‘Keep the pace! You’ve got this!’: The Content and Meaning of Impactful Crowd Encouragement at Mass Running Events

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Abstract

This study identified helpful and unhelpful encouragement at mass-participation running events and explored meaning that runners found in encouragement. First, 10k and half-marathon post-event surveys differentiated instructional and motivational components of helpful and unhelpful support. Second, an inductive, reflexive thematic analysis of 14 interviews highlighted the reciprocal relationship between the crowd and runners, whereby quality of support was reflected in runners' emotions and behaviour. Participants drew pride in participation and belief from the crowd, and they wanted to 'give back' through doing their best. Personal and authentic support was particularly valued. Although support was widely appreciated, at times it created a pressure to 'perform'. As a novel intervention based on our combined findings, we recommend that crowds, event organisers, and psyching teams give encouragement 'with IMPACT' (Instructional; Motivational; Personalised; Authentic; Confidence-building; Tailored to the distance). Crowds should demonstrate the 'core conditions' of authenticity, empathy, and being non-judgmental within their encouragement.

Keywords: 10k; endurance sports; endurance performance; half marathon; psyching teams; qualitative research; verbal encouragement.

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In the year of her passing, we wish to acknowledge Dr Kate F. Hays’ contribution to psychology. Through psyching teams, she ‘gave psychology away’ and helped the public recognise that psychology is part of their everyday lives (Hays & Katchen, 2006).

Recreational running has become one of the most popular sporting activities (e.g. Scheerder et al., 2015). Mass-participation running events have similarly become very popular, from 5km events through to 10km events, half marathons, and marathons. To illustrate their popularity, 7.9 million race results were recorded globally for recreational runners in 2018 (Andersen, 2019). Further, parkrun (a free, weekly, community 5km running event run globally) has logged over two million attendees and over 34 million finishes since its inception in 2004 (parkrun, 2021). Mass-participation events are inclusive to recreational and professional runners alike, with many participating for health and psychosocial reasons rather than competition (e.g. Lane et al., 2008; McCormick et al., 2020). For example, McCormick et al. (2020) found that runners’ most common motives for participating in events were for the challenge and to become fitter or remain fit, although other common motives were health, socialising as part of a community, the exercise feeling pleasurable or satisfying, benefiting their weight, benefiting their esteem or self-worth, and competing or comparing against others. Sport and exercise psychology practitioners can play an important role in helping runners to pursue their varied goals at mass-participation events.

Regardless of participation level and motive, there are ‘inherent’ physical and psychological demands when performing in endurance events (Meijen, 2019). These may include pre-race anxiety, exercise-induced pain, discomfort, exertion, stressors encountered

before (e.g. delays arriving at events) and during performance (e.g. weather, nutrition, hydration), and optimising pacing and race plans (e.g. McCormick et al., 2018; Meijen, 2019). These demands may impact motivation, concentration, and emotions, and therefore have implications for performance, satisfaction, and quality of experience (McCormick et al., 2018). Psychological interventions that help people to cope with the demands of endurance events therefore have considerable potential value for runners.

One psychological intervention that has been researched within endurance contexts is verbal encouragement (McCormick et al., 2015), which runners receive from crowds at live events. Verbal encouragement can be considered one part of the encouragement provided by crowds, which can also include clapping, cheering, written messages displayed on signs, and high fives. Verbal encouragement has particularly been considered within a controlled environment of maximal exercise testing. When fatigued, and throughout longer duration tests, it facilitates maximal effort and performance for both competitive and recreational runners (Andreacci et al., 2002; Midgeley, Earle et al., 2017; Moffatt et al., 1994). Despite its prevalence in endurance research, limited attention has been paid to the volume and frequency of verbal encouragement, and the effective characteristics of its content (Halperin et al., 2015; Midgley, Earle et al., 2017; Midgley, Marchant et al., 2017).

Midgley, Marchant et al. (2017) explored what constitutes effective verbal encouragement during an experimental endurance test. They considered the content, timing, and frequency of encouragement, with participants providing feedback on the helpfulness of each statement. Phrases were categorised as general encouragement (e.g. “just keep going”), power or effort related (e.g. “keep pumping those arms and legs” or “keep going to the max”), or positive reinforcement (e.g. “you’re doing really well”). The study found individual differences in preferences for both timing and content of encouragement. Many found the encouragement helpful, and some found it distracting or “annoying”. A small number of

participants felt they did not require the motivational effect of verbal encouragement, or that it made no difference to their effort. Preferences in the content of encouragement varied more than in its timing, and tone was also an important aspect of encouragement. Participants found verbal encouragement to be most helpful when the test became challenging or during times of fatigue, although a small sample found this distracting. The authors concluded that these individual differences show the complexity of providing such an intervention for endurance performance. It has also been suggested that detailed exploration of the "characteristics of effective verbal encouragement with respect to content, tone, loudness, timing and frequency" could help to promote evidence-based support (Midgley, Earle et al., 2017, p. 12). The perceived qualities and content of effective verbal encouragement have yet to be explored in naturalistic endurance settings (i.e. at real-life events) despite its prominence at mass-participation events such as 5km and 10km events, half marathons, and marathons. At mass-participation events, effective verbal encouragement could play a key role in participant reappraisal of stressors and coping, pace maintenance, and adherence to race plans (Meijen, 2019). Nevertheless, through influencing pacing decision making (e.g., runners going too fast early in an event), it could also lead to abandoning a race plan or mis-pacing the event and then associated negative outcomes like premature exhaustion and an unenjoyable experience.

One population who could benefit from guidance on verbal encouragement are 'psyching teams'. A psyching team is a model used to assist endurance participants prior to, during, and/or after endurance events through mental skills support (Day, 2019; Hays & Katchen, 2006; Meijen et al., 2017). Key aims of this service are to improve the experience and support performance at public events, by providing free psychological guidance. This is done by providing a brief, solution-focused psychoeducational approach to sport psychology. It allows an athlete to integrate mental strategies into their race-day experience, from planning through to recovery (Day, 2019). The structure of the psyching team may include: pre-race

workshops or pre-race speeches at pasta dinners; race-day written or verbal advice; in-race support through strategically-placed teams providing encouragement; and post-race guidance on recovery and reflection of race-day experiences. In-race support can draw upon the principles of verbal encouragement for providing motivational messages (either verbal or written) to runners. Psyching team support may particularly benefit recreational athletes, who may appreciate support with training, performing well, and enjoying the experience, but who may not otherwise have access to sport psychology services (Day, 2019). Self-reports from runners show that the services provided by psyching teams are well received (Hays & Katchen, 2006; Meijen et al., 2017). However, previous research has not examined helpful and unhelpful encouragement during real-life endurance events, which means that psyching teams may benefit from evidence-based guidance. In fact, this research was initiated to address an applied question that was asked and discussed within the Plymouth Marjon University Psyching Team: 'Based on research evidence, what should we be shouting to runners?'

Taken together, verbal encouragement contributes towards the crowd encouragement prominent at mass-participation events and can potentially influence a range of important outcomes relating to performance and quality of experience. Nevertheless, there is a lack of evidence-based guidance on providing effective encouragement at real-life events, such as guidance on what words to use, because of a lack of research in naturalistic settings. We therefore explored runners' experiences of crowd encouragement during mass-participation running events, to identify helpful and unhelpful content and qualities of encouragement. We also explored the meaning that runners find in the encouragement they receive, to understand how encouragement impacts on runners at real-life events. Through doing so, we aimed to provide insight and evidence-based guidance that could support psyching teams, mass-participation event organisers, and crowds in providing high-quality, impactful encouragement to runners that benefits their performance and quality of experience.

Methods

Following ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee, the research was completed in two phases. The first phase used a survey to identify helpful and unhelpful verbal encouragement content for runners participating in 10km and half marathon mass-participation events. The second phase used interviews and a focus group to interpret the meaning that runners found in encouragement by exploring experiences of crowd and psyching team support.

Paradigm

The adopted ontology was relativist, which assumes that social reality is constructed. The adopted epistemology was subjectivist, transactional, and constructivist, which assumes that the researchers are thoroughly and inseparably a part of what they are studying, and that findings are co-created through interaction between the researcher and participants. The adopted methodology was hermeneutical and dialectical, which assumes that constructions are elicited and refined through interactions between the researcher and participants, and that varying constructions are interpreted, compared, and contrasted through dialectical interchange (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2017; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In Phase 1, we assumed that no verbal encouragement would be universally helpful or unhelpful, as the encouragement would be interpreted individually. Nevertheless, there may be patterns in what runners interpret as helpful or unhelpful. In Phase 2, we used the interview dialogue to explore and interpret the meaning that helpful and unhelpful encouragement had for individual runners.

Phase 1 – Survey

Data Collection

Our data collection questions were included in the anonymous, online, post-race survey that was sent by the event organisers of a mass-participation 10k (2017) and half marathon (2018) running event in the South West of England, UK. These events had a modest psyching team presence at them (up to three sport and exercise psychology practitioners, and a small group of

their students). The aim of our questions was to develop an understanding of the crowd encouragement perceived as helpful or unhelpful during the events.

Responses to each question were anonymous and independent, which meant that the total number of people who completed each of the two surveys could not be determined. Nevertheless, a minimum of 627 people answered one or both of the questions in the 10k survey, and a minimum of 234 people answered one or both of the questions in the half marathon survey. Through these surveys, participants provided examples of helpful and unhelpful encouragement. For the half marathon event, participants were asked: '*Do you have any suggestions relating to what the crowd should shout, in order to provide motivational support to runners at the [event name]?*' and '*Based on things you heard people in the crowd shout at the [event name], do you have any suggestions relating to what the crowd should NOT shout?*'. For the 10k event, the survey asked: 'W*hat words of encouragement is it helpful for people to shout during a 10k (e.g. what is motivating?)?*' and 'W*hat words of encouragement is it unhelpful for people to shout during a 10k (e.g. what is frustrating?)?'* Due to the nature of the one-shot survey, follow-up questions could not be used to seek clarification, context, or elaboration.

Data Analysis - Surveys

Domain summaries were constructed to summarise participants' survey responses and capture surface meaning relating to the content of helpful and unhelpful encouragement (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Clarke et al., 2019). Preliminary domain summaries were constructed more inductively, driven by the content of the responses rather than an organising theory. As these preliminary summaries were similar to motivational and instructional self-talk, the data were deductively integrated into motivational and instructional domain summaries to help sport and exercise psychologists to link the findings to the broader literature.

Phase 2 – Interviews

Like Phase 1, Phase 2 examined runners' experiences at a mass-participation 10k (2018 and 2019) and half marathon (2019) running event in the South West of England, UK. There was a modest psyching team presence at these events, holding motivational signs, cheering, and giving 'high fives'.

Participants

Purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) was used to recruit participants, through local running groups and psyching team pre-race workshops. The aim was to capture the heterogeneity of the participant group (Maxwell, 2013). The criteria for inclusion were participants of 18 years and over, who had completed the 10k (n = 5) or half marathon (n = 9) during the data collection period. Fourteen runners participated in one-to-one interviews (runners' characteristics are provided in Table 1). Pseudonyms were randomly chosen names from the 10k finishers list. Eight male and six female runners, ranging from 21 to 73 years (m = 39 years), shared their experiences. Completion times for the 10k ranged from 55:55 to 1hr 09, and half marathon times ranged from 1hr 25 to 2hrs 27. Across events, years of regular running participation ranged from four months to six years.

Table 1
Overview of Participant Characteristics

Research event	Participant pseudonym	Gender identity	Age	Race time	Event training	Events last year	Regular running experience
10k	Emily	f	41	01:09:52	3	5	3 years, 6 months
	Colin	m	52	01:05:37	3	6	8 months
	Hannah	f	20	00:59:37	5	1	4 years
	Ravi	m	48	01:07:02	1	0	4 years
	Laura	f	35	00:55:55	2.5	0	5 months
Half marathon	Claire	f	26	01:48:21	2	2	4 years, 6 months
	Josh	m	35	01:25:27	4.5	2	6 years, 9 months
	Jeff	m	73	01:44:00	10	3	1 year
	Tim	m	34	01:52:22	2	0	4 months
	Jo	f	46	02:27:16	2.5	0	3 years
	Hamish	m	21	01:59:22	1	0	5 years
	Ben	m	51	01:53:00	5	0	1 year, 6 months
	Kate	f	36	02:21:00	4	1	6 months
	Drew	m	32	01:39:00	2	1	5 years, 6 months

Note. f = female; m = male; Event training = weekly hours of training in the build up to the event; Events last year = Events at distance of event or greater in the past 12 months.

Interview Process

Information sheets were sent to gatekeepers (e.g. committee members and coaches) of running clubs in the South West of England and participants at psyching team event preparation workshops. To support recall of the meaning and impact of encouragement, the 10 participants who volunteered before the event (four contacted us in the days after the event) were given instructions prior to the endurance event. These instructions asked participants to ‘notice how the crowd provides verbal encouragement’ and the ‘effects the different encouragement has on how you think, feel, and behave’. All 14 participants were asked to complete a reflective log, as shortly after the event as possible to support recall, 12 of whom completed one. This log intended to capture examples of helpful and unhelpful encouragement. Questions within it included: ‘What encouragement did you notice?’ and ‘What thoughts did it cause you to have?’.

A semi-structured interview guide, which provides a flexible but focused approach (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), was used to explore the meaning that runners found in the encouragement they received. The first two interviews were treated as pilot interviews and were used to check for understanding and fluidity of the interview guide (Chenail, 2011). Pilot participants felt the interview process had enabled them to reflect on their experiences and that the post-race reflection log was beneficial for recall of experiences during the interview. A pilot interview was also shared with the second author, to gain feedback and engage in reflexive discussion. After listening to the interview recording, the first and second author undertook a critical discussion, but no direct changes were made to the interview guide as a result. Pilot participants were included in the data analysis.

Participants were invited to discuss their experience during the race, with the aim of exploring what types of encouragement were perceived to be helpful or unhelpful, and why this was the case (e.g. how the encouragement made them feel, whether it impacted their motivation or pace). Prior to the interviews, the purpose of the study was communicated with the participant, with specific regard to 'how different types of encouragement affect runners' thoughts, feelings (e.g. emotions) and behaviours (e.g. your pace, or what you said to other runners), and the relationships between these'. The interviews aimed to support the building of a rich picture of the experiences of encouragement. Opening questions (e.g. 'Please describe your experience of the event') aimed to support the recall of experiences and encourage visualisation of the race. Both the reflective log and the interview guide were used to focus the interview (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). While most of the interview focused on crowd encouragement, participants were also asked about their experience of the psyching team. To differentiate the impact of the psyching team from that of general crowd encouragement, the interviewer asked about each but drew on similar questioning e.g. 'Please can you describe an experience within the race when you noticed helpful encouragement from the psyching team

[or crowd]?'. Follow-up questions explored the meaning of the encouragement by asking questions such as 'What did that mean to you, in that moment?' and 'Did it affect how you were feeling?'. At the end of the interview, participants could add anything they felt pertinent. The lengths of interviews ranged from 26 minutes to 1 hour 24 minutes (M = 51 minutes), and each took place within five days of the race (5 days n = 9, 4 days n = 1, 3 days n = 1, 1 day n = 3) to support recollection of specific examples.

Focus Groups

The methods of the research were flexible, and the plan of enquiry evolved. As an example, a focus group was added after considering who else might offer valuable experiences or an alternative perspective on the impact of verbal encouragement (Smith & Sparkes, 2014). Focus groups can encourage the sharing of experiences, whilst capitalising on group interaction such as discussion, debate, exchange of anecdotes, and use of humour (e.g. Kitzinger, 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Smith & Sparkes, 2014). A focus group was being run as part of a separate study, considering the characteristics of an effective psyching team. The final section of the focus group (35 mins) was spent reflecting on psyching team members' perceptions of helpful and unhelpful support at mass-participation events; that is, what psyching team members perceived to be helpful and why (a separate consent process was included). Five members (three females and two males) of the psyching team took part in the focus group, three were part of the research team (one of whom facilitated the discussion) and two were students at the university. Each member had participated in at least two psyching team events. A semi-structured guide was used to initiate and develop conversation (Smith & Sparkes, 2014), and participants shared their experiences of helpful or unhelpful support that they had noticed during the event. Follow-up questions were used to provide additional insight; these included 'why do you feel it was helpful/unhelpful?' and 'what impact did you notice?'.

Data Analysis – Interviews and Focus Group

All interviews were recorded and transcribed manually or using an online transcription platform (Otter.ai), depending on participant consent. Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview and focus group data and to construct themes of meaning across the dataset. These phases involved a recursive, reflexive process of data familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme revision, theme naming, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Clarke et al., 2019). The first author became familiarised with the data by listening to the audio recordings once, and then again during the transcription process. Reading and editing the transcripts also supported familiarity with each interview. Initial codes were established by making notes of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours noticed by the participant prior to, during, or after the event. After initial coding, further refinement was made to ensure that codes were relevant to the research question and reflective of the data (Braun et al., 2016). An example of an early, fully-coded interview was shared with the second author, for a reflexive discussion. Relevant data for each code were then manually clustered to form broader patterns of meaning; at this point, some codes were discarded or combined with other clusters. After a process of refinement, clusters were constructed into themes and sub-themes, centred around a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2016) that related to participants across the varied sample (e.g. across genders and experience levels). The themes were mapped, discussed with the second author, and then revised and refined. While coding and theme construction involve inductive and deductive elements, a predominantly inductive approach was adopted whereby the analysis process was more data-driven than theory-driven (Braun et al., 2016). Data analysis of the interviews and focus group particularly used semantic codes, whereby the obvious meanings expressed by participants were reported as explicit themes (Braun et al., 2016). Some consideration was also given to the underlying meanings of participant narratives in the form of latent codes, interpreting beyond the spoken word (Braun

& Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2014). 'Storybook' themes (Clarke, 2019) were constructed, whereby a central message was used to unify each theme, with the first author considering questions such as 'what is the central idea?' and 'what is the shared pattern of meaning and underlying assumptions?'. The interview and focus group dialogue were viewed as a social interaction and therefore the analysed participant quotes were kept in context.

Quality Criteria and Generalisability

Consistent with our stated paradigm, we adopted a relativist approach to judging and enhancing quality. We did not seek to apply a universal set of criteria, but rather viewed the criteria used to judge a piece of research as dependent upon the context and purposes (Sparkes & Smith, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Wadey & Day, 2018). Reflecting the context and purpose of the current research, readers are invited to form their own judgement on the extent to which the research meets the following 'list' of criteria from Tracy's (2010) 'Big-Tent' quality criteria for qualitative research:

- Is the research on a 'worthy' research topic?
- Does the research provide a 'significant contribution' to furthering knowledge in this context? Does the study facilitate understanding of the content and qualities of helpful encouragement? Considering the applied nature of the research, do the findings hold clear practical significance within the context of mass-participation endurance events?
- Considering 'meaningful coherence', do the methods and procedures fit the intended aim? Are the conclusions and implications for practice and future research meaningfully interconnected with both the literature and the presented data?
- Do the findings—communicated using participant narratives of experiences and in lay language—resonate with the reader? Can the reader make connections between the presented themes and their own involvement in mass-participation events?

The following practical strategies were used to support the study's credibility, worthiness, significant contribution (including practical contribution), meaningful coherence, and resonance (Tracy, 2010): (1) the research question addressed a real-life applied problem faced by a psyching team; (2) multiple, complementary sources of data were used to explore the research question; (3) the first and second author engaged in ongoing, reflexive and critical discussions about the research process and data interpretations; (4) an abundance of aesthetic quotes were used to capture the nature of the themes; and (5) encouragement 'with IMPACT' is a novel, practical intervention built upon the findings.

We aimed to encourage *naturalistic generalisability* (see Smith, 2018), through resonating with the experiences of readers who have participated in mass-participation events (whether running or another endurance sport such as triathlon) or who have been involved with people who have (e.g. psyching team members, family of endurance participants). To support this type of generalisability, we have provided contextual details and aesthetic participant quotations throughout the Results.

Results

Survey Findings

Once irrelevant responses were excluded (e.g. 'all the support was helpful', 'I don't listen to the crowd'), 537 codes (10k = 431, half marathon = 106) and 164 codes (10k = 100, half marathon = 64) were analysed for helpful encouragement and unhelpful encouragement, respectively, and included within the tables of themes. Accurate information relating to the course and support with the processes of running (e.g. 'run tall') was clearly perceived as helpful. Praise for participation and effort during the event was also helpful to many. Encouragement that reinforced self-efficacy (e.g. perceived ability to complete the event) was also helpful, alongside gestures that made support more personal such as use of names of runners, running clubs, or charities. Inaccurate course-related information was particularly

unhelpful when paired with feelings of fatigue, or when this information impacted pacing decisions. The surveys highlighted that although there were themes for helpful and unhelpful support, personal preferences were apparent. An example was the differentiation in whether accurate course-related information was helpful or unhelpful (e.g. "Two miles to go"). Contextual factors were also important, such as whether course-related information was accurate, and how runners perceived their physical and psychological state at the time.

Helpful Encouragement

As summarised in Table 2, instructional encouragement was coded in two forms, *instruction relating to the process of running* and *course information*. Motivational encouragement was coded as *praise for participation and effort* or *verbal persuasion of belief in the runner*. Further, *personalised support* through use of runners' names, club names, or charities was encouraging. Helpful encouragement was also found in humour (n = 29) (e.g. 'run like Tom Hardy is at the finish') and generic clapping and cheering support (n = 45).

Table 2
Words of Encouragement Perceived as Helpful

Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Example Quote**
Instructional	Running process (n = 21)	'keep the pace' 'run tall' 'keep those legs moving'
	Course information (n = 49)	'downhill next' 'this is the last hill' '[x] to go'
Motivational	Praise for participation and effort (n = 190)	'great effort' 'brilliant running' 'you're inspiring others'
	Verbal persuasion of belief in the runner (n = 205)	'you can do it' 'you've got this' 'keep going'
	Personalised support (n = 72)	Use of name/club/charity/number

Unhelpful or 'Misplaced' Encouragement

As summarised in Table 3, unhelpful comments from the crowd were coded as *instructional* or *'misplaced' motivational support.* Though it was deemed helpful for some, other participants found *distance-related information* unhelpful, especially when the details were inaccurate or early in the course. This was particularly apparent for half marathon runners. For example, 'saying "not far now". That's the worst when you still have 3 miles to go'. 10k participants also found comments such as 'you're over half-way', or 'saying "only a few hundred meters to go" when clearly there's still a couple of miles' unhelpful. The accuracy of information provided by supporters appeared important for both event distances.

For some, *well-intended motivational comments* were not well received. This appeared particularly pertinent when fatigued as one respondent wrote, 'when someone shouts "keep running" when you are struggling and obviously not running for a good reason'. *Effort-related critical comments* were understandably unhelpful, even if applied in good humour. Example comments were, 'call that running', and 'you look like you're struggling but keep going'. This appears to demonstrate a lack of empathy with those participating, and a lack of awareness of the variation in goals for participation, as running for the entire duration may not be a primary goal for many. Comments such as 'it's a run not a walk' and 'you're letting yourself down by walking' may not reflect their participation aims.

A few participants spoke of appearance-related comments (e.g. 'make an effort fat boy'). Whether these comments were experienced during the studied events was unclear. Well-intended motivational support (as highlighted within the 'helpful' section) was also sometimes unhelpful (e.g. 'don't give up' or 'dig deep'). This was especially relevant when runners were experiencing fatigue or a challenging part of the course. These findings demonstrated that the context and psychological state of the runner may impact how encouragement is interpreted.

Table 3
Words that are perceived as unhelpful or 'misplaced'

Theme	Sub-theme	Example quote
Instructional	Distance-related information (*n* = 59). N.B. especially when inaccurate or early in the race.	'saying "not far now". That's the worst when you still have 3 miles to go'
		'saying "only a few hundred meters to go" when clearly there's still a couple of miles'
'Misplaced' motivational support	Well-intended motivational comments (*n* = 32). N.B. especially during times of fatigue.	'keep going', 'dig in'
		'when someone shouts "keep running" when you are struggling and obviously not running for a good reason'
	Effort-related critical comments (*n* = 59)	'call that running'
		'this is easy'
		'you're letting yourself down by walking'
	Appearance-related critical comments (*n* = 14)	'move it fatty'
		'anything weight related'
		'you look terrible'

Interview Findings

Three themes were constructed from the interviews that provide an insight into the individual and shared experiences of verbal and non-verbal encouragement: 'I'm here!'; 'I wanted to give back what they were giving me'; and 'There's a connection and it…speaks to the core of you' (see Table 4). Sub-themes are also explored, in relation to the central organising concept (or *essence*) of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In summary, both pride in participation and belief in one's own capabilities were drawn from crowd support; in turn participants perceived this to foster a greater sense of determination and enhance physical effort. A meaningful interaction was experienced through encouragement, which recognised a

reciprocal relationship between the crowd and participants. Furthermore, the quality of support appeared to be mirrored in participant emotion and behaviour (e.g. 'the more you give me, the more I want to give back'). Although this support was generally appreciated, at times the support created a social responsibility to 'perform' for the crowd. This pressure was experienced as feeling a need to maintain or increase pace, when psychological and physical reserves were low. A final theme considered the core qualities of helpful support, in terms of creating a connection with the person being encouraged. This connection was made when the crowd or psyching team members used their name, made eye contact, or said something meant for them.

Table 4
Interview Themes

Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**'Essence' of Theme / Sub-Theme**
Theme 1: 'I'm Here!': Support Reinforced a Sense of Pride and Competence		Crowd support helped to reinforce pride and fostered determination and physical effort.
	'I Was Proud as Punch': Support Evokes a Sense of Pride	Participants drew pride and acknowledgement from the support received.
	'They Believe I Can Do It, So I Can Do It': Support Reinforces Competence	Crowd support helped participants to build or reappraise their sense of competence.
Theme 2: 'I Wanted to Give Back What They Were Giving Me': Encouragement Creates Meaningful Interaction		There was a reciprocal relationship between the crowd and participants, enabling a sense of connection.
	'I Think that Energy…Goes Through to You': The Quality of Support is Reflected by Runners	Participants wanted to do their best for the crowd and give something back.

	‘I Think it was Kind of Like a Ripple Effect’ - There is an Indirect Impact of Support	Positive emotions were experienced by watching fellow runners interact with the crowd and receive support.
	‘Stop Cheering Me, I’m Tired’ - Support Creates a Sense of Social Responsibility	Encouragement can create internal conflict and a pressure to ‘perform’.
Theme 3: ‘There's a Connection and it… Speaks to the Core of You’: Runners Value Personal and Authentic Support		Genuine and personal support facilitated a connection between runners and those providing support.
	‘Use Names, Make Eye Contact, and Say Things Meant for that Particular Individual’: The Qualities and Impact of Personal Support	Personal support helped runners feel ‘noticed’ and to overcome challenges.
	‘I Convinced Myself my Name is Julie’: Connections can be Created by Participants	When a personal connection with the crowd was not readily apparent, it was sometimes constructed by runners.

Theme 1: ‘I’m Here!’: Support Reinforced a Sense of Pride and Competence

There was a clear feeling of pride in participation, for both first-time and experienced event participants. Crowd support helped to reinforce this sense of pride and fostered determination and physical effort. Participants also shared their experiences of how support facilitated or reinforced feelings of self-efficacy.

‘I Was Proud as Punch’: Support Evokes a Sense of Pride. On reflection of his first half marathon, Hamish described the association he made between crowd support and a message of pride and encouragement:

> ‘Clapping is lots of people saying “I'm proud of you”, essentially…So when I'm running, people clapping is like, “I'm proud of you”. It's encouraging. You know, you know, all these people are encouraging you “go on, you can do this”… there's these

> crowd of people who want you to achieve, and they're clapping you and they're encouraging you and they're shouting "go on you can do this". So, it just, it encourages you to be determined to do better, and finish it, get over the finish line and smash it'.

The support that was received helped runners to remain determined in pursuit of their goals. It was acknowledged that, 'the crowd…made me feel like I can just find it, keep going' (Claire). Experiences of personal support also provided motivation to remain focused and determined, especially when family were present at the event:

> 'So, as I ran out and they [my partner and son] were like cheering and then I knew that they'd be near the end as well. So that kind of was a factor in keeping me going because obviously I knew how proud they'd be, and my son was so excited. And I knew he'd be waiting for me' (Laura, reflecting on familial support at her first 10k event).

This sense of pride was also echoed by Ben in acknowledging the journey that had led to the involvement in his first half marathon:

> '[when I saw my wife] I was proud as punch. Yeah, I am… I do get a little bit overwhelmed with it because… it's alright for everybody else. And I don't underestimate that other people have got their challenges, but for me an immense challenge. The challenge of my life'

Many participants spoke of the 'boost' experienced because of support like this. This boost was often interpreted as creating an emotional response (e.g. a sense of pride), which enabled greater determination and persistence (e.g. to sustain a difficult pace).

'They Believe I Can Do It, So I Can Do It': Support Reinforces Competence. Another clear implication of crowd support was the facilitation and reinforcement of competency. Claire explained, 'obviously, physically, I can do it. It's just sometimes. Because mentally I feel like I can't. But actually with that crowd there, kind of makes me feel like I can, that I can just find it. keep going'. Participants also spoke of reappraising their progress in

response to motivational encouragement. For example, ‘yeah, I’m doing alright’ and how the crowd ‘made me feel like I can [complete the course]’.

> ‘If you can actually go out and do that, a 10k race, and if somebody while you're running around that race, at some stage tells you you're doing really well. That does make you feel good. And it does make you feel better. And it feels like “yeah I'm actually doing alright”. Instead of thinking, “God, I'm struggling. This is really hard, why am I doing this?”. Whereas when there's a few people saying, “you're doing really well, you're looking really well”. And like “yeah, come on, you're doing well”, that sort of, those sort of minimal comments by somebody you don't even know. And probably wouldn't recognise again, are actually, boost, boost your confidence and keep you going. And you think actually “yeah I'm doing alright here”. (Colin)

Specific phrases were recalled by participants, especially the phrase ‘you’ve got this’ which can be interpreted in a way that is meaningful to each individual. The popularity of this phrase was also echoed in the survey findings and was coded under ‘verbal persuasion in belief of the runner’. Ben explains how this phrase can be interpreted in a personal and meaningful way:

> 'You've got this' has just, it's really stuck with me in my brain. It's simple words isn't it, but it's become really powerful in everything for me. Umm, it's the easiest mantra to repeat. It's sort of a variable that, although you say “you've got this”, you're not being too specific as to which bit you've got. It can be adaptable. So, in that “you've got this”, well “you've got this far. You've managed it, you've got this. You've got to the start line, you've gotten to the point in your life where you're completing a half marathon”. Or it could be “you've got this. You're looking really good”. Or it could be, you know, “your pace is excellent”. Or, it can, you can adapt it to so many things. But when I heard it, it just made me think back to “you've done this before, you've practiced this. You've trained for it. You've done this faster than you're going to do it today. You've done it

> for longer than you've done it today. You've done it when you couldn't walk. But you still finished"'

Laura described how social facilitation triggered or reinforced motivational self-talk, and that this was perceived to impact on her running behaviour:

> 'I think, I think obviously, when you're training, you're training on your own like you don't, you know, you've only got your own thoughts in your head telling you like "you can do it. Come on, come on. You can do it". When you've got other people telling you, "you can do it", then you believe that as well you think, "well, they believe I can do it. So I can do it and I have to show everyone I can do it".

Theme 2: 'I Wanted to Give Back What They Were Giving Me': Encouragement Creates Meaningful Interaction

This theme captured the recognition that there is a reciprocal relationship between the crowd and participants. The quality of support (in terms of the words spoken and enthusiasm shown), was reflected in participants' emotions and running behaviour. Participants also recognised that there can be an indirect impact of support, through the observation of other runners receiving support. Mostly, encouragement was welcomed and valued, but it also created a pressure to 'perform' or to 'give the crowd what they are there for'. This pressure was described as a social obligation to maintain or increase pace, particularly during challenging parts of the course.

'I Think that Energy…Goes Through to You': The Quality of Support is Reflected by Runners. The very presence of supporters was appreciated by participants, which was reflected in wanting to 'do your best' for the crowd because they have 'made the effort' (Ravi, after completing his first 10k event). 'Doing your best' was described in terms of pace maintenance and enhanced effort, and such acts were seen as encouragement for the crowd.

> ‘I guess I wanted to give them a little bit of a reward. Because they were, they were giving something to me and I wanted to give something back, which was a show of “thank you”’ (Hamish)

> ‘Seeing the crowd provide support makes you feel like you want to be a bit better for them and push yourself. It's a two-way interaction, like I thank people “Oh thanks for coming out” or somebody sort of says “Oh you're doing really well. Great running”, I'll thank them for it as well. So that like, sort of they're getting that little bit back from me as well. I quite enjoy that, it does make you feel, does make you feel good’ (Colin)

This interplay was well represented by the narrative of Ben: ‘I’m giving them something, but they give me something…I feel good’. On reflection of his first 10k event, Ravi added that this support helped to improve interpretation of fatigue. He stated ‘my power up was people cheering’.

Participants valued certain qualities of support (e.g. authenticity, personally-directed support), as represented in Theme 3, however the volume of support was also highlighted by several participants who felt it enhanced their motivation to ‘push hard’ and ‘perform’. This was partly due to the energy created by a larger crowd; this energy, however, was also demonstrated by much smaller groups showing enthusiasm. The narrative of Claire summarised this transfer of energy.

> ‘Sometimes you get energy from other people, there's a lot to be said, for the energy of people kind of yelling and the noise and the sound and seeing all these faces. I always feel like there's just energy in the crowd. And I think that energy that kind of then goes through to you’.

For some, the volume of support can feel more challenging. This was clearly expressed by Hamish who said, ‘I directly avoid eye-contact in the last 100m or whenever there is a big

crowd. If anything, it makes you feel a bit nervous because there are hundreds of eyes on you, so I avoided looking at them'.

There were few accounts of the *absence* of enthusiasm but when it was experienced, it was noticeable and experienced as 'awkward'. Reflecting on her sixth 10k event in a 12-month period, Emily spoke of a time when supporters were watching, rather than supporting, and explained 'It was a bit like "don't know where to look"'. Although not deemed to have a detrimental impact on running behaviour, it was perceived as a 'missed opportunity' to make a difference.

> 'I noticed people that were there but not interacting in any way. Just sort of watching. It seemed like a missed opportunity to make a difference. There may have been some mild disappointment in that, but it was more a feeling of a missed opportunity' (Drew, reflecting on his 2nd half marathon)
>
> 'It's really good because you notice it in parts where the crowd are more noisy. You feel more encouraged to run quicker. Whereas if you're getting past a bit of crowd where they've got clapping fatigue they're bit like "ah yeah" [spoken in an unenthusiastic tone] then you don't feel like putting in as much effort' (Tim, reflecting on his first half marathon).

An absence of support also created an internal focus for some participants, whereas for others its presence created a distraction and supported pace maintenance. An absence of interaction was also noticeable from some psyching team members. Colin reflected on his experience of this during the 10k, when he ran past a psyching team member holding a motivational sign (or 'board'): 'It [the psyching team member holding a sign] was almost like it was a board on a stick. That's quite harsh to say that. One or two of them were smiling but it was almost like a board on a stick'. This statement reaffirms the importance of interaction and enthusiasm.

'I Think it was Kind of Like a Ripple Effect': There is an Indirect Impact of Support. Direct interaction was not always required to experience positive emotions; indeed the act of observing support for others was noted as lifting mood. Positive emotions were experienced by 'watching other people' engage in support and seeing them 'being happy about it'. Particular reference was made to the characteristics of support-givers. For example, 'It was lovely seeing young children out supporting people…it lifted my mood and made the experience more enjoyable' (Jo, reflecting on her first half marathon).

> 'The ones that I liked the most, were not directed at me. The ones I really enjoyed the most was seeing a little child with "Go Dad" or "Go Mum" or a family with a, you know, a picture and a sign on a bit of cardboard. A scribble. Those are the ones I really enjoyed' (Ravi)

The noticeable impact of support on other runners was also felt to improve the race experience: 'I liked watching other people do it [high-five station] and like them being happy about it and stuff like that' (Hannah, reflecting on her second 10k event). In this respect, there was an indirect benefit of support directed at others.

> 'I think, people seeing other people really happy for other people makes you feel more motivated to keep going. So, I think it was kind of like a ripple effect sort of. Like it just made me feel like "oh yeah, okay, I can keep going"' (Hannah).

'Stop Cheering Me, I'm Tired': Support Creates a Sense of Social Responsibility. There was some internal conflict between the influence of support on psychological factors such as determination, and a feeling of 'pressure to perform'. Ben explained that 'you feel like you are performing, and this can make me feel that there is an expectation'.

> 'The fact, people were cheering you on and specifically cheering on [company name], particularly the [psyching team] people on the side were cheering you. It was kind of like the embarrassment factor of having to walk in front of them, so you wanted to keep

> going, which is kind of good. Because the more you kept going, the less likely you were then to stop' (Ravi)

In addition, in the focus group, psyching team members discussed the importance of recognising the context of their encouragement and how their encouragement needed to be adapted to the needs of the individual:

> 'I think [placed at the end of the half marathon] … we did have a lot of, a lot of walkers or a lot of people that had slowed down naturally, I think you've got to be a bit careful in terms of trying to encourage them… too much or encourage them to a point where they perceive it as you want them to go faster. I think there was a couple of times when people turned around to me and said "I'm done, I'm done"' (Focus group participant – Student)

For some, the support experienced during challenging parts of the course (such as hills or the final 1km/mile) was perceived as beneficial to emotions and performance. It caused a welcomed distraction, supported efficacy, and helped to maintain pace. Being able to 'perform' and demonstrate effort was associated with feelings of 'pride'.

> 'So, I felt a responsibility as well to the crowd for them to see somebody give. That's what they're there for. They're seeing people push themselves really hard. So, if I still had something to give, I'm gonna give it and I want them to see somebody sprinting at the end and, and I want me to be remembered like that. I don't want me to be remembered shuffling across the line, dragging my foot or whatever' (Ben)
>
> 'I definitely made sure I paced myself. I absolutely did not wanna start walking. My personal pride was not gonna let me walk with all those people cheering and clapping. Why would they cheer you on, and clap, when you're walking? I mean, of course they would, but for me in my mindset, it was. I think, you know, people have come to see

> you run. You want to do the best, because they've made the effort to come out for you' (Ravi).

For some, there was something 'left in the tank' to give and this helped to exert effort. For others, however, there was more of a social obligation to maintain their running, twinned with thoughts of not wanting to 'let the crowd down' and feelings of 'embarrassment' and 'disappointment' for walking. These thoughts were shared by many. Hamish explained 'I was thinking "stop cheering me, I'm tired"' and Tim highlighted that 'It's almost kind of like a social obligation to carry on'.

> 'So, I started walking. And there were still people still cheering me on, and I felt a bit disappointed in myself, because they were encouraging me, and I had given up for a very short amount of time. I did carry on running, but for that short amount of time, I was thinking, I'm a bit embarrassed that there are these people encouraging me and I'm here walking' (Hamish).

Theme 3: 'There's a Connection and it… Speaks to the Core of You': Runners Value Personal and Authentic Support

Participants spoke of the importance of genuine interaction from the crowd and expressed that 'you can feel when it's not genuine' (Claire). For some, authentic and genuine encouragement was deemed 'more important than the actual words' (Drew). This was also true of the quality of support, which was sometimes seen to be more impactful than the amount of support received. The perceived impact of this support was linked to how the runners thought (reappraisal of competency), felt (feeling happier, a mental 'boost', being able to find reserves and to 'dig a little deeper') and performed (maintaining or increasing pace, or improving posture). This connection also helped the individual to feel 'special', and participants spoke about constructing these connections when they were not readily available. Participants spoke

of taking ownership of support (as if to make it personal), and even taking on the persona of another runner.

'Use Names, Make Eye Contact, and Say Things Meant for that Particular Individual': The Qualities and Impact of Personal Support. A sense of connection was made from the crowd shouting a runner's name. Claire expressed this quality of support getting to the 'core of you'. Personal support such as this appears to 'heighten' the positive emotional response associated with generic support.

> 'I guess kind of when it's the general encouragement, that's really exciting and fun. But when you hear someone actually say your name specifically. It just, it like heightens, all the same kind of like feelings of encouragement [as generic support]' (Tim)
>
> 'I thought, oh, that's quite good. Yeah, it's bit weird having random people shouting your name, but the same time it sort of spurs you on a little bit more, because they've chosen to shout your name.' (Kate)

The runners also felt personal support helps them to push through pain, exertion, and other challenges; there is also greater utilisation of psychological reserves.

> 'Really, really genuine interaction as well. I think the more genuine is the better. Because you can feel when it's not genuine… I think that really, really genuine energy, then kind of does impact you little bit more. You feel better. You want to do more, and you want to show that you're grateful for them being there' (Claire)
>
> 'When you hear people cheering you, kind of your loved ones cheering you, it makes you search a bit deeper within to find, you know, to draw on these kind of like final energy reserves and just really push. It's definitely a mental thing.' (Tim)

For some, the quality and direction of support was perceived as being more important than its content. As an example, the authentic nature of encouragement was thought to impact to a

greater degree than the words of encouragement themselves. Drew explained his interpretation of helpful encouragement:

> ‘I think good encouragement's kind of authentic, people believe what they are saying, you know genuine. You know it's given to individuals who are running, using people's names, making eye contact with them, saying things that are meant for that particular individual. What matters more is that person buys into it. They do the same things that they think will make a difference. The kind nature of support is appreciated, especially coming from a stranger.’ (Drew)

Genuine support was also valued by the psyching team members, who discussed how core counselling skills can facilitate the encouragement process:

> ‘I really made sure that they saw the genuineness...that what you're saying is genuine… you're introducing some kind of counselling skills into the process, you're being empathetic to their situation, and how they're feeling because…it's hard running up those hills, a long slog, you know, and I'm not pretending that they're running on air. So, to create an ability to be empathetic in your feedback, your tone, all the things that you would consider when you are in your practice…to think about the tone of your delivery, and the volume, the pitch. Yeah. And to be as sincere as possible’ (Focus group participant – Sport and Exercise Psychologist)

Participants also expressed how personal support made them feel, with words such as ‘special’ and ‘noticed’ coming up in several accounts. Claire explained that ‘personal support makes you feel special…and noticed’ and Drew added ‘it shows they care, they've made an effort to support you, they’re well-meaning and are going out of their way to support a stranger and that's nice’. This was also supported by another participant who acknowledged the desirable consequences associated with personal support:

> ‘I think it's that you feel a bit more special. And you feel like someone's noticed that maybe you're doing well or someone's noticed that you're really struggling and they've actually taken that time to go, “come on, you can do it”, and you know that that's aimed at you. I think that’s why it feels good’ (Claire)

‘I Convinced Myself my Name is Julie’: Connections can be Created by Participants. When a personal connection with crowd members was not readily apparent, it was sometimes constructed by participants. An example that demonstrates this was the experience of Hamish, in his description of the final 50m of the half marathon. At this time, the crowd were shouting ‘you can do this, sprint at the finish’. Although it was recognised that this support could have been aimed at another runner, Hamish chose to take ownership of it.

> ‘About 50 metres within the finishing line, and I started walking. And I don't know if this person was talking directly to me, but I'm pretty sure I heard someone say “you can do this”, you know, “sprint at the finish”, and then I did carry on running. Almost that I guess I didn't care if they were talking to someone else. I kind of thought, well, they could be talking to me. So, I'll take it as if they are’.

Similarly, Emily described how she took on the persona of another runner, and therefore created a sense of personal connection with the support:

> ‘Everyone was cheering Julie on. Everyone! I convinced myself my name is Julie just to get around it. I thought “I'm Julie”, so when people were shouting, I'm thinking “thank you, thank you very much” and that is what got me there…so I became Julie for the last three quarters of a mile 'cos she was really popular, like, everyone…was waiting for Julie. So, I just became, I just became Julie [laughs]’.

Discussion

We explored runners’ experiences of crowd encouragement during mass-participation events, to identify helpful and unhelpful content and qualities of encouragement. We also explored the

meaning that runners found in encouragement, to understand the impact on runners at real-life events. Through doing so, we aimed to gain insight that could support crowds, mass-participation event organisers, and psyching teams in providing high-quality encouragement. While the survey in Phase 1 allowed us to identify helpful and unhelpful words or phrases, the interviews in Phase 2 then allowed understanding of how helpful and unhelpful encouragement influenced participants' experiences of the running event. The survey content provided clear examples of helpful and unhelpful instructional and motivational content, but individual differences were also apparent in the preferences for such content. Interviews suggested that the context of the specific words was important; the runner's appraisal of the encouragement was, at times, influenced by contextual factors such as the runner's perceived psychological and physical state (e.g. current fatigue, distance remaining, self-efficacy for completing the distance). For example, some perceived encouragement at the end of the race as a welcomed 'boost', while others felt pressure to continue or embarrassment in walking. Interviews also provided further understanding of important qualities and outcomes of crowd encouragement. The findings suggested that there was a reciprocal relationship between the crowd and participants, whereby the quality of support (e.g. the enthusiasm shown) was reflected in participants' own emotions and running behaviour. Effective support was seen to reinforce pride in participation, foster determination and physical effort, and provide a helpful source of self-efficacy (e.g. by thinking 'they believe I can do it, so I can do it'). Whilst this encouragement was widely valued, it also created a social obligation to 'give the crowd what they are there for', especially during challenging parts of the course. Finally, participants spoke of the importance of genuine interaction from the crowd, and personal support appeared to 'heighten' the positive emotional response associated with generic support.

The current findings contribute to the literature by shedding light on crowd encouragement in a real-world setting (Edwards et al., 2018; Midgley, Earle, et al., 2017;

Midgley, Marchant, et al., 2017). In support of Midgley, Marchant et al. (2017), the current findings determined inter-individual and contextual variation in preferences for the content of support. As an example, our findings highlighted that the physical and psychological state of the runner can impact how encouragement is perceived, providing another consideration in enabling 'effective' verbal encouragement (Halperin et al., 2015). Our findings also demonstrate the multi-dimensional nature of encouragement in real-world settings. Research to date has particularly focused upon verbal encouragement, but the interview findings demonstrate that clapping, written signs, and high fives are also important forms of encouragement, and that personal attention and eye contact influence the quality of impact that the crowd has.

Applied Implications

The findings offer implications for crowds, event organisers, and psyching team members. The qualitative phase of the study explored the meaningful qualities of support, which we argue mirror the core conditions of therapeutic change (Rogers, 1957). These qualities included using authentic encouragement (e.g. saying things that you believe in), providing support that demonstrates empathy (e.g. imagining how the runner feels at that point of the event), and being non-judgemental (e.g. not judging the runner for walking by shouting "It's a run, not a walk"). In trying to empathise with the participants, the crowd and psyching team members may be less likely to provide 'misplaced' support or make assumptions about the psychological state of the participants. Approaching support with a non-judgemental attitude could also reduce unhelpful appearance-related comments.

The findings highlighted content that is often perceived as helpful or unhelpful, whilst demonstrating the importance of the context that such support is provided in. A challenge for those providing encouragement is to find the fine line between support that is evidence-based and that feels, and is perceived by participants as, authentic. The researchers propose that a

novel encouragement ‘with IMPACT’ approach can be disseminated as guidance for crowd members and psyching teams. Based on our combined Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings, encouragement ‘with IMPACT’ is: Instructional, Motivational, Personalised, Authentic, Confidence-building, and Tailored to the distance completed and remaining (e.g. through accurate distance information) (see Table 5). Encouragement ‘with IMPACT’ provides a way to share our findings with event organisers, crowds, and sport and exercise psychology practitioners, in accessible language, through simple and concise content, and in a practical and concrete way (Martindale & Nash, 2013; McCormick et al., 2020). It also builds upon a call from Midgley, Marchant et al. (2017) to develop evidence-based verbal encouragement guidelines. This approach could be shared with crowds using infographics on social media, webpages and blog posts affiliated with a mass event, and through race packs, if sport and exercise psychology practitioners collaborate with event organisers (McCormick et al., 2020). Psyching team members could also hold signs that capture brief messages associated with this approach or that have a QR code linked to online guidance and examples. Psyching team members could also wear shirts or hold signs that have messages encouraging the crowd to ask questions about how to encourage (e.g. “Ask me what runners like to hear”).

Table 5
Encouragement 'with IMPACT'

		How to do this	Example
I	Instructional	Encourage the process of completing the distance, especially for slower runners, or give specific course information.	'Run tall'
M	Motivational	Praise their participation or effort.	'Great effort'
P	Personalised	Make eye contact. Use names or other personal information on clothing (e.g. charity, club, or company represented).	'Come on, Jess'
A	Authentic	Say things you genuinely mean.	'That's an amazing charity you're running for'
C	Confidence-building	Express your belief in the runner, and say other things that will boost their confidence (e.g. applaud obstacles overcome).	'You've got this'
T	Tailored to the distance	Be specific about distance completed/ remaining, rather than subjective "not far to go" language.	'You've got 1k to go'

Note. Examples are based upon our combined survey and interview data.

The findings also provide key considerations for those organising psyching teams at mass-participation events. Participant interviews suggested that personal meaning is often drawn from generic support. Considering this, the wording of verbal and written messages would benefit from phrases that can be interpreted in different ways by participants. As an example, 'You've got this' can elicit meanings relating to belief in competence, a sense pride, or reinforcement of participation goals. Although many reflections detailed experiences of enthusiasm and energy from the crowd, it was recognised that there are also 'missed opportunities' when support is absent. These came during quieter parts of the course, and where spectators were present but not vocal. The findings highlight a need for logistical

considerations when placing psyching team members, but also the importance of demonstrating enthusiasm in the role. An important note on this role was made by one psyching team member during the focus group; 'there is no perfect psyching team or crowd [member]…you can't always get it right'. However, the authors argue that increasing feelings of competence in psyching team members and helping them to understand the role (e.g. through psyching team training; Hays & Katchen, 2006) could support greater impact on runners. Providing a clear induction process (using evidence-based and experiential guidance) and creating opportunities for 'practice' (e.g. role play or attendance of smaller events such as parkrun) will help prepare members. A sense of competence may also be developed by modelling the encouragement behaviours of experienced psyching team members, and repeating attendance at psyching team events. The induction process might also educate psyching team members about how to engage with the crowd, as well as with runners.

As explained above, the findings highlight the importance of empathy, as some runners may not want encouragement or the pressure to perform for a crowd. There are also occasions, however, where encouraging a runner to continue or run faster could be dangerous, such as if they have an injury or are experiencing a life-threatening condition such as heat stroke or acute cardiovascular events. Psyching teams should be educated about the importance of observing runners (e.g. for injury), observing their responses to encouragement (e.g. for dismissive body language or facial expressions), respecting runners' autonomy (e.g. not pressurising if the runner does not respond to encouragement), and being willing to ask if struggling runners are OK. Psyching team members should also be aware of how to contact race medical personnel.

Limitations and Reflections on Generalisability

For Phase 1, the nature of survey data meant that follow-up questions could not be used to request clarification, elaboration, or examples. Nevertheless, a substantial volume of data were collected for Phase 1 that provided helpful insight that Phase 2 interviews could

rigorously explore in greater depth. For Phase 2, none of our participants experienced an injury during their mass-participation event. While our results do highlight that encouragement may be unwanted when exhausted, and perceived as a pressure to perform, the results do not capture the experiences of injured runners who may have different needs and preferences for encouragement (e.g., reassurance that walking is the right decision). Phase 2 also did not explore intricacies in the differences in experiences of event sub-populations (e.g., competitive versus non-competitive runners).

For Phase 2, we studied encouragement at a real-life event. We acknowledge that the specific events studied may not be 'typical' mass events because of the presence of psyching teams. The presence of the psyching team, however, reflects the applied nature of the research. The research was initiated to address an applied question asked and discussed by our psyching team ('Based on research evidence, what should we be shouting to runners?'), and the findings will feed into our psyching team training and activities. In a profession with a 'research-practice gap' (e.g. Keegan et al., 2017), some readers may see this as a strength of our research.

The reader might reflect on whether the findings can be generalised to other mass events and to sub-populations of participants in these events (e.g., particular levels of experience or competitive standard). As a qualitative study, we invite each reader to judge the naturalistic generalisability of the findings. As captured by Smith (2018, p. 140), this type of generalisability "happens when the research resonates with the reader's personal engagement in life's affairs or vicarious, often tacit, experiences… In other words, the research bears familial resemblances to the readers' experiences, settings they move in, events they've observed or heard about, and people they have talked to." We aimed to write about the findings in a way that can resonate with the experiences of readers who have participated in, or been involved with people who have participated in, mass-participation events. Psyching Teams members might also reflect on the 'transferability' of the findings (Tracy, 2010); in other

words, could they adopt ideas such as displaying the core conditions and giving encouragement 'with IMPACT' within their own psyching team training and activities?

Future Research

The present study offers insight into impactful encouragement at real-life mass-participation events and can support crowds and psyching teams in providing higher-quality encouragement. Future research could examine the effects of encouragement 'with IMPACT' (e.g., on performance, satisfaction, or quality of experience), and examine the feasibility of supporting event organisers and mass-event crowds in providing this type of encouragement. Building upon our research into the interactions between the crowd and runners, future research might also explore the interactions between the crowd (e.g., spectators, friends, and family supporting runners) and psyching teams, to consider how psyching teams can improve their impact at mass events.

Further research on the impact of psyching teams would also be valuable. There is some data supporting the impact of psyching teams (McCormick, 2019). Data from the 2019 half marathon showed that psyching team activities helped 86% of surveyed runners (n = 818) to keep running (e.g. "They were so positive and so encouraging; they really helped me to keep going and keep smiling!") and 87% to enjoy the event (e.g. "Always lovely to see a smiling face cheering you on, the high fives and signs offer motive to carry on and a reminder that you're there to have fun on the day. The students are all really friendly and motivating and I feel it's a really fun, unique aspect of the race that makes it a step above other races I've run!"). Similarly, data from the 2019 10k showed that 91% of surveyed runners (n = 367) found the encouragement provided by the psyching team helped them to keep running (e.g. "There were times I was going to start to walk but through their encouragement I kept running"), and 92% reported it helped them to enjoy the event (e.g. "They made such a huge difference to my enjoyment of the day and helped me to achieve a finish time I could only dream of before the

race.”). Future research could use interviews to explore runners' experiences of events that have psyching teams, including how psyching teams impact their behaviour after the event (if at all). For example, research could explore in greater depth how psyching teams influence how runners experience events, how they talk about events with other people (e.g. do they encourage others to run an event with a psyching team?), and whether their own running behaviours are impacted (e.g. signing up to additional events).

Finally, psyching team literature (Day, 2019; Hays & Katchen, 2006; Meijen et al., 2017) to date has focused on performance and quality of experience, but has not focused on brief interventions for injury avoidance. Interdisciplinary research with sport biomechanists, allied health professionals, and coaches could explore the potential for psyching teams to contribute towards injury avoidance.

Conclusion

Our findings showed that instructional and motivational encouragement is valued by runners, but that the runner’s appraisal of such encouragement is influenced by contextual factors (e.g. the runner’s perceived state and the accuracy of course-related feedback). We also found that there is a reciprocal relationship between the crowd and participants, whereby the quality of support (e.g. the enthusiasm shown), was reflected in participants’ own emotions and running behaviour. Effective support was seen to facilitate a sense of pride and self-efficacy; it also fostered physical effort. Although support was widely appreciated, at times it created a pressure to ‘perform’ for the crowd. A genuine interaction from the crowd was perceived as an important quality, and personal support appeared to ‘heighten’ the positive emotional response associated with generic support. The findings highlight the complexity of individual preferences for encouragement at such events, and the interplay with the context in which support has been provided. The researchers invite readers to consider how encouragement could be improved by drawing on the key findings of this paper. We recommend that crowds and psyching teams

give encouragement 'with IMPACT' (Instructional; Motivational; Personalised; Authentic; Confidence-building; and Tailored to the distance completed and remaining). We also encourage them to apply Rogers' core conditions of authenticity, empathy, and being non-judgmental to their support at mass-participation events. Finally, we encourage psyching teams to engage with crowds and event organisers, to maximise reach and impact.

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