

Research article

Self-expressiveness and goal achievement during times of restricted marathon participation

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ABSTRACT

Marathon running has been growing steadily as an activity of serious leisure, and offers participants opportunities to enhance their eudaimonic consumption experiences. This study aimed to explore how the four dimensions of self-expressiveness (perceived self-realisation potential, perceived effort, perceived challenge, and perceived importance) and goal achievement, operationalised through three goal types (process, performance, and outcome), feature as motivators. The sample involved marathon runners before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using netnography, user-generated content was gathered from an online marathon running community on Facebook over five months, covering different levels of COVID-19 sport participation restrictions. Based on deductive thematic analysis, the findings indicate that all four dimensions of self-expressiveness were upheld to some extent throughout the different phases, while the achievement of outcome goals featured most prominently. Event organisers and marketers should develop functional benefits that drive self-expressions to fulfil the needs for self-identity and goal achievement, irrespective of the nature of the event. This study contributes to the leisure, sport, and consumer well-being literature by shedding light on marathon events, especially during times of restriction, and how these events have an impact on goal achievement.

KEYWORDS

Eudaimonia; goal achievement; marathon; netnography; self-expressiveness

Introduction

Across the globe, serious leisure activities such as endurance sports have gained significant popularity, with running being the largest segment (Finnegan et al., 2020; Kumari et al., 2025). This popularity aligns with the shift among individuals to seek not only pleasure and fun, but also eudaimonic well-being through consumption experiences (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; McEwan et al., 2020; Voigt et al., 2010). The unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19 for physical and psychological well-being have further strengthened the significance of promoting eudaimonic well-being (Yang et al., 2023). Research has explored eudaimonic well-being in team sports activities (Hallmann et al., 2021), adventure sports (Mackenzie et al., 2023), and participatory sporting events such as road cycling (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020) and trail running (McEwan et al., 2020). However, eudaimonic well-being has attracted limited attention in the sport consumer literature (White & Yu, 2019). Although eudaimonic well-being has been considered in cross-country running and half-marathon events (Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020), marathon running events have not been explored. In this regard, the current study focuses on the Comrades Marathon event, one of the world's largest marathon events, which is hosted in South Africa. Pursuing marathon running as a serious leisure activity allows individuals to express themselves through a combination of special skills, knowledge, and experience (McEwan et al., 2020). Such self-defining activities enhance eudaimonic well-being (Sirgy et al., 2016) and provide opportunities for self-expressiveness (Helsen et al., 2022; Waterman, 2011). Self-expression provides functional benefits that result from cognitively-driven self-expressions that are intended to fulfil the individual's need to create and maintain a self-identity, and

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hedonic benefits such as the fun and pleasure that result from self-expression (Morgan & Townsend, 2022). What is unknown to date is whether the dimensions of self-expressiveness are preserved when marathon participation is restricted. Thus, this study closes this gap to discover the role of self-expressiveness in the context of restricted participation in sport events. The following research question is posed: How has self-expression featured as a motivator for event participation among marathon runners to participate before and during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions?

Coinciding with the need for self-expression, goal achievement contributes to self-realisation through attaining specific desired outcomes (Locke & Latham, 2002). When a goal is important to an individual, that goal will be pursued despite initial failures to achieve the goal (Locke & Latham, 2002). Goal achievement encompasses various types of goals, such as process goals, performance goals, and outcome goals. The extent of one's efforts to achieve the goals will partially depend on the perceived feasibility and desirability of the goal's outcomes (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). This study fills a second gap by using user-generated content (UGC) from an online marathon running community platform to determine the extent to which different goal types are realised by marathon runners during restricted marathon participation. A second research question is posed: How has goal achievement been realised through marathon running before and then during three restricted COVID-19 pandemic phases? The COVID-19 context for the Comrades Marathon event has provided a unique opportunity to study the two research questions owing to the contextual factors at play. This study contributes to the literature on self-expressiveness and goal achievement in marathon running events before and during times of event participation restrictions. Understanding the change in motivations of sport participants is crucial not only to supporting ongoing eudaimonic well-being, but also to the sustainability of the industry.

Literature review

Theoretical foundation – Eudaimonistic identity theory and achievement goal theory

The key motivational constructs for this study are rooted in eudaimonistic identity theory and achievement goal theory. The eudaimonistic identity theory posits that “the goal of human functioning is to live in a manner consistent with one's true self”, and is reflected in involvement in activities that defines one's identity (Waterman et al., 2008: 42). Marathon events as self-defining activities provide opportunities for individuals to express themselves. In this context, Sirgy et al. (2016) noted that self-expressiveness is the extent to which runners feel that their self-concept is increased through participation in marathons (Sirgy et al., 2016). Self-expression provides both hedonic and utilitarian benefits. Hedonic benefits make consumption experiences more enjoyable owing to one's self-expression (Morgan & Townsend, 2022), while utilitarian benefits fulfil an individual's need to develop a self-identity owing to cognitively driven self-expressions. For the purpose of this study, four dimensions of self-expressiveness are regarded as identified in leisure activities, namely perceived effort, perceived self-realisation potential, perceived importance, and perceived challenge (Bosnjak et al., 2016; Waterman, 2011). Self-expression is strengthened through the achievement of personal goals (Mba et al., 2025; Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2018); thus, the achievement goal theory of Nicholls (1984) is relevant, since it focuses on the motivations of individuals to show their competence or achievement in marathon running. Goal achievement includes performance (achieving competence), performance avoidance (avoiding incompetence), and mastery (attaining the requirements of a task or surpassing a self-determined standard) (Senko, 2016). For this study, three goals are considered. First, process goals are needed actions that are within the control of the individual. Second, performance goals reflect the personal standards of the individual and can be controlled to a large extent. Finally, outcome goals are about winning or participating but are not within the full control of the individual (Locke & Latham, 2002). Like self-expressiveness, challenging goals and complex tasks are more motivational, as they allow for personal development and perseverance. Goals must also be perceived as important in order to generate commitment; such perceived importance in turn allows for self-expression (Mba et al., 2025; Vansteenkiste et al., 2014).

Dimensions of self-expressiveness and goal achievement in marathon running

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that guides the study, based on the literature, depicting the dimensions of self-expressiveness and goal achievement, operationalised through three corresponding goal types.

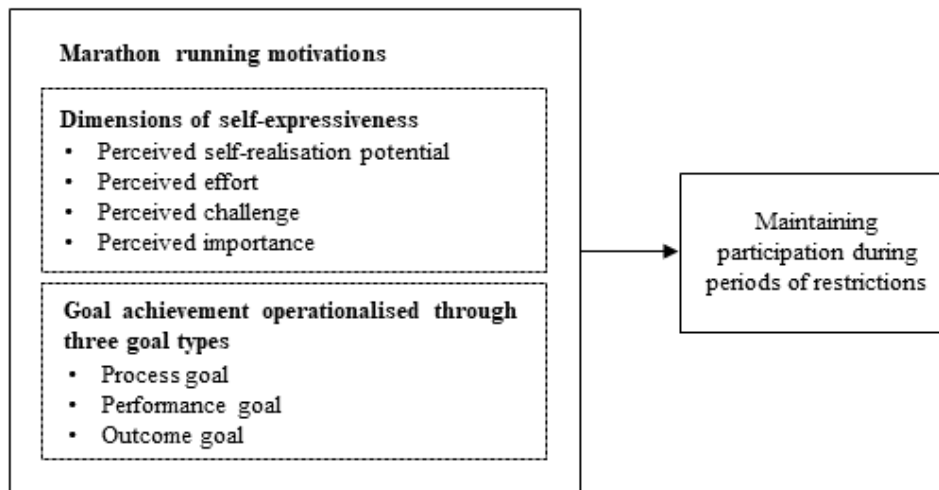


Figure 1. Conceptual framework guiding the investigation

Perceived self-realisation potential

Perceived self-realisation potential can predict self-expressiveness from participation in event experiences (Sirgy et al., 2016), and is a process that narrows the disparity between one's actual self and one's ideal self (Bosnjak et al., 2016). Self-realisation thus helps to shape an individual's identity (Løvoll, 2019), which can be achieved through marathon running participation, as it allows for goal achievement (Locke & Latham, 2002; Sirgy et al., 2016). Successfully achieving one's goals leads to continued participation, highlighting the importance for marathon organisers of understanding the role of goal achievement in a sport context (Hyun & Jordan, 2020).

Perceived effort

Participation in an activity enhances self-expressiveness if substantial effort is needed to achieve one's goals (Bosnjak et al., 2016). This means that effort in respect of time, energy, and/or money is needed to strengthen a person's identity in serious leisure activities (Mba et al., 2025; Qiu et al., 2020). Also, the amount of effort exerted is linked to the difficulty of the goal and the performance level (Locke & Latham, 2002). Serious leisure runners often persist in their efforts to reach their goals, even when faced with challenges (Voigt et al., 2010).

Perceived challenge

Among those engaged in serious leisure, self-expressiveness is apparent when the activity is perceived to be challenging (Bosnjak et al., 2016; Waterman, 2011), such as marathon running events that typically involve some extremes in respect of strength, endurance, and level of competition (Hyun & Jordan, 2020). A study by Bosnjak et al. (2016) indicated that activities should be challenging enough to be engaging, but not seem impossible to achieve. The Comrades Marathon in South Africa is known as the ultimate human race, covering about 90 kilometres (Comrades Marathon Association, 2020). The perceived challenge of this event would provide opportunities for runners to experience self-expression.

Perceived importance of the activity

Another predictor of self-expressiveness in leisure sports is the perceived importance of the event, which influences individuals' motivation to participate in it (Bosnjak et al., 2016; McEwan et al., 2020). When a goal is important to an individual, they will persist despite failures to achieve the outcome goal (in this case, to complete the marathon) (Locke & Latham, 2002). Thus, important events ensure that participants will regulate their own goals (Hyun & Jordan, 2020), but also allow for a connection with the activity (in this case, the marathon event) and with the service provider of this event (Behnam et al., 2021).

Methods

Study setting and sampling

The Comrades Marathon in South Africa is one of the world's largest and oldest marathon events, and serves as the backdrop for this study. COVID-19 resulted in the first cancellation of the event since World War II, even though about 2,500 entries from international participants and 25,000 from South African participants had been received for the event. Several sport participation restrictions were imposed in South Africa during

COVID-19. First, all events were cancelled for 30 days; this was followed by a ban on outdoor exercise, and eventually restricted outdoor exercise was allowed. These restrictions led to an increase in the use of social media (Morgan & Townsend, 2022), as many Comrades participants relied on these platforms to remain informed and to maintain connections with others in an effort to cope with the pandemic. This study applied netnography as a way to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of marathon runners by assessing their UGC on the ‘Comrades Marathon 2020 Down Run’ private Facebook community group. With over 23,000 Facebook members at the time of the study, this group was suitable for data collection. The study collected data on self-expressiveness and goal achievement over a five-month period in the first half of 2020. The period before the onset of COVID-19 restrictions (1 January – 16 March 2020) provided data on the extent to which self-expressiveness and goal achievement feature as participation motivations among marathon runners under ‘normal’ circumstances. Three subsequent phases of COVID-19 restrictions (17–26 March, 27 March – 29 April, 1–30 May) provided data on changes in the extent to which runners maintained their needs for self-expressiveness and goal achievement, given the varied restrictions on events and the social-distancing regulations that were imposed in South Africa.

Data collection

The study applied netnography for data collection, as this method involves observing or participating in discussions on public online forums, providing valuable access to consumer conversations that offer a faster, simpler, and cost-effective alternative to traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2015). For this purpose, the Facebook community group allowed the researchers to study the culture of marathon runners through narrative analyses of their online text-based conversations (i.e., UGC) for thematic analysis. Kozinets’ (2015) netnography procedure was applied in a marathon running context, which entailed three steps. First, the online community was identified, namely the ‘Comrades Marathon 2020 Down Run’ Facebook community. Second, the institutional Ethics Committee provided ethical clearance for the study (approval EMS034/20). This study followed a passive, covert approach in which the researchers did not intervene in the naturally occurring or ongoing discussions, although participants were informed of the research via the online community, with an option to ‘opt out’ if they chose not to be involved. Third, data were collected from UGC over four defined periods, starting with conversations a few weeks before the onset of COVID-19 restrictions by ‘scrolling down’ to read previous conversations. Subsequent phases were introduced to represent the varying levels of sport restrictions imposed by the South African government during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Figure 2 outlines the phases examined in the study. All text-based conversational posts were captured and cleaned by removing any content regarded as irrelevant (i.e., outside the scope of the research question), such as news articles from external sources and celebrity news. This resulted in a final document comprising 166,455 words.

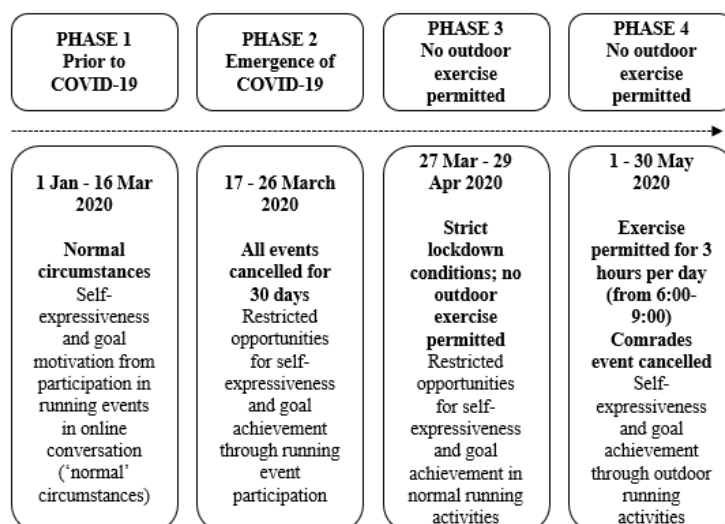


Figure 2. Phases before and during COVID-19

Data analysis and reliability

A deductive theory-based thematic analysis was used to identify text-based statements related to the four dimensions of self-expressiveness and goal achievement identified in the literature review. In a deductive thematic analysis, the data are read, and content related to the themes (repeated patterns of meaning) is generated from the data using a pre-existing theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this context, the first theme

was self-expressiveness, with four corresponding dimensions as sub-themes. The second theme was goal achievement, with three corresponding goal types as sub-themes. To perform deductive thematic analysis, the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data in each phase, and initial codes were generated to represent the different themes. Second, the coded data extracts were sorted and collated into groups of potentially relevant and related codes. Thereafter, the validity of the individual code groups was verified through inter-coder reliability. Three rounds of reliability checks were conducted, yielding similar results, thus indicating acceptable inter-coder reliability, which exceeded the conventional benchmark of 80 per cent (Belur et al., 2021). Fourth, the specifics of each theme were finalised on the basis of the constituent codes, and an overall picture was formed of how the theme occurred in the phase. Last, each theme was described using selected illustrative text and placed in its theoretical context.

Findings

Figure 3 provides an overview of the self-expressiveness dimensions together with the associated goals for each that were prevalent during the study's phases.

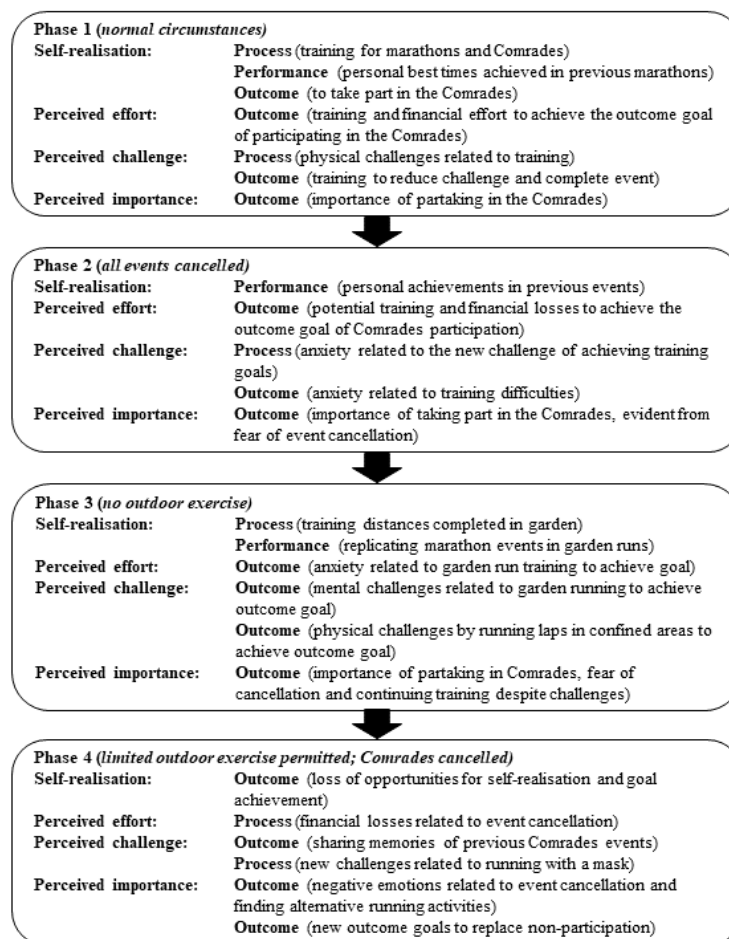


Figure 3. Overview of self-expressiveness and goal types in the four phases

Phase 1: Before COVID-19

Before COVID-19 (Phase 1), the Comrades was seen as an event for *self-realisation*, as seen in the conversations on training targets and training regimes. To achieve their self-realisation potential for the upcoming marathon, individuals focused on goal achievement through all three goal types. Process goals focused on training – for example, the number of kilometres targeted per month. Performance goals focused mainly on improving personal best times. Finally, several outcome goals were outlined, such as finishing the Comrades Marathon or targeting a specific medal category. These goals are highlighted by the following statements: “... 157 km missed my target this month with 43 km”, and “... I am aiming to do 360 km in February” (process goal); “... Last year I ran 5:35:00 and obtained a G seeding for the start. My target now is 5:14:59 to start the race in an F seeding” (performance goal); and “... The only things I want to achieve in 2020 is to earn a comrades marathon cap and medal” (outcome goal).

Engaging in an activity that requires significant effort to reach important goals often leads to greater self-expression through involvement in that activity (Bosnjak et al., 2016; Voigt et al., 2010). Participants in the Comrades event indicated that their *perceived effort* was linked to the training they had to do, as well as the financial expenses incurred to prepare for the event. These efforts were related to the outcome goals of Comrades participation. The monthly distance completed and the frequent injuries resulting from running long distances were clear indicators of the training effort required to reach the desired outcome. In respect of financial effort, there were remarks about the rising costs of entry fees for qualifying races, along with expenses for travel and accommodation. Here are examples: "... *December collection 262 km for the 2020 Down Run*" (training effort, outcome goal); and "... *Always do I race to qualify and train hard. Don't attend races because they [are] expensive for nothing*" (financial effort, outcome goal). When individuals participating in leisure activities view the task as challenging, they tend to express themselves more (Bosnjak et al., 2016). The anticipated physical discomfort and pain from event participation (*perceived challenge*) were clearly recognised as a concern, and the issue of training needed for this challenge relates to the process goal. This reflects the concept of serious leisure theory, in which people frequently encounter tiredness and discomfort while engaging in serious leisure pursuits. However, these runners were still willing to endure these challenges to achieve their outcome goals, as noted by Scott et al. (2017), who state that "painful extraordinary experiences operate as regenerative escapes from the self". The challenge of the event was highlighted by the frequent references to the number of Comrades Marathon individuals started versus those who had successfully completed it, confirming the challenge of achieving this outcome goal. Sample statements of event challenges include: "... *This will probably be the most painful thing you have ever done. It's not easy, it was never meant to be*" (process goal); and "... *done 15 Comrades but only finished 11 Comrades*" (outcome goal). Finally, the *perceived importance* of participation in the Comrades Marathon event was clear, as individuals shared this outcome goal with others. Before COVID-19 (Phase 1), the significance of taking part in the Comrades Marathon was reflected in the sacrifices that participants were prepared to make, their repeated involvement, and their plans to join the event in the future. Typical statements include: "... *Your family must realize all parties/holidays will be determined by your racing and training program*" (outcome goal); and "... *Completed my 20th in 2019 – 20 consecutive and still going!*" (outcome goal)

Phase 2: COVID-19 emergence

In the second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals exhibited *self-realisation* by frequently highlighting their achievements and performance goals from previous marathon participation; for example: "... *Township Marathon where I achieved my personal best of 3:59:36*" (performance goal); and "... *Deloitte Challenge is where I achieved my New Personal Best*" (performance goal). Perceived effort to achieve outcome goals was again apparent in the amount of training and financial investment made for the forthcoming event (with event participation being the outcome goal); for example: "... *we're all holding on to hope that this year's Comrades will take place on 14 June. We have put in hours of training and made enormous sacrifices*" (training effort, outcome goal); and "... *Comrades should make their decision ASAP! Because many of us made flight and accommodation bookings; many of us booked long time ago*" (financial effort, outcome goal). Training-related aspects were mentioned and related to the *perceived challenge*. Bosnjak et al. (2016) reported that, by engaging in proper marathon training, individuals can lower its perceived difficulty and enhance their focus on process goals. The anxiety of being unable to participate in running events as an important part of training regimes was notable in the UGC during this phase, and it affected outcome goals to complete the Comrades Marathon. The following statement illustrates the importance of training to complete this challenge: "... *You know what I like about Comrades Marathon, if you didn't train, you can't finish the race*" (process and outcome goals). The cancellation of all sporting events highlighted the *importance of participating in events* as an outcome goal. There were clear signs of anxiety about the possibility of the event being called off, yet there was also optimism that it might still proceed. The following are examples of statements that emphasise the importance of the event: "... *Now fearing for Comrades 2020 (cancellation)*" (outcome goal); and "... *I am hopeful and waiting for Big C to go ahead*" (outcome goal).

Phase 3: No outdoor exercise activities permitted

During the lockdown (Phase 3) there was a pronounced rise in the desire for *self-realisation*, leading individuals to establish various running objectives within the confines of their own gardens. Performance goals for garden running related to setting specific distances to be achieved by running laps in backyard areas, in driveways, and even on balconies. Some individuals even replicated real marathon events that would have taken place on the day – for example, the popular Two Oceans and Loskop marathon events that take place annually in South Africa – and in so doing, focused on process goals. By introducing new garden

running challenges, runners inspired one another, creating a shared purpose and commitment to achieving their goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). This is highlighted by the following statements: "... 42.2 km well done. Our first backyard marathon winner" (process goal); and "... I managed 50 km and a few meters in time of 7 hours and 1 minute, missing the new Two Oceans Marathon cut off with 7 odd kilometres ... I ran 1173 times around the house" (process and performance goal). The emphasis on *perceived effort* in training remained significant, resulting in runners' training activities in gardens; this underscores the participation in the Comrades Marathon event as an outcome goal – for example: "... as a novice, this is the hardest I have trained in my life, but it is what it is" (outcome goal).

During times when outdoor exercise was not allowed, self-expressiveness was seen in the mental and physical *challenges* created through 'garden running' or running in confined areas in order to support the outcome goals of future Comrades Marathon event participation. Here is an example:

"... I did this new route ... around my house in my yard. It is as challenging as the monster race. Just this one was more challenging for the mind than it was on the body" ('new' outcome goal). The perceived importance of event participation to achieve outcome goals was again prominent in the fear of an impending cancellation. These are sample statements: "... there's no life without comrades" (outcome goal); and "... Let's just console ourselves guys! We will not run on 14th June 2020! Painful but very true" (outcome goal).

Phase 4: Outdoor exercise permitted and Comrades Marathon 2020 event cancelled

During the lockdown (Phase 4) there was a lack of opportunity for self-realisation owing to the cancellation of the Comrades Marathon, which led to the inability to achieve set outcome goals. Here is an example: "... lots of goals and dreams shattered with this decision" (outcome goal). The cancellation of the event led to substantial financial setbacks, especially concerning the fees for entry. These losses related to the *perceived effort* to prepare for the marathon, and affected the process goals in that payment was part of the process needed for Comrades Marathon participation. Below is an example from the online conversation of the financial losses: "... This is our hard-earned money and we also spent a lot preparing for it" (process goal). Following the cancellation of the event, individuals were allowed to run for three hours each day. During this time, online discussions were linked to the physical and mental challenges (*perceived challenges*) faced in past Comrades Marathon experiences, reinforcing the outcome goals of runners. Perceived challenges were also related to COVID-19-related experiences, such as having to wear a mask when running, which was linked to a process goal of doing what is needed to continue to run. Here follow statements that outline some of the mental and physical challenges that were mentioned: "... Down run is only easy on your mind but brutal to the body. The 'uprun' is forgiving on the body but brutal on the mind!" (previous experiences of the challenge, outcome goal); and "... but to run with a mask is so difficult" (process goal).

Perceived importance was reflected in whether people participated in the event, how the event was remembered, and the nostalgia that was associated with it. When the Comrades Marathon event was cancelled, the significance of participation was highlighted, confirming the importance of goal achievement. Some individuals dismissed the previously mentioned financial commitment in support of having the chance to participate again. Also, plans were being made for how they were going to observe the Comrades Marathon event with special activities on 'race day', turning their focus to process goals. Below are a few sample statements: "... you know it's like missing the whole season of running if you miss comrades" (outcome goal); "... Feeling bad, there are no words to describe the feeling. An empty feeling of nothingness into eternity. It matters not who says what" (outcome goal); "... I will be watching a Comrades Marathon from another year" ('new' outcome); and "... I will be doing 90 km training to honour the day" ('new' outcome goal). Finally, feelings of nostalgia emerged, leading to reflections on what would be missed most in not running the Comrades Marathon. Interestingly, goal achievement became less important when all their goals (process, performance, and outcome) were unattainable, with a shift in focus to longing for or thinking fondly of previous Comrades Marathon running experiences. Here is an example: "... I am going to miss watching the last cut-off at the stadium. Screaming and encouraging your fellow comrade is truly something special."

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to assess how self-expression and goal achievement were realised through marathon running before and during the different phases of restricted participation. The conceptual framework suggests that activities such as marathon running provide opportunities for self-expressiveness. In relation to the first research question, the findings indicated that marathon running provided participants with opportunities to express themselves through perceived self-realisation potential, effort, challenge, and underlined the importance of event participation despite restricted opportunities for participation. The

findings also supported the second research question, showing that goal achievement varies with different levels of sport participation restrictions.

Self-expressiveness from marathon participation

Perceived self-realisation: The UGC showed that self-realisation was expressed primarily through training targets and performance (whether in an actual race or through garden running), except during the final phase. During Phase 3, when no outdoor activities were permitted, online conversations highlighted a growing desire for self-expression through newly discovered activities and challenges related to garden running. These results support the findings of Bosnjak et al. (2016), who also reported that self-expressiveness affects sport activities. However, no self-realisation was evident once the Comrades Marathon had been cancelled, with conversations focusing on the inability to realise their dreams. **Perceived effort:** The perceived training efforts of the Comrades Marathon runners featured strongly throughout all the phases except the last. When COVID-19 first emerged and sporting events were initially postponed for a month, the significance of the Comrades Marathon was most evident in the mentions of the possible cancellation of the event. Individuals expressed their determination to keep up with their training, hoping that the event might still occur. The findings of Pienaar et al. (2023) and De Vries and Gunter (2021) also reported that physical activity continued during lockdown to ensure goal achievement. **Perceived challenge:** The UGC showed that the Comrades Marathon was seen as physically and mentally challenging throughout all the phases, contributing to self-expressiveness through participation. Once the event had been cancelled, runners reminisced about the challenges experienced during previous races, but also shared the new physical challenges of running while wearing a mask. These findings align with those of Bosnjak et al. (2016), who reported a link between self-expressiveness and a challenge such as a marathon event. **Perceived importance:** At first, the perceived importance of Comrades Marathon participation was expressed in respect of race participation, but moved to a sense of loss from not being able to participate. Interestingly, perceived importance shifted from 'participation importance' to 'event importance', when runners became nostalgic about the event and highlighted the camaraderie they would miss. This notion is supported by Cho et al. (2021), who indicated that, when individuals are deprived of activities, they may recall their positive memories and feel nostalgic about their past participation.

Goal achievement through marathon participation in support of self-expression

While the different goal types were noted throughout the different phases, outcome goals (participation) were most prominent in the UGC and were present in all the phases. This finding suggests that participants were able to overcome the obstacles posed during COVID-19 and to continue their running activities, even though they were unable to participate in the Comrades Marathon specifically. Thus, autonomous goal regulation manifested when motivation was positive and individuals continued their training regimes to prepare for the main event (De Vries & Gunter, 2023; Mba et al., 2025; Vansteenkiste et al., 2014). Goal achievement was maintained through garden running challenges, the replication of previous or popular marathons, or performance goals for future participation. Outcome goals initially focused on training targets for participation, then shifted to continued training despite the restrictions, and ultimately, individuals shared their sense of outcome goal loss resulting from event cancellation. These findings support the goal switching identified by Vansteenkiste et al. (2014), who stated that individuals switch to a different achievement goal if they experience difficulties during goal pursuit. The outcome goals supported all four self-expressive dimensions, and were thus clearly an important contributor to goal achievement. The second most prominent goal based on conversations from the online community sample was process goals, which involve actions that individuals can control. Process goals were present in all dimensions and phases, with a stronger presence in the first and last phases of COVID-19. Before COVID-19 (Phase 1), the process goals related to planning training distances and managing pain from event participation. During the last phase (Phase 4), process goals focused again on preparation and training distances despite there being limited outdoor activity. These findings are in line with those of Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006), who stated that goals involved subsequent tasks to be completed. Finally, the least prominent goal mentioned by the online community was performance goals. Performance goals were only present in the first three phases, and then only in the self-realisation dimension. During Phase 3, when no outdoor activity was permitted, performance goals related to garden run lockdown challenges, when runners challenged each other and reported how they performed in relation to times and distances.

Study's contribution and practical implications

This research adds to the body of work on sport, leisure, and consumer well-being by proposing that marathon running events offer individuals opportunities for self-expressiveness and goal achievement that

may enhance their eudaimonic well-being during challenging times. The findings build on the theoretical framework of Bosnjak et al. (2016), whose eudaimonia model showed that certain dimensions predict self-expressiveness in a sport activity. Our study allowed deeper insights not only into self-expressiveness through sport participation, but also into how goal achievement contributes to eudaimonia. The findings highlight the importance that runners attach to fulfilling their self-expressive needs through goal achievement, despite different participation contexts. Although the world is no longer ‘in crisis’ and so restricting physical running events to prevent the spread of disease, the findings of the current study have broader significance for the role that event participation plays in enhancing eudaimonic well-being. This study guides event organisers to consider other ways or activities to enhance well-being and to recognise that other forms of running event may be of value to the running community. In the aftermath of COVID-19, enhanced health and well-being have become a growing global concern, and physical activity has been indicated as one of the top-earning sectors in the lucrative wellness economy (Baykadi, 2023). The findings of this study therefore provide insights into different perspectives of running participation, placing event organisers in a position to create not only profitable but also socially responsible offerings. This study has important managerial implications for sport event practitioners. First, the findings have confirmed that runners consider marathon running events to be events in which they can express their true self through participation (self-expression). Sport event managers could therefore capitalise on the four self-expressiveness dimensions and related goal types when organising sport events. Runners continued to focus on their goals, as was evident in their training efforts despite challenging circumstances. Given the importance of self-expression and goal achievement, event organisers and marketers could provide runners with customised goal-setting resources such as goal-tracking apps to help them to stay motivated for and engaged in their training and participation.

Second, it is suggested that, during times of crisis, sport event organisers should engage with online communities and highlight their awareness of how crucial event participation is for these individuals. Recognising the importance of social connection and support in marathon running, event organisers and marketers may need to prioritise community-building initiatives that foster a sense of belonging and camaraderie among participants, both in person and virtually. The need to develop new programmes was also identified in the study of Chen et al. (2024) and Khaki et al. (2024), and could involve organising virtual meet-ups, online forums, and social media campaigns to facilitate interaction and support among runners. In addition, many runners commented on the financial efforts needed for participation, including financial losses when events are cancelled. In the future, event organisers may need to implement flexible registration and refund policies that allow runners to adjust their participation plans as needed without financial penalty. Third, there was evidence of the need for autonomy (also reported in Vansteenkiste et al., 2014): runners participated in the Comrades Marathon because they wanted to, which aligns with the achievement goal theory. Thus, sport event managers could consider implementing hybrid formats that allow for both in-person and virtual participation, thus ensuring that runners can still pursue their goals and express themselves through running, regardless of external limitations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study confirmed that sport event organisers and marketers should continue to engage runners in pursuing their goals (achievement goal theory) and support them in finding fulfilment through marathon running (self-expressiveness through eudaimonic identity theory). This study does have certain limitations. First, it took place over a short period under unique circumstances. Longitudinal studies of the running career of participants could provide valuable insight into variations in self-expressiveness and goal achievement when there are a wide range of participation barriers. There may be other dimensions of self-expressiveness (e.g., a sense of community belongingness and perceived long-lived experience) that may provide opportunities for individuals to express their sense of self that have not been considered in this study (Voigt et al., 2010). It is also important to understand whether participants’ behaviours were limited to the COVID-19 context, or whether they represent changes that will last into the future. Second, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other running communities or sport groups without applying additional techniques for triangulation. Future research could use interviews or focus groups to validate these findings with primary data collection. Third, although a proposed conceptual framework was provided to guide the investigation, future research could test this framework quantitatively in a sports event or similar leisure context, such as bicycle tourism (Kumari et al., 2025). Fourth, the data were collected during COVID-19, and thus reflect behavioural and contextual dynamics specific to this period. Caution is therefore warranted when generalising findings to the current post-pandemic context. However, the findings offer a theoretically meaningful snapshot of self-expressiveness and goal achievement under conditions of heightened uncertainty and disruption, offering value for understanding structural patterns and adaptive processes that

may persist beyond the immediate crisis phase. Last, this study was limited to Facebook posts, which means that event participants who are not members of this online community were not considered. Future studies should use a combination of Facebook and other platforms to augment the findings of this study.

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