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From Kilometers to Kudos

A Study of Runners' Online Interaction on Strava

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Abstract

The exercise platform Strava combines self-tracking capabilities with social media features and enables interaction, inspiration and competition between its users. With inspiration from Erving Goffman's theory this study investigates how online interaction affects Strava-users' running experiences and self-presentations. Through semi-structured interviews supplemented by netnographic observations, Strava is analyzed as a performative scene where physical and social ideals are staged and negotiated. The study identifies how Strava's visual feedback mechanism and interactions from other users both strengthen motivation and create performance pressures. The self-presentation of Strava-users is formed through roles that are negotiated in the intersection between authenticity and idealization. Informed by Axel Honneth's ideas about recognition as a macro-sociological backdrop, we discuss how young Strava-users' struggle for recognition can be seen as a reflection of digital behavior that blurs the distinction between the private and a solidarity sphere. Accordingly, the study contributes to an enhanced understanding of the interplay between technology, social interaction, and identity constructions in modern digital sport communities.

Keywords: running, Strava, self-presentation theory, recognition, interviews, social media

It is almost trivial to emphasize that the emergence of the internet some thirty years ago revolutionized sport and exercise and that it has ever since fueled digital developments including wearable digital devices, social media platforms, and apps. On the one hand this development is characterized by a changing and transforming mediascape and additional consumption preferences beyond old media such as television (Frandsen and Pedersen, 2025). On the other hand, the birth of the internet and subsequently social media has radically influenced social behavior and interactions which unsurprisingly have affected sport and exercise patterns as well as how we theoretically are able to understand and analyse this development (Sanderson, 2025). This study will draw attention to the latter.

It can be argued that our understanding of what entails a community also changed at the turn of the millennium when the internet took a conspicuous position in social life as new online communities were recommended to be cautiously approached (Schwen & Hara, 2003). Following the internet revolution, social media has changed our behavior significantly by extending the scope of interactions from predominantly face-to-face encounters to digital spaces where platforms or apps daily enable peoples' interaction. Accordingly, scholars advocated early that social media had a potential for health promotion and behavioral change (Korda and Itani, 2013), whereas more recent debates have started to elucidate the downsides of social media opposed to the optimism witnessed only a decade ago (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018).

The social media Strava was launched in 2009. Unlike Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, TikTok or Snapchat, Strava has since its inception had explicit attention to exercise. While often being associated with road cycling (Felczak and Filiciak, 2025; Rogstad and Røsten, 2025), Strava today encompasses more than 30 disciplines. Its basic technology relies on GPS, thus enabling tracking of both distance, speed and elevation. Like other social media, excessive self-promotion on Strava is not uncommon, and a peculiar phenomenon known as *Strava-jockeys* has seen the light of day, i.e., alibi-exercisers who offer doing the activity on behalf of others who can then upload results as being done by themselves. This pursuit of recognition and status has also led to more direct forms of manipulation on the platform. Recently, Strava has removed activities from the platform due to suspicions that some users are employing alternative methods to improve their rankings on the so-called leaderboards. In total, 4.45 million suspicious activities have been removed, as Strava

suspects that certain users have set records by completing routes using e-bikes or cars. With this extreme in mind, but also by departing from the fact that social media represent new digital interactive exercise communities, this study seeks to answer the central research question: How do online interactions affect young Strava users' running experiences and the way they present themselves on Strava?

By emphasizing an interactionist perspective, we depart theoretically from the works of Erving Goffman, importantly with the sensitivity that his works were developed prior to the internet and social media, which have in no way prevented self-presentation theory to inform studies on social media (Rogstad and Røsten, 2025; Sanderson, 2025; Xu, 2025). While emphasizing interactions we try simultaneously to counter the critique that Goffman remained constrained to an interactionist (micro) level (Williams, 1986) as we use Axel Honneth's ideas about recognition as a backdrop for our final discussion. Empirically, we draw on interviews with young Danish Strava users, supplemented by netnographic observations. Following the recent recommendation by Brown (2025), our aim is to elucidate and interpret human interactions through the social media rather than descriptively mapping the content appearing (for instance exploring text sequences and doing content analysis) although a clear distinction may be hard to establish.

Literature review

Posting one's exercise activities on social media has become regular practice as a way to document and expose oneself to an audience (Kashian and Liu, 2020), and when linked to health promotion by means of physical activity, much research has been dedicated to investigating motivation in connection with social media (Tate, Lyons and Valle, 2015; Stragier, Vanden Abeele and De Marez, 2018; Johnston and Davis, 2019; Bell *et al.*, 2025). A significant aspect with attention to exercise and physical activity of this bodily turn on social media is encapsulated with the term *self-tracking* that has gained traction in research (Feng *et al.*, 2021). During the 2000s and 2010s, self-tracking became increasingly visually oriented and closely integrated with digital technologies (Girginov *et al.*, 2020). Self-tracking technologies are used to quantify the exercise behavior of the individual, and it can, according to Lomborg and Frandsen (2016), be understood as three-dimensional communication: with the system, the self, and social

networks of peers. With a digital behavior (of the self) linked to a technology (the system) follows the pleasure of receiving acknowledgements (symbolic likes or texted comments) from networks of peers (Pinkerton *et al.*, 2017). However, scholars have also pointed to downsides of these digital habits and self-tracking such as causing increased levels of stress and making users addictive to digital stimuli. An intensified culture marked by social comparison and bodily idealization can be linked to increased psychological stress, anxiety, and symptoms of depression (Fardouly *et al.*, 2015; Dobrean and Pasarelu, 2016) regularly referred to as technostress (La Torre *et al.*, 2019).

Self-tracking integrating social media platforms adds a new dimension to training practices, wherein users engage not only with their own performance data but also with the gaze, reactions, and potential evaluations of others (Lupton, 2016; Ehrlén, 2021). Strava is one of the most prominent and widely used digital platforms combining traditional self-tracking tools with communicative elements and a range of individuals, from exercisers to professional athletes, sharing their workouts with a self-selected group of followers. Strava experienced a significant surge in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, as large parts of the global population were cut off from their usual physical social networks and sought alternative ways to maintain social relations and a sense of community. During this period, traditional physical sports communities were replaced by digital communities, in which online platforms such as Strava played a central role. Since the pandemic, Strava's popularity has continued to grow, and today the platform has more than 100 million users worldwide (Russell, Potts and Nelson, 2023). Through features such as kudos (a form of likes) and comments, Strava facilitates social interactions in which users acknowledge, compare, and compete with one another (Franken, Bekhuis and Tolsma, 2023; Van De Pol, 2023). According to some studies, this form of social feedback, where users receive kudos and comment, does enhance motivation and supports social connections among users (Jasmine M. Petersen *et al.*, 2020; Russell, Potts and Nelson, 2023). Features like kudos play a central role in fostering user engagement, which can encourage increased physical activity and, ultimately, contribute positively to public health (Jasmine Maria Petersen *et al.*, 2020; Ehrlén, 2021; Franken, Bekhuis and Tolsma, 2023). Moreover, users find social trackers meaningful, as they fulfil social needs in a flexible and independent manner (Lomborg and Frandsen, 2016). However, researchers have also pointed to several problematic aspects of Strava's dual function as both an individual self-tracking tool

and a social media platform. A lack of privacy has emerged as a relevant reason why some users limit or completely avoid sharing their workouts on Strava (Ehrlén, 2021). Moreover, the online sharing of training activities can foster a negative culture of comparison, potentially leading to feelings of stress and inadequacy (Ehrlén, 2021; Russell, Potts and Nelson, 2023; Van De Pol, 2023). For some users, this may result in excessive and unhealthy engagement in their use of Strava, which can negatively impact their mental and physical health (Couture, 2021; Whelan and Clohessy, 2021; Russell, Potts and Nelson, 2023). Accordingly, based on a human-centric approach (Brown, 2025) and the literature that outlines the positive effects and negative consequences associated with Strava use, it is relevant to take a closer look at the online interactions that occur on the platform to enhance our understanding of communication mediated by Strava.

Theoretical frame

We perceive modern social media as sites of interaction, however mediated or filtered by digital platforms' design and their technology. Accordingly, we take Goffman's classic ideas on the presentation of self as a theoretical point of departure and apply them to the context of social media (Sanderson, 2025, Xu, 2025) while acknowledging that his work was developed in a pre-digital era and with the important add on that media technologies frame the interactions. By framing we refer to the enabling as well as constraining effects of the technology. As social media has become an inherent part of social life's self-presentations it can be applied strategically (Goffman, 1971) as a way to enable certain impression management (Goffman, 2020). According to Goffman, individuals are able to control the impressions they leave on others through what he calls impression management. When the performer on stage plays a role in relation to their audience, they make use of impression management by directing and shaping specific impressions. The purpose of impression management is to maintain a desired self-presentation and avoid embarrassment (Goffman, 2020). Social media modifies the face-work that audiences encounter while at the same time providing feedback options through standardized features such as kudos or the use of symbols. Importantly, the technology integrates a backstage space for the performer (the runner in our case), e.g., self-tracking details that can easily in the very same piece of technology be transformed into

a frontstage. Hence, a swift use of the technologies and digital design enables users to 'manipulate' and shape their visible frontstage appearance without appearing physically face-to-face with their audience. On Strava, the backstage thus consists of the self-tracking data that users choose to keep hidden from their followers. This distinction between backstage and frontstage is not merely a technical matter of hiding or sharing data but reflects an active and strategic management of self-presentation, where users curate which aspects of their performance and bodily data become visible to an audience. Such an expanded online presence enables runners to make use of defense and protection mechanisms (Goffman, 2020) as well as adhering to rules and rituals based on expectations and commitments ascribed to the media by users of Strava. Defensive mechanisms refer to the strategies that the performer uses to protect their own face and to avoid appearing embarrassed or incompetent in a given situation, while protective mechanisms refer to the actions undertaken by the audience to safeguard the performer's face and to maintain an orderly and smooth interaction. In Goffman's framework, rules refer to the implicit norms that structure appropriate conduct in interaction, while rituals denote the routinized practices through which these norms are enacted and reaffirmed in everyday encounters (Hviid Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2002). In that sense, we argue that this social medium constructs a micro social order in which individuals through rapid digital interactions with followers, and dependent of concrete contexts, negotiate roles varying from commitment, affiliation, embracement, or distance. Role commitment refers to a role that the individual performs on the basis of an assignment or expectations from their surroundings, whereas role affiliation describes the individual's active desire to take on a particular role. Role embracement refers to roles that the individual voluntarily and enthusiastically adopts, while role distance denotes situations in which the individual fulfils a role imposed by others but maintains an inner distance from it (Hviid Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2002). Goffman's concept of roles can thus be used to illuminate both the "artificial" character of everyday life and, in relation to Strava, to explain individuals' online self-presentations. While Goffman's merits are primarily situated at the level of social interaction and remain our prime analytical focus, we draw on his concepts of frontstage and backstage, impression management, defence and protection mechanisms, rules and rituals, and roles. We use Honneth's theory of recognition (2006) as a backdrop for understanding the wider context. His idea of recognition is linked to two interrelated spheres (the private and the legal) that provides

the preconditions for the third sphere of recognition named the sphere of solidarity. Here individuals gain recognition through community or group belonging and, if considered positive, affect the individual's self-esteem, or conversely, lacking recognition can cause negative effects. In our study we devote attention to this third sphere of recognition once discussing online interactions (Honneth, 2006).

For decades, self-presentation theory inspired by Goffman has commonly been used in studies of sport (Dimmock, Jackson and Beauchamp, 2020). Interestingly, when linked to athletes and social media research contributions based on self-presentation seems to grow rapidly (Xu, 2025). A number of studies are informed by Goffman when gender differences are analyzed, for instance by comparing communication via photographs (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016), type of content posted (Wanzer *et al.*, 2025), and differences between athletes performing a role as fan versus a brand manager (Lebel and Danylchuk, 2014). An important discovery shared by Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) and Wanser et al. (2025) is that posting on social media often contains what Goffman would label backstage material thus indicating (our interpretation) that social media blurs a clear distinction between front- and backstage appearances. While these studies rely on athletes' behavior, for instance their interactions with audiences (Murtas *et al.*, 2025), research has also applied self-presentation theory to elucidate and compare non-athletes from various sectors of society and outline their differences. Accordingly, Horky, Grimmer and Theobalt (2021) argue in favor of addressing multiple social personalities in social media. Following this brief theoretical introduction where we rely on Goffman accompanied by Honneth and with the notion that self-presentation theory is regularly already applied across fields like sociology, psychology and communication (of sport), we introduce our methodology.

Methodology

In the following we will briefly outline how we have used and combined self-presentation theory informed by Goffman and Honneth's ideas about recognition. Following this, we present our research position and explain how the interviews, supplemented by netnographic observations, form the empirical foundation of the study.

The researchers' positioning

The study departs from an interpretivist understanding (Smith and Sparkes, 2019). That entails that we seek to describe and understand individuals' subjective experiences with digital interactions. Hence, we embrace a constructivist philosophy without neglecting the importance of outlining our own positioning as this has a significant influence on our interpretations (Sveinson *et al.*, 2025). Informed by Haraway (1988), the knowledge we construct is the outcome of our situated position(s) whereby we distance ourselves from the illusion of objectivity but simultaneously avoid mere relativism (Haraway, 1988). In concrete terms we benefit from the two younger female authors being regular runners and experienced users of Stava, while the third older male author has a long experience with endurance sports but without the use of social media like Strava (or any other social media platforms). The two younger researchers led the data collection for the study. For this study, the divergent positionings foster a dialogue between an insider and outsider perspective in which our pre-understandings and á priori experiences (akin to a hermeneutical view) are deliberately used to enhance and challenge our understanding of social media interactions.

The study participants

For the study, eight participants were recruited (see table 1). Inclusion criteria were that they were regular runners aged between 18-30 years (vast majority of them at a sub-elite level) and within the previous six month they should have used Strava at least two times per week. Participants should also allow the researchers access to their Strava profiles (most of them already had open profiles), and they should at least themselves follow and be followed respectively by a minimum of 25 additional Strava-users. Finally, it was a criterion that participants had shared posts including text or images related to their running within the past year, as the study focuses on active self-presentation on the platform, and therefore primarily focuses on posts where the Strava user has added text or pictures. The shared post on the platform always displays the activity type, distance, time, pace, and route. The user can add a title, text, and pictures, and other users can interact through kudos and comments. All participants in the study use the free version of Strava. The people the participants follow are primarily friends and running mates, but they also follow a few professional athletes and influencers who inspire them. Prior to engagement the participants

were informed about the purpose of the study. Each participant was anonymized (pseudonyms are provided, see table 1), club affiliation was not mentioned, and at any time they had the right to withdraw from participation without further notice.

Although the sample comprises only eight participants, the study is based on in-depth interviews and sustained engagement with the empirical material, allowing for detailed insights into participants' experiences. The heterogeneity in running experience and years of Strava use was a deliberate sampling strategy, aimed at capturing variation in experiences. This diversity strengthens the analytical depth by illuminating both common patterns and experiential differences across participants' profiles.

Table 1: *Overview of the study participants*

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Years as a runner	Number of years on Strava	Following	Followers	Number of runs on Strava per week
August	Male	27	3,5	3,5	81	82	6
Aksel	Male	25	10	10	237	285	7
Cornelius	Male	24	14	4	112	116	3
Luna	Female	24	3	2,5	109	108	4
Mille	Female	27	1	1	77	72	4 - 5
Sigrid	Female	27	10	3	132	187	7
Silas	Male	25	2,5	0,5	154	131	8
Svea	Female	25	1,5	1	67	69	4 - 5

The study combined two qualitative methods, both focusing on human activity in the context of communication and sport: qualitative interviews focusing on subjective perceptions and experiences, supplemented by netnographic observations focusing on how participants behave and interact digitally (see Figure 1 overleaf). The subsequent analytical process was interactive, moving from an initial exploratory phase toward a more focused analysis.

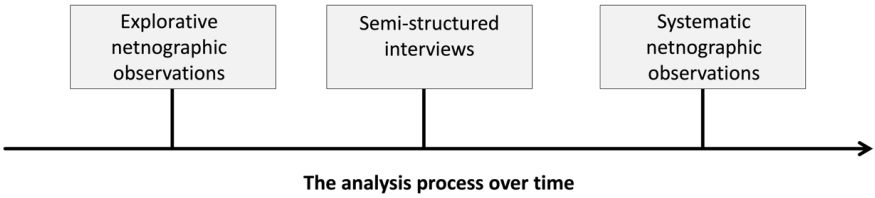

Figure 1: *The analysis process over time*

Semi-structured interviews

The interviewers deliberately ask participants about their perceptions and experiences using Strava. Using a semi-structured interview guide allows individuals' subjectivity to occur while directing the interview conversation (Smith and Sparkes, 2019). The interview situation is itself an interactionist event (Järvinen, 2005) where the interviewers' situated knowledge and personal experiences affect the outcome of the conversation. All interviews had a length between 35 and 46 minutes. The interview guide was structured according to pre-defined themes developed from exploratory observations (which will be explained below) and the theoretical frame informed primarily by Goffman. Recorded interviews were transcribed orthographically shortly after ending the interviews. The interview guide can be obtained by contacting the authors.

Explorative and systematic netnographic observations

The study primarily employs qualitative interviews, while netnographic observations are used as a supplementary method that combines ethnography with online interactive communication (Kozinets, 2002, 2010). This means that it is not a netnographic study in itself, but rather a study that draws on netnographic insights to supplement the interview data. This approach allows the researchers to enter online forums as observers of digital human interaction. The supplementary netnographic observation took place within the pre-existing online community on Strava, allowing the researchers to observe users' behavior without interfering with or influencing it. We observed the participants' training activities, post captions, comments, and kudos over a delimited period of approximately one year, from September 2023 to September 2024, focusing on recurring interaction patterns. During the first phase of the study, explorative netnographic insights served as background knowledge and a precondition for devel-

oping the semi-structured interview guide. Based on these explorative insights and themes derived from the interviews, the third phase engaged briefly and selectively with further netnographic observations, in which the netnographic material functioned as an independent empirical source used to nuance the participants' descriptions of practices on Strava. This supportive interplay, where netnography informed and contextualized the interview data, contributed to a deeper understanding of the field and ensured an ongoing reflexive approach throughout the research process. Out of consideration for the participants' anonymity, we have chosen not to include screenshots from Strava in the article, as pictures, routes, and textual content could potentially be traced back to the participants. We have therefore described the netnographic observations and translated the textual material from Danish into English.

Analytical strategy

The overall strategy can be labelled an abductive interplay that merges and ranges from inductive exploration to deductive theory-driven interviewing. The data was coded using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, and Weate, 2019) in a non-linear iterative process. Data was coded by using NVIVO software. As NVIVO elaborates text, screen saves from netnographical observations were each given a headline aligned with the á priori defined observation questions and were thereafter subjected to manual coding in a separate Word document. The analytical process was primarily driven by a theoretically informed deductive coding procedure but occasionally opened for inductively derived codes as well.

Results

Based on the thematic analysis described above, we constructed four themes (see Table 2). Examples referring to netnographic discoveries are reported as textual content (e.g. as sequences of text message interactions) in the awareness that visual appearances also illustrate how technology operates. While the first theme covers perceptions mirroring the individuals up against other users, the two following themes draw attention to interactions with other users and with technology respectively, whereas the fourth theme illustrates how roles are constructed. Importantly, the themes shall be understood as forming a mutual interplay and

not as occurring in a hierarchic or chronological order. Although all four themes link to our central research question, the first three themes in various ways emphasize how online interactions affect experiences while the fourth seeks to illustrate how users present themselves through role construction.

Table 2: *Themes based on the thematic analysis*

	Core elements	Examples of initial codes
Mirroring oneself against other users	– Description of the performer, audience, front- and back-stage – Comparisons with other users – Exercise-related stress	– Reasons for Strava-use – Comparisons – Stress
Interactions between Strava users	– Code of Conduct for giving and receiving kudos – Defense mechanisms such as excuses are used by Strava users to avoid losing face – Protective mechanisms such as encouragement are used by the Strava audience to safe a performance	– Giving kudos – Receiving kudos – Special rules – Kudos values – Excuses – Loss of face – Encouragement
Interaction with technology and visual feedback	– Strava's technology as motivator and a toll to help improve performance, but the – Strava technology as creator of negative emotions and performance pressure	– Feedback from Strava – Motivation of data – Pace, time, distance – Strava features: Segments, Local Legend, QOM, KOM, leaderboards
Self-presentation and ideals	– Three types of roles are defined. Impression management is used to stage roles – Ideals: physical performance standards, social engagement and visual appearance	– Staging of results – Self-censorship – Considerations about profile picture – Physical performance

Theme 1: Mirroring oneself against other users

The first theme concerns the mirroring against other users that takes place on Strava. When the performer, the Strava user, posts an activity after completing a run, the data from the run becomes available on an online frontstage for a (self-selected) audience of other Strava users, either through manual posting or automatic syncing from connected devices. The performer maintains control over their own frontstage and can choose to hide running activities or specific data from their audience.

COMPARISON AND EXERCISE-RELATED STRESS

In the semi-structured interviews, participants describe how they compare themselves to other users on Strava in terms of performance, such as pace, distance, and frequency of training. Comparisons can, in some cases, lead to what the participants refer to as *exercise-related stress*, which may diminish the enjoyment of running. The participants describe it as a natural part of their behavior on Strava to stay updated on the running activities of the users they follow. However, this practice leads them to compare themselves with other users:

> I keep an eye on those I know are better than me, and on those I know are roughly at the same level as me. I look at how they train, and if they write that a training session failed, I sometimes think, 'Nice,' because I did a similar session where I didn't fail.

In the above quote, Sigrid expresses that comparison with other Strava users has a positive effect on her running experience when she performs better than others. This suggests that social comparison on Strava can serve as a source of affirmation and motivation. By outperforming others Sigrid reinforces her sense of competence, which may enhance her self-confidence with her training.

> I really try to tell myself not to compare myself to others. Still, sometimes I end up doing it anyway. It's hard. That's why I think that one day I need to delete this [Strava] or make it private.

Here Svea expresses that comparing herself to other Strava users has a negative impact on her running experience specifically to her own experience of being at runner. The comparisons evoke feelings of pressure and insecurity regarding her own performance, which in turn shape how she perceives herself in relation to other runners on the platform. In continuation of this, both Mille and Svea describe how comparisons on Strava can contribute to what they refer to as exercise-related stress. Mille explains that if she is lying on the couch and sees on Strava that someone she compares herself to has been out running, she starts to feel guilty. Similarly, Svea describes how keeping up with others' running activities during holidays causes her stress.

The online interactions among young Strava users significantly shape their running experiences in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, social comparison can enhance the running experience when users

perform better than those they compare themselves to, which serves as a source of motivation and affirmation. On the other hand, these comparisons can have adverse effects when users perceive their performance as inferior, potentially leading to exercise-related stress. This dual dynamic highlights a competitive dimension within Strava's social environment, where users' experiences are influenced not only by their own achievements but also by how these achievements measure up against those of others.

Theme 2: Interactions between Strava users

GIVING AND RECEIVING KUDOS

Goffman describes all interaction as ritualized, with these rituals serving to ensure that a performance does not fall apart. The rules of conduct are mutually dependent, meaning that one person's expectations are another person's obligations (Hviid Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2002).

There is consensus among the participants that Strava should be a positive and inclusive community. One rule that helps ensure this is the practice of giving kudos to all running performances, regardless of time or distance. Sigrid says: "I think it [kudos] is an easy way to spread good energy", and she is therefore neither stingy nor selective when it comes to giving them. August, Aksel, and Luna all say that they expect to receive kudos for their running performances, just as they themselves give kudos to others. There is thus agreement among the participants that the rule of giving kudos contributes to making Strava a positive and inclusive community to be part of.

Although the participants express that time and distance are not important when it comes to kudos, they still experience that performances that are extraordinary in time and distance yield more kudos. Aksel says:

> If you run fast, you get more [kudos]. If you run far, you also get more. If you're participating in a race, you get significantly more. But if it's just a jog, you might get a bit less.

Aksel further describes that receiving kudos gives him a sense of happiness. Thus, he links the amount of kudos to a feeling of joy and an emotion that arises from the perception that others are impressed by his performance. Svea also explains that kudos generate motivation not only to run for one's own sake but also to gain social affirmation. She states:

> Many people may say that they download Strava for their own sake – but they don't! Of course, part of it is for yourself, maybe 20 percent, but the other 80 percent is just like Instagram. You get a kick out of people seeing your stuff.

Despite the fact that kudos can have a beneficial impact on their running experiences, a contradiction emerges in the participants' statements. Although Aksel, Cornelius, and Silas claim that everyone deserves kudos from them, they do not believe that all performances belong on Strava. Furthermore, Svea states that kudos from fast runners hold more value for her than those from slower runners. This reveals a duality in the participants' accounts, pointing to a complex code of conduct that each Strava user must learn to navigate. If a user fails to understand these implicit rules and exceptions, it may negatively affect their running experience.

DEFENCE AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

According to Goffman, the individual may use defense mechanisms to preserve a situation and thus avert a potential loss of face. In social situations, the audience can employ protective mechanisms to help save a performance (Goffman, 2020). Through interviews supplemented by netnographic observations, we have examined how such defense mechanisms manifest on Strava, which, in our coding process, were analytically identified as "excuses" in relation to performance. The relevant protective mechanisms employed by the audience involve encouraging the performer. Some Strava-users tend to make excuses for their performances, whether they go better or worse than expected. These excuses relate to a wide range of factors, including the weather (heat, cold, rain, wind), nutrition (eating too much or too little), GPS issues, social runs, and more. What these excuses have in common is that they shift attention away from the performance. Such excuses can be seen as a defense mechanism by Strava users to protect their self-image and avoid confronting a sense of failure in relation to the expectations placed upon them. In the interview, we were curious about the participants' use of excuses in their Strava posts. To this, Aksel remarks:

> We also live in Denmark, so I don't really think I would choose to use the weather as an excuse. Unless it's really extreme. I mean, very wet, I think I used that one on Monday.

The example illustrates a duality in which Aksel does not consider it legitimate to use the weather as an excuse, since it is always changing in Denmark, yet he does so anyway. By mentioning the weather, Aksel diverts attention away from the result and toward a suitable excuse, thereby protecting his reputation. In one post, Sigrid writes: "It's not easy to keep a steady jogging heart rate in the hills of Tuscany with my father-in-law on a bike." In doing so, she offers an excuse for having had an inconsistent heart rate during her run. By shifting the focus to external factors, she avoids appearing as a less competent runner in relation to the community's expectations of her performance. In this way, she protects her position as a skilled runner and maintains control over how her followers perceive her achievement. Sigrid's followers refrained from commenting on the post and instead limited their responses to giving kudos. This approach reflects a form of social sensitivity, in which her followers signal that they accept her explanation for a run that did not meet her usual standards and thereby, Sigrid manages to maintain her protection.

A post on Aksel's profile clearly illustrates how the audience uses protective mechanisms in the form of encouragement. In a post after a marathon, Aksel writes: "It's not a shame not achieving your goals. It is a shame not to have any." In doing so, he expresses that the race did not go as he hoped. In the comment section, his followers respond with encouragement, writing messages such as: "You are so much more than your times, my friend" and "Exactly, sometimes you just gotta take a shot at the target!" These comments demonstrate how the audience's use of protective mechanisms helps Aksel transform the running experience from a negative to a positive one. In this case, the Strava community functions as a form of social support and helps saving the performance.

Theme 3: Interaction with technology and visual feedback

This theme illustrates the interaction that arises between the Strava user and the Strava technology. The interviews revealed that the visual feedback provided by Strava's technology also affect young Strava users' running experiences. Data such as distance, time, pace, and route are always illustratively presented after a run, providing the Strava user with a visual understanding of their running performance. If the Strava user is the fastest on a given segment, Strava rewards them with titles such as Local Legend, Queen of the Mountain (QOM), King of the Mountain (KOM), or a ranking on one of the leaderboards. The visual feedback allows the Strava

user to analyze their performance over time, and the associated statistics from previous runs provide the opportunity to compare performances. Aksel describes the significance of Strava's visual feedback in the following quote:

> Strava is like a diary. I can go back and see that two weeks ago I ran the same route, but it felt completely different, it feels much better today. What, like, made it good, and what didn't? [...] So I think it's that overview you can get [that I really like about Strava].

Silas states that being the fastest on a segment and thereby earning the title of Local Legend gives him a boost in his self-confidence. For both Aksel and Silas, Strava's technology thus functions as a source of motivation and affects positively to their running experience.

Statements from some of the participants also reveal that there are downsides to Strava's visual technology. Svea explains that the large amount of data can be overwhelming for her, as she finds it difficult to make sense of the many data points. A dependency on the technology may also develop. Aksel describes how he feels that a training session is wasted if the technology fails to track his run properly. For some participants, Strava's technology and features are thus attributed greater significance than their own subjective experience of the training, for instance that the strong focus on running performance can negatively affect the running experience:

> After 4–5 kilometers, I start running a bit slower than during the first kilometers. Then I think I have to maintain the good average pace. I'm maybe doing it 65% for myself and 35% for others... or for Strava. But then I think I just have to run a bit faster, so I don't go above 5:30 (Svea).

There is thus a risk that the running experience becomes reduced to a narrow focus on data, creating performance pressure and diminishing the spontaneous joy of physical activity. The interaction between the Strava user and the Strava technology therefore contributes positively to some users' running experiences by enhancing motivation, while for others it generates performance pressure and negatively affects their experience of running.

Theme 4: Self-presentation and ideals

Goffman argues that all social interaction is tied to ideals and that individuals are capable of controlling the impressions it leaves on others through impression management (Goffman, 2020). Based on the interviews, we reconstruct how participants themselves articulate various ideals they associate with Strava. In this section, we describe the specific Strava-related ideals that the participants seek to present through their Strava profiles and how these ideals of self-presentations lead to three distinctive roles. These roles will be presented at the end of this section.

THE STRAVA IDEAL

What stands out most clearly in the participants' statements is their desire to live up to a high physical standard. This includes running long distances, maintaining a fast pace, training regularly, following a structured program, setting ambitious goals, and participating in official races. August says in the following quote:

> I think it's perfectly fine to have a professional look based on your Strava. Because it's not just about maintaining a consistent pace in terms of the number of kilometres you run. It also looks better than doing what's known as the Alpe d'Huez.

Both August and Silas emphasize the importance of having a "flat" Strava curve, one that does not resemble Alpe d'Huez. Alpe d'Huez is a term used to describe a Strava activity graph with steep ups and downs, which signals that a user is not running consistently.

In addition to the ideal of maintaining a high physical standard, there is also an ideal of being a companion runner. On Strava, this is reflected through regular interaction with followers or by participating in races as part of groups and clubs. Strava users also express their social engagement through posts that include both text and pictures featuring other Strava users. We asked Aksel how he wants to present himself and what he thinks his followers think of him:

> I think a lot of people see me as a fast runner, and I am. But I also still want to be able to join for example, on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the club, there's a social run where we run at a 5:30 pace. I definitely want to be part of that, and I am. So I think people also think, 'he wants to do that too,' or 'he's capable of that as well'.

The quote shows that Aksel is willing to adjust his pace when running with others. He hopes this signals that he has both physical capacity and humility. In doing so, he leaves an impression on his audience that conveys social and physical surplus while also portraying himself as an inclusive runner.

Finally, our netnographic observations revealed that the ideal Strava user keeps up with the latest trends in fashion, apparel, and gear. Netnographic observations of Mille's Strava profile show that she runs in the latest sportswear trends. She has posted a picture of herself running to a parcel shop to pick up a package containing running clothes from a popular Danish fashion brand. In a post Sigrid is also posting a photo of her old and new running watches. Silas also expresses that what he wears when running and posting photos on Strava is not without significance:

> The running world has kind of become a style icon. Running has become a bit of a fashion thing. So of course, you want to show that off too [...]. There's not really a right or wrong in the running world as such. But there might be some brands that are more style conscious. That could be brands like Satisfy or Bandit. New Balance is also really cool in the urban running culture. And you could say that maybe ASICS is still a bit more associated with the dad role.

Summarizing, the Strava ideal is constructed by merging desires to adhere to standards of physical performance, social behavior and awareness of recent trends in fashion, apparel, and gear.

STRAVA ROLES

According to Goffman, individuals are able to control the impressions they leave on others through impression management (Goffman, 2020). Strava users therefore act strategically in order to create the desired impressions among their followers. In the following section, we show how the participants, through impression management, construct particular Strava roles on their profiles. In Goffman's theory, the concept of role is used to describe the behavioral expectations that individuals follow in social interactions. Just as an actor takes a role on stage, individuals, in Goffman's perspective, perform corresponding roles in social interactions, adjusting their actions to create particular impressions on their audience (Hviid Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2002). In the coding process, it became evident that the participants adopt different roles on Strava. These roles should not be understood as ideals in themselves, but as concrete ways in which the participants stage particular aspects of the Strava ideal. Two of the three

roles we identified closely align with the Strava ideal of maintaining a high physical standard and being a companion runner. It can be difficult for participants to live up to all aspects of this ideal simultaneously; therefore, the roles can be understood as ways in which they prioritize certain aspects of the ideal over others in their self-presentation. Through the netnographic observations it was possible to examine how the participants express their respective Strava roles, and through the interviews it was possible to understand the relationship the participants have with their role.

THE SERIOUS RUNNER

The serious runner is the runner who most consistently meets the Strava ideal of a high physical standard. Aksel, August, Sigrid, and Silas have been categorized as serious runners, a role they all embrace. This is reflected in their explicit desire to maintain a flat Strava curve, set ambitious goals, and run almost daily for instance:

> I think it has become more of a personal struggle for me to hold myself accountable to get out and run because I can't have my Strava curve breaking. And maybe it's just as much a competition against others. Some of us in the club are following a training program, so you can see how well you're sticking to it whether you've hit 80 km a week for several weeks, or whether you've made an Alpe d'Huez. Ideally, you want to be hitting 80 km consistently. So I definitely think Strava has changed things in the sense that you push yourself a bit more to get out the door, just to hit the weekly target you've set for yourself (Silas).

Three of the four participants we categorized as serious runners have a profile picture taken by a professional photographer at an official race. In the interviews, they stated that they use a professional photo to communicate strong commitment and dedication to running. August, the only serious runner without a professionally taken profile picture, describes his desire for a more "top-tuned" photo which illustrates how he wants to shape the image that others see on his Strava profile. He expresses a wish for a picture that more ideally aligns with his role as a serious runner. This desire to have 'the right' photo indicates how small details become central to how a Strava user is perceived.

THE SELF-IRONIC RUNNER

Being a self-ironic runner is not part of the ideal, but rather a way in which the participant attempt to cover up their inability to live up to certain as-

pects of the ideal. Through the netnographic observations, we observed in posts that Cornelius considers himself a self-ironic runner through witty comments and humorous pictures, and this is also the impression he conveys on his Strava profile. In one post, Cornelius writes that he went for a run with a group suffering from hangovers, demonstrating that he does not take his training too seriously and has enough self-irony to highlight the contrast between hangovers and a training platform. Cornelius thus willingly embraces his role as a self-ironic runner, a role he consistently presents through both pictures and text on his profile. Svea also fits the role of the self-ironic runner. In the interviews, however, she expresses an ambivalence towards how she presents herself on Strava. She describes an internal struggle between wanting to appear as a serious runner and feeling that her actual performance does not live up to this ideal:

> I feel like there's an inner struggle in my mind. On one hand, I want to present myself in the best possible way. On the other hand, that's just not the reality. Subconsciously, I think a lot about how I come across. I want to appear faster than I might actually be.

We have categorized Svea within the self-ironic role, as she frequently posts unpolished pictures and captions in which she does not take her runs too seriously; for instance, while traveling, she was unable to finish her run and had to call a driver to take her home. In this situation, Svea displays enough self-irony to acknowledge that she had to give up, and she includes a photo of herself sitting on the back of a scooter on the way home. Such posts receive recognition from her followers in the form of kudos, suggesting that this form of self-presentation is socially validated within her network. In another post, Svea attempts to adopt a more serious role by writing that she is testing her half-marathon pace. In the comment section, however, she is met with a skeptical remark questioning whether she maintained that pace for the entire route. This example shows that when Svea tries to embrace a more serious role, it may be met with contestation. Taken together, these examples point to a tension between different modes of self-presentation and suggest that the self-ironic role is one that is both recognized and reinforced by her audience.

THE COMPANION RUNNER

The companion runner is the runner who most fully embodies the Strava ideal of strong social engagement. We have categorized Mille and Luna as companion runners. In her interview, Mille expressed that she would

like to appear serious and ambitious, but she does not see herself as fast enough to embrace that role and instead adopts the role of the companion runner. Mille says in the interview that she loves running with others and that, for her, running is a social activity. Mille has chosen to embrace this role by running (almost) all of her sessions with others. On her Strava profile, there are (almost) always pictures of the people she has run with, and if no pictures are included, their names are mentioned in the post. Likewise, Luna frequently runs with others and uses her Strava profile to showcase how she and her running companions not only run together but also share post-run rituals such as eating breakfast, taking ocean dips, and going to the sauna. Luna thus highlights not only the act of running itself but also the social routines that follow. When Luna and Mille interact with others online, they consistently aim to leave the impression of being socially engaged. The social dimension becomes essential to their self-presentation on Strava.

Concluding discussion

Our final section is organized and divided into three parts: first we elevate our findings to a discussion about recognition before subsequently relating these insights to existing research. Finally, we briefly summarize our study.

Our study richly illustrates that Strava-users consistently engage with their surroundings. Therefore, adoption of new technology must not be seen as an isolated and individualized event but emerges as a relational social activity where multiple social personalities can be presented (Horky, Grimmer and Theobalt, 2021). Accordingly, similar to the process described by Lomborg and Frandsen (2016), the runners' self is constructed through an interplay with vital Strava technology and in negotiation with an audience that forms a micro-community of runners. To understand the wider context of this social behavior, the quest for recognition in the sphere of solidarity (Honneth, 2006) is essential as Strava is designed to mediate this process but also enables a swift transition from a private to a solidarity sphere. Thus, Strava works at the level of social interactions but potentializes macro-level implications through its access to overarching social structures, i.e., runner communities where solidarity can be achieved and enacted. However, what also entails a potential detrimental aspect of the technology is the blurred line between a private and a solidarity sphere

where lacking recognition in the latter can easily cause negative effects on the private sphere leading to negative effects such as increased psychological stress (Korda and Itani, 2013; Fardouly *et al.*, 2015). Our study illustrates this duality of Strava. Given the growing use and importance of self-tracking devices integrated into social media, it is important to be aware of both the upsides and downsides of such platforms. Moreover, our findings are in line with studies drawing on self-presentation theory (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Wanzer et al., 2025), which illustrate how easily transitions between back- and frontstage occur. Furthermore, while studies on social media and athletes seem to be increasing rapidly in terms of outlining branding and marketing efforts as well identity construction (Xu, 2025), our study dwells upon sub-elite runners. Hence, branding efforts and mapping out commercial potentials have been less of an issue in this study.

Our study therefore adds nuances to recent studies on the merger between social media and self-tracking technologies among a broader sub-elite segment in a population. As addressed by Brown (2025), we employ human subjects who provide deeper details into individuals' perceptions which adds empirically to those studies primarily relying on analyzing the textual contents. Like numerous other studies (e.g. Couture, 2021; Ehrlén, 2021; Lupton, 2016; Russell et al., 2023) we emphasize that a technology like Strava contains potentials as well as downsides, and it is therefore important to balance this assessment rather than constructing new dichotomies such as pro or against social media technologies promoting physical activities and exercise communities. This leads to our final reflection: While studies on self-presentation and social interaction informed by Goffman work well to illustrate the human interactive aspects of social media communities like Strava (Rogstad and Røsten, 2025; Sanderson, 2025; Xu, 2025), future studies on the interaction between humans and technologies may well become more nuanced by embracing theories dealing specifically with human–technology interaction such as inter-disciplinary Science and Technology studies (STS). Our study has illustrated that a technology like Strava is designed to perform a quasi-agency role and therefore a future path to investigate social media and self-tracking technologies entails a theoretical willingness to transcend the distinction between 'human' and 'non-human' entities (Thorpe, 2017). Future studies could beneficially incorporate Leon Festinger's social comparison theory as an analytical framework. The theory is well established in social media research and can nuance the understanding of the comparative processes that take place on Strava, for example how users relate to others' performances through lead-

erboards and segments. Such an inclusion would strengthen the analysis of Strava as a social space that structurally fosters social comparison.

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