Antecedents Of Runners Happiness

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Abstract:
Background: *This study aimed to analyze social factors that can influence runners' happiness, from the sense of belonging, social influence, and social competence.*
Materials and Methods: *A survey with 223 runners participating in the International Marathon of Porto Alegre 2019 was carried out in Porto Alegre, southern Brazil.*
Results: *The results indicated that social influence and social competence impact the sense of belonging, which, in turn, influences runners' happiness. Social competence positively influenced happiness.*
Conclusion: *We concluded that social competence is an important factor for runners' sense of belonging and happiness, showing that social interactions success reflects running. Therefore, social competence must be seen as a social skill that can be developed so that the interactions reverts to a greater sense of belonging and happiness.*
Keywords: *Happiness; Social competence; Sense of belonging; Social influence; Running.*

I. Introduction

A review of the literature on happiness performed by[46] indicated that happy people tend to be healthier and have longer life expectancies, thanks to a more robust immune system, better cardiovascular health, and healthier behaviors (exercise, wearing seatbelts, even wearing sunscreen). They also have better relationships, have more friends, stay married, and rate their marriages better; they are more pro-social and engaged citizens and are more successful at work. So, what concerns researchers is how to increase people's happiness[57].

Studies have already confirmed that participating in sports increases practitioners' happiness[23,38,47,67]. Recently, happiness in sport and running has been investigated from serious leisure[69], social identification[26], mood and negative affect[52], subjective performance[11], and physical enjoyment[48]. However, other social factors can influence the happiness of runners.

One factor that can influence happiness is the sense of belonging because one of the benefits of leisure is the development of social relationships[20], enabled by the formation of similar groups or communities[53], which results in increased happiness[18,42,66]. However, social relationships can be facilitated or hampered by social competence, people's ability to interact within a particular position, and context successfully[70]. In literature, social competence was investigated as a social malfunction, or deficit, with children[59], autistic[21], foreigners[14], and depressed mothers[63]. As an asset for social capital, social competence is investigated in business environments[6,13,36] and in leisure, with children only[64]. Given the above, this study intended to broaden the perspective of social competence in adult athletes. We understand that social competence is a social capital that can influence people's sense of belonging and happiness through interactions.

However, we propose that the sense of belonging can be influenced by social influence, which is a central variable of exchange relations and is related to greater satisfaction with the consequences of exchange[5]. For example, if a runner finds support and encouragement from people, they may be even more connected to running and running groups, resulting in an increased sense of belonging. In literature, social influence can encourage participation in leisure through friendship[7], spouse support[24,39], social identity and restrictions[45], and support and facilitation in leisure[1]. Therefore, we believe that social influence is another crucial factor to be investigated.

Hence, this study aimed to analyze social factors that can influence runners' happiness, from the sense of belonging, social influence, and social competence. The research was applied to runners, as running is a substantial leisure activity currently growing[39]. In a recent survey[3], mapped more than 70,000 running events from 1986 to 2018 and identified that in 2016 the participation in these events peaked with 9.1 million runners crossing the

finish line. Over the last ten years, there was an increase of 57.8% (from 5 to 7.9 million participants). The reason for choosing runners is that these practitioners may obtain personal and social benefits[61], such as providing a sense of conquest, social and psychological benefits, such as satisfaction with leisure, life satisfaction, happiness, and self-realization[62].

II. Theoretical Background

Social competence and sense of belonging

Social competence refers to the quality of perceived individual social interactions[27] or people's ability to successfully interact with each other within a particular position and context[70]. Socially qualified individuals can understand each other perspectives and react appropriately and conclude that demonstrating social competence is an essential aspect of healthy normal development[70] and can be trained[54] and developed[31].

In this context, positive social ties predict social competence[44], and the consequence of this success in social interactions can increase the sense of belonging. Individuals with greater social competence will have better friendships characterized by higher levels of help, closeness, and safety and will receive greater social support[49], resulting in an increased sense of belonging. For example[37], found that students felt a sense of belonging related to acceptance, comfort, and understanding by their peers in the group. For the context of runners, we believe that greater social competence can provide greater participation and connection to running groups and, therefore, an increased sense of belonging. Thus, we have the first hypothesis:

H₁: Social competence positively impacts the sense of belonging.

Social influence and sense of belonging

The theory of social influence describes that three social processes affect an individual's behavior: conformity, which is the normative influence of the expectations of others; internalization, which is the congruence of an individual's goals with the goals of others; and identification, which is the conception of oneself in terms of the characteristics that define the group[33]. These processes can be operated as subjective norms, group norms, and social identity[58]. Subjective norms mean that a person acts upon other significant person opinions to obtain their support or approval. Group norms indicate that a person accepts the group influence because of the similarity between their goals and those of other group members. Social identity refers to a person's sense of belonging and efforts to maintain a satisfactory or self-defined relationship with other people in the group[12]. In other words, we can see the relationship between social influence and the sense of belonging from those processes. To maintain and establish a relationship, individuals change their behavior (subjective norms), accept the influence of this group because they have common goals (group norms), and accept social influence to establish and maintain a self-defined relationship with another person or group - the sense of belonging[58].

In the sport context, social influence can encourage or create barriers to practice, increasing or decreasing the practitioner's sense of belonging to the sport and related groups. Leisure restrictions are described as perceived or experienced reasons that inhibit or prohibit an individual's participation and pleasure in a leisure activity[32]. For example[24], confirmed that the relationship between runners' commitment and the conflict between leisure and family was moderated by the level of spouses' support for running. At this point, social identity, which refers to the sense of belonging[12], plays a significant role in negotiating restrictions and this support, as well as in the participation of leisure more broadly[45]. When there are support and encouragement from significant people, the practice of running is facilitated[1], increasing their social identity and sense of belonging. As a result, the hypothesis is suggested:

H₂: Social influence positively impacts the sense of belonging.

Social Competence and Happiness

A suggestion[16] that subjective well-being generally is what people have in mind when referring to happiness. However, because of the multiplicity of meanings that happiness holds, researchers avoid the term and prefer to use the term subjective well-being (SWB), although happiness is also used synonymously with SWB[17,18,19,25]. The answer to this double concept has not yet been clarified since the relationship between SWB and happiness is not yet clear[8].

The description[17] of SWB as a multifaceted construct with two main components: the affective component, which encompasses emotions associated with reactions to events and life experiences (subjective happiness), and the cognitive component, which refers to judgments evaluations of life satisfaction. Additionally, subjective happiness depends on the question of why some people are happier than others. It includes how people perceive, interpret, remember, and experience life events positively or negatively[40].

For example, high-quality friendships have been associated with health, happiness, and academic and occupational success[30], since social competence was associated with greater satisfaction with life, a component of SWB[71]. The possible justification may be that individuals who have strong social competence can understand others' perspectives and react appropriately[70].

Previous researches have identified that one of the predictors of well-being is social competence[29,55]. Shek and Liang (2018) study verified the longitudinal development of adolescents' SWB (or happiness) related to life satisfaction and hopelessness. The results indicated that resilience, social competence, family functioning, and relational qualities between father and son were significant predictors of life satisfaction in initial status, also[10] reinforced the discussion of the role of social interaction and social capital models in promoting well-being. Thus, the hypothesis is suggested:

H₃: Social competence positively impacts happiness.

Sense of Belonging and Happiness

One can identify the relationship between sense of belonging and happiness from social resources (e.g., family support, friends, romantic relationships, and social skills), which are among the strongest correlates of SWB[18] and proposed[42] universal human needs and that satisfying them would likely increase a person's well-being. Thus, psychological needs, such as close social relations, domination, and autonomy, are linked to human beings, and meeting these needs should lead to higher SWB[66].

Successful experiences of feeling accepted can lead to feelings of strong belonging and improve a person's overall well-being[2]. Besides, a sense of belonging is a central determinant of health and well-being for people of all ages, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds[34]. Recent studies also confirmed the relationship between the sense of belonging and SWB[43,49,50,60,65]. Even so, the hypothesis is suggested:

H₄: Sense of belonging positively impacts happiness.

III. Research Method

The research method used in this study development was quantitative and descriptive, implemented through a single cross-section survey[28]. For data analysis, structural equation modeling was performed to assess the proposed theoretical model's intrinsic relationships and assumptions[9].

Participants

The research participants are Brazilian runners, who participated in the International Marathon of Porto Alegre 2019, where the data collection was carried out, a city in southern Brazil. One day before the event, when the practitioners were collecting the running kits (containing t-shirt, numbering, promotional products), they were approached by one of the researchers and invited to answer the questionnaire voluntarily, characterizing a sample for convenience. On June 1, 2019, we collected a total of 248 questionnaires, and after checking for missing and outliers (through the z-score and Mahalanobis tests), the final sample resulted in 223 valid questionnaires. As the event limits to 10 thousand registrations, the conversion rate was 2.23%.

Instrument

The happiness scale used was from[41] and validated in Portuguese by[15]. The social competence scale used was the Perceived Social Competence Scale-II (PSCS-II), contemplating the eight items proposed by the authors[4].

The sense of belonging scale was adapted from[68], containing five items. The original scales presented Cronbach's Alpha higher than 0.6 in the original studies. It should also be emphasized that the scales of social competence, sense of belonging, and social influence were measured with a 7-point Likert scale, varying from 1 (I completely disagree) to 7 (I completely agree).

In order to identify whether runners were actually involved in the running practice or if they were only in that marathon occasionally, we applied[72] scale, consisting of 10 items, ranging from 1 to 10, to which respondents were asked to select their level of involvement with running. After data collection, the questionnaires considered were those that presented a minimum average of 8 points on this scale. This way, it was possible to separate the runners who do not have involvement with running from those who do.

All analyses were performed using the statistical software SPSS 21 and AMOS 20. Confirmatory factor analyses evaluated the quality of the instrument. Then, structural equation modeling examined the proposed hypotheses.

IV. Results

Descriptive analysis

From the 223 respondents, 152 (68.2%) of the sample were male runners and 71 (31.8%), female runners. Most of them were between 31 to 50 years old, representing 160 respondents (71.7%). As to marital status, 144 (64.6%) were married, and, concerning schooling, 166 respondents (74.4%) have completed higher education or MBA/specialization. As the marathon is international, runners from all regions of Brazil attended the event. The South and Southeast regions had the most representative number of runners in the event, with 69 (30.9%) and 113 (50.7%), respectively. As for frequency, most respondents, 128 (57.4%), reported practicing running three times a week. Table 1 presents the complete characterization of the sample.

Table 1. Sample characterization.

Variables		n	%
Gender	Female	71	31.8
	Male	152	68.2
Age	18 to 30 years old	28	12.6
	31 to 40 years old	85	38.1
	41 to 50 years old	75	33.6
	51 to 60 years old	30	13.5
	61 years old or older	5	2.2
Schooling	Incomplete elementary school	1	0.4
	Complete elementary school	2	0.9
	Incomplete high school	1	0.4
	Complete high school	14	6.3
	Incomplete higher education	12	5.4
	Complete higher education	83	37.2
	MBA/Specialization	83	37.2
	Master	24	10.8
	Doctorate	3	1.3
Marital status	Single	57	25.6
	Married	144	64.6
	Widower	3	1.3
	Divorced	19	8.5
Region of Brazil	South	69	30.9
	Southeast	113	50.7
	Northeast	16	7.2
	Midwest	24	10.8
	North	1	0.4
Activity frequency	Once a week	15	6.7
	Twice a week	1	0.4
	3x a week	128	57.4
	4x a week	20	9.0
	5x a week	7	3.1
	Daily	52	23.3

Source: data from research.

Assessment of the structural model

For the individual validation of the constructs, convergent validity and discriminant validity were evaluated. In the convergent validity, factor loadings ranged from 0.52 to 0.85 and were considered satisfactory[9], except for variables HA4 (4th variable of happiness) and SB3 (3rd variable of the sense of belonging), which were below 0.50, and were removed from the analysis. The extracted variance from the sense of belonging was at the minimum limit indicated (50%), with 49%, but was adequate to the other analyses. The composite reliability and Cronbach's Alpha of all constructs were above the recommended score of 0.6 for Cronbach's Alpha and 0.7 for composite reliability[28], indicating that they present adequate reliability (Table2).

Table 2. Convergent validity.

	Variable	Factor loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
Happiness	HA1. In general, I consider myself:	0.76	0.50	0.75	0.72
	HA2. Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself:	0.75			
	HA3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describes you?	0.57			
Social influence	SI1. People who are important to me think that I should keep practicing running.	0.73	0.63	0.84	0.83

	SI2. People who influence my behavior think that I should keep practicing running.	0.85			
	SI3. People whose opinions that I value prefer that I practice running.	0.800			
Sense of belonging	SB1. I feel a strong sense of being part of this running community.	0.76	0.49	0.79	0.80
	SB2. I have complete trust of others in this running community.	0.65			
	SB4. I am very committed to this running community.	0.71			
	SB5. Overall, there is a high level of morale in the running community.	0.65			
Social competence	SC1. I am good at making friends.	0.54	0.60	0.91	0.89
	SC2. I help other people.	0.76			
	SC3. I get along well with others.	0.72			
	SC4. I ask others if I can be of help.	0.70			
	SC5. I show concern for others.	0.82			
	SC6. I am a good friend.	0.73			
	SC7. I show care for others.	0.85			
	SC8. I give support to others.	0.83			

Source: data from research.

The discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the constructs' squared correlations and the average variance extracted for a construct[22]. A rule for assessing discriminant validity requires that the square root of the average variance extracted be higher than the correlations between the constructs (see diagonal versus non-diagonal elements in Table 3). The constructs presented discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant validity[22.]

	Social competence	Sense of belonging	Social influence	Happiness
Social competence	0.60			
Sense of belonging	0.15	0.49		
Social influence	0.29	0.31	0.63	
Happiness	0.23	0.13	0.15	0.50

Source: data from research.

Structural model validation

To validate the proposed Theoretical Model fit, the similarity between the estimated and observed covariance matrixes are verified through the GOFs (Goodness-of-fit), classified as absolute fit measures (RMSEA); incremental fit measures (IFI, and TLI); and parsimonious fit measures (CFI)[9]. In this study, when analyzing the fit measures, the CFI (0.945), TLI (0.935), and IFI (0.946) were satisfactory. The RMSEA (0.056) also presented the value recommended in the literature, between 0.05 and 0.08, adequate to the recommended parameters[35].

The hypotheses test examined the significance and magnitude of the estimated regression coefficients[9]. Table 4 presents the structural paths, non-standardized coefficients, standard errors, standardized coefficients, t-values, and probabilities.

Table 4. Construct hypothesis test.

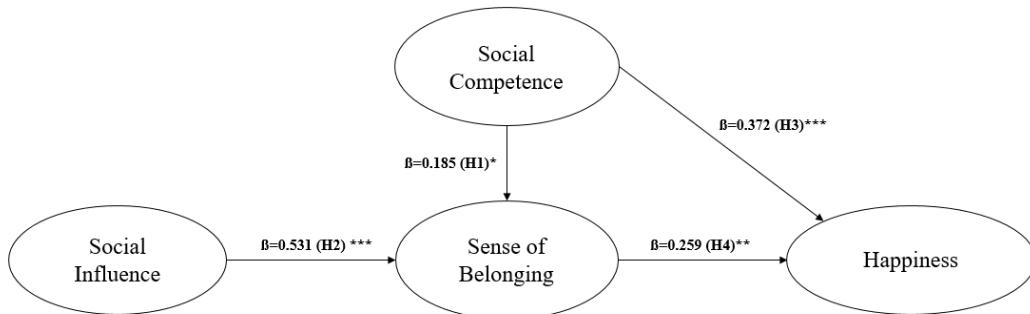| Hy	Path diagrams	Unstandardized coefficients (b)	Std. error	Standardized coefficients (β)	t-value	Sig.	Result
H1	SC → SB	0.22	0.098	0.185	2.248	0.025	Supported
H2	SI → SB	0.357	0.063	0.531	5.632	***	Supported
H3	SC → HA	0.385	0.104	0.372	3.702	***	Supported
H4	SB → HA	0.226	0.074	0.259	3.036	0.002	Supported

Source: data from research.

According to the results presented, we observe that hypotheses H_1 (social competence positively impacts sense of belonging, $\beta = 0.185$, $p < 0.05$), H_2 (social influence positively impacs sense of belonging, $\beta = 0.531$, $p < 0.001$), H_3 (social competence positively impacts happiness, $\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.001$), H_4 (sense of belonging positively impacts happiness, $\beta = 0.259$, $p < 0.01$), were statistically supported. Figure 1 presents the final theoretical model.

Another way to check the hypotheses test effectiveness is to use the theoretical model coefficient of determination (R^2)[35]. Social competence, sense of belonging, and social influence can explain 24.1% of happiness

in the investigated context. Besides, social influence and social competence explain 31.6% of the sense of belonging.

Figure 1. Final theoretical model.

Source: data from research.

V. Discussions and conclusions

Based on the proposed theoretical model, the study highlighted the social factors that can influence runners' happiness, from the sense of belonging, social influence, and social competence. The results confirm the **H1** hypothesis that social competence impacts the sense of belonging because people who have greater social competence will have better friendships, characterized by higher levels of help, proximity, and security, and will receive greater social support[49], which may increase the sense of belonging. In fact, people who have social competence can understand others' perspectives, react appropriately, and achieve greater success in social interactions[70]. We believe that this success can increase the runner's connection to the sport and the running groups, positively impacting the sense of belonging. People who have a greater sense of belonging have been accepted, have become comfortable, and have been understood by other group members[37]. We remind that this competence can be trained[54] and developed [31], and therefore, the relationship between social competence and the sense of belonging can be improved throughout life.

The **H2** hypothesis, which concerns the positive relationship of social influence on the sense of belonging, was confirmed in this study. The theory of social influence can justify this relationship[33], operationalized by the processes of social norms, group norms, and social identity[58]. In this way, individuals adapt themselves according to the groups to obtain support since they have common goals, resulting in greater social identity, which refers to a person's sense of belonging and efforts to maintain a satisfactory or self-defined relationship with other people in the group[12,58]. Therefore, when people who are important to the runners support and encourage them, the practice of running is facilitated[1]. Consequently, with fewer leisure restrictions[32], runners may have a greater chance of creating a social identity and sense of belonging.

It is worth noting that the social influence impact on the sense of belonging has a strong relationship ($\beta = 0.531$). This strength shows how much people's influence impacts the sense of belonging to running and running groups. It seems that dedication and immersion in the sport require significant people's consent, and when this occurs, runners feel more identified and belonging to this sport and related groups.

Social competence has a positive influence on practitioners' happiness, confirmed by **H3**. People with strong social competence can understand others' perspectives and react appropriately[70], which enables greater acceptance by people, and consequently increases their well-being and happiness[29,30,55,71]. As observed, the leisure practice encourages social interactions that can be improved over time. By developing these interactions, they are consolidated with their success, establishing social competence. Therefore, these relationships can strengthen the bonds between practitioners[20] through the formation of similar groups or communities[53] and result in increased happiness[18,42,66].

In line with the above, this study confirmed that social competence is an antecedent of happiness, identifying the personal conquest perceived by practitioners, who can interact with others and increase their happiness. In this way, socially qualified individuals can understand others' perspectives and react appropriately, enabling greater acceptance by people and, consequently, increasing their well-being and happiness.

Up to our knowledge, this study approached, in an unprecedented way, social competence as a social asset that adult athletes can have to develop a greater sense of belonging and happiness. This perspective was different from that in the literature, which investigated social competence only in business environments[6,13,36], or as a deficit or social malfunction as is usually researched[14,21,51,59,64]. Therefore, this study also validates the scale for social competence, previously used in youth and children, and now for "healthy" adults.

The study confirmed hypothesis, H_4 that the sense of belonging impacted happiness of running participants, as pointed in the literature[43,49,50,60,65]. This relationship is based on the satisfaction of psychological needs, such as close social relationships, which increases people's psychological well-being[42,66], once social resources (e.g., family support, friends, romantic relationships, and social skills) are among the strongest correlates of subjective well-being[18]. Therefore, accepted feelings, resulting from successful experiences, can lead to a strong sense of belonging and improve a person's overall well-being[2]. We believe that, for runners, the sense of belonging provides a greater connection to the sport and, consequently, greater benefits such as social attraction (association with other participants of the social world of the activity), group achievement (feeling of being necessary, the achievement of leisure goals together), and contribution to the maintenance and development of a group[61].

We concluded that social competence, social influence, and sense of belonging are essential factors to increase happiness. Faced with the acceptance of the sport by significant people, combined with the ability to interact with other people successfully, runners increase their sense of belonging through a social identity, resulting in increased happiness. We evidenced that social competence is an important factor for the sense of belonging and happiness of runners, showing that the success of social interactions reflects in the practice of running. Therefore, social competence must be seen as a social skill that can be developed so that interactions reverts to a greater sense of belonging and happiness.

One of the study's limitations is that the data collection was performed by a cross-sectional survey the day before the marathon. On that day, people could be happier than usual and answer with a bias towards happiness since anxiety questions were not performed. For this reason, we recommend replicating the survey in other periods, with dates far from the marathons.

Future studies could replicate the model to check the hypotheses and confirm the proposed relationships, especially social competence. Consequently, new investigations can verify if social competence influences other non-researched social aspects, such as the intention to participate in sports, events and groups, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, practice facilitation, among others.

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