

Consumption experience in running: how design influences this phenomenon

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Abstract

The studies on consumption experience have gained force not only in the Marketing field but also in relation to the impact that design can have in the construction of those experiences. This paper discusses the role that Design can play in the construction of experiences perceived in road running activities. In order to do so, an exploratory study was conducted through the use of multiple techniques of data collection (in-depth interviews, desk research, and ethnographic essay). The results indicate that the experience generated by the running activity is strongly dependent on external agents, like sport consultancy services and competitions, being Design as an important factor to the promotion of sports practice and the constitution of consumption experience.

Keywords

Experience design; running; tribes.

The road running market¹ is a global phenomenon. Millions of runners practice this physical activity in parks, squares, and streets in big cities all over the world. More than a sport activity accessible to a great public for several reasons (easy to practice, no specific equipment required or no need for other participants), running has gained strength as the fastest growing sport in the world with very expressive figures in Brazil, too.

Practicing alone or in groups, runners have motivated the creation of an expressive number of competitions, from short distances (5km and 10km) to higher challenges (21,097km and 42, 195 km – half-marathon and marathon), or ultra-marathons as the Comrades in South Africa, with 89 km.

The evolution of the practice can be noticed by the impressive figures of the New York Marathon, with more than 100 thousand applications for 43 thousand allowed participants (AIMS, 2009). Marathons as Tokyo, Chicago, Berlin and Paris are big events that attract thousands of tourists and athletes, representing important dates on their tourist calendars. But, why does it happen?

We can speculate on some reasons for this trend, such as the increasing concern with sedentary life style and stress, typical of post-modern societies, or the search for a perfect body and the consequent elevation of self-esteem. However, which factors are really responsible for such figures?

In the 70s, there was a booming in jogging all over the world influenced by the work of Dr Kenneth Cooper and by the beginning of the increasing status of running as a healthy sport. In the USA, there were about 100,000 runners at that time, increasing to 30 million nowadays. In Brazil there is an estimative of 3 million daily basis runners², placing it as the second most popular sport in the country's biggest cities (São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro), being soccer the first one.

¹ According to the International Association of Athletics Federations (2009), road races are disputed in streets, avenues and roads with official distances varying between 5 to 100km.

² Daily basis runner is considered the one who practices this physical activity at least 3 times per week for 30 minute-length period.

Sports goods companies have invested huge amounts of money in the development and launching of shoes and accessories for running, focusing on lighter, more resistant to different kinds of ground and weather, and customized products for each type of runner, taking into consideration, for instance, their weight or the way they step and move when running. At the same time, the events organization related to running have multiplied and professionalized. In São Paulo, the biggest Brazilian city, there were 11 official competitions in 2001. In 2009, 174 competitions were carried out, or 3 competitions every weekend (Corpore, 2009).

Once it is realized the relevance of this sportive and social phenomenon, some inevitable questions come to mind: The increasing number of people practicing running is something spontaneous or created? What makes a strenuous and little stimulating activity into something attractive and capable of mobilizing crowds?

The discussion proposed by this paper is guided by these questions: is the experience of running something designed by others or is it something constructed by the user; how can Design influence the practice or the consumption of running; can the racing practice phenomenon be explained by the formation of a subculture proper of this kind of individuals that are sometimes organized in tribes; is the formation of tribes the result of projected actions by market agents? In order to discuss these points, it was defined as research goal the evaluation of experience design influence on consumer behavior of road runners in Porto Alegre, as well as on the tribe's formation process in this market.

The scope of Design action has been broadened since the original conception of product projecting to the constitution of offer and value to the user. Mitchell (1993) used to say that Design should not project only objects but also functions, contexts of use, systems and environments. This conception is materialized through experience design, which has as its purpose not only in product development but also creating conditions to generate satisfactory experiences for the user.

Recent studies have tried to analyze the role of Design in the development of consuming experiences (Forlizzi, Di Salvo e Hanington, 2003; Freire, 2009), however, there are innumerable theory gaps in the area. In the next section the concepts of experience design will be detailed.

Experience Design

The experience theme has gained relevance in the field of consumer behavior since Holbrook and Hirschman's study (1982). Until then, the discussion about consume wouldn't explicitly consider the role of hedonistic and symbolic elements that products and services had on consumer perception. The authors highlight that there was a flow of fantasies, feelings and fun around consuming processes so far underestimated by organizations in the development of their offers and even when designing their products. Personal experiences would be the result of individual events, full of emotional meanings resulting from the interaction between user and a set of stimuli, either related to products, services, or communication.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) pointed out that the consuming in XXI century would be within the "experience economy", that is, the XIX century industrial revolution that attempted to implement standardization and mass production would be replaced by mass customization (products/services increasingly more adapted to individual needs and desires) which, in its turn, can be characterized by the search for individual immersion in consumer experiences instead of simply buying products or services.

In economies increasingly more dependant on services, the concern is to generate experiences based on the creation of environments capable of absorbing clients in a pleasant, memorable, and unique way, with services working as stages and products as supports (Pine e Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 2003). Lusch and Vargo (2006) point out that the dominant logic of services in national economies lead to a new consumer role in the purchasing and consumption process. A passive posture loses space to an individual in search of co-authorship in the creation of consuming value. There is no value in offers until they are used, and the experience is fundamental in determining it. Experience, in that sense, is not an accessory element to the consuming process anymore and it plays a leading role in the construction of value organizations. The consequence of this process is the change in the role of Design that in this new context is not an ability focused only at designing artifacts but to develop user experiences. The challenge is to be capable of generate not just

everyday and satisfactory experiences, but outstanding ones. The cognitive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly says that activities that are intrinsically motivating³ for the individual, that give pleasure in their accomplishment and take the user to a deep state of involvement and personal joy generate a state of mental flow and are essential for the constitution of outstanding experiences. When in this state, the feelings of pleasure and satisfaction are considered unique and can contribute for a bigger engagement in the continuous realization of a certain activity. The figure 1 shows the conditions for generating flow, which occurs when there is a higher level of challenge to be faced, demanding a higher degree of skill to be accomplished.

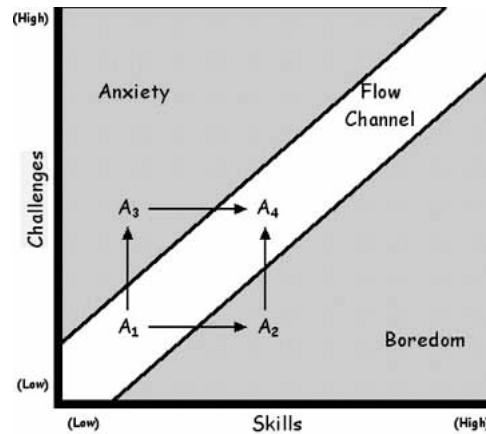


Figure 1. Conditions for the generation of Flow

Source: Csikszentmihaly and Csikszentmihaly, 1988.

Many authors have discussed the nature of consumption experience. Pullman and Gross (2004, p.551) indicate that the experiences are “inherently emotional and personal”, and are dependant on individual factors like cultural background, previous experiences, mood and personality traits. Forlizzi, Disalvo and Hanington (2003) as well as Hekkert and McDonagh (2003) point out that experiences are unique, made of small experiences related to contexts, products and people, and the experiences themselves cannot be projected, only the situations of interaction with users.

Caru and Cova (2007) classify consuming experiences within a continuum, according to those responsible for their construction, as visualized in figure 2. There are, on one side, experiences oriented by consumers, which are organized by users and tend to be the result of everyday services and products sold by companies through traditional marketing approaches. On the other hand, there are experiences oriented by companies conceiving all the details of the projected experience, characterized by specific organizational efforts to generate immersion consuming contexts.

³ Intrinsic motivation can be described for not be focused on the rewards from some activity, but as consequence of its involvement and effort. Extrinsic motivation occurs when an activity is just the way to reach some goal, generating more tension and stress for its achievement (Czikszentmihaly and Csikszentmihaly 1988).



Fig 2. Continuum of Experience Consumption

Source: Caru and Cova, 2007.

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

According to McLellan (2000), experience design is intended to “orchestrate” experiences that are functional, engaging, attractive and memorable. It demands designing all the details of content and context for the user, seeking to generate emotional fulfillment and pleasure in use that enhance one's perceived experience (Kurtgozu, 2003). The scope of experience design is beyond the materialization of a service or a product; it is in the set of planning activities of processes and systems that support the occurrence of the experience, besides the earlier stages of its construction, like the full understanding of clients and production contexts.

Method

The study presented here sets out from a phenomenological approach and presents an exploratory character. To generate understanding about the road running market phenomenon it is used data triangulation by employing different approaches of data collecting. The development of a desk research about the running world, either from market data or studies from other academic research fields like Physical Education, Tourism, Marketing and Psychology was the starting point.. Secondary data collecting was carried out at running related institutions like Association of International Marathons and Distance Races (AIMS), International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), Corpore (Paulista Road Runners United), Associação dos Treinadores de Corrida de Rua de São Paulo (São Paulo Road Runners Instructors Association), as well as a large research in the different running specialized medias like magazines, sites and blogs.⁴

Primary data was collected through a set of audio recorded in-depth interviews based on semi-structured scripts with agents from this industry.

1. Corpore general manager: the biggest running group (9850 athletes) and the biggest competition organizer in Brazil.
2. Two directors from the biggest running training groups in the country (Run & Fun and MPR, with 1400 and 1300 enrolled athletes respectively).
3. Marketing directors from the two leading sports brands in the running world market.
4. Members from the media specialized in running (Runners World Brazil magazine, and Sprint Final newspaper).

⁴ It's important to highlight that the data was collected in two Brazilian cities (Porto Alegre and São Paulo) due to the expressiveness of São Paulo market in the context of road running, being considered the city with the highest number of runners and running races in Latin America.

An ethnographic essay with one of the authors of a sports consultancy service company was developed in parallel, in which he was submitted to three training sessions of 60 minutes each, three times a week for 7 months. The criteria for choosing this company were the number of athletes participating (120 runners) and its structure level in relation to other groups in Porto Alegre. Besides the training, the researcher also took part in 5 annual competitions in the city, with distances of 5 and 10km, as well as of social activities with members of the running group. Notes were taken in field diaries throughout the study and photos were taken during the activities.

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

Results

The results of this study are presented in two parts: the description of the main agents in the running market, followed by the analysis of the influence of experience design over the consuming behaviour of road runners.

The market of road running in Brazil is made up by the following agents:

1. Runners
2. Sporting goods brands
3. Events organizers (private companies, running clubs, public sector)
4. Sport consultants or training groups
5. Specialized media
6. Business opportunity seekers
7. General public and family members

Unquestionably, the main agent of this process is the one that runs. For many reasons that will further be dealt in this paper, runners get interested in the running activity and in most cases start playing the sport independently. Running, just like walking, is the most accessible sport activity because it can be carried out alone, anywhere, and initially requires little investments. Some studies point out the factors that motivate people to choose running as a physical activity. According to Silva (2009), running improves the physical conditions of athletes (better fitness, less risk of cardiac diseases, weigh control and breathing capacity), the emotional and cognitive balance (stress reduction, better mood, higher self-confidence, enhanced learning, concentration and abstract reasoning), and the social skills (the need to belong to a group, make new friends etc.).

Although it takes little investments to go running, the role of sporting goods labels is more important than it seems. Brands like Nike, Asics, Mizuno and Adidas have noticed that the market of running has a high annual growth rate and that runners look for products that allow higher performance, regardless of their own performance level. Products range from foot wear, with improved technology to bring comfort, cushioning, resistance and stability, to training apparel crafted with smart fabrics that are light and moisture-wicking, and also accessories like heart monitors that measure speed, distance, calorie expenditure, with GPS sensors and other performance display features.

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

A particular issue from the Brazilian running market is the relevance of the running groups or sport training consultancy services for influencing the runner behavior. There is no recent statistics of the share of runners market which hires this kind of service, but it's an important element to leverage

the sport growth in the country. The running training groups, distinctively from the runners groups, are paid services which seek to become the sport experience more pleasure and comfortable. They are compound by training counseling before, during and after the exercise and races (including warm-up, stretching, massage, and hydration), customized training spreadsheets, tents and lounges for athletes in the race. The distribution of t-shirts for the members, the transportation for training in distant sites (most of the practices occur in parks and streets of the cities, according to a previously informed timetable), the race registration service, the web-based platform for communication between athletes and instructors, as well as the organization of running trips (especially for interesting races as prestigious marathons abroad) are extra services which differentiate the companies and the value perception of the runners (the basic cost for this services is US\$ 80 per month).

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

The growth of Brazilian running market is due to an increasing number of races in a structured calendar, which can vary according to distances, courses and purposes. Competitions have been more professionally organized, which involves processes and services of advertising (mass and specialized media), application (mostly by the internet), the use of transponder timing systems (which are essential to measure the performance of athletes), the distribution of apparel sets (a numbered T-shirt is the basic item with a variation of accessories and toiletries), the setting of race courses, inspection, lightning, music etc. Application costs are also higher (ranging from US\$ 20.00 to US\$100.00 for each athlete), not only for restricting the number of participants but also for choosing a target public for the organizers. Races that are up to 13.1 miles have a number of participants that ranges from 2.000 to 15.000 in average.

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

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

Analysis of Data and Findings

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

1. Group 1: formed by extremely competitive individuals seeking a superior performance. They participate of competition on a regular basis and are heavy users of related services and information.
2. Group 2: formed by individuals seeking a better quality of life. They participate of competitions for the pleasure of taking part in the event and, in some cases, for the challenge to improve performance. They often start practicing motivated by the possibility of being accepted in a social circle or because it is trendy, but as they get involved they realize it is an easy, pleasant and low cost activity.

3. Group 3: formed by individuals who are marginal to the market. They do not take part in competitions and are light users of products and services related to running.

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

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

For individuals from group 2, the initial motivations for running are extrinsic, with goals not specifically related to the act of running. Because of the immersion in the running context, either inside of the structure of running clubs or advisory services or participation in competitions, the motivational nature is altered, and the pleasure and satisfaction with the activity comes naturally. The immersion process, according to Caru and Cova (2006), is not quickly or automatically established, it is progressive and can be accelerated according to the designing and management of services that compose the experience, either in terms of consultancy services or the organization of street competitions.

Running clubs play an important role in the promotion of the running practice because they are behavior inducers. When gathering people with different motivations, level of performance and different socio-cultural backgrounds but united around the same cause (running), the clubs produce positive reinforcements in the individual, like socialization, the necessary orientation for safely practicing the activity with less injury risks, comfort and support to allow for a carefree practice. It can be concluded that *flow* occurs in this context since consultancy services act as promoters of intrinsic motivation characteristics of this mental state and of extraordinary experiences.

Competitions, even if they are not common to all kinds of runners, play the role of generating constant challenges, which is essential for the arising of *flow*. Unlike other sports, road running is essentially a competition against ones own limits, not against other competitors. Competitions assume two responsibilities in relation to competitors: create opportunities to challenge their records and engage individuals in experience sharing communities, a central characteristic of consuming tribes (Cova and Cova, 2001).

There is evidence that runners who actively participate in the practice of running, either using consultancy services or taking part in competitions, tend to get a more significant involvement with sports practices. Stebbins (1992) reveals that the construction of a social identity is relevant for the individual because it creates a sense of fitting in, a valuable place in a social environment, a connection with others and a way to raise self-esteem. Shipway and Jones (2008), in a study on the experiences of the London Marathon participants, pointed out that only what is known as serious leisure can create a meaningful social identity. Since a social identity is created between runners, a new consuming tribe is constituted. According to criteria identified by Cova and Cova (2001), the four elements necessary to the constitution of a new tribe are: the everyday practice (regular training), locations (parks, streets), trends (increasing number of people practicing running) and gatherings (training sessions, competitions, social activities).

It is in this context that the formation of tribes occurs because, besides the natural obstacles to be overcome, the activities demand a high commitment and engagement. This is possible to notice on

the structuring of the consultancy services with the institution of a standard uniform (usually a t-shirt), that reinforces the feeling of belonging to a group, sharing affinities and seeking common goals. The perception of the running competition itself is substantially altered when experienced independently and individually or in teams or groups sharing a minimally constituted identity. The group experience revealed itself as being more stimulating, promoting a longer involvement with the running practice (lower rates of quitters). Design can play an important role in the configuration of this projected experience, either in the constitution of services to stimulate the formation of groups or with tangible elements that reinforce the structuring of a collective identity (brand, uniform, communication, facilities).

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

Conclusion

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

A good example of how organizations may constitute different experiences for a single runner is the realization of theme competitions in different formats, not only in the possibilities of participation (individual or teams) but also in terms of environments and possible external stimuli (Fashion Run, Corporate Run, Disney Marathon, Volkswagen Inside Run). More than just an event for runners, competitions are their goal because it is where they can break records, improve performance, socially interact and try new sceneries, like circuits, services and products offered by organizers and sponsors .

Initiatives in the developing of running related products reveal the efforts in the designing of experiences, like the partnership between Nike, the sporting goods manufacturer, and Apple in the launching of the Nike Plus system. The system integrates Nike running shoes and iPods, making it possible to monitor the runner's performance, listen to music and participate in a Nike social network on the Web for athletes using the same technology, reinforcing the stimuli for the constitution of a community of users or sports practicing people with tribal characteristics (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007). Running is not an obstacle to be overcome and it acquires a social, entertaining and pleasurable character from products that free runners' central activity from the fatigue, discomfort and sacrifice that they normally face.

This study made it possible to verify, from an approach of various perspectives of different participants in the industry, how the running consuming experience is constituted and the role design plays in the transformation of that experience into something more accessible to a common user, not restricting itself only to a performance athlete. The construction of consuming experiences less focused on the user sportive performance and more focused on the providing for their hedonic and functional needs is the fuel for the expressive growing of this market and highlights the importance of design in the constitution of services, experiences and products.

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

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