Running Together, Winning Together

How Brand-Facilitated Run Clubs Create Value for Consumers and Brands

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Abstract

Brand-facilitated run clubs have emerged as a significant form of experiential marketing, yet the psychological mechanisms through which they generate commercial value remain largely unexplored. While existing research confirms that physical brand communities build brand equity, the role of consumer wellbeing as an underlying pathway has received little empirical attention. This study investigates whether participation in a brand-facilitated run club is associated with higher consumer wellbeing and brand equity, and whether wellbeing mediates that relationship. A cross-sectional survey comparing 186 run club participants against 171 non-participants was conducted across eight Stockholm-based run club brands, while statistically controlling for five demographic variables to ensure the observed benefits stem directly from run club participation. The results show that participants report substantially higher wellbeing and brand equity compared to non-participants, with large effect sizes, though the non-randomised design means these differences reflect associations rather than confirmed causal effects. Wellbeing is established as a significant partial mediator, confirming two simultaneous pathways to brand equity: a direct effect from brand-facilitated run club and a supplementary indirect effect through enhanced wellbeing. Complementary analyses reveal that brand equity accumulates with repeated attendance, that food and beverage brands benefit disproportionately relative to established sportswear brands, and that socialising is the primary driver of participation enjoyment. This study provides among the first empirical evidence in a physical and recurring brand community context that consumer wellbeing partially mediates the commercial returns of brand-facilitated physical communities.

Keywords: *Brand-Facilitated Run Clubs, Experiential Marketing, Consumer Wellbeing, Customer-Based Brand Equity, Brand Communities, Mediation, Self-Determination Theory.*

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1 Introduction

Each Tuesday evening, a group of strangers gather outside the Mikkeller brewery in Södermalm, and for the next hour they run together through the city. At the end, they stay for post-run beers and conversation (visited April 28, 2026; see Appendix 1). Across the city in Östermalm on Wednesday evenings, participants at the Vitamin Well Run Club finish their laps and are handed protein bars and beverages from the facilitating brand (visited April 29, 2026; see Appendix 2). One participant noted having never eaten protein bars before joining, but now purchases them independently, a product relationship that began entirely through community participation. Another described feeling unable to skip a session not because of the exercise, but out of not wanting to miss the people. These observations preview the two outcomes this study tests: a psychological one, and a commercial one.

Whether this kind of social and psychological fulfilment translates into measurable commercial value for the facilitating brand, and through what psychological mechanism, is the question this paper sets out to answer.

Brand-facilitated run clubs have emerged as a significant form of experiential marketing. Global run club participation increased by 59% in 2024 (Strava, 2024). This trend carries societal significance. With physical inactivity remaining a growing global challenge (World Health Organization, 2024), governments have increasingly encouraged corporate brands to fund community sport initiatives (Low & Pyun, 2016). Organisations that facilitate these environments can foster deeper customer loyalty while simultaneously delivering substantial public health benefits (Chifamba et al., 2025). Furthermore, brands have long recognized the limitations of traditional mass-media advertising, systematically shifting budgets toward physical, shared experiences (Cornwell, 2019; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). This reflects a change in consumer expectations: an active lifestyle is increasingly viewed as a core element of personal identity, and consumers have come to expect brands to actively participate in that lifestyle rather than just advertise around it (McKinsey & Company, 2025). Industry survey data indicates that 81% of respondents attended live, in-person fitness experiences in the past year (McKinsey & Company, 2025), suggesting strong and growing consumer appetite for this type of engagement. Research confirms that community-based brand participation builds favourable brand associations and long-term brand equity (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013; McAlexander et al., 2002). Yet the psychological mechanisms through which brand-facilitated run clubs generate this commercial value remain poorly understood.

Three specific gaps motivate this study. First, while research confirms that even single experiential brand events build brand equity, the recurring and community-driven nature of run clubs represents a more sustained form of engagement whose psychological mechanisms remain empirically underexplored. Second, although social physical activity is known to generate significant consumer wellbeing (Graupensperger et al., 2019), the role of wellbeing as the psychological pathway connecting participation to commercial outcomes has received little direct empirical attention. Scholars have explicitly identified consumer wellbeing as largely absent as a metric in brand experience research (Yuan et al., 2026). Third, academic research on the commercial and psychological outcomes of physical sport participation remains underdeveloped relative to the extensive literature on spectator sports and digital brand communities (Chifamba et al., 2025). Brands and governments are increasingly investing in community sport initiatives (Low & Pyun, 2016), yet empirical evidence on whether and how the psychological fulfilment of participants translates into brand equity for the facilitating organisation remains limited.

This study addresses these gaps by empirically testing whether participation in a brand-facilitated run club increases consumer wellbeing and brand equity, and whether consumer wellbeing mediates that commercial return. The term brand-facilitated run clubs is used throughout to describe recurring, community-based running groups that are financially or operationally supported by a commercial brand, distinguishing them from solitary exercise or occasional large-scale races by their continuous, social nature and habituated weekly routines.

Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which explains how recurring participation satisfies basic psychological needs and generates durable wellbeing, and image transfer theory, which explains how the positive associations produced by that participation flow back to the facilitating brand as stronger brand equity, a mediation model is developed and tested through a cross-sectional survey comparing 186 run club participants against 171 non-participants across eight Stockholm-based brands facilitating run clubs.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows: Section 2 develops the theoretical framework and states the three hypotheses, Section 3 describes the methodology, Section 4 reports the empirical results, and Section 5 discusses the findings and their implications.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine whether participation in a brand-facilitated run club increases consumer wellbeing and brand equity, and whether consumer wellbeing serves as the psychological mechanism mediating that commercial return. Drawing on experiential marketing theory (Schmitt, 1999), image transfer theory (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), a mediation model is developed and tested empirically through a cross-sectional survey comparing active run club participants against non-participants across eight brands facilitating run clubs in Stockholm, Sweden. By providing empirical evidence on consumer wellbeing as a mediating mechanism in physical brand community research, this study aims to deepen understanding of how participatory and community-based marketing initiatives create value for both individuals and brands.

2 Theory and Hypothesis Development

This chapter develops the theoretical framework and the three hypotheses that structure the empirical study. By integrating experiential marketing, Image Transfer Theory, and Self-Determination Theory, it establishes consumer wellbeing as the psychological mechanism through which brand-facilitated run clubs generate customer-based brand equity.

2.1 Experiential Marketing and Image Transfer

Brands increasingly utilize experiential marketing to engage consumers beyond passive advertising (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013), providing environments where attendees can co-create their own brand experiences and value (Gentile et al., 2007). Pine and Gilmore (1998) assert this as a broader macroeconomic shift in which experiences have emerged as distinct economic offerings valued beyond standard goods and services. Within this logic, brand-facilitated run clubs represent a particularly integrated form of experiential engagement. By combining physical exercise, product immersion, and recurring social interaction, these run clubs create curated platforms for direct consumer-brand contact that neither traditional advertising nor one-off events can replicate. Experiential marketing is the broad philosophy of engaging consumers through direct and participatory encounters (Schmitt, 1999); event marketing is a common tactic within it that is centred on branded occasions (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013); and sponsorship-linked marketing refers to a brand attaching itself to an existing activity or property to borrow its associations (Cornwell, 2019). Brand-facilitated run

clubs sit at the intersection of all three, which matters, because it concentrates the associative, emotional, and behavioural mechanisms of each into a single recurring context, compounding their effects on consumer memory and brand perception.

Schmitt (1999) conceptualises experiential marketing as a rejection of the view of consumers as purely rational decision makers, proposing instead that consumption is a holistic experience driven simultaneously by emotional and functional needs. Brakus et al. (2009) demonstrate empirically that brand experience unfolds across four dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural, evoked by brand-related stimuli across various settings. Critically, direct experience with a brand generates stronger and more favourable associations in consumer memory than indirect marketing communications (Keller, 1993), and experiential marketing capitalizes on this by transforming passive consumers into active participants. Within brand-facilitated run clubs, the physical exertion demanded serves this exact function, embedding the brand into the participant's episodic memory.

When these conditions are met, run club participation facilitates a process known in sponsorship research as image transfer, whereby the associations consumers hold for an activity, such as health, vitality, or community, become linked in memory to the brand repeatedly co-present within it (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). Originally conceptualised as meaning transfer in celebrity endorsement contexts (McCracken, 1989), the framework was adapted to sports sponsorship by Gwinner and Eaton (1999), who show that transfer strength depends on the functional and image-based similarity between the brand and the activity. While image transfer was originally theorised for passive spectator sponsorship, the mechanism may operate with particular strength in participatory settings, where the brand is embedded in the physical experience rather than merely displayed alongside it. Anagnostou et al. (2024) support this in a running-specific context, finding that the perceived authenticity and centrality of a brand's personality within running predicts repeat participation intentions and deeper sport identification, suggesting that brands which integrate genuinely into the running experience strengthen the associative link rather than merely borrowing it. Keller (1993) further posits that repeated exposure is required to build strong, enduring brand associations, meaning the recurring nature of run clubs is structurally important: each session reinforces the symbolic values being transferred. How much equity is gained varies across brands, a point returned to in Section 2.4.

2.2 Social Belonging and Brand Communities

Baumeister and Leary (1995) propose that the value of repeated social interactions is fundamentally driven by the psychological need to belong and maintain stable interpersonal relationships. Within fitness environments, Graupensperger et al. (2019) find that perceiving a high degree of groupness is significantly associated with greater enjoyment and more positive affective valence. They further find that class-to-class variation in this perception explains a considerable portion of variance in how participants experience each session. This suggests that the social structure of a session is a fundamental determinant of the participant experience (Graupensperger et al., 2019).

As interpersonal bonds deepen through frequent and shared physical exertion, they have the potential to evolve into a true brand community. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) define such communities by three core markers: “consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility”. Brand-facilitated run clubs fulfil these criteria where participants share a consciousness of kind through their running identity, rituals through weekly sessions and shared routes, and a sense of social obligation that manifests as encouraging slower members to finish. Muniz and O’Guinn emphasize that while these communities are explicitly commercial and anchored around a single brand, the interpersonal ties they foster are genuine. Relationships in these settings form not only between the consumer and the firm but among consumers themselves (McAlexander et al., 2002), and over time this shared social identity deepens into emotional attachment characterized by strong positive feelings such as affection and passion (Thomson et al., 2005). Park et al. (2010) find that consumers who develop this deep connection are significantly more willing to invest in personal resources such as time, energy, and reputation, to maintain the relationship. This suggests that brand community membership shifts the consumer-brand relationship from transactional to genuinely relational (Fournier, 1998). It is through this deepening of social identity that belonging begins to carry psychological weight extending well beyond the session itself.

Empirical evidence indicates that small-scale, recurring, and brand-managed formats are particularly well-suited to generating these forms of social belonging and emotional attachment. Low and Pyun (2016) suggest that small-scale amateur sporting events generate greater long-term social, health, and psychological benefits than large-scale sporting events. Temerak and Winklhofer (2021) demonstrate empirically that social environment,

specifically the presence and dynamics of other participants, act as a major stimulus driving behavioural engagement and sustaining continued involvement over time. Because brand-facilitated run clubs are recurring events, social belonging is not a one-time output but a condition that accumulates across sessions, progressively translating these deepened community ties into measurable consumer wellbeing.

2.3 Run Clubs as Platforms for Consumer Wellbeing

Wellbeing extends beyond momentary happiness to encompass an overall evaluation of life across multiple dimensions. Research distinguishes two central dimensions: hedonic wellbeing, capturing happiness and positive affect, and eudaimonic wellbeing, capturing meaningfulness and purpose (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Psychological richness has emerged as a third dimension, defined as a life characterized by interesting and perspective-changing experiences (Oishi et al., 2019), and can be cultivated by surviving and recovering from demanding physical pursuits (Dahlén & Thorbjørnsen, 2022). Regular physical activity is itself a reliable predictor of psychological wellbeing, with evidence consistently linking exercise participation to improvements in mood, life satisfaction, and mental health outcomes (Penedo & Dahn, 2005). Brand-facilitated run clubs are well-positioned to activate all three wellbeing dimensions simultaneously: shared social activity generates immediate happiness, athletic progress and belonging build meaningfulness, and the physical challenge can cultivate richness even when it temporarily reduces hedonic comfort. Marketing literature frames consumer wellbeing as a practical subdomain of the broader wellbeing construct, grounded in the principle that positive consumption experiences and community-based marketplace interactions contribute meaningfully to a consumer's overall quality of life (Sirgy et al., 2007). In this study, consumer wellbeing is referred to as wellbeing.

The psychological mechanism underlying wellbeing can be explained by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which proposes that human wellbeing depends on satisfying three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While psychological richness operates as an independent experiential construct not fully explained by SDT's need structure (Oishi et al., 2019), both hedonic happiness and eudaimonic meaningfulness are driven by it. Deci and Ryan (2008) frame this as a process rather than a target: when people act in ways that satisfy all three needs, hedonic happiness and eudaimonic meaningfulness emerge simultaneously as natural outcomes.

Brand-facilitated run clubs are theorised to be structurally well-positioned to satisfy all three needs, though it should be noted that only one of these, relatedness, is empirically captured in this study. Relatedness is activated through recurring social contact with a persistent group, and Graupensperger et al. (2019) demonstrate that perceived groupness in fitness settings significantly elevates enjoyment, consistent with the dynamic SDT predicts. Competence is theoretically satisfied through athletic progression, as improving performance over successive sessions is expected to fulfil the need to feel effective and capable (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy is theoretically supported when participation is experienced as volitional and consistent with one's personal identity rather than externally pressured (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The extent to which competence and autonomy satisfaction actually occur in this specific run club context remains an empirical assumption in the present study rather than a tested finding. Because SDT predicts that intrinsically motivated need satisfaction produces wellbeing improvements that persist once established (Deci & Ryan, 2008), the wellbeing generated by run club participation is likely more durable than the acute affective responses of isolated experiential events.

This durability matters commercially. Yuan et al. (2026) establish empirically that consumer wellbeing promotes brand loyalty and repeat purchase behaviour. In the context of participant sports, Chifamba et al. (2025) support this, demonstrating that actively weaving wellbeing into the event experience is essential for nurturing customer advocacy and sustained participation. This positions wellbeing not as a by-product of participation, but as a psychologically meaningful driver for commercial value. Accordingly, this study first asks whether participation in run clubs successfully generates this psychological state, leading to the following primary hypothesis:

H1: Participation in a brand-facilitated run club positively predicts consumer wellbeing.

2.4 Building Brand Equity Through Participation

While the preceding section establishes that participation generates wellbeing at the individual level, the facilitating brand's commercial interest lies in whether that wellbeing translates into stronger brand equity. The primary framework through which marketing research captures this value is customer-based brand equity, defined by Keller (1993) as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to a brand's marketing, driven by the associations consumers hold in memory. Interactive brand environments can move consumers beyond simple awareness to build favourable, strong, and unique associations that

define customer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). This study operationalises brand equity through the multidimensional scale of Yoo and Donthu (2001), extended with an affective dimension to capture the emotional responses and sense of personal connection that repeated, face-to-face brand contact generates but cognitive items alone cannot capture (Brakus et al., 2009; Park et al., 2010), and aggregated into a single composite score for hypothesis testing. Full measurement detail is reported in Section 3.2.1.

However, building equity through participation is not automatic. Crompton (2015) identifies poor event presentation, perceived over-commercialisation, and insensitivity to participant sentiments as recurring sources of negative image transfer in sports sponsorship. Applied to run clubs, a session that feels poorly organised, commercially intrusive, or inauthentic risks generating unfavourable associations rather than strengthening them, an outcome consistent with Low and Pyun's (2016) finding that consumers respond less favourably when a brand's presence feels ill-fitting. Continuity also matters: positive brand outcomes from occasional participation are often short-lived unless the firm maintains engagement systematically over time (Solem, 2016), making the recurring structure of run clubs commercially significant rather than incidental.

The magnitude of equity gains varies across brands. Brands with already well-developed association networks have less room to gain from additional experiential exposure, whereas brands starting from lower consumer awareness benefit more substantially from the same contact (Keller, 1993; Hoeffler & Keller, 2003). Gwinner and Eaton (1999) further establish that transfer strength depends on the functional or image-based similarity between brand and activity, suggesting that endemic brands such as sportswear may gain most strongly on loyalty, while non-endemic brands such as beverages may gain more broadly across all equity dimensions. While the magnitude of these gains is expected to vary across brand categories, the overall direction remains consistent, as participation in a brand-facilitated run club is predicted to generate a positive commercial return for the facilitating brand:

H2: Participation in a brand-facilitated run club positively predicts the brand equity of the facilitating brand.

2.5 The Mediating Role of Wellbeing

While H1 and H2 predict that run club participation generates consumer wellbeing and brand equity, these direct effects alone do not fully explain the process. Specifically, whether consumer wellbeing acts as the mediating psychological mechanism connecting these outcomes in physical and recurring brand communities remains empirically underexplored. Studies examining wellbeing as a mediator of brand outcomes are largely confined to digital contexts: Yuan et al. (2026) identify a significant gap in using consumer wellbeing to evaluate brand experiences yet test their framework on a digital social media platform, while Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2024) similarly examine sports branding through a virtual fan community lens. Academic models of customer engagement in physical participant sports remain significantly underdeveloped relative to spectator sports and digital communities (Chifamba et al., 2025), leaving the role of wellbeing as a commercial mechanism in face-to-face, community-based brand settings an open empirical question.

Yuan et al. (2026) provide the closest empirical precedent, finding that ritualized brand experiences generate consumer wellbeing, which in turn drives brand loyalty, establishing wellbeing as a mediating mechanism between experiential brand activation and commercial outcomes. It is worth noting that the wellbeing measure used in this study captures overall life wellbeing rather than brand-specific affect. This is a deliberate theoretical choice grounded in SDT: because need satisfaction in the run club context is predicted to generate durable improvements in general psychological wellbeing, not merely transient brand-linked affect, it is this broader psychological state that is theorised to transfer back to the brand through the image transfer mechanism. Nevertheless, this operationalisation means the mediation chain rests on the assumption that general wellbeing improvements are at least partially attributable to the run club experience, a premise that cannot be fully isolated in a cross-sectional design.

Because brand loyalty is a core dimension of the composite brand equity score used here (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), this chain extends directly to the outcomes this study examines. The mechanism is theoretically grounded in the intersection of SDT and image transfer. As established in Section 2.3, run club participation satisfies all three of SDT's basic psychological needs. It satisfies relatedness through recurring social contact, competence through athletic progression, and autonomy through volitional participation, generating durable improvements in wellbeing. Crucially, it is the brand that structures the conditions

enabling this need satisfaction as it organizes the sessions, provides the social infrastructure, and makes the recurring experience possible. This means the wellbeing participants experience is not an incidental by-product of running, but a brand-created psychological state.

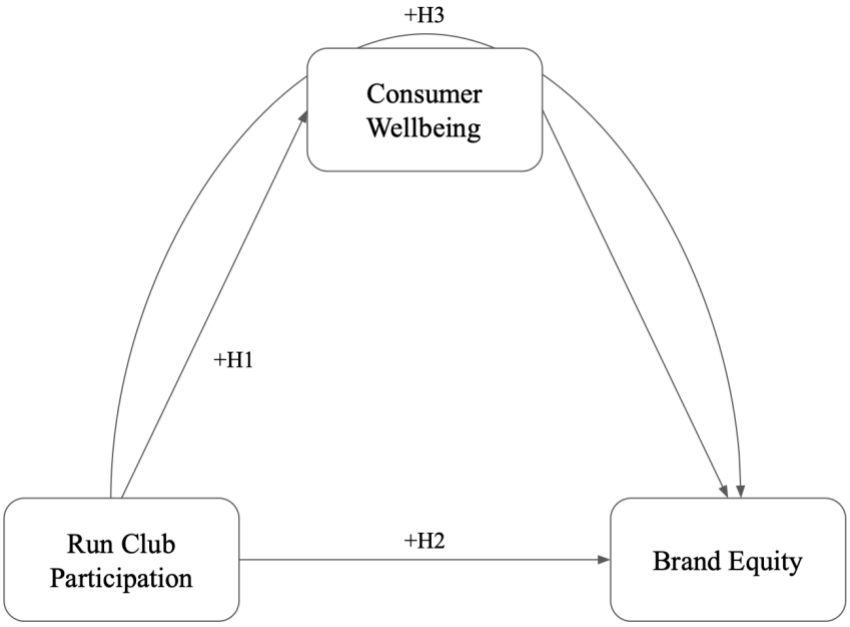
Gwinner and Eaton (1999) theorize image transfer as a process whereby the associations generated by an activity become linked in memory to the brand co-present within it. In participatory settings, this process extends beyond cognitive associations to encompass the affective states the activity generates. Because the brand is the visible and repeated architect of the experience, not merely a logo displayed alongside it, the positive psychological states produced by need satisfaction are encoded as associations with the brand, elevating evaluations of brand quality, loyalty, and personal connection. Keller (1993) establishes that direct brand interaction produces stronger and more personally relevant memory associations than indirect communications. In this context, the wellbeing generated through brand-facilitated participation represents precisely this kind of direct association. This produces two simultaneous pathways through which run clubs can generate brand equity: a direct associative pathway through repeated brand exposure and product immersion, and an indirect psychological pathway through the wellbeing the brand actively generates. Accordingly, this study proposes:

H3: The effect of brand-facilitated run club participation on brand equity is mediated by consumer wellbeing.

2.6 Conceptual Model

As illustrated in Figure 1, the proposed conceptual model maps the direct and indirect relationships investigated in this study. The straight arrows denote the direct effects: participating in a brand-facilitated run club is hypothesized to directly increase both consumer wellbeing (H1) and brand equity (H2). Additionally, the overarching curved pathway represents the indirect mechanism (H3). This path illustrates how the effect of run club participation on brand equity operates through consumer wellbeing. In this mediating role, wellbeing serves as the psychological mechanism that translates the experiential and social benefits of run club participation into commercial brand value.

Figure 1. Conceptual model



3 Methodology

This chapter explains how the study was designed and executed. It begins by outlining the overall research approach: a quantitative, deductive, and cross-sectional comparative design, and the reasoning behind each of those choices. It then describes the survey instrument, covering how participants and non-participants were identified, how the questionnaire was structured for each group, and how the key constructs were measured. The pre-study and main study are then presented in sequence, each describing the purpose, sample, and data collection procedure. The chapter concludes with an assessment of validity and reliability.

3.1 Research Approach

To test whether participating in a brand-facilitated run club increases consumer wellbeing and brand equity, and whether wellbeing mediates that relationship, the study compares a group of run club participants against a group of non-participants. The method is classified as quantitative, in which all hypotheses were deductively derived from existing theories and prior empirical research (Bryman, 2018).

The overall design is best characterised as a cross-sectional comparative survey with one embedded experimental element. The primary data collection is cross-sectional: naturally

occurring groups of run club participants and non-participants completed the same wellbeing and brand equity scales at a single point in time. However, one aspect of the design introduced a controlled manipulation: rather than allowing non-participants to freely nominate any brand, they were randomly assigned one of eight predefined brands. This decision was made to ensure comparability across groups: both groups would evaluate the same pool of brands, reducing the risk that aggregate differences in brand equity reflected inherent differences between brands rather than the effect of participation. The trade-off is that non-participants may have been asked to rate brands they had never encountered, which risks producing artificially low equity scores for lesser-known brands. This limitation is discussed further in Sections 4.5.3 and 5.4. A qualitative approach could not produce the numerical data required for this analysis, and a quantitative approach is generally superior when the goal is to generalize insights from a sample to a broader context (Eliasson, 2018).

Because it was not possible to randomly assign people to run club participation, the study instead recruited two naturally occurring groups: people who were already active run club participants, and people who had not participated in a brand-facilitated run club. Group membership was determined by a single screener question at the start of the survey: 'Have you participated in a run club organised or sponsored by a brand?', with respondents routed into the participant or non-participant path based on their answer. To account for the demographic differences that naturally arise from this self-selection, five covariates (age, gender, occupation, living situation, and income) were included in the hypothesis testing models, allowing the effect of participation to be isolated from pre-existing group differences. This approach follows the logic used in field-based consumer research where random assignment is not feasible but rigorous statistical control is applied instead (Hair et al., 2013).

A note on the use of AI tools in the research process is warranted here. During the early stages of the project, AI-assisted literature tools (SciSpace and the SSE Library AI assistant) were used to explore the research landscape and identify potentially relevant sources. As these tools do not guarantee relevance or accuracy, all suggested literature was manually read, assessed for fit, and verified before inclusion. This process shapes the scope of the literature reviewed, and the resulting framework reflects the authors' own judgment in selecting and synthesising the identified sources. In the quantitative phase, an AI tool (Gemini) was consulted as a technical guide for executing specific statistical procedures in SPSS, including the PROCESS macro mediation analysis. All theoretical reasoning, research

design decisions, data analysis execution, and interpretation of results were carried out entirely by the authors. Full details of AI tool use are reported in Appendix 6.

3.2 Survey Design

The same core survey instrument was used in both the pre-study and the main study, with targeted refinements made to the main study version based on pre-study experience, as described in Section 3.2.2. This section describes the shared instrument: how the two respondent groups were identified and routed, and how all key constructs were operationalized.

In an online survey (Microsoft Forms), respondents first confirmed that they could participate in English and provided informed consent, including information about the study purpose and GDPR compliance. An online survey was selected as the data collection mode as it enables access to geographically dispersed respondents, reduces administrative costs, and allows for efficient large-scale data collection, all of which are well-established advantages of online over traditional formats (Evans & Mathur, 2005). As introduced in Section 3.1, respondents were divided into two groups based on their answer to the opening screening question. This use of a single filter question to divide the sample into distinct subgroups at the outset is a standard technique in survey-based consumer research, ensuring that each respondent path is tailored to their relevant experience and that the comparison between groups remains internally valid. Those who had participated in a brand-facilitated run club were asked to identify the primary brand associated with their run club, first by selecting a product category (Sports Apparel & Footwear, Beverage, Food & Snacks, or Other) and then by writing the specific brand name, and to report how many times they had attended and when they had last participated. Those who had not participated were randomly assigned one of the eight most frequently nominated run club brands identified in the pre-study.

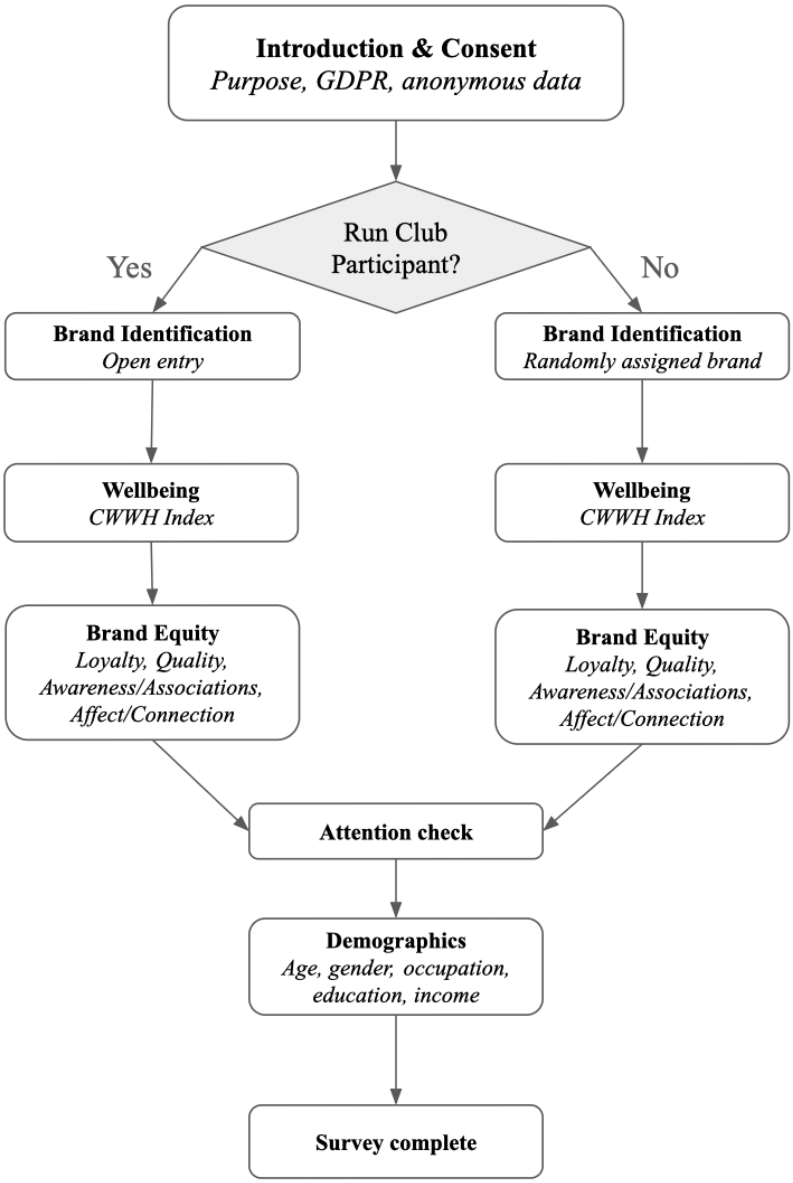
The decision to randomly assign brands to non-participants, rather than allowing them to name any brand freely, was made to ensure that both groups evaluated the same pool of brands to the highest degree possible, making the comparison between them meaningful and reducing the risk of extraneous variance confounding the results (Malhotra, 2020, pp.524-525). While it was anticipated that the open-text format for participants would inevitably yield a broader variety of brands, anchoring the non-participant control group to the eight core brands minimized the risk that any difference in aggregate brand equity scores could

reflect inherent differences between the brands themselves rather than the effect of run club participation.

Regarding the participant group, it is worth noting that brand affinity prior to joining is not a given. Informal field observations at Mikkeller and Vitamin Well run clubs revealed that participants typically found their run clubs through Strava, recommendations from friends, or colleagues, not because they already had a strong preference for the facilitating brand. This suggests that many participants did not self-select into the run club based on existing brand loyalty, which limits the concern that the participant group simply reflects people who already liked their brand before any community involvement. That said, some degree of residual self-selection bias cannot be ruled out, and this is discussed further in Section 5.4. To clarify the role of these field observations, they were conducted after our survey had already been distributed and served a purely descriptive, post-hoc role rather than gathering qualitative pilot data to design our measurement scales.

Following these initial routing and brand identification steps, both groups completed the same wellbeing and brand equity scales, in that order. An attention check item was embedded midway through the survey, instructing respondents to select a specific response, allowing inattentive respondents to be identified and excluded prior to analysis (Oppenheimer et al., 2009). Placing it after the main scales ensured that respondents' wellbeing and brand equity responses were not influenced by the check itself (Söderlund, 2018, pp. 90-91). The survey concluded with a demographics section covering age, gender, primary occupation, current living situation, education level and annual income. The survey flow is illustrated in Figure 2. A full list of the survey questions is provided in Appendix 7.

Figure 2. Survey flow and branching logic



3.2.1 Measures

Wellbeing is measured using the Wellbeing Index developed at the Centre for Wellbeing, Welfare and Happiness (CWWH) at the Stockholm School of Economics. The four items capture overall quality of life, happiness, meaningfulness, and psychological richness, each rated on a 1–10 numerical scale (Dahlén et al., 2026). Run club participants were additionally asked to rate, to the best of their recollection, how much four factors contributed to their

enjoyment of the run club: socialising with other runners, improving physical fitness, an attractive physical environment, and reducing daily stress (Graupensperger et al., 2019). These items were included to provide descriptive insight into the primary drivers of participation and are examined in Section 4.5.1.

While Aaker (1996) conceptualizes brand equity as four broad asset dimensions, this study operationalizes it through the Multidimensional Brand Equity (MBE) scale of Yoo and Donthu (2001), a cross-culturally validated 10-item instrument covering three dimensions: brand loyalty (3 items), perceived quality (2 items), and brand awareness and associations (5 items), all rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). As Yoo and Donthu (2001) found no discriminant validity between awareness and associations as separate constructs, these are treated as a single combined dimension consistent with the theoretical framework in Chapter 2.

In experiential and community-based contexts, consumers also develop emotional responses to brands: feelings of warmth, excitement, and personal connection that cognitive items alone cannot capture (Brakus et al., 2009; Keller, 1993). Having multiple measures capturing different facets of a single construct is highly recommended in contemporary consumer research, especially when examining psychological reactions (Söderlund, 2018, p. 134). Relying solely on the original MBE scale would therefore risk underestimating the commercial value generated by run club participation, precisely where its effects are likely to be strongest. Accordingly, a fourth affective dimension was added to the framework, consisting of two items capturing positive emotional responses, adopted from the affective subscale of the Brand Experience scale (Brakus et al., 2009), and one item capturing a sense of personal connection to the brand, adopted from the Brand Attachment scale (Park et al., 2010). Together, the four dimensions form a 13-item composite measure. As noted in Section 2.4, these dimensions are aggregated into a single composite score for hypothesis testing; the dimensionality and internal consistency of this composite were verified prior to analysis and are reported in Section 3.4.3. A comprehensive overview of all constructs and their respective sources for both wellbeing and brand equity is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Constructs and Measures

Construct	Item	Source
Wellbeing	Where would you place your life right now, on a scale from 1 to 10? How happy do you feel overall, on a scale from 1 to 10? How meaningful does your life feel overall, on a scale from 1 to 10? How rich does your life feel overall, on a scale from 1 to 10?	Dahlén et al. (2026)
Brand Loyalty	I consider myself to be loyal to [brand]. [brand] would be my first choice among competitors. I will not buy from other brands if [brand] is available at the store.	Yoo & Donthu (2001)
Perceived Quality	The likely quality of [brand] is extremely high. The likelihood that [brand] will be functional is very high.	Yoo & Donthu (2001)
Brand Awareness & Associations	I can recognise [brand] among other competing brands. I am aware of [brand]. Some characteristics of [brand] come to my mind quickly. I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of [brand]. I can easily imagine [brand] in my mind.	Yoo & Donthu (2001)
Brand Affect & Connection	Interacting with [brand] makes me feel good. I feel a strong positive emotion when I think about [brand]. I feel a personal connection to [brand].	Brakus et al. (2009) Park et al (2010)

Note: *The [brand] placeholder was dynamically replaced with the respondent's chosen or randomly assigned brand.*

3.2.2 Refinements for Main Study Design

Based on the pre-study findings, three refinements were made to the main study instrument. First, the introductory text shown to respondents before the survey began was clarified to reduce ambiguity identified during pre-study data collection. Second, the brand identification question for run club participants was revised to make explicit that respondents should name only one primary brand, following instances in the pre-study where respondents named multiple brands. Third, whereas pre-study non-participants were free to name any brand of their choice, main study non-participants were instead randomly assigned one of the eight most frequently nominated brands identified in the pre-study, as described in Section 3.2.

3.3 Pre-Study

3.3.1 Purpose of Pre-Study

The pre-study served two purposes. The first was to validate the survey instrument prior to main data collection, verifying that the branching logic correctly separated run club participants from non-participants, that the Likert scale responses showed adequate variance, and that the sample size was sufficient to support the planned mediation analysis for H1, H2, and H3 (Perdue & Summers, 1986). The second purpose was to identify the most frequently nominated brands among run club participants, to construct the predefined brand list presented to non-participants in the main study, as described in Section 3.2.

3.3.2 Pre-Study Sample & Data Collection

Respondents were recruited through non-probability convenience sampling via personal networks and direct outreach to run club organizers in Stockholm, who were asked to distribute the survey to their members, as well as through direct contact with known run club participants. This approach is appropriate for a pre-study where the primary objective is instrument validation rather than statistical generalizability (Malhotra, 2020). Of the 59 responses recorded, 56 were retained after data cleaning, yielding a final sample of n = 56, of which 30 were run club participants and 26 were non-participants.

3.3.3 Pre-Study Results

A frequency analysis of brand nominations from the participant group identified Sports Apparel & Footwear as the most frequently nominated category (n = 17), followed by Beverage, Food & Snacks (n = 9). The most frequently nominated brands within each category are reported in Table 2. Based on these findings, the four most nominated brands from each category were selected for the main study: Salomon, Lululemon, Adidas and New Balance from Sports Apparel & Footwear, and Vitamin Well, Nicks, Mikkeller, and Nocco from Beverage, Food & Snacks. This four-per-category structure was chosen to achieve balance across the two product categories rather than selecting purely by nomination count.

Table 2. Most Nominated Brands by Category

Category	Brand	Nominations
Sports Apparel & Footwear (n = 17)	Salomon	4
	Lululemon	3
	Adidas	3
	New Balance	2
Beverage, Food & Snacks (n = 9)	Vitamin Well	5
	Nicks	2
	Mikkeller	1
	Nocco	1

To ensure that items within each construct could be combined into indices, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > .70$) (Söderlund, 2018, p.136). All constructs met the threshold except for the non-participant perceived quality scale ($\alpha = .520$). This is attributable to the combination of a small pre-study sample and a two-item scale structure, both of which structurally suppress alpha estimates. Given that the main study's substantially larger sample resolves the power limitation, and that the two-item structure is inherent to the validated Yoo and Donthu (2001) scale, no changes were made to the instrument.

A preliminary test of the mediation model using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4, 5,000 bootstrap samples) (Hayes, 2022) found directional support for the direct effects of run club participation on both wellbeing (H1: $B = 1.31$, $p < .001$) and brand equity (H2: $B = 1.42$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of participation on brand equity through wellbeing (H3) was non-significant, with a bootstrap confidence interval of [−.36, .15] crossing zero. Given the small sample size of n = 56 and the correspondingly limited statistical power available to detect indirect effects, this null result was not considered grounds to revise the hypotheses, and the study proceeded to main data collection.

Table 3. Pre-Study Results

Hypothesis	B	SE	p	95% CI
H1: Run Club → Wellbeing	1.31	.26	< .001	[.80, 1.82]
H2: Run Club → Brand Equity (total effect)	1.42	.25	< .001	[.93, 1.92]
H3: Indirect effect via Wellbeing*	−.11	.13	—	[−.36, .15]

Note. * *CI includes zero, indicating a non-significant indirect effect.*

3.4 Main Study

3.4.1 Purpose of Main Study

The purpose of the main study was to formally test the three hypotheses on a sufficiently large and diverse sample. The pre-study sample of n = 56 provided preliminary directional support for H1 and H2 but lacked the statistical power needed to detect the indirect effect required for H3. The main study was therefore designed to collect a minimum of 320 respondents: a target derived from the eight brands in the study, each requiring at least 20 responses per group from participants and non-participants to enable meaningful subgroup-level comparisons (Hair et al., 2013), yielding a minimum of 160 participants and 160 non-participants. This enabled robust testing of both the direct and mediated relationships.

3.4.2 Main Study Sample & Data Collection

Data collection took place between April 22 and May 5, 2026, employing two distinct sampling strategies reflecting the different recruitment challenges associated with each group.

For the participant group, a targeted non-probability purposive sampling approach was adopted (Malhotra, 2020). Recruitment focused on individuals associated with the run club communities of the eight brands identified in the pre-study. Potential respondents, including run club organizers, trainers, and active members, were identified through systematic searches of activity on Strava, Instagram, and Facebook, covering event pages, followings, likes, and comments. Outreach was conducted via email and Instagram direct messages. To extend reach within existing communities, recruited participants were also encouraged to forward the survey link to fellow members, consistent with a snowball sampling technique (Bryman, 2018). A full list of the specific run clubs contacted for each of the main eight brands is provided in Appendix 3. For the non-participant group, convenience sampling was employed through personal networks including university peers, workplaces, and broader social circles, as well as through Facebook groups (Malhotra, 2020, p.363).

In total, 393 responses were collected, of which 213 came from run club participants and 180 from non-participants. After removing incomplete responses and those who failed the attention check, the final analytical sample consisted of N = 357 (186 participants, 171 non-participants). Because the participant survey used an open-text field for brand identification, respondents nominated a wider variety of brands than the eight predefined options assigned to the control group. Of the 186 participants, 171 nominated one of the eight core brands,

while 15 nominated other brands, 14 within the two primary product categories and one outside them. Each of the eight targeted brands received at least 20 responses from both groups, meeting the minimum threshold for sub-group analysis (Hair et al., 2013).

3.4.3 Assessment of Validity & Reliability

To assess whether the 15 participants who nominated alternative brands introduced confounding variance, independent-samples t-tests (Welch correction for unequal variances) were conducted comparing them against core-brand participants (n = 171). No significant differences emerged for total wellbeing, $t(14.80) = 1.20$, $p = .248$, or total brand equity, $t(15.75) = 1.80$, $p = .092$. Since the study aims to evaluate the general effects of run club participation rather than brand-specific responses, all valid participant responses were considered meaningful. All 186 participants were therefore retained for primary aggregate hypothesis testing (H1–H3), while brand-specific analysis in Section 4.5.3 focuses exclusively on the eight core brands.

To ensure that items within each construct could be combined into indices, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > .70$) as the accepted threshold for internal consistency (Söderlund, 2018, p.136). All scales met this criterion. The wellbeing scale returned $\alpha = .917$ (4 items). For the participant group, brand loyalty yielded $\alpha = .907$, perceived quality $\alpha = .853$, brand awareness and associations $\alpha = .814$, and brand affect and connection $\alpha = .882$. The corresponding values for the non-participant group were $\alpha = .924$, .910, .954, and .863 respectively, indicating strong internal consistency across all constructs and both groups.

As signalled in Section 2.4, the four brand equity sub-dimensions were intended to be aggregated into a single composite for hypothesis testing. Prior to doing so, an Exploratory Factor Analysis using principal components extraction with Varimax rotation was conducted to verify that aggregation was empirically justified. Sampling adequacy was excellent (KMO = .876) and Bartlett's test of sphericity was highly significant ($p < .001$). The analysis extracted two components with eigenvalues greater than 1, together explaining 63.4% of total variance. The rotated solution revealed a theoretically coherent structure: items relating to brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand affect and connection loaded onto Component 1, while brand awareness and association items loaded onto Component 2. Because both components represent foundational and highly correlated dimensions of customer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2001), all 13 items were aggregated into a single

holistic composite. This composite demonstrated excellent internal consistency for both the participant group (α = .903) and the non-participant group (α = .947).

Regarding validity, all measurement scales were adopted from established, peer-reviewed instruments, supporting content validity (Söderlund, 2018, p.134). The primary threat to validity in a non-randomised design, that observed group differences reflect demographics differences rather than run club participation, was addressed by including five demographic covariates in all hypothesis testing models, as described in Section 3.1.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics & Comparability Check

The final analytical sample of N= 357 comprised 186 run club participants (52.1%) and 171 non-participants (47.9%). Prior to hypothesis testing, chi-square tests of independence were conducted to assess whether the two groups were demographically comparable. Results indicated significant between-group differences in age ($\chi^2(6) = 56.54$, $p < .001$), gender ($\chi^2(1) = 4.52$, $p = .034$), primary occupation ($\chi^2(4) = 41.65$, $p < .001$), current living situation ($\chi^2(4) = 27.30$, $p < .001$), and annual income ($\chi^2(8) = 50.74$, $p < .001$). Education level was the only variable that did not differ significantly between groups ($\chi^2(2) = 4.02$, $p = .134$).

These differences reflect the naturalistic, self-selected nature of run club participation. While the non-participant group was predominantly composed of students (69.6%) aged 18–24 (81.9%) and concentrated in the lowest income bracket (71.3% earning 0–200,000 SEK), the participant group was notably older and more professionally established. Over half of the participants (54.8%) were employed, and a much larger share fell into the 25–34 age range (34.9% compared to just 11.1% of non-participants). Consequently, participants also reported higher earnings, with over a quarter (26.3%) making above 500,000 SEK annually. Furthermore, the participant group leaned more female (58.6% versus 47.4%) and was more likely to live with a partner or spouse (32.8% versus 17.5%), whereas non-participants were far more likely to still be living with their parents (23.4% versus 7.0%). A complete breakdown of the demographic composition for both groups can be found in Appendix 4.

Because these five variables: age, gender, primary occupation, living situation, and income, differed significantly between the groups, they were included as covariates in all hypothesis

testing models. This rigorous statistical control allows the true effect of run club participation to be isolated from these pre-existing demographic differences.

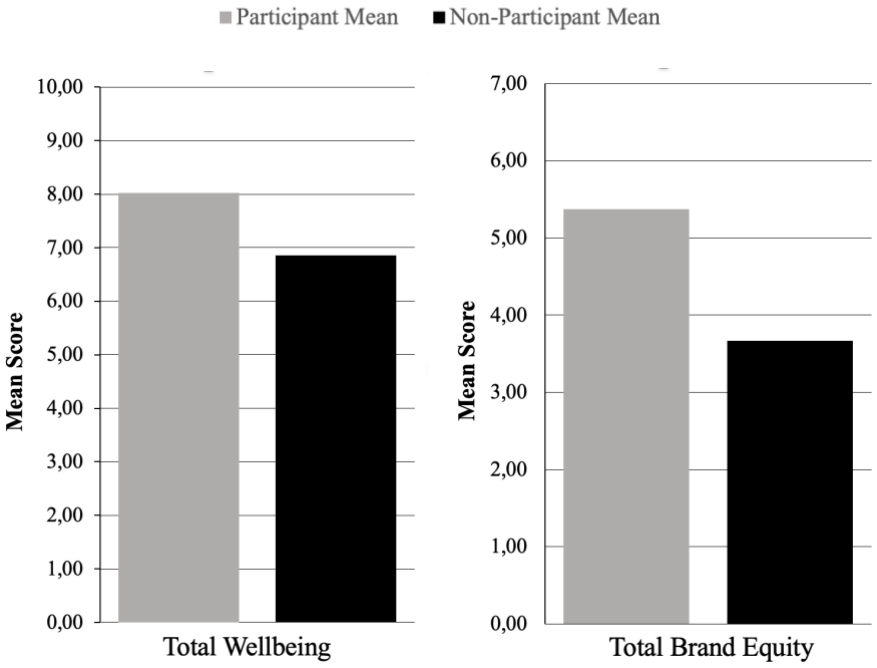
4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

Descriptive statistics for consumer wellbeing and brand equity, including their respective sub-dimensions, are presented in Table 4 alongside mean differences and Cohen's d effect sizes from independent-samples t-tests comparing participants and non-participants. All t-tests were statistically significant at $p < .001$.

As illustrated in Figure 3, participants reported substantially higher total wellbeing ($M = 8.02$, $SD = 0.98$) than non-participants ($M = 6.86$, $SD = 1.26$), a mean difference of 1.17 points on a 10-point scale, corresponding to a very large effect size (*Cohen's d* = 1.04). Differences were consistent across all four scale items including current life evaluation, happiness, meaningfulness, and psychological richness, with effect sizes ranging from $d = 0.89$ to 0.96, all classified as large to very large. Similarly, also shown in Figure 3, participants reported substantially higher total brand equity ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 0.98$) compared to non-participants ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.23$, a mean difference of 1.70 points on a 7-point scale (*Cohen's d* = 1.53). Significant differences were observed across all four brand equity dimensions. The largest effect was found for brand loyalty ($d = 1.35$) and brand affect and connection ($d = 1.53$), while perceived quality showed a comparatively smaller but still large effect ($d = 0.89$).

Finally, it is worth noting that across both wellbeing and brand equity measures, non-participants exhibited slightly greater variance in their responses, displaying consistently higher standard deviations than the participant group, suggesting a more uniformly positive experience among participants compared to the diverse responses of non-participants. These descriptive differences provide initial evidence in support of H1 and H2 and are formally tested in Section 4.3.

Figure 3. Mean Wellbeing and Brand Equity for Participants vs. Non-Participants



Note. *Wellbeing is measured on a 1–10 scale; Brand Equity is measured on a 1–7 Likert scale.*

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Group Comparisons for Main Study Variables

Variable	Par M	Par SD	Non M	Non SD	Diff.	Cohen's d
Total Wellbeing (1–10)	8.02	0.98	6.86	1.26	1.17*	1.04
Overall Quality of Life	7.99	0.99	7.01	1.22	0.99*	0.90
Happiness	8.08	1.07	6.95	1.28	1.13*	0.96
Meaningfulness	8.09	1.34	6.81	1.55	1.28*	0.89
Richness	7.93	1.22	6.66	1.55	1.27*	0.91
Total Brand Equity (1–7)	5.37	0.98	3.67	1.23	1.70*	1.53
Brand Loyalty	4.55	1.59	2.51	1.41	2.04*	1.35
Perceived Quality	5.80	1.10	4.66	1.46	1.14*	0.89
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.18	0.74	4.50	1.77	1.68*	1.26
Brand Affect & Connection	4.96	1.33	3.02	1.19	1.94*	1.53

Note. *Par = participants (n = 186), Non = non-participants (n = 171). Wellbeing is measured on a 1–10 scale; brand equity dimensions are measured on 1–7 Likert scales. Diff. = Participant M minus Non-participant M. Cohen's d effect sizes: small ≥ .20, medium ≥ .50, large ≥ .80 (Cohen, 1990). * p < .001.*

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

To test the three hypotheses, a mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro (v5.0, Model 4), which estimates direct and indirect effects within a single regression-based framework using 5,000 bootstrap samples to generate confidence intervals for the indirect effects (Hayes, 2022). The five demographic variables that differed significantly between groups: age, gender, primary occupation, living situation, and income, were entered simultaneously as covariates. The model estimated four quantities of interest: the a path (run club participation → wellbeing), the b path (wellbeing → brand equity, controlling for participation), the direct effect c' (run club participation → brand equity, controlling for wellbeing), and the total effect c (run club participation → brand equity, without wellbeing partialled out).

The hypotheses, as formulated in Section 2, are restated below prior to reporting the results:

H1. Participation in a brand-facilitated run club positively predicts consumer wellbeing.

H2. Participation in a brand-facilitated run club positively predicts brand equity of the facilitating brand.

H3. The effect of brand-facilitated run club participation on brand equity is mediated by consumer wellbeing.

4.3.1 H1: Run Club Participation and Wellbeing

H1 concerned the a path in the mediation model: the effect of run club participation on consumer wellbeing, controlling for the five demographic covariates. The regression analysis confirmed a significant positive relationship ($B = 1.053$, $SE = .127$, $t = 8.27$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.803, 1.304]), indicating that participants reported wellbeing scores approximately one point higher on the 10-point scale than non-participants. The model explained 23.1% of the variance in wellbeing ($R^2 = .231$). H1 is therefore supported, indicating a significant positive association between run club participation and consumer wellbeing after controlling for measured demographic differences.

4.3.2 H2: Run Club Participation and Brand Equity

H2 concerned the total effect (c) of run club participation on brand equity, estimated by regressing brand equity on participation and the five demographic covariates without wellbeing included in the model. The total effect was large, positive, and significant ($B =$

1.672, *SE* = .126, *t* = 13.30, *p* < .001, 95% CI [1.425, 1.919]), indicating that participants scored on average 1.70 points higher on the 7-point brand equity scale than non-participants after controlling for all demographic differences. This represents a substantial elevation across the full brand equity construct, spanning loyalty, perceived quality, awareness and associations, and brand affect and connection. The model explained 38.7% of the variance in brand equity (R^2 = .387). H2 is therefore supported, indicating a significant positive association between run club participation and brand equity after controlling for measured demographic differences.

4.3.3 H3: The Mediating Role of Wellbeing

H3 predicted that consumer wellbeing would mediate the effect of run club participation on brand equity. In other words, participation enhances wellbeing, which subsequently predicts more positive brand evaluations. The bootstrap analysis confirmed a significant indirect effect of run club participation on brand equity through wellbeing (*B* = .172, BootSE = .064, 95% BootCI [.052, .301]). Because the confidence interval does not contain zero, wellbeing is established as a significant mediator. As the direct effect also remains significant, this constitutes partial mediation: run club participation is linked to higher brand equity both directly and indirectly through enhanced wellbeing. The full model explained 40.3% of the variance in brand equity (R^2 = .403). H3 is therefore supported, with consumer wellbeing functioning as a significant partial mediator in the association between run club participation and brand equity.

4.3.4 Additional Findings from the Mediation Model

Beyond the hypothesis test, the full mediation model yielded two further estimates. The b path confirmed that wellbeing significantly predicted brand equity when run club participation and the five demographic covariates were held constant (*B* = .163, *SE* = .052, *t* = 3.12, *p* = .002, 95% CI [.060, .265]), indicating that for every one-point increase in wellbeing, brand equity increased by approximately 0.16 points after controlling for run club participation. The direct effect of run club participation on brand equity remained large and significant after accounting for wellbeing (c': *B* = 1.501, *SE* = .136, *t* = 11.05, *p* < .001, 95% CI [1.234, 1.768]), indicating that run club participation is associated with higher brand equity through mechanisms beyond wellbeing alone. All path estimates are summarised in Table 5.

Regarding the covariates, age was the only demographic variable that reached significance in the brand equity equation ($B = -.191$, $p = .040$), indicating that younger respondents showed slightly higher brand equity scores. None of the remaining covariates: gender, occupation, living situation, or income, reached significance in either the wellbeing or brand equity models (all $p > .08$). This suggests that the effect of run club participation on both outcomes is largely universal across demographic subgroups.

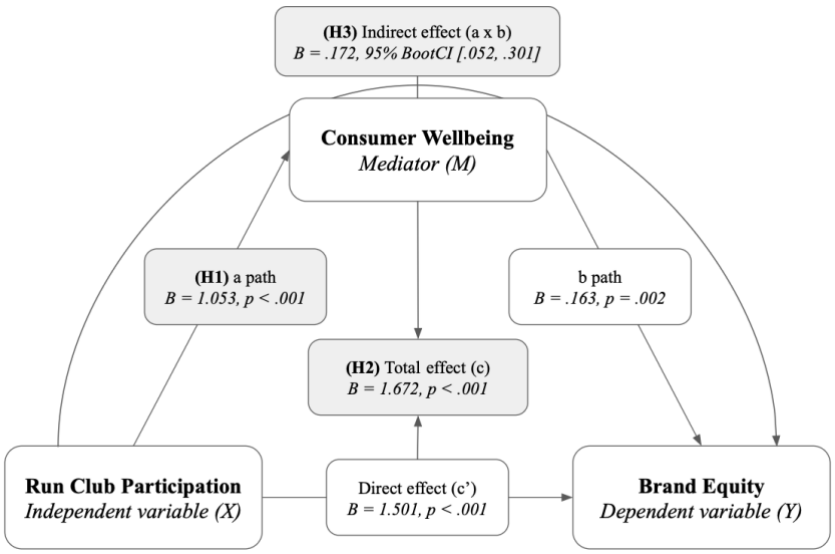
Table 5. Mediation Analysis (PROCESS Model 4)

Path / Effect	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
(H1) a path: Run Club → Wellbeing	1.053	.127	8.27	< .001	[.803, 1.304]
b path: Wellbeing → Brand Equity	.163	.052	3.12	.002	[.060, .265]
Direct effect (c'): Run Club → Brand Equity	1.501	.136	11.05	< .001	[1.234, 1.768]
(H2) Total effect (c): Run Club → Brand Equity	1.672	.126	13.30	< .001	[1.425, 1.919]
(H3) Indirect effect (via Wellbeing)*	.172	.064	—	—	[.052, .301]

Note. *Covariates included: age (Q26), gender (Q27), primary occupation (Q28), living situation (Q29), annual income (Q32). * Bootstrapped 95% CI excludes zero, indicating a significant indirect effect. t and p values are not applicable for the indirect effect, which is evaluated via bootstrapped confidence interval.*

To provide a clearer picture of how these mechanisms operate simultaneously, Figure 4 illustrates the full PROCESS Model 4 path estimates. The a path (H1) confirms that run club participation significantly predicts consumer wellbeing ($B = 1.053$, $p < .001$), while the b path shows that wellbeing in turn significantly predicts brand equity ($B = .163$, $p = .002$). The indirect effect (H3) captures the product of these two paths (a × b = .172, 95% BootCI [.052, .301]), confirming wellbeing as a significant mediator. The direct effect (c') shows that participation continues to predict brand equity even after controlling for wellbeing ($B = 1.501$, $p < .001$), and the total effect (H2) represents the combined direct and indirect influence of participation on brand equity ($B = 1.672$, $p < .001$), together confirming partial mediation.

Figure 4. Mediation model path estimates



4.4 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 6. Hypothesis Summary Table

#		Result
H1	Participation in a brand-facilitated run club positively predicts consumer wellbeing.	Supported
H2	Participation in a brand-facilitated run club positively predicts brand equity of the facilitating brand.	Supported
H3	The effect of brand-facilitated run club participation on brand equity is mediated by consumer wellbeing.	Supported

4.5 Complementary Findings

To complement the confirmatory hypothesis testing, the following analyses explore how specific participation patterns and brand contexts shape the outcomes identified in the main model. The aim of this section is not to test new formal hypotheses, but to explore the empirical conditions under which the effects of brand-facilitated run clubs are strongest. Specifically, this section examines primary drivers of participation enjoyment (4.5.1), the impact of participation frequency and recency on wellbeing and brand equity (4.5.2), and how the magnitude of brand equity gains varies across different product categories and individual brands (4.5.3).

4.5.1 Primary Drivers of Participation

As described in Section 3.2.1, run club participants rated the extent to which four factors contributed to their enjoyment of the run club on a 1–10 scale. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 7.

Socialising with other runners was rated highest (M = 8.41, SD = 1.70), followed by improving physical fitness (M = 7.53, SD = 1.64), reducing daily stress (M = 7.05, SD = 1.93), and an attractive physical environment (M = 7.03, SD = 1.85). Paired-samples t-tests confirmed that socialising was rated significantly higher than each of the other three factors: improving physical fitness, $t(185) = 4.787$, $p < .001$, reducing daily stress, $t(185) = 8.075$, $p < .001$, and an attractive physical environment, $t(185) = 8.600$, $p < .001$. These findings suggest that the primary driver of run club enjoyment is the community dimension, indicating that participants experience these events primarily as social occasions rather than purely physical workouts.

Table 7. Primary Drivers of Participation Enjoyment

Enjoyment driver	M	SD	vs. Socialising: t(185)	p
Socialising with other runners	8.41	1.70	—	—
Improving physical fitness	7.53	1.64	4.787	< .001
Reducing daily stress	7.05	1.93	8.075	< .001
An attractive physical environment	7.03	1.85	8.600	< .001

Note. *Rated on 1–10 scale (1 = does not contribute at all, 10 = contributes significantly). Paired-samples t-tests compare each factor against socialising with other runners.*

4.5.2 Participation Frequency & Recency

Two one-way ANOVAs were conducted within the participation subsample (n = 186) to examine whether the number of times respondents had attended their run club (Table 8) and the time elapsed since their last visit (Table 9) were associated with differences in wellbeing and brand equity.

Regarding participation frequency, respondents were grouped into five levels: once, 2–3 times, 4–5 times, 6–8 times, and 9 or more times. Wellbeing did not differ significantly across frequency groups, $F(4, 181) = 0.40$, $p = .811$, with means ranging narrowly from M = 7.93 to M = 8.18. Brand equity, by contrast, differed significantly across frequency tiers, $F(4, 181) = 8.52$, $p < .001$, scaling from M = 4.69 among first-time attendees to M = 5.95 among those who had attended nine or more times. These results suggest that the wellbeing effect is

uniformly present regardless of how often a person attends, while brand equity is progressively higher with repeated participation.

Table 8. Wellbeing and Brand Equity by Participation Frequency

Participation frequency	n	Wellbeing M	SD	Brand Equity M	SD
Once	28	7.93	1.03	4.69	1.10
2–3 times	40	8.01	0.84	5.19	0.91
4–5 times	61	7.95	1.12	5.36	0.93
6–8 times	29	8.13	0.73	5.78	1.48
9 or more times	28	8.18	1.05	5.95	0.75

Note. *One-way ANOVAs. Wellbeing on 1–10 scale; brand equity on 1–7 scale.*

Regarding recency, respondents were grouped by time since their last participation: within the past week, past month, past three months, past six months, past year, and more than a year ago. Wellbeing did not differ significantly across recency groups, $F(5, 180) = 1.50$, $p = .191$, varying from $M = 8.08$ to $M = 7.52$. Brand equity differed significantly, $F(5, 180) = 6.58$, $p < .001$, with scores ranging from $M = 5.58$ among those who had participated within the past week to $M = 3.83$ among those whose last visit was more than a year ago. Together, these findings reveal an important asymmetry in the cross-sectional data: while wellbeing scores remain stable and do not show a statistically significant decline regardless of how much time has passed since a participant's last visit, brand equity scores are substantially lower among those with less recent participation.

Table 9. Wellbeing and Brand Equity by Recency of Last Participation

Participation recency	n	Wellbeing M	SD	Brand Equity M	SD
Within the past week	89	8.08	0.95	5.58	0.90
Within the past month	58	8.18	0.77	5.35	1.04
Within the past 3 months	17	7.69	1.35	5.53	0.62
Within the past 6 months	11	7.68	0.74	4.99	0.70
Within the past year	5	7.60	1.56	4.15	0.64
More than a year ago	6	7.52	1.79	3.83	1.11

Note. *One-way ANOVAs. Wellbeing on 1–10 scale; brand equity on 1–7 scale.*

4.5.3 Category & Brand Analysis

To examine whether run club participation produced different brand equity effects depending on product category and individual brand, independent-samples t-tests were conducted

comparing participants and non-participants across all four brand equity dimensions. Category-level results are reported in Table 10, while a summary of brand-level results are reported in table 11. Full dimension-level results for all eight brands are reported in Appendix 5.

At the category level, participants recorded significantly higher scores across all four brand equity dimensions for both Sports Apparel & Footwear and Beverage, Food & Snacks brands (all $p < .001$). Effect sizes were systematically larger for Beverage, Food & Snacks brands across every dimension. The largest differences were observed for brand affect and connection (Sports: $d = 1.20$ vs. Beverage: $d = 1.94$) and brand awareness and associations (Sports: $d = 0.94$ vs. Beverage: $d = 1.64$). The smallest gap was on perceived quality (Sports: $d = 0.49$ vs. Beverage: $d = 1.32$).

This pattern reflects the substantially higher non-participant baseline scores for sports brands (*Awareness M*= 5.20, *Quality M*= 5.36) compared to beverage brands (*Awareness M* = 3.82, *Quality M* = 3.99), leaving less room for statistical divergence between the groups.

These results suggest that run clubs are associated with more pronounced discrepancies for beverage and food brands that have a lower non-participant average, whereas established sports brands show smaller between-group differences because their non-participant scores are already high.

Table 10. Brand Equity Dimensions by Category and Run Club Participation Status

Category / Dimension	Par M	Non M	Diff.	d	p
Sports Apparel & Footwear (participants n=98, non-participants n=84)					
Brand Loyalty	4.49	2.65	+1.84	1.22	< .001
Perceived Quality	5.87	5.36	+0.52	0.49	< .001
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.18	5.20	+0.98	0.94	< .001
Brand Affect & Connection	4.93	3.42	+1.50	1.20	< .001
Beverage, Food & Snacks (participants n=87, non- participants n=87)					
Brand Loyalty	4.65	2.38	+2.28	1.52	< .001
Perceived Quality	5.75	3.99	+1.76	1.32	< .001
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.19	3.82	+2.37	1.64	< .001
Brand Affect & Connection	5.01	2.63	+2.38	1.94	< .001

Note. *Means on 1–7 Likert scales. Cohen's d: small = .20, medium = .50, large = .80 (Cohen, 1990). Diff. = Participant M minus Non-participant M.*

At the brand level, participation was associated with significantly higher brand equity across most brands and dimensions, though with notable variation (see Appendix 5). Adidas was the clearest exception: no significant differences were found on perceived quality ($d = 0.03$, $p = .914$), brand awareness ($d = 0.07$, $p = .809$), or brand affect and connection ($d = 0.43$, $p = .152$), with only a marginal trend for loyalty ($d = 0.56$, $p = .066$), consistent with non-participant baseline scores already near the ceiling (awareness $M = 6.35$ out of 7). Among the remaining sports brands, New Balance, Lululemon, and Salomon showed large and significant between-group differences across loyalty, awareness, and brand affect and connection (all $p < .001$), though Salomon's perceived quality discrepancy was marginal ($d = 0.60$, $p = .058$), with non-participants already rating it at $M = 5.00$. Among beverage and food brands, Vitamin Well scored significantly higher among participants across all four dimensions, while Nocco showed significant differences on loyalty, awareness, and brand affect and connection but not on perceived quality ($d = 0.24$, $p = .441$). Mikkeller and Nicks produced the largest effects in the dataset, with Mikkeller's brand awareness more than three times higher among participants ($M = 6.44$) than non-participants ($M = 2.11$), yielding a $d = 4.12$, and effect sizes above 2.0 across all four dimensions for both brands (all $p < .001$). Taken together, these brand-level findings reinforce the category-level pattern: for smaller and lesser-known brands, run clubs are strongly associated with higher awareness and quality perceptions relative to non-participants, while for established high-awareness brands their primary distinction lies in stronger loyalty rather than broader new associations.

Table 11. Total Brand Equity by Brand and Participation Status

Brand	Par M	Non M	Diff.	d
Adidas (n=23 per group)	4.94	4.38	+0.57	0.35
New Balance (n=20 per group)	5.62	3.93	+1.69	1.68***
Lululemon (participants n=22, non n=21)	5.75	4.39	+1.37	1.46***
Salomon (participants n=22, non n=20)	5.45	3.54	+1.91	2.06***
Vitamin Well (participants n=21, non n=20)	5.29	3.97	+1.32	1.07***
Mikkeller (participants n=21, non n=22)	5.88	2.12	+3.76	3.82***†
Nocco (participants n=20, non n=23)	5.26	4.24	+1.02	1.11***
Nicks (n=22 per group)	5.36	2.48	+2.88	2.96***†

*Note. Means on 1–7 scale. *** p < .001. † Effect size likely inflated by non-participant unfamiliarity with the brand (see Section 4.5.3 and limitation in Section 5.4). Total brand equity calculated as mean of all 13 items across the four dimensions. Individual dimension results in Appendix 5.*

It should be noted, however, that the brand equity comparison is methodologically compromised for low-awareness brands such as Mikkeller and Nicks. Non-participants were randomly assigned these brands and asked to rate equity for brands they may never have encountered. The near-zero baseline awareness scores for non-participants assigned to these brands are therefore likely to reflect genuine unfamiliarity rather than the absence of run club participation. As a result, the very large effect sizes observed for Mikkeller and Nicks (e.g., brand awareness d = 4.12 and d = 2.85 respectively) almost certainly overstate the equity gap attributable to run club participation and should be interpreted with caution. The brand-level findings are most interpretable for brands that non-participants could plausibly be familiar with prior to the survey, such as Adidas, Lululemon, and Nocco.

5 Discussion

5.1 General Discussion of Main Findings

Connecting back to the introduction, the purpose of this study is to examine whether participation in a brand-facilitated run club increases consumer wellbeing and brand equity, and whether consumer wellbeing serves as the psychological mechanism mediating that commercial return. In short, how does facilitating a physical, recurring running community shape consumer attitudes toward the brand, and does the psychological fulfilment of the consumer explain this commercial gain?

The findings provide strong associative evidence in support of the proposed model. Participants in brand-facilitated run clubs report substantially higher consumer wellbeing and customer-based brand equity than non-participants, though the cross-sectional and non-randomised design means these differences should be interpreted as associations rather than established causal effects. Furthermore, the results confirm that this commercial gain operates through partial mediation. Wellbeing acts as a significant psychological mechanism bridging participation and brand equity, meaning brand equity accumulates through two simultaneous pathways: a direct effect from event attendance and community engagement, and an indirect pathway where the participant's enhanced wellbeing transfers back to the facilitating brand.

These findings follow the theoretical mechanisms outlined in Section 2. According to Self-Determination Theory, enduring wellbeing emerges as a natural outcome when the three needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy are satisfied simultaneously (Deci & Ryan,

2000, 2008). By demonstrating empirically that run club participation is significantly associated with higher overall wellbeing, the data support the theoretical assumption that the run club environment successfully provides the structural conditions necessary for need satisfaction. Furthermore, the exploratory finding that socialising with other runners is the primary driver of enjoyment highlights the power of relatedness within this environment. This aligns with Graupensperger et al. (2019), who identify the social structure of a session as a determinant of participant enjoyment, and is consistent with Temerak and Winklhofer's (2021) finding that the social environment acts as a major stimulus for engagement. While immediate enjoyment is distinct from enduring wellbeing, this finding reinforces the SDT premise that the social dimension acts as the primary driver of the experience, operating alongside the assumed structural supports for athletic progression and volitional participation.

The data also reveal that consumer wellbeing serves as a significant, partial, mediator between run club participation and brand equity. This finding of partial mediation accurately reflects the dual-pathway nature of physical experiential marketing. The direct pathway accounts for the majority of the equity gains, likely reflecting the associative effects of repeated brand exposure and product immersion, consistent with Keller (1993) and Zarantonello & Schmitt (2013). However, the significant indirect pathway aligns with image transfer theory (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). Because the brand acts as the visible architect of the social experience rather than just a passive logo, the positive psychological states generated by the activity transfer back to the brand. Together, these mechanisms form a cohesive model: while direct participation builds the associative foundation, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs generates durable wellbeing, which translates into a deeper, psychologically rooted form of brand equity.

Before turning to the theoretical contributions, we consider the conditions under which these effects are strongest, as revealed by the complementary analyses. Interestingly, while wellbeing remains consistently higher for participants, regardless of attendance frequency or recency, brand equity only accumulates with repeated participation and diminishes without recent visits. This aligns with Keller's (1993) assertion that repeated, continuous exposure is required to build strong, enduring brand associations in memory.

Furthermore, the data reveal that the difference in brand equity between participants and non-participants varies significantly depending on the brand's baseline market position. Consistent with Hoeffler and Keller (2003), brands with lower baseline awareness have more associative

room to benefit from experiential exposure. This explains the variance observed within both categories. Among the food and beverage brands, emerging names like Mikkeller and Nicks produced substantial differences in brand equity, whereas more established brands like Vitamin Well and Nocco saw smaller comparative gains. This same ceiling effect was visible within the endemic sportswear category, where New Balance generated higher brand equity differences than the market-dominant Adidas, demonstrating that even functionally relevant brands benefit more when they have greater associative room to grow (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003).

Beyond baseline awareness, the outsized gains for food and beverage brands can also be attributed to the multi-sensory nature of their event integration. Unlike sports apparel, which is primarily experienced visually through logos or observing other runners' gear, food and beverage sponsors offer physical product trials that engage the senses of taste and smell. Pine and Gilmore (1998) establish that the more senses an experience engages, the more effective and memorable it becomes. Furthermore, Gentile et al. (2007) demonstrate that when a product's core functionality is directly linked to a natural sense, such as taste for food and beverages, this sensorial component becomes a highly relevant driver of the consumer experience. This aligns with Krishna's (2011) conceptualisation of sensory marketing, which establishes that subconscious triggers appealing to the basic senses are often a more efficient way to engage consumers and shape their brand perceptions than explicit visual or verbal appeals. By allowing participants to physically consume the products after the run, these brands generate a multi-sensory brand experience at the point of consumption (Schmitt, 2011), which significantly amplifies the resulting brand equity compared to purely visual brand exposure.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to experiential marketing and sports sponsorship literature by shifting attention from passive or digital brand interactions to the psychological mechanisms that drive physical, recurring brand communities. These findings extend prior research by integrating Self-Determination Theory, image transfer theory, and customer-based brand equity into a unified explanatory framework, tested empirically in a community-based setting.

First, the study advances brand community and experiential marketing literature by demonstrating that consumer wellbeing serves as a mediating mechanism. While prior

research has acknowledged the value of physical brand communities, scholars have noted that consumer wellbeing remains largely absent as a metric in brand experience research (Yuan et al., 2026), and that models of customer engagement in physical participant sports are significantly underdeveloped relative to spectator sports or digital spaces (Chifamba et al., 2025). By providing empirical evidence of an associative pathway where wellbeing partially mediates the relationship between participation and brand equity, this study addresses that gap. It repositions wellbeing not as an incidental by-product of physical activity, but as a psychological pathway that translates community participation into commercial value.

Second, the findings expand upon Image Transfer Theory. Traditional models of image transfer (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999) suggest that the cognitive associations of an activity transfer to a co-present sponsor. This study demonstrates that in participatory and habituated settings, image transfer extends beyond cognitive associations to encompass affective states. Because the brand acts as the visible architect of the social infrastructure, rather than just a logo displayed alongside it, the enduring wellbeing psychological dimensions (happiness, meaningfulness, and richness) generated by the activity are encoded as positive associations with the brand. This refines the theory by showing that affective image transfer is an effective mechanism in participatory sports.

Third, the study contributes theoretically by bridging Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with commercial brand evaluation. By utilising SDT as a framework to explain why recurring, brand-facilitated physical communities generate wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and establishing this holistic wellbeing as a direct antecedent to customer-based brand equity, the study expands the traditional application of SDT within marketing science (Chifamba et al., 2025; Keller, 1993).

Finally, the finding that socialising with other runners is the primary driver of enjoyment, isolates the specific power of relatedness within this environment. Thus, reinforcing the principle that satisfying the need to belong is a fundamental driver of human behaviour (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). By fulfilling this social need, the brand transcends a traditional transactional role and establishes itself as a genuine relationship partner in the consumer's life (Fournier, 1998). Ultimately, this demonstrates that when a brand structurally facilitates environments supporting fundamental human psychological needs, the resulting psychological fulfilment is not only a public health benefit, but a mechanism for generating consumer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

5.3 Managerial Implications

The findings carry several important implications for brands and retail managers looking to invest in community-based experiential marketing initiatives.

The substantial commercial gains associated with run club participation demonstrate that these initiatives should be treated as strategic, long-term brand-building platforms rather than purely promotional events. Because socializing with other runners emerged as the strongest driver of participation enjoyment, surpassing even physical fitness, managers should prioritize social infrastructure over athletic intensity. Brands should intentionally design sessions to facilitate interpersonal connections, such as incorporating structured post-run mingles. Fostering this social environment is crucial, as it generates the psychological wellbeing that eventually translates into brand equity (Chifamba et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the results revealed that one-off participation does not maximize commercial returns. While participants report high wellbeing even after a single session, brand equity scores are progressively higher with repeated attendance and substantially lower among those whose participation is not recent. Brands should therefore avoid treating run clubs as short-term campaigns or seasonal pop-ups. To capture and sustain commercial value, managers should commit to habituated, recurring routines that keep the brand continuously embedded in the consumer's weekly lifestyle, thereby preventing the decay of positive brand associations.

From a strategic standpoint, the category-specific findings highlight the importance of aligning community investments with the brand's existing market position. The data show that non-endemic brands (e.g., food and beverage) experience the highest relative gains in brand equity, making run clubs effective acquisition tools for building broad brand awareness and enhancing quality perceptions. To elevate this, managers of non-endemic brands should leverage their multi-sensory advantage by integrating product sampling into the event, engaging the senses of taste and smell at the point of consumption (Schmitt, 2011). Conversely, established endemic brands (e.g., sportswear) generally operate near the awareness ceiling. For these brands, the primary managerial objective of a run club should not be just exposure, but to focus on retention to deepen brand loyalty and emotional connection among the core target audience.

Finally, the mediating role of consumer wellbeing emphasizes the need for authentic and supportive brand integration. Since the psychological fulfilment participants experience is attributed to the facilitating brand, managers should ensure the brand's presence feels authentic to the running experience rather than overly commercial. By actively cultivating community and relatedness, rather than operating as a sponsor seeking visibility, brands can successfully foster the psychological states that reliably convert into long-term consumer-based brand equity (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study offers valuable insights into how brand-facilitated run clubs influence commercial and psychological outcomes, it is not without limitations. Acknowledging these limitations is important, as they highlight directions for future research.

First, the study relies on a cross-sectional comparative design. While this successfully establishes the presence of wellbeing and brand equity differences between participants and non-participants, it captures a single snapshot in time. Consequently, it cannot definitively track how these constructs evolve. This limitation applies to our participation recency finding. While we find that participants who attended more recently report higher equity, there is an alternative explanation for this pattern. Instead of brand equity actively wearing off over time, it is possible that these individuals possessed a lower baseline brand equity to begin with, causing them to stop attending earlier. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal tracking to measure participants over several months, mapping the exact trajectory of how wellbeing and brand equity accumulate from a participant's first session to long-term community integration.

Second, because it was not possible to randomly assign people to run club participation, the study utilized naturally occurring groups. Although demographic covariates were included to isolate the effect of participation, a degree of residual self-selection bias cannot be entirely ruled out. It is possible that individuals who choose to join a run club possess baseline traits, such as higher extraversion or inherent brand affinity, that influence the outcomes. Future experimental studies could randomly assign individuals to a run club versus a control activity to strictly establish causality.

Third, the geographic and cultural scope of the study is limited. The empirical focus primarily centred on eight core brands facilitating run clubs specifically in the Stockholm region. The

findings reflect a specific cultural context where running and active lifestyles are highly normalized. Consequently, the results may not generalize identically to markets with different fitness cultures, social norms, or public health landscapes. Future research could replicate this study across diverse global markets to verify if these psychological and commercial mechanisms hold universally. Related to this brand focus, it should also be noted that in the aggregate hypothesis testing (H1 - H3), the participant group included 15 individuals who nominated non-core brands, whereas the non-participant group only evaluated the eight core brands. Given that these 15 responses constitute a small fraction of the participant sample, and that the brand-level analysis (Section 4.5.3) isolates the eight core brands with equally significant results, this slight asymmetry in the aggregate model is highly unlikely to have skewed the overarching findings.

Fourth, the research focused on brands within the sports apparel, footwear, food, and beverage categories. While these are the most prevalent facilitators of run clubs in this context, it remains unclear whether these effects transfer to non-endemic corporate brands outside the health and lifestyle sectors (e.g., technology or financial services). Future studies could usefully examine whether the same wellbeing and image transfer mechanisms operate when highly non-endemic brands attempt to build physical communities. A related validity concern applies specifically to the brand-level analysis in Section 4.5.3. By randomly assigning non-participants to one of eight brands, the study introduced an experimental element into an otherwise observational design. For brands with low prior market awareness, most notably Mikkeller and Nicks, non-participants were effectively asked to rate equity for brands they had never heard of, producing low baseline scores. This means the large between-group differences observed for these brands are likely attributable at least in part to baseline unfamiliarity rather than to the presence or absence of run club participation. Future research should consider designs that match participants and non-participants on prior brand awareness, or that restrict brand equity comparisons to brands with established pre-existing consumer familiarity.

Fifth, while this study utilises Self-Determination Theory to explain the psychological mechanisms at play, the SDT-based explanation is a theoretical assumption rather than an empirically tested finding. The study captured evidence consistent with the relatedness need through the finding that socialising with other runners was the primary driver of enjoyment. However, competence and autonomy were not formally measured, meaning the claim that the run club satisfies all three psychological needs simultaneously relies on theoretical reasoning

rather than direct empirical support. The SDT framework thus functions as an explanatory lens rather than a fully validated mechanism. Future research should incorporate validated scales for all three SDT needs to empirically isolate which specific psychological driver has the strongest effect on wellbeing and subsequent brand equity. Furthermore, because the wellbeing measure captures overall life wellbeing rather than a brand-specific psychological state, the mediation model rests on the assumption that general wellbeing improvements are at least partially attributable to run club participation: an assumption that, while theoretically grounded, cannot be empirically isolated with the current cross-sectional design.

Sixth, both wellbeing and brand equity were measured through self-report scales, which introduces the possibility of social desirability bias and cognitive dissonance effects. Participants who have actively invested time in a run club may be motivated to report more favourable brand evaluations to remain consistent with that behavioural commitment. Future research could complement self-report measures with behavioural indicators of brand equity, such as observed purchase behaviour or willingness to pay.

Taken together, these limitations suggest multiple avenues for future research. Studies can extend the current findings, refine theoretical models of experiential marketing, and further explore the psychological drivers of physical brand communities. Organisations cannot assume that community initiatives automatically generate equity; understanding the precise boundaries and developmental arcs of these effects remains an important endeavour for both scholars and practitioners.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Mikkeller Run Club Visit

apr.
28
tis

3 idrottare har anmält sitt deltagande

MRC Tuesday

tisdag 28 april 2026 6:00 PM

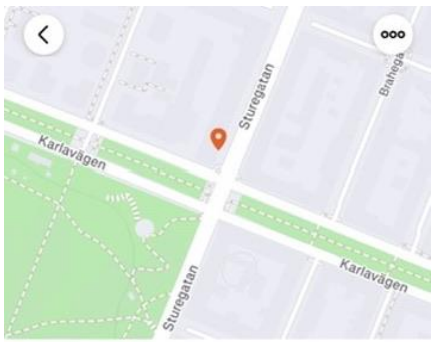
Sport
Löpning

Format
Socialt evenemang

Om

Join our weekly runs at Mikkeller Bar.
We meet upstairs in the bar (or in the new basement), bagdrop possible. Join us a few minutes before 18:00 if you want to drop your bag.

Appendix 2. Vitamin Well Run Club Visit



apr.
29
ons

64 idrottare har anmält sitt deltagande

Run Well in Stockholm

onsdag 29 april 2026 5:30 PM

Sport
Löpning

Format
Socialt evenemang

Om

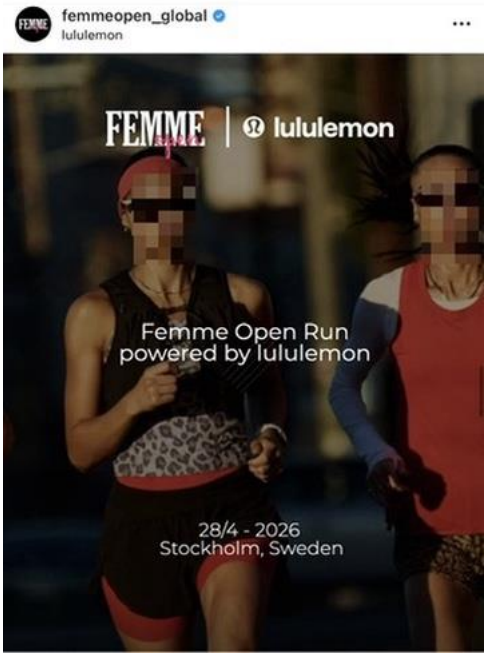
Varmt välkommen till Run Well - ett socialt och engagerande löppass som hålls av Vitamin Well för alla löpsugna.

Appendix 3. Run Clubs contacted for the top 8 brands

Adidas:

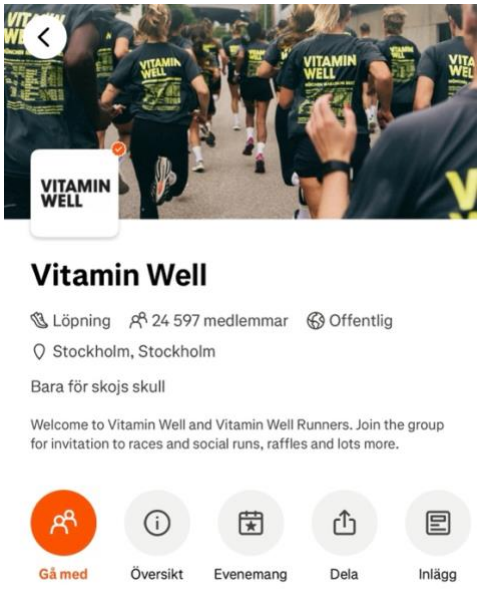
New Balance:

Lululemon:



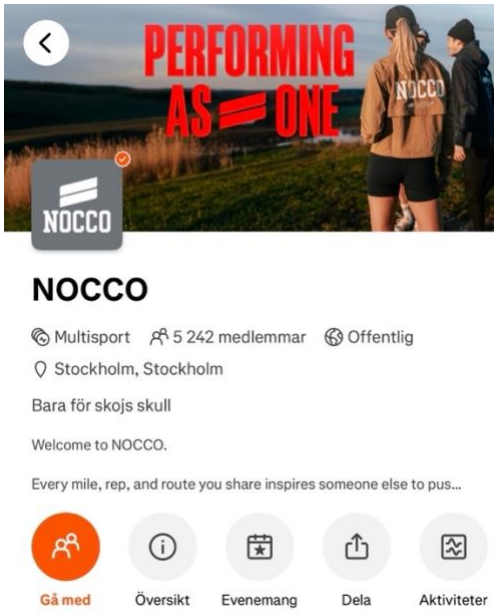
Salomon:

Vitamin Well:

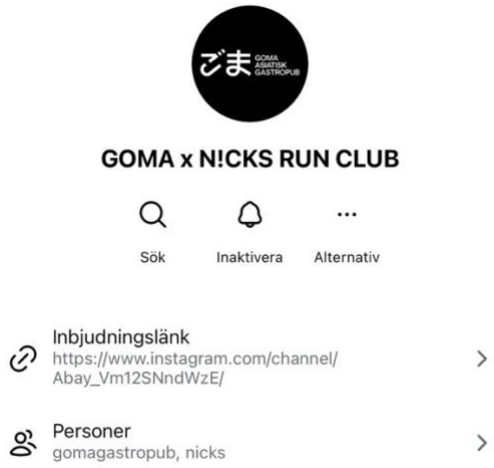


Mikkeller:

Nocco:


PERFORMING
AS ONE
NOCCO
NOCCO
Multisport
5 242 medlemmar
Offentlig
Stockholm, Stockholm
Bara för skojs skull
Welcome to NOCCO.
Every mile, rep, and route you share inspires someone else to pus...
Gå med
Översikt
Evenemang
Dela
Aktiviteter

Nicks:


GOMA x N!CKS RUN CLUB
Sök
Inaktivera
Alternativ
Inbjudningslänk
https://www.instagram.com/channel/Abay_Vm12SNndWzE/
Personer
gomagastropub, nicks

Appendix 4. Demographics by Group

Demographic	**Participants** (n = 186)	**Non-participants** (n = 171)
Gender		
Female	58.6%	47.4%
Male	41.4%	52.6%
Age		
18–24	47.3%	81.9%
25–34	34.9%	11.1%
35–44	10.8%	1.8%
45+	7.0%	5.3%
Primary Occupation		
Student	36.0%	69.6%
Employed (full- or part-time)	54.8%	26.3%
Self-employed	5.9%	1.8%
Other	3.2%	2.3%
Living Situation		
Single household	50.0%	43.3%
Living with roommates	10.2%	15.8%
Partner/married	32.8%	17.5%
Living with parents	7.0%	23.4%
Annual Income (SEK)		
0 – 200,000	37.6%	71.3%
200,001 – 500,000	36.0%	18.7%
500,001 or more	26.3%	9.9%

Appendix 5. Brand Equity Dimensions by Brand and Participation Status

Brand / Dimension	Par M	Non M	Diff.	d	p
Adidas (n=23 per group)					
Brand Loyalty	4.07	3.17	+0.90	0.56	.066
Perceived Quality	5.37	5.33	+0.04	0.03	.914
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.39	6.35	+0.04	0.07	.809
Brand Affect & Connection	4.30	3.64	+0.67	0.43	.152
New Balance (n=20 per group)					
Brand Loyalty	4.77	2.35	+2.42	1.63	< .001
Perceived Quality	6.10	5.23	+0.88	1.06	.002
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.44	5.30	+1.10	1.53	< .001
Brand Affect & Connection	5.28	3.23	+2.05	2.01	< .001
Lululemon (participants n=22, non-participants n=21)					
Brand Loyalty	5.05	3.25	+1.79	1.26	< .001
Perceived Quality	6.05	5.29	+0.76	0.86	.004
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.16	5.12	+1.04	1.09	< .001
Brand Affect & Connection	5.45	3.70	+1.76	1.59	< .001
Salomon (participants n=22, non-participants n=20)					
Brand Loyalty	4.55	1.73	+2.81	2.44	< .001
Perceived Quality	6.16	5.00	+1.16	0.60	.058†
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.02	3.84	+2.18	2.30	< .001
Brand Affect & Connection	4.94	3.08	+1.86	1.93	< .001
Vitamin Well (participants n=21, non-participants n=20)					
Brand Loyalty	4.22	3.28	+0.94	0.55	.044
Perceived Quality	5.79	4.63	+1.16	0.92	.003
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.04	4.91	+1.13	1.20	< .001
Brand Affect & Connection	4.87	3.03	+1.84	1.40	< .001
Mikkeller (participants n=21, non-participants n=22)					
Brand Loyalty	4.89	1.32	+3.57	2.97	< .001
Perceived Quality	6.00	2.98	+3.02	2.40	< .001
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.44	2.11	+4.33	4.12	< .001
Brand Affect & Connection	5.75	1.83	+3.91	3.81	< .001
Nocco (participants n=20, non-participants n=23)					
Brand Loyalty	4.83	3.38	+1.46	1.06	.001
Perceived Quality	5.25	4.98	+0.27	0.24	.441
Brand Awareness & Associations	6.26	5.58	+0.68	0.78	.007
Brand Affect & Connection	4.65	3.22	+1.43	1.45	< .001
Nicks (n=22 per group)					
Brand Loyalty	4.74	1.56	+3.18	3.00	< .001
Perceived Quality	5.93	3.41	+2.52	2.20	< .001
Brand Awareness & Associations	5.91	2.70	+3.21	2.85	< .001
Brand Affect & Connection	4.82	2.44	+2.38	2.25	< .001

Note. Independent-samples t-tests. Means on 1–7 Likert scales. Cohen's d: small = .20, medium = .50, large = .80 (Cohen, 1990). Non-significant results: Adidas quality/awareness/affect (all p > .05); Adidas loyalty p = .066 (marginal); Salomon quality p = .058 (marginal); Nocco quality p = .441.

Appendix 6. AI Disclosure

This thesis utilised several AI tools in strictly supportive roles, consistent with the SSE Artificial Intelligence Policy. The tools used were Claude, Gemini, SciSpace, and the SSE Library's AI research assistant.

SciSpace and the SSE Library's AI research assistant were used during the early stages of the project to assist with scope exploration, helping us map the landscape of relevant research areas and identify potentially useful topics. An important limitation we encountered was that AI-recommended literature was not always directly relevant to our research scope. Our approach to managing this risk was to treat AI suggestions with caution. For instance, when a recommended paper was not applicable to our research, we examined its reference list manually to identify cited works that were more directly applicable to our study. All sources included in this thesis were independently read, assessed, and verified by the authors before inclusion.

Claude and Gemini were used for language-related support, specifically to assist with structuring and organising certain paragraphs and to check wording and phrasing for clarity. Neither tool was used to generate the content. Additionally, Gemini was utilised as a technical guide during the quantitative phase, providing step-by-step instructions on how to execute specific statistical tests in SPSS. Importantly, while AI provided software instructions, all theoretical reasoning, research design decisions, the actual execution of the data analysis, and the interpretation of the results were carried out entirely by the authors.

Using AI in this process taught us to treat these tools as research assistants rather than research authorities, useful for orientation and clarity, but requiring consistent critical oversight to ensure that the intellectual work remained our own.

Appendix 7. Survey questions

Q#	Construct Measured	Target Group	Question Text	Response Scale / Options
Q1	Screening	Everyone	Have you participated in any run clubs or running events organized or sponsored by a brand?	• Yes • No
Q2	Brand Identification	Participants	Think about the primary sponsored run club or running events you have participated in. What category does the sponsoring brand belong to?	• Sports Apparel & Footwear • Beverage, Food & Snacks • Other
Q3	Brand Identification	Participants	Please write the specific name of this (1) brand below. (Please choose 1 brand ONLY)	*[Open text field]*
Q4	Baseline Activity	Non-Participants	On average, how often do you run?	• Never • 1-3 times a month • 1-2 times a week • 3-4 times a week • 5 or more times a week
Q5	Participation Frequency	Participants	Approximately how many times have you participated in a run club or running event organized or sponsored by [brand]?	• Once • 2-3 times • 4-5 times • 6-8 times • 9 times or more
Q6	Participation Recency	Participants	When was the last time you participated in a run club or running event organized or sponsored by [brand]?	• Within the past week • Within the past month • Within the past 3 months • Within the past 6 months • Within the past year • More than a year ago
Q7-Q10	**General Wellbeing** *(CWWH Index)*	Everyone	Where would you place your life right now, on a scale from 1 to 10? How happy do you feel overall, on a scale from 1 to 10? How meaningful does your life feel overall, on a scale from 1 to 10? How rich does your life feel overall, on a scale from 1 to 10?	1–10 Scale *(Anchors vary per item, e.g., 1 = Worst possible life, 10 = Best possible life)*

Q11-Q13	Run Club Contribution to Wellbeing	Participants	On a scale from 1 to 10, please indicate how much you think your participation in the [brand] run club or running events contribute to your: • **Happiness** • **Meaningfulness** • **Richness**	1–10 Scale *(1 = Does not contribute at all, 10 = Contributes significantly)*
Q14-Q17	Drivers of Enjoyment	Participants	On a scale from 1 to 10, to what extent do the following factors contribute to your level of enjoyment when participating in the [brand] run club or running events? • **Socializing with other runners** • **Improving my physical fitness** • **An attractive physical environment** • **Reducing daily stress**	1–10 Scale *(1 = Does not contribute at all, 10 = Contributes significantly)*
Q18-Q20	**Brand Loyalty** *(Yoo & Donthu)*	Everyone	Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements regarding [brand], on a scale from 1 to 7: • **I consider myself to be loyal to [brand].** • **[brand] would be my first choice among competitors.** • **I will not buy from other brands if [brand] is available at the store.**	1–7 Likert Scale *(1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)*
Q21-Q22	**Perceived Quality** *(Yoo & Donthu)*	Everyone	Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements regarding [brand], on a scale from 1 to 7: • **The likely quality of [brand] is extremely high.** • **The likelihood that [brand] will be functional is very high.**	1–7 Likert Scale *(1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)*
Q23	Attention Check	Everyone	To demonstrate that you are reading the questions carefully, please select 2.	• 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7
Q24-Q28	**Brand Awareness & Associations** *(Yoo & Donthu)*	Everyone	Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements regarding [brand], on a scale from 1 to 7: • **I can recognise [brand] among other competing brands.** • **I am aware of [brand].** • **Some characteristics of [brand] come to my mind quickly.** • **I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of [brand].** • **I can easily imagine [brand] in my mind.**	1–7 Likert Scale *(1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)*

Q29-Q31	**Brand Affect & Connection** *(Brakus / Park)*	Everyone	Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements regarding [brand], on a scale from 1 to 7: • **Interacting with [brand] makes me feel good.** • **I feel a strong positive emotion when I think about [brand].** • **I feel a personal connection to [brand].**	1–7 Likert Scale *(1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)*
Q32	Demographics	Everyone	What is your age?	• Under 18; 18-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65+
Q33	Demographics	Everyone	What is your gender?	• Male • Female • Non-binary / third gender • Prefer not to say
Q34	Demographics	Everyone	What is your current primary occupation?	• Student • Employed (Full-time or Part-time) • Self-employed • Unemployed / Job seeking • Other
Q35	Demographics	Everyone	What is your current living situation?	• Living with parents • Single household • Living with roommates • Partner/married without kids in the household • Partner/married with kids in the household
Q36	Demographics	Everyone	What is your current or highest completed education?	• Primary school • Upper secondary school • Higher education
Q37	Demographics	Everyone	How would you rate your physical health on a scale from 1-10?	1–10 Scale *(1 = Worst possible, 10 = Best possible)*
Q38	Demographics	Everyone	What's your annual income (SEK)?	• 0-100 000 • 100 001-200 000 • 200 001-300 000 • 300 001-400 000

	• 400 001-500 000 • 500 001-600 000 • 600 001-700 000 • 700 001-800 000 • 800 001 or more