fundamental opposite of productive time. This, too, should be productive in the vocabulary of achievement. Vacation time, Simon told me, used to be seen by many as a time to do nothing and enjoy the experience of relaxing and unwinding. But now, it is seen as a time to be productive, to achieve something.

20 years ago, you went for a vacation to relax and now it's very trendy you don't go to vacation to relax. You go to do a course in photography, writing, running. You do activities on vacation. Just going there, lying in the sun? Not many people do that.

(Simon, ultra-distance runner)

Even sleep time, which one could hardly imagine could be made productive, can be made useful. George described in his running diary how he puts his sleep time to good use in improving his desert running technique.

Have now started the ultimate preparation for my desert run. I am listening to sleep-learning to become a better runner.

(George, ultra-distance runner)

The concept of productive leisure could be relevant to understanding the economic nature of the vocabulary of achievement. Modern conceptions of leisure place it in the realm of play. It is unproductive, or at least productivity should be incidental and play should take centre stage (Stebbins, 2007). Leisure is undertaken for its own sake—for intrinsic enjoyment—rather than

for instrumental reasons. Just like running in the vocabulary of freedom, the “pleasure is in the doing and not in what has been done” (Guttman, 1978, p.3). Play, in modernity, is an activity of minimal importance for adults (Huizinga, 1949; Seregina & Weijo, 2017). If play does have a purpose in modernity, it is as a counterpoint to work, a release from or reward for hard work. Since modern life arguably alternates “between times/spaces of work and times/spaces of consumption” (Sassatelli, 2007, p.3), this situates leisure activities under a logic of consumption rather than of production. Work is productive. Play is “pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill and often money” (Caillois, 1961, p.125).

However, in contemporary consumer culture, leisure activities are not necessarily separated from work and are not necessarily unproductive or wasteful. In fact, “play is often... enmeshed in market activity, thus complementing work by extending personal market capacity” (Seregina & Weijo, 2017, p.6). In endurance running we see evidence of this kind of thinking when runners use the vocabulary of achievement. The vocabulary of freedom is based on modern conceptions, which build on a non-productive, consumption idea of leisure and play. Meanwhile, the vocabulary of achievement builds on more postmodern ideas, in which leisure activities are not necessarily separate from work and may follow a logic of productivity as well as a logic of play.

In the following extract from his diary, Tony takes the idea of productivity to the extreme. He explains that he sees smiling while running as a sign that he is not being as productive as possible. He is, therefore, happy to see photos of himself without a smile whilst running.

Whenever I am photographed running, I very rarely have a smile on my face and that suits me fine - I don't want to look like I am enjoying the race as if this is the case I am not doing enough!

(Tony, ultra-distance runner)

It is not enough for Tony to merely be productive in his leisure; he must be fully productive, not wasting any energy that could potentially be directed into running more efficiently. It is as if he feels guilty if he is not being maximally productive. Weber argued that the protestant idea of work as a means to

salvation led to individuals proving their faith in productivity. In the vocabulary of freedom, religiosity manifested itself in Simon's description of feeling religious when immersing himself in primitive nature. In the vocabulary of achievement, religiosity appears in the form of the protestant work ethic. Work, for the Calvinists, was the only way to be a good person. This ethic is pervasive in endurance running only now it takes a more neoliberal form. Guilt about being less than fully productive, may be attributed less to a fear of God than to a fear of not being a successful neoliberal citizen—good leader, employable employee, etcetera. Ulver-Sneistrup et al.'s (2011) finding that ordinary, passive consumption is not pleasurable to “foodies” seems to also apply here to endurance runners. “The only way to experience pleasurable consumption is by mobilizing traditional work ethics” (Ulver-Sneistrup, Askegaard & Brogård Kristensen, 2011, p.232).

## Market discourses & vocabularies of achievement

Foucault expressly connected biopower with the marketisation of society. Economic security and risk are key motifs in his conception of biopower (Fleming, 2014). In the previous section we saw how, in the vocabulary of achievement, endurance runners make sense of endurance running using financial and economic discourses. These discourses can be seen as part of a market ideology that pervades contemporary consumer culture. Market ideology functions biopedagogically in the realm of extraordinary experiences. In other words, it disciplines endurance runners by shaping their values and knowledge, as we will see in the following section.

### Quantifying achievement

The vocabulary of achievement is heavily dependent on the ability to measure and quantify endurance running. While it has long been possible to measure the duration and distance of a run, the rise of self-quantification and its associated devices has made it simpler and more common to do so (Lupton, 2016). Self-quantification is a phenomenon that is becoming popular in many spheres of life. Typical examples include steps walked, kilometres cycled, heart rate, and sleep cycles (Charitsis, 2016). Individuals also log manually aspects of their wellness, such as menstrual cycle, mood, diet, and exercise in digital format (Ajana, 2019). Among endurance runners, the use of digital self-

tracking devices is particularly popular. Runners use them in different ways. Some simply measure how far they have run—using GPS technology—and how long it took. Others measure altitude, heart rate, stride, cadence, calories burned, oxygen consumption or recovery time, among other things. Invariably though, self-tracking devices are used by runners to quantify what is otherwise a subjective experience, to objectify a run and to compare it to other running objects. Endurance runners want their devices to demonstrate that they are achieving; running further, moving faster, getting fitter. This is success. This is the point of running, of consuming endurance running experiences: to make each more productive than the last.

I need numbers at the end of any workout (sometimes during): how long? how far? how much weight? how fast?

(Andrew, training for Ironman)

Tracking technologies seem to pull runners back from the experience of the void by reinserting the demands of real life into their emancipatory experiences. Sometimes the demands are literally inserted into the soundtrack of the run as an automated voice interrupts the music playing in one's headphones to announce the distance covered at what speed. Chalmers' (2006) research suggests that tracking and measuring may contribute to the experience of emancipation but there is some contradiction suggested here between the vocabulary of freedom and the vocabulary of achievement, as they relate to tracking and self-quantification.

The trend of self-quantification is a good example of biopower and how individuals deliberately govern themselves. Self-tracking is not only about monitoring, recording, and measuring "elements of an individual's behaviours or bodily functions" (Lupton 2016 p2) but also about guiding them towards optimal behaviours, such as ideal number of steps per day (Charitsis, 2016). People may be motivated to quantify themselves in this way for a number of different reasons—lose weight, get fitter, live longer, etcetera—but typically they review the quantified data in order to improve or optimise themselves, with behaviour being calibrated according to a cost-benefit analysis (Fleming, 2014). Although it is billed as self-knowledge through numbers (Quantified self, 2015), examination is not merely for the purposes of self-knowledge or self-reflection but for adapting oneself to biopedagogical demands and

conditions; structuring various aspect of one's life in order to become a more productive person (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p.104). Here we see clear evidence of what Giesler and Veresiu (2014) call capabilisation. Self-quantification via market mediated products and services, such as Garmin sports watches, allows individuals to manage themselves and their bodies. It is thus made materially possible for them to act according to neoliberal ideals of self-improvement and personal responsibility. Through capabilisation, individuals are incited to improve their performance and productivity and basically to become better versions of themselves (Ajana, 2019).

For endurance runners, measuring and tracking themselves not only helps them to objectify their achievements but also helps to make sure that they are continually improving themselves and that their efforts are being rewarded by better results. A productive subjectivity, the kind of subjectivity that once only governed work lives, seems to have permeated what literature considers to be a space of consumption—extraordinary experiences. The literature on extraordinary experiences describes them as spaces of escape (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Huseman & Eckhardt, 2018), of liberation (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Canniford & Shankar, 2013) from the demands of professionalism and resumés (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). But by studying the vocabulary of achievement used by endurance runners we see an extraordinary experience replete with goals of achievement, measurement and efficiency of which Taylor would have been proud (Saval, 2014).

The externalised representations (objects) of endurance running—trackers, timers, running CVs and other artefacts—function as “normalizing technologies” (McNay, 2009, p.57). They make an intangible experience tangible in the form of digital output (times, distances, Strava awards, titles—such as Ironman) and physical rewards (medals, trophies, certificates). These externalised and tangible representations of endurance running serve to control endurance runners, in several different ways. On a micro or individual level, the trackers and timers control runners by urging them to increase or decrease their pace in order to meet arbitrary targets—which expert knowledge has deemed necessary. On a macro or societal level, these representations of running serve as biopedagogical models that allow individuals to understand what is required from them to be adequate societal members, good, fit, healthy, high-achieving citizens. Hence, they can be seen as “*disciplinary mechanisms* that shape the behaviours and identity of the individual” (McNay, 2009, p.57 emphasis in original). Furthermore, the apparatus of measurement is frequently



in the hands of corporations and other market entities with whom we share it willingly (Charitsis, 2016). Goals and targets—ideal weight, body composition, calorie intake, running speed, to mention but a few—are often set for us by those apparatus, which are under the control of corporate and market entities. One could hence argue that biopower has been outsourced to the market just like many other aspects of power in neoliberal society.

The quantified self can easily be thought of as a scientifically manageable business with inputs and outputs, which fits perfectly into the life of “the ideal neoliberal agent” (Mirowski, 2013). In fact, Shore and Wright argue that quantitative metrics have developed from the “neoliberalising projects of the 1980s [which employed] a few strategically chosen performance indicators to give greater state control over the public sector through contact management and mobilising ‘users’” (2018, p.11). But they argue that “the use of metrics has [now] expanded from managing professionals to controlling entire populations” (2018, p.11) and to “responsibilis[ing] individuals to perform according to new state and commercial norms about the reliable/conforming ‘good’ citizen” (2018, p.11). The trend for self-quantification has revived Taylor’s goal of pure efficiency only now the stopwatch is not confined to the factory floor (Saval, 2014), “but keeps ticking at all moments of life, even during our sleep” (Cederström & Spicer 2015).

Carrying the idea of quantified selves to its logical conclusion and we live in a world exemplified in an episode of the dystopian future Netflix show, *Black Mirror*, entitled *Nosedive*, in which citizens’ socioeconomic status as well as their ability to access services such as transport, housing and healthcare, is based on a quantified score derived from ratings assigned to them in every social (online and offline) encounter they have (Wright, 2016). This is already becoming a reality in China’s social credit system, “which allocates individual scores to each citizen and uses rewards of better or privileged service to entice people to volunteer information about themselves” (Shore & Wright, 2018, p.11). Closer to home we see corporate health and wellness schemes both formal and informal that encourage employees to wear Fitbits or to quantify themselves in other ways in order to encourage health and wellness. This might sound good in principle but these kinds of schemes promote a specific type of health. They redefine what it means to be healthy in the first place and place the responsibility for that health squarely in the hands of the individual, who is unhealthy or overweight not because she is compelled to work too many hours in a sedentary job and is encouraged by the market to keep up by drinking

sugary, caffeinated drinks, but rather because she is not completing 10,000 steps per day (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Corporate wellness schemes also redefine what it means to be an active, ideal worker and, as a result, employees start to become streamlined “according to these ideals [...] in such a way that we arrive at uniformity of the work force” and of human beings in general (Ajana, 2019). This represents the colonisation of life itself in which work demands are carried home, to the gym and even out to the supposed freedom of nature. Consumption of extraordinary experiences hence becomes production of a quantified enterprise: the self.

The quantified self is an individualised self. Blomseth Christiansen et al. describe the quantified self as a “1-person-laboratory” in which “self trackers put their own questions, observations and subjective experiences front and centre” (2018, p.97). Using their own instruments and data as if they were running their own, individual laboratories the quantified self is not looking for causalities that can be generalised to entire populations. Instead, their findings are individual (Blomseth Christiansen, Brogård Kristensen & Eg Larsen, 2018). This represents not only the individualisation of health, fitness, wellness but also of extraordinary consumer experience. This is no longer the *communitas* of the river rafter but the individual quantified achievement of entrepreneurial neoliberal individuals.

## **Branding achievement**

It is not only digital tracking devices that serve to measure and externalise the individual and subjective experiences of endurance running. All the runners that were interviewed or kept diaries for this study, except for one, ran in officially organised races. Running measured distances—such as half-marathon, marathon, 100-miles and so on—preferably in ever-decreasing times is the goal of most of their training and competition and these goals shape the way that they talk about their running. In other words, a vocabulary of achievement frequently shapes their accounts.

It is against this backdrop of quantification, objectification and achievement that brands become important in talk about endurance running. The greatest endurance running achievements are almost invariably mediated by brands in large, organised events. Although it is perfectly possible to run long distances independently or even in small groups, endurance running events—such as

marathons and triathlons—are packaged, branded and sold as experiences that are considered rites of passage by many.

By paying to take part in these timed and measured events, endurance runners earn the right to call themselves and to be recognised by others as runners, desert runners, Ironmen, etcetera. And they are hesitant to refer to themselves as runners without these achievements to authenticate their claims. In our interview, George told me that he would not have called himself a runner 10 years ago, but now that he has completed several organised ultra-running events, he feels able to do so.

I'm a runner. I wouldn't say that 10 or 15 years ago [...but] the more ultra runs I've done, the more I have seen [myself] as a runner.

(George, desert runner)

In its dependence on market/brand mediation, endurance running differs from many of the other extraordinary experiences studied in the CCT literature. Even though it is not possible for most people to do river rafting or skydiving without the help of an organisation, the market mediation of extraordinary experiences has not been foregrounded in previous studies. In endurance running, although it is perfectly possible to run alone and without any special equipment—even running shoes are not necessary as highlighted by the barefoot running trend—it is not legitimate to do it without market mediation. It is the market/brands that authenticate the achievement. Running feats that are not mediated and authenticated by business or brands, but that are otherwise identical—for example, running a marathon as measured by oneself—are valued to a lesser degree, if at all, by endurance runners and their peers.

In the following excerpt from our interview, Angus, who was training for a triathlon, explains that running achievements must be branded in order to be valid. Someone who achieves the same physical feat outside of an organised event, and, therefore, without the authentication provided by the brand, is regarded as dishonest—a cheat.

- If I did an ironman, I'd want it to be the proper one. The one that's advertised [...and branded with the registered M-dot trademark owned by World Triathlon Corporation, a consortium of investors]. I think you really only have stripes if you do one of those ones. [...] You can't say you've done an ironman but not actually have done an ironman event. I think that would be, I dunno. It would be cheating! (Angus, obstacle-adventure course runner)

- So, it's got to be the proper branded business? (Interviewer)

- Yep. The full Walt Disney. [...] You want that thing to show for it or that thing you earn [the medal bearing the trademarked Ironman logo]. That thing you can show off. (Angus, obstacle-adventure course runner)

In comparing Ironman to Walt Disney, Angus emphasises the aspirational nature of branded endurance running events. Just as small children dream of going to Disneyland, endurance runners dream about completing an Ironman, the Marathon des Sables, or the Ultra Trail de Mont Blanc. This is not just an indication that these particular brands are more commercially successful at aspirational marketing than others. It also highlights an idea that pervades the vocabulary of achievement: that endurance running is about meeting societal, and market, expectations of achievement. Endurance running is about aspiring to push one's body to achieve feats that are pre-measured and pre-packaged and that are legitimised—authorised in Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) terms—by experts, who also happen to be brands. This is the frame through which extraordinary running experiences are understood by consumers.

While brands are widely understood to mark situations as significant and/or meaningful (Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016; Lury, 2004), their significance is not rarely explored in the CCT literature on extraordinary consumption experiences (with Schouten and McAlexander's 1995 study of the Harley Davidson brand community being an exception). The commercial element of extraordinary experiences has been noted in previous studies but is typically seen as something to be overcome in the search for authenticity. For example, both the Burning Man festival (Kozinets, 2002b) and the Mountain man rendezvous (Belk & Costa, 1998), have a commercial element but studies of each highlight how community members ignore the commercial nature of the extraordinary experience. They are supposed to rise above the presence of the market, which is conceptualised as inherently profane, in order to retain the sacred, magical or romantic nature of the experience. However, in endurance

running, we see that brands and/or the market at the heart of the experience. The experience unmediated by brands is worthless. It is the brand/the market that sacralises rather than profanes the extraordinary experience.

This can be seen as further evidence of the insidiousness of market ideology. Neoliberalism extends the classical liberal process of making economic activity the focus of social and political relations (Read, 2009) by prioritising “a radically free market, maximized competition, [and] free trade achieved through economic deregulation” (Bradshaw, 2011, p.27). Neoliberalism is sustained by a rationality that produces its own norms and subjectivities, which are increasingly understood as common sense (Bradshaw 2011). “This common sense concerns a systematic extension of market values to all institutions and social actions and a reconfiguration of all human and institutional activities as rational entrepreneurial actions” (Bradshaw, 2011, p.27). In other words, the market becomes an ideal model for the resolution not only of economic problems but also of social ones. Neoliberal values have “been incorporated into the common sense way many of us live in and understand the world” (Harvey, 2005, p.19) and that is evident here in the way that consumers require the market to legitimise their extraordinary consumer experiences. The self-torment and self-discipline of endurance running is done in order to fulfil market demands. Extraordinary experiences, theorised as an escape from the areas of life where market logic dominates—the job market, the relationship market—are far from being free from market logic. Rather than being spaces of antistructure—playful and unproductive—extraordinary experiences are, in the case of endurance running, understood and performed according to a neoliberal market logic. Neoliberal ideologies not only shape social and economic relations but also remake individual consumer subjectivities.

## **Transferring achievement**

Keinan and Kivertz (2011) examined why consumers voluntarily chose leisure activities that were predicted to be less pleasurable. One of their key findings was the idea of an experiential checklist (similar to the popular idea of bucket lists), which we can arguably see evidence of in endurance running. The 5 and 10 kilometre runs, the half-marathon, the marathon, the ultra run: these are examples of the kind of experiences that endurance runners should check-off their experiential lists. But, perhaps more interestingly, Keinan and Kivertz also suggest that consumers use less pleasurable experiences to build a CV,

which demonstrates their ability and willingness to be productive even when not working. This idea, when used to understand endurance running, emphasises the importance of external discipline or social control in endurance running. It is not entirely up to the individual endurance runner to decide what experiences will feature on her checklist. The achievements that demonstrate one's capability as an endurance runner are socially sanctioned.

Kienan and Kivetz (2011) also suggest that achievements generated during leisure consumption might have value outside of that particular sphere. In this case, that would suggest that endurance running achievements have value outside of endurance running. That idea certainly seems to play out in the empirical material generated in this study. Once they have been measured and validated, the objectified achievements of endurance running can be used in a number of ways. Within the field of endurance running, validated achievements are sometimes just used for bragging purposes but may also be used as entry tickets to endurance running events. For example, one cannot just enter certain endurance running events but must qualify to take part by competing in other events and registering sufficiently fast times. This is why you will sometimes hear of people who cheat in marathons in order to register, for example, a "Boston qualifier"—a sufficiently fast finishing time to allow them to enter the Boston Marathon. The organisers of some desert running events even ask for a "running CV to tell what they have done before" (George, desert runner) before they select the participants.

But endurance running objects are not only used within the field of endurance running. They also have value outside—in everyday life. In other words, endurance running achievements are transferrable to areas of life where they might seemingly have no connection. To understand how and why they are valued, we have to understand the discourse of achievement.

The vocabulary of achievement draws heavily on a discourse in which physical achievements, such as running long distances, are connected to achievements in other areas of life—professional, romantic, familial, etcetera—and that lessons learned and traits developed in endurance running can be seamlessly transferred to other spaces, such as the boardroom. In the following excerpt, drawn from a *Forbes* magazine article, Bruce Eckfeldt explains why triathletes—specifically, those who have completed an Ironman distance triathlon—make great CEOs. To do so, he equates physical transitions—such

as from swimming to running—with the mental transitions that he argues a company manager must master in order to be successful.

Over the last decade, triathlon has become the executive sport de rigueur. Triathlon tests you in different ways than most other endurance sports. And interestingly, it is analogous of the unique challenges of executive leadership. [...] Like triathlon, executive leadership involves three core key competencies: setting a vision, developing strategy, and managing accountability. Great leaders are well-versed in each of these disciplines and know how to move fluidly between them.

Athletes who progress to Ironman-distance events — that’s a 2.4 mile swim, a 112 mile bike ride, and a 26.2 mile run — have developed several key characteristics that can serve them well as executives. [...]

The first thing you learn as a triathlete is that you need to balance your training amongst three different sports. While you need to [sic.] in each, the real trick is learning how to balance all three. Transitioning from one to the next seamlessly is the key to being a top-performer. [...] Athletes that can make these transitions successfully and quickly gain time in the race. Likewise, successful executives know that they need to be able to move quickly and fluidly from setting goals, to communicating strategic focus, to evaluating performance. Those who excel in each area and who can transition effectively between will be highly successful.

(Eckfeldt, 2015, p.np)

Eckfeldt’s analogies might seem to stretch the bounds of plausibility but they are by no means uncommon. In another popular cultural example, Sylvia Lafair, President of Creative Energy Options, encouraged readers “to develop the perfect entrepreneurial body” by doing lunges “to stay flexible” (2016, p.np). Lafair clearly confounds the metaphorical with the physical when she argues, that having flexible knees will prevent would-be entrepreneurs making “ingrained, knee-jerk responses that stop [them] from seeing new possibilities” in business (2016, np) but the transferability of endurance running achievements into apparently unrelated fields seems to be widely accepted. Management consultants sometimes include lists of their endurance running achievements on the websites that they use to attract new clients, as though such achievements prove their capability to give business management advice (see, for example, Volati, 2017). Meanwhile, in Janet Johansson’s study, top

managers claim that by taking part in different sporting activities, they acquire the knowledge and skills to help them face the challenges of their particular industries (2017).

To illustrate the contemporary consumer's penchant for productivity, Cederström and Spicer contrast Zadie Smith's (2013) heady description of raving the night away in a joyful drug-fuelled night at nightclub Fabric in the 1990s with the contemporary trend of "raving into the day" (2015) at Morning Gloryville, a drug-free, sober morning club where workers go to physically and psychologically prepare themselves for a productive day at work through dance. Smith's Fabric experience was a moment of excessive joy, of escape. It was likely detrimental to her health and left her feeling bad (hung over) the following day. Morning Gloryville, on the other hand, is about measured wellness and pleasure (not too much). It seeks to improve health and wellness and promises to leave participants in a better and more productive state of mind and body. The difference between these two experiences, Cederström and Spicer argue, points towards our contemporary proclivity for controlling, modifying and optimising ourselves; our search and struggle to be more productive. It also suggests a contrast between old ways of understanding the consumption of extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Kozinets, 2002b; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017)) with the governmental perspective I take in this book. For example, Arnould and Price suggested "more and more people buy experiences to give their lives meaning" (1993, p.41-2). But, as illustrated by their use of a vocabulary of achievement, consumers of endurance running are buying something more substantial than meaning. They are buying something with transferable value when they buy extraordinary experiences.

The tendency to make sense of life itself according to economic rational can be related to the market ideology that dominates neoliberal thinking. In neoliberal market ideology, all human endeavours—even those traditionally thought of as outside of the economic realm—are subject to the logic of supply and demand and in which humans are economic objects. In neoliberal market ideology, play is not separate from work but instead is something that contributes to one's market value and, therefore, should be made to be productive. The market ideology, I have argued, functions as a biopedagogy that teaches neoliberal subjects how they should discipline themselves and their bodies in order to be responsible citizens. Internalising the market



ideology leads individuals to adopt a secular kind of protestant work ethic, in which work is the only way to be a good neoliberal subject. Understanding it as work, as a site of discipline and productivity, is the only way to enjoy consuming extraordinary experiences in this secular work ethic. The market intervenes practically in extraordinary consumer experiences, by measuring, incentivising, sacralising and, of course, selling them but it also intervenes ideologically, by shaping the way that people make sense of their extraordinary experiences. Consumers of extraordinary experiences might feel that they are escaping the market and its associated responsibilities and performances; breaking free from the individualism, competition, and constant productivity required of consumers in contemporary society but, since they use market resources and a market frame of reference to do so, extraordinary experiences become merely another example of the same.

In the vocabulary of achievement, we see evidence of personalisation, authorisation and capabilisation from Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) P.A.C.T. model of consumer responsabilisation. Issue of health, fitness and wellness are personalised by being framed as an individual responsibility and not as a structural or institutional problem, even when they are part of corporate wellness schemes. Knowledge from experts—such as brands, organisations, peers, and influencers—authorises this personalisation and, furthermore, legitimises individuals' endurance running achievements. Finally, the market capabilises individuals by providing resources with which they can measure and manage themselves and their bodies. In endurance running, these resources take the form of technologies of self, such as the timers and GPS watches used to quantify the self, as well as extraordinary experiences, such as marathons, desert runs, and so on, through which individual consumers can mark their achievements and improvements.

## Summary and concluding remarks

The ideas explored here under the heading of the vocabulary of achievement represent a new perspective on the consumption of extraordinary experiences. Some scholars have suggested that people consume experiences to give their lives meaning (Arnould & Price, 1993). But, as illustrated here, consumers of endurance running are buying something more substantial and transferrable than meaning; namely objectified achievements. Others have understood the

consumption of extraordinary experiences as a quest for nothingness or unproductivity where even thoughts are not produced (see work on running as edgework by, for example, Lyng, 1990; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), or have suggested that individuals use the pain experienced while competing in endurance running events as a release from the tiring work of maintaining a self (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). But, in this study, consuming extraordinary experiences is not an unproductive undertaking. On the contrary, it is an intensely productive one. Even though the consumers in this study seem to desire an escape from the tiring work of self maintenance, as suggested by Scott et al. (2017), they also seem unable to do so. They are barely able to understand what it means to be unproductive let alone to allow themselves the luxury of being so.

In the field of corporate governance, researchers have observed an expansion of economic discourse and ideology into areas of life that were previously thought to be outside of the economic sphere. They refer to this phenomenon as the financialisation of everyday life (Martin, 2002) and argue that the democratisation of finance, in which “financial products and services have been made available to large parts of the population” in Western industrialised economies, has had an effect on the “the subjective understanding of one’s role within the political economy” (van der Zwan, 2014, p.111). Savings, pensions, insurance and healthcare, which were once provided by the state or the employer, are now often provided by financial markets, even in socialist countries. This represents an individualisation of responsibility for financial security and a corresponding individualisation of risk, which has, in turn, had an impact on the underlying logics of the economy and of democratic society (Dore, 2008; van der Zwan, 2014). From a Foucauldian perspective—emphasising governmentality and self-management—economic discourses of efficient self-management, of investment and return, of risk and reward are internalised by financial subjects and actively reproduced in their role as consumers of financial products and services. Discourses of financialisation are also reproduced in the language of neoliberal economic policies, such as those that promote flexible (precarious) work and the privatisation of health and welfare programmes. Individuals cannot help but use financial logics when making choices and decisions in areas of life that were previously outside of this realm.

Because individuals have internalised economic or financial discourses, they use vocabulary from those discourses when they account for their consumption

of extraordinary experiences—for example, when they talk about training as an investment that rewards them with better health or more impressive achievements. This also helps explain why they use financial measures and criteria—such as efficiency and return on investment—to make choices about their consumption experiences. The individuals in my study understand their extraordinary experiences as assets that should be actively managed. They suppose that their time must be invested wisely so as to obtain the type of returns necessary to sustain and improve their own marketability. They see the body as something to be disciplined so that it produces results—quantified measurements of endurance running performance, achievements for the CV, etcetera. This is indicative of an understanding of the self as a commodity (Bauman, 2007) or as an enterprise (Burchell, 1993; Gordon, 1991), which might also be called an entrepreneurial subjectivity (McNay, 2009), or even enterprise culture (Peters, 2001). It is as if the *homo economicus* of economic models has become what I call a *homo economicus su cognito*. Not just a being that makes rational economic choices but one who understands herself as an pseudo-economic entity to be maximised and made efficient<sup>6</sup>.

It is perhaps worth noting here that the vocabulary of achievement, in many ways, contradicts the vocabulary of freedom in which endurance running was all about escaping external demands and expectations. Here, in the vocabulary of achievement, we see the same people describing how running is about fulfilling arbitrary time- and distance-related achievements that experts (peers, the market, brands) have designated as important or significant. In earlier work on extraordinary experiences, consumers made clear distinctions between extraordinary experiences as spaces of freedom or liberation and real life as a space of success and achievement. For example, Belk and Costa's mountain men value the freedom they find at the rendezvous experience more than "worldly success and material achievement" (1998, p.234). It is too simple to say that there is a clear opposition between the discourses of freedom and achievement but they are certainly contradictory in many ways. Yet endurance runners do not seem to experience any cognitive dissonance nor any sense of irony when using both vocabularies of freedom and of achievement to account for their extraordinary experiences.

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Gerald Murphy for suggesting how to translate this concept into Latin.

## 7 Vocabularies of Competition

In this final empirical chapter, I will outline a third vocabulary of motive that was observed to structure endurance runners' accounts of endurance running. The vocabulary of competition represents another level of complexity because it actually consists of two interwoven vocabularies: a vocabulary of non-competition and a vocabulary of competition. In the first, competition in endurance running is denied and an ideal of sportsmanship is professed. In the second competition is alive and well but it takes place on a social rather than a micro level.

At first reading, it is the vocabulary of non-competition that appears most often and most powerfully in most endurance runners' accounts of endurance running, while competition is conspicuously absent. Competition, also expressed as self-promotion, is dirty or vulgar and should be eschewed. Runners play down the importance of competition in endurance running—for example, by insisting that “it’s not JUST about the people at the front” (Jackie, ultra-distance runner) or that “It’s more about finishing than it is about [...] winning” (Sara, former ultra-distance runner). This immediately struck me as odd. After all, most endurance running events are competitions, with winners being announced at the end of each event. Yet there is no obvious competition in runners' accounts of endurance running. When competition is discussed by runners it is in negative terms—in other words, it is frowned upon. This was an empirical mystery that prompted me to look more closely.

A critical reading of endurance runners' accounts revealed that a vocabulary of competition existed alongside the vocabulary of non-competition. Runners use a vocabulary of *non-competition* when they talk about endurance running at the micro level—normal interactions between people within the endurance running subculture—but competition reasserts itself on a societal level. They use a vocabulary of *competition* when they talk about endurance running in relation to their everyday lives, where endurance running is used as a tool to compete for status. The vocabulary of non-competition is dominant within the

endurance running community and is likely learned by runners as they learn the practices of endurance running. However, endurance runners are also attuned to the social world outside of endurance running and there (here) other vocabularies of motive dominate. Endurance runners use a vocabulary of competition, at the same time as they frown upon competition, because they have learned it from the dominant discourses in contemporary consumer culture.

The vocabulary of non-competition is linked to the vocabulary of freedom. In both, endurance running is supposed to be a place to escape from the (competitive) pressures of everyday life. But the vocabulary of competition is linked to the vocabulary of achievement. Endurance running achievements are objectified so that they have exchange value. They are then used to compete with other individuals for status. Ideas about impression management and entrepreneurial subjectivity help explain the vocabulary of competition.

## The non-competition vocabulary

As explained earlier, the vocabulary of non-competition is more obvious in endurance runners' accounts than the vocabulary of competition. The vocabulary of non-competition relates to the micro-level. It is used when endurance runners talk about their normal interactions with other people from within the endurance running community. In this vocabulary, competition between people, within races, for times, positions, etcetera, is rare. When competition is mentioned directly it is typically in negative terms. Competing overtly is framed as vulgar and is discouraged by the telling of stories like the one below, in which the hero shows a spectacular disdain for his own competitive success. In a very important race, which he is on the verge of winning, he stops in order to help a fellow competitor in need. This story and others like it exemplify the ideal that competition should be unimportant in endurance running. Instead, sportsmanship—which can be understood as a certain kind of *communitas*—is foregrounded as the ultimate achievement for endurance runners.

Alistair and Jonny Brownlee are world champion triathletes. They are among the most famous and successful triathletes in the world, having represented Great Britain at the 2012 and 2016 Olympic games and having won numerous

Olympic, Commonwealth and European medals between them (Davies & Scothorn, 2018). However, one of their most famous moments came when Jonny collapsed from heat exhaustion just a few hundred metres from the finish line of the final race of the World Triathlon Series in Mexico in 2016. Alistair gave up the chance to finish the race in first place in order to help his brother and support him physically across the finish line (Ingle, 2016). Alistair Brownlee was lauded in traditional and social media for his selfless, sportsmanlike actions. And the image of the brothers crossing the line together became “an instant sporting classic” (Ingle, 2016). Meanwhile, the winner of the gold medal, South African Henri Schoeman, received considerably less media attention.

That the hero in this story helped his own brother is largely irrelevant. During interviews with endurance runners, I heard similar tales of people helping strangers or even rivals, as you will read shortly. Endurance runners repeatedly emphasised their disdain for competition and their respect for a sportsmanlike attitude in which individuals sacrifice their own goals in order to support others to reach theirs. Often referred to as “the true spirit of [for example,] the Olympics”, time after time, the selfless actions of endurance runners are reported with at least as much pomp as their winning of races (Burgess, 2017; Kaemmerle, 2018). These kind of stories hark back to the shared goals and interpersonal growth seen in the vocabulary of freedom and echo similar stories found in the literature on extraordinary consumption experiences, which are explained using theories of *communitas* (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) and metaphors of pilgrimage (Arnould & Price, 1993; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018).

At certain endurance running events, especially those that are attended by new endurance runners, the non-competition vocabulary is made explicit. Endurance runners are informed directly about the kind of behaviour that is expected of them and they also learn an acceptable vocabulary with which to account for their extraordinary experience. I saw this for myself at a Tough Mudder event in the United Kingdom. At the start of the race, as at all Tough Mudder events, the competitors were gathered together to be hyped up by a minor celebrity—typically an athlete or comedian. The hype woman, or man, leads the competitors in reciting a pledge:

## The Mudder Pledge

I understand that Tough Mudder is not a race but a challenge.

I put teamwork and camaraderie before my course time.

I do not whine – kids whine.

I help my fellow mudders complete the course.

I overcome all fears.

In the pledge, it is emphasised that Tough Mudder is not a race but a challenge. That is to say that winning should not be the competitor's aim. Teamwork and camaraderie are highlighted as being more important than securing a good finishing time. In other words, one should be a good sports(wo)man above all else. When competitors are instructed to help their "fellow mudders complete the course" we see a direct instruction about how to comport oneself but we might also notice that a new word, "mudders", has been invented, which enables the organisers to refer to competitors in a way that avoids connotations of competition. In other words, competitors are not called competitors. Competition is unimportant, or framed as such.

There are similarities here with the kind of team-building games played by the river rafters in Arnould & Price's (1993) study. However, while Arnould and Price focus on the capacity of such moments to create or force team feelings, intimacy and *communitas*, I would argue that they are also about learning the discursive norms of the subculture or community. Endurance runners do not typically take part in a one-off extraordinary experience, like river rafting. They are more likely to participate in a series of increasingly difficult extraordinary experiences—for example, a half marathon, followed by a marathon, followed by an ultra-distance marathon—while also participating in more mundane events such as training. All the while, they are part of a consumption community defined by shared beliefs, desires (Belk & Costa, 1998, p.236) in which they "concrete meanings within a community of fellow actors" (Tumbat & Belk, 2011, p.45). In this way, endurance runners may be more like Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) bikers or Belk and Costa's (1998) mountain men than Arnould and Price's (1993) river rafters.

## How non-competition plays out

The endurance runners in this study often used a vocabulary of non-competition when they described how they had helped others and had been helped while running. As outlined above, the ideal sports(wo)man puts her own desire for success aside in order to help other competitors. In our interview, James explained how he helped a younger competitor to achieve a qualifying distance at an endurance running event. This is a good example of the kind of help that endurance runners are expected to provide for one another.

I'd had a good race in Barcelona a couple of years ago. [...] but there was a young guy there who was trying to break in and um he needed a certain distance to get picked for [his country] and he wasn't doing it. He wasn't on target and he wasn't really getting the support he needed [...] I was able to step in, as I wasn't racing for anything in particular, and just give him a bit of guidance through the race. And sometimes just putting my arm around him when he was walking and just start chatting to him a bit.

(James, ultra-distance runner)

In the excerpt above, James did not have a particular goal in mind for his own race but he went on to explain that the ideal of sportsmanship should be upheld even if it is one's arch rival that needs assistance. In the vocabulary of non-competition, the mythical sports(wo)man should help her fellow runners even at a cost to her own ambitions. This type of vocabulary is used by James in the following excerpt when he describes helping as bring out "the best in people". This perhaps implies that not helping would be the worst, or at least less than ideal.

I very seldom see any sort of bad practice where people are trying to get one over on somebody else. Even if it's your arch rival. You see people saying, "Are you okay? You're struggling. Can I do anything to help?" You see people sharing drinks and sharing food and even slowing down just to help people through a certain section. And I really like that. It seems to bring out the best in people.

(James, ultra-distance runner)



Individuals within the subculture who do not adhere to the ideal of sportsmanship are singled out as “competitive” or “self-promoters”, with both terms being used in derogatory ways. And they are said to contribute to bad endurance running experiences. When I asked, during our interview whether it was normal to receive help from one’s competitors during a race, George explained that he had only observed un-sportsmanlike behaviour on one occasion during a race. Otherwise, people generally live up to the sportsman ideal.

Can you ask other competitors for help if you need something [...]?  
(Interviewer)

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. [...] Normally it's no problem. I have only had one bad experience [...] I had some problem with my shoes and I was quite ahead in the row and then came a guy from California. He was quite competitive. He said, "You take care of yourself!" [...] That's the only time I had a bad experience on a race. Otherwise, you share your things. Okay, you don't have too much food with you so you maybe normally [can't] share food but after a few days maybe you can see you're not eating all your food and then some people have maybe just the minimum that they have to bring and then maybe you share. (George, desert runner)

Ben, a triathlete, told me that he had gotten help from a competitor during a race when his bike suffered a puncture. “One of the guys from my club stopped and asked if he could help”. Ben went on to suggest that this would not happen in a more serious race but stories like that of the Brownlee brothers and other professional athletes (Burgess, 2017; Kaemmerle, 2018) suggest that Ben might be wrong. The sportsman ideal is part of an important (non-competition) vocabulary in endurance running and influences how ordinary everyday endurance runners aspire to behave and to be seen.

Endurance runners have learnt the subculture-specific, macro-level non-competition vocabulary and it has become part of the way in which they understand and perform endurance running. Almost none of the endurance runners in this study talked about winning or trying to win races. Nor did they write about winning in their diaries. They did not seem to be at all concerned with beating out the competition to the podium or to a faster finishing time. Competitors in races are almost invisible in endurance runners’ accounts of running. When fellow runners do appear, they are constructed less as

competitors and more as sources of help, advice or inspiration. And this role is reciprocal, meaning that runners describe themselves as much more likely to try to help a fellow endurance runner than to try to beat her in an event. There was much more focus on beating one's own records—times and distances—than other people's. Endurance runners compete against themselves, not others, following a neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivity of constantly working and bettering yourself.

## The competition vocabulary

Although runners use a vocabulary of non-competition when they talk about endurance running at the micro level—normal interactions between people within the endurance running community—competition reasserts itself on a macro level. A hermeneutic reading of endurance runners' accounts reveals that they use a vocabulary of competition when they talk about endurance running in relation to their everyday lives. Competition is more or less absent on the micro level but reappears on a macro, social level, in ways that we might not immediately recognise as competitive. The competition vocabulary is less obvious. It is not about competing for the best time or position on the podium in a race. Instead it is about competing for status or the best position in life. The presence of two such clearly oppositional vocabularies is interesting and I argue that it can be interpreted as the societal discourse of competition discursively trumping (if you will) the effort of endurance runners to make endurance running a non-competitive space. Competition is an important discourse in neoliberal society and is heavily interwoven with ideas about efficiency, productivity and the importance and supremacy of the market as a model not only for exchange but also for all kinds of interactions and relationships (Harvey, 2005; Dean, 2010). From a governmentality perspective, these discourses become part of the way in which individuals understand and make decisions about many aspects of their lives.

The vocabulary of competition is exemplified in the way that people publicise their endurance running achievements. The pride that people take in sharing their achievements is based on the idea that not everyone can or will be able to achieve what they have achieved. In simple terms, this would be called bragging. Bragging is competition that takes place *in* the field but not *on* the field. Here I use Bourdieu's concept of field to describe a social arena where

people manoeuvre and struggle in pursuit of desirable resources, such as status (1984). In other words, when endurance runners brag, they are engaging in competition but it is not the kind of competition that one might expect to see in endurance running. It is not direct competition for endurance running achievements—times, distances, etcetera—and it does not take place when people are running. Instead, bragging is competition for status or respect and takes place in everyday life and especially, these days, in social media (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016).

In social media individuals seem to be less fettered by social constraints of politeness and injunctions not to brag. Bragging about all aspects of one's life—including sporting prowess and achievements—appears to be much more socially acceptable than it would be if face-to-face. Simon explained that he reserves his endurance running bragging for Facebook: “You do get proud and want to [brag] but um that's why you have Facebook!” Even Wes, who insisted throughout his two interviews that he did not brag at all about his running and ran only for the pure pleasure of being out in the fresh air, enjoying the sunshine and feeling good (freedom vocabulary), admitted that he would brag just a little bit on Facebook when he finally got his marathon medal (competition vocabulary). Perhaps restricting one's bragging to social media is less about being modest and more because in social media, one's achievements are more visible and they, therefore, have greater publicity value (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). Linking back to the idea of the self as enterprise, which was discussed in the previous chapter, we might presume that the enterprise self, just like any enterprise, needs publicity.

Competition is absent from most studies of the consumption of extraordinary experiences. There are hints in (for example) Schouten and McAlexander (1995) of the hierarchy, based on status, that is present in subcultures of consumption. However, this is not exactly conceptualised as competition and furthermore, occurs within the subculture and not outside of it. In this study, we see endurance runners using their endurance running achievements and status to compete in life *outside* of the endurance running subculture, or community. One study that does focus on competition is Tumbat and Belk's (2011) study of commercialised climbing expeditions on Everest. The authors show that escape to apparently communal spaces and places may be less communal and less romantic than they first appear. Tumbat and Belk emphasise the individualistic and competitive nature of extraordinary experiences, in stark contrast to the “celebratory, romantic and communitarian

view” taken by most scholars of the consumption of extraordinary experiences (2011, p.44). They make the case that participants in the commercialised climbing expeditions on Everest can barely be described as a community because, above all, they are competing with each other. In my own study, endurance runners are communitarian with each other within the subculture. It is outside of the community that competition for status appears. In other words, the runners are not competing with others, as the Everest climbers do, instead they use their extraordinary experience achievements to compete in everyday life. And this is something new.

In general, extraordinary experiences have not been understood in this way—as a kind of capital for competition in social life (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Bourdieu, 1984; Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013; Holt, 1998; Üstüner & Thompson, 2012). The extraordinary experience is more commonly described in literature as a liminal space of antistructure, separate from the structures and demands of everyday life. In endurance running too, participants often understand what they are doing as getting away from everyday life pressures and obligations—as in the vocabulary of freedom. But they also appear to be disciplining themselves, through their participation in extraordinary experiences, not to escape from everyday life but to heavily manage their appearance in that life (Goffman, 1959). We will read more about this in the following section.

## How competition plays out

In this section we will see, with the help of quotations from interviews with endurance runners and consumption diaries, how competition plays out in accounts of endurance running. This occurs in two main ways: through maximising self (and body) and through minimising others. Maximising self is about keeping up in the imaginary life race while minimising others is about keeping oneself ahead in the race by discursively keeping others back. In this sense, endurance running can be understood as both a metaphor for life and also a tool for competing in the metaphorical life race. It is as if the language of competitive running is found not in talk about endurance running but in talk about life.

## Maximising self

In the vocabulary of competition, social life is described as a competition or as a race. When employing a vocabulary of competition, individuals in this study talked about *keeping up* with others in some kind of imaginary race of life, comprising work, family, body, and so on. Many expressed fear about being left behind or losing in this imaginary race. Many of the runners who decried competition in endurance running as being unsportsmanlike nevertheless employed a vocabulary of competition when they talked about social life. In the vocabulary of competition, endurance running is part of a project of image or impression management that ensures that one appears to be winning, or at least keeping up, in life.

It can often feel, as explained by Simon during our interview, that one's peers are living perfect lives. This can lead individuals to feel that they are falling behind in the race, which generates feelings of stress or anxiety.

Jesus! I'm getting very stressed by Facebook because everything is so perfect. You know? Everybody has great [...] homes, jobs, colleagues, presents. Everything! And they're so in love. They get flowers. All the time!

(Simon, ultra-distance race organiser)

Feeling that they are being left behind in the race makes individuals feel pressured to employ tactics to keep up. André, for example, felt pressured to begin running, and to run longer and more extreme races, because of competitive urges.

I'm 34 now and, when you are in your 30s, people start to get these small crises and everybody should do triathlon and marathons. So, it was all my friends almost—it felt like all my friends anyway—started to run. And I was like I'll have to go along.

(André, OCR runner and organiser)

André went on to explain that he thinks this kind of competitive pressure is the reason why many people feel compelled to take part in endurance running. They do it for the prestige. In the job market especially, having achievements in one's leisure time can be seen as important in order to be competitive.

It's almost like it's good for your CV or you should have done it. You see a lot of managers—I mean I come from that background—[...for] a lot of those people it's like a prestige thing to do it. You know, you should have been doing a marathon.

(André, OCR runner and organiser)

In the following excerpt from our interview, Sara compared herself to non-runners and suggested that being known as a long-distance runner helped to elevate her from the competition in the life race by demonstrating her ability to achieve what most could or would not.

I mean people knew me as the runner, right? [...] So maybe that helped me with an aura of invincibility, right? And an aura of something that most people are not going to achieve.

(Sara, former ultra-distance runner)

We can use Goffman's (1959) ideas about the presentation of self in everyday life to help us make sense of what endurance runners are saying here. Underpinning the idea of the *life race* are notions of impression management. The endurance runners seem to work hard to present an impression of themselves as more successful or better than other, ordinary individuals due to their participation in extraordinary experiences. And here we see how the vocabulary of competition draws on the vocabulary of achievement. The objectified achievements are the weapons in this competition. Team sports such as rugby may equip players with transferable skills such as how to effectively communicate and work together as part of a team. It is less easy to see how the skills and abilities developed in running in circles for hours at a time transfer into the workplace to help one, for example, manage projects, people or time. In fact, the opposite might make more sense; that the

individualism and narcissism involved in running alone for hours or days on end might attract people who are not especially interested in team working. However, endurance running achievements might serve to make someone a better leader as they *appear* to be special, inspiring or motivating (Johansson, 2017). Consuming an extraordinary experience, then, can be understood as an exercise in managing appearances so as to signal that one has relevant capabilities. It is about building a self that represents to others that one is prepared to suffer in order to succeed; that one has correctly disciplined one's self and one's body in order to produce a tangible achievement; that one is a successful and responsible neoliberal subject.

### **Maximising the body**

Maximising self, in the vocabulary of competition, also means maximising and objectifying the body. Many of the endurance runners in this study explained that they feel compelled to run in order to maintain a body that appears fit, healthy and the right shape and texture. They do this not for their own sakes but also because it is expected of them. The physical body is an important site of social competition. This may be in no small part because the physique of an endurance runner—lean, toned, often muscular—often resembles “societal body ideals” (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2012, p.207), which are also closely associated with hard work, power, confidence and success while “overweight and oversized bodies are deemed to indicate sloppiness and an irresponsible attitude” (Johansson, 2017, p15). Slimming is argued to be healthy despite a lack of consistency in studies that attempt to connect weight and longevity but is often undertaken for cosmetic rather than health purposes in any case (Featherstone, 1982). Eating and training correctly are achievements that demonstrate “superior life skills” (Cederström & Spicer, 2015) and the slim are portrayed as more successful, more attractive and more empowered (Featherstone, 1982; Sassatelli, 2010). Physically fit equates to morally fit and endurance runners use their socially desirable body shapes as well as other endurance running achievements instrumentally in the competition for social status, as seen in the following excerpts.

André feels forced to run because he feels it is the only way he can keep fit. In our interview, he described how he feels he has to run, even though he does not actually like it because, if not, he will not train at all. Training of some sort is seen as a must, in order to maintain his fitness. And, since running is the only kind of training that fits his schedule, he feels compelled to run.

I have two kids, a family. I work too much. Always have done. There's no time for training, like for most people. So, I was in the middle of my career and I realised that the only thing I can train is like running. And I actually hate it. I think it's quite boring to run. But that's the only option because I can do it at nights. I can do it when I have the time, because I couldn't any longer have sort of specific times when I would go to a club or an organisation to train.

(André, OCR runner and organiser)

Simon too seems to feel coerced to run very often because of a fear of being unhealthy if he does not. During our interview, he told me that he feels stressed out if he cannot achieve more than five training runs per week. Even though he does enough to “have a healthy body anyway”, running only five times is a “bad week [...] That's not enough.” Simon, went on to explore this idea in more detail, explaining that his compulsion to work-out and be fit and healthy stems from a pressure exerted by society on individuals.

To train is good. Implying that if you don't train, if you're a couch potato and a slacker, that's not healthy is it? [...] You're a better person if you train. I think that's like an underlying message or something. It's not correct but that... I don't care about that. But I think many people who don't train, maybe feel bad because of that.

(Simon, ultra-distance runner)

Simon insisted that this pressure did not affect him personally—“I don't care about that”—but his earlier admission that he worries about his health if he runs less than five times a week suggests that he has indeed internalised moralising discourses around health. Wes, training for his first full marathon, perhaps put it most succinctly when he explained that, when you are training for a marathon “you can eat what you want and not have to worry about it”, implying conversely that eating is something to worry about if one does not run long distances. Although he is generally healthy, Wes worries about eating too much, gaining weight and deviating from what is seen as an ideal body shape. Thus, we can argue that he, like many others, has bought into the social competition surrounding the ideal body type.



To find that people are afraid of their bodies becoming disobedient, soft, and unhealthy is no surprise. Being fit and healthy is seen as a moral responsibility (Featherstone, 1982) in neoliberal society and being fat or overweight often seen as disgusting or shameful (Harjunen, 2016). It is possible to interpret this disgust of fat or overweight bodies using Mary Douglas's ideas about pollution and purity. Being a good citizen means being fit and healthy and individual bodies are hence subject to social control. "Pollution beliefs can provide a deterrent to wrongdoers" in cases where "breach of a particular moral norm is difficult to punish and "when self-help is the only way of righting wrong" (Douglas, 1966, p.134). In cases of secret or ambiguous moral breaches, "the pollution belief acts as a *post hoc* detector of the crime (Douglas, 1966, p.135). This can be said of a disobedient body that attests to many private or secret decisions to give in to temptation—eating badly, not exercising. The result of each individual decision is ambiguous but cumulatively they create a body that signifies the crime of being a morally dubious individual. Pollution can usually be removed by performing a rite or ritual. "A small cost of time and effort can satisfactorily expunge them" (Douglas, 1966, p.137). Running a race, experiencing pain and sacrifice, and crossing the boundary—finish line—from one state to another—mere human to marathon runner/ultra-distance runner/Ironman/ Tough Mudder—can be understood as a ritual sacrifice that physically expunges our bodily pollution—too fat/scrawny/round/slow. Taking part in an endurance running event or ritual both removes the physical stain or pollution by changing the body through training and also discursively cleanses the pollution by providing proof—market sanctioned and branded—of purity.

From a Foucauldian perspective, we can see the compulsion to present a morally responsible body as a result of the influence of neoliberal discourses on consumer subjectivities. A competitive enterprise ideology today permeates areas of life that have typically been understood as outside of the economic realm, such as individual conduct (Rose, 1996). "The enterprising self is thus both an active self and a calculating self, a self that calculates *about* itself and that acts *upon* itself in order to better itself" (Rose, 1996, p.154). Individuals understand themselves as market entities; enterprises to be optimised, marketed and eventually sold to the highest bidder. They are responsibilised and individualised. This is perhaps most evident in the field of employment, where instead of being offered job security, individuals are asked to secure their own futures by ensuring that they are employable (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013). But, as we have seen in this book, the field of employment is not the

only field in which this kind of competitive enterprise thinking appears. The body is a site of biopolitical power and the way that one looks is a proxy for one's morality (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014).

Showing eagerness, being willing to play the game by any rules, looking attractive and involved, while at the same time maintaining a psychological distance and looking for better prospects elsewhere—these are the chameleon-like qualities of [individuals in] the new economy.

(Gabriel, 2005, pp.15–16)

To govern is to affect the ways in which individuals see and make sense of the world. Expertise and knowledge are means by which this can be achieved. Expertise achieves its ends through “the persuasion inherent in its truths, the anxieties simulated by its norms, and the attraction exercised by the images of life and self it offers to us” while knowledge creates an “alliance between personal objectives and ambitions and institutionally or socially prized goals and activities” (Rose, 1989, p.10). People run because they want to but where does that want come from? It is socially shaped and based on the expert advice that running is good for us, that being slim is good for us. It is also based on the knowledge that competition is good and that we must compete with our peers. We must optimise and maximise ourselves in order to progress and to win at life.

## **Minimising others**

In the vocabulary of competition, keeping up is not the only way to succeed in life. One can also hinder or slow down one's competitors by excluding or minimising their achievements. In addition to working on their own selves, endurance runners also use a vocabulary of competition to hinder the impression work of others. In doing so, they create a kind of competition around what kind of runner one is and what kind of events one takes part in. Runners create competition between themselves and *non-runners* when they deliberately seek out extreme endurance running events—with “wow factor” (Richard, ultra-distance coach)—in order to impress non-runners and present their own selves as superior to those of others. In addition, endurance runners compete with *other runners* through their participation in exclusive endurance running events, which only permit entry to runners with certain achievements—for example, you must qualify for certain marathons by

competing in others and registering sufficiently fast times, while some events even ask for a running CV (George, desert runner) before selecting participants. Runners use these exclusive events as ways to belittle the achievements of others and, therefore, to raise their own achievements. I argue that their intention in doing this is to maximise their own selves in relation to others.

By excluding certain types of endurance runner and certain types of endurance running events from what counts as impressive, individuals discursively create competition with fellow runners to be special, different or unique. This finding becomes even more evident when we hear many interviewees describing how endurance runners actively seek out events “that the mainstream can’t do” (Paul, triathlon organiser), in order to impress friends “down the pub” (Richard, ultra-distance coach), at parties (André, OCR runner and organiser) or at work (Angus, runner, swimmer, cyclist and OCR runner), or just to “stand out from everybody else” (Richard, ultra-distance coach).

Richard uses a vocabulary of competition when he sets himself apart from and above other ultra-distance runners by explaining that their running 100 kilometres in a particular ultra-distance running event is less than extraordinary because the event is well organised. He implicitly suggests that his own style of ultra-distance running, which is self-supported and often undertaken alone, is more challenging and, therefore, that it contributes to a better/more important self than the “solicitors, accountants, teachers and policemen” he disparages.

The biggest ultra last year was Race to the Stones. They've already sold 1000 places this year. [...] It's a very expensive race. It's the most expensive race in the UK. [...] But they do everything for you. You've got overnight camping. You've got food. You've got atmosphere. [...] You've got all those things and it's near London [...] So, you know, there's even a train. They allow for the train to come in in the morning with all the weekend warriors on, to do the race, to look after them, to put them back on the train at the end and on, you know, on the Sunday they all go home sort of thing. [...] People are paying for pastime. [...] Most ultra marathon runners are solicitors, accountants, teachers, policemen. [...] They've got free access to the internet and they can sort of chop people's heads off and put their own heads on the body of somebody going and doing something extraordinary.

(Richard, ultra-distance coach)

The aim of endurance running is not to win the race. The endurance runner is not competing with the individuals with whom she is running. Rather she is competing with everyone else in the world. Anyone who might potentially be selected for a job at the same company, a project within the same team, a relationship with the same romantic partner, a mortgage with the same financial provider, a medical procedure at the same hospital department, or a place in the same educational programme as her is her competitor. On the micro level, endurance running is not competitive, it is inclusive and a vocabulary of non-competition has been learned by runners. But on the macro social level, a vocabulary of competition is used to create exclusion and exclusivity thus helping individuals to compete in life.

Competition is a structuring ideology in neoliberal democracies. It is not only an ideal but also an organising principle. Competition is idealised because it is thought to be integral to the working of the market, which in turn is idealised as the best and most efficient organising principle for economy and society (Harvey, 2005). It is through markets and competition that progress occurs and consumers are empowered (Shankar, Cherrier & Canniford, 2006). Competition supposedly assures that consumer demands are met by institutions—those who do not provide what the consumer wants will disappear. And through the profit mechanism, competition supposedly ensures that the most economically efficient institutions survive and are imitated. On an individual level, competition structures our daily lives in as much as we live them in ostensibly meritocratic organisations. We are used to competing for employment, for places in educational establishments, even for the right to live in the country of our choosing (Bauman, 2007). The competition, we are assured, ensures that the most deserving person gets the job, that the student with the most potential gets to learn, and that the worker with the most appropriate skills emigrates. Societal discourses of competition have permeated our souls so that we find it difficult to escape it. We see competition everywhere and feel compelled to understand situations competitively even when trying to do otherwise. In other words, even when runners try to escape the competition in endurance running, to subsume their competitive urges and to help each other in a communitarian way, competition creeps back in and structures their subjectivity.

Since the neoliberal subject sees both successes and failures as the result of her own efforts, she must choose wisely how to invest her resources so as to maximise outcomes (Gordon, 1991). This introduces competition into our

conceptions of ourselves and our interactions with others and an economic understanding organises “the totality of human behaviour” (Gordon, 1991, p.43). Home is an enterprise—we must climb the property ladder. Work is an enterprise—we should not merely work but should have a career trajectory that enhances employability. The body is an enterprise—a project to be refined and perfected.

Everything for which human beings attempt to realise their ends [...] can be understood “economically” according to a particular calculation of cost for benefit”

(Read, 2009, p.28)

## Enterprise discourses & vocabularies of competition

The vocabulary of competition differs significantly from the vocabulary of freedom in its focus on individual conformity and entrepreneurial subjectivity. In the vocabulary of freedom, running was described as being an escape from just the kind of pressures to conform and compete that we see in the vocabulary of competition. The vocabulary of competition points to an individualised conception of the self as a commodity or a kind of enterprise that can, and perhaps should, be fashioned and improved. Key to understanding the vocabulary of competition then are the ideas of self-work and the entrepreneurial self and the disciplinary effects of those ideas in contemporary consumer culture.

What was once consumerism has expanded to 24/7 activity of techniques of personalization, of individuation [...] Self-fashioning is the work we are all given, and we dutifully comply with the prescription continually to reinvent ourselves and manage our intricate identities. As Zygmunt Bauman has intimated, we may not grasp that to decline this endless work is not an option.

(Crary, 2013, p.72)

What does it mean to work on the self? Part of self-work consists of enhancing skills or abilities that one thinks will make one more capable, employable, or

attractive. For example, training courses to improve programming abilities might make you a more capable programmer and, therefore, a more attractive employee. However, it is not enough to simply have useful skills or abilities, one must also ensure that potential employees, mates, etcetera know about those skills or abilities. Therefore, another part of self-work consists of impression management (Goffman, 1959), also known as self presentation (Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016). Arvidsson and Caliendo suggest that “consumer practices are increasingly oriented towards visibility and self-presentation” (2016, p.744) and “documenting the self for the consumption of others” (Schwarz, 2010, p.165). Some argue that this is a natural outcome of the prevalence of social media and a network society (Marwick & boyd, 2014; van Dijk, 2012) but others relate it to a more fundamental shift in how we are compelled to understand ourselves in contemporary consumer culture; an entrepreneurial subjectivity.

Might I get a better job than this if I updated my personal brand?

(Thinking Allowed podcast 11 December 2017)

Personal branding was a popular idea in the late 1990s (Peters 1999). It evolved out of self-help and self-improvement techniques and adapted them for success in the corporate world (Gandini 2016, p125). Today, personal branding often takes place in social media and, in his 2016 article, Gandini explores how knowledge workers use social media to create a professional image and to manage social relations with a view to creating value. Strategic management of, in Gandini’s case, social relations is key to generating “reputational capital”, (2016, p 124) which is an important source of value in the contemporary economy. In my own study, I also see evidence of strategic management work, this time among consumers of extraordinary experiences. In the vocabulary of competition, as well as the vocabulary of achievement, the consumption of extraordinary endurance running experiences is strategically managed in order to create reputational capital. Time and money are invested in strategic ways, according to an economic or financial logic with the hope of creating a return (reputational capital), which is a form of value. While Gandini shows how “the strategic pursuit of social relations [leads to] expected economic returns” (2016, p.133), in this case it is the strategic pursuit

of experiential achievements that lead to the economic returns—also called social capital (Nan Lin 1999; 2002).

In particular socio-economic contexts, for example, those in which “digital technologies and social media allow reputation to become tangible” (Gandini, 2016, p125), reputational capital transforms into substantial value. Neoliberal democracy is one such socio-economic context. In her (2017) book about finding work in the “new economy”, Ilana Gershon describes how the metaphors we use to understand ourselves in relation to our work have changed. She argues that until recently we understood the self as property. Employment was metaphorically renting yourself out for a limited time and then getting it (you) back. Since the advent of neoliberalism in the early 1980s, the metaphors of self have changed, especially—but not only—in relation to work. Neoliberal discourses encourage people to see themselves as businesses or enterprises rather than property. Your business can temporarily assist another when you are employed. A short-term business-to-business contract is drawn up to solve “market-specific problems” (Gershon, 2017, p.2).

When the self is understood as property, you own yourself. Employment as rental implies that there is some part of the self that is not sold, “that is inalienable” (Gershon, 2017, p.5) and that there are, therefore, boundaries between work and personal life. You get your “self” back when you stop work (rental is over) and your employer has no claim on your behaviour during your free time. However, the metaphor of self as enterprise is all encompassing. The focus is on maximising employability (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013), which means seeing ourselves as bundles of skills, relationships, assets, qualities and experiences that must be managed, enhanced and sold. There is no longer a private or non-work part of the self to which employers, potential employers, government agencies, and so on, have no right. “Work and life outside work, whether in employment or not, are mobilized” in the name of selling the self (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013, p.706). Personal and work selves must embody the same authentic values. Online and offline personalities must correspond. One’s personal brand must cohere with the brands of others—businesses, organisations, significant others—with which one will partner. The whole of an individual’s life is disciplined and controlled as part of the work of producing a sellable self, even that part which was once reserved for non-productive enterprises such as consumption, play or leisure.

Nowadays, learning how to hire or be hired means learning how to operate as though you are a business whether you want to or not.

(Gershon, 2017, p.3)

It is not only in the sphere of work that individuals understand themselves as enterprises operating in a market. Today's "entrepreneur of the self" (Foucault, Davidson & Burchell, 2008, p.226) understands the whole ensemble of her life—her relation to self, her professional activity, and her personal property, for example—as "the pursuit of different enterprises" (Gordon, 1991, p.42). In these enterprises, the individual must develop and deploy her human capital according to economic rationale—maximum return on the investment of finite resources—so that she can compete with other individuals for jobs, for romantic partners, and even for relationships with organisations such as insurance companies—smokers need not apply (Cederström & Spicer, 2015). Cohen and Taylor talk about everyday life in terms of different careers: "our occupational career [...] the career of our marriage [...] the educational career of our children [...] our leisure career [...] our sexual career" (1976, p.38). Meanwhile, Cederström and Fleming describe how relationship counsellors advise couples to "manage their romances as a love bank" (2012, p.37). In Foucauldian terms, entrepreneurial, neoliberal ideology is reflected in our consumption of extraordinary experiences, structuring and controlling our supposedly free choices.

These findings contrast with Scott et al.'s (2017) assertion that individuals take part in painful extraordinary experiences, like endurance running, as a reprieve from the tiring work of maintaining a self. While the freedom vocabulary might suggest this, the presence of the other vocabularies, especially the competition vocabulary, shows clearly that part of what people are doing when they engage in extraordinary experiences is self-work. Do they do it purely or consciously to create a self? Probably not. They are not lying when they talk about feeling free when running. That is certainly a motivator but it is not the full story. There are societal discourses that encourage them to discipline themselves in these particular, uncomfortable ways. But they are either not fully aware of these pressures or have learned that these are not the correct—socially acceptable—ways in which to talk about their motivations for running. These findings also contrast with the postmodern construction, found in the literature on extraordinary consumption experiences, of the consumer-agent, who is "a



reflexive and empowered identity seeker” (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011, p.383). The endurance running consumer seems compelled to discipline herself in order to comply with the societal discourses that demand she acquires certain extraordinary experiences—to demonstrate that she is a good/employable/desirable neoliberal subject.

## Summary and concluding remarks

In this final empirical chapter, I have outlined a third vocabulary of motive. The vocabulary of competition actually consists of two interwoven vocabularies: a vocabulary of non-competition and a vocabulary of competition. At first reading, it is the vocabulary of non-competition that is most commonly observed in endurance runners’ accounts. However, a critical reading of those accounts revealed that while runners use a vocabulary of *non-competition* when they talk about endurance running at the micro level, they also use a vocabulary of competition to talk about extraordinary experiences in relation to their everyday lives, where those experiences are used as a tool to compete with others. The vocabulary of non-competition can be considered a subculture-specific or macro-level vocabulary that is likely learned by runners when they learn the practices of endurance running and other subcultural norms. However, endurance runners are also attuned to the social world outside of endurance running and they have internalised an ideology of competition from the dominant neoliberal discourses in contemporary consumer culture.

Competition plays out in accounts of endurance running in two main ways: through maximising self and through minimising others. Maximising self is a discursive strategy to keeping oneself ahead while minimising others is about discursively keeping others back. Competition is a structuring ideology as well as an organising principle in neoliberal culture. And it seeps into endurance runners’ accounts of their extraordinary consumption experiences, despite the fact that there is a strong belief in non-competition and in the sportsman ideal in the endurance running subculture. I have argued that, from a governmentality perspective this can be seen as evidence of the structuring and disciplining effects of neoliberal culture in extraordinary experiences. Rather than being liminal spaces of antistructure in which consumers escape from the demands of social life, as suggested by much of the CCT literature on

extraordinary experiences, the vocabulary of competition shows us that extraordinary experiences are spaces in which the demands and structures of social life are reproduced and where particular consumer subjectivities are assumed.



## 8 Extraordinary Sellable Selves

The vocabularies of motive—freedom, achievement, competition—identified in the three preceding chapters are means to an end as well as ends in themselves. Freedom, achievement and competition are morally desirable in neoliberal culture and, hence, talking about themselves and their experiences in these terms is rewarding or pleasurable to contemporary consumers. The motives can therefore be understood as being ends in and of themselves. However, these motives are also means to an end because they are useful instruments. In contemporary consumer culture, freedom, achievement and competition do not only have use value but also exchange value. Using vocabularies of freedom, achievement and competition, individuals wittingly or unwittingly construct themselves as market entities; selves that are built on a notion of exchange value. Understanding and talking about oneself in terms of freedom, achievement and competition endows the self with (exchange) value. The individual in neoliberal society is encouraged not only to think of herself in enterprise terms but to think of herself as the very thing that is being bought, sold, rented or leased: the product. The self itself is for sale. To this end, she must market and sell herself to maximum effect using, among other things, her extraordinary experiences as evidence of her capabilities: her ability to endure, to compete, to achieve, and to be productive and efficient. In the way that they talk about their consumption of extraordinary experiences, we can, hence, see contemporary consumers living up to the market demands of neoliberal society by constructing themselves as commodities for sale—sellable selves. Let me explain what I mean in more detail.

Achievements are a means to an end where the end is the creation of a self with exchange value. Achievements produced via the consumption of extraordinary experiences are attributes used to signal the value of the individual who holds them. They are used to demonstrate one's capability and are transferable into other, apparently unconnected, areas of life. For example, being an accomplished endurance runner apparently indicates one's competence as a leader, capability as an employee, desirability as a romantic partner etcetera.

Endurance running achievements can, therefore, be understood as product attributes where the product is a self that is for sale. Since the whole of life, in neoliberal culture, is understood as “the pursuit of different enterprises” (Gordon, 1991, p.42), consuming extraordinary experiences can be understood as engaging in a kind of product development. Great achievements indicate that the product for sale (the self) is valuable in a variety of markets—employment, romance, insurance—and can command the highest exchange value.

Competition is also a means to an end and can be understood as marketing the self that achievements have helped to discursively create. The vocabulary of competition is all about promoting the value of the product in question—the sellable self—while devaluing the value of competing products—in other words, of people who consume different extraordinary experiences. If the self is a product for sale, the vocabulary of competition can be understood as marketing that product.

Even the freedom described by consumers of extraordinary experience can be understood as a means to an end, where the end is selling the self. Just as the carnival functions as a temporary release that allows the return to the status quo, so the experience of (negative) freedom from the demands of contemporary consumer culture and its constant demands for productivity and efficiency functions as a temporary release, which allows the consumers of extraordinary experiences to continue to be productive and efficient and to continue working on their sellable selves. If the self is a product, then the vocabulary of freedom could be understood as a function of the human resources department. It ensures that the work of constructing a sellable self continues.

There are, of course, other ways to understand what this is all about. For example, Chalmers (2006) has argued that endurance runners experience freedom by imposing the discipline of measurement upon themselves. Meanwhile, Scott et al. (2017) have suggested that individuals take part in painful extraordinary experiences as a reprieve from the work of maintaining a self. But I have chosen to focus on the ways in which extraordinary experiences are used to create and maintain a sellable self; the ways in which extraordinary experiences are used discursively to perform efficiency, productivity, competition, freedom, and achievement. I do this in order to add

a critical perspective to our understanding of the consumption of extraordinary experiences in contemporary consumer culture.

At the start of this book I asked how we could understand extraordinary consumer experiences as sites of both freedom and control. Over the course of the previous three chapters, I have unpacked endurance runners' accounts of their extraordinary consumption experiences and examined them through a critical lens. Using the concept of vocabularies of motive, I have revealed a number of different ways in which macro-level societal discourses and ideologies discipline or control consumers of extraordinary experiences. Endurance running has been revealed as a space not only of freedom and escape but also of discipline and control. In this chapter, I will draw together the findings from the three previous chapters, reflect on how the motives come together in the concept of the sellable self and explain how my findings contribute to a number of areas of consumer culture theory: (1) extraordinary consumption experiences; (2) the consumers of extraordinary experiences; and (3) governmentality in consumer culture theory. Finally, I will discuss in more detail, the implications of being a sellable self in contemporary consumer culture.

## Freedom and discipline

### Discipline

Chapter seven illustrated how endurance runners use a vocabulary of non-competition to describe their micro-level interactions with other runners, but employ a vocabulary of competition when they use their extraordinary experiences as a means to compete with others in social life. I have argued that this indicates a competitive entrepreneurial subjectivity (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008) among consumers of extraordinary experiences and have suggested that endurance runners have internalised an ideology of competition from the dominant discourses in contemporary consumer culture (Harvey, 2005). A neoliberal ideology of competition encourages endurance runners to consume experiences that are more and more extraordinary. They discipline themselves and their bodies to run further, faster and under more extreme conditions so that they can keep up in the race of life. By creating a competitive environment in which they are constructed as leaders

and their particular choice of extraordinary experience as most worthy, endurance runners make themselves more sellable. Neoliberalism is intensely individualistic and with this act of competitive self-interest, endurance runners increase their own exchange value in relation to others—others who might one day compete with them for a job, a relationship, a mortgage, a medical procedure, and so on.

Chapter 6, revealed other kinds of discipline. When using a vocabulary of achievement, consumers draw on economic and financial discourses to describe extraordinary experiences as sites of productivity and efficiency, as a way to fulfil the demands of social life. Consumers talk about measuring, objectifying and validating external representations of their subjective experiences, and using corporate or market offerings to do so. Extraordinary experiences are understood, justified and rationalised through a framework based on market logics and neoliberal ideals: competition, efficiency and productivity (Harvey, 2005). Meanwhile, experiences are mediated, legitimated and reified by the market. It is from market-mediated representations of subjective experiences (objects such as quantified times and distances or titles, medals and brands) that consumers draw satisfaction or happiness rather than from the extraordinary experiences themselves. But these external representations act back on the runners, disciplining and controlling them. Numbers govern and enslave and so, when consumers thus objectify subjective experiences, they allow external objects to become technologies of control. Consumers willingly subject themselves to control and discipline from reified market objects in order to generate objects of achievement that have exchange-value in other areas of life—for example, as items on a résumé. These achievements can be understood as attributes of the sellable self, demonstrating its worth and value. In this way, consumers of extraordinary experiences seem less like *homo economicus*, choosing to maximise utility or enjoyment, and more like *homo economicus su cognito*, disciplining themselves in order to maximise an economic or market conception of self—the sellable self.

The vocabularies of competition and achievement focus on individual conformity and economic/entrepreneurial subjectivity. They point to an individualised conception of the self as a commodity or a kind of enterprise that requires continual refashioning and improvement (Crary, 2013; McNay, 2009; Peters, 2001; Rose, 1989). This is a neoliberal way of thinking about the self. Neoliberalism is an ideology, an economic approach and a way of thinking

and is even considered a culture by some because of its pervasiveness and persuasiveness (Harjunen, 2016; Ventura, 2012). Neoliberalism encourages us to see ourselves in terms of competition, achievement, productivity and efficiency. The responsible neoliberal subject has learned to see both successes and failures as the result of her own efforts. In order to succeed, she must hence choose wisely how to invest her resources so as to maximise outcomes (Gordon, 1991). This introduces competition into our conceptions of ourselves and our interactions with others and an economic understanding organises all of human life, even those parts that have previously been considered outside of the economic realm (Peters, 2001) such as playful experiences.

Neoliberal biopower sees economic calculability permeate into our broader life projects, making human capital no different to any other resource. Moments of living we traditionally thought to be beyond direct domination become its primary vehicle.

(Fleming, 2014, p.883)

What Fleming is suggesting here is that individuals today often conceive of themselves as enterprises, or business, and run their lives as if they were running a business (see also Bauman 2007). That means they need a kind of selling mind (Svensson, forthcoming) and must think about themselves and their choices in terms of the value of their sellable selves. They hence control and discipline themselves to effectively produce the correct kind of self, one that the market society demands. As explained by Barnett et al. in the following citation, macro-level discourses govern individuals, or rather they teach individuals how to govern themselves by calculating and regulating themselves. Neoliberal discourses of competition and achievement normalise and demand the consumption of extreme or extraordinary experiences in what might have once been considered “free” time. They experiences are necessary components of a sellable self.

Seen from the perspective of governmentality ... neoliberalism is ... a ‘discourse’ that constitutes practices, institutions and identities. Macro-processes of neoliberal governance are presumed to be mediated through micro-process of calculation, regulation, and subjectification.

(Barnett et al., 2008, p.625)



So, what happens when we look at the consumption of extraordinary experiences through a critical lens? We are able to question the overwhelmingly positive discourses surrounding those who discipline their bodies in certain “correct” ways; discourses in which potential risks or negative outcomes of participating—such as injury—are idealised into something more positive; proof of heroism, of striving beyond one’s capabilities to achieve and produce. We are able to see consumers of extraordinary experiences that feel compelled to push themselves beyond their capabilities and comfort in order to achieve externally set and validated achievements. We are able to suggest answers to the question of why consumers spend a great deal of time and money on experiences that are painful; of why they sacrifice so much to meet arbitrarily defined milestones—such as 42.2 kilometres, 70.3 kilometres. Through a critical lens, we see the power at play. Individuals are not as free to (not) consume extraordinary experiences, as they might feel they are. They are responding to the expectations and ideals of a neoliberal society. They feel compelled to consume extraordinary experiences and to construct those experiences in ways that help them to create a sellable self that conforms to market expectations and has exchange value.

## **Discipline through freedom**

We have also seen a third discourse or ideology at work here. The vocabulary of freedom is a heady mix of positive and negative freedom. It conjures up romantic ideas of extraordinary experiences as an escape—or negative freedom, in Berlin’s (1969) terms—from the demands and constrictions of everyday life as well as invoking the compelling and seductive ideology of positive freedom—to choose for oneself and be free of compulsion—which is celebrated as perhaps the most important of values in neoliberal culture. The ideal neoliberal subject is an individualised, sovereign consumer who is always free to choose. But this talk of freedom in the consumption of extraordinary experiences, both in academic literature and in popular culture, serves to obscure or obfuscate the discipline that is also involved. I have argued that this obfuscation makes it possible for consumers of extraordinary experiences to willingly discipline themselves without necessarily experiencing it as discipline. While punishing themselves physically and mentally, endurance runners feel free. From a critical perspective, the vocabulary of freedom fulfils a carnivalesque function. By emphasising pleasure, choice, and agency, talk of freedom obscures the discipline involved in *freely* choosing to consume certain extraordinary experiences. That there is obfuscation is evidenced by the fact

that consumers do not seem to experience any cognitive dissonance when they talk (almost in the same breath) about both escaping from and fulfilling the demands of social life by consuming extraordinary experiences.

This is the very definition of governmentality. It is discipline through freedom. Consumers have positive freedom to choose for themselves but their choices are shaped by societal discourses that make only certain options seem rational, normal, wise or obvious. They are agents but their agency is shaped by the social rewards and sanctions that they have internalised. Governmentality relies on the governed having agency but using that agency morally and responsibly to fulfil the demands of society (Cova & Cova, 2009). Consumers do not experience the control as control because they choose it for themselves. Control and freedom combine in endurance running experiences in such a way that they appear, at first glance, just spaces of escape, of freedom. On closer examination we see that they are not liminal spaces of antistructure that are free from the societal demands and discipline that individuals face in their everyday lives. Instead, they are spaces in which individuals discipline themselves and their bodies in accordance with a multitude of societal expectations. Whilst attempting to escape the control that they face in everyday life, consumers of extraordinary experiences, in fact, reproduce that very control through their absurd expressions of self-chosen masochism and self-regulation. But by discursively constructing their chosen extraordinary consumption experiences as spaces of freedom, endurance runners obscure the disciplinary demands that exist in extraordinary experiences.

In other words, the brief illusory flight from capitalism only prolongs the suffering, as it makes us better prepared to go on, indefinitely, and more successfully.

(Cederström & Fleming, 2012, p.52)

Freedom is a concept with considerable ideological weight in contemporary consumer culture. The idea of freedom is a compelling and seductive one that goes unquestioned by most people, most of the time, even if it is not clear exactly what it means. Who does not want to be free? Revolutions have begun and wars been won and lost in freedom's name. "Freedom is the Almighty's gift to every man and woman in the world", declared George W. Bush on the first anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks (Harvey, 2005, p.6). In

other words, freedom is an ideology if one accepts McCarthy's definition of ideologies as "absolutizing voices, passing themselves off as natural, as the only way of viewing things" (1996. p.7). And freedom has played a conspicuous role in social and economic decision-making in liberal and neoliberal democracies. "The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of ... individual freedom as fundamental, as the central values of civilization" (Harvey, 2005, p.5). It is perhaps no surprise then that neither consumers nor scholars seem to question the ideal of freedom in the consumption of extraordinary experiences.

To be clear, I do not want to suggest that extraordinary experiences are *not* spaces of freedom, that consumers are mistaken in understanding them in such a way. On the contrary, consumers experience extraordinary experiences as spaces of freedom because of the very fact that they, and others, talk about them in that way. They *are* spaces of freedom. But they are not *only* spaces of freedom. They are also spaces of intense discipline and control. And the idea of freedom is essential to the effective functioning of that discipline and control. Endurance running is neoliberal in nature, as are perhaps many extraordinary experiences. It relies on neoliberal governmentality for its very existence. Without a neoliberal subjectivity, in which consumers are moralised and responsibilised (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), endurance running would make little sense, at least not to so many people.

## **The sellable self**

The concept of the sellable self is not really new. Rather it is an amalgamation of ideas about how individuals live up to the market demands of neoliberalism by treating themselves as enterprises or commodities. People have been observed to do this by thinkers such as Bauman (2007), Foucault (Burchell, 1993; Gordon, 1991), McNay (2009) and Peters (2001). What is new is the particular way in which this plays out against a backdrop of extraordinary experience, which literature has typically constructed as a liminal space, a space of antistructure, in which consumers can find temporary release from these kinds of demands—for example, from the demands of creating and maintaining a self (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). However, as I have shown in this book, extraordinary experiences should not be understood as an escape but rather should be understood as the embodiment of neoliberal ideology, as a choice calculated to fulfil the demands of neoliberal society.

A critical perspective allows us to see beyond the glossy surface of extraordinary experiences. It allows us to see beyond the romantic idea that people consume extraordinary experiences in order to escape the demands of everyday life; that extraordinary experiences are necessarily a space of freedom. A critical perspective allows us instead to see that the demands and discourses of everyday life influence extraordinary experiences, just as they influence any other area of life. They influence how and why we take part in extraordinary experiences, how we account for and talk about them and how we use those experiences. We understand extraordinary experiences as freedom, but we feel compelled to take part in them. We describe them as spaces where we are free from expectations but yet we quantify, objectify, and brand our extraordinary experiences so that we can transfer them to fulfil expectations elsewhere. We think of them as untouched by the competitive nature of contemporary consumer culture but somehow the urge to compete infiltrates our motives, even there.

## Contributions

The findings outlined above have implications for how we understand various other concepts/ideas in contemporary consumer culture. In this section, I will outline some of the areas of scholarship that might benefit/be impacted/change and specify how exactly our understandings might be advanced.

### **To our understanding of extraordinary experiences**

Research into the consumption of extraordinary experiences has often focused on the restorative nature of those experiences. As well as harmony with nature, ideas of personal and interpersonal growth and transformation are emphasised in the consumer culture theory (CCT) literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013). Anthropological concepts have been used to emphasise the anti-structural nature of extraordinary experiences and there is a strong focus on *communitas* (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), *liminality* (Belk & Costa, 1998), and the *dramatic* (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993) to explain extraordinary experiences as spaces in which consumers transcend and escape everyday life. The logics that apply to everyday life are said to be suspended or inverted in the

carnavalesque rituals that typify extraordinary experiences (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2002b) and the body and self are freed to express themselves in ways that they cannot ordinarily (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017).

My finding that extraordinary experiences are sites of productivity, in which the demands and discourses of everyday life have significant influence, paints an alternative picture to much of the aforementioned literature. Most notably, it contrasts with Scott et al.'s finding that individuals take part in painful extraordinary experiences, like endurance running, as a reprieve from the tiring work of maintaining a self. While the freedom vocabulary might suggest this, the presence of the other vocabularies, especially the competition vocabulary, suggests that part of what people are doing when they engage in extraordinary experiences is self-work. Freedom and escape certainly seem to motivate consumers but they do not represent the full story. Scott et al. note themselves that their idea of escaping the self "might be based on a serious ambiguity" (2017, p.19) because, they suggest, even while consumers are hurting themselves, in order to forget themselves, they are also building résumés of pain, wounds and extraordinary experiences, which they use to tell stories of fulfilled lives. In this book, I have explored that idea in greater depth and shown that what Scott et al. have hinted does indeed seem to play out, provided that their notion of a story of a fulfilled life corresponds in some way to what I call a sellable self.

This study furthers Tumbat and Belk's (2011) findings that extraordinary consumer experiences may be less communal and less romantic than they first appear. In their study of commercialised climbing expeditions on Everest, Tumbat and Belk emphasise the individualistic and competitive nature of extraordinary experiences, in stark contrast to the "celebratory, romantic and communitarian view" taken by most scholars of the consumption of extraordinary experiences (2011, p.44). They make the case that participants in commercialised climbing expeditions on Everest can barely be said to constitute a community because, above all, they are competing with each other. In my own study, endurance runners *are* communitarian with each other within the subculture. It is *outside* of the community that competition for status appears. In other words, the runners are not competing with others, as the Everest climbers do, instead they use their extraordinary experience achievements to compete in everyday life. And this is something new.

## **To our understanding of consumers of extraordinary experiences**

The consumer of extraordinary experiences depicted in this book is not the empowered, reflexive, postmodern consumer typically found in the literature on extraordinary consumption experiences. Instead my consumer of extraordinary experiences is compelled to discipline herself in order to demonstrate her status as a responsible, moral, employable, desirable citizen; as a sellable self. The findings in this book can, therefore, be said to complicate the idea of the consumer-agent as “a reflexive and empowered identity seeker” (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011, p.383) with the capacity to define herself and to shape her reality and surroundings.

The consumers in this study were governed by discourses and ideologies that encouraged them to choose certain extraordinary experiences and to perform them in certain ways. They seemed compelled to do this in order to construct themselves as good, desirable, employable, sellable citizens. Moreover, they did not often seem to reflect on this situation and continued to describe their extraordinary experiences in romantic, perhaps even naïve terms. In this sense they seem much less empowered and reflexive than the consumers in previous literature on extraordinary experience. The societal context in which extraordinary experiences are consumed can, hence, be said to have a profound effect on the ways in which they are interpreted, understood and made sense of. An extraordinary experience may well be liberating and emancipatory in certain contexts but, in a neoliberal context, it might be experienced as another stage on which to perform the self creatively and productively. The consumer, in that case is more an unreflective, entrepreneurial neoliberal subject than a reflexive, sovereign consumer agent. In line with Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) argument then, I contend that consumers of extraordinary experiences need to be understood in light of the structuring forces of the dominant neoliberal sensibility that circulates in contemporary society.

Having said that, the consumer depicted in this book does manifest agency in the telling of stories around extraordinary experiences. In a clearly quantified context, where the winners and losers should be clear to all, my consumer of extraordinary experiences works hard to construct a reality in which her particular extraordinary experiences are more worthy or extraordinary than anyone else’s. Endurance running is a modernist pursuit in which achievements are clearly measured and easily comparable. But yet each of the consumers in this study sees themselves as some kind of winner. They are

either beating former versions of themselves or minimising the experiences of others so that their own consumption activities become discursively more important. In this way, my consumer of extraordinary experiences does indeed seem to be using her extraordinary experiences reflexively and creatively to produce herself. Hence, the findings in this book complicate rather than dispute consumer culture theory's idea of the consumer-agent as "a reflexive and empowered identity seeker" (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011, p.383).

In their studies of the various "faces" of consumers in marketing literature over a twenty-year period, Cova and Cova (2009) identify three faces: "the individualistic consumers of the early 1990s; the hedonistic consumers from the turn of the millennium; and creative consumers since the mid-2000s" (2009, p.95). The entrepreneurial consumer depicted in this book might well be considered a new consumer face. Or perhaps she is just a different kind of creative consumer from prosumers/consum'actors described by Cova and Cova, one that participates in creating (and selling) herself rather than creating products and services for corporations. Here it is perhaps worth noting that the consumer *is* arguably the product for many contemporary organisations, notably (in this context) the "free" tracking apps used by endurance runners and other self-trackers loggers, which monetise the data recorded about individuals as part of their business model (Charitsis, 2016). Either way, the finding that consumers of extraordinary experiences can be understood as entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects extends Cova and Cova's depiction of consumers as becoming increasingly "competent, creative and responsible" (2009, p.96).

## **To our understanding of governmentality in CCT**

Askegaard and Linnet (2011) suggest that CCT's emphasis on consumers' lived experiences has led to a dearth of research on the institutional frameworks in which consumers live those experiences. Several studies in CCT have addressed this lack, using Foucault's theory of governmentality to illuminate discursive frameworks in which particular consumer subjectivities are developed. Through a critical lens, the empowered consumer has been shown to be disciplined through choice (Shankar, Cherrier & Canniford, 2006), the creative consumer to be docile and malleable (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008), and the responsible consumer to be actively formed by moralistic regimes of governance (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). My own study contributes to the conversation on consumer subjectivities in two ways.

First, by using governmentality to examine the context in which extraordinary endurance running experiences are consumed, I suggest the existence of another kind of consumer subject from the ones previously observed (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Shankar, Cherrier & Canniford, 2006; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). The sellable self is a product of neoliberal culture, which provides a discursive framework through which individuals understand, justify and rationalise their consumption of extraordinary experiences. Like Shankar et al.'s (2006) empowered consumer, the sellable self appears to have unlimited freedom to choose yet is disciplined in and through that freedom. The sellable self is individualised and responsabilised, like the consumer subjects in Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) study and has internalised neoliberal discourses that make clear which choices are the "correct" ones. However, the sellable self differs from consumer subjectivities that have been described in the past in that she is an individualised enterprising subject. Where the creative consumer engages in mass collaboration (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008), the sellable self is driven by notions of competition with her peers. She consumes competitively and efficiently in order to produce achievements, which will help her compete with others. The sellable self markets herself via consumer practices that are oriented towards visibility and self-presentation (Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016) and use social media to document herself for the consumption of others (Schwarz, 2010). Economic discourses have financialised (Martin, 2002) the sellable self to the extent that she understands herself not as a human being making rational economic choices but as a pseudo-economic entity being maximised—a *homo economics su cognito*. For such a subject, doing nothing, doing something unproductive, and achieving something that no one knows about are equally unthinkable.

Second, I describe the process of subjectivisation from the point of view of the governed—in other words, the consumer—rather than from the perspective of the agents/regimes of governance, as in the other three studies mentioned. I show how individuals internalise the institutional framework of market logics and neoliberal ideals that make them into sellable selves and how their understandings of themselves are shaped by the political economy of contemporary consumer culture. In doing so, I add to Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) finding that the responsible consumer subject is formed by moralistic regimes of governance by showing how specific elements of their P.A.C.T. routine play out from the consumer's perspective. In other words, how moralistic governance regimes shape consumers' everyday lives and choices.



## The sellable self in contemporary consumer culture

David told Eric that he was going to spend the weekend at his summer house. Eddie, unfamiliar with the Nordic habit of retiring to the country to do nothing much, asked David what he would do while he was there.

“Just relax,” replied David.

“Well, yes, but what do you *do* when you are relaxing?” pressed Eddie, bemused.

“I don’t *do* anything,” insisted David. “I do nothing at all.”

“Nothing at all?” Eddie seemed unconvinced by this inadequate explanation and continued to muse about what kind of activities might constitute relaxing in Denmark.

This is a paraphrased but faithful representation of a conversation relayed to me by a colleague several years ago. The story has stuck in my head all these years because it is emblematic of contemporary consumer culture; a culture in which being unproductive is almost incomprehensible, in which health and wellness have become ideologies, in which leisure time is no longer free time, and in which the self is something that should be sold. Before concluding this study, I will discuss the implications for individuals of being a sellable self in contemporary consumer culture.

### The sellable self and the body

Considering that endurance running is so heavily discursively connected with body—comprising health, wellness, longevity, fitness and body shape—I have touched relatively lightly on the topic in this book. Fitness was, of course, mentioned by runners in their accounts of endurance running and it featured heavily in their rationalisations for consuming extraordinary running experiences. You might recall Simon’s fears of becoming a couch potato if he did not run more than five times a week. But fitness has not been the focus of this book because it relates so directly to endurance running rather than to extraordinary consumer experiences more widely. Nevertheless, wellness is

worth mentioning here because it seems to function as an important aspect of the sellable self and a means by which consumers in neoliberal society are disciplined and controlled.

The healthy body has come to signify the morally worthy citizen—one who exercises discipline over his or her own body.

(LeBesco, 2011, p.154)

What Crawford (1980) calls “healthism” and Cederström and Spicer (2015) call “wellness” refers to the “political ideology that elevates healthy lifestyle to a high moral calling” (LeBesco, 2011, p.160). Healthism functions especially well as an ideology because it is not only something that people should do/be but also something that they should *want* to be. Who would not want to be healthy and well? Suggesting that we should strive for wellness is common sense. It is so obvious that it does not warrant questioning. “Wellness has wormed its ways into every aspect of our lives” (Cederström and Spicer, 2015, p.3) not just because it “offers a package of ideas and beliefs which people may find seductive and desirable” but because “for the most part, these ideas appear as natural or even inevitable. Health and wellness consumption is ubiquitous in contemporary consumer culture. Apart from endurance running, examples include relaxation and mindfulness offerings such as yoga, massage and therapy; fitness resources such as gym memberships and personal trainers; and cosmetic and beauty products and services. These products and services do not only help consumers achieve their health and wellness goals (or societal expectations) but, as was suggested in the vocabulary of achievement, also help them *signal* that they are achieving those goals. Market mediation of health and wellness products and services is important in order to validate and authenticate the sellable selves that they help to produce.

Rose and Foucault both emphasise the disciplinary nature of wellness or healthism (Gordon, 1991; Rose, 1996) by highlighting the marginalisation of those who choose not to pursue a lifestyle that is perceived to be healthy according to current standards or expectations. Skrabank (1994) argues that “healthism has underpinned racism and eugenic campaigns that separate the ‘healthy’ (which equates to moral and pure) from the ‘unhealthy’ (the foreign or impure)” (LeBesco, 2011, p.160). The ideological element of health and wellness is particularly visible when considering the prevailing attitudes to

those who fail to look after their bodies. “These people are demonised as lazy, feeble or weak willed. They are seen as obscene deviants, unlawfully and unabashedly enjoying what every sensible person should resist” (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p.3-4). The fat body is commonly perceived as “unruly or excessive” (Harjunen, 2016; LeBesco, 2011) while ageing and disability are signs of failure or lack of control over one’s body (Harjunen, 2017). For the sellable self, the body is a biopolitical space. On its surface, and in its quantified measurements she demonstrates her conformity, her compliance, her self-control, her employability and her entrepreneurial subjectivity. Health and wellness consumption represents a “strategy to improve [her] personal market value” (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p.4) and is part of a wider societal transformation in which self-expression is co-opted by a neoliberal or entrepreneurial subjectivity. Healthy, fit and well bodies especially those that have had the opportunity to escape—for example, through the kind of extraordinary experiences provided by what Cederström and Fleming (2012) call the escape industry—are productive bodies. Hence, the body can be seen as another element of the sellable self. It is an important aspect of the consumption of extraordinary running experiences but may also be influential in other kinds of extraordinary experiences. Neoliberal ideology has added “a new layer of normative expectations on top of the existing ones that determine the boundaries” of normal and successful bodies (Harjunen, 2017, p.7).

In their study of quantified self technologies in the workplace, Moore and Robinson (2016) argue that a neoliberal approach to health and wellness has been incorporated in to corporate health and wellness programmes. In the recreational gymnastics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which emphasised “integration in well-ordered groups” (Sassatelli, 2010, p.19), and in the exercise encouraged in the military or other totalising institutions, such as hospitals and factories, the body was trained to be of service to the collective. The health and wellness consumption prescribed for the sellable self is individualised and is implicitly, if not explicitly, about competition and hence, fitness transforms from a social responsibility to an individual one (Powers & Greenwell, 2016; Shilling, 2012). In some corporate wellness schemes, employees are asked to wear fitbits or to otherwise quantify themselves even outside of work in order to encourage health and wellness (Hull & Pasquale, 2018). Having an employer that is concerned about your health and wellness might sound good but the very existence of these kinds of schemes “promotes a specific type of health” and a specific type of body (Ajana, 2019) with other kinds of body being less acceptable. “A line of subordination goes from the economic system [...] to

the subjective ideal to the mind and to the body” (Moore & Robinson, 2016, p.2775) and what it means to be an active, ideal worker is redefined to incorporate life not only at work but also at home, at the gym and even out to the apparent freedom of nature. Corporate health and wellness schemes, furthermore, individualise employees because they pit them against each other. Their focus is on creating the best version of oneself in order to compete with other individuals. Even if society benefits from its members being healthy and well, there is little sense of the collective in healthism discourses. The message is that the sellable self should be fit for herself, to help her to be more, achieve more and get more for herself. Thus, the sellable self represents an individual and competitive subjectivity, which is likely to discourage collective action among employees or citizens.

### **The sellable self and leisure**

The idea of leisure arose along with industrial society, with leisure time being understood as time free from obligations, or non-work time (Leisure, 2014). Leisure time is thus traditionally associated with activities that are chosen and pursued for intrinsic enjoyment and has the idea of freedom at its heart. Leisure time is free time. “In leisure [...] we are considered, and culturally represented, to exist in a state of voluntarism. By voluntarism is meant the realm of free choice and action determined by, and commensurate with, private conscience” (Rojek, 2009, p.1). Leisure time is typically subject to a consumption logic and is a realm where people find release—giving into desires, cravings or temptations—from the productive realm of work, which involves discipline, control and thrift.

[L]eisure has been seen as the happy, carefree refuge from the earnest pursuit of money and social standing the paying job supposedly provides.

(Stebbins, 1982, p.251)

Leisure has been understood as autotelic and playful in nature, having an end or purpose in and of itself rather than being extrinsically or instrumentally motivated (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Guttman, 1978; Holbrook et al., 1984; Kaplan, 1960; Lyng, 1990; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Rojek, 2009; Stebbins, 2007). That is not to say that play is totally free in the sense that it

does not have any rules, or that it is only fun. Play can also evoke “other emotions such as grief, anxiety, anger or desperation (Kjeldgaard & Bode, 2017, p.26) etc. What I mean is that typical understandings situate play in the realm of consumption rather than production. It is unproductive, or at least we believe that any productivity is incidental with the objective of play taking centre stage. The “pleasure is in the doing and not in what has been done”, Guttman explains succinctly (1978, p.3). Holt also notes that “playing practices capture the autotelic dimension [...] that has no ulterior end, interaction for interaction’s sake” (Holt, 1995, p.9). We believe that we play for the sake of playing, for enjoyment rather than for what play affords us. Hence, the spirit of consumption as play is supposedly free from “the ugly power games that are inherent in other types of social life. It is essentially a matter of enhancing interaction with others, sociality for sociality’s sake.” (Askegaard, 2010, p.366).

But for the sellable self in contemporary consumer society, leisure does not seem to fit this traditional description. Although there may be other ways of relating to neoliberal demands, the sellable self seems to derive instrumental satisfaction from the achievements she produces when she consumes extraordinary experiences, more than she enjoys the playful experience itself. And she uses those achievements discursively to compete with others in what could certainly be considered power games. According to modernist dichotomy, leisure for the sellable self seems to follow more of a productive/work logic than a consumption logic. The modern idea that life can be divided into work time and leisure time where work is productive and leisure a playful waste of, for example, “time, energy, ingenuity, skill and often money” (Caillois, 1961, p.125; Sassatelli, 2007) does not hold in postmodernity where play and leisure have been shown to be more purposeful (Seregina & Weijo, 2017). As we have seen in this book, what should be playful experiences are “enmeshed in market activity, thus complementing work by extending personal market capacity” (Seregina & Weijo, 2017, p.6). We can, perhaps, imagine something that begins as a liberating leisure pursuit becoming, in neoliberal culture, something quite different. We might say that leisure has been co-opted by the market.

That play and leisure have been co-opted and made productive has been well documented. In innovation studies, several authors have demonstrated the importance of play in stimulating creative innovations (Anderson, 1994; Dodgson, Gann & Salter, 2005; Dougherty & Takacs, 2004). Once harnessed,

this creative play becomes value for the organisation in the form of new and innovative products and services. In marketing, studies of co-creation have shown how consumers can be a source of competence for organisations by acting as producers and engaging in value creation activities, such as researching and developing medical treatment or testing and refining computer code during their leisure time (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, 2002, 2004; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). The critical perspective taken by Zwick et al. (2008) highlights the fact that consumers are not only unpaid for their work but are actually paying more for consuming the fruits of their labour, which have been enhanced by their work. They hence recognise co-creation as co-optation.

The sellable self is slightly different from other creative consumers. The sellable self co-opts her own leisure consumption and her own playful activities in the production of self, creating value for herself rather than for organisations—although organisations certainly also benefit from this value co-optation. However, just as co-creation between firms and consumers can be understood as “a political form of power aimed at generating particular forms of consumer life at once free and controllable, creative and docile” (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008, p.163) so can the particular kind of creative consumption that engages the sellable self. Neoliberal discourses of competition and achievement normalise and demand the consumption of extreme or extraordinary experiences in what might have once been considered “free” or leisure time. A particular kind of consumer subjectivity is hence created. The sellable self believes that the only rational consumption is the kind that produces achievements and the logic of consumption as wasteful or unproductive disappears. Hence doing nothing, or doing something unproductive, becomes unthinkable.

Critical scholars have suggested that consumer culture theory research has contributed to this situation, in which consumers are individualised and responsabilised and are compelled to be creative and productive. Cova and Cova (2009) have argued that the consumer is governed by the marketing discourses created by researchers and consultants. Skålen et al. (2006) emphasise how such discourses act governmentally to create particular consumer subjectivities. In an attempt to liberate consumers from being the second-class citizens of modernist market logic (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), consumer culture theory research has often constructed consumers as creative and productive rather than just destructive of value (Arnould & Thompson,

2005; Kozinets, 2001; Murray, 2002; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). One could argue however that, while liberating consumers from passivity in marketing logic, consumer culture theory has compelled them to be creative and productive neoliberal citizens and contributed to a climate in which passive, uncreative, unproductive consumption is unacceptable, undesirable and even unenjoyable (Ulver-Sneistrup, Askegaard & Brogård Kristensen, 2011). Cova and Cova describe how marketing discourses have placed people “in a situation where they increasingly determine themselves as consumers and above all as competent, creative and responsible consumers” (2009, p.96) and hence disengage from competencies outside of the field of consumption. Fitchett et al. go even further when they describe “the underlying neoliberal sentiment at the centre of the CCT project” (2014, p.495). This sentiment manifests itself in the “belief in the importance of consumption as the foundation in personal, social, economic and cultural life, the centrality of consumer as an active subject (agent), and the notion that the market offers a legitimate (if not the most legitimate) context through which individuals should seek to explore, identify and experience the world around them” (Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014, p.497).

### **The sellable self and alienation**

In 1844 Marx explained that people in capitalist societies feel a sense of estrangement from their essence. The worker, he suggested, is alienated from the product of her labour because that labour produces not an item with use-value but rather a wage and an item with exchange value (Harvey, 2010). Miller (2001) went on to explain that, in the contemporary capitalist system, people confront feelings of alienation and dehumanisation by consuming. Individuals replace the identity that they might once have had as workers or craftsmen with a consumer identity. They consume in order to differentiate themselves and to counteract feelings of homogenisation. This argument builds on the idea that industrialisation has made the protestant idea of work ethic obsolete; that the industrial worker can no longer find salvation in her work because it has become homogenised labour rather than the craft that it arguably once was (Ulver-Sneistrup, Askegaard & Brogård Kristensen, 2011).

If, as I have suggested in this book, consumption has also become a site of productive labour, and furthermore is becoming homogenised as all neoliberal subjects are compelled to choose similar productive experiences, do we also risk alienation from our consumption? In other words, if experiential

consumption is now made productive in the service of creating a sellable self, if that which we produce during our experiential consumption has exchange-value and not just use-value, do individuals in capitalist societies risk becoming alienated from our consumption experiences as well as from our work? If so, how and where will we escape alienation from consumption?

The craft nature of consuming extraordinary experiences can be understood as reintegrating and sacralising both production and consumption and may shed some light on the problem of alienation from consumption. In craft consumption, the work ethic is resacralised because work is no longer in the pursuit of profit for capitalists but in the service of creating something—even if it is one's own sellable self. It evokes the protestant work ethic but, instead of eternal life, the sellable self is promised a longer, healthier and more prosperous life here on earth in return for her endeavours. She is also rewarded with social approval for being a responsible and moral neoliberal individual. The consumption ethic is resacralised through the idea that craft consumption is not passive consumption (Campbell, 2005). It is active and instead of greed invokes notions of dedication and sacrifice. What craft consumption is to passive consumption, endurance running is to more passive forms of experiential consumption. The physical hard work and pain of endurance running experiences makes endurance running an active craft experience in which consumption is resacralised and alienation banished. Moreover, the sellable self differentiates her extraordinary experiences from others' and counteracts feelings of homogeneity by complicating or elaborating her extraordinary consumption experiences through the telling of stories in which her particular kind of endurance running is the most valid. This kind of behaviour is common among connoisseur consumers (Holbrook, 1999; Holt, 1998; Kozinets, 2002c; Quintão & Brito, 2015) such as coffee aficionados (Kjeldgaard & Östberg, 2007; Kozinets, 2002c; Quintão & Brito, 2015).

### **The un-sellable self**

Cova and Cova pose the question of whether individuals are aware of what they might lose as a result of being constructed as productive and creative consumers. Will the acquisition of competencies acquired and developed to help individuals become sellable selves be detrimental to other competencies such as “walking outdoors, picking flowers or mushrooms, pottering around the house, chatting with friends and, more than anything else, doing nothing at all” (2009, p.95)? If the individuals is seen, and sees herself, as a productive



consumer she will understand the totality of her life in those terms and will see leisure activities that do not align with or contribute to this subjectivity as a waste of time. Hence Eddie's incomprehension of David doing nothing in his leisure time.

How then might individuals resist the colonisation of their everyday lives, of their innermost desires and of their leisure and experiences by neoliberal discourses that compel them to feel, think and act as sellable selves? In other words, how might they practice "the art of not being governed quite so much" (Foucault, 1997, p.45). Several CCT researchers have studied consumers that resist market influences (see, for example, Cherrier, Black & Lee, 2011; Holt, 2002; Mikkonen, Moisander & Firat, 2011; Ozanne & Murray, 1995; Penalzoa & Price, 1993). While co-optation theory suggests that successful resistance is absorbed by the marketplace and sold back to consumers (Hebdige, 1991; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007), others have suggested that any escape from market logics is likely to be only temporary (Kozinets, 2002b). Sellable selves consuming endurance running experiences are reminiscent of Kozinets's Burning Man participants. Both groups use discourses of communality and natural surroundings in an attempt to emancipate themselves from the everyday. But, just as Kozinets's festival-goers could not entirely escape market logics by partying in the desert, the sellable self cannot escape neoliberal ways of being by running in the desert. There exist possibilities to resist external pressures but those desires that are experienced as springing from one's own essential being—as rational, normal and free choices—are harder to withstand (Gabriel, 1999; Rose, 1999). What does this mean for our capacity to resist or avoid enterprise culture and the demands it places on the self and the body? Where is the carnival that lets us escape, even temporarily, if only so that we can return to being better neoliberal subjects after letting off steam (Bakhtin, 1984; Rhodes, 2001)?

On an empirical level there are glimpses of another way of doing things. Small pockets of endurance runners, such as Malmö Guerrilla Runners [Gerrilalöpare], resist the market, by organising regular, small-scale, free endurance running events. Here we see how consumers of extraordinary experience might escape the market but not, however, the demand to be productive. Sleep has been argued to be an escape from the productive demands of neoliberal or capitalist society (Crary, 2013). Time spent asleep, Crary argues, is "one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism" (2013, p.10) since it, so far, has resisted being

“colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability” (2013, p.11). But the freedom of sleep is being eroded as it becomes understood as something productive (Crary, 2013). The power nap, it is suggested, can help employees to improve their overall productivity (McCamy, 2018). In my own research I met George, who listens to hypnotic tapes while he sleeps in order to become a better runner, thus putting his sleep time to productive use. Furthermore, in discussions about the “sleepless elite” (Beck, 2011)—who are recognised as exceptionally productive, highly functioning people due to their capacity to function on less sleep than the majority of people—we see evidence that sleep has been recognised as an escape and is no longer permitted to be such.

Maciel and Wallendorf’s (2012) perspective on leisure consumption suggests a potential mode of resistance in the re-emphasis of manual, slow-paced, time-wasting, labour. This has been devalued in contemporary consumer culture—which generally prizes efficiency and convenience—but is regaining cultural significance as something that denotes distinction and commands admiration. One could certainly interpret endurance running as time-wasting labour and understand it as a form of resistance against the productive demands of neoliberal society. But, from a critical perspective the distinction and admiration that this slow labour commands can be seen as evidence that even time-wasting has been co-opted by the requirements of the sellable self in neoliberal society. Time-wasting is not resistance but is indeed something that contributes to the production of a sellable self via its potential to confer distinction and signal status or luxury.

Several scholars have characterised sickness as perhaps the ultimate escape from the neoliberal demand for constant productivity (Cederström & Fleming, 2012; Cederström & Spicer, 2015). Since health and wellness are aspects of the sellable self, this appears to be an appropriate as well as effective form of resistance. A doctor’s note is a get-out-of-jail-free card, a weapon with which one can win a few days for oneself (Cederström & Spicer, 2015), willed by the body for itself and rejoiced on its arrival (Lucas, 2010). But, when the only possibility for inoperativity, is to be ill or unwell, what prospects for the mental health of the sellable self?



## 9 Conclusions

At the start of this book I asked how we could understand extraordinary consumer experiences as sites of both freedom and control. My aim was to problematise the existing (consumer culture theory) literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences by questioning its underlying assumptions—namely the romantic understanding of extraordinary experiences as spaces of emancipation from the demands of everyday life. In order to do this, I have critically examined how consumers talk about their consumption of one particular extraordinary experience, namely endurance running. Using the theory of vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940), I explored how various societal discourses and ideologies govern consumers' understandings of extraordinary experiences. In other words, I listened to how consumers used neoliberal discourses and entrepreneurial subjectivities to rationalise their consumption of extraordinary experiences. In doing so, I have been able to shed light on the less playful, more disciplinary aspects of extraordinary experiences. I have exposed some of the subtle power relations that govern the consumption of extraordinary experiences. This represents a shift in focus from the ways in which consumer culture theorists have studied extraordinary experiences; a shift away from seeing the consumer as reflexive and empowered towards a focus on the consumer as product of ideology, as a product of cultural, social, economic and political expectations. It also involves a shift in the understanding of the nature of extraordinary experiences. For instance, it has shown that extraordinary experiences may be less freely chosen than we imagined. And it has shown that they may involve more discipline, productivity and competition than was previously thought. There are societal discourses that encourage consumers to discipline themselves in particular, uncomfortable ways. But consumers are either not fully aware of these pressures or have learned that these are not the correct—socially acceptable—ways in which to talk about their motivations for consuming experiences.

When we look at the consumption of extraordinary experiences through a critical lens, we are able to question the positive discourse around health and

fitness, in which those who discipline their bodies in certain “correct” ways are lauded and potential risks or negative outcomes of participating—such as injury—are idealised into something more positive; proof of heroism, of striving beyond one’s capabilities to achieve and excel. We are able to see consumers of extraordinary experiences that feel compelled to push themselves beyond their capabilities and comfort in order to achieve externally set and validated achievements. We are able to suggest answers to the question of why consumers spend a great deal of time and money on experiences that are painful; of why they sacrifice so much to meet arbitrarily defined milestones—for example, 42.2 kilometres, 70.3 kilometres. Through a critical lens, we see the power at play. Individuals are not as free to (not) consume extraordinary experiences, as they might feel they are. They are responding to the expectations and ideals of a neoliberal society.

Critical studies should have an emancipatory aim (Horkheimer, 1972) and this one is no different. At the beginning of this book I suggested that, by presenting a critical narrative of endurance running, I hoped to make consumers of extraordinary experiences aware of the power relations that affect their material existence, subjectivities and bodily experiences and to enlighten them about the choices they make each time they consume an experience. I am well aware that, from a Foucauldian perspective, power is inescapable and that emancipation attempts tend to result in power changing its form, rather than being eliminated. Individuals are not free to choose whether or not to discipline themselves. However, they might just have some choice about what kind of disciplinary discourses they engage with and what kind of techniques of the self they employ. By highlighting the self-discipline at play in the consumption of endurance running as well as the demands exerted by societal discourses and ideology—such as the demand for productivity in extraordinary experiences, the pressure to imagine oneself in market terms and the push to compete with other neoliberal subjects in social life—I hope that I have provided the productive neoliberal consumer with some food for thought regarding her choices.

For those of us who are used to seeing media portrayals of endurance runners as heroes, I hope that this book provides some ammunition with which to challenge or at least question this idealisation. The woman who trains for an Ironman while raising three children and also being a successful CEO is an ideal that is held up for us all to imitate. Excuses are not welcome and structural impediments are acknowledged. In this sense, endurance running epitomises

the American dream. If you put in the work, you will be rewarded with success. Through the critical lens provided in this book, we can ask who benefits from this image and start to understand what is sacrificed in order to achieve it. Furthermore, we might now be better able to cast doubt on the idea that sporting achievement is illustrative of other skills, such as leadership. And we can question whether it is appropriate for corporate and public policy to promote extraordinary consumption experiences—for example, through corporate and public wellness programmes. Such promotion forces conformity of the body and of identity and represents the colonisation of life itself by work. It and also remakes citizens into individual sellable selves who are more capable of competition than of collective action.

## Limitations

One might well argue that the arguments made in this book are too structural, that a social constructionist ontological standpoint, even a weak one, reduces the human being to a mouthpiece, without agency, through whom discourses are reproduced without change. In my initial analyses, I have perhaps tended to be too conspiratorial, too structuralist, assuming that humans act in the ways that they do because of the structure of the society in which they (we) live. Having read Barnes (2001), I recognise that I should perhaps acknowledge more agency among societal individuals. After all, many different people acting in many different ways live within the same societal structures. Not all people consume extraordinary experiences and some possibly even consume them without sharing their experiences in social media and/or constructing sellable selves based on those experiences. These people serve to illustrate that an overly structural approach is conducive neither to understanding the endurance running phenomenon, nor to explaining the consumption of extraordinary experiences.

Having said that, I believe that a methodological individualist (Watkins, 1957) or reductionist approach—which assumes that macro phenomena (such as societies) are reducible to their micro parts (individuals) and are explained by the activity of those parts (Barnes, 2001)—accounts too little for the role of societal discourses and ideology in shaping the behaviour of individuals. There are too many of us that consume similar extraordinary experiences to simply explain this as an outcome of, for example, rational choice by a huge number

of independent individuals. My reading of much of the CCT literature on the consumption of extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Kozinets, 2002b; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017) is that it focuses heavily on the freedom and choice of reflexive consumers with regard to extraordinary experiences. For that reason, I have deliberately chosen to focus on the disciplining and controlling aspects of societal discourses in order to offer an alternative, critical, picture.

There are, in all likelihood, people who consume endurance running simply for the joy of it, for escaping from the mundanity and repetition of everyday life. They are not constrained by societal norms to consume high status endurance running experiences and to advertise their achievements in pursuit of recognition in other spheres of life. They are not compelled to authenticate their endurance running achievements by consuming market-generated and –mediated products and experiences—such as marathons or Ironman competitions. Perhaps they are not consumers of endurance running experiences at all. Perhaps they just run. And perhaps they do not even track their runs! It could be argued that these runners display more agency than others and may be understood to be subtly altering societal structures by acting in the ways that they do. However, other individuals, because they seek ontological security in what is familiar, feel compelled to act according to societal structures—norms, expectations and so on—to do all of the above. They consume products and experiences that confirm their identities as endurance runners and that signal their achievements in order to assure their continued success in a society that continues to be structurally reinforced by their practices. In this study, the former group, which we might call the non-consumers, are not well researched or represented. However, as Gherardi and Turner (2002) explained, theoretical accounts are not lists of experiences but rather one arrangement (of many possible arrangements) of *some* of the elements of those experiences that may be useful to others.

## Future research

The findings of this study could shed light on the consumption of other extraordinary experiences, especially other physical or bodily experiences and those related to fitness, such as CrossFit or yoga. It is easy to draw parallels between endurance running and yoga, another physical experience that has seen an increase in popularity in western contexts in recent years (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012). There are now countless types of yoga and several varieties that could be considered extraordinary experiences—for example, acro yoga, which combines yoga with acrobatics (Yogapedia Inc., 2019) or hot yoga such as Bikram, in which yoga is performed in rooms that are heated to around 40 degrees centigrade with 40 per cent humidity (Therien, 2019). Further research might indicate that, like endurance running, consumption of extraordinary yoga experiences can also be understood as a productive enterprise that is used to discursively create sellable selves. Like running, yoga is discursively constructed as a space of escape from everyday life and its stressors, but yet we see hints of achievement and competition at play when people share in social media photos of themselves performing extreme yoga poses, in extraordinary locations, wearing branded yoga clothing and using the latest equipment.

The extraordinary experiences examined in this book are bodily experiences. They are also consumed publicly. It would be interesting to see how the kind of vocabularies and discourses we see in accounts of endurance running are moderated in extraordinary consumer experiences that are less related to the body or perhaps in those that are less public. Further research on the consumption of less bodily extraordinary experiences might consider eSports (electronic sports), competitive video gaming that is typically broadcast on the internet (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Discourses of freedom might be considerably moderated in this kind of experience, since there is no longer any *communitas* with nature. However, the experience of escape from the everyday might be considerably enhanced by submersing oneself in a digital virtual world. Further research on less publicly consumed extraordinary experiences might consider extraordinary sexual experiences. It is difficult to see how they would be used in the work of creating a sellable self since, at the moment, they are typically consumed in relative privacy. It seems unlikely that the skills developed during the consumption of extraordinary sexual experiences would be transferrable to typical white-collar work but we know little about how work



will change in the future. After all, 30 years ago, it would probably have seemed absurd to suggest that running through snow or swimming through mud would indicate one's capabilities as a management consultant.

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# Appendices

## Creation in practice

These appendices supplement the methodology chapter with figures and images that would otherwise interrupt the flow of text. They refer specifically to the section on data collection and may be useful in helping to understand visually how the collection (or creation, as I prefer to call it) of the empirical material took place in practice.

### *Email prompts*

Approximately once a week, I prompted participants via email to make entries in their consumption diaries. These prompts sometimes contained a question asking about—for example, a favourite running location—and sometimes just asked them to reflect on that day or week's running endeavours. The following two figures show examples of these email prompts.



**Figure 1: Examples of emails sent to prompt participants to make diary entries**

**Carys Egan-Wyer**

It's diary time!

To: Carys Egan-Wyer

---

Hi there,

Thanks so much for keeping your running diary updated. I enjoy reading every post.

In your next post, could you please think about the following:

Reflect on last week's training. How did it measure up to your plans? How do you feel about that?

Kind regards,

**Carys Egan-Wyer**

**Lund University School of Economics & Management**

Företagsekonomiska Institutionen

Lunds universitet

Box 7080, 220 07 Lund

**Carys Egan-Wyer**

It's diary time again!

To: Carys Egan-Wyer

---

Dearest Diarists,

Thanks so much for all your wonderful diary entries. I really appreciate your efforts :-)

This week, could you think about **what piece of equipment you could not be without during training or competition, and why?**

Thanks again and kind regards,

**Carys Egan-Wyer**

**Lund University School of Economics & Management**

Företagsekonomiska Institutionen

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## Log of diary entries

The majority of runners created diary entries when they were prompted by me, as well as on other notable occasions, such as competition days or events. I kept track of the entries received in a large spread sheet, an extract of which can be seen below.

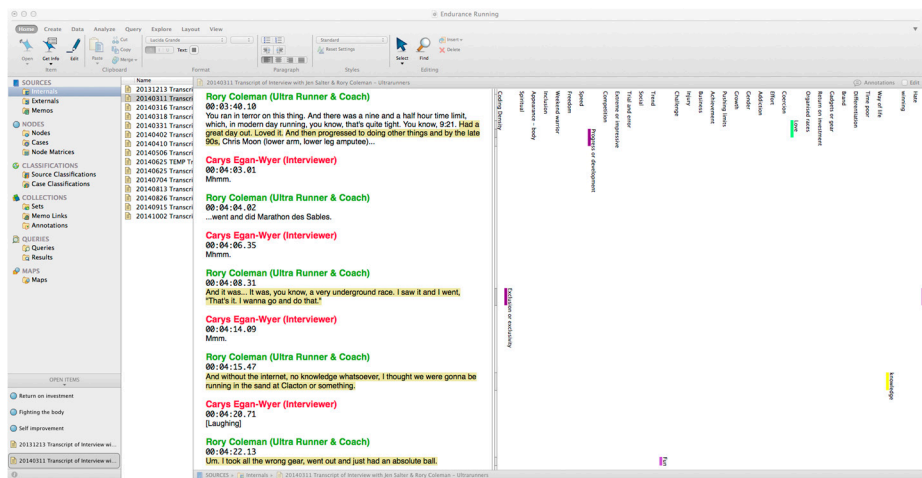
Figure 2: An excerpt from the log of respondents' diary entries

Entry made	Tell be about your greatest achievement and/or proudest moment endurance running moment.	Entry made	What are your training plans this week and do you think you will complete them all?	Entry made	Reflect on last week's training? How did it measure up to your plans?	Entry made	How do you convince yourself to train or run when you don't feel like getting out of bed or off the couch?	Entry made	What piece of equipment could you not be without during training or competition?	Entry made	What training or races do you have planned for the week ahead and how will that fit in with your everyday life?	Entry made	Please describe how the weather is impacting your training/competition at the moment?
X	20140310	X	20140317	X	20140326	X	20140404		20140415	X	20140513		20140602
	20140311	X	20140317	X	20140326	X	20140404	X	20140415	X	20140513		20140602
	20140311		20140317	X	20140326	X	20140404		20140415		20140513		20140602
											20140513		20140602
	20140311	X	20140317	X	20140326	X	20140404		20140415	X	20140513		20140602
		X	20140317	X	20140326	X	20140404		20140415		20140513		20140602
							20140407	X	20140415		20140513		20140602

## Thematising in Nvivo

Nvivo is a visual software that allows researchers to replicate manual paper-based thematisation using a highlighter pen. I used Nvivo for sentence-by-sentence coding rather than paper and a highlighter. It allowed me to keep track of the themes I had already noted and to gather and view all interview excerpts relating to a particular theme in one place. Figure 3 shows Nvivo during thematising of an interview.

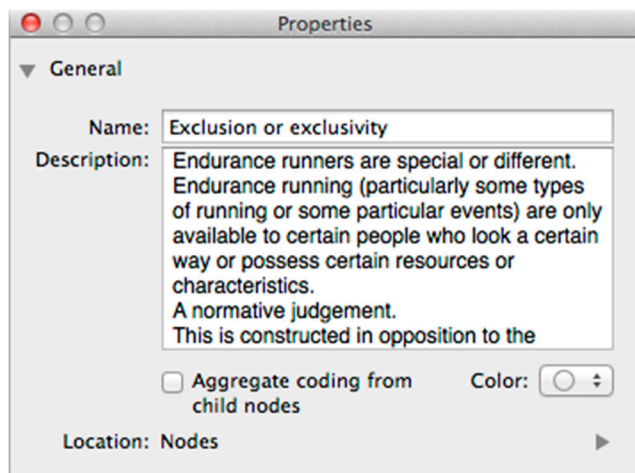
Figure 3: Thematising in Nvivo



### *Memo-writing in Nvivo*

Nvivo allows for the creation of theme descriptions during thematisation. See figure 3. These descriptions approach what Charmaz calls memos or “informed analytic notes” (2006 p87). Their creation and revision allowed me to move between thematising and theorising; to play with different interpretations and to capture connections that were close to the empirical material (2006 p87).

**Figure 4: Memo-writing in Nvivo**




The screenshot shows a window titled "Properties" with a "General" tab. The "Name" field contains the text "Exclusion or exclusivity". The "Description" field contains the text: "Endurance runners are special or different. Endurance running (particularly some types of running or some particular events) are only available to certain people who look a certain way or possess certain resources or characteristics. A normative judgement. This is constructed in opposition to the". Below the description field, there is a checkbox labeled "Aggregate coding from child nodes" which is currently unchecked. To the right of this checkbox is a "Color:" label followed by a color selection button. At the bottom left, the "Location:" is set to "Nodes".

**Properties**

▼ **General**

Name: Exclusion or exclusivity

Description: Endurance runners are special or different.  
Endurance running (particularly some types of running or some particular events) are only available to certain people who look a certain way or possess certain resources or characteristics.  
A normative judgement.  
This is constructed in opposition to the

☐ Aggregate coding from child nodes      Color: 

Location: Nodes ▶



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