

# Media@LSE MSc Dissertation Series

Editors: Simidele Dosekun, Zichen Hu



## Running the Numbers

Strava, Communal Self-Tracking and the Digital  
Mediatization of Movement Among Gen Z Runners

**Jagoda Feder**



Running the Numbers: Strava, Communal  
Self-Tracking and the Digital  
Mediatization of Movement Among Gen  
Z Runners

Jagoda Feder

Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"),  
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a  
Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the  
Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

Copyright, Jagoda Feder © 2026.

The author has asserted their moral rights.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval  
system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing  
of the publisher nor be issued to the public or circulated in any form of binding or cover  
other than that in which it is published. In the interests of providing a free flow of debate,  
views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the compilers or the LSE.

## **ABSTRACT**

*This dissertation critically examines how Strava, a community-oriented self-tracking platform, shapes the sociality, identities and affective experiences of Gen Z runners within the broader context of the mediatization and neoliberalization of contemporary running culture. It situates these dynamics amid the so-called 'third running boom' - a period marked by the rise of digital commercialization and the sociocultural reimagining of running - to understand whether this context has affected the way in which users engage with the platform. Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with eleven participants who are part of the Gen Z community and identified as Strava users, the study generated unique insights into how the platform's affordances are differentially used and prioritized amid the rising socialization of running. The findings corroborate previous research on Strava's capacity to elicit varied affective responses and to support multipurpose motivations for use. Additionally, the study extends the existing literature by foregrounding the previously overlooked role of the 'third running boom' in shaping Strava usage. It highlights how the proliferation of run clubs and the commodification of running have contributed to the formation of running identities and communities, both online and offline, as well as the sports' popularization amongst 'leisurely' runners. These processes are further reinforced through self-tracking practices and their display on Strava and beyond, even extending to unexpected forms of social connection.*

## INTRODUCTION

The 1970s and 1980s are often referred to as the beginning of the first fitness boom, a period characterized by the proliferation of recreational and fitness related content, ranging from branded apparel from companies such as Nike and Adidas to equipment such as treadmills to fitness media like workout videos (Millington, 2016: 1185). Running, and more specifically 'jogging', played a central role in this movement (Scheerder *et al.*, 2015: 2). In 1961, Arthur Lydiard founded the world's first jogging club in New Zealand, promoting running as part of everyday life routines to support general health and fitness. During a trip to New Zealand, American track coach and Nike co-founder, Bill Bowerman, discovered Lydiard's approach to running and popularized it in the United States. As a result, an estimated 25 million Americans began running analogously to the fitness boom of the 70s and 80s (Lathan, 2023: 777).

The late 1990s and early 2000s marked the onset of the second running boom, characterized by increased participation in races and community-based events (Nilson *et al.*, 2021: 660). This period coincided with what has been described by Millington (2016: 1184) as the second fitness boom, driven in part by technological advancements and the emergence of self-tracking tools. Lupton (2016: 2) defines self-tracking as a set of practices 'directed at regularly monitoring and recording and often measuring elements of an individual's behaviors or bodily functions' (Kent, 2020: 1). During that time, self-tracking was characterized by the intensification of:

*Human-technology interactivity [...], data-intensiveness [...], the customization of fitness activities in the interest of 'optimization' [...], the option for individual users to partake in wider online communities and, [...] both 'new' and 'old' forms of commodification*  
(Millington, 2016: 1185).

Building on this intensified entanglement between fitness and technology, the rise of self-tracking culture has raised questions regarding the moral dimensions of the practice and the ways in which health and fitness have 'helped establish the 'common sense' of neoliberalism' through widespread digital mass (self-)surveillance (Millington, 2016: 1186). Nonetheless, the emergence of self-tracking culture has undeniably reshaped how individuals engage with exercise, positioning digital metrics and data-driven reflection, valuation and community

interaction as central to contemporary fitness practices (Sharon & Zandbergen, 2017: 1695). One of the most prominent platforms enabling this mode of engagement is Strava, a web-based platform and mobile app meant for both professional and recreational use which allows users to not only keep track of their physical activity but also serves as ‘the social network of those who strive’ (Strava, 2025).

In January 2025, Strava was the most downloaded fitness app worldwide, with close to 3.4 million downloads, where despite the app supporting 32 different types of physical activity, cycling and running remain the most logged activities (Statista, 2025; Couture, 2021: 185). Concurrently, the 2025 London Marathon set a new world record for the highest number of participants in any marathon, while the 2026 event has already broken a record with 1.1 million sign-ups (Ingle, 2025). Although initially, the typical runner in the 1960s represented a ‘white, [...] middle-class and middle-aged’ male, by the 1970s, more diverse populations began running (Mold, 2024: 495). Now, more than a third of UK entries for the London Marathon are for participants aged 18 to 29 years old, and for the first time, there is almost an even split between male and female participants (Ingle, 2025).

Amid the rise of what has been called the ‘third running boom’ and the increasing mediatization and marketization of running on digital platforms, by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews, this study aims to critically examine the motivations and experiences of 11 Gen Z men and women associated with the usage of community-oriented self-tracking platform Strava, focusing in particular on its influence on the affective and communicative dimensions of self-tracking. Additionally, this study will try to situate these dynamics within the broader theoretical and conceptual debates regarding mass (self-) surveillance, biopolitics, self-tracking and the neoliberal rationale. While there exists prior research on the ‘Strava-sphere’ and user’s experiences of (communal) self-tracking (see Couture, 2021 and Spotswood *et al.*, 2020), to my knowledge, no study has investigated this phenomenon in the broader socio-cultural context of the ‘third running boom’ and its associated mediatization, specifically amongst the Gen Z demographic.

To explore the research question, this study will begin by introducing some theoretical and conceptual groundwork on (self-)surveillance, biopolitics, (communal) self-tracking as well as empirical work on runners’ self-tracking experiences before situating the literature within the

broader scope of online and offline movement cultures. Subsequently, the study's methodology will be outlined and will be followed by a presentation of its results and their interpretation in light of the literature reviewed and the conceptual framework introduced. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the findings and address some of the study's limitations and ways in which these can be addressed in future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Mass (Self-) Surveillance

In many ways, Foucault's conceptual debate regarding modern forms of surveillance, which commenced as early as 1977, served as the foundation for contemporary debates regarding self-tracking and (self-) surveillance in a mediatized age.

In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1977) introduces the concept of a hypothetical prison, the 'panopticon'. This idea is derived from Jeremy Bentham's prison design where prison guards can always observe inmates from both inside and outside while all along, they are unaware of whether they are being watched or not. Foucault (2008: 6) suggests that the panopticon aims to 'induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power'. Seeing as the panopticon acts as a tool for sustained surveillance and discipline, it dictates power relations and can be understood as 'a generalizable model of functioning' (Foucault, 2008: 9).

Additionally, as many contemporary scholars have remarked, it also serves as an apt metaphor for the (digital) surveillance state in which we currently find ourselves in. While scholarly perspectives on surveillance vary from negative to neutral, with scholars such as Giddens (1984) defining surveillance purely as a way of systematically encoding information for administrative purposes, entailing that it plays a crucial role in the organization of society, Foucault's (1977) perception is far from neutral (Fuchs, 2011: 135). Building on Foucault's conceptualizations, Fuchs (2011: 134) highlights that the birth of the internet facilitated 'a system of panoptic sorting' that made use of 'user-generated content and permanent dynamic communication flows' to observe and evaluate its users and collect data on them.

Nonetheless, Fuchs (2011: 140) further argues that even though Foucault (1977: 200) envisioned a clear-cut divide between the observed and the observer, noting that 'he is the object of information, never a subject in communication', the rise of the internet led to the blurring of this boundary, establishing a state of 'mass self-surveillance', also referred to as 'mass self-communication' by Castells (2009). By engaging in online communication, users make their personal data available to others and willingly engage in sustained communication and consumption, for example by sharing their location and posting pictures and videos or receiving personalized ads amongst others. This results in the reproduction of surveillance by means of 'providing user-generated (self-produced) content', embodying Castells' (2009) notion of as mass self-communication (Fuchs, 2011: 138).

While Foucault's perspective remains relevant today when evaluating the risks of digital surveillance, Mathiesen (1997: 215) argues that, alongside the evolution of modern surveillance systems, the rise of mass media has enabled a reverse process to occur. He refers to it as the 'synopticon', a condition in which the many observe the few in positions of visibility and power. However, Couch and colleagues (2015: 128) argue that the rise of social media has added 'further intricacy to this dyad'. They note that on one hand, 'panoptic surveillance promotes personal responsibility and self-discipline', encouraging individuals to monitor and regulate their personal health and health-related behaviors. On the other, mass media has also led to the production and circulation of narratives that might undermine the imposed health-related norms, such as the spread of anti-vaccine discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic (Couch *et al.*, 2015: 129,134).

### **Biopolitics and Biopower**

Extending on his work on surveillance and power, Foucault (1978) coined two other useful concepts for the evaluation of the ramifications of (digital) surveillance and control in health-related settings; biopower and biopolitics.

According to Mendieta (2014a: 37), Foucault's biopolitics relate to new modalities of 'producing, circulating and enacting power that subjects and governs individuals through a set of disciplines that normalize bodies', which is circulated through biopower. Although Foucault refers mainly to 'the medicalization of power-knowledge' in hospital and educational

settings for 'public health' purposes, this concept still applies today to individuals who are forced to comply with and be compared online according to newly established standards of 'normality' (Mendieta, 2014a: 38). Foucault further identifies the ways in which 'capitalism is able to use, harness, control, subjugate, and exploit bodies', both on an individual and a collective level (Mendieta, 2014a: 39).

Nevertheless, scholars call for a nuanced reading on biopower and biopolitics in the context of late capitalism, seeing as Foucault had not considered that biopower could be exercised directly upon the individual by targeting the body through technologies such as self-tracking tools (Charitsis *et al.*, 2019: 351). Millington (2016: 1188) also adds that the running boom and its associated self-tracking practices were largely a 'socio-technical' phenomenon, highlighting the way in which human and non-human interactions came to be seen routine. Indeed, Sanders (2017: 46) argues that digital self-tracking technologies help maintain the 'automatic functioning' of biopower not only by implementing a state of surveillance, but also by 'compelling them to internalize the watchful gaze, or to turn it upon themselves', relating back to the notion of 'mass self-surveillance' outlined above. Additionally, Reiby and colleagues (2022: 124) indicate that users of digital self-tracking technologies are also indirectly being pressured to comply with fixed arbitrary performance standards in the form of daily caloric, sleep or step goals for example.

Other scholars have suggested that in the current age of datafication, it is crucial to consider the idea that we might be transcending the 'biopolitical' and verging on the 'post-biopolitical', a setting in which not only biological life is monitored, but also factors such as 'daily choices, rhythms, preferences and tendencies' (Ruckenstein & Schüll, 2017: 265). Nonetheless, Ajana (2017: 6) reminds us that 'biopower and biopolitics are not so much about explicit coercive discipline but follow the neoliberal modality of free choice and the promise of reward', therefore complementing Foucault's vision of biopower acting as both a site of subjectivity and resistance (Mendieta, 2014b: 45). Spotswood and colleagues (2020: 773) highlight this idea by remarking that biopolitics help paint self-tracking as a form of 'voluntary self-optimization'.

## **Self-Tracking**

Thus, in line with the conceptualizations of (self-)surveillance, biopolitics and biopower as defined above, contemporary scholars have established that these concepts are 'not about direct oppression but about the creation of biotechnologies that permeate society through self-discipline and self-governance', leading us to consider the ways in which users integrate and experience self-tracking (Reiby *et al.*, 2022: 119).

Ruckenstein and Schüll (2017: 262, 264) suggest that data generated by 'health-related peer-to-peer social media, and a vast array of wearable fitness and health devices and smartphone applications' form part of a 'digitally mediated feedback loop', one which allows for participants to reflect on their performance and integrate the feedback received. This has led scholars to investigate (mainly through ethnographic inquiry) the lived experiences and 'the social, narrative, and affective dimensions of actual data practices and experience' users' perspectives, in which the data can be characterized as 'lively', according to Lupton (2015: 3) (Ruckenstein & Schüll, 2017: 266). This research has stemmed from studies on members of the Quantified Self (QS) community, a collective of users seeking 'self-knowledge through numbers' and has highlighted the ways in which 'shared data offers a common language that people can relate to', encouraging people to foster relationships and facilitating communication (Lomborg & Frandsen, 2016: 1015).

## **Community**

Subsequent research has aimed to focus on a broader population of users who engage with self-tracking technologies and remain community oriented despite not identifying as members of Quantified Self movement, what Kersten-van Dijk and Ijsselsteijn (2016: 121) refer to as a form of 'more socially oriented Quantified Us' (Reiby *et al.*, 2022: 118). This can be further exemplified by people's casual usage of apps and platforms such as MyFitnessPal, Strava, Nike Run, Endomondo, Garmin Connect and others, which not only record a wide range of biometric data such as vital signs, including calories burned, steps, heart rates and hours slept, but also allow people to connect and communicate with others while sharing data and self-tracking (Stragier *et al.*, 2015: 121). Here, Lomborg and Frandsen (2016: 1016) understand self-tracking as a 'social and cultural practice', a flexible and customizable experience embedded

in the fabric of everyday life, one which can allow users to relate to themselves, to others and to the system, simultaneously 'mirror[ing] and mold[ing] the user', a phenomenon which Millington (2016: 1192) refers to as 'networked individualism'. Thus, employing 'a communicative perspective on self-tracking' as described by Lomborg and Frandsen (2016: 1024) aptly fits into the notion of 'mass self-communication' discussed earlier in this literature review. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that while being 'social', communication centred around self-tracking remains deeply personal as well. Additionally, while it can help users forge friendships and provide 'emotional support', it can also create different 'kinds of affective atmospheres in their users' (Kersten-van Dijk & Ijsselsteijn, 2016: 127; Lupton, 2017: 7).

### **Affect**

Therefore, in addition to its relationship with sociality, self-tracking comes to play a central role in one's affective relationship with oneself. Scholars note that self-trackers portray data with ambivalence, which is 'reflected in the volatile range of affective orientations that people have toward the tracking of self-data' (Ruckenstein & Schüll, 2017: 267; Lupton, 2017: 5). Indeed, by giving agency to data and numbers, and relying on visualizations in the form of charts, tables, maps and others, users allow for their self-esteem and self-perception to be swayed, with their emotions ranging from hope to disappointment, joy to anger and control to obsessiveness (Lyall, 2024: 1). Ajana (2017: 4) notes that the way in which data is valued as 'some kind of 'objective truth', highlights users' tendencies to 'anthropomorphize technology with performance standards' as remarked by Reiby and colleagues (2022: 117). Nonetheless, it is important to consider the ways in which 'the narrative dimensions of self-quantification' come to play a role in users' self-reflection and meaning-making process, triggering 'critical reflection and questions to pursue' while serving as motivation and a tool for self-improvement, fueling goal setting (Ruckenstein & Schüll, 2017: 266; Shen, 2024: 5). Overall, Lyall (2024: 4) evaluates the ways in which data turns into a form of 'mediated memories', one that users can look back on, affirming their identity and allowing them to partake in what can be defined as a form of 'journaling' or 'lifelogging'.

## Running in the 'Strava-Sphere'...

While literature addressed in the section above regarding self-tracking has addressed its social and affective components, a limited subsection of research has focused on running and communal self-tracking in combination, particularly amid the popularization of running.

Scholars such as Hardey (2019) and Spotswood and colleagues (2020) have extended Lomborg and Frandsen's (2016) and Reiby and colleagues' (2022) findings regarding the implications of communal self-tracking on its users, namely its ambiguous emotional implications and effects. While Hardey's (2019: 991) results mainly shed light on how runners who are heavy users of apps and wearables engaged with these technologies as a way of visualizing their long-term running and health performance, Spotswood and colleagues (2020) specifically interrogated leisure-time runners using Strava on their self-tracking habits. The scholars assessed the ways in which Strava's affordances, namely its features such as commenting, messaging people, uploading pictures and videos and giving 'kudos' (that is a form of thumbs up in reaction to people's posts of their metrics following physical activity) shaped their communal self-tracking practices. Their results mainly shed light on the ways in which the community aspect motivates runners to remain engaged in their running practice (Spotswood *et al.*, 2020: 772). Nonetheless, Kersten-van Dijk and Ijsselsteijn (2016: 126) warn against the risks of platforms such as Strava in bolstering social comparison through its specific features such as challenges, segments and trophies, promoting what Kent (2023: 34) refers to as the 'gamification' of health, namely the idea that thanks to self-tracking technologies, our everyday life has become more like a game. Indeed, in a study focusing specifically on the Nike+ app, Charitsis and colleagues (2019: 347) identified that the 'gamification', competitiveness and sociality of running were marketed to users as an intrinsic part of self-tracking.

Other scholars such as Couture (2021: 184) have focused on both the negative and positive interplay of users' involvement in the 'Strava-sphere', extending Spotswood and colleagues' (2020) findings, but also highlighting the risks associated with the adoption of 'technologically mediated surveillance strategies that encourage and rewards displays of bodily self-discipline'. Building on that, Couture (2021: 194) also addresses users' concerns about sharing their location, noting that features such as geo-tracking and mapping can reveal sensitive

information, such as the exact location of a user's home. Nonetheless, Lyall (2024: 12) reflects on the ways in which geo-tracking and the 'mainstream cartography of Strava' allow for participants to express their creativity by partaking in 'Strava art', which consists of participants running for the sake of forming shapes that will later appear on maps to be published on Strava.

Finally, Couture (2021: 195) also touches upon user's concerns related to 'disrupted data', that is data which has not been recorded or was interrupted for any reason. A popular narrative and meme omnipresent online is that 'if it's not on Strava, it didn't happen', highlighting users' dependence on data and a fear of missing data skewing the 'bigger picture', raising 'further questions about the reason(s) why people exercise in the first place' (Couture, 2021: 195).

Although not directly based on users' experiences on Strava, in her study, Esmonde (2019: 805), extends the aforementioned findings on the lived experiences of self-tracking while focusing on the embodied experiences of female runners specifically. She remarks that that gender not only shapes bodily experiences, but also dictates norms for comparison and capacity, shaping factors such as perceptions of safety linked to location-sharing practices. Similarly, Sanders (2017: 38) calls upon the need for an 'explicitly feminist account of the sociopolitical context in which digital self-tracking devices emerge', noting that while these technologies allow for 'knowledge and self-care', they simultaneously serve the interests of 'biopower and gender retrenchment'.

### **... and Beyond**

In addition to studies on the 'Strava-sphere', it is important to consider how people's motivations for using such apps fall within the broader culture of running, and how it is marketed to them, both online and offline.

Kent (2020: 2) reflects on the ways in which 'participatory audiences' span beyond apps such as Strava, with users also sharing health and fitness-related content on apps such as Instagram, suggesting that 'sharing self-tracking data can enable specific self-representations of health and constructions of health identities on social media, and can influence health behaviors offline'. Indeed, Hitchings and Latham (2017: 337) acknowledge the ways in which the accessibility of the sport has motivated its sociality, perpetrating the narrative that 'anyone can

run', whether alone or in a group, facilitating for runners to identify with a running 'subculture'. Ingle (2025) remarks that there has been a rise in 'running' influencers that have popularized the sport, and their success is largely due to the fact that they are not pro-athletes. Indeed, Scheerder and colleagues (2007: 347) note that in the past two decades, running has transformed from a 'service-oriented organization towards a mainly consumer-oriented organization', giving rise to a culture of 'leisurely' runners.

In line with this, Mold (2024: 492) also addresses the ways in which the jogging boom, as early as 1970, coincided with 'growing consumerism, individualism, and healthism' which, according to Millington (2016: 1186) helped establish 'the 'common sense' of neoliberalism', painting fitness-related self-care practices as individual responsibility. Furthermore, Mold (2024: 492) notes that 'growing commercialization of sport and leisure' in the mass media has led to a rise in its marketization. Ingle (2025) suggests that women in particular are driving the 'third great running boom' given their willingness to spend money on sports apparel, with brands such as Lululemon putting in effort to make running aesthetically 'fashionable'. Finally, Couture (2021: 193) reminds us that brands such as Lululemon also have their own running clubs, which exist offline in selected locations but are also extended online through features such as 'Strava Club' on Strava, forming 'virtual extensions of groups that exist offline'.

Taken together, these shifts underscore the need to examine how market forces, technology and social interaction intersect within contemporary running cultures, a convergence that this study approaches through a particular conceptual lens which will be outlined below.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Building on the context provided in the literature review above, the present study seeks to integrate themes of surveillance, biopolitics, (communal) self-tracking in the digital age, and digital movement cultures. The literature review has outlined varying positionalities regarding surveillance and biopolitics, situated at the intersection of Foucauldian frameworks and contemporary analyses shaped by the rise of the digital age and various technologies (Foucault, 1977; Fuchs, 2011; Mathiesen, 1997; Couch *et al.*, 2015). It has also assessed how (communal) self-tracking embodies a tension between control and empowerment, which both

lie at the core of debates surrounding surveillance and biopolitics in the digital age (Charitsis *et al.*, 2019; Ajana, 2017). This tension mainly stems from users' simultaneous voluntary engagement and exposure to observation on digital platforms, while their data is being extracted, assessed and/or shared (Sanders, 2017). This study understands this relationality as a form of what Castells (2009) referred to as 'mass self-communication' and builds on this notion by investigating specifically the communicative and affective facets of self-tracking practices amongst runners on digital platforms. Similarly to Lomborg and Frandsen (2016), we adopt a 'communicative perspective on self-tracking' and emphasize the need to acknowledge the diversity of experiences associated with such practices, affecting a user's range of affective responses and their sociality. In particular, the study evaluates Castells' (2009) and Lomborg and Frandsen's (2016) concepts within the neoliberal model mode of production and consumption, with a focus on the growing commodification and commercialization of the running amid a wave of rising 'individualism and healthism' (Mold, 2024: 492).

Viewing these practices through this conceptual lens allows for a nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate the interplay between self-expression, community, and surveillance in contemporary running cultures. This focus is central to the research question which examines the perspective of a demographic group that, to my knowledge, has not yet been studied in the context of communal self-tracking among runners on Strava. Adopting a broader conceptual framework is therefore essential to evaluate how, and to what extent, existing theoretical and conceptual perspectives remain applicable to this emerging context (Rathbun, 2009: 696).

## **Research Objectives**

The research question guiding this study is: 'In what ways does Strava, as a community-oriented self-tracking platform, influence the communal and affective experiences as well as identities of Gen Z runners amid the mediatization and neoliberalization of contemporary running culture?'

In the first instance, this study endeavors to fill a gap in the academic literature concerning the practice of communal self-tracking, particularly in relation to Strava. While to my knowledge, only Spotswood and colleagues (2020) and Couture (2021) have attempted to address the

motivations behind and experiences associated with (communal) self-tracking practices of runners on Strava, they have not done so in the context of the 'third running boom' or the broader mediatization and neoliberalization of digital running cultures. Therefore, this study seeks to extend and build on previous findings, focusing specifically on the community and affective dimensions of Strava use, while trying to understand whether (digital) running cultures and the popularization of running have changed the way in which people experience and engage with the platform and the reasons behind its use. Furthermore, given Ingle's (2025) assertion that Gen Zs are driving the 'third running boom', this research contributes a novel perspective by centering on this demographic, seeing as Spotswood and colleagues' (2020) and Couture's (2021) work has either omitted demographic details or failed to specify age parameters, leaving this aspect underexplored. Finally, it is important to note that this study is grounded in the emerging concept of the 'third running boom', a notion currently underrepresented in academic discourse, and to my knowledge primarily referred to scarcely in press and popular media, thus introducing a novel conceptual lens through which to understand these dynamics. Taken together, these objectives position the study as a way to not only deepen understanding of how Gen Z runners experience and negotiate communal self-tracking on Strava, but also to contribute to broader debates on the intersections of technology, identity, and culture within contemporary running practices.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This section aims to outline the methodological strategy adapted in this research, including the rationale which has guided the research process, namely thematic reflexive analysis via in-depth semi-structured interviews, followed by an outline of the sampling and data collection procedure. Finally, the ethical ramifications of the study will be discussed, and this will be connected to my positionality as a researcher.

### **Justification for Methodology**

The decision to conduct eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews and assess them using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic reflexive analysis framework mainly stemmed from the

exploration of topics such as identity, affect, experience and self-reflection, central to the research question.

While a survey design was initially considered, it was promptly rejected seeing as such a design would take away my ability as a researcher to contextualize the findings and capture 'a fine textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations', as well as ask follow-up questions (Gaskell, 2000: 39). Indeed, if the formulation of the survey were to be poorly adapted to a specific participant or were to omit certain facets of their experiences that they might forget to share otherwise or consider irrelevant when filling it out, this could significantly impact the results (Allmark *et al.*, 2009: 48). Therefore, in-depth semi-structured interviews were identified as the method of choice seeing as, in qualitative research, 'interview participants are more likely to be viewed as meaning makers' (Warren, 2002: 83). The interviews were designed as semi-structured to maintain flexibility in the interview process, allowing for varying viewpoints to shine through and for participants to answer the questions as seemed fit to them (Rathbun, 2009: 691). By prioritizing quality over quantity, as a researcher, I chose to conduct individual interviews instead of focus groups as I believed they would yield more nuanced responses and would allow for more in-depth conversations (Gaskell, 2000: 48). Additionally, seeing as self-tracking can be a deeply personal practice, I questioned whether participants would feel as comfortable sharing detailed insights in a group setting as they would in one-on-one interviews (Gaskell, 2000: 51). While a sample size of eleven participants seemed both manageable and appropriate for an MSc dissertation, and on average, the interview lasted 27 minutes (range 16-43 min), it should be noted that without time constraints, a sample of anywhere between fifteen to twenty-five interviewees and an interview duration of up to an hour would have been appropriate (Gaskell, 2000: 43).

Initially, a questionnaire with fifteen questions was devised and included seven sections, namely: (1) background and context, (2) self-tracking and the emotional experience of running, (3) reflections on identity, (4) surveillance and control, (5) assessing Strava's affordances, (6) community and social media and (7) closing questions. However, after six interviews, the questionnaire was adjusted to encompass four more questions which further addressed participants' Strava usage and their interactions with running content online beyond Strava. Although, regardless of the interview, particular follow-up questions were asked to each

participant depending on the thematic course of their interviews, the order of questions was spontaneously rearranged during certain interviews to match the flow of the conversation. The decision to formally extend the questionnaire was made based on the frequency with which the first half of the participants mentioned certain topics (Rathbun, 2009: 696). This ensured that all future participants would address those core questions for comparative purposes in the analysis process.

## **Data Sampling**

The data consisted of 11 participants, who were recruited through personal contacts in the first instance and then snowball sampling based on being members of the Gen Z community and Strava users (Warren, 2002: 87). In a first instance, I reached out to people who I knew to fit both categories, and as recommended by Rathbun (2009: 699), I asked my interviewees to suggest people they knew who might be interested in participating in my research study. All participants ranged in age from 20 to 28 years old, with four of the participants identifying as females and seven as males. It should be noted that while for comparative purposes, sampling an equal number of females and males would have been ideal, the priority remained snowball rather than purposeful sampling. Here, the collection of demographic data such as age and gender proved necessary when addressing the key elements of the research question, namely the experiences of Gen Z runners on Strava as well as the gendered experiences of running (Gaskell, 2000: 42). Scholars reviewed in the literature review including Sanders (2017) and Esmonde (2019) explicitly highlighted the need to incorporate feminine perspectives on self-tracking and to examine how these experiences differ from those of men. This study aimed to indirectly achieve this, meaning that the participants were not prompted about their gendered experiences of running, but if such answers were to be provided, they would be reflected upon.

## **Design of Research Tools**

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online over video call on Microsoft Teams between May and July 2025 and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (Rathbun, 2009: 697). Transcribed participant responses were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step analysis framework was

utilized to undertake a thorough analysis of the transcripts' content in relation to the research question. The first phase focused on familiarization with the dataset through immersion by means of repeated listening to audio recordings, re-reading of transcripts and the transcription process itself. Subsequently, the data was coded in a way that captured the core concepts of the research question – communal self-tracking, affect, identity and the mediatization of running culture – while focusing on both semantic and latent meanings. Elements of focus included participant's language use, their emotive reactions to the questions, individual and collective experiences, and participants' interpretations of digitally mediated practices shaped by social visibility and self-tracking.

Once the data was coded, codes were sorted according to overarching themes which became clear in the sorting process. The data was sorted under 'candidate' themes and subthemes were further generated to present the full depth of the data to the broader audience. These themes were then reviewed to make sure that they fit the initial data and that they represented adequately the core concepts of the research question. Based on the questions asked, three main categories were created which reflected the semantic and latent meanings voiced by participants in relation to the core concepts of the study: self-tracking, Strava's versatility, and the mediatization and neoliberalization of running culture. Subthemes were then generated inductively based on the frequency at which elements relating to the main themes were mentioned. Finally, the results section was written up and final extracts from the interviews that best complemented the themes were selected.

## **Ethics**

Contacted participants were outlined the aims of the study and the general type of information that would be asked of them via a participant information sheet. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without providing a reason and were reassured that their responses would remain confidential and only used for academic purposes. Participants then gave their informed consent to participate in the study by filling out the consent form they were provided electronically prior to the interview (Warren, 2002: 88). The participants' data was anonymized, and participants were referred to as participant 1 through participant 11 in the results section (Allmark, 2009: 51). Their gender was only disclosed by extension if a

participant directly referred to an aspect of their gendered experience of running. Beyond informed consent and anonymization, careful attention was given to data protection. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices, with access limited to the researcher. Although the research posed minimal risk, I remained attentive to any discomfort that might arise when discussing personal experiences of self-tracking or identity formation, and participants were reminded they could skip any question they did not wish to answer (Allmark, 2009: 52). This research received approval from the London School of Economics and Political Science's Department of Media and Communications' Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 547494).

## **Reflexivity**

My own background as a life-long runner and more recent Strava user is central to my positionality in this research and has influenced my interest in carrying out this study based on reflections I have had throughout my Strava usage (Subramani, 2019).

My running journey began at 13, initially as a transition from gymnastics. Despite my father being an avid runner, I was reluctant to take up the sport until I became disillusioned with gymnastics and started competing in track and cross-country through high school, both regionally and nationally. An injury in my final year forced me to step back from competing, but my passion was reignited after running the Brussels 20k race with my father in 2023. Since then, I have trained consistently and participated annually in races. In 2024, after I began running with others and upon recommendation from friends, I transitioned from using the Nike Run Club to Strava, where I now log all my runs.

This dual identity, as both participant and researcher, has undoubtedly shaped my perspective and informed my understanding of the phenomenon under study. While it has provided me with an insider's understanding of the practices and meaning surrounding self-tracking and digital running cultures, it has also required a heightened reflexivity throughout the research process to remain aware of how my own experiences and biases could influence the design, conduct and interpretation of interviews with fellow runners and Strava users.

Additionally, my shared demographic characteristics with participants, as Gen Z runner myself, likely facilitated rapport and openness during interviews, enabling richer data

collection. However, this insider status also risked reinforcing shared assumptions or overlooking taken-for-granted aspects of the phenomenon. To counter this, I engaged in critical self-reflection throughout the research process to ensure my interpretations remained analytically rigorous.

## RESULTS

The results section is divided into three main themes. The first theme focuses on the practice of self-tracking, uncovering its varying facets and its affective impact on runners. The second theme frames the uniqueness of Strava as both a social media platform and a self-tracking tool, allowing for users to adapt it to their own needs and preferences as a social, expressive and/or functional outlet. Finally, the third theme captures the ways in which, in the current 'third running boom', running has transcended its image as simply a fitness-oriented activity and has become entangled with branding, commodification and neoliberal practices, both online and offline, all the while constructing 'new' and re-shaping 'old' running identities.

### **Theme 1: Tracking the Self**

This first theme examines the multifaceted role of self-tracking in participants' running practices, highlighting how it evokes experience of motivation, uncertainty, and validation.

#### **Subtheme 1.1: Data as Objectivity and Motivation**

When asked about the role self-tracking plays in their running lives, most participants emphasized its function in visualizing progress.

While participants 5, 6 and 9 described the data gathering process as '*informative*', participant 7 described it as '*scientific*'. Participant 1 expressed that they '*love statistics*', relating their self-tracking to a scientific approach, whereas participant 2 not only associated their self-tracking practice to precision and objectivity, but also to their academic and professional identity, noting that as a STEM student, '*putting things in numbers helps me a lot*'. These accounts align with Ajana's (2017: 4) assertion that self-tracking is framed as a source of 'objective truth',

one which offers insights that would otherwise be inaccessible through ‘traditional techniques of self-analysis and introspection’.

Participants also highlighted the temporal dimensions of self-tracking. Participants 1 and 10 noted that data collected from their self-tracking practice enables them to reflect retrospectively on their running progress, while participants 2, 3, 5 and 8 emphasized its prospective value in terms of goal setting and adapting their running practice accordingly based on their performance. Participant 2 highlighted this perspective by noting that it serves as ‘*a confirmation that I’m on the right track, working towards the goal*’. Participant 3 further linked their self-tracking practice to notions of ‘*consistency*’ and ‘*accountability*’, explaining how it sustains motivation:

*When I see [...] I’ve been running for the last three months consistently, it is not now that I am going to decide not to do it [...] I’ll do it again today, and it keeps me accountable on a daily basis.*

Beyond shaping how runners reflect on or plan their future sessions, metrics also influenced participants’ real-time experiences of running itself. Participant 10 remarked that it is difficult to avoid metrics when exercising given that they have permeated every layer of running process:

*I try not to look at it too much, but it is really hard when I am running as I have my watch on my wrist, so I always look at it and I see the average pace all the time.*

Similarly, participant 3 admitted to checking metrics during the run and reflected on how this can create a sense of unease: ‘*if I feel that my heart rate is a bit higher than it should be for a certain pace, during the race, when I’m running, I’m like oh sh\*t*’.

This temporal dimension of self-tracking aligns with notions of digital surveillance explored in the literature review, namely the idea that ‘its aim is not to see a specific behavior so much as to continuously track for emergent patterns’, meaning that health data associated with running is quantified ‘minute by minute’ (Ruckenstein & Schüll, 2017: 264; Kent, 2023: 29). These findings also illustrate Lyall’s (2024: 3) claim that access to digital evidence allows users’ to ‘corroborate their memories’, reinforcing both their sense of progress and commitment.

Nonetheless, participants 5 and 7 noted that regardless of whether the metrics they obtained were deemed satisfactory or not, *'it does put a little bit of pressure on [them] to try to work harder the next workout or so on, or rest more'*. Lyall (2024: 7) suggests that this 'pressure' is amplified given that 'outlying data points hold [particular] interest to participants because they capture extremes'.

### **Subtheme 1.2: Data vs Embodied Experience**

Although, as explored in the previous subtheme, most participants used objective language to describe the datasets obtained through self-tracking, some also reflected on the fragile and ephemeral nature of these metrics. Participant 5 remarked that *'you just have to accept that number in your mind, and push yourself based on that, which is kind of an abstract concept'*.

Interestingly, while several participants acknowledged the legitimacy of their embodied experience of running, such as participant 10, who noted that *'you know your body better than anyone else'*, others still prioritized metrics over how they felt during a run. Participant 5 explained that:

*Obviously I know how it felt for me – without the phone, without the tracking or without the everything – but I'll still look at it, and it can sometimes shift how I feel about it.*

Similarly to Esmonde's (2019: 812) participants, participant 10 admitted that their perception of a run could be easily swayed by the metrics collected:

*Sometimes I will go on a run, and I will feel really good about myself, but then I will look at my pace and I will be like, oh, today was actually not such a good day.*

Participant 9 encapsulated these considerations by noting that their data does reflect their *'mood quite a lot'*.

Additionally participant 3 admitted that excessive tracking did not prove particularly *'insightful'* as *'at the end of the day, I know how I'm feeling. So to that level of detail, I thought it was just useless and a bit stress inducing and unnecessary'*. Furthermore, participant 10 reflected on their reliance on certain features offered by self-tracking apps such as its 'fitness' reminders, which indicate whether one should rest, exercise, get more sleep and more. They explained

that while this feature could prove useful, it was also largely stress-inducing, with participant 2 denoting that they regularly need to remind themselves that self-tracking *'is a conscious choice, and it does not reflect on my fitness of it being a linear progress'*.

Ruckenstein and Schüll (2017: 266) warn against the risks of relying on what they refer to as 'situated objectivity', denoting that 'self-quantification rarely produces a definitive truth', highlighting the 'lively' nature of data, as suggested by Lupton (2015: 3).

Concerns about the accuracy of self-tracking devices further contributed to this sense of detachment and uncertainty. Participant 10 expressed that when comparing data on different self-tracking apps *'it's strange because it doesn't give me the same [...] metrics on both apps'*. Similarly, participant 1 shared that they had watched YouTube videos highlighting significant discrepancies between pace tracking on a Garmin watch versus a Samsung GPS device.

These reflections illustrate a tension between embodied knowledge and quantified data, where the authority of metrics often overrides runners' subjective experiences, despite recognized inaccuracies in measurement (Esmonde, 2019:805; Reiby *et al.*, 2022: 125).

### **Subtheme 1.3: Recording as Validation**

Beyond shaping how participants interpret their data, self-tracking also influences how they approach running itself, embedding the act of recording as a central component of the practice. Indeed, participant 5 explained that before, they used to engage in all sorts of physical activity freely, whether alone or with friends, but now, while they continue to exercise:

*There is a certain awareness that I'd like to track it well, to collect this data to get that information, to see how it all fits together in the performance of running or whatever I happen to be working on.*

Similarly participant 10 admitted to being *'obsessed with being able to track every single activity'*. To illustrate this, they recounted being asked by a friend to go on an untracked run, inspired by emerging trends on social media that encourage detachment from self-tracking on Strava. Although they acknowledged that they believed *'they could technically do it'*, they admitted to not wanting to do so, raising questions as to the reasons why people run in the first place (Couture, 2021: 195).

Furthermore, participants also covered the ways in which logging their activity was seen as essential to validate their efforts in order to avoid resulting in what Esmonde (2019: 809) refers to as 'broken data'. Participant 4 explained that *'if I go on a run and I don't track it on my Garmin, I feel like, you know, Strava or it didn't happen'*. Similarly, participant 11 recalls attending a marathon and seeing a spectator with cardboard which boasted the slogan *'if it's not on Strava, it never happened'*. This specific catchphrase, made popular in running circles and on social media, was also reported to Couture (2021: 195) by their participants repeatedly. Participant 8 echoed this sentiment, saying that tracking makes the run feel *'more real, like I actually ran it'* while participant 10 similarly reflected, *'if I didn't record it, it didn't happen in a way'*.

In line with Spotswood and colleagues' (2020: 781) observation regarding runners' need to 'materialize' their effort through metrics, participants 2 and 10 expressed a fear that *'if I do not move or run constantly, then I would instantly lose it'*. However, when asked whether they would be able to stop recording their runs and/or sharing them with others, most participants indicated that they would not have an issue not sharing their metrics with others, but that they would struggle to give up self-tracking as a practice. Participant 2 explained that *'it's not because I would feel the need to keep this social presence to others, but more to my body'*.

These accounts also complement Couture's (2021: 195) findings in two ways; first, they suggest that, whether displayed privately or publicly, visibility is of paramount importance in self-tracking experiences. Second, they justify the notion that missing data 'no longer faithfully represents all that ha[s] happened', highlighting how central consistent self-tracking is in validating users' runner journeys.

#### **Subtheme 1.4: Contextualizing Performance**

Interestingly, participant 10 remarked that *'people always have to justify themselves, regarding what they're doing, because they don't want to seem bad at something'*.

This tendency was reflected across several participants' accounts, most prominently highlighted in the way in which users caption their runs on Strava. By specifying who they ran with, users 'contextualize' their performance to prevent others from perceiving their runs as 'slow', subtly justifying their performance by attributing it to other runners (Spotswood *et al.*, 2020: 778). Participant 11 also noted another common strategy in which runners accelerate

toward the end of a run to lower their average pace, thereby improving their metrics before publishing them on Strava. Additionally, participants admitted to framing their performances in relation to situational factors such as energy levels, weather conditions or menstrual cycles, as highlighted by participants 4, 5, 9 and 10. Participant 5 poignantly reflected on this ‘performative’ aspect of self-tracking on Strava:

*I also know that since it will be sort of [...] published, posted, I'll go back and make sure that, sort of my quote unquote audience – which feels ridiculous, because it is not that many people – but whoever sees it, has enough information to understand what the activity was, what the aim was, that kind of thing.*

This need to actively contextualize data for an ‘audience’ aligns with Castells’ (2009) notion of mass self-surveillance, emphasizing the panoptical dimension of communal self-tracking (Couture, 2021: 196).

Overall, this theme has illustrated the ways in which self-tracking as a practice encompasses a spectrum of ‘experienced emotional intensities of running’ and inherently involves forms of surveillance, whether those are self-imposed, communal or platform-mediated (Spotswood, 2020: 777; Lupton, 2015: 6; Reiby *et al.*, 2022: 122).

## **Theme 2: Strava as a Multipurpose Platform**

This second theme considers how participants engage with Strava in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways, using it not only as a tool for tracking performance but also as a space for self-expression, social interaction and the formation of new personal connections.

### **Subtheme 2.1: Tracking as Journalling**

Echoing findings from subtheme 1.2, several participants highlighted the instrumental role of Strava in logging their activities. Participant 3 described the platform ‘*an instrument to keep track of how many hours I've put in this week, I just try to see my fitness progression, that's the main reason I use it*’. They added that they avoid editing the titles that Strava automatically assigns to their runs, such as ‘Afternoon Run’ or adding photos because for them, the app functioned

primarily as a technical log: *'it is more technical – I did this set, with this pace, but there is no real narrative to it'*.

Others, such as participant 2, preferred to edit titles, add captions and photos, reasoning that *'no one wants to just see my stats surely'* and that *'there has to be a personal note to [it]'*. Indeed, participant 5 noted that they enjoyed interacting such posts on Strava to *'understand a little bit of what the run was like – what did they see? What did they do? How did they feel?'*. Participants 9 and 11 also indicated that they liked to make use of humor when crafting their titles, captions and pictures on Strava. In line with this, Spotswood and colleagues (2020: 778) remark that the practice of labelling can help assign 'purpose, emotion, projects and goals to the practice of running'. Participant 6 also added that they invest more thought into their posts seeing as they do not use any other social media. Kent (2020: 5, 2023: 39) denotes that posting pictures enable users to partake in 'life-stylizations' of running, becoming a form of 'public diarising' which allows for users to share a part of their personality, displaying their progress, goals and emotions.

Participant 9 encapsulated this dual function, noting that Strava can serve as both a private log and a space for self-expression, seeing as it is:

*Quite a safe space to promote yourself in a nice – just documenting what you're doing, not compulsory – so even if you do want to track stuff on Strava, you can just hide it and just have as for yourself.*

They also shared how they personally try to balance *'tracking what I've actually done in the run for just tracking purpose but also keeping a bit of a mental health log'*. They explain that they felt inspired to do so after seeing a friend use Strava to document their running journey to cope with poor mental health. Finally, participant 10 was able to further creatively engage with Strava's affordances when they planned to *'write something in the streets of the city'*, an activity known 'Strava art' (Lyll, 2024: 10).

These results illustrate how Strava's features allow users to oscillate between purely functional tracking and more reflective, personal forms of journalling, accommodating different user needs, with Lyll (2024: 4) remarking that self-tracking practices are closely correlated with 'personal diaries and similar forms of life-writing'.

## Subtheme 2.2: Tracking as Social Belonging

Beyond functioning as a personal log, Strava also operates as a social platform where users can cultivate connections, with participants frequently reflecting on Strava's perceived authenticity compared to other social media platforms.

Participants 7, 9 and 11 expressed that they started using Strava 'because' of the community aspect it offered. Participant 8 emphasized that *'it is very not like social media – it's very authentic'*, while participant 6 contrasted it with Instagram, noting that *'nobody cares about looking pretty in photos'*. This sense of authenticity enables users to present themselves in ways that feel less performative and more genuine.

Interestingly, participants 1,3 and 6 described Strava as their primary form of social media. Participant 11 noted how overall, Strava has become 'trendy' and has *'evolved into a social media [platform]'*. Participants 3 and 6 mentioned that they do not use any other social media networks, while participant 1 explained that they only use Instagram for work and consider Strava as their main platform, adding that *'I've been giving up my Strava instead of social media like Instagram'*. Additionally, participant 2 admitted to being *'probably more excited about kudos than [...] Instagram likes at this point'* and described Strava as their favorite social media.

Overall, Strava was largely seen as a positive and supportive space. Participant 6 reflected on this, noting that:

*Ultimately, if people are looking at Strava and having body dysmorphia or huge body issues from it, there's probably a broader social media issue going on not akin to it. I think it's an incredibly happy and positive place [...].*

While Couture (2021: 189) assesses the ways in which Strava's affordances, such as the ability of users to 'follow' others, message them and comment under their posts in a centralized 'feed' closely resemble other social networks, our results shed light on the ways in which despite Strava operating 'near-exclusively through the sharing of biometric data', participants still consider it as a potent way to connect with others, and choose it as an alternative to other social platforms.

### **Subtheme 2.3: Strava as a Social Connector**

Additionally, several participants denoted the ways in which running, and Strava in particular, intersect with their personal and romantic lives.

Participant 11 expressed that *'Strava is the new Tinder'* while Participant 7 remarked that:

*There was at one point this culture that 'Strava is the new dating app' [...] the fact that it's come up means that it has some truth to it, I guess.*

Additionally, participant 9 shared that if they were to meet someone romantically, *'I would love to be in a relationship in the future with somebody who shared that kind of passion'*. Participant 7 further suggested that through Strava, *'it might be easier to strike up a conversation and then get to know that person, and then you can go on a run together'*. Participant 10 recalled being surprised when *'one person asked me to go get a beer with them in the comments under one of my runs'*. Participant 4 added an observation that relationship status also appears to shape user behavior on the app, remarking that people in relationships *'tend to write less'* on Strava while *'singles' 'put more effort, pictures'*.

Beyond romantic interactions, participant 2 also pointed to the ways in which Strava fosters an environment in which people can reconnect with acquaintances from various settings, *'forg[ing] this specific Strava friendship'*. By sharing personal metrics and a giving a glimpse into habitual running routines, users create new forms of intimacy and friendship, independent on pre-existing relationships. Participants 1 and 9 reflect on this, with participant 9 noting that:

*There's a lot of friends that I maybe don't speak to very much anymore but I feel like I'm still close to them because I see that they're active every day and [...] that they're in cool places doing cool things, and I feel like I maybe don't even have to speak to them because I know that they're happy.*

These reflections fit Stokel-Walker's (2024) observations regarding the ways in which 'hobby' apps have become new social networks, allowing for people to connect with others who share similar lifestyles and values.

#### **Subtheme 2.4: Negotiating Inclusivity and Safety**

While as outlined above, many participants described Strava as a positive and supportive environment, one which fosters relationships and allows for self-expression, their reflections also revealed tensions around who feels truly included and safe in this community.

Participant 8 was the only one to share a notably negative experience on Strava, recounting a time where they chose not to post a run they perceived as 'too slow', which prompted self-reflection on why they felt compelled to hide it, and served as an indicator to stop using Strava all together to self-track in their case. While it did not influence their personal usage of the app, participant 10 noted that people on Strava are '*more judgy*', noting that they personally prefer to post their Strava metrics on Instagram stories to engage with others in a more '*encouraging*' setting.

Comparison emerged as a recurring theme in shaping participant's running journeys. participants 1, 4, 9, 11 admitted to initially comparing themselves to others on Strava. However, participant 4 explained that '*once I stopped comparing myself to others too much, I'd say I improved my mood when looking at my statistics*'. All four participants noted that once they realized they were comparing themselves to runners with different levels or goals, this helped them detach themselves from those metrics, almost framing comparison as a 'rite of passage'.

Only two participants reflected on the negative aspects related to privacy and safety on Strava, despite various scholars denoting the risks that digital surveillance, and in particular specific features of self-tracking apps such geo-tracking, pose to users (Kent, 2023: 27; Fuchs, 2011: 137; Ajana, 2017: 12). Interestingly, in a study on young Australians' use of digital technologies for health and fitness, where participants ranged in age between sixteen and twenty-five years old, similarly to our research, the majority of participants 'did not spontaneously refer to privacy or security issues when they were outlining their use of digital health', therefore suggesting a need for further investigation into the role that age plays in shaping concerns regarding privacy and security (Lupton, 2020: 9). Participant 7 was the only one that voiced '*becom[ing] more concerned with [their] data in general*', pushing them to manually adjust which of their followers had access to their metrics. They further reflected on how '*data is quite sensitive, particularly if you run from home as well*', which could divulge a users' place of residence

based on the starting point of a run, given that maps are automatically uploaded after a run onto Strava. Participant 9 built on this by noting that *'typically it is maybe more of a female thing, but people have had issues with [...] stalkers and things like that in the past'*, with Couture's (2021: 194) participants similarly acknowledging the gendered differences that can emerge when it comes privacy concerns.

These experiences contrast with the majority view that Strava fosters acceptance, support and serves as a safe space. Participant 1 noted that *'everyone is so nice in the running community'* while participant 7 remarked that *'the only time it's not positive is when there are non-runners involved'*, enhancing a sense of shared identity amongst runners. Participant 7 also mentioned offering support to injured members of their running network, echoing participant 2's view that *'seeing someone else doing better does not influence how you do, if anything, it's helpful and I think people are quite happy to share their tips and take you along'*, highlighting the ways in which user-to-user sharing can be empowering (Millington, 2016: 1193).

Nonetheless, these varying perspectives remain significant and demonstrate that Strava's inclusivity is not automatic but is negotiated through individual choices and interpretations.

Overall, drawing on Lomborg and Frandsen's (2016: 1016) *'communicative perspective on self-tracking'*, these findings reinforce their argument that self-tracking *'mirrors and molds the user'*. Our results illustrate how runners actively shape their self-tracking practices, negotiating how social, personal, or informational they want their engagement with the platform to be. This highlights Spotswood and colleagues' (2020: 784) findings regarding the in-built flexibility of Strava as a social platform, emphasizing the idea that the platform fosters a *'sense of active participation as opposed to loss of agency'*. This in turn reinforces Ajana's (2017: 6) claims with regard to the ways in which digital platforms cannot be reduced to sights of surveillance but also need to be considered as sites of subjectivity and resistance.

### **Theme 3: From Trend to Commodity: Running as Lifestyle Practice**

This final theme demonstrates the ways in which running has permeated the neoliberal market of consumption, making running a lifestyle that can be sold and marketed to customers.

### **Subtheme 3.1: Running and Trend Culture**

Throughout their interviews, several participants alluded to the phenomenon described by Ingle (2025) as the ‘third running boom’ without naming it explicitly.

Participant 10 noted that ‘a lot of people started running now that it is more of a trend’ while participant 3 referred to the ‘the running hype’, and participant 7 remarked that Strava has ‘gained a lot of popularity’. Participant 9 attributed this surge to the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that ‘the last sort of two or three years, mainly since COVID, it seems like everyone is running’. Participant 2 reflected more broadly on whether running has ‘made a big comeback post-COVID because it’s an independent sport’ or whether ‘you need to hit a specific age group when running becomes a sport that everyone partakes in, or if it has always just been here when you’re in your early/mid-twenties’. Reflecting on a meme they saw, participant 4 joked that:

*People in their 20s need to choose a new personality, and they just start getting into running and they talk about running all the time, and I can kind of relate to that.*

This sentiment aligns with Stokel-Walker’s (2024) observations on the rise in popularity of digital ‘hobby’ platforms, with participant 4 remarking that running serves as a potent relational activity seeing as their other hobbies, such as video games or travel, are not as easy to bond over or spontaneously engage in with others. Here, both participants 2 and 4’s reflections beg the question of whether Gen Zs specifically are driving the popularization of running or whether it is an entirely unrelated phenomenon.

### **Subtheme 3.2: Constructing the Updated ‘Runner Identity’**

Building on this and findings from subthemes 2.2 and 2.3 regarding Strava’s role as a social media platform, running’s widespread popularity not only positions the sport as a cultural trend but also shapes how individuals define themselves through their engagement with it.

Participants described how running has permeated the fabric of everyday life, transcending the act of running itself. Participant 3 noted that on social media ‘you see all these influencers dressed nicely, having coffee runs in the morning with a little cinnamon bun, and you enter a certain lifestyle’. Participant 2 echoed this sentiment, humorously noting that ‘I have made running my whole personality for a little bit – I walk around town just in my running shoes and running clothes’,

adding that people who are targeted by running-related Instagram reels have *'the same personality type'*.

Participants also highlighted the sociocultural dimensions of identifying as a runner. Participant 5 described how joining a run club *'helped me identify as a runner, it helped me engage with people who had lifestyles or goals that were similar to the ones that I was trying to adopt'* while participant 8 emphasized that *'it becomes a bit of your identity, like 'I'm part of this run club'. [...] and most of the people who run there were also disciplined and competitive'*, highlighting the ways in which social identity is constructed based on shared goals. Participants also reinforced Ingle's (2025), Scheerder and colleagues' (2007: 346) and Hitchings and Latham's (2017: 338) claims regarding the ways in which the popularization of running has led to the rise of 'leisurely' runners, which in turn has facilitated for more individuals to establish 'running' identities. While at first participant 5 describes how calling themselves a runner *'felt fake'*, they then explain how both run clubs and Strava helped them identify as a runner:

*Seeing that I was part of a community, that did it so recreationally, and some of them at a pretty high level, made me feel that event though I'm not at that same level, you don't have to be, to be a runner. So I think that helped me sort of cross that bridge of, okay, I'm not just someone who does it super recreationally – I'm doing it, so I am a runner.*

On the other hand, participants 7 and 9, who are both more experienced runners, explained how transposing their Strava metrics onto Instagram (for sharing example results from races and pictures from scenic runs) further validated their identities as (more experienced) runners. Daily practices also shaped this sense of identity. Participants 2 and 4 both referred to early bedtimes as part of a healthy running lifestyle. Participant 2 further explained that by connecting with like-minded individuals on Strava:

*I feel more accepted, and no one is judging my choices of not going out too late because I want to go on a run the next morning, because I think that people are in a similar boat.*

They concluded that *'it is good to be validated by a community that gets it and is experiencing the same things'*. These findings complement Charitsis and colleagues' (2019: 358) reflections on the ways in which users are 'often keen to use social media platforms to share their data,

interact with each other, exchange ideas and become active members of specialized communities of like-minded users’.

Kent (2020: 3) further highlights that this blurring of boundaries between ‘health’ and ‘lifestyle’, amplified by social media, has not only facilitated for runners to forge and cement their identities online and offline, but has also accelerated the commodification of running and the promotion of associated experiences as lifestyle products.

### **Subtheme 3.3: Branding and the Commodification of Running**

Building on this, various participants reflected on how branding and marketing strategies have impacted their running experiences.

Participants 1, 5 and 10 noted the abundance of branded running events frequently advertised on Instagram. Participant 10 expressed cynicism regarding how influencer culture has driven the promotion and sales of specific running gear, such as hydration backpacks. They reflected that the equipment, which was originally designed for ultra-marathon runners, has now been popularized and marketed to a broader population of ‘leisurely’ runners to drive sales (Mold, 2024: 92). Similarly, participant 4 emphasized ‘*the influence of buying stuff*’ in their running journey. They explained that after attending a branded running club, they felt compelled to purchase a pair of shoes promoted by the same brand, highlighting how corporate marketing penetrates both social and athletic dimensions of running. They also observed that running shoes have become popular as casual sneakers, further exemplifying how the lifestyle associated with running extends into everyday life.

Beyond events and influencer marketing, branding has extended deeply into self-tracking practices themselves.

For example, several participants mentioned how brands strategically leverage running apps and run clubs. When asked about apps used before Strava, a third reported being former Nike Run Club users. Participant 10 also shared that, despite already using Nike Run Club and Strava, they were required to download Adidas’ running app when joining an Adidas run club to access free branded merchandise such as t-shirts, socks and shorts. They also described

how attending themed run clubs often involved posting photos on Strava in exchange for perks such as free food or drinks, humorously noting that *'my Strava is mostly pictures of food'*.

This commercialization also extends to Strava's own monetization model (Stragier, 2015: 121). Participant 9 explained they subscribed to Strava Pro to access route-plotting features, while participant 10 criticized the paid features of self-tracking apps, remarking that *'being a healthy person should be free'*.

Therefore, these reflections move beyond literature which primarily links 'healthism' and health-related practices to the neoliberal tenet that 'active living is good living' (Millington, 2016: 1196). Instead they illustrate how, beyond self-tracking, digital running cultures, both online and offline, have been commercialized and commodified, enabling corporations to capitalize on the 'third running boom' (Kent, 2020: 3; Mold, 2024: 492).

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined how, as a community-oriented self-tracking platform, Strava has affected the sociality, identity and affective experiences on Gen Z runners within the broader context of the mediatization and neoliberalization of contemporary running culture. The decision to conduct this research was motivated by the advent of the 'third running boom', a period marked by the rise of digital commercialization and sociocultural reimaging of running online. Given the limited nature of academic literature communal self-tracking, particularly among Gen Z runners on Strava in the context of the 'third running boom', the study aimed to understand whether this context has affected the ways in which users engage with the platform.

By conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews analyzed through thematic reflexive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), the research both confirmed previous findings and offered novel insights. First, corroborating previous findings on communal self-tracking, the study demonstrated that self-tracking is a multifaceted practice, with participants reflecting on how the practice can be motivational, insightful and validating, while also leading to feelings of uncertainty, shaped by the abundance of available data, which in turn skewed their self-perception of their running practice. Second, the research illustrated how participants engaged

with Strava in diverse and individualized ways, using it not only as a functional self-tracking tool, but also as a journal, a platform for self-expression, and a means of forming personal connections. In particular, the study offered new insights into how the rise of ‘hobby apps’ such as Strava has encouraged users to treat the platform as an alternative to mainstream social media, enabling them to forge both friendships and romantic relationships based on shared interests, functioning as a replacement for platforms such as Tinder (Stokel-Walker, 2024). Finally, the study highlighted how the ‘third running boom’ and its associated Strava usage are closely tied to the commodification of running and its portrayal online as a lifestyle practice that can be bought into and collectively shared.

Interestingly, while prior research on (communal) self-tracking on Strava has emphasized the role of affordances such as ‘kudos’ in shaping users’ sense of self-validation (see Spotswood *et al.*, 2020 and Couture, 2021), participants in this study largely downplayed their significance. While they acknowledged kudos as pleasant and recognized that these were awarded alongside larger achievements such as completing a race or a scenic run, they did not attach substantial affective value to them. Similarly, while other scholars such as Charitsis *et al.* (2019), Ajana (2017) and Spotswood *et al.* (2020) have argued that features such as ‘trophies’ reinforce the ‘gamification of health’, this study found that competition between users did not primarily stem from these features. Instead, belonging was negotiated through feelings of comparison and inclusion, not only echoing the dynamics of other social media platforms but also underscoring how runners curate their identities on ‘hobby apps’ like Strava through metrics and by aligning with shared lifestyle practices.

While Ingle (2025) argues that the current running boom is driven by Gen Z, future research could examine whether the insights gathered in study regarding the motivations for and experiences of Strava use during this period of heightened popularity are generalizable across generations. Moreover, although some participants briefly raised gendered aspects of running, referring to menstrual cycles and safety concerns, gender did not emerge strongly enough to constitute more than a candidate subtheme in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Seeing as Ingle (2025) notes that the popularization of running can be particularly accredited to the fact that ‘brands have cottoned on to the fact that women are willing to spend a lot of money on products that work better and look nicer’, further research could investigate how

commodification and mediatization shape Strava usage and experiences differently across genders. Finally, as discussed in the methods section, future studies would benefit from a larger sample size and longer interviews to capture broader perspectives.

Overall, while the study integrated themes of surveillance, biopolitics and (communal) self-tracking, foregrounding the importance of Castells' (2009) 'mass self-communication' and Lomborg and Frandsen's (2016) 'communicative perspective on self-tracking', it also raises questions about whether classic Foucauldian frameworks of surveillance and biopolitics remain fully applicable in the era of 'mass self-communication'. Given participants' general positive attitudes toward Strava, the findings support Ruckenstein and Schüll's (2017: 265) 'post-biopolitical' future of health datafication. Therefore, this dissertation argues that Strava should not be understood as a neutral fitness app but as a socio-technical platform that both reflects and reproduces contemporary transformations in running culture. By shaping how runners track, interpret and display their practices, Strava embeds individual experiences within broader networks of community, commerce and identity. In doing so, it exemplifies the entanglement of sport, digital culture, and neoliberal logics in the everyday lives of Gen Z runners.

## REFERENCES

- Ajana, B. (2017) Digital health and the biopolitics of the Quantified Self, *Digital Health* 3: 1-18.
- Allmark, P., Boote, J., Chambers, E., Clarke, A., McDonnell, A., Thompson, A. and Tod, A.M. (2009) Ethical issues in the use of in-depth interviews: literature review and discussion, *Research Ethics Review* 5(2): 48-54.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*, London: Sage Publications.
- Castells, M. (2009) *Communication Power*, Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Charitsis, V., Yngfalk, A.F. and Skálén, P. (2019) 'Made to run': Biopolitical marketing and the making of the self-quantified runner, *Marketing Theory* 19(3): 347-366.
- Couch, D., Han, G-S., Robinson, P. and Komesaroff, P. (2015). Public health surveillance and the media: a dyad of panoptic and synoptic social control, *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine* 3(1): 128-141.
- Couture, J. (2021) Reflections from the 'Strava-sphere': Kudos, community, and (self-) surveillance on a social network for athletes, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 13(1): 184-200.
- Esmonde, K. (2019) Training, tracking, and traversing: digital materiality and the production of bodies and/in space in runner's fitness tracking practices, *Leisure Studies* 38(6): 804-817.
- Foucault, M. (1977) Chapter 3. Panopticism, pp. 195-228 in A. Sheridan (ed.) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (2008) "Panopticism" from *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2(1): 1-12.
- Fuchs, C. (2011) New Media, Web 2.0 and Surveillance, *Sociology Compass* 5(2): 134-147.
- Gaskell, G. (2000) Individual and Group Interviewing, pp. 38-56 in M.W. Bauer & G. Gaskell (eds) *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound*, London: Sage Publications.
- Hardey, M. (2019) On the body of the consumer: performance-seeking with wearables and health and fitness apps, *Sociology of Health & Illness* 41(6): 991-1004.
- Hitchings, R. and Latham, A. (2017) How 'social' is recreational running? Finding from a qualitative study in London and implications for public health promotion, *Health & Place* 46: 337-343.

- Ingle, S. (2025) From TikTok to the track: gen Z are driving running's third great boom. *The Guardian*, 27 May, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2025/may/27/running-gen-z-boom-athletics-london-marathon> [Last consulted 23rd July 2025].
- Kent, R. (2020) Self-Tracking Health Over Time: From the Use of Instagram to Perform Optimal Health to the Protective Shield of Digital Detox, *Social Media + Society*, 1-14.
- Kent, R. (2023) Chapter 2. Understanding Our Bodies through Datafication, pp. 23-47 in R. Kent (ed.) *The Digital Health Self: Wellness, Tracking, and Social Media*, Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Kersten-Van Dijk, E.T. and Ijseelsteijn, W.A. (2016) Design Beyond the Numbers: Sharing, Comparing, Storytelling and the Need for a Quantified Us, *Interaction Design and Architecture(s) Journal* 29: 121-135.
- Lathan, R.S. (2023) A history of jogging and running – the boom of the 1970s, *Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings* 36(3): 775-777.
- Lomborg, S. and Frandsen, K. (2016) Self-tracking as communication, *Information, Communication & Society* 19(7): 1015-1027.
- Lupton, D. (2015) Personal Data Practices in the Age of Lively Data, pp. 1-16 in J. Daniels, K. Gregory & T. McMillan Cottom (eds) *Digital Sociologies*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Lupton, D. (2017) How does health feel? Towards research on the affective atmospheres of digital health, *Digital Health* 3: 1-11.
- Lupton, D. (2020) 'Better understanding about what's going on': young Australians' use of digital technologies for health and fitness', *Sport, Education and Society* 25(1): 1-13.
- Lyll, B. (2024) Narratives in numbers: Sociotechnical storytelling with self-tracking, *Memory, Mind & Media* 3(1): 1-20.
- Mathiesen, T. (1997) The viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited, *Theoretical Criminology* 1(2): 215-234.
- Mendieta, E. (2014a) Chapter 7. Biopolitics, pp. 37-43 in L. Lawlor & J. Nale (eds) *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, New York City, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Mendieta, E. (2014b) Chapter 8. Biopower, pp. 44-50 in L. Lawlor & J. Nale (eds) *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, New York City, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Millington, B. (2016) Fit for presumption: interactivity and the second fitness boom, *Media, Culture & Society* 38(8): 1184-1200.

- Mold, A. (2024) Fun, running and the jogging boom in Britain, 1970s-1980s, *Sport in History* 44(4): 490-513.
- Nilson, F., Lundkvist, E., Wagnsson, S. and Gustafsson, H. (2021) Has the second 'running boom' democratized running? A study on the sociodemographic characteristics of finishers at the world's largest half marathon, *Sport in Society* 24(4): 659-669.
- Rathbun, B.C. (2009) Chapter 29. Interviewing and Qualitative Field Methods: Pragmatism and Practicalities, pp. 685-701 in J.M. Box-Steffensmeier, H.E. Brady & D. Collier (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Reiby, K.M., Buhmann, A. and Fieseler, C. (2022) On track to biopower? Toward a conceptual framework for user compliance in digital self-tracking, *The Information Society* 38(2): 117-132.
- Ruckenstein, M. & Schüll, N.D. (2017) The Datafication of Health. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 46: 261-278.
- Sanders, R. (2017) Self-tracking in the Digital Era: Biopower, Patriarchy, and the New Biometric Body Projects, *Body & Society* 23(1): 36-63.
- Scheerder, J., Noppe, L. and Vanreusel, B. (2007) The rise of Light Communities in Sport: The Case of Running, *Sports Events and Sustainable Development* 364-347.
- Scheerder, J., Breedveld, K. and Borgers, J. (2015) Chapter 1. Who Is Doing a Run in the Running Boom?, pp. 1-27 in J. Scheerder, K. Breedveld & J. Borgers (eds) *Running across Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sharon, T. and Zandbergen, D. (2017) From data fetishism to quantifying selves: Self-tracking practices and the other values of data, *new media and society* 19(11): 1695-1709.
- Shen, Y. (2024) From Data Points to Well-Being: A Design Framework of Self-Tracked Data through the Lens of Positive Psychology, pp. 1-18 in C. Gray, E. Ciliotta Chehade, P. Hekkert, L. Forlano, P. Ciuccarelli and P. Lloyd (eds) *DRS2024: Boston*, Boston.
- Spotswood, F., Shankar, A. and Piwek, L. (2020) Changing emotional engagement with running through communal self-tracking: the implications of 'teleoaffective shaping' for public health, *Sociology of Health & Illness* 42(4): 772-788.
- Stokel-Walker, C. (2024) Goodbye Tinder, hello Strava: have 'hobby' apps become the new social networks? *The Guardian*, 8 September, URL:

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/sep/08/goodbye-tinder-hello-strava-have-hobby-apps-become-the-new-social-networks> [Last consulted 23 July 2025]

Subramani, S. (2019) Practising reflexivity: Ethics, methodology and theory construction, *Methodological Innovations*, 1-11.

Statista. (2025) Leading fitness and sport apps worldwide in January 2025, by downloads, URL: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1239771/top-fitness-and-sport-apps-downloads/#:~:text=Most%20popular%20fitness%20and%20sport%20apps%20worldwide%202025%2C%20by%20downloads&text=In%20January%202025%2C%20Strava%20was,first%20month%20of%20the%20year> [Last consulted 23 July 2025]

Stragier, J., Evens, T. & Merchant, P. (2015) Broadcast Yourself: an Exploratory Study of Sharing Physical Activity on Social Networking Sites, *Media International Australia* 155: 120-129.

Strava. (2025) URL: <https://www.strava.com> [Last consulted 23 July 2025]

Warren, C.A.B. (2002) Qualitative Interviewing, pp. 83-102 in J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (eds) *Handbook of Interview Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

## APPENDIX: REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS GRID

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Example Quote
<b>Theme 1:</b> <b><u>Tracking the Self</u></b>	<b>Subtheme 1.1: Data as Objectivity and Motivation</b>	Self-tracking as a source of 'objective truth'	<i>'Being a STEM student - putting things into numbers helps me a lot' (participant 2)</i>
		Goal setting as a prospective value	<i>'When I see [...] I've been running for the last three months consistently, it is not now that I am going to decide not to do it [...] I'll do it again today, and it keeps me accountable on a daily basis' (participant 3)</i>
		The omnipresence of tracking	<i>'I try not to look at it too much, but it is really hard when I am running as I have my watch on my wrist, so I always look at it and I see the average pace all the time' (participant 10)</i>
	<b>Subtheme 1.2: Data vs Embodied Experience</b>	Ephemeral nature of metrics	<i>'You just have to accept that number in your mind, and push yourself based on that, which is kind of an abstract concept' (participant 5)</i>
		Legitimization of users' embodied experiences	<i>'But then, you know your body better than anyone else' (participant 10)</i>
		Reduced 'situated objectivity'	<i>'Obviously I know how it felt for me – without the phone, without the tracking or without the everything – but I'll still look at</i>

			<i>it, and it can sometimes shift how I feel about it' (participant 5)</i>
		The over-abundance of data and its impact on users	<i>'At the end of the day, I know how I'm feeling. So to that level of detail, I thought it was just useless and a bit stress inducing and unnecessary' (participant 3)</i>
	<b>Subtheme 1.3: Recording as Validation</b>	Obsessiveness associated with tracking	<i>'I am obsessed with being able to track every single activity' (participant 10)</i>
		Logging activity to prevent 'broken data'	<i>'If I go on a run, and I don't track it on my Garmin, I feel like, you know, Strava or it didn't happen' (participant 4)</i>
	<b>Subtheme 1.4: Contextualizing Performance</b>	Performance framing as a form of justification to the running community	<i>'I also know that since it will be sort of [...] published, posted, I'll go back and make sure that, sort of my quote unquote audience – which feels ridiculous, because it is not that many people – but whoever sees it, has enough information to understand what the activity was, what the aim was, that kind of thing' (participant 5)</i>
<b><u>Theme 2: Strava as a Multipurpose Platform</u></b>	<b>Subtheme 2.1: Tracking as Journalling</b>	Instrumental nature of self-tracking	<i>'I see it really as an instrument to keep track of how many hours I've put in this week, I just try to see my fitness progression, that's the main reason I use it' (participant 3)</i>

		Self-tracking as a creative practice and a form of 'public diarising'	<i>'I find it fun to engage weird posts on Strava beyond just like Kudos, to sort of understand a little bit of what the run was like. What did they see? What did they do? How did they feel?'</i> (participant 5)
		Duality of self-tracking as an instrumental and creative practice	<i>'I try and balance it between tracking what I've actually done in the run for just tracking purpose, but also keeping a bit of a mental health log'</i> (participant 9)
	<b>Subtheme 2.2: Tracking as Social Belonging</b>	Strava as a primary form of social media	<i>'I've been giving up my Strava instead of social media like Instagram'</i> (participant 1)  <i>'I am probably more excited about kudos than [...] Instagram likes at this point'</i> (participant 2)
		Strava as an alternative to other social media	<i>'Ultimately, if people are looking at Strava and having body dysmorphia or huge body issues from it, there's probably a broader social media issue going on not akin to it. I think it's an incredibly happy and positive place [...].'</i> (participant 6)  <i>'It is very not like social media – it's very authentic'</i> (participant 8)

	<b>Subtheme 2.3: Strava as a Social Connector</b>	'Strava is the new Tinder'	<i>'There was at one point this culture that 'Strava is the new dating app' [...] the fact that it's come up means that it has some truth to it, I guess' (participant 7)</i>
		Forging romantic relationships based on shared interest	<i>'It might be easier to strike up a conversation and then get to know that person, and then you can go on a run together' (participant 7)</i>  <i>'I would love to be in a relationship in the future with somebody who shared that kind of passion' (participant 9)</i>
		Connecting with past/new friends	<i>'Forged this specific Strava friendship' (participant 2)</i>  <i>'There's a lot of friends that I maybe don't speak to very much anymore, but I feel like I'm still close to them because I see that they're active every day and [...] that they're in cool places doing cool things, and I feel like I maybe don't even have to speak to them because I know that they're happy' (participant 9)</i>
	<b>Subtheme 2.4: Negotiating</b>	Fear of judgement associated with	<i>'Once when I was running, it was too slow. I was like, no, I'm not showing the, that is when I</i>

	<b>Inclusivity and Safety</b>	displaying metrics publicly	<i>realised that I was like 'you're not happy at the end of your run because you are not showing it', it's just like why do you not want to show that?' (participant 8)</i>
		Overcoming comparison	<i>'So it was once I stopped comparing myself to others too much, that I would say I improved my mood when I look at my statistics' (participant 4)</i>
		Security concerns	<i>'Data is quite sensitive, particularly if you run from home as well' (participant 9)</i>
<b><u>Theme 3:</u></b> <b><u>From Trend to Commodity:</u></b> <b><u>Running as Lifestyle Practice</u></b>	<b>Subtheme 3.1:</b> <b>Running and Trend Culture</b>	Running as a recent trend	<i>'The last sort of two or three years, mainly since COVID, it seems like everyone is running' (participant 9)</i>
		Running as a trend amongst Gen Zs	<i>'People in their 20s need to choose a new personality, and they just start getting into running and they talk about running all the time, and I can kind of relate to that' (participant 4)</i>
	<b>Subtheme 3.2:</b> <b>Constructing the Updated 'Runner Identity'</b>	Running as a lifestyle, omnipresent in the fabric of everyday life	<i>'You see all these influencers dressed nicely, having coffee runs in the morning with a little cinnamon bun, and you enter a certain lifestyle' (participant 3)</i>
		Negotiating running identities through	<i>'Seeing that I was part of a community, that did it so</i>

		technological and sociocultural dimensions	<i>recreationally, and some of them at a pretty high level, made me feel that even though I'm not at that same level, you don't have to be, to be a runner. So I think that helped me sort of cross that bridge of, okay, I'm not just someone who does it super recreationally – I'm doing it, so I am a runner' (participant 5)</i>
		Daily reproduction of participants' running identities through communality online and offline	<i>'I feel more accepted, and no one is judging my choices of not going out too late because I want to go on a run the next morning, because I think that people are in a similar boat' (participant 2)</i>
	<b>Subtheme 3.3: Branding and the Commodification of Running</b>	Commodification as an integral part of running	<i>'The only thing that I can think of that we didn't talk about is the influence of buying stuff [...] once you start running you enter this world where they have a different way of dressing and also types of clothes' (participant 4)</i>
		Critique of Strava's monetization model	<i>'There shouldn't be a premium version because [...] being a healthy person should be free' (participant 10)</i>
		Branded nature of running on Strava	<i>'You run and at the end, you try a new pastry place or like a new restaurant and we basically get food for free all the time. But in exchange for free food, you need</i>

			<p><i>to like post pictures and do kind of like advertising for them. [...]</i></p> <p><i>So my Strava is mostly pictures of food' (participant 10)</i></p>
--	--	--	---