

Beyond a Footrace: Ultramarathon as a Liminoid Performance

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the experience of becoming an ultramarathoner and the codes of ultramarathon culture in Turkey through the lenses of symbolic and interpretive anthropology and performance studies. It identifies the meaning, value, and significance of ultramarathons for runners, and presents an ethnographic description of ultramarathon racing. The anthropological fieldwork was conducted from April 2018 to March 2022, employing in-person and online interviews, and participant observations at İznik Ultra Marathon, Salomon Cappadocia Ultra-Trail and Uludağ Premium Ultra Trail organizations. In total 28 in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 ultramarathoners (13 men and 9 women), ranging in age from 34 to 60 years old, from İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Adana and Eskişehir. The results have shown that running ultramarathons is far beyond a pass time activity for recreational runners. It is an integral element of their identity and a lifestyle choice for them. Ultrarunning is an additional social space in their lives outside of the home and work environments. It gives ultrarunners a breathing space away from crowded city life, providing them with uninterrupted space for thinking and contemplation in nature. It turns into a vehicle for pushing their limits and seeing what they are truly capable of. It allows them to thrive physically, mentally, and spiritually, ultimately reinforcing their adherence to the neoliberal structure. The present study also revealed insights into the dynamics of ultramarathon races and the cultural norms, values and characteristics of the ultramarathon community.

Keywords: Communitas; liminality; liminoid; performance; ultramarathon

INTRODUCTION

In the earliest stages of human life, running follows shortly after crawling and walking. Running is one of the basic bodily motions that our ancestors needed for hunting. From the first humans until today, running has been one of the essential components of human existence. Heinrich (2009) positions running more of a cultural phenomenon than a biological capacity of human beings. Prior to the 1970s, marathon running (42.2 km) was a competitive event mostly for serious athletes. In 1970s, number of distance-running events as well as number of running or jogging people were exploded. Following the commoditization of marathons, running marathons lost its position of 'genuinely impressive feat of human' especially in the West and almost became a standard level of sporting achievement for many recreational runners. In the 'post-marathon' era, extreme endurance sporting events like ultratriathlons, ultra distance cycling, and ultramarathons have taken over the legacy of the marathon, and they have been growing exponentially across the globe (Eren, 2017). From 2011 to 2016, the number of people who finished an ultramarathon in the world was doubled. More than one hundred thousand ultrarunners compete in more than a thousand ultramarathon races around the world (Waśkiewicz, et al., 2019). Participation to ultramarathon races has increased exponentially by 345% from 137,234 participants in 2009 to 611,098 participants in 2018 (Ronto, 2021).

Ultramarathon refers to any running event longer than marathon distance (42.195 km) that occurs over a single day or multiple days in any terrain and surface (Scheer, 2019). Ultramarathons are organised all around the world, often in locations placing physiological stress and demands on the human body (Hoffman, et al., 2014). Ultramarathons are run on surfaces like scree, rocky, muddy, sandy, salt flats or in extreme weather conditions ranging from 50 °C in the Sahara Desert to -40 °C in the Yukon. The most common ultramarathon distances are 50 km, 50 miles, 100 km, and 100 miles. 50 km is the most popular ultra distance worldwide, just above the marathon distance and widely accepted as the entry level for ultramarathons (Scheer, 2019). An ultramarathon race can be single-stage or multi-staged. In multi-stage format, a race is broken into specific, shorter segments to be completed over multiple days, e.g., Marathon De Sables at Sahara Desert is a six-day, 251 km ultramarathon. Ultramarathons are either distance-limited runs measured in kilometres

or miles, or timed races measured in hours or days. Timed ultramarathons are held as 6-hour, 12-hour, 24-hour, 48-hour, 72-hour, 6-day, and 10-day races. In a timed race, the goal is to cover the longest distance within a given time. The most frequently performed ultramarathons are distance-limited events, where runners are expected to run a specific distance in a set time. Ultramarathons are run on marked courses. The progress of ultramarathoners on the racecourse is tracked by the race organiser at checkpoints. A checkpoint (CP) is a temporary control station in ultramarathons where the event organiser records the runner's arrival time at a specific location on the racecourse.

Demographic analysis of ultramarathoners reveals a typical ultra-marathoner as male, married, well-educated, and ~45 years old (Knechtle & Nikolaidis, 2018). Approximately 70% of ultrarunners are in their 30s and 40s. The female runners constitute only 23% of the ultramarathon race participants worldwide (Ronto, 2021).

Ultramarathon is an emerging footrace category in Turkey and ultramarathon organisations have been growing since their introduction to Turkish sports arena in 2010. The first official ultramarathon event, Lycian Way Ultramarathon, was a multi-stage race (250K in 6 days) held in 2010 in southwestern Turkey, at ancient Lycian region (Damcı, 2018). One year later, first single-stage official ultramarathon race, Sigma Cam 50K Ultramarathon was organised in Çekmeköy İstanbul (Çelikbaş, 2011). The number of ultramarathon events has grown over the years and in 2022 reached 30 events hosting 47 ultramarathon races (Team Run.Bo, 2022; Deutsche Ultramarathon Vereinigung, 2022). The longest ultramarathon distance in Turkey is 160 kilometers.

Preparation for ultramarathons requires long hours of training, often in solitude. Given the demanding nature of ultramarathons, ultrarunners place a high priority on mental training and prepare themselves to acquire the necessary mental toughness to be able to deal with unpredictable course and weather conditions as well as their physical and psychological conditions (Simpson et al., 2014, p. 180). For ultramarathoners, mental toughness is the embodiment of persistence, ability to cope with physical fatigue or perceived exertion, and managing a positive self-talk in such demanding times, physical and psychological awareness, ability to being flexible, and commitment to the goal relentlessly (Jaeschke et al., 2016, p. 248). The acceptance of suffering in sports is unique compared to other spheres of social life. In sports, it is an “accepted by-product”, almost sought after by athletes, and

can serve as a tool for self-discovery and enhancement of self (Roessler, 2005). Pain, injuries or suffering are inevitable components of ultramarathon running. Lev (2019) argues that getting pleasure from physical discomfort and pain while long-distance running is not a spontaneous outcome, but rather a complex social process that requires learning. Le Breton (2000) suggests that people participating in extreme physical and sporting activities look for intensity of feeling and reinforcing their will-power.

Ultramarathoners spend substantial time and energy on training for ultramarathon races in their free time. They learn and rehearse running techniques that will help them to perform and help prevent injuries on different types of terrain. They develop race-specific strategies with no major expectation of winning a prize. Ultramarathon running can be classified as "serious leisure" activity through the lens of leisure studies (Lee, et al., 2016, p. 491). Serious leisure is "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity. It is sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling for the participant to find a career there by acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (Stebbins, 2014, p. 4).

Running has long been known to give trance-like state, providing significant emotional or mental benefits, including stress reduction, mood and self-image improvement, and enhanced creative thinking (Callen, 1983). The studies show that ultramarathon runners have high levels of intrinsic motivation; life meaning, and affiliation are particularly important source of motivations for running ultramarathons, whilst recognition and competition are not driving forces for running ultra distances (Hoffman & Krouse, 2018 ; Waśkiewicz et al., 2019). Running ultramarathons is associated with a psychological drive to explore physical and mental limits (Roebucka, et al., 2018). Ultramarathoners tend to be highly task oriented and relatively low for ego orientation with their running (Hoffman & Krouse, 2018). Hanold (2016) considered ultrarunning practices as "visible markers of the ideal citizen in a neoliberal context" (p. 181). Eren (2017) pointed out the link between neoliberalism and the rise of endurance sports with the changing context of labour.

There is limited amount of scholarly research on ultramarathon running in Turkey. It is a relatively new field of study, and no previous research was conducted from anthropological lens to explore the experiences of these recreational athletes and their community. This research aimed to fill this gap in the literature and set out to understand the experience of

becoming an ultramarathoner and the emerging ultramarathon culture in Turkey. It explored the components of ultramarathoner identity, the meaning of ultramarathon running for individuals, the motivations, benefits, and rewards of taking part in ultramarathons, the impact of ultramarathon running on ultrarunners' lives, and the cultural behaviours and norms of the ultramarathon community in Turkey.

The research is based on a qualitative research approach employing anthropological data collection methods. It was undertaken over a 4-year period using a variety of qualitative data sources, most notably participant observation, in-depth interviews, and digital ethnography. The anthropological fieldwork was conducted from April 2018 to March 2022. In three ultramarathon organizations (İzник Ultra Marathon, Salomon Cappadocia Ultra Trail and Uludağ Premium Ultra Trail), a total of ten ultramarathon distance races were observed, ranging from 55 km to 160 km. The field sites were chosen based on the criteria of total contestant numbers, geographical features of the racecourse, the presence of ultramarathon distances below and above 100K.

A total of 28 in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 participants (13 male and 9 female) in a variety of offline and online settings including coffee shops, participant's workplace, video conference (Zoom, Google Meet) and phone calls. The participants were recruited from amateur athletes for whom sport is not a source of income, range in age from 34 to 60, living in İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Adana, and Eskişehir. They had a diverse experience in ultramarathon running with respect to type of race (i.e., single-stage vs multi-stage, distance-limited vs. timed ultramarathons), race location (raced only in Turkey vs. raced both in Turkey and outside Turkey), and maximum race distance (50K vs 240K).³⁴ to 60. The sample was selected on the basis of participation to İzник Ultra or Cappadocia Ultra Trail races at ultramarathon distances. Snowball and judgement sampling were employed. The interviews ranged in length from 60 to 150 minutes and the arrangement of questions was tailored to the respondent's unique circumstances. The final number of participants was determined by data saturation, which occurred when information obtained in interviews became redundant. During the race observations, short interviews were also conducted with race crew, aid station volunteers, race photographers, race medical team members, ultrarunners' crew and relatives, race presenter, marathon fair vendors and

villagers. Informal in-depth interviews were conducted with a partially structured interview approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ultramarathon is any footrace longer than the standard 42.195-km marathon distance (Scheer, 2019). Although any individual who completes an ultramarathon successfully is officially counted as an ultramarathoner, from the research what qualifies an individual as an ultramarathoner came out as a subject of debate among ultrarunners. For some, running beyond 42.2 km makes a runner an ultramarathoner, whereas some argued that it only starts with performing at 100 km and beyond. The research results indicated that, despite the lack of consensus, ultrarunners agreed on the fact that finishing an ultramarathon race is not sufficient to qualify as an ultrarunner. According to ultramarathoners, in addition to running ultra distances, being an ultrarunner requires possession of an ethos and culture that are shared by the community's members. An ultramarathoner is expected to have a variety of qualities and values including self-motivated, solution-oriented, open to learning, self-sufficient, self-controlled, persistent, resilient, patient, committed, adaptable, determined, taking full-responsibility of their results regardless of the external conditions, competing with oneself-not with others, being supportive to fellow runners, respectful to nature, humble, and easy going.

The research identified that ultramarathon running has a cyclical nature in ultrarunners' lives. The cycle is initiated with the choice of an ultramarathon race. After they prepare for and perform in an ultramarathon, a new cycle of ultramarathon performance commences. Ultramarathon races are an essential source of motivation for ultrarunners to be able to set running goals and train rigorously for them. Seasoned ultrarunners tend to create a race calendar early in the year, some even before the year starts, driven by their ultramarathon goals. Running an ultramarathon is a highly demanding physical activity with numerous variables impacting its performance. According to Schechner (2020), the performance process sequence consists of proto-performance, performance and aftermath (p. 38). Proto-performance is a stage where performers discover the action of the performance through training, workshops and rehearsal (Schechner, 1985). A good performance often requires thorough planning and elaborate rehearsals, which gives rise to a performance. Running an

ultramarathon requires developing requisite skills over a prolonged training period. The distance, altitude, elevation, and terrain profile of a race have a significant impact on the intensity and duration of ultramarathoners' preparation phase. Ultrarunners develop a tailor-made strategy for every race and train both their bodies and minds to be prepared for the challenges. For a regular runner, the typical training period for an ultramarathon is between 12 and 16 weeks. Schechner (1985) asserts that there is no free or easy performance behaviour, and they are either known or practised behaviour which he refers to as 'twice-behaved behaviour' and/or 'restored behaviour' (p. 118). According to him, all behaviours are reconstructions or reconfigurations of already behaved actions. Running an ultramarathon, whether it is a first-time experience on a racecourse or not, involves both known and practised behaviour. Their performance is the reconstruction or reconfiguration of already behaved actions during training runs or past races.

Following months of preparation, ultrarunners finally transition into the public performance stage which encompasses warm-up, performance, and cooldown. The warm-up helps performers transition into performing (Schechner, 2020, p. 51). Ultrarunners start warming up while packing up for the race, and continue it with picking up the race kit and socializing with other ultrarunners at the marathon fair or race registration office. Schechner defines every performance as a liminal time, and the warm-up is a leap from the ordinary side of life to the performance (Schechner, 2020, p. 51). The start line is a threshold that separates ultrarunners from their families, friends, daily chores, and usual urban settings. The flow of an ultramarathon event is straightforward. The runners are expected to proceed from one checkpoint to the next on a marked course at a predetermined time. During a race, ultrarunners experience many stressors. Injuries, cramping, blisters, chafing, gastrointestinal tract problems such as bloating, belching, stomach pain, the urge to vomit, vomiting, and nausea are among the common medical issues runners experience due to the extreme physical demands of these events place on participants. Aid stations are temporary settlements in a race, where ultrarunners are usually offered a place to sit, access food, drinks and medical care, and get rest in a supportive, friendly atmosphere. They operate within the time frame set by the race organizer. The layout of an aid stations is simple. A timing mat is laid on the ground at the entry to record check-in time to CP, tables are lined up to fill their tops with food and drinks, and chairs or benches are placed to

provide a resting area for runners. An aid station is more than just a physical location that ultrarunners meet their physiological needs. It is where runners recharge themselves both physically and mentally. It is a place for chatting with fellow runners to vent off the stress, hearing encouraging and motivating words from volunteers and fellow runners, boosting mood, finding a companion for the rest of the race, reconnecting with family and friends, doing an interim evaluation for the race performance, and reviewing the strategy for the rest of the course. The ultrarunners have mixed emotions as they approached the finish line. They transition from the unknown to the known, proving what they are capable of to themselves and the world. Finishing an ultramarathon, regardless of ranking, makes them feel successful. The end of the award ceremony marks the closure of the performance, like the 'curtain down' of a stage performance.

Once the performance comes to an end and the performer cool downs, evaluation. process commences. The third stage of performance process is called aftermath. It is the period of evaluation, critique, and memory reinforcing activities after a performance where ultramarathoners review the race with other ultrarunners, evaluate their race performance, take lessons from their mistakes, further develop their winning race strategies, post their race photos on social media, and write race reports to give a reference to ultrarunning community to benefit from. Schechner (1985) considers two types of performances: Performances transporting the performer and performances transforming the performer. (p. 130). He argues that each performance is a transportation, which takes the performer to a liminal space, a performative world, and when the performance over, the performer goes back to ordinary life, ending about the point where they started. However, a series of transformations may lead the performer to a transformation eventually. While some ultrarunners are slightly or not changed after an ultramarathon race, i.e., 'transported, there is a portion of runners who cross the finish line transformed; they meet with a new version of themselves. They become someone who left an old physical and/or a psychological barrier behind, and ready to use this new reference point in their daily life.

Every performance includes some form of ritualised behaviour, and ultramarathon running is no exception. Ultrarunners have their own rituals, which can be considered key elements of the ultramarathon culture. Traveling together and sharing a room, visiting a marathon fair to meet with other runners, counting back at the start line, cheering ultrarunners

arriving at or leaving the checkpoint, running the last couple of hundred metres to the finish line no matter how tired they are, posing with the race medal for the race photographer, and wearing the race t-shirt/fleece jacket after the race and hanging around with it are a few examples of these rituals. Having the race bib (competition number) means the public performance is only hours away. Wearing race-t-shirts from previous races functions as a means of communication among ultrarunners. It is a visual cue for highlighting their ultrarunning experience as if reading a line on their 'ultrarunning resumé'. Wearing such outfits has a particular function at the race expo or pasta party where the runners spend a long time together. It gives a hint to an inexperienced ultrarunner (either in ultrarunning or in a specific race) about who should be approached and heard about their experiences. The research revealed that ultramarathon running is a journey within and outside. Although ultramarathoners appear to be on a physical journey, a closer look at the ultrarunning phenomenon reveals that, in parallel, they are also on an internal journey, traversing their beliefs, experiences, relationships, and the meaning of their lives. For the sake of finding out their limits and seeking meaning in life, ultrarunners voluntarily and repeatedly embrace the gruelling conditions of ultramarathon running. Ultrarunners commit themselves to becoming limitless in facing difficulties to be able to find their limits, which move farther as they reach them. They make peace with pain and discomfort to create outstanding stories of willpower and self-government with their bodies. In the absence of an absolute limen (threshold) to cross, the ultrarunners aim to thrive for "becoming an ultramarathoner" instead of "being an ultramarathoner". The title "ultramarathoner" is structurally transitional and fluid, a multifaceted construct representing a way of life, almost an ideal form of existence that is hard to reach. Ultrarunning reflects an integral part of their identity and is a signature of their life view, shaping their lifestyle and social spheres. The ultramarathons they complete may lead to a transformation in their identity construct in varying degrees.

According to Turner and Turner (1978), liminal phenomena present their participants with situations outside their normal lives, breaking from the routines and repetitions of life, and stepping into a new status; the legitimacy of institutionalised statuses, roles, norms, and values of ordinary life is suspended. Turner (1982) characterises sport as a liminoid, a liminal-like, phenomenon like art performances. While social obligations are the source of

motivation for attending liminal activities, liminoid activities require a sense of voluntarism for participation. He identifies liminoid (liminal-like) phenomena as spectacular and frequently commodified performances, appealing to individuals or small set of individuals. Being a sporting activity, ultramarathons meet many of the criteria that Turner identified as liminoid. When the liminality properties were examined, in the context of ultramarathons, the most prominent observed characteristics included *communitas*, transition, homogeneity, equality, absence of status and rank, uniform clothing, minimization of gender differences, disregard for personal appearance, humility, simplicity, unselfishness, and acceptance of pain and suffering. In an ultramarathon, the arch and the race timing mat at the start line function as the *limen* (threshold), separating the ultrarunners from the liminoid (liminal-like) state that they are about to step into, where they leave their names, status, roles, routines, and responsibilities behind. All ultramarathoners are expected to adhere to the rules set by the event organizer, including the outfit they can wear and the gadgets they can carry; therefore, they all look similar in terms of what they wear and carry with them. Mud stains on their legs or body odour are perceived as normal. The number on the bib replaces the ultrarunner's name throughout the race; their names, titles, or status lose its significance. Ultramarathoners are exposed to both emotional and physical difficulties in liminal-like space. While undergoing ultramarathon experience, they face multiple adversities sourced from terrain and weather conditions as well as physiological problems. In this liminal-like space, hope and new possibilities go hand in hand with discomfort and despair. Ultramarathoners accept the conditions and instead of complaining about them, they focus on finding solutions to be able to make their way to the finish.

Liminoid events contain the potential for the development of an intense egalitarianism, social bonding, and comradeship among the participants, which is called *communitas* (Turner, 1982). Given the arduous conditions ultrarunners are subject to at both training runs and races, ultramarathons host the ideal conditions for *communitas* to emerge. While many sports highlight competition and can be divisive of the social fabric, ultramarathons promote solidarity and companionship. During observations, camaraderie amongst ultrarunners was strongly visible at the checkpoints and finish line. It showed up in the encouraging words ultrarunners shared with one another, in offering company to fellow

runners until the next station, running together at night with the ones not feeling comfortable with the dark, and in waiting at the finish line to celebrate the arriving runners. The research revealed that ultrarunners prioritise helping one another at any moment of the race, not only because they are bound by the rules of the organisation but because they are eager to do it. Ultramarathon *communitas* emerging from semi-liminality can be recognised as a deeply connected community. The supportive attitude of ultrarunners transcends the time and space of the races they meet. Their solidarity presents itself at different dimensions, from trading (i.e., choosing an ultramarathon in shopping) to transferring experience on ultramarathon running (e.g., how to train for a specific race). In *communitas*, individuals have tied one another in an egalitarian way, they are treated as equals to one another. An ultramarathon is a place where many stereotypes fade away. Ultrarunners value respect and support for one another, regardless of profession, socioeconomic class, gender, or age. The runners' social status in the community is not influenced by such factors but by their race experiences, performance, and general attitude. The findings suggest that the normative *communitas* is the most prominent *communitas* type encountered in the ultrarunning phenomenon. The experienced ultrarunners form a normative *communitas*, uniting them across the boundaries of physical fitness, gender, social class, age, and profession. It arises from the foundation of "love of endurance and pushing the limits", adhering ultrarunners to their *communitas*. They foster and maintain their relationships within their *communitas* on an almost permanent basis through investing time and effort in certain activities, including training, travelling, and racing together, as well as exchanging their experiences on online forums.

The research indicated that recreational ultrarunners have a variety of motivations and reasons for participating in ultramarathons. Ultramarathon running gives access to a particular experience of self. They choose ultrarunning for personal challenge—to push themselves beyond anything they've endured before and thus to explore themselves. Other motivations and rewards for participating in this sport include breaking away from routines, creating something extraordinary and meaningful in their lives, reconnecting with nature and with one's spiritual self, as well as increasing overall life satisfaction, becoming psychologically and mentally stronger, and experiencing solidarity and companionship. The participants claimed that preparing for and running ultramarathons help them practise

mastering their minds. The skills they gain from ultramarathon running support them on other fronts of their professional and personal lives, e.g., in approaching the adversities of daily life with a calmer, more patient, and more positive attitude.

This observational study suggests that ultramarathoners approach their sport like a career, they invest their time, energy, and resources in ultra distance running. Exploring limits is a lifelong quest with full of surprises worth pursuing for ultrarunners. They devote far more time to training runs than they do to competing in events. Preparing for an ultramarathon requires developing a structured, efficient, long-term training plan in accordance with the racecourse's requirements and executing this plan in a systematic and rigorous manner. Ultrarunners tend to normalise extremes and set their next challenge based on increased level of difficulty or longer distances.

Participation in ultramarathon running becomes so pervasive in their lives that it has a significant impact on their lifestyle choices, almost ruling their lives on multiple fronts. It moulds their social circles and forces them to be efficient and pragmatic in their personal, professional, and social lives. Ultrarunners work hard to balance their family obligations and social lives; they accommodate their running demands around other family activities. Due to long training hours, they are pressed with time; hence optimisation in everything they do becomes critical for a sustainable running, working, social life triangle for them. The process of enculturation take place in multiple physical and virtual spaces. What happens in between travelling to a race location and traveling back home from an ultramarathon race provide ample opportunities to the members of the community to acquire and embody the norms, values and practices of ultra distance running culture. The exchanges at training sessions and online platforms as well as the race reports also feed this enculturation process.

In ultramarathon liminoid space, voluntary suffering and hardship lie at the core of this sport. Managing suffering and withstanding, even enjoying, pain is highly valorised by the ultrarunning community. The research indicated that it is a marker of their collective identity. Ultramarathoners, like ascetics, subject themselves to pain and suffering in the process of ultramarathon running and as a result, they practise self-mastery and defy their limits. Endurance is a learning process for ultrarunners, and it is almost fetishized. The bar of endurance is continuously raised by signing up for longer or harder races. Overcoming

self-doubt and having an enduring mindset to defend the runner from their own frailties in the face of injuries, fatigue, pain, and other external stressors (e.g., weather conditions, geography) is a key competency to develop in order to progress in “ultramarathon running career”.

From the outside, an ultramarathon appears to be an athletic contest, but in parallel it also encompasses a spiritual journey. Nature is regarded by ultrarunners as a calibration tool to maintain their humility and enhance their satisfaction with life. Ultrarunners find peace in solitude, better connect with their thoughts and emotions, and feel realigned. In a world where digital media consumption and digital socialisation tools have been slowly but steadily taking over the offline time people spend with themselves without distraction, ultramarathon running has the potential to provide people with a space where they can spend quality time with themselves and nature to contemplate. Ultramarathoners believe that nature cures them both physically and spiritually. As a matter of fact, research shows that repeated contact with nature leads to improved emotional functioning and greater life satisfaction (Capaldi et al., 2015). Running for long periods of time helps them get into a mindful state, where they focus on what is and take an observer seat, where they notice and confront their ego-driven thoughts and actions as well as their self-beliefs. This mental state leads to increased knowledge of oneself and impacts the trajectory of one's life journey.

The research suggested that the competition and struggle in ultramarathons are predominantly with oneself, not with other people. Becoming an ultrarunner is founded on the capacity to negotiate discomfort and overcome suffering. At the very core of ultramarathon running, pushing the body to preconceived limits and exploring these limits through voluntary suffering and hardship lies. Being outside their comfort zone becomes their new comfort zone. In ultramarathon running, pain appears as an indicator of reaching one's limits and the point where self enhancement begins (Roessler, 2005, p. 98). Le Breton (2010) argues that in extreme sports pain is used as a tool for knowledge, a way to explore one's own limits (p. 207). He points out that athletes relate to pain as a raw material for the work they do with the body, thus enduring pain in sport represents a symbolic meaning for taking back the control of life (Le Breton, 2010, p. 195). Neoliberal strategies promote the idea that individuals are autonomous, active subjects who can improve their own well-

being; as a result, everyone is encouraged to work on themselves (Larner, 2000). In ultramarathon culture, an ultrarunner is expected to be self-motivated, flexible, and self-sufficient, continuously challenging their limits, having a “growth mindset”, and providing solutions to setbacks and unexpected developments without complaining. Their ultimate goal is to endure all internal and external challenges and complete a race before the cut-off time. Thus, in ultramarathon running, neo-liberal notion of self-empowerment is reproduced through this accomplishment (Hanold, 2010). Given the strong task orientation for running among these ultramarathoners, it is possible to hypothesise that their goal orientation may extend beyond running, encompassing their career and other personal activities as well. Their focus on optimization and productivity may rule other areas of life.

CONCLUSION

Given the growing popularity of ultramarathons, the present study sought to close the gap in the literature by examining the ultramarathoners’ experiences from a phenomenological standpoint and shedding light on meaning and impact of ultrarunning on their lives and the emerging ultramarathon culture in Turkey. The research presented the ultramarathon as a liminoid space that creates tribal bonds among its members, making them feel unified with one another and with nature. Ultramarathon running goes beyond a leisure activity for physical fitness, transforming lifestyle of its performers, facilitating their quest to know themselves, and improving their sense of well-being. It holds a space for contemplation and serves as a calibration tool for life; it reminds its performers of their vulnerability and promoting a sense of modesty. It becomes a platform where they train their souls, reshaping their spiritual "physiques".

In the final analysis, running ultramarathons becomes a physical and mental training ground for participation in neoliberal economy. The ultrarunners reaffirm and practise some parts of neoliberal ideas and beliefs by raising the bar of endurance, self-government, practising being self-sufficient, solution-oriented and flexible in the face of ever-changing conditions, and overcoming resistance both externally and internally.

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