Emancipation Through Modernist Pursuits: the Discipline of Running

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This study presents an alternative and complementary view of emancipation revealed through an existential-phenomenological analysis of the running subculture. The process through which distance runners achieve emancipation diverges from the mechanisms outlined in previous consumer research in that it is not temporally constrained, it takes place within the confines of ordinary life, it is not opposed to a dominant power, and, most interestingly, it occurs through a systematic imposition (not removal) of modernist constraints such as time, distance, achievement, and progress.

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Emancipation Through Modernist Pursuits: The Discipline of Running
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“It’s the art of taking more out of yourself than you’ve got” (Roger Bannister).

In the early 1950s, English-born runner Roger Bannister set out to run a mile in under four minutes. This unprecedented feat was thought by many to be physiologically impossible. Nonetheless, on a windy day in 1954, Bannister crossed the line in 3:59.4. Two months later, Australian John Landy surpassed Bannister’s record. At the time, commentators noted that in breaking the four-minute mark, Bannister not only broke a physical record but also burst through the psychological barrier surrounding the mystique of the four-minute mile. The interactions between the body and mind of distance runners (referred to solely as runners in this article) form the research site for this study. In particular, the manner in which runners utilize their bodies and the precision of the sport of running to achieve psychological emancipation is presented. This expands the current perceptions of emancipation as evidenced in marketing and consumer behavior literature.

The concept of emancipation is presented extensively in a myriad of academic areas. Each discipline removes the concept from its original theological or philosophical underpinnings and applies it to discipline-specific contexts. Consumer behavior and marketing researchers have examined emancipation from perspectives such as branding techniques (Holt 2002), postmodern ideals (Firat and Venkatash 1995), and consumer resistance (Geisler and Pohllmann 2003). This research typically presents emancipation as the disavowment of modernist tendencies. That is, emancipation is viewed as stemming from the removal of modernist constraints like competition, achievement, measurement, and progress that enslave individuals in their everyday lives. While this view is both enriching and informative, other manifestations of emancipation are also relevant to consumer research. This study focuses on the running subculture and presents a view of emancipation that, rather than opposing modernist elements, embraces them.

This paper outlines the key elements of the conceptualization of emancipation across academic literature, followed by a brief discussion of the methodology employed in the study and a discussion of findings related to a re-conceptualization of emancipation. It concludes with a discussion of how these findings expand upon and benefit marketing and consumer behavior researchers and proposes avenues for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review briefly outlines the philosophical views of emancipation. This is followed by a discussion of how emancipation is presented in consumer behavior literature.

Perspectives on Emancipation:

Emancipation is defined as the process of being set free from constraints—deliverance from physical, intellectual, moral or spiritual fetters. Consistent with this definition, Alvesson and Willmott (1992), critical theorists, provide a conceptual synthesis of the theoretical underpinnings of emancipation: “Emancipation describes the process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions, in particular those that place socially unnecessary restrictions upon the development and clarification of the meaning of human need and expansion of autonomy in personal and social life” (432). This definition states the premise of emancipation, however, the process through which emancipation occurs and the nature of the shackles from which one is to escape is hotly debated.

Implicit in the preceding definition of emancipation is freedom from constraints. Originally, emancipation referred to freedom from constraints of slavery and religious persecution. Marxist emancipation entails overcoming the capitalist ethos and is fully realized “with the suppression of the capitalist mode of production” and the removal of obstacles imposed by the conditions of wage labor (Lukes 1983; McGowan 1991). Since Marx, however, the focus has been on how modern society and consumer society constrain individual autonomy and freedom.

Critical theorists, represented by scholars such as Horkheimer, Habermas, and other representatives from the Frankfurt School, in an attempt to explain inadequacies in Marxist emancipation, express an alternate view of emancipation. They argue that emancipation lies in escaping the false consciousness imposed by society through self-knowledge and understanding of constraints inhibiting personal freedoms (Agger 1991; Fay 1987; Kilbourne 1987). One such constraint, consistent with the views of Marx, is wage labor enterprises, encompassing such practices as Frederick Taylor’s scientific management. Critical Theory tends to “dismiss modern management theory as an expression of technocratic thinking that seeks to manipulate human potential and desire in order to bolster falsely naturalized status quo” (Alvesson and Wilmott 1992, 436).

The arguments surrounding emancipation are complex and heterogeneous, but in simplified form, the focus of many of these arguments is that modernist pursuits focused on competition, achievement, measurement, and progress entrap and enslave individuals, resulting in a feeling of being ‘slaves to the clock and performance.’ Hence, these modernist pursuits are those from which individuals are thought to seek emancipation.

Emancipation in Consumer Theory and Research:

In the context of consumer research, emancipation has taken a particular focus on freedom from the totalizing constraints of the marketplace. Theory and research has taken to addressing three issues relating to consumer emancipation. The first question is whether and under what conditions consumers can be emancipated. In general, research suggests that consumers can only be emancipated by escaping the totalizing logic of the marketplace—a logic that is bound with the modernist pursuits described above. For example, Firat and Venkatash (1995) note that even modernist views of emancipation serve to further enslave individuals in an unemancipated existence. These theorists, building upon the work of Murray and Ozanne (1991), believe that emancipation occurs when consumers place themselves outside of the totalizing logic of the marketplace. Further, Firat and Dholakia (1998) advocate “theatres of consumption” as emancipatory spaces where consumers can escape the marketplace.

Contrary to the aforementioned orientation, some argue that an escape from the marketplace is illusory and impossible, and that even those attempting escape are caught up in the pursuit of brands. Holt (2002), utilizing an extended case method approach to examining the experiences of individual consumers, finds inconsistencies between his analysis and the ideas set forth by Murray and Ozanne (1991) and Firat and Venkatash (1995). Specifically, he finds that those individuals seeking to escape the totalizing logic of the marketplace end up making meanings with brands such that even these consumers further the traditional marketplace rather than being emancipated from it.

Still other researchers argue that escape from the marketplace is temporary and spatially constrained. Kozinets (2002) is an excellent example of research on consumer emancipation that
highlights the abandonment of modernist pursuits as a vehicle for experiencing temporary emancipation. In his ethnography of the Burning Man Festival, Kozinets describes a process in which consumers engage in a hyperreal temporally constrained event to achieve emancipation. He posits that by removing the totalizing elements of the marketplace and creating an environment that is free of modern constraints, consumers are able to free themselves from the totalizing logic of the marketplace. In this context, emancipation is set up as oppositional to daily life, the marketplace, and the rules of time, measurement, progress, and achievement.

In a similar vein as Kozinets (2002), Geisler and Pohlmann (2003) look at emancipation in terms of opposition in a dichotomous power relationship. They present the notion of a social form of emancipation. This social form of emancipation “is engaged in a permanent process of ensuring a social distinction between itself and its environment” (94). Central to their thesis is that consumers place themselves in direct opposition to mainstream corporate society and, through this, achieve emancipation from the marketplace.

The second inquiry, stemming from the presentations of emancipation described in the preceding section, asks whether other types and variants of consumer emancipation are possible. Specifically, researchers have questioned the underlying assumptions of some conceptualizations of consumer emancipation—resulting in the question, “if not this, what?” Murray and Ozanne (1991) provided a crucial impetus for debate related to consumer emancipation. For example, Hetrick and Lozada (1994) critique the work of Murray and Ozanne (1991) outlining discrepancies in the critical approach utilized in the original analysis. They argue that, in the Murray and Ozanne (1991) conceptualization, the purpose of critical analysis is not directed to the purpose of freeing individuals from a false consciousness to enable the emancipatory potential that flows from this.

Additional critique of conceptualizations of emancipation is presented in Thompson (2004). The author, making specific reference to Holt (2002), Kozinets (2002) and Firat and Venkatesh (1995) note that in their attempts to describe emancipation as freeing from modernist elements, they create a dichotomy between ‘within’ and ‘outside’ the marketplace: a dichotomy which is very ‘modern’ in orientation thereby negating elements of their ‘postmodern’ analysis of emancipation.

These critiques bring to light the third question entrusted to consumer researchers: whether or not consumers’ feelings of emancipation are always oppositional to daily life, the marketplace, and modernist pursuits. The purpose of this paper is to focus on a venue where modernist pursuits are valued in order to examine where and how opportunities for emancipation exist, thus exploring this third question.

In this paper, I take a critical approach to the notion of emancipation in an attempt to uncover new, previously underrepresented, processes through which emancipation can occur. While this does not fall into the category of a true ‘critical research project’ as I do not attempt to provide any form of emancipation for my audience (Handelman 1999), I do propose an expanded view of emancipation that is counter to traditional thinking. This view combines philosophical underpinnings and allows consumer narratives and experiences to drive the interpretative findings (Hirschman 1986).

**FINDINGS**

The analysis of the interviews revealed several interesting aspects of the running subculture and the mentality of runners. Specifically, a powerful emergent theme relating to the core values of the running subculture is a seemingly paradoxical phenomena experienced by subculture members in that they achieve emancipation through the self-induced imposition of the modernist constraints of measured distance and time. Consider this quote from Bryan (Elite M 40):

“I approach it as sport and I think that has its own appeal. Even just chasing time and all that, subjecting yourself to the discipline of the clock and measuring the success in those terms. I think that has its own appeals and I think the whole faith and religion and spirituality aspect of [running] appeals more to people who do it as sort of a lifestyle kind of thing. And also, another one of the ways in which the running habit is dismissed is that i’ts sort of like we’re addicted to it or something like that, or it’s a substitute for something or another. And I don’t like thinking of it as a substitute for something: either a substitute for religion or drugs or alcohol. I like to think it has its own appeals with the discipline of the watch, and distance, and intervals and just all those measurement elements of it that actually give it its appeal. And not in...
a way that’s sort of enslaving. The kind of the thing that you use to measure how well you’re doing, how much better you’re getting, for its own sake.”

As Bryan describes the appeal of running, it becomes clear that runners achieve a kind of secular emancipation through the imposition of modernist elements that are traditionally thought to be enslaving. The two key elements of this process, modernist pursuits and emancipation, will be discussed separately and then in combination below.

**Modernist Pursuits:**

The preceding quote from Bryan describes the modernist aspect of the emancipation process and the running subculture. Runners derive a sense of fulfillment and pleasure from measurable success. The types of measures most frequently noted by runners as salient to them are time and distance. This creates an almost Frederick Taylor-like addiction to the ‘discipline of the clock.’ This ‘addiction,’ however, is not enslaving or negative as it contributes significantly to the emancipatory appeal of running.

The enjoyment of these modernist elements of running takes on several manifestations. First, the objectivity of time and distance is appealing to runners. Tyler (Elite M 31) states: “I like the preciseness of it. You have a set distance. I have a set time and go out and run another 1500 meters and if you run a couple of seconds more, you see that.” The objectivity of these kinds of measurements is closely tied to the second manifestation of modernist characteristics: the desire to continuously improve, achieve, and progress. Both elite and non-elite runners express these sentiments. Lyndsay (Elite F 22) captured this when she said, “I think part of it is that it’s just the challenge of it. Every time you run a certain time you want to go faster… ‘Oh I ran that but I can go faster’ so…and you keep training.” All of the runners, when talking about their running goals, expressed a desire to perform better in some measurable way. For example, Jessica (Non-elite F 23) talks about how she would like to better her marathon time and qualify for the Boston Marathon and Aaron (Non-elite M 42) states, “My goal as far as pace goes is to do a sub five minute kilometer.”

The third manifestation of the modernist focus on measurable performance is the ability to easily see and measure improvement, achievements, and progress. Runners find the objectivity and clarity of measured performance rewarding as it shows that the training efforts are worthwhile. Dylan (Elite M 23) says: “In running its clear how you’re progressing. If you run everyday you know you’re going to get better. It’s without question. You’re going to get better. It’s just simple.” Runners are propelled by the ability to clearly see improvement in themselves.

The ultimate appeal of the objectivity of running is that, in its purest form, it is free of ambiguity. With objective measurement of performance, it is impossible to question how well a person is doing. Furthermore, it allows an individual to receive recognition and credit for his or her performances. This is not something that is always accomplished in other sports, as some individuals may not feel comfortable talking about how well they performed. This clarity and lack of ambiguity is discussed by Dylan (Elite M 23):

> “Success meant a lot and I started to realize how good I was. And then I started to realize how fast I could run. And going fast, and blazing, that’s what I love. So realizing that I could do a 400m interval workout in 53 seconds. At the end of a workout, wow, that I loved. And the intensity of being on the track and the pressure. There’s no hiding. There’s nowhere to hide. That’s what I love about track.”

Thus, recognized (public and private) achievement, is an important element of running.

**Emancipation:**

The feeling of freedom and emancipation truly enriches those who run. Maxine (Elite F 29) articulates this freedom:

> “I like it when you can just go out and run and your thoughts are free and you feel really good afterwards and at the time it’s just time set apart for yourself—you’re not going to do anything else for this hour. Everything else is so hectic and busy, once you fit it in and you’re out there, you’re relaxed and calm.”

Maxine talks about the freedom that occurs when she is emancipated from a hectic, busy lifestyle. This is not uncommon among the participants in this study. Kyle (Elite M 11), the youngest member of this sample, best shows the intrinsic value of this to the running subculture as he (arguably) has the fewest demands made on his time. He says, “I usually run by myself. It’s good: some time to be alone. To think about things.” Sonya (Non Elite F 27) takes a somewhat different approach to the escape elements of running. She does not view it as a time to think, but more as a time to not think:

> “When you’re running that’s the only thing you’re thinking about. You’re not thinking about your groceries or what you’re going to do tomorrow or your work…you’re just thinking about the next two strides. I think that’s another reason why running appeals to me—it’s like meditation because I find my mind going blank and I just have peace and I’m just running.”

In addition to being able to free one’s mind, Bryan (Elite M 40) discusses another element of the emancipation experienced by runners that relates to modernist measures. Bryan talks of how running is an element of life that can be controlled, whereas most elements cannot: “In a world where it’s difficult to find a sense of control and mastery. In a world like that, it’s a place to feel like there’s at least one thing in your life that you can control and you can actually improve yourself.” Thus, runners articulate a distinct feeling of emancipation from their everyday lives resulting from the running activity.

**Emancipation Through Modernist Pursuits:**

Through reliance on measurable performance and ‘enslavement’ to the clock, runners are able to achieve emancipation derived from self-actualization. The discipline of the clock is integral to emancipation for runners as it creates a concrete and objective measurement of performance. The constant measurement of distance and time against the performances of an individual’s body results in a measurable mastery over oneself. This is accompanied by a sense of freedom (and control) from the constraints of everyday life.

The importance of the emancipatory feeling experienced by runners is captured in the manner in which runners describe the running emancipation. One way in which this is expressed is in comparisons to running versus other sports. Bryan (Elite M 40), in an attempt to explain why running is special when compared to other sports, states:

> “It’s partly physical, partly emotional, and partly psychological…it’s all three of those things. People will stick at it to get back to that moment [where they feel a perfect sense of control and mastery].”
of self-mastery] just one more time in their life. I’ve seen it over and over again. People go through all kinds of injuries, break up with spouses, raising children. Everything. They will fight through all that stuff just to get back to that one moment.”

It is “that moment” of ultimate emancipation that serves as the driving force behind runners. As Geoff (Transition M 22) states: “It’s just sort of a high you get when you finish a really tough workout or when you’ve run a new [personal record]. It’s just a good feeling it keeps you going back.” The feelings that Geoff and Bryan refer to are those resulting from being emancipated through modernist pursuits, the importance of which is articulated by Dylan (Elite M 23):

“Runners will miss events. If people are partying, they go to a party late because they have to run. Or they’ll do whatever they have to do to run on a day where they’re supposed to run and if they’ve already done other exercise, it’s not an excuse not to run. They’re not like, ‘oh I’ve already exercised today I don’t have to run.’ So when I was a runner, I could play two hockey games and still have to run. I could be playing ultimate frisbee, or doing two other events and I would still have to run, because nothing could replace it. That’s exactly it, nothing can replace it.”

An additional element of the runner emancipation is the evangelical tendencies of runners to help others achieve emancipation through modernist pursuits. Overall, what emerged from the interviews is a sense of cooperation and respect across all levels of the running subculture with elite members expressing a desire to share their knowledge and love of the sport with those who have not yet experienced emancipation through running. The emancipatory nature of running, therefore, includes an almost evangelical desire to help others achieve this kind of freedom.

Bryan (Elite M 40): “Because my own performances, I’ve trained so hard for so long, I realize that I’m just, my personal bests are so fast now that I’m going to have difficulty and I’m never actually going to beat some personal bests, but I can work with people who can achieve personal bests. So I enjoy that process. The process of preparing someone to run faster, do something that they’ve never done before. So it’s a bit of a way of keeping in touch with that side of the sport. And also, I really get a kick out of watching people who don’t think they ever had any ability or talent, and in some cases didn’t think they had any athletic ability at all, actually discover running and do quite well and start winning….So I guess yeah, just passing on the torch to other people and prophesizing about the benefits [of running] and stuff like that [is what I want to continue doing with running in the future].”

To summarize the theme of emancipation through modernist pursuits, the core characteristic of the running subculture is that members seek emancipation and freedom from everyday life. This is achieved through a commitment to modernist concepts of objective measurement, time, distance, and achievement.

**DISCUSSION**

Emancipation through modernist pursuits is extremely interesting as it combines both modern and non-modern mentalities. The notion of embracing modernist elements to achieve emancipation contradicts traditional thoughts on emancipation. Emancipation is typically thought to be something that occurs when modernist principles of time and control are abandoned so that individuals can take a more enlightened and liberated view of their world and their lives. In the case of runners, however, they abandon their ‘work clock’ for the ‘running watch.’ The running watch is a time keeper that they can control and turn off whenever they choose, but this choice is rarely made. The reason for the perpetual power of the running watch: emancipation. In the case of the running subculture, the mechanism through which emancipation occurs contradicts traditional thinking. Runners do not escape modernist elements; they choose to constrain themselves with specific modernist elements (competition, achievement, measurement, and progress) so that they can escape the constraints of everyday life. These individuals tradeoff different forms of modernity so that they can better control the constraints of their lives: it is empowering to enslave oneself but demoralizing to be enslaved by others. Runners are emancipated through their choice of enslavement, that they control, and that cannot be corrupted by outside forces. An enslavement that does not feel enslaving.

This research serves to enhance the current perceptions of how individuals can achieve emancipation. Generally speaking, consumer researchers are concerned with how consumers can emancipate themselves from the marketplace. While this is most certainly an important element of emancipation, the singular focus on one kind of emancipation has resulted in a view that is not holistic and does not fully appreciate the nuances of individuals and emancipation. Thus, an alternate view of emancipation is revealed through this examination of achieved emancipation that occurs within a less ‘marketplace’ (or anti-marketplace) sphere of consumption.

This alternative view presents an emancipation that is not temporally bound but instead takes place within the confines of everyday life. Furthermore, unlike many forms of consumer emancipation that are conceptualized as resistant to dominant entities, this emancipation does not rely on a dichotomized power relationship and bridges the tensions of modernist thinking contradicting emancipatory thought espoused by Thompson (2004). This form of emancipation depends upon individual autonomy in taking control of emancipation. This emancipatory control relies upon the imposition of modernist constraints to achieve liberation.

**CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study is to present an alternative and complementary view of emancipation to enrich the discourses of consumer researchers. Motivated by the singular and somewhat contested views of emancipation in consumer literature, I undertook an existential-phenomenological analysis of the distance running subculture. In doing so, I discovered that these runners achieve emancipation through the imposition of modernist pursuits and an exploitation of these modernist elements to conform to the will of the runner.

The process through which runners achieve emancipation diverges from the mechanisms outlined in previous work in that it is not temporally constrained, it takes place within the confines of ordinary life, it is not opposed to a dominate power force, and, most interesting, it occurs through a systematic imposition (not removal) of constraints characteristic of the modern ethos: time, distance, and performance.

It is my hope that this research will stimulate interest in the various and abundant ways that individuals can achieve emancipation. Furthermore, I urge researchers to seek out this understanding in common areas of life as opposed to only exceptional life experiences. Researchers should also seek to uncover the complexities of how emancipatory activities fit into and interact with everyday life. The implications of this type of research are far reaching as it will bring to light fundamental functionalities and motivations of consumers functioning within society, hopefully
leading to a more enriching experience for consumers and researchers alike.

REFERENCES


| APPENDIX |
| PARTICIPANT SUMMARY |

| Tyler | Male, Aged 31; Elite; Running for 20 years. Tyler is a highly competitive runner. He started running and competing when he was in grade six. After high school he took two years off, but has since returned, running 40-80 miles\(^1\) per week. |
| Bryan | Male, Aged 40; Elite; Running for 29 years. Bryan competes at the masters level. He started running when he was 11 years old and competing year round at age 16. He is one of the top runners in the country, competes nationally and internationally, and coaches highly competitive runners. His runs 70-95 miles per week. |
| Dylan | Male, Aged 23; Elite; Running for 12 years. Dylan was an elite level runner who experienced a career ending injury at age 20. He started running in grade two and competed nationally and internationally as one of the top junior runners in the country until the end of his first year in university, running 35-60 miles per week. |
| Lyndsay | Female, Aged 22; Elite; Running for 8 years. Lyndsay started running when she entered high school at the age of 14. She is one of the top university runners in the country and the world. She runs approximately 50-60 miles per week. |
| Maxine | Female, Aged 29; Elite; Running for 15 years. Maxine started running in elementary school and moved on to compete seriously in high school, university, and now independently. She currently competes in marathons and is one of the best marathon runners in the country. She runs 60-80 miles per week. |
| Geoff | Male, Aged 22; Transition; Running for 9 years. Geoff started running when he was in grade eight. He competed throughout high school and for three years at university, after which he suffered an injury that caused him to stop competing. He now competes as a non-elite. He runs 50 minutes a day, five days a week. |
| Wayne | Male, Aged 24; Transition; Running for 11 years. Wayne started running in grade three and competed seriously throughout high school and his first year of university when he suffered a serious injury. He has recently started running again, but only recreationally. He currently runs about 30 km a week. |
| Aaron | Male, Aged 42; Non-elite; Running for 20 years. Aaron started running in his early twenties. In recent years he has started taking it more seriously and regularly competes in local road races. He currently runs approximately 20 km per week. |
| Christopher | Male, Aged 33; Non-elite; Running for 1.5 years. Christopher started running 1.5 years ago with a group of people from work. He recently competed in his first race (10km) and is training for a half marathon. He runs 30-35 km per week. |
| Jessica | Female, Aged 23; Non-elite; Running for 4 years. Jessica used to compete in triathlons but found it to be logistically difficult so she switched to only running. She has competed in five marathons. She runs between 60-70 km per week. |
| Sonya | Female, 27; Non-Elite; Running for 1 year. Sonya has been running for 1 year. She started running with a group from work and has competed in one race (10km) and is training for a half-marathon. She runs between 15-21 km per week. |
| Kyle | Male, 11; Young Elite; Running for 4 years. Kyle started running when he was in grade three. He runs with his school and trains with an independent track club. He competes in both cross-country and track, and is currently the county champion in the 1500m. He runs for approximately 20-30 min everyday. |

\(^1\)Participants differed in their use of miles versus kilometers. I present the units used by each participant.


