'More than just a run in the park': an exploration of parkrun as a shared leisure space

Leisure Sciences

## Abstract

Over the last thirteen years parkrun has grown from a small time trial in Bushy Park, London, to become a global social movement. During this time much has been claimed about the potential health-related benefits that are accrued from participating, but comparatively little attention has been given to the social reasons for attending. The aim of this study was to better understand the meanings of participation for both runners and volunteers using an intrinsic case study that focused on a specific event, Colwick parkrun in Nottingham, England. Building on literature that positions leisure sites as third places, the paper seeks to enhance our understanding of parkrun as a community-based initiative. Data collection included observation, participant observation, semi-structured interviews (N=19), and a survey (N=235). Several themes emerged, suggesting that participation in parkrun provides an inclusive leisure space for casual sociability, as well as facilitating a shared experience of exercising with others.

Keywords: running, physical activity, community, third place.

## Introduction

It has been reported that one in four women and one in five men in England are classed as physically inactive, taking part in fewer than thirty minutes of moderate physical activity per week (Public Health England, 2016). Such behaviours are troubling. The association between physical inactivity and both morbidity and mortality is well established (Knight, 2012). Additionally, there is an economic burden, with an estimated direct cost of physical inactivity to the NHS across the United Kingdom totalling £1.06 billion per annum (Department of Health, 2011). One encouraging sign, however, to counter this inactivity has been the significant growth in 'athletics' participation – a catch-all term for a diverse range of pursuits including track and field, cross country running, and ultra-marathon running. Over the past decade participation has increased by 72 per cent, with an estimated 2.4 million people running on a weekly basis (England

Athletics, 2017). There are two aspects that are particularly striking about the growth in running's popularity. The first, is the unstructured and informal nature of the activity, with the majority of participants not being affiliated to a running club (England Athletics, 2013). This is evidenced by the development of initiatives such as informal running networks, and emergent types of running groups (Spiers, Harris, Charlton, & Smale, 2015). As Jennie Price, Chief Executive of Sport England, remarked "running has continued to be a powerful driving force, with welcoming, low-cost and easy-to-access options like parkrun making a big impact in the last decade" (Sport England, 2016). Parkrun represents a new kind of hybrid organisation that is different from traditional sports organisations in a number of ways: it is a not-for-profit that relies on sponsorship and corporate branding, with only a small number of paid staff, there are no membership fees, whilst growth is driven by volunteers across the country who manage weekly events. The expansion of parkrun over the last decade can, arguably, be situated against a rising interest in registered running events (Shipway & Holloway, 2010) as well as a wider change in such events, moving away from serious competition and towards sociality, camaraderie, and experience – for example, the proliferation of themed races (e.g. Colour Run) and obstacle events (e.g. Tough Mudder), as well as identifiable increase in charitable fundraising through mass-participation events (King, 2003; Nettleton & Hardey, 2006).

The second, is despite the 'boom' in recreational running, limited data exist on the behaviours and motivations of the people involved (England Athletics, 2013). Of relevance to this study, Bell & Stephenson (2014) contend that we know relatively little about the motivations of participants in 5km events, whilst Murphy & Bauman (2007) argue that the impact of mass participation events on subsequent physical activity among participants is under-explored. Existing literature has tended to concentrate on groups of highly committed runners (Hitchings & Latham, 2016) or what Bale (2004) labels as 'serious' or competitive running. As a result, key questions, particularly with regards to the experiences of comparatively casual runners, remain largely under the radar.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to explore whether and how we can understand recreational running through an examination of one particular form of volunteer-led community running, namely through the use of an intrinsic case study that focuses on one parkrun site - Colwick County Park (Nottingham). Using a mixed method approach, our study aims to access and make sense of the meanings of participation for both runners and volunteers. A secondary aspiration is to examine the perceived benefits of participating in parkrun for the runner/volunteer. Previous research has demonstrated that parkrun is well positioned to attract non-traditional participants, with a high proportion of women, first time runners, overweight people, and older adults (Stevinson & Hickson, 2013; Stevinson, Wiltshire, & Hickson, 2015). Thus, we will also question to what extent parkrun is successful in breaking down barriers to participation and providing an inclusive and welcoming environment, open to all, no matter what their background or ability. As such in reviewing the qualitative experiences of parkrunners this paper seeks to tease out public health lessons, and to consider the key design characteristics of parkrun as a mass community event when thinking about possible applications for physical exercise promotion.

This article is organised into four parts. First, we introduce parkrun, before reviewing the existing literature on recreational running and its application to thinking about the role of parkrun in engaging local communities to become physically active. Next, the site and strategy of inquiry guiding this study is provided emphasising the opportunities and challenges presented by the mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis. Third, we report the findings, identifying a number of salient themes which emerged that provide insights to Colwick parkrunners' experiences and the meanings they attributed to participation. In the penultimate section, Oldenburg's (1999) concept of the 'third place' is assessed in light of the findings, exploring to what extent parkrun helps to foster social interaction and encourage citizen involvement. The concluding discussion considers the theoretical and practical implications of this research, thinking about the lessons learned from parkrun, and the complex challenge of creating a 'parkrun family' in which the aims of health promotion, sport and social connection co-exist.

**'More than just a run in the park'**

Parkrun has been variously described as a 'rapidly growing mass community event' (Stevinson & Hickson, 2013:269), an 'organised running revolution' (Brilliant, 2013), a 'sustainable community lifestyle initiative' (Watson, 2013:277) and a 'social movement' (McAnena, 2017). As noted previously, parkrun as a not-for-profit that relies on a small number of paid staff and an army of local event volunteers is distinctive from traditional sports organisations. Parkrun offers a weekly series of free, timed 5km runs (and 2km junior parkrun events for 4-14 year olds), organised by volunteer teams and held in public spaces, including municipal parks and green environments. The integrated volunteer system enables participants to contribute to the sustainability of their local event, as well as helping to generate a sense of belonging (Stevinson, Wiltshire, & Hickson, 2015). At the heart of the parkrun ethos is a desire to create opportunities for participation. As Fullagar (2016) notes "the inclusive format enables people to walk, wheel or run together. Even pets are welcome". The origins of parkrun can be traced back to October 2004. The founder, Paul Sinton-Hewitt, had sustained a long-term injury and was searching for a way to keep engaged with the running community. His idea was a weekly 5km time trial for members of his running club, Ranelagh Harriers, as well as other local clubs. The inaugural event involved 13 runners in Bushy Park in west London who navigated their way around an unmarked route (Bourne, 2014). From these humble beginnings, parkrun has evolved into a global phenomenon with 577 parkrun and junior parkrun events in the UK, and 460 events across the rest of the world. By the end of 2016 there were 1,228,337 unique parkrunners, whilst in May of that year it was reported that for the first time that more than 100,000 people had completed a parkrun across a single weekend (Parkrun, 2017).

The growing popularity of parkrun can, in part, be attributed to its simplicity and accessibility. The only requirement is a one-off online registration and printed barcode, which enables participants to monitor and review their attendance and progress over time. Moreover, there is a determination to minimise participation barriers. There is no upper age limit, whilst at the other

end, children as young as four are allowed to participate. No special clothing or equipment is required, and there are no direct costs. Framing parkrun as "a run and not a race" invites the participation of groups who don't identify with the traditional stereotypical views of running. As Watson (2013:277) observes "there are no expectations that participants are fast or slow, just a preference they complete the distance in a time comfortable for them". The commitment to making parkrun inclusive, is borne out by previous research by Stevinson & Hickson (2013) who report its appeal to groups with traditionally low levels of physical activity. These findings are echoed in parkrun's first annual review in 2016, where it was reported that 38,038 previously inactive individuals are now running, there were 178,812 female first-timers, and that 14 per cent of parkruns were by those aged 55 and over (Parkrun, 2017). In addition, a qualitative study by Stevinson, Wiltshire, & Hickson (2015) identified two overarching themes from parkrunners' individual accounts, namely freedom and reciprocity, to help explore the factors which encouraged initial and sustained attendance at parkrun. These include the accessible, inclusive ethos, the provision of achievement opportunities, and a supportive social environment, along with natural outdoor settings, and integrated volunteer system. Interestingly, whilst the aforementioned studies place an emphasis on inclusion, such claims need to be tempered by the observation that the numbers of ethnic minorities and people from lower socio-economic groups are disproportionately low (Stevinson & Hickson, 2013).

### Review of the existing literature on recreational running

As the popularity of mass-participation running has exploded in parks and on pavements, a fascination with exploring the activity has steadily grown amongst academics. Nevertheless, it has been asserted that whilst there is a relatively rich literature that has focused on distance or endurance runners "the rationale for recreational running is largely ignored" (Spiers, Harris, Charlton, & Smale, 2015:89). Furthermore, we still know relatively little about the actual nature of the running community (England Athletics, 2013) whilst despite the impressive growth of

parkrun, to date the community-based running initiative has attracted only limited academic attention.

In order to better understand this phenomenon, a logical starting point is to review what existing studies tell us about those who run, and the meanings they attach to running. There is a widely held belief that running provides an accessible form of physical exercise that is 'convenience rich' (Spiers, Harris, Charlton, & Smale, 2015:90) which requires little in terms of specialist equipment, expertise and experience. Running is often characterised as an open and democratic form activity, which attracts a relatively high proportion of females. Since 2012 73 per cent of running participation has involved women (England Athletics, 2017) whilst running also appears popular among slightly older age groups (Breedveld, Scheerder, & Borgers, 2015). Such an interpretation however, fails to fully acknowledge possible divisions and barriers to participation. It has been argued, for example, that the running community favours an idealised body type (Abbas, 2004) whilst clothing and accessories are designed more for those kinds of bodies than larger, heavier ones (Chase, 2008) with Robinson, Patterson, & Axelson (2014) noting that on occasions overweight runners attracted negative comments. Gimlin (2010) and Smith (1997, 2001) explore the phenomenon of runner harassment, highlighting the types of abuse and annoyances that runners experience when exercising in public places.

When it comes to seeking some conceptual clarity over the term 'runner' Smith's (1998) study into non-elite road running in South Wales is instructive. He identified three distinct participant groups: athletes, runners and joggers. Under this analytic categorisation, athletes are elite runners who are potential race-winners; runners "run and train, week in and week out, at levels far in excess of that required for basic physical fitness, yet stand no realistic chance of winning, or doing well in *any* race" (Smith, 1998:176); whereas joggers or fun runners train infrequently, race episodically (if at all), and only partake in fair weather. Crucially they appear, to the majority of runners, to treat the activity as a form of body maintenance and self-improvement, with an emphasis on extrinsic motivations such as to lose weight, to keep fit, and so on. In this, the group dynamics reflect a status hierarchy, with Smith (1998) noting tensions between runners and

joggers due to potential confusion over how the terms may be used interchangeably by the general public, unaware of the status differential based on the 'respect' runners feel they derive through their demonstrations of physical prowess and commitment. Other authors have also attempted to develop runner typologies (Ogles & Masters, 2003; Vos, Scheerder, Boen, & Feys, 2008). For example, based on a survey of motives and attitudes towards running Vos & Scheerder (2009) divide the running market into five distinct segments, namely: individual runners, social-competitive runners, social-community runners, health and fitness runners, and performance runners. Scheerder & Van Bottenburg (2010) make the distinction between 'organised running' on the one hand and 'light running' on the other hand. The former refers to running in a club-organised setting, whereas the latter covers leisure-time running outside a formal setting, for instance running on their own or with friends, in informal networks or at fitness centres or with colleagues. These contexts are often referred to as 'light running communities' (Van Bottenburg, Sheerder, & Hover, 2010) with the inference being that for the majority of runners they are not primarily focused on the sport of running (i.e. entering competitions or looking for self-improvement) but rather consider running as a health-enhancing and social physical activity.

It is worth pausing at this juncture to ask what questions emerge from the above accounts. To what extent is the framing of running as an accessible form of exercise borne out by the attendees that are attracted to take part in parkrun? How successful are these weekly mass-running events in welcoming different types of participants, regardless of ability, attitude and motive, as well as appealing to individuals that don't conform to an idealised body type or runner identity? In addition, drawing on the distinction between organised and light running, how might we understand parkrun as a hybrid organisation and what influence, if any, does its non-traditional membership structure have?

Existing studies have tended to emphasise the positive contributions running can make towards physical and psychological wellbeing, promoting healthy ageing, and reducing obesity levels (Shipway & Holloway, 2010 and 2013). Qvistrom's (2016) historical account of the 'jogging wave' in Sweden in the late 1970s reveals a close association with running for fitness and self-

improvement. As such running is bound up with ideas of 'healthiness' – held up as one way to both achieve and to demonstrate this (Perrier & Bridel, 2016:205). Indeed, Wiltshire, Fullagar, & Stevinson (2017) examine how parkrun can be understood as a health practice, providing a space for 'collective bodywork' that invites participants with a range of body shapes and competences. Nash (1979) meanwhile suggests that involvement in running events is both an eventful and rewarding experience for participants, regardless of age, gender or level of ability. In this way running affords a dual function: it promotes a person's health, whilst also giving meaning to their lives. Mass-participation running can therefore be seen to provide opportunities for a range of positive outcomes, which include physical and mental wellbeing, a sense of achievement, and social interaction. One of the aims of this paper, therefore, is to examine these accounts in the context of parkrun as a weekly, mass participation, community-based initiative, adding qualitative insight to the meanings of participation for both runners and volunteers.

Drawing on existing qualitative studies, Hitchings & Latham (2016) identify two marked themes with regard the apparent 'social' character of running. The first involves the supposition that running is about an identifiable wider group culture or subculture. The second is concerned with how running is about self-identity – in other words, what it means to be a serious or competitive runner. The sociability of running has been examined by Allen-Collinson (2008) and Shipway, Holloway, & Jones (2012) who have framed the activity as a means of forging and maintaining social relationships. This echoes the work of Tulle (2007) who emphasised the importance of a social network which is fostered through being associated with a running club. In Shipway & Jones' (2008) study of marathon runners they concluded that participants followed behaviours prescribed by a particular prototype associated within the running subculture, resulting in a homogeneity of dress, behaviour and values amongst the group. Such elements helped to affirm membership of the 'social worlds' of distance runners, engendering a sense of belonging, and the opportunity to use valued identities to enhance self-worth and self-esteem. Allen-Collinson (2008) underlines ideas of identification in her auto-ethnographic work. As an accomplished distance runner she reflects upon her experiences as an 'insider' and the construction and maintenance of

her personal runner identity. What is seemingly peripheral from the attention of these studies is an understanding of the culture of mass participation running, or how those who run recreationally see themselves. Furthermore, how does parkrun as an emergent form of mass-running event that isn't explicitly about competition and commitment compare to traditional running clubs when considering issues of identity and membership?

Hitchings & Latham (2016) contend that this preoccupation with the social aspects of running needs to be treated with caution, advocating an alternative approach which goes beyond notions of shared culture, group belonging, or self-identification. In their qualitative study of twenty 'non-runner runners' in London, they found that these casual recreational runners were relatively uninterested in the idea of technique, ambivalent about the presence of others when running, and reticent about being pulled into a more committed collective practice. As such, there is a need to examine the rapid growth of parkrun as a mass community event when for many recreational running is a solitary pursuit and when, arguably, there may be a tendency to overplay its social character. An objective of this paper therefore, is to gain a better understanding of how 'the social' features in the experience of parkrun participants.

To briefly summarise, amidst the wider scholarly work on 'serious' or competitive running, there is an emerging literature that focuses on the experiences of comparatively casual runners. Within this collection, and against the backdrop of the contemporary leisure-time 'running boom' parkrun remains an exciting yet under-researched phenomenon, which this paper aspires to contribute towards. As noted, research into parkrun is warranted in thinking about how these meanings play out in this rapidly growing new context, as well as thinking about whether other leisure activities can learn from participants' experiences of parkrun. Moreover, this paper seeks to build on existing literature that positions leisure sites as third places, in order to enhance our understanding of parkrun as a community-based recreational running initiative.

### Research setting, methods and participants

Approval for the research was granted by the University Ethics Sub-Committee. Additionally, authorisation was gained from the parkrun Research Board, who along with the local event organisers, provided support for the implementation of the study. Ethical approval included permission to name Colwick parkrun as the site for inquiry. To be eligible to take part in the study, respondents had to be at least 18 years old, registered for parkrun, and provide informed consent. Participants were informed that all data would be anonymised.

Empirical research was undertaken over a five-month period, using a variety of methods of inquiry, most notably observation, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a face-to-face and online survey. In doing so, the purpose of the data collection was to access and explore the experiences of parkrunners (runners and volunteers) and the meanings they associated with participation. Specific objectives were to 1) identify participants' perceived benefits of parkrun and 2) explore the meanings parkrunners associate with their experiences of participating in a mass community event. As noted, the research underpinning this paper was conducted using Colwick parkrun as an intrinsic case study (Stake, 2005). This approach was designed to allow for in-depth exploration using multiple methods, thus enabling a greater understanding of this particular case (Yin, 1994). Furthermore, it is recognised that whilst parkrun events share a high degree of similarity in ethos, format, and delivery, each location possesses some particularity. Colwick parkrun is one of thirteen parkruns located in Nottingham and the surrounding area, and has an average attendance of 179, with a total number of 7,826 participants across the 312 events to date (Parkrun, 2017). Figure 1 below illustrates the gender split between those who have registered Colwick as their 'home' parkrun.

**Insert figure 1 here**

Colwick parkrun was the first in Nottingham, having been in operation since June 2011, offering a free weekly Saturday run in Colwick Country Park which is situated on the outskirts of the city. The park contains two large lakes, a marina, woodland and meadows, and has three main entrance points, each with public parking. The 5km route, which includes one lap of the Main Lake and two laps of the West Lake, is on a mixture of informally surfaced paths, combined with short

road and grass sections. After each event, participants are encouraged to socialise at the nearby Daleside Café.

Participant observation focused on gaining a better understanding of the experiences and behaviours of those involved (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Informal conversations were recorded using a digital recorder and notebooks to capture snippets of conversations, participant observations and thoughts immediately after leaving parkrun. Photography was also used during visits, and reviewing these images helped in refining observations and added details to the descriptive field notes.

A face-to-face and online survey of 235 participants (110 males and 125 females) was conducted. The scope of the questions was to explore the experiences of the respondents and to identify the perceived benefits of taking part in parkrun. A specific emphasis was made to elucidate on the physical and social environment of Colwick parkrun, as well as probing the participants' attitudes and motives for attending parkrun. Participants self-reported their running status as 'competitive runner', 'recreational runner', 'club runner', 'regular runner', 'occasional runner', or 'non-runner', as well as identifying their frequency of attendance at parkrun. Taking our lead from the study conducted by Stevinson & Hickson (2013) subjective ratings of participants' perceptions of the impact of parkrun involvement were recorded using six outcomes (fitness, health, weight control, mental well-being, confidence for running, sense of community), rated on a five-point ordinal scale.

A total of 19 interviews were conducted (10 males and 9 females), with additional data collected through conversations with participants on an ad hoc basis. The sample was largely opportunistic, based upon access at appropriate times, and with the majority of interviews conducted *in situ* using a semi-structured interview guide, scheduled in advance directly before or after Colwick parkrun. Interviews lasted between 12 and 27 minutes, yielding valuable participant insights on their experiences of parkrun. The guide included a loose schedule of open-ended questions and probes around participants' motives for attending parkrun, the physical and social environment of parkrun, to identify the perceived benefits of taking part in parkrun whether as a runner or

volunteer, and any positive or negative outcomes or observations. All interviews were recorded electronically, and were transcribed verbatim, removing any personal information to preserve anonymity. Notes were also taken directly after each interview to enrich the analysis, with transcripts subsequently imported to Nvivo10.

Thematic analysis of transcribed audio recordings was undertaken to code the qualitative data to identify patterns (themes) and for describing and interpreting the meaning and importance of these (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). A six-phase model was followed in the analysis process (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). The first phase is familiarisation, involving repeated reading of the transcripts in order to begin identifying codes. The next three phases entailed organising codes into themes, reviewing and revising these themes, and developing a rich analysis of the data represented by these final themes. The final phase, as identified by Braun, Clarke, & Weate (2016) was concerned with the 'writing up', identifying illustrative extracts from the data, alongside an analytical narrative. The validity, or trustworthiness, was established through member checking, making sure that they represented the views of the people involved, and method triangulation (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Quantitative survey data was analysed through the use of SPSS to obtain descriptive statistics, frequencies and graphic representations of data. All data sources were then combined to provide insights to the experiences of participants and as a way of understanding Colwick parkrun as volunteer-led community event. Verbatim quotes have been used in the text and have been tagged by a number and the respondent's gender for readers to distinguish between interviewees.

### Results and themes of analysis

Participant characteristics are summarised in Figure 2, representing a broad sample based on gender, age, running status and frequency of attendance at parkrun. The largest proportion of the sample identified themselves as regular runners (59.1%) whereas 14.0% labelled themselves as either occasional runners or non-runners (6.8%). The majority of participants are unattached to a running club, with 12.3% identified as club runners. Comparison of participant characteristics

exhibits a marginally greater representation of female respondents (53.1%) whereas the largest proportion are aged 35-54 (55.3%) with 14.0% in the older age group (≥55 years). With regards frequency of attendance at parkrun, 54.0% attend three or more per month, 19.1% attend between 1-2 per month, and 26.8% less than one per month.

**Insert figure 2 here**

Figure 3 presents the responses to the survey question on what the participants thought was the most important aspects of parkrun. 'Getting exercise' (78%) was reported as the most significant characteristic, with the next three aspects chosen by the respondents as 'the social togetherness' (31%), 'having fun/enjoyment' (29%) and 'enhances well-being' (29%). These findings help to highlight that for those participants described in the study, parkrun has a primarily instrumental orientation.

**Insert figure 3 here**

Figure 4 summarises the percentage of participants perceiving a positive impact of their involvement in parkrun. These subjective ratings suggest that the majority of participants benefitted both physically in terms of fitness and health, and psychologically (mental well-being and confidence for running). In addition, the social aspect of parkrun (sense of community) was frequently reported as one of the positive outcomes. This echoes the findings of Stevinson & Hickson's (2013) study which suggests that the perceived impact of taking part in parkrun includes a mixture of physical, psychological and social benefits.

**Insert figure 4 here**

Based on the analysis of qualitative data, a number of themes emerged, suggesting that participating in Colwick parkrun 1) provided a leisure space that helped foster casual conversation, 2) promoted accessibility and inclusion, 3) created a sense of belonging and community, and 4) facilitated a shared experience of exercising together which can be both supportive and engender a sense of personal improvement and competition. Taken together these themes contributed to both initial attendance and sustained involvement. Figure 5 provides illustrative quotes from these four themes.

*Casual sociability*

For many respondents in the study, especially those that are regular attendees, Colwick parkrun acts as a temporary public space that is conducive for incidental and casual social interaction. These informal exchanges tended to arise from the activity itself – intermittent conversations on running-related topics - as well as everyday interactions. At Colwick parkrun it was observed that interaction with both running friends and complete strangers is not only possible, but highly probable, which helped create an inviting atmosphere. This feeling of congeniality is facilitated by participants sharing a number of common interests and experiences, making it easy for individuals to converse because they speak the same universal language. Thus, although participants may have few, if any, similar interests, running provides a mutual frame of reference. Conversations with strangers were easily obtained because "you immediately have something in common" (Interview 1, Female) whilst for some the social interaction took on a core purpose. As one respondent remarked, "without you actually realising it, the social aspects are really important. I'm very happy just coming down here on my own knowing that I'll know somebody, or even if I don't, you know it'll be a friendly place and you can engage in conversation with anyone because you are all here for the same reason" (Interview 4, Female). It seems reasonable to assume that the occasional, seemingly casual conversations between parkrunners may serve to sustain their continued participation. This appears to echo the work of Wiltshire & Stevinson (2018) who argue, in the context of parkrun, that even loose ties with relative strangers can be highly valued. As a further point of reflection, parallels can be drawn between the findings of this study with the work of Amin & Thrift (2002) who use the term 'light' sociality to refer to groups and individuals that come together momentarily around a particular purpose and then disperse again. This may in part be explained by the informal ties that membership of parkrun affords, as well as the number of attendees (on occasion totalling more than 200) which lessens the possibility of strong group bonds developing. Nevertheless, as Hitchings & Latham (2017) suggest, the casual sociality that may indirectly arise out of exercise should not be overlooked as it appears to represent a valued part of the participant experience.

**Insert figure 5 here**

*Accessibility and inclusion*

A second theme was the perceived accessibility and inclusivity of Colwick parkrun. This is perhaps unsurprising given that parkrun offers free, weekly running events that are explicitly marketed as being 'open to everyone' (Parkrun, 2017). A number of aspects relating to accessibility were referred to by the majority of participants, including the cost, convenient time, community setting, and the rolling opportunity to turn up when desired, without overt commitment or pressure to attend. Respondents remarked upon the diversity of participants with regard to gender, age, background, and running ability which in turn helped make parkrun feel welcoming to different sections of the community. This encouraged people to attend the first time, as well as helping them to feel relaxed and keen to return. As this respondent observed, "[Colwick] parkrun is friendly and non-threatening" (Interview 14, Male). Others commented on how novice or slower-paced runners were made to feel included: "there are a broad range of abilities. Not everyone is hell-bent on running as fast as they can" (Interview 12, Male) and "despite not being a very good runner I was made to feel very welcome" (Interview 3, Female). The 5km distance is noteworthy in this respect, in that it provides an inclusive entry-point that a vast majority can complete. These findings chime with a previous study by Stevinson, Wiltshire, & Hickson (2015) which found that parkrun is successful in eliminating some of the traditional barriers to physical activity for women and novice exercisers. Other examples, such as the acceptance and provision for individuals with visual impairments, as well as inviting groups of Nordic walkers, indicate a desire on behalf of the Colwick parkrun event organisers to reflect and attract non-traditional populations. Moreover, Wiltshire & Stevinson (2018) argue how by drawing on social capital in local communities, the parkrun model could help to reduce the financial and geographic barriers to physical activities that are often experienced in low socioeconomic groups. It is important to note however, that whilst parkrun is seen here to represent a community that is a thriving space of inclusion and diversity it is difficult, when scrutinised, to support such claims with empirical evidence. At present, relatively little

demographic data is captured when registering (an individual's age, sex, and postcode) and subsequently parkrun has no records regarding participants' ethnic background. As previously highlighted in the study by Stevinson & Hickson (2013) the numbers of ethnic minorities and people from lower socio-economic groups are disproportionately low, whilst Fullagar (2016) identified fewer parkrunners from non-white British backgrounds even in areas of high ethnic diversity. There needs to be an additional note of caution with regard potentially over-stating the assumed friendliness and accessible nature of parkrun, with a number of participants in the study voicing their apprehension in attending the first time (Figure 6). In the majority of instances respondents' participation was facilitated through existing social ties, accompanied by a friend, partner or family member, and when probed expressed some reservations over actually whether as a newcomer they would have attended parkrun alone. This begs the question why is it the case that some feel welcomed and included, when others feel anxious about attending, as well as what parkrun as an organisation can do to address some of these preconceptions? As one attendee reflected "the biggest hurdle for parkrun is getting someone cold over that initial fence and into parkrun. I was a bit nervous the first time. I thought they'd be two hundred quality athletes. But everyone was out to enjoy themselves" (Interview 13, Male). Another conceded, "you could feel isolated if you came on your own" (Interview 8, Female). These extracts suggest that in spite of the inclusive ethos that is overtly promoted by parkrun and through 'word of mouth', first-timers may still harbour reservations about attending. That said, once individuals are able to overcome any initial anxieties or perceived cliques, their attendance is likely to be sustained, as well as encouraging others.

*Belonging and community*

A sense of community and affiliation with parkrun was another recurrent theme that emerged from the data. As one respondent noted, "the parkrun community is like a village where everyone knows one another. You look out for one another, and support each other" (Interview 7, Female). Another mentioned, "I attend not because it's a run, but because it's a community" (Interview 5, Female).  This hints at Colwick parkrun providing more than just a temporary leisure space for

casual social interaction or to merely take part in running. It represents a social world, which despite having no formal membership, provides participants with a sense of belonging to a wider social group ('the parkrun family'), a place within that environment, and the subsequent opportunity to use their attachment to the group to enhance feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Green & Jones, 2005). What became evident from the qualitative data was the sense of belonging and identity that parkrun fosters, which blurred into other aspects of individuals' social lives. For many respondents parkrun has become habitual, a regular form of exercise that is embedded within the weekend schedule, with some commenting on how they would seek out the local parkrun when away on holiday or visiting family and friends.

The data directs us to the assertion that membership of the parkrun network facilitates both the development and confirmation of a recreational running identity. This is demonstrated through a number of participant practices including intergroup behaviour, displays of subcultural capital (including dress and language), as well as the benefits that the association brings. The findings of this study support the idea that parkrunners belong to an identifiable group with its own norms, values, behaviours and language, and that over time and with repeated attendance, an individual's commitment and sense of attachment to the activity should increase (Green & Jones, 2005). Echoing the suggestion of Shipway and Jones (2007) attendees at Colwick parkrun would accentuate their membership through wearing clothing that clearly identifies them as runners, most notably t-shirts containing logos or insignia demonstrating involvement in previous running events as a marker of pride in their experience or as a starting point for conversation. Much of this apparel, which includes running club vests and milestone parkrun t-shirts, act as a 'badge of honour', representing the possession of subcultural capital to others to demonstrate their identity as a (park)runner. Other examples include the pre and post-race routines that some participants adopted, which might appear alien to those outside of the parkrun community.

The sense of commitment evidenced draws comparisons with the study by Hitchings & Latham (2016) on casual runners living in London. They found that the runners weren't explicitly involved in an ongoing and evolving running 'career' with a coherent narrative arch, but for them

the activity represented an enduring physical activity that they wished to maintain. Whilst habitual, as with the majority of parkrunners described in the present study, for these respondents they were uninterested in forms of running that would necessitate greater levels of commitment and formality (for example, becoming a member of a running club). Similarly, Stevinson, Wiltshire, & Hickson (2015) observed that attendance at parkrun represents a more autonomous commitment than conventional exercise opportunities that are based on membership or subscription fees, or reliance on team members attending. In our study it is parkrun's looser ties, with no overt pressure to attend, that is an important component that has contributed to its success.

*Exercising and competing with others*

The notion of a shared communal experience is also central to understanding the attraction of parkrun, with some respondents acknowledging the value of the collective group for emotional support. The data points to a number of attendees' sustained participation because their motivation and enjoyment are maintained, and potentially increased, by exercising around others, even if they don't talk with them. As this respondent noted, "running with others is a massive motivation … I don't think I would run 5km every week if I didn't have a group like this to run with" (Interview 8, Female). Another remarked, "one of the initial aspects that attracted me to parkrun was the fact that you are running with other people" (Interview 9, Female). The data shares similarities with Barnfield (2016) who noted that amongst respondents in his study, the conviviality of running with others, and mixing with people of different abilities and body types, was an important aspect for thinking about health practice maintenance. Hitchings & Latham (2016) also suggest that the presence of others affords a range of socialities that variously assist runners to remain on task, provide distractions, and offer a sense of being involved in a communal activity. Similarly, Stevinson, Wiltshire, & Hickson (2015) identify a key characteristic of parkrun to be a supportive social environment, which engenders an additional desire to attend beyond health and fitness goals. The data also echoes the work of Wiltshire, Fullagar, & Stevinson (2017) who highlight the community aspect of parkrun, which allows participants to experience a

collective sense of responsibility. In this sense, parkrun offers an experience of running together that both reflects and challenges traditional notions of running as being primarily about competition. And whilst participants acknowledge there is no pressure or expectation for effort or performance level – encapsulated by parkrun's 'a run and not a race' strapline – for a number of respondent's competition was an important stimulus for continued participation. For example, a number of parkrunners in the study mentioned they were motivated by an individual goal, driven by a target time or finishing position, or celebrating sustained attendance over a period of time with the award of a milestone t-shirt. As this respondent remarked, "I think what is really clever about parkrun is the timed element. I wouldn't consider myself to be massively competitive, but my god do I wait for that timed text to come through and then try to weave it into every conversation over the weekend" (Interview 8, Female).

Whilst the narrative illustrates the extent to which self-regulated competition is a potential driver for repeat attendance, it is interesting that a number of respondents viewed parkrun in far more favourable terms than their perception or experience of running clubs (Figure 7). Others meanwhile remarked upon the different type of access than membership of a running club enables, drawn to the looser ties that parkrun affords.

### Parkrun as a 'Third Place' for shared leisure

In this section, the conceptual lens of Oldenburg's (1999) 'third place' is introduced and considered in light of the case study on Colwick parkrun, providing an additional layer to the analysis. The term was coined by urban sociologist, Ray Oldenburg (1999) to describe public places where people could gather voluntarily, informally and habitually for social interaction to encourage citizen involvement and to help foster a sense of belonging. His analysis, along with the work of Putnam (2000), was a major contribution to the assessment of the decline of social capital in America, drawing attention to the need for opportunities and places for individuals to (re)connect with community, where informal affiliation and serendipitous encounters are facilitated. They are defined as accessible spaces, located away and distinguishable from the home

(first place) and work (second place). Oldenburg's portrayal of a third place infers that a number of essential characteristics are evident, which taken together help to explain their potential civic and community-building functions. These are neutral, welcoming spaces, which serve to treat all guests equally so that individuals are able to drift in and out as they please, in which none are encumbered to play the role of host (Oldenburg, 1999). As Hawkins & Ryan (2013) observe, it is a different type of access than membership of a club enables as the bonds are looser and the level of commitment is not as evident. By their nature, third places can be levellers, providing an inclusive space that is accessible to all and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion (Oldenburg, 1999). Within these places, conversation is the primary activity, mediating casual and informal interaction amongst a diverse mix of people, thus expanding one's social network (Oldenburg, 1999). It is asserted that third places serve the community best to the extent that they are accessible, convenient and local. The character of a third place is determined by its 'regulars' whose incidental interactions help to create a playful ambiance and foster a desire to return to recapture the experience (Oldenburg, 1999). Third places are generally taken for granted, and as such tend to have a low profile. An additional characteristic is that third places represent a 'home away from home' and whilst a demonstrably different setting from home, the third place creates a congenial and restorative environment, which offers psychological comfort, warmth, and mutual support (Oldenburg, 1999).

Whilst the notion of third place has been variously applied to a range of cultural and leisure contexts, it has yet to be extensively applied to sporting activities, and even less so to running where there is a dearth of empirical evidence to support or refute the concept. Leisure settings such as curling clubs, sports stadiums, music clubs, festivals and arts venues, have been examined as third places (Mair, 2009; Suny, 1993; Jacke, 2009; Hawkins & Ryan, 2013; Slater & Koo, 2010). Such places are frequently presented as informal gathering spaces where individuals can interact with family, friends, or community members. Mair (2009) provides a narrative account of curling clubs in rural Canada, emphasising their 'homely' and welcoming atmosphere, as well as the role membership plays in offering informal networks of social support. Of particular interest to this

paper is Shipway (2012) whose work draws upon third place literature to explore the social world of distance runners, demonstrating how running events offer participants an opportunity for escape, as well as fostering a sense of camaraderie.

The qualitative data from the present study illustrates the extent to which Oldenburg's (1999) third place dimensions are evident at Colwick parkrun. It could be argued that parkrun acts as a social leveller on neutral ground where, in the main, individuals gather to participate as equals and the regulars are welcoming, including first timers. Sociability, especially informal conversation and sharing running stories, as noted above are a central feature. Repeated visits to Colwick parkrun moved the running experience toward a social activity and a third place rather than simply a running event. Oldenburg & Brissett's (1982) notion of meeting a friend of a friend emerged as a recurring theme in the data, with a number of participants citing their enjoyment in these casual one-off encounters and chance meetings, as well as having forged longer lasting friendships with fellow parkrunners. As such Colwick parkrun could be described as a re-bonding space. Third places are a conduit to do this.

It is worth noting that Oldenburg's (1999) conceptualisation of accessibility as a characterisation of third places is markedly different from the notion explored here. His discussion on the ease of access focused on the long hours of third places and their close proximity to their patrons. In the context of parkrun, accessibility is intertwined with notions of social inclusion, where the ethos of parkrun is on minimising the barriers to participation, as well as the inexpensive nature of the activity. An alternate interpretation relates to the weekly, community-based nature of parkrun. The accessibility criterion in third place theory is one, broadly speaking, that has been previously explored in extant leisure and running-related literature. For example, Mair (2009) describes how the curling clubs in rural Canada sought to change their associations from exclusive, elite spaces to more open, equitable spaces that are welcoming to all members of the community. According to Oldenburg (1999) the notion of regulars is an important one, dominating traditional third places, and contributing to their atmosphere and character. In the context of Colwick parkrun 'regulars' – those who frequently show up, and in some cases religiously - play a valuable

role in setting the tone, mood and manner - helping to illustrate how volunteerism, long-term commitment and a sense of ownership underpin the event's character and foundations.

It is, arguably, the low profile dimension of third places where Colwick parkrun diverges most markedly from the extant literature. Third places are characterised as being both visually plain and unimpressive, but also typically low profile in the minds of those who frequent them, such that they are viewed as ordinary and taken for granted. In contrast, the narrative exemplifies an evangelism towards parkrun, with a number of respondents expressing a desire for a greater presence and recognition within the local community, in some cases actively encouraging work colleagues, friends and family members to join parkrun. Similarly, parkrun does not have a low profile while it is in operation, regularly attracting participants en masse to converge at a predetermined point shortly before 9am on a Saturday morning. In addition, parkrun boasts a significant online presence. According to parkrun UK's *2016 Run Report*, more than one million people receive parkrun's weekly e-mail newsletter in the UK. On social media, every Saturday morning #parkrun is a trending topic on Twitter, whilst on the parkrun Facebook page in the UK there were 16.5 million impressions, not including more than 500 additional event-specific Facebook pages. In contrast, its physical presence is a distinctly temporal one. The temporality of parkun offers another notable departure from Oldenburg's conceptualisation of the third place, in that the examples cited in the existing literature tend to concern more lasting spaces, which have a permanent physical presence. As such the temporal and fleeting nature of a mass-running event makes parkrun an interesting phenomenon to conceptualise using the third place lens. In many ways, reflecting on the data gathered and the qualitative insights gained, our attention is focused more on the relationships between people in creating a shared leisure space, particularly the idea of atmosphere and conviviality, rather than on the physical space in which the event takes place. Moreover, parkrun appears to impact very little on changing the physical layout of the place, unlike other event spaces such as urban city marathons or festivals.

### Conclusion

Using a mixed method approach, this research studied participants at Colwick parkrun, attempting to make sense of this community-based physical activity event in terms of the meanings people attach to this. Through an analysis of the personal accounts of parkrunners, this approach helps us to understand these experiences, and how a combination of features contributes to not only encouraging initial participation, but facilitating sustained involvement. Accordingly, whilst it is important that we don't lose sight of the instrumental health benefits that accrue from exercise, the findings serve to counter the work of Hitchings and Latham (2016) in drawing our attention to the value participants place on the social features in the parkrun experience. Furthermore, if community-based mass-running events fulfil a number of characteristics of the third place as articulated by Oldenburg (1999) then the potential implications are noteworthy in terms of the wider social benefits that these features may combine to produce. When reflecting upon the implications of this study for public health initiatives as well as formal institutions that are responsible for growing more opportunities for people to experience running (for example, England Athletics) it is important to consider the key design characteristics of parkrun which serve to minimise barriers and help individuals take part in exercise. As Pringle & Pickering (2015) note, parkruns are regular, so can be inbuilt into people's busy routines, local and take place in familiar natural environments. Whilst the data points to health and fitness benefits being important in facilitating initial engagement, social support, cohesion and helping others have also been reported as being influential in facilitating continued involvement (Stevinson, Wiltshire, & Hickson, 2015). As such the findings of the present study hold value to the extent that the wider social context of the third place appears to be an important contributor to making parkrun a meaningful leisure activity, and in turn is an area which merits further investigation. Seeking a richer understanding of the more intangible benefits of parkrun and how to leverage these is important for event organisers, as well as identifying strategies to better engage with those who experience greater health inequalities and a lack of physical activity (for example, those of a lower socioeconomic status, Black and Minority Ethnic groups, and people with disabilities).

That said, there are obvious limitations to this study. Whilst qualitative research, in providing rich insights to the experiences of participants, can be seen as a positive, conversely it is also a principal weakness, risking what Silverman (2006) terms 'anecdotalism'. In turn the decision to focus on a single site provides obvious limitations with regards to its generalisability. A third limitation relates to the lack of negative experiences, with all participants reporting no adverse experiences or negative perceptions of Colwick parkrun. Upon further probing, a couple of individuals offered examples of the growth in the popularity of parkrun, citing tensions that may arise between different groups of park users, as well as the impact of parkrun on them and Colwick County Park. This suggests that the individuals volunteering to be interviewed (all of whom were regulars) did not include those for whom parkrun may have held negative connotations or been demotivating. In addition, as other authors have noted, specific studies aimed at elucidating what criteria third places should be analysed through are paramount to understanding new and/or emerging third places. As Yuen & Johnson (2016) assert, in order to develop a more complex understanding of third places we need to move beyond Oldenburg's idealised notion of public places.

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