Determinants of Distance Running Expenditure in China: The Influence of Consumption, Health and Social Capital

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A running fever has been catching on in China. Amateur Chinese runners, mainly health conscious middle class people, typically treated running as a choice of lifestyle and a vehicle of pursuing self-development (Ronkainen, Shuman, Ding, You, & Xu, 2018; Xue, Ge, & Zheng, 2016). Although governmental report in China asserted that the industrial size of marathon in China would reached cn¥120 billion in 2020 (NDRC, 2018), no work has yet examined, at the grassroots level, what are the factors influencing millions of Chinese runners’ distance running expenditure and how. In order to address the gap, this study examined determinants of distance running expenditure in China.

Study participants were 10414 full and half marathoners from all 34 regions in China. They were asked to fill out questions about their running related sport participation behavior, the degree to which their health was changed since they started to run regularly and their socio-demographic information. Following Wicker, Breuer, and Pawlowski’s (2010) operation of sport expenditure, 11 expenditure items in terms of race registration fees, training related expense, sport apparel, and race travel related expense that can be incurred by distance running were included.

The results revealed Chinese runners spent an average of cn¥13,424 per year with the largest portions going to running apparels (cn¥5,437) and race travel related expense (cn¥4879). OLS and Heckman selection models are constructed to examine the effects of the determinants. Models on total expenditure (R2=0.517), sport apparel (R2=0.333), registration fee (R2=0.477), and travel related expense (R2=0.479) all reached large effect size, and the model on training related expense (R2=0.195) reached medium effect size. In term of socio-demographics, income was positively related to the total expenditure and its four subcategories. Contrary to the formulated expectation, male runners spent less than their female counterparts. Runners of the two work schedule types differed significantly in total expenditure and three subcategories. In terms of consumption capital, running tenure had different effects on the total expenditure and its four expenditure subcategories. Monthly running mileage, the number of other sports practiced, the number of total race attendance, and the number of travel race attendance positively correlated to total expenditure and four subcategories. Half marathon runners and full marathon runners differed significantly in total expenditure and three subcategories. In terms of health and social capital, both perceived health improvement via running and running group membership positively affected total expenditure and two subcategories. The frequency of attending group activities positively affected training related expense and sport apparel.

Findings of this study highlight the importance of running events and health benefits of sport participation in the promotion of sport consumption. While the finding supports the neoclassical orthodox perspective that consumption, health and social capital influences sport expenditure, it also opens to a heterodox social science interpretation. The fact that determinants of sport expenditure in China were similar to those in the West is discussed in the context of China’s social and economic transformation at the end of the paper.