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# Road Running as a Designed Experience

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The road running market<sup>1</sup> is a global phenomenon. Millions of runners practice this physical activity in parks, squares, and streets in cities all over the world. As a sport activity accessible to a large public for several reasons (easy to practice, no specific equipment required or no need for other participants), running has gained strength as the fastest growing sport in the world with very impressive growth in Brazil.

Practicing alone or in groups, runners have fostered the creation of a large number of competitions, from shorter distances (5 km and 10 km) to higher challenges (21.097 km and 42.195 km – half-marathon and marathon), or ultra-marathons, as the Comrades in South Africa, that is 89 km.

The increased popularity of running can be seen by the impressive figures of the New York Marathon, with more than 100,000 applications for 43,000 allowed participants.<sup>2</sup> Marathons in Tokyo, Chicago, Berlin and Paris are big events that attract thousands of tourists and athletes. But, why does this happen? We can speculate on some reasons for this trend, such as the increasing concern with sedentary

life style and stress, typical of post-modern societies, or the search for a perfect body and the consequent elevation of self-esteem. However, which factors are really responsible for such figures?

In the 70s, there was a boom in jogging all over the world influenced by the work of Dr Kenneth Cooper and by the growing status of running as a healthy sport. In the USA, there were about 100,000 runners at that time, increasing to 30 million currently. In Brazil there is an estimated 3 million daily runners<sup>3</sup>, placing it as the second most popular sport in the country's biggest cities (São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro), soccer being the first one.

Sporting goods companies have invested large amounts of money in the development and launching of shoes and accessories for running, focusing on lighter, more resistant to different kinds of ground and weather, and customized products for each type of runner, taking into consideration, for instance, their weight or the way they step and move when running. At the same time, the events organization related to running have multiplied and become more professional. In São Paulo, the biggest Brazilian city, there were 11 official competitions in 2001. In 2009, 174 competitions were took place, or 3 competitions every weekend.<sup>4</sup>

In realizing the relevance of this sportive and social phenomenon, some inevitable questions come to mind: Is the increasing number of people practicing running something spontaneous or created? What turns this act in a minimally stimulating activity into something attractive and capable of encouraging crowds?

The debate related to the nature of user running experience, as spontaneous or projected by others, shed light on the role of design as a behavioral change agent or a key for stimulating unwanted consumption. The road running phenomena choice as study object is justified by the characteristics as a physical activity: individual practice, high physical stress involved, and which has been growing exponentially in recent years. This growth, associated with the emergence (and increase) of correlate businesses (sporting goods, services, race organization, segmented travel agencies, food and supplements), lead us to investigate the essence of this practice among runners and their motivations. Is there an experience project, designed by someone, behind the road running boom? Is it a sport activity developed solely by the runner? Can design leverage this practice and spread it to people who wouldn't run by themselves?

The discussion proposed by this paper is guided by these questions: is the experience of running something designed by others or is it something constructed by the user; how can design influence the practice or the experience perceived; can the racing practice phenomenon be explained by the formation of a subculture suitable for a certain kind of individuals that are sometimes organized in tribes; is the formation of tribes the result of projected actions by market agents? In order to discuss these points, this research was developed and its purpose was to evaluate experience design

influences on consumer behavior of road runners in Porto Alegre. In order to reach this goal, the participating agents or elements which can influence the individual runner experience were assessed, as well as the design interventions related to the running itself and user experience perception.

In the last decades, the scope of design action has been broadened since the original conception of product development and its tangible characteristics to a wider perspective, not only constrained in tangible aspects as aesthetics, materials and shape. Mitchell<sup>5</sup> has stated that design should not project only objects but also functions, contexts of use, systems and environments. This conception is materialized through experience design, which has as its purpose not only in product development but also in creating conditions to generate satisfactory experiences for the user. Recent studies have tried to analyze the role of design in the development of consuming experiences<sup>6</sup> however, there are many theory gaps in the area.

In the next section the concepts of experience design will be detailed.

## **Experience Design**

The experience theme has gained relevance in the field of consumer behavior research since Holbrook and Hirschman's study.<sup>7</sup> Until then, the discussion and studies in the area related to consumption did not explicitly consider the role of hedonistic and symbolic elements that products and services had on consumer perception. The authors highlighted that there was a flow of fantasies, feelings and fun around consuming processes so far underestimated by organizations in the development of their offers and even when designing their products. Personal experiences would be the result of individual events, full of emotional meanings resulting from the interaction between user and a set of stimuli, either related to products, services, or communication. Pine and Gilmore<sup>8</sup> pointed out that consumption in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be within the "experience economy", that is, the nineteenth century industrial revolution that attempted to implement standardization and mass production would be replaced by mass customization (products/services increasingly more adapted to individual needs and desires) which, in turn, can be characterized by the search for individual immersion in consumer experiences instead of simply buying products or services.

In economies increasingly more dependant on services, the concern is to generate experiences based on the creation of environments capable of absorbing clients in a pleasant, memorable, and unique way, with services working as stages and products as supports.<sup>9</sup> Lusch and Vargo<sup>10</sup> pointed out that the dominant logic of services in national economies lead to a new consumer role in the purchasing and consumption process. A passive posture was replaced by an individual

in search of co-authorship in the creation of consuming value. There is no value in offers until they are used, and the experience is fundamental in determining it. Experience, in that sense, is not an accessory element to the consuming process, and it plays a leading role in the construction of value organizations. The consequence is a change in the role of design: in this new context the focus is not only on designing artifacts but also on developing user experiences. The challenge is to be able to generate not just daily and satisfactory experiences, but outstanding ones. The cognitive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly says activities that are intrinsically motivating<sup>11</sup> for the individual, give pleasure in their accomplishment and take the user to a deep state of involvement and personal joy, generate a state of mental flow and are essential for the constitution of outstanding experiences. When in this state, the feelings of pleasure and satisfaction are considered unique and can contribute to a bigger engagement in the continuous realization of a certain activity.

Many authors have discussed the nature of consumption experience. Pullman and Gross<sup>12</sup> indicated that the experiences are “inherently emotional and personal”, and are dependant on individual factors like cultural background, previous experiences, mood and personality traits. Forlizzi, Disalvo and Hanington as well as Hekkert and McDonagh<sup>13</sup> pointed out that experiences are unique, made of small experiences related to contexts, products and people, and the experiences themselves cannot be projected, only the situations of interaction with users.

Caru and Cova<sup>14</sup> classified consuming experiences within a continuum, according to those responsible for their construction. There are, on one side, experiences oriented by consumers, which are organized by users and tend to be the result of everyday services and products sold by companies through traditional marketing approaches. On the other hand, there are experiences oriented by companies conceiving all the details of the projected experience, characterized by specific organizational efforts to generate immersion in consuming contexts.

The intermediate position in this context relates to experiences dependable on the construction by companies of an experiential platform as well as on the user's active participation in the development of his/her own experience. Therefore, the results of the projected experience are the outcome of co-authorship between organization and consumer. Playful activities like adventure tourism and cultural events are typically co-driven experiences.

According to McLellan<sup>15</sup> experience design is intended to “orchestrate” experiences that are functional, engaging, attractive and memorable. It demands designing all the details of content and context for the user, seeking to generate both emotional fulfillment and pleasure and a satisfying experience. The scope of experience design is beyond the materialization of a service or a product; it is in the set of planning activities of processes and systems that

support the occurrence of the experience, besides the earlier stages of its construction, like the deeper understanding of clients and production contexts.

## Method

The study presented here is based on a phenomenological approach and is exploratory. To understand the road running market phenomenon, we used data triangulation by taking different approaches of data collecting. Secondary research about the running world, either from market data or studies from other academic research fields like Physical Education, Tourism, Marketing and Psychology was our starting point. Secondary data was collected at running related institutions like Association of International Marathons and Distance Races (Aims), International Association of Athletics Federations (IAFF), Corpore (Paulista Road Runners United), São Paulo Road Runners Instructors Association, as well as at different running specialized medias like magazines, sites and blogs.<sup>16</sup> Primary data was collected through a set of audio-recorded in-depth interviews based on semi-structured scripts with agents from this industry. The data description obtained by this process is shown in the Table 1.

An ethnographic essay was developed with one of the authors of a sports consultancy service company in parallel, in which he experienced three training sessions of 60 minutes each, three times a week for 14 months. The criteria for choosing this company were

**Table 1** Data Collection In-depth Interviews.

Agent	Description	Variables involved
Running competition organizer	Corpore (biggest competition organizer in Brazil and the oldest running club with 9850 athletes enrolled)	Race market evolution and trends, runner's profiles, races tangibles, opportunities and challenges
Running training groups	Run for Fun and MPF owners (1400 and 1300 enrolled athletes respectively) <sup>17</sup>	Users' motivation, profiles, benefits, services offered, service usage cycle, tangibles
Sportswear manufacturers	Asics Marketing Director Nike Running Director	Market overview, new product development strategies (running shoes, apparel, gadgets), communication strategies
Specialized media	Runner's World Brazil magazine Director (national magazine) Sprint Final director (regional newspaper)	Information consumption, market evolution and trends

the number of athletes participating (120 runners) and its structure level in relation to other groups in Porto Alegre. Besides the training, the researcher also took part in 5 annual competitions in the city, with distances of 5 and 10 km, as well as social activities with members of the running group. Notes were taken in field diaries throughout the study and photos were taken during the activities. The variables observed in the ethnographic essay were related to the user perception about the running experience promoted by a sport consultancy, as well as the motivations for engagement on this type of service. The most relevant attributes of the running training service were analyzed and their impact on the overall evaluation by the user for continuing the running practice was scrutinized.

Data analysis was performed by the transcriptions of in-depth-interviews, and a content analysis was carried out on the collected material, that was evaluated in conjunction with other obtained data.

## **Results**

The results of this study are presented in two parts: the description of the main agents in the running market, followed by the analysis of the influence of experience design over the consumption behavior of road runners. The market for road running in Brazil is made up by the following agents: runners, sportswear brands, events organizers (private companies, running clubs, public sector), sport consultants or training groups, specialized media, business opportunity seekers and general public and family members.

Undoubtedly, the main agent of this process is the person who runs. For many reasons that will further be dealt with in this paper, runners get interested in the running activity and in most cases start engaging in the sport independently. Running, just like walking, is the most accessible sport activity because it can be carried out alone, anywhere, and initially requires little investments. Some studies point out the factors that motivate people to choose running as a physical activity. According to Silva<sup>18</sup> running improves the physical conditions of athletes (better fitness, less risk of cardiac diseases, weigh control and breathing capacity), the emotional and cognitive balance (stress reduction, better mood, higher self-confidence, enhanced learning, concentration and abstract reasoning), and the social skills (the need to belong to a group, make new friends etc.).

Although it takes little investments to go running, the role of sporting goods labels is more important than it seems. Brands like Nike, Asics, Mizuno and Adidas have noticed that the market for running has a high annual growth rate and that runners look for products that allow higher performance, regardless of their own performance level. Products range from foot wear, with improved technology to bring comfort, cushioning, resistance and

stability, to training apparel crafted with smart fabrics that are light and moisture-wicking, and also accessories like heart monitors that measure speed, distance, calorie expenditure, with GPS sensors and other performance display features.

Running shoes are the flagship of brands. They have an outstanding role in the market since there are annual collections launched globally that bring on technological advancements and are widely advertised in the specialized media (most of them publish running shoes profiles comparing brands, models and performance tests), as well as in the outlets and races sponsored by the labels.

A particular issue from the Brazilian running market is the relevance of running groups or sport training consultancy services in influencing runner behavior. There is no recent statistics of the share of runners market which hires this kind of service, but it's an important element to leverage the sport's growth in the country. The running training groups, distinctively from the runners groups, are paid services which seek to make the sport experience more pleasant and comfortable. They are complemented by training counseling before, during and after the exercise and races (including warm-up, stretching, massage and hydration), customized training spreadsheets, tents and lounges for athletes in the race. The distribution of t-shirts to members, transportation for training in distant sites (most of the practices occur in parks and streets of the cities, according to a previously informed timetable), the race registration service, the web-based platform for communication between athletes and instructors, as well as the organization of running trips (especially for interesting races such as prestigious marathons abroad) are extra services which differentiate the companies and the value perception of the runners (the basic cost for this service is US\$ 80 per month).

Sports consultants (or running groups) offer services to two segments of the market: individual runners and corporations. Companies, with the objective of improving the health and lifestyle of their staff, have been hiring consultancy services to organize and assist their staff in running activities. Besides promoting fitness among the staff, this kind of initiative also improves corporate life.

The growth of the Brazilian running market is due to an increasing number of races in a structured calendar, which can vary according to distances, courses and purposes. Competitions have been more professionally organized, which involves processes and services of advertising (mass and specialized media), application (mostly by the internet), the use of transponder timing systems (which are essential to measure the performance of athletes), the distribution of apparel sets (a numbered T-shirt is the basic item with a variation of accessories and toiletries), the setting of race courses, inspection, lightning, music etc. Application costs are also higher (ranging from US\$ 20.00 to US\$100.00 for each athlete), not only for restricting



the number of participants but also for choosing a target public for the organizers.

Another interesting fact with regard to race events is that they are usually related to an issue, a project or a specific public. Besides being organized by their course length, races can be directed to females (Venus Circuit), Kids (Kids Run) or companies' running clubs (Corporate Run). They can be held in the evening, with a clubbing atmosphere (Fila Night Run, Poa Night Run), inside a factory around the assembly line (Volkswagen Run) or in fashion high streets. A common kind of race is the one in which athletes take turns allowing groups with different numbers of participants to run side by side, regardless of the performance level of each runner.

Some elements that characterize the studied races are the great number of stands dedicated to sport consultants and running clubs. They usually provide support services to runners that take part in these clubs, like a place to keep their belongings, fruit and drinks. All participants of a running club wear the same apparel as a way of indicating unity, even when race organizers offer a specific T-shirt for the competition.

### **Analysis of Data and Findings**

Considering the analysis in the context of road running, the guiding questions of this study about the role of design (specifically experience design) in different forms of consumption associated with running can be discussed. The individuals who practice running were grouped in different segments according to their motivations. It became clear throughout the interviews with the specialized media and sport consultancy services that there are three runner profiles:

- Group 1: formed by extremely competitive individuals seeking a high performance. They participate in competition on a regular basis and are heavy users of related services and information.
- Group 2: formed by individuals seeking a better quality of life. They participate in competitions for the pleasure of taking part in the event and, in some cases, for the challenge of improving performance. They often start practicing motivated by the possibility of being accepted in a social circle or because it is trendy, but as they get involved they realize it is an easy, pleasant and low cost activity.
- Group 3: formed by individuals who are marginal to the market. They do not take part in competitions and are light users of products and services related to running.

The first group represents a very small percentage of the running population, but works as an aspiring element for the other participants, mainly for the second group. Group 2 has been responsible for market growth, influenced by the increasing number of runners in public places and by the growing number of competitions designed for beginners (5 to 10 km).

Based on Csikszentmihaly's flow concept, it is possible to see that practicing running has distinct tones for each runner profile. For those who aim at continuous improvement of performance, the imposed challenges demand the development of skills necessary to achieve their goals, forcing them to use all necessary resources in order to be able to accomplish their goals. The use of sports advisory services, the constant search for information and the continuous investment in equipment and accessories to improve performance give support for the mental state of pleasure to be eminent. Besides the elevation of challenge levels, diversity of stimuli has played a fundamental role for the designing of outstanding experiences. This can be confirmed by the constant innovation in the dynamics of competitions, either in racing circuits, services or available technologies for their occurrence. Another trend identified for competitive runners is the called *running tourism*, that is, competitions like the New York Marathon, or similar ones in Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro that have attracted tourists/runners willing to face new challenges and, at the same time, visit new places. Travel agencies, hotels, and airline companies have designed services targeting these specific tourists who usually travel with other runners or with their families.

For individuals from group 2, the initial motivations for running are extrinsic, with goals not specifically related to the act of running. Because of the immersion in the running context, inside of the structure of running clubs, advisory services or competitions, the motivational nature is altered and emotional states as pleasure and satisfaction arise gradually. The immersion process, according to Caru and Cova<sup>19</sup> is not quickly or automatically established, it is progressive and can be accelerated according to the designing and management of services that compose the experience, either in terms of consultancy services or the organization of street competitions.

Running clubs play a major role in the promotion of the running practice because they are behavior inducers. When gathering people with different motivations, level of performance and different socio-cultural backgrounds but united around the same cause (running), the clubs produce positive reinforcements in the individual, like socialization, the necessary orientation for safely practicing the activity with less injury risks, comfort and support to allow for a carefree practice.

Competitions, even if they are not common to all kinds of runners, play the role of generating constant challenges, which are essential for the arising of *flow*. Unlike other sports, road running is essentially a competition against one's own limits, not against other competitors. Competitions assume two responsibilities in relation to competitors: create opportunities to challenge their records and engage individuals in experience sharing communities, a central characteristic of consuming tribes.<sup>20</sup>

There is evidence that runners who actively participate in the practice of running, either using consultancy services or taking part in competitions, tend to get a more significant involvement with sports practices. Stebbins<sup>21</sup> reveals that the construction of a social identity is relevant for the individual because it creates a sense of belonging, a valuable place in a social environment, a connection with others and a way to raise self-esteem. Shipway and Jones<sup>22</sup>, in a study on the experiences of the London Marathon participants, pointed out that only what is known as serious leisure can create a meaningful social identity. Since a social identity is created between runners, a new consuming tribe is constituted. According to criteria identified by Cova and Cova<sup>23</sup>, the four elements necessary to the constitution of a new tribe are: the daily practice (regular training), locations (parks, streets), trends (increasing number of people practicing running) and gatherings (training sessions, competitions, social activities).

It is in this context that the formation of tribes occurs because, besides the natural obstacles to be overcome, the activities demand a high commitment and engagement. This is possible to notice on the structuring of the consultancy services with the institution of a standard uniform (usually a t-shirt), that reinforces the feeling of belonging to a group, sharing affinities and seeking common goals. The perception of the running competition itself is substantially altered when experienced independently and individually or in teams or groups sharing a minimally constituted identity. The group experience revealed itself as being more stimulating, promoting a longer involvement with the running practice (lower rates of quitters). Design can play an important role in the configuration of this projected experience, either in the constitution of services to stimulate the formation of groups or with tangible elements that reinforce the structuring of a collective identity (brand, uniform, communication, facilities). For sportswear companies (focused on footwear, athletic apparel and equipment), the opportunities of growth are closely related to experience design efforts. Building appealing interfaces among traditional sportswear equipment and social media platforms, the runner experience could be improved stimulating belonging feelings (“to be a part of a group”) and encouraging to get a better performance and creating new challenges. Solutions such as the Nike Plus (Nike and Apple running-entertainment system) are good examples of product attributes, web-based system and social network can influence beginners to run (and continue to do it). For race organizers, designers can contribute to promote extraordinary experiences, mainly developing innovative competitions, with challenging courses, thematic environments, unexpected services for runners and their families, etc.

When discussing the concept of experience design, it was possible to notice that the elements for its structuring, either for

competitions or consultancy services, could be found in the constitution of content (central or auxiliary services offered by event organizers or teams), context (development of physical evidences) and processes (supporting systems that allow for advisory and competition operations). The challenge for the people responsible for it is the continuous generation of positive experiences. Not only this, but with an urge to continuously develop innovations that will characterize them as satisfactory and, if possible, extraordinary experiences.

## Conclusions

It is possible to observe that the running activity is initially an independent, low-cost and an easy one to practice by the participants. However, the construction of a more complex experience with the participation of other people and with specialized technical orientation from professionals of Physical Education and related areas brings other elements for the engagement with the sport. The formation of running clubs, with their own identification and sport consultancy service, as well as services like warming up, stretching, hydration, circuit definition, performance control, organization for collective participation in regional, national and international events, transform a consumer-driven experience into a co-driven one, that is, its fruition and development are equally dependent on the user and companies initiatives.

Initiatives in the developing of running related products reveal the efforts in the designing of experiences, like the partnership between Nike, the sporting goods manufacturer, and Apple in the launching of the Nike Plus system. The system integrates Nike running shoes and iPods, making it possible to monitor the runner's performance, listen to music and participate in a Nike social network on the Web for athletes using the same technology, reinforcing the stimuli for the constitution of a community of users or sports practicing people with tribal characteristics. Running is not an obstacle to be overcome and it develops a social, entertaining and pleasurable feature from products that free runners' central activity from the fatigue, discomfort and sacrifice that they normally face.

This study has how the running experience is constituted and the role design plays in the transformation of that experience into something more accessible to a common user, not restricting itself only to a performance athlete. The construction of running-related consuming experiences less focused on the user's sportive performance and more focused on providing for their hedonic and functional needs is the fuel for the growing of this market and highlights the importance of design in the constitution of services, experiences and products.

An interesting discussion can be developed concerning the road running activity as a sustainable type of consumption and its impact to the society. At the same time running is an engaging, democratic activity, the phenomena has stimulated consumption in apparel, shoes, electronic devices, not necessarily sustainable practices for the people and the environment. This “designed” experience, more complex, even more sophisticated and not so accessible to all income brackets, can cause undesired results to the society. This is an important challenge for designers: to deal with an emerging market of runners and supporters in a sustainable way, focused in projecting products and services with less environmental impact, encouraging collaborative practices and reducing abusive and unnecessary consumption.

The study has focused on a minor portion of the running experience as consumption. Issues such as runner perception process and its relationship with designed experience weren't discussed on this article. These findings presented on this paper represent the first part of data analysis of this research project. Further data collection and analysis will be conducted focusing on the experience design methods and their application to the service industry.

### Notes

1. According to the International Association of Athletics Federations (2009), road races are conducted in streets, avenues and roads with official distances ranging from 5 to 100 km.
2. AIMS. Association of International of Marathon and Distance Races. *Marathon statistics*. Retrieved December 24, 2009, from [http://aimsworldrunning.org/statistics/World%27s\\_Largest\\_Marathons.html#2009](http://aimsworldrunning.org/statistics/World%27s_Largest_Marathons.html#2009)
3. Daily basis runner is considered the one who practices this physical activity at least 3 times a week for 30 minute-length period.
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9. Pine & Gilmore; Bernd Schmitt, *Customer experience management*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1999.
10. Robert Lusch & Stephen Vargo, Service-dominant logic: reactions, reflections & refinements. *Marketing Theory*, 6, v. 3, 2006, p. 281–288.
11. Intrinsic motivation can be described as not focused on the rewards from some activity, but as consequence of its involvement and effort. Extrinsic motivation occurs when an activity is just a way to reach a goal, generating more tension and stress for its achievement. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi & Isabella Csikszentmihalyi (Eds, *Optimal experience: psychological studies of flow in consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1988.
12. Madeleine Pullman & Michael Gross, Ability of experience design elements to elicit emotions and loyalty behaviour. *Decision Sciences*, 35, v. 3, 2004, p. 551.
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14. Antonella Caru & Bernard Cova, How to facilitate immersion in a consumption experience: appropriation operations and service elements. *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, 5, 2006, p. 4–14.
15. Hillary McLellan, Experience design
16. It's important to highlight that the data was collected in two Brazilian cities (Porto Alegre and São Paulo) due to the size of São Paulo market for road running, as the city with the highest number of runners and running races in Latin America.
17. The biggest running training groups in the country, both located in São Paulo.
18. Mario Sergio Silva. *Corra*. São Paulo: Academia, 2009.
19. Caru and Cova, op cit.
20. *Ibid*.
21. Robert Stebbins, *Amateurs, professionals and serious leisure*. Montreal: Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 1992.
22. Richard Shipway & Ian Jones, The great suburban Everest: an 'insiders' perspective on experiences at the 2007 Flora London Marathon. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 13, v. 1, 2008, p. 71–77.
23. Bernard Cova, Robert Kozinets & Avi Shankar, *Consumer tribes*. Oxford: BH, 2007.