



# Running Rotterdam: on how locals' participation in running events fosters their sense of place

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**Abstract** Building on the insights of scholarship highlighting specific aspects of the forming of place meanings and experiences during running (events), this paper aims at applying a more holistic perspective on how meanings attached to and experiences of place by local runners are shaped through both individual and collective sense-making. Conceptually, the paper combines (post-)phenomenological and symbolic interactionist approaches. Empirically, the paper focuses on the Dutch city of Rotterdam and draws on extensive fieldwork conducted at the 2018 edition of the NN Marathon Rotterdam, and two smaller scale, non-commercially oriented running events organized by a local running club in 2017. Based on this qualitative research, the paper demonstrates that individual local runners' understandings and embodied experience of the physical and social environment is always situated in, and interwoven with, broader social meanings and instances of shared embodiment. At the same time, the paper reflects on the methodological challenges faced by research on running (events) and calls for a more explicit acknowledgement of the multiple character of the running

world(s) studied, and of the trade-offs between the different research techniques applied.

**Keywords** Running · Running event · Sense of place · Qualitative research

## Introduction

Following the first 'running boom' that was rooted in the American cultural and fitness revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, one could witness a second wave of running sweeping across (especially, but not exclusively) the Western world from the turn of the millennium, entailing a rise in the number of people running on a regular basis (Scheerder et al. 2015) as well as a mushrooming of running events (see e.g. Bezold 2006; Blin 2012; Ettema 2014). Parallel to this "running 'tsunami'" (Wirz 2015, p. xxi), there has been a proliferation of scholarly writings across the social sciences on, amongst others, the motivations of (organizing and participating in) running (events) and on the meanings people attach to it (these).

The present paper examines the ways place becomes meaningful to local runners who participate in running events that are (partly) devised to enable or to enhance a positive experience of the urban environment. Hence, from the literature on running (events), the paper primarily considers those accounts

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that show a(n) explicit or implicit concern with issues of space, place and belonging. In some studies, focusing mostly on mass participation events, this concern is part of a political-economic interpretation of the urban condition under advanced capitalism. Accordingly, the studies in question regard running events as signs of commodification and urban boosterism (Nettleton and Hardey 2006; Herrick 2015) that fit broader processes of ‘festivalisation’ (Richards 2007) and ‘eventification’, strategically devised by urban governments to stage and market the ‘city product’ (Jakob 2013). However, a larger share of the ever-expanding literature on running (events) has taken a more bottom-up perspective and has variously highlighted aspects of sociability (Sheehan 2006; Shipway et al. 2012; Robinson et al. 2014; Hitchings and Latham 2017a), mobility (Cidell 2014), and—in some cases relying on autoethnographic insights (e.g. Allen-Collinson 2003; Hockey 2006; Lorimer 2012; Barnfield 2017)—has discussed running in terms of (individual and collective) embodied experiences (e.g. Cook et al. 2016; Lorimer 2012; Edensor and Larsen 2018).

Overall, existing studies have delivered important insights on how place meanings and experiences are shaped through running (events). Yet, given the often rather narrow research focus of most studies—on urban policy goals related to the organization of mass participation events (Herrick 2015) or the transgressive nature (Cidell 2014) and the ‘multiple rhythms’ (Edensor and Larsen 2018) of road races, for example—there has been a lack of analyses applying a more holistic perspective on how meanings attached to and experiences of place are shaped through both individual and collective sense-making. As Cook et al. (2016, p. 748) put it, the mobile practice of running is produced as the ‘brute fact of movement’ is “pervaded by a range of embodied experiences, social interactions and co-constituted meanings”. The aim set by this paper is to develop a more comprehensive account attending to these various components. To this end, the paper proposes to overcome the neat distinction between what are labelled ‘structuralist-humanist’ (Duffy et al. 2011) or ‘social/discursive’ (Williams 2014) interpretations and those (post-)phenomenologically grounded ones concerned with the embodied sense of (running) places and practices, by developing a conceptual framework combining (post-)phenomenological and symbolic interactionist

perspectives. Furthermore, in addition to research on running (events), the paper draws on insights from a range of—to date partly separately evolving—scholarship including sports geography, literature on tourism, and festivals and community building. In doing so, it responds to recent calls to reinvigorate scholarship on the role of sport in society and on its impact on place through a combination of perspectives and a focus on senses of place, community and identity (see Wise and Kohe 2018). Empirically, the paper focuses on the Dutch city of Rotterdam and draws on extensive fieldwork (qualitative surveys, in-depth interviews, social media analysis and participant observation) conducted before, during and after the 2018 edition of the NN Marathon Rotterdam, and two smaller scale, non-commercially oriented running events organized in late 2017 by the Rotterdam Running Crew, an open running club organizing monthly running events that pass through ‘special places in Rotterdam’. On this basis, the key contribution of the paper is to show how individual local runners’ understandings and embodied experience of the physical and social environment is always situated in, and interwoven with, broader social meanings and instances of shared embodiment.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section gives a brief overview of the key areas of focus in existing research on running and running events and argues in need of a more holistic view on how aspects of the physical and social environment are made sense of and experienced individually and collectively. To (start) fill(ing) this research gap, the subsequent section engages with insights from scholarship theorizing (sense of) place to sketch a conceptual framework combining (post-)phenomenological and symbolic interactionist perspectives. Afterwards, notes on empirical focus and research method are discussed, followed by the presentation of the findings. The concluding section reflects on the findings as well as on the methodological challenges of research on the link between running events and sense of place.

### **Scholarly perspectives on the significance of place for running and running events**

Research on running and running events has been undertaken from diverging philosophical-theoretical perspectives and has shown a great variety in terms of

focus. This section provides an overview of the main ways in which the relation between the links between place meaning and experience have been conceptualized in this diverse literature.

From the perspective of sports and tourism geography, one of the most obvious ways in which place matters to (non-recreational) running (as to any other sport) is the way in which it is characterised by defined spatial delineations, such as the length of a marathon course (Bale, discussed by Higham and Hinch 2006). Distinguishing between reproducible and non-reproducible sport environments, this perspective recognizes today's standardized and uniform running events infrastructures as examples of transportable 'sportscares' (see Higham and Hinch 2006), and also the fact that running events are highly place-dependent as the host city's natural landscape and cultural heritage provide a non-reproducible setting that is key to experiencing the event.

This uniqueness of running event settings and the organizers' aim to capitalize on this has been central to political-economic interpretations of running events. These studies have commonly started off from the premise that the rise in the number of running events is not simply driven by a running 'craze' (Blin 2012), as in the era of post-industrial capitalism,<sup>1</sup> "[s]port events are no longer merely about providing good sport" (Green 2001, p. 1) but about tying in cities, communities and individuals into the consumer-led society through the creation of new place imaginaries, identity discourses and subjectivities. Berking and Neckel (1993) argue that the urban marathon is an event "staging [...] individualized society as a spectacle, a symbolic and real experience" (p. 68) and discuss the upsurge of road races as an (other) illustration of how cities under globalizing capitalism compete in staging cultural experiences (Nettleton and Hardy 2006; see also Herrick 2015); according to Suozzo (2002, p. 142), "[i]n many ways, a city without a major marathon is a city that has not arrived". Recently, marathons have ceased to be the only relevant running events, and to boost local economic development, mid-sized cities (100 thousand inhabitants or more) as well have increasingly become active

in organizing events that cover a variety of formats (often a half-marathon, a 10 K-run and/or a 5 K-run), target a diverse running audience (e.g. women or children specifically) and intend, at the same time, to engage a broader public through a wide array of activities and entertainment (Green 2001; Blin 2012). Despite a prevailing competitive element runs are thus no longer about sport performance alone but can be viewed as cultural products devised and promoted by cities attempting to enhance their image and increase (tourism) revenues (Green 2001; Blin 2012; Herrick 2015).

Understanding running events in terms of trends of 'eventification' in urban development (see Jakob 2013) remains plausible and relevant<sup>2</sup> but it has often relied on a rather limited view on places, taking them to be rather inert locations that are easily instrumentalized to economic development ends. Also, writings in this vein seem to assume, albeit implicitly, that the way in which runners experience the event *and* the place is related to the sight of emblematic sights alone. As a result, they have tended to ignore the manifold other ways in which running (events) imply experiencing and creating meaning about the physical and social environment.

In contrast, an expanding strand within the broader scholarship on running (events) has focused, often from a (post-)phenomenological perspective, on aspects of body, embodiment and the experience of movement. Some authors (e.g. Allen-Collinson 2003; Hockey 2006) draw on Lederer to discuss running in terms of the phenomenological processes that make up the learning of corporeal skills necessary for running, the combination of specific movement and cognition. Central to phenomenological engagements with running is the recognition that running as a mobile physical activity is intimately bound up with a sense of place. Bale (1996, p. 170.) quotes Tuan,<sup>3</sup> according to whom "[r]unning is [...] a reaching out to and an immersion to the world" and recalls his own running experience as "a series of visual images and bodily feelings; images of country lanes and sharply defined

<sup>1</sup> Although in this period, place boosting had become related to sport in new ways, this relation has existed since at least the middle of the nineteenth century in the United States according to Bale (1988).

<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the paper generally uses the term 'run' or 'running event' rather than that of 'road race', except when the sources referred to use the latter expression.

<sup>3</sup> The work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 1977) has played a key role in advancing a conceptualization of place rooted in phenomenology and existentialism.

colours; smells of bluebells and cut grass”. Hockey’s (2006) autobiographic account of routine training applies an explicit focus on his and his training partner’s sensuous experiences as they traverse their routine training routes.

Studies on running events more specifically have also emphasized aspects of embodied experience. According to Cidell (2014), for runners, “there may be pleasure associated with feeling one’s speed as the world flashes by, experiencing or performing the city or other landscapes in a different way” (p. 574). Sheehan (2006, p. 255), argues that “the movement of one’s body, contact with others (and the pavement), travel through the course and the city, provide a particular means to see and feel”. Accounts underscore thus the centrality of the environment to the running experience and hence the ‘power of the phenomenological gaze’ (Hitchings and Latham 2017b, p. 305). More recently, post-phenomenological thought (see Ash and Simpson 2016) has had more and more influence in research on running (events), entailing a blurring of phenomenology’s conventional distinctions between ‘body’ and ‘space’. Illustrative of this is Lorimer’s (2012) performative approach to running that considers the latter as an ‘exploratory practice’ where differently textured terrains alter the runner’s mood.

While some accounts like Lorimer’s (2012) discuss running as a solitary activity and focus on aspects of individual movement and bodily sensations, most experience-orientated accounts of running (events) emphasize the social dimension of meaning-making and identity formation. Studies focusing on runners who pursue (distance) running as ‘serious leisure’ (Robinson et al. 2014), often as a member of a running club, have discussed sociality dominantly in terms of a (differentiated) ‘social world’ (Shipway et al. 2012) in which otherwise rather self-centred individuals concerned primarily with their own performance gain recognition and exchange experiences. Here, distance running events appear as places of social gathering and as sources of runners’ social identity. Some studying recreational runners in turn warned from overplaying the social character of running and observed instances of ‘sociality light’, implied by the mere presence of others that offers distractions, enables moments of interaction and “a sense of being involved in the communal rhythms of their neighbourhood” (Hitchings and Latham 2017b, p. 342).

Yet another group of writings has highlighted aspects of sociality related to the collective and public character of running events. Cidell (2014) argues that the transgressive nature of road races is closely linked to their public character and that the camaraderie that comes from running with a group (and from transgressing the ‘natural’ rules of the road collectively) makes part of the appeal of these events. As Barnfield (2017, p. 372) puts it, running is a “convivial and a public act, the body exposed to other city dwellers and moments of collective engagement”. Similarly, Sheehan (2006) remarks that “participants’ and spectators’ repeated and ritualized performances create complex convivial situations of gazing and being gazed upon” (p. 259) and that participation in road races is productive of group identities (as well). While the above-mentioned studies have tended to put the emphasis on the socially constructed meanings and experiences of running, running events and running identities, others have stressed aspects of collective experience and embodiment. Edensor and Larsen (2018) for example draw on Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis to highlight how spectatorial participation at events in the form of clapping, whistling or chanting is a source of inspiring and even craved-after external rhythms for runners.

Finally, it should be noted that—even if sometimes implicitly—most writings consider the spatio-temporal aspect of running (events) and link thus runners’ sense of place to their sense of time. “[T]ime [...] has special significance in the running world” (Smith 2002, p. 343); to start with, running implies a particular kind of embodied timing, as a component of the runner’s time habitus (Métoudi, cited by Allen-Collinson 2003, p. 342). This time habitus is closely connected to runners’ sense of place: runners develop a sense of timing on their regular training routes as they negotiate the demands of the terrain (ibid.; see also Hockey 2006). Also, as runners “go on automatic”, the flow they experience (Allen-Collinson 2003) is both one across time and space. A sense of place is something people create in the course of time (Jackson, cited by Stedman 2003, p. 674); developing the habitual practice of running implies thus change(s) in the experience of place and in the meanings attached to it. Furthermore, the temporal organization of the running world is fundamentally cyclical, both with regard (competitive) races and the training of runners. Smith (2002, p. 343) argues that

these (socially constructed) temporal organizations—amongst others—are “important symbolic resources that help to build and reaffirm the runner’s self”.

### Conceptualizing the sense of place of running event participants

Against the above background, in this paper we propose to consider sense of place in an encompassing way including the personal dimension of place experience and bonding processes to a place as well as the social (i.e. collectively shaped) aspect of these processes. Importantly, however, the present paper does not share environmental psychology’s dualistic understanding of the individual and social, and the social and the physical (see e.g. Stedman 2003; Scannell and Gifford 2010) but regards these to be separable only analytically. Although scholars applying an environmental psychological perspective have noted that sense of place is influenced by collective processes of meaning-making (Scannell and Gifford 2010; Hashemnezhad et al. 2013), their emphasis has remained on explaining, by means of quantitative methods and hypothesis-testing, individuals’ perceptions and behaviour in terms of underlying cognitive processes (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001; Stedman 2003). Furthermore, they have suggested that the contribution of the physical environment to place meanings can be delineated quantitatively (Stedman 2003).

Given its aim to *understand* how the experience of running events shapes locals’ sense of place (rather than trying to explain its causes, as environmental psychologists would do), this paper applies a qualitative approach based on the combination of (post-)phenomenology and symbolic interactionism to develop a (dominantly) non-cognitivist perspective from which meaning-making is both an individual and a social process, and from which the subjectivity of behavioural and experiential processes cannot be operationalized and measured. The phenomenological approach is drawn upon to acknowledge that local runners’ experience of place at running events is not only shaped by cognitive intentionality but also by bodily intentionality and emotions (see Seamon 1982). Runners develop a corporeal and cognitive understanding of how to do running; a practical sense made up of meaning, intention and appropriate action

(Hockey 2006). At running events, intentionality is apparent as runners follow whatever rhythm and pace they wish (Edensor and Larsen 2018). ‘Appropriate action’ relies not only on seeing but also on ‘smelling’ and ‘feeling’ the route, as well as on listening to it, and on developing an awareness of one’s own body (Hockey 2006). From the paper’s perspective, the physical environment—including aspects of the surface and the landscape, for example—is thus not assumed to be a factor *contributing* to sense of place (cf. Stedman 2003). Rather, these aspects tie up with runners’ “physical feelings of being” (Lorimer 2012, p. 84); ‘external’ and ‘internal’ (bodily) aspects of physicality are thus inherently interlinked. A key insight from post-phenomenology is the one positing the body as a combination of the ‘lived body’ and a ‘socialized body’, underlining thus that “[e]mbodiment is *both* actional-perceptual and culturally endowed” (Idhe 2003, p. 13, emphasis original). In other words, socially shaped symbolic codes and associations related to running (places) and the wide range of sensuous experience are inherently interlinked and together constitute runners’ sense of place. Post-phenomenology helps us acknowledge how at running events, similarly to festivals, participants’ “embodied responses to rhythm are crucial to the marking out of a space of communal identity and notions of belonging” (Duffy et al. 2011, p. 23). Finally, symbolic interactionism is regarded useful for taking into account the interactional nature of meaning-making: that individual runners do not make sense of their experiences in isolation but through ongoing participation in society (Jeon 2004; Carter and Fuller 2015). Akin to other urban events, running events can be seen as “situated encounters in planned spaces, where the mode of social exchange is significant to people’s experience” (Pløger 2016, p. 260). Furthermore, (as in the case of festivals) running events can be interpreted in terms of a collective celebration of a sense of place (Derrett 2003) where *place*-based communities actively reproduce shared values and beliefs (Kyle and Chick 2007; Lau and Li 2015, own emphasis).

The combination of these perspectives also allows us to consider the space–time, or ‘place-time’ aspects of running events. Jackson’s (1986, p. 9) remark that “similar rhythms and similar calendars bring us together, and help create a community” seems to be particularly fitting for runners’ communities and



emphasizes the interactional aspect of runners' (shared) sense of time. Taking a (post-)phenomenological perspective, we can furthermore recognize the interlinkage of the collective sense of time and the sense of place at the event itself, where "the spatiality and temporality of emotions coalesce" (Davidson et al., cited by Duffy et al. 2011, p. 17). These interactional and embodied dimensions of runners' collective sense of time and place are assumed here to be interconnected: the (collective) embodied experience of 'the moment' is (partly) influenced by cultural significations of running (place and time), while also shaping the latter as runners narrate their experience.

Nonetheless, we do not claim to provide a neat framework where the above perspectives are seamlessly combined, and it is certainly necessary to more explicitly reflect on the obvious divergences across these approaches and why we regard them as complementary. First, given its focus on the more cognitively derived layers of meaning, symbolic interactionism might by some regarded as incompatible with phenomenology, which is characterized by a distinctive concern with (unspoken and unreflected) individual emotional and bodily dimensions. Also, there is a tension between phenomenology and post-phenomenology, amongst others due to the former's assumption of an intentional subject in advance of experience and the latter's understanding of intentionality as an emergent relation with the world (see Ash and Simpson 2016). As to the first point, this paper agrees with those who argue that phenomenology and symbolic interactionism can be combined because they share an interest in the kinds of symbols and understandings that give meaning to a particular group's or society's way of living and experiencing (Seamon 2000; see also Jeon 2004). As to the second, this paper largely aligns with the phenomenological assumption of a pre-given running subject with a pre-conscious bodily intentionality but wishes to leave some room for the recognition of how the constitution of the running subject is also ongoing. To the extent we can regard post-phenomenology as expanding and not replacing phenomenology (Ash and Simpson 2016), such a conceptual opening is considered to be permissible.

### Notes on the empirical focus and research methods

Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands (with around 640,000 inhabitants in 2018) hosts

several running events throughout the year and is often referred to as a, or even 'the' city of runners (*hardloopstad*) of the country, and this made it an interesting case. Furthermore, with one of us being a native Rotterdammer and the other being a regular runner (although not immersed in the social world of the (distance) running social world, as Shipway et al. 2012 use this term) but not familiar with the city, we could usefully combine 'insider' and 'outsider' views.<sup>4</sup>

In a first step, the information available about Rotterdam running events on the organizers' and other running-related websites was studied to gain a general picture of the nature of the events and (the representation of) their physical setting and social atmosphere. Concerning the actual choice of events, initially two criteria were set: (1) the event's route should have been purposefully designated to enable and enhance the (supposedly positive) experience of the physical environment, and (2) the event should count as 'big' in the Dutch context, i.e. it should (traditionally) attract more than 10,000 participants. Due to the original time scale of the research (from September 2017 to April 2018), first the Bridge Run (*Bruggenloop*) was selected: a 15 km run first organized in 1986 that had 12,000 participants in 2016 and the route of which is (normally<sup>5</sup>) leading through six bridges of the city. However, due to unfavourable weather conditions the 2017 edition of the Bridge Run was cancelled. Subsequently, the time frame of the research was extended to focus on the 2018 (April) edition of the NN Marathon Rotterdam. This (set of) event(s) has been taking place since 1981 and is commonly promoted as the Netherlands' biggest (around 13,000 participants in 2017)<sup>6</sup> and most beautiful marathon; as it is stated on the event's website, "the breath-taking course passes several highlights of Rotterdam", including the iconic Erasmus Bridge (as a new start location from 2018) (Marathon Rotterdam 2019). From 2007 on, a number of side events have been organized as well: a ¼ marathon, the AD City Run

<sup>4</sup> At the same time, we have remained aware of—and have constantly reflected on—the fact that these are not dichotomous, fixed perspectives (see Corbin Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Due to road maintenance works, in 2018 the itinerary was (temporarily) changed.

<sup>6</sup> In 2017, ca. 14,000 appeared at the start and 13,063 runners accomplished the marathon (Marathon Rotterdam 2018a).

(4.2 km), the NN Kids Run (1 and 2 km) and a Business Run, for which an additional 29,000 participants have registered. With 920,000 visitors, the NN Marathon Rotterdam is the best attended publicly accessible event in the Netherlands (Marathon Rotterdam 2018b).

While not meeting the initial criterion of a ‘big event’, two runs of the Rotterdam Running Crew (RRC), the Erasmus University Run organized on 8 November 2017, and the (second<sup>7</sup>) *Lichtjes Run* (‘Light Run’) taking place on 20 December 2017 were included in the project. The RRC is a ‘club’ set up by four enthusiastic local runners in 2013 (see RRC 2019)—‘by Rotterdammers for Rotterdammers’—that anyone can join (following calls posted on social media, notably Facebook<sup>8</sup>) for runs that are (normally<sup>9</sup>) organized every month. Encountered in the process of inventorying running events in Rotterdam, the RRC runs (that have varying distances, usually between 3 and 12 kms) appeared to be worthwhile studying as their main aim is to offer an ‘unusual’ place experience as they criss-cross ‘special’ spots in Rotterdam, such as a stadium or public buildings like a theatre, without closing the course of the run to normal traffic or usage.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the small-scale, non-competitive runs of the RRC, which generally cover a route once, appeared to form an interesting

complement to the yearly recurring,<sup>11</sup> larger scale, top-down organized commercially oriented running events that have attracted most attention from scholars studying running events (e.g. Cidell 2014; Herrick 2015; Sheehan 2006).

#### Methods of data collection

Given the study’s interest in how local participants of running events in Rotterdam experience and make sense of place (with others), we opted for a qualitative approach that aims “to understand phenomena in context-specific settings” (Golafshani 2003, p. 600). Different data collection strategies—including a qualitative survey, (in-depth) interviews, participant observation and social media analysis—were applied within a broader methodological framework informed by (post-)phenomenology and qualitative content analysis (QCA). As discussed earlier, (post-)phenomenology is a useful approach to apprehend the embodied experience of events. QCA in turn uses coding to extract the manifest as well as the latent content meaning of communications (Cho and Lee 2014). QCA was chosen as it focuses on the meaning of the activity or communication and the situation in which it emerges and is thus consistent with the tenets of symbolic interactionism (Ulibarri 2016).

The conceptual orientation of symbolic interactionism resembles also that of grounded theory (Cho and Lee 2014) and some studies on the production of a sense of meaningful place in the case of festivals did opt for the latter (e.g. Lau and Li 2015). However, in contrast to (‘strong’ applications of) grounded theory, the present study did not aim to come up with a fully-fledged theoretical framework on the link between running event participation and sense of place; rather, its objective has been to combine existing theoretical insights to arrive at a more holistic understanding of aspects of individual and collective meaning-making. To refer to Schreier (2012, p. 1), QCA is “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material”. Furthermore, and in contrast to adherents of grounded theory (and phenomenology), we assumed that a purely empirical grounding of theories is neither possible nor useful, for new theoretical propositions

<sup>7</sup> Here an exception was made to the (implicit) rule of the RCC of not ‘repeating’ an event as the *Lichtjes Run* was organized, both in 2016 and 2017, as a charity event to raise funds for the Sophia Children’s hospital.

<sup>8</sup> Given the lack of formal registration, the actual number of participants can be approximated in the first instance by the number of those who signal their interest or intention to participate via social media.

<sup>9</sup> This was the case up until early 2019. In March that year, the RCC announced that it was increasingly challenging to organize a run through unique places each month (especially given the fact that permits had to be obtained from the municipality), and that the decision was made to keep offering exciting runs rather than to stick to the monthly frequency at any price.

<sup>10</sup> As such, the RRC fits in the running crew movement, emerging from the mid-2000s in big cities like New York, London and Paris. In contrast to ‘running clubs’ that unite regular runners who aim to improve their performance, ‘running crews’ have been open to experienced runners and novice runners alike and have put the emphasis on creating an inspiring running atmosphere (Arson 2014).

<sup>11</sup> In the case of larger scale runs there might be some modifications of the route from year to year, but this is generally not significant.

are necessarily informed by researchers' a priori knowledge (Goldkuhl and Cronholm 2010; cf. Starks and Trinidad 2007). In QCA, coding is not exclusively inductive as codes are not only data-driven but can be also concept-driven (Schreier 2012). Moreover, a knowledge synthesis of such existing theories and new abstractions provides new insights (Goldkuhl and Cronholm 2010). In what follows we briefly discuss the methods used.

Survey questionnaires presuppose that people's attitudes are stable mental positions and they treat individual views in isolation (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002); consequently, they do not suit well research grounded in (post-)phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. However, qualitative surveys are useful to describe and analyse the diversity of a topic of interest in a given population (as opposed to the distribution of a topic of interest in the case of quantitative surveys) (Jansen 2010). In the present research, a separate qualitative, dominantly open-ended<sup>12</sup> survey questionnaire was designed (in Dutch) to explore the associations and experiences that (1) participants of the NN Marathon Rotterdam and (2) those of the two RRC runs have in relation to the physical and social environment of the event. Both questionnaires had two main themes. The first included questions probing into respondents' bonding to the city through participating in the event; here, several questions were specifically formulated to gain insight into the meanings that runners attach to a particular route and to running with a group. The second part, comprising questions related to experience gained earlier at (other) Rotterdam running events, was intended to reveal associations to the specific event that make it unique and that (possibly) make respondents want to experience it anew. Given the study's concern with the sense of place of local participants, a question inquiring about the place of residence of the respondent was included into each questionnaire. As personal data of running events are not accessible, it was decided to approach potential respondents immediately after the event informally, through one of the authors' social networks in the case

of the NN Marathon Rotterdam,<sup>13</sup> and—with the organizers' approval—via the RRC Facebook account in the case of the runs organized by the RRC. In both cases, informed consent was sought (and received) from each respondent.

In addition to the surveys, the snowball method was used through the network of friends and acquaintances (of the author who is from Rotterdam) to obtain a sample of running event participants for qualitative, semi-structured interviews. From this sample, three persons (a 25-year old female participant of the ¼ marathon, a 22-year old female participant of the AD City Run, and a 34-year old male participant of the NN Marathon Rotterdam) were willing to participate in an interview. Interviews were conducted in Dutch<sup>14</sup>; one face-to-face and two on the phone, after having received consent from respondents to use their data (anonymously). In line with the focus of the study, the original research design envisaged face-to-face interviews, but two respondents preferred—presumably for reasons of convenience—being interrogated via the phone. Phone interviews have been conventionally regarded of being less in-depth in the methodological literature, amongst others because of the lack of visual cues and a restriction of rapport in comparison to face-to-face interviews (Novick 2008; Irvine et al. 2012). While it is not possible to tell whether and to what extent the quality of data has been compromised by the fact that they were collected via the phone, overall, we did not observe any substantial difference in the quantity, nature and depth of responses (see for similar results, Sturges and Hanrahan 2004).

Participant observation has been generally regarded as the most authentic and reliable ethnographic method (Kusenbach 2003) and as a key means to gain in-depth, contextual understanding of the unfolding of running (events) in particular (Atkinson 2008; Shipway et al. 2012). Moreover, given the increasing concern with aspects of performativity and mobility, researchers have increasingly used their bodies as instruments of research (Duffy et al. 2011) to 'move

<sup>12</sup> Multiple-choice questions related to the events attended and aspects of the physical and social environments that runners value in particular.

<sup>13</sup> The marathon and the side events were treated as one event (but the questionnaire did contain a question that inquired about the course accomplished by the respondent). Given that respondents were not recruited at the event itself, it was not considered necessary to ask for permission from the organizers.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews were conducted by the author who is a native speaker so as to capture as much as possible the intended meaning and its context (see van Nes et al. 2010).



along' in an attempt to (better) engage with the running subject(s) under study (e.g. Barnfield 2017; Hitchings and Latham 2016). Others, however, have cautioned not to exaggerate the power of mobile methods at the expense of 'conventional' ones, arguing that rather than overprioritizing the former, one should productively combine them with the latter (Merriman 2014). Accordingly, this study opted for a 'mobile spectatorship' (see Edensor and Larsen 2018) that allows the researcher to develop a broader engagement with the event in its totality (see Herrick 2015), including aspects of the physical and social environment and the behaviour of (both running and spectator) participants. Also, this position allowed the immediate and detailed recording of observations in different forms (photographs, video material, written field notes). Prior to each event the route was covered to familiarize oneself with the setting and to gain a sense of the course's affordances; during the running events one tried to become immersed in the field at different points without a predefined planning.

Research on festivals has increasingly included the (content) analysis of social media as the latter have greatly impacted on the way in which organizations communicate with their customers (MacKay et al. 2017). To refer to Flinn and Frew (2014, p. 419), "ubiquitous social media is a managerial and festival game changer" and it enables festival goers to "construct, re-tell and consume [...] dynamic narratives of identity" (Flinn and Frew 2014, p. 430). At the beginning of our study, we assumed that similarly to festivals, participants' enhanced interactivity at running events produces new forms of engagement through all phases of the experience (MacKay et al. 2017). Hence, our study included the qualitative content analysis of messages posted before, during and immediately after the two RRC events and the NN Marathon Rotterdam<sup>15</sup> on Facebook (FB), which was found to be the most frequently used social media platform.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> More concretely, in the case of RRC events FB content was collected for 1 week from the announcement of the events and during the week that the events took place (including the days before and after the event), while in the case of the NN Marathon Rotterdam during the week prior to the event and the week of the event itself.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the ethical aspects of social media research, Townsend and Wallace (n.d.) was taken as a key point of reference. Accordingly, before starting the analysis of messages,

## Data analysis

The survey among the participants of the RRC events produced 142 fully completed questionnaires by locals<sup>17</sup>; in the case of the NN Marathon Rotterdam this number was 71. The analysis of FB content included 15 posts by RRC and 301 responses for the Erasmus University Run, 24 posts by RRC and 374 responses for the *Lichtjes Run*, and 30 posts by the organizers of the NN Marathon Rotterdam and 750 responses. Interviews were literally transcribed. First, all the qualitative data (survey responses, interview transcripts, FB posts and all fieldwork material) were read and re-read. Then, open coding was conducted to identify themes relevant to the research questions. After completion of the open coding of the interview transcripts with the help of the qualitative software package NVivo 2 Pro, the preliminary codes that emerged were used to code following sets of data. When the encountered data did not fit an existing code, new codes were added. Subsequently, similar codes were organized into broader, 'higher order' categories and then regrouped and refined until final categories were obtained that respond to the research question (see Schreier 2012; Cho and Lee 2014). To diminish researcher bias and 'the loss of meaning in translation' from the source language into English<sup>18</sup> (see van Nes et al. 2010) investigator triangulation was used at key points of the analysis.

## Findings

From the survey it appeared that by participating in running events, locals' attachment to Rotterdam has

Footnote 16 continued

we carefully studied Facebook's terms and conditions and considered posts (outside closed groups) as public. As runners posting on Facebook are adults who can reasonably expect to be observed by strangers, and given the subject matter (that is, participation at a running event) is not sensitive, we decided that data can be accessed and quoted (anonymously) without seeking explicit consent from platform users.

<sup>17</sup> Locals were considered to be those who indicated one of the fifteen municipalities that had belonged to the *Stadsregio Rotterdam* (Rotterdam City-region, abolished in 2015) as their place of residence.

<sup>18</sup> Given that one of the authors (the interviewer) is a native Dutch and the other is a non-native, while proficient in Dutch as well as in academic English, we considered this loss to be minimal.

increased. In the case of RRC runs, the route and the chance to be able to run through unknown places stands out as the major source of pride and runners perceived a stronger attachment to the city because of the atmosphere and as they were running with others. As one respondent noted: *'The RRC brings you to spots you normally would not go to or where I have never been before, and it lets you experience them when they are the most beautiful: in the evening, with lights, in a good atmosphere'* (Respondent 128, *Lichtjes Run*). Some respondents remarked in relation to a specific question containing the word 'pride' that this is not a word they would use: *'Proud of the city is not how I would put it. But I have come to appreciate the city in new ways, and I am proud to have the chance to participate in such a well-organized event'* (Respondent 28, *Lichtjes Run & University Run*). In the case of the NN Marathon, the role of the social environment—the public supporting and cheering on the runners, and the general atmosphere—is more prominent in feeding a sense of pride. Here as well, some respondents did not see 'pride' as the most fitting term and preferred to speak of attachment and bonding instead, challenging thus understandings of running events in terms of straightforward sources of 'civic boosterism' (see e.g. Herrick 2015). The in-depth interviews revealed that this attachment and bonding are especially important for those who accomplish their first run in their home city: *'The fact that I did my first running event at home in Rotterdam does have a meaning. Rotterdam is not only my home now, but I feel even more attached to it as I participated in my first running event here. My attachment has surely grown'* (Respondent B, AD City Run).

Concerning the experience of the physical environment and the meanings attached to it, runners find that the route greatly contributes to the experience of the event and many of them find that a change of the itinerary would compromise the uniqueness of the event. As mentioned earlier, participants of runs organized by the RRC especially value passing exclusive places; however, the author present at one of the runs was also asked to take a picture of two participants with the City Hall as the background after they had finished the *Lichtjes Run*. For participants of the marathon, the *Erasmus Bridge* and the *Coolsingel* (one of the best-known streets in central Rotterdam and where the run finishes), are as essential parts of the course that figure prominently in their memories of the

event and that also help to present the city to the outer world. As one runner noted (to the question what omitting these landmarks would mean): *'Then you lose the most important part of the city from your show. And that negatively affects participation'* (Respondent 5, ¼ marathon). Others responded that they might not even be participating if iconic places were left out (Respondent A, ¼ marathon). This suggests that runners' appreciation of the physical setting resonates with the image promoted by the organizers of the NN Marathon Rotterdam: in the thirty analysed FB posts of the marathon, twelve contained a photo of the *Erasmus Bridge* (see Fig. 1) and eleven a photo of the *Coolsingel*. In this regard, attempts to promote place-specific qualities through specific running routes (see e.g. Herrick 2015; Edensor and Larsen 2018) do seem effective. On the other hand, it appeared that even if the itinerary passes less scenic points, running in one's own city is perceived to create a different—and more valuable—experience. As another interview respondent remarked, she expected the ¼ marathon to run through the centre or at least along the Maas river. Nonetheless, she said the following: *'Still, I'd rather run in Rotterdam than in another city'.—Have you participated in running events in other cities? [RV]—'I have done the CPC [City Pier City] run in the Hague, and I noticed that it felt very different...it was much more about the running itself than about the city. [...] I felt less at my place, it was more impersonal'* (Respondent A, ¼ marathon).

Interestingly though, it is not just the well-known 'hotspots' that matter to runners. One of the interview respondents mentioned the part of the route that passed



**Fig. 1** Facebook post NN Marathon Rotterdam, one week before the 2018 race

through Crooswijk, a folksy neighbourhood, as the one that he appreciated most:

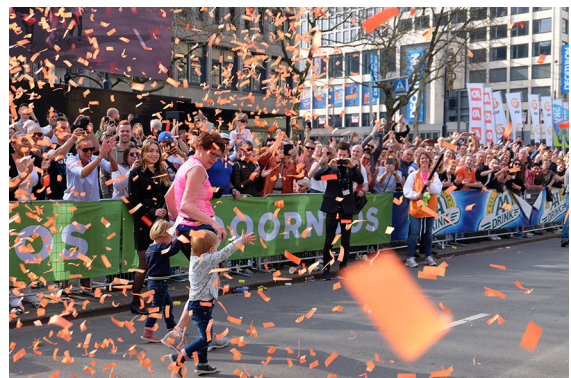
‘Yes, I think the part [of the run in] Crooswijk, where a lot of people stand to cheer on you, that’s what I like most.’ – I have been told about Crooswijk before. Is it that there are many people or different kind of people? [RV] – ‘There are a lot of people and also other kinds of people I think. On the Erasmus Bridge it’s the public, but in Crooswijk it’s really the atmosphere you know, the Rotterdam atmosphere’ (Respondent C, Marathon Rotterdam).

From other responses it also appears that the appreciation of the route is strongly interlinked with that of the social environment, confirming existing studies’ emphasis on the significance of others’ presence and the interaction with them to running (place) experience (Cidell 2014; Sheehan 2006). Participants of the RRC events frequently used the words ‘atmosphere’, ‘conviviality’ and ‘sense of belonging together’ to characterize the events. This is also how the founders of the RRC envisage the organization and its events; as one of them put it: ‘*We are a social run and thus do not time the runs and do not have a starting signal. The focus is much more on together and with each other.*’ At the start of the *Lichtjes Run*, one of the organizers gave a brief talk and said that ‘*together one can achieve a lot*’. For some, these aspects matter more than the actual route; as one participant remarked (in response to the question as to how omitting unique spots would affect the runs’ appeal): ‘*Then an important strength of the event and its charm would disappear. But there are enough nice places in the city to run through and the conviviality would not diminish. So, I’d continue to participate*’ (Respondent, 52, *Lichtjes Run*).

Similarly, participants of the NN Marathon highly valued how the event brought people together and enhanced their involvement with the city, even prior to the actual event. As one of the respondents noted: ‘*I felt like the whole city was looking forward to it; you see the preparations in progress, especially the week before the run*’ (Respondent B, AD City Run). Participants often mentioned their appreciation of the support of friends and family members in the first instance, but they equally emphasized how the event creates a sense of togetherness as strangers (runners and spectators alike) encourage each other. As a

runner noted, after finishing she was cheering on other runners: ‘*It is a very nice atmosphere, very warm. Everyone is very happy and positive and tries to help you get through*’ (Respondent A, ¼ marathon). As the same respondent noted, the marathon is very present in the public’s consciousness even after the event, as many people are participating or know someone who is; ‘*That’s something I really like about it [...] even days later you are talking about it: how was it for you, what [distance] did you do*’. Another respondent said that she was not paying much attention to the spectators, except ‘her own’, but she also emphasized that ‘*what it [the event] is about is that people come together*’, rather than the individual performance alone (Respondent B, AD City Run). This is expressed by the tradition of cheering on the last-place finisher of the marathon, whereby the song ‘You’ll never walk alone’ is played, confetti are thrown on the last runner and (s)he is welcomed by the winner and the mayor at the finish (see Fig. 2). As it was noted by the previously quoted respondent: ‘*They try to involve you regardless of whether you are good at it or not*’.

While at the NN Marathon, for those running shorter distances ‘*the run*’ [was] more about the people, the public, than the location itself (Respondent A, ¼ marathon), for marathon runners, although they also appreciated aspects of sociality and location, an important (or even primary) focus and source of pleasure remained their own run(ing). As one of them noted (to the question as to which part of the route was appreciated most): ‘*Crooswijk and the Coolsingel, the interaction with spectators and that they help you get through [the finish]*’ (Respondent 42, Marathon Rotterdam). However, another runner recounted: ‘*I was*



**Fig. 2** Welcoming the last-place finisher at the 2018 Marathon Rotterdam

*training alone, and this was a whole new experience. People on the side, yes you see them but actually in your mind you are busier with finishing the run'* (Respondent C, Marathon Rotterdam). This fixation on oneself seems to underline that “solitude is the very essence of long distance running” (Robinson et al. 2014, p. 392) but it contradicts Edensor and Larsen’s (2018, p. 740) remark that “[b]eing on autopilot may also allow [marathon] runners to gaze upon the iconic scenery”. Survey results have confirmed that for marathon runners, the primary motivation of participating again is to improve their personal performance, to challenge themselves and to experience the ‘kick’, as opposed to participants of RRC runs, for whom experiencing the social and physical environment (in this order) constituted the dominant factors of appeal. Although no specific survey and interview questions have been formulated regarding participants’ sense of time, the above seem also to suggest—in line with existing accounts (e.g. Allen-Collinson 2003; Smith 2002)—that competitive long-distance runners have a particular sense of time (and timing) and this affects their sense of place. At the same time, temporality appears to play a different role for ‘less fully absorbed runners’ (Hitchings and Latham 2017b), who would more often participate at events to have a *good time*. The latter has been a prominent motivation for participating at the RCC runs that, by virtue of their non-recurrent character, also become inscribed differently—more loosely, without an accompanying sense of urgency (see Smith 2002)—in runners’ agendas and lifeworlds. At this point it should be noted though that marathon runners’ concern with performance is also suspended after the finish as they become ‘dissolved’ in the momentary joy of accomplishment:

‘For months you have trained and when you see the finish then you think, for God’s sake, finally I got it. And once you are done, you feel like falling into a black hole. I think: yes, I finished it, and that’s it. Yes, it sounds strange, but you are not thinking about doing it again. Look, I can do it again next year, I think I will. I want to do it but that’s for later’ (Respondent C, Marathon Rotterdam).

Overall, the experience of the social and that of the physical environment appears strongly interlinked for the participants of running events, while different ‘kinds’ of runners seem to appreciate different

aspects of sociality (see Hitchings and Latham 2017a). Similarly—and this has remained underexplored in the literature that tends to be biased in its focus on committed runners (ibid.)—different kinds of runners also experience temporality in different ways.

Zooming in on the rhythmic aspects of the events under study, these shape runners’ sense of place by triggering various kinds of embodied responses and create thus also differences in the ‘shared inhabitation of [...] running space’ (Edensor and Larsen 2018, p. 741). For RRC runs, streets are not cleared of regular traffic, and as participants must climb stairs and (avoid) various other objects, they cannot rely on their practical sense of running developed by habit (see Hockey 2006). Also, participants must stick to the group, monitor fellow participants and thus adjust their rhythm and pace. In contrast, at the NN Marathon runners could be on autopilot, get into and stay at their habitual rhythm and, due to the scale of the event, the “rhythmic soundscape of shoes-hitting-the-ground” (Edensor and Larsen 2018, p. 741) created an energizing connection between runners. Similar to other mass participation events (ibid.), such a connection also emerged at the Marathon between runners and spectators (and also between spectators), with spectators’ cheering, clapping and bands playing along the route combining in a vitalizing sonic rhythm. This seemed to reach its peak at the end of the run: *‘One can sense the emotion of the crowd rising. The last runners seem to be cheered on even more enthusiastically. The closer Marian [the last runner] gets, the harder spectators sing their hearts out’* (Field notes NN Marathon Rotterdam). Despite this being a momentary experience, given its situatedness in social discourses and practices—as previously mentioned, cheering on the last-place finisher is a tradition and it is also widely covered in the local and national (online) media—it arguably does play a role in fostering a long(er)-lasting attachment to place. Other—fleeting—experiences of (collective) embodiment and place at running events are also being (re)narrated and have a significance beyond the event, as apparent from the affirmative answers regarding (the motivations behind) future participation.

Finally, the analysis of FB posts showed that social media use further contributes to a strengthening of a sense of community and belonging together before and after both the RRC events as well as the NN



Marathon Rotterdam<sup>19</sup>; in this regard, social media can be seen as an extension of the social environment of running events. ‘Conviviality’, ‘atmosphere’ and ‘spectators’ (especially in case of the marathon) were recurrently mentioned or implicitly referred to, as it is illustrated by the following post: *‘Loads of love for all the supporting Rotterdammers: thanks for your enthusiast cheering, orange slices, sips of water, liquorice and sweets: thanks to you we could go on after all!♥ I enjoyed the great atmosphere during my first marathon’*. In comparison, aspects of (place) experience were rarely shared (e.g. ‘A nice place to start’—shared by a participant of the Erasmus Run that started from the university campus), and interview responses did also not reveal any significant role of social media use in strengthening attachment to the city. Overall, although runners share their pre-and post-event experience, unlike in the case of festivals (Flinn and Frew 2014) the virtual worlds of social media seem to play a less important role in co-creating running event experience, arguably because participation in running events is primarily directed at physical mobility along with others in a confined space (Cidell 2014), as well as—for many—at becoming immersed in practices of collective embodiment (Duffy et al. 2011; Edensor and Larsen 2018).

## Conclusion

Starting out from the diverse perspectives on the link between running (events) and (sense of) place, this paper set the aim to develop a more holistic understanding of how meanings attached to and experiences of place by local runners are shaped through both individual and collective sense-making. In other words, the objective was to simultaneously consider the way in which the personal and social, as well as cognitive and embodied aspects of runners’ sense of place are being formed and are interlinked. To this end, the paper proposed to draw on insights of (post-)phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, arguing that the shared interest of these perspectives in how people relate to and understand their lifeworld makes it possible to productively combine them.

<sup>19</sup> Due to the nature of the event, real-time experience is less likely to be shared during the event itself via social media (cf. MacKay et al. 2017).

The findings of the extensive qualitative fieldwork show that the experience of the physical environment and that of the social environment are closely (and contingently) connected in shaping participant residents’ sense of place, both in the case of smaller scale and larger events. City-images focusing on iconic sights, as promoted by (especially commercial) organizers do appear to have some influence on how (or which aspects) runners appreciate (from the) physical setting, even in the case of small-scale running events which aim to offer an alternative place experience. However, contrasting accounts (e.g. Herrick 2015) that emphasize, or implicitly assume, that place meanings are straightforwardly shaped by top-down attempts to showcase the city and to foster civic boosterism, our research found that local participants value spots and aspects (as well) that do not figure in officially promoted urban imaginaries. Furthermore, the findings also underline that aspects of sociality—including collectively shaped understandings of running (events) in runners’ social worlds (see Shipway et al. 2012), the surrounding flow of fellow runners, the supporting presence of both their loved ones and strangers—play an important role in shaping the meanings attached to and experience of both emblematic and ‘non-emblematic’ parts of the run. At the same time, the meanings ascribed to, and experiences of the event are not wholly socially conditioned: participants make ‘their own sense’ of the place by drawing together individual, embodied understandings with collective representations and embodiments in unexpected ways. Importantly, individual and collective experiences shaping sense of place should not be treated in isolation. Rather, in line with Antonsich (2010), we can postulate that while runners develop a self-understanding of being-in-a-place, (running event) places are also discursively activated as a socio-spatial category, and that these constitute two mutually constitutive moments. Similarly—as (post-)phenomenological approaches have emphasized (e.g. Duffy et al. 2011; Edensor and Larsen 2018),—aspects of individual and collective embodiment are closely interlinked as constituents of place experience. Runners’ ‘emplacement’ is thus not only produced as the combination of individual corporeality and cognition interacts with the physical environment (cf. Howes, cited by Hockey 2006, p. 187), but it also always has a collectively shaped dimension. Although it was beyond the scope of our research to



extensively inquire into and observe runners' training prior to the event, extending the temporal framework of the investigation could possibly deliver useful insights into this *process* of emplacement, and how it is not only (sense of) place that is *becoming*, but also the runner. Or, in post-phenomenological terms, how "the [running] subject comes to be in or through experience" (Ash and Simpson 2016, p. 49).

Overall, conducting empirical research about the meanings attached to and the experience of running events from a holistic perspective has been challenging. Some of the challenges, such as the difficulty of capturing people's understandings and embodied experience, without imposing researchers' preconceptions, is common to qualitative research. On the other hand, from survey and interview responses regarding the link between running event participation and sense of pride it appeared that respondents do not uncritically adopt the frames advanced by the researcher, but they try to reflexively look for alternative wordings that better describe their perceptions and experiences. Adherents of mobile methods convinced of the power of 'run-alongs' in more accurately capturing runners' experience might also question the use of interviews 'after the fact'. However, along with Merriman (2014) we contend that participative and performative methods should not be assumed as superior in apprehending habitual practices, feelings and sensations (related to place) that are said to be unspeakable. The example of our respondent speaking of 'falling into a black hole' at the finish is a good illustration of the fact that 'people can talk about their practices' (Hitchings 2012), and often in very revealing ways. To extend on Merriman's remark, "the world of *runners* is multiple" (cf. Merriman 2014, p. 176) and it asks for the combined application of different techniques. At the same time, one researcher's, or rather, one method's 'loss' will be another's 'gain' (cf. Spinney 2015, p. 24): arguably, our ambition of gaining a more holistic view of runners' sense of place was realized at the cost of a more in-depth understanding of runners' embodied experience. An important task and challenge for the expanding scholarship on running (events) is to be more reflexive about such trade-offs, and to more explicitly acknowledge the multiple character of the running world(s) they study.

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#### Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from each study participant after they were told of the potential risks and benefits as well as the investigational nature of the study.

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