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“My parkrun friends.” A qualitative study of social experiences of men at parkrun in Ireland.

Allison Dunne Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Helen Quirk, University of Sheffield, UK

Alice Bullas, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Steve Haake, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Corresponding author Allison Dunne a.r.dunne@shu.ac.uk

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Abstract

Social support is a well-established determinant of mental wellbeing. Community initiatives, which combine a purposeful activity with social connection, may be appropriate to promote the mental wellbeing of middle-aged men in Ireland - a group at risk of poor mental wellbeing due to social isolation. parkrun offers free, weekly, 5 km run or walk events in 22 countries. This study aims to explore the social experience of parkrun participation for middle-aged men in Ireland and considers how social connections made at parkrun relate to mental wellbeing.

Online semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2022/23 with 39 men aged 45-64 years, who run, walk or volunteer at parkrun in Ireland, recruited purposively in rural and

urban communities. Men with a range of parkrun experience gave interviews lasting a mean of 32 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Reflexive thematic analysis resulted in three themes and ten subthemes. The men described parkrun as offering a welcoming and supportive environment (Theme 1). Men at parkrun could choose the level of social connections, building strong or weak social ties to provide social support and improve mental wellbeing (Theme 2). Social engagement with parkrun evolved following repeated participation (Theme 3).

The results suggest that parkrun is a suitable community initiative for middle-aged men at risk of poor mental wellbeing due to social isolation. Social connections were developed after repeated participation in parkrun and these connections improved subjective mental wellbeing. The findings from this study could be used to design new initiatives for mental health promotion.

Keywords Social connection, social support, community, mental wellbeing, physical activity, men's health, loneliness.

Contribution to health promotion (84 words)

- This study considers how social connections made through community initiatives, such as parkrun, can be used to support mental wellbeing in middle-aged men in Ireland.
- Both strong and weak social ties provided social support.
- Social connections were developed after repeated participation in parkrun and these connections improved subjective mental wellbeing.
- This information can be useful when recommending community initiatives to populations at risk of poor mental wellbeing due to social isolation.
- It could also be useful when designing new interventions for mental health promotion.

Background

Mental wellbeing is defined as a state of positive mental health which is vital for quality of life (World Health Organization, 2022). Maintaining a state of good mental wellbeing can be preventative against mental health conditions and suicide (Barry et al., 2019; Keyes et al., 2010). Social connections, incorporating social support, social capital and social networks, are recognised as determinants of mental health and wellbeing (Holt-Lunstad, 2022; Thoits, 2011; Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010) and have been identified as a priority area for public health policy (Holt-Lunstad, 2023; World Health Organization, 2023).

Ireland's national mental health promotion plan Stronger Together highlights the importance of community programmes to improve social connection, particularly in the post COVID-19 pandemic environment where communities are recovering from long periods of lockdowns and hardship which saw people become socially isolated (Health Service Executive, 2022). Social isolation and the subjective feeling of loneliness are risk factors for premature mortality (Elovainio et al., 2017) and mental health conditions. One population group in Ireland who are known to be at risk of social isolation and poor mental wellbeing are middle-aged men (often defined as aged 45 to 65 years) who live in deprived neighbourhoods or who belong to marginalised groups (Health Service Executive, 2016; O'Donnell & Richardson, 2020). Unemployment, relationship breakdown and living in rural communities can exacerbate this risk (McGrath et al., 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2022; O'Donnell & Richardson, 2020). Men's physical and mental health is seen as a priority issue in Ireland due to the continued lower life expectancy of men, when compared to women and the persistent gender gap in mortality by suicide (Department of Health, 2024; Health Service Executive, 2016). To address this the government of Ireland were first in the world to introduce a men's health policy (Health Service Executive, 2016).

Previous research has explored "what works" for men's mental health promotion (Robertson et al., 2018). Recommendations include using a safe space where men can gather, away from clinical settings (Robertson et al., 2018) and harnessing interest in sports or physical activity (Sharp et al., 2021; Zwolinsky et al., 2013). Giving men control over the design and application of interventions was shown to be important (Robertson et al., 2018). A study on design of men's health interventions in Ireland reported that a focus on wellness rather than health (illness) was beneficial for engaging with men (Lefkowich et al., 2017).

Community-based initiatives, which combine a purposeful activity with social contact, support mental wellbeing by addressing the social determinants of health (Ballinger et al., 2008; Baskin et al., 2021; Golding, 2011; McLeroy et al., 2003) contributing to the building of social support and social capital (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Linnemann et al., 2017; Wiltshire & Stevinson, 2018). One community initiative which has potential to support middle-aged men in Ireland to improve social connections is parkrun. In a similar way to walking football, parkrun includes a physical activity which is open to all genders (Andersson et al., 2023; Cholerton et al., 2020), and, as with Men's Sheds, it offers a place to socialise away from pubs and bars (O'Donnell & Richardson, 2020). parkrun (branded with a small 'p') is a registered charity which supports free, weekly, timed events in the UK and over 20 other countries worldwide (parkrun, 2021) in which adults and children (four years and older) run or walk a 5 km route in an outdoor setting on Saturday mornings (parkrun UK, 2021). Volunteers from the local community organise the events (parkrun support, 2021). By the

start of 2024, parkrun was available at 107 locations in Ireland, with events in both rural and urban settings (parkrun Ireland, 2024). Considering the evidence for what works for men's health, parkrun combines several of the qualities recommended for a viable health promotion offering for men. These include the natural setting, using running as a hook for engagement, involvement of participants in the organisation of the event and a focus on wellbeing rather than illness prevention.

Along with the physical health benefits associated with running and walking at parkrun, such as cardiovascular fitness and body weight control (Stevinson & Hickson, 2014, 2019), previous research also suggests parkrun participation improves mental wellbeing in the short-term and long-term. The subjective mental wellbeing of parkrun participants was first explored in a cross-sectional study by Stevinson and Hickson (2014) where parkrun attendance was positively associated with high mental wellbeing scores. Research has found that mental wellbeing indicators (self-esteem, stress and mood) improve immediately after parkrun participation (Rogerson et al., 2016) with benefits for some maintained after 12 months of participation (increased happiness and decreased risk of stress and depression) (Stevinson & Hickson, 2019).

The link between social connections at parkrun and mental wellbeing has not been fully established. Research exploring the social experience of parkrun participants has consistently reported positive effects for social interaction, social capital and connections (Sharman et al., 2019; Wiltshire & Stevinson, 2018) but little research has explored the mechanisms through which parkrun can influence mental wellbeing (Grunseit et al., 2020). One study did note that men at parkrun describe a change in wellbeing related to community connectedness (Grunseit et al., 2017), suggesting that parkrun may be a suitable setting for men to form social connections which could in turn improve mental wellbeing. Research in Ireland suggests a possible link between social factors at parkrun and mental wellbeing (Dunne et al., 2023; Haake et al., 2019). To date there has been no detailed exploration of these phenomena in an Irish setting, or with a focus on middle-aged men.

The current study aims to explore the relationship between mental wellbeing and social experiences for middle-aged men in Ireland with the principal research question:

What is the social experience of parkrun participation for middle-aged men in Ireland and how is this related to mental wellbeing?

Method

Research team and reflexivity

The interviews were all conducted by lead researcher AD, a female pharmacist with over 20 years of patient-facing clinical experience in mental health care. With regards to the positionality of the lead researcher the following reflections were considered. The researcher is in the same age category as the men interviewed, although a different gender. She moved to Ireland as an adult so has experienced Ireland as a newcomer. She has run or walked over 100 parkruns and has volunteered over 70 times, visiting more than 25 parkrun sites. The researcher noted that she should be mindful of her position as a keen and confident parkrunner and that this may influence her interpretation of the data. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was chosen as the researcher could use her experiences as an embedded parkrun participant to engage with the interviewees and understand nuances in the interview data. This method recognises there will be a subjective nature to the data analysis and is commonly used in health research (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Campbell et al., 2021).

In this study the term participants is used to describe people who run, walk or volunteer at parkrun. To avoid confusion the term interviewees will be used to describe the men who took part in the current study. The interviewees were all parkrun participants. The 9 interviewees from Knocknacarra parkrun (one of the recruitment sites) had met AD briefly at previous parkrun events but did not have a confiding relationship with her prior to study commencement. At the start of each interview all 39 interviewees were told that AD was a researcher who had an interest in mental health and wellbeing. If the topics arose during the interview AD described her participation in parkrun events as a runner and volunteer and disclosed her background as a pharmacist.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the type and value of social experiences among middle-aged men attending parkrun in Ireland. An interview guide was developed in consultation with parkrun participants, health professionals and the public. Interview questions were designed to be exploratory in nature and the interview script was semi-structured, allowing for the interviewer to explore topics around mental wellbeing and social experiences at parkrun. Putnam's definition of social capital (Putnam et al., 1993) and Cohen's concept of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985) were used to list possible topics and questions. The interview questions and prompts can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview questions and prompts for semi-structured interviews with men aged 45-64 years attending parkrun in Ireland.

Opening questions and follow up questions or prompts
1. Tell me about your first time at parkrun. 1a, Was there anything that put you off from attending before your first time?

- 1b. Did you attend parkrun on your own?
- 1c. What were your first impressions?
- 1d. How did you feel afterwards?
2. What do you understand by the term mental wellbeing?
 - 2a. *WHO define mental wellbeing as "a state of positive mental health which is vital for quality of life."*
3. Does parkrun participation have any impact on your mental wellbeing? Tell me more about that.
4. Do you think there is anything that can be changed about parkrun to support good mental wellbeing?
5. Who do you usually interact with at parkrun? This can be people you attend with, or meet at parkrun.
 - 5a. Provide an example of an interaction.
6. In terms of relationships, what opportunities has parkrun opened up for you?
 - 6a. Prompts "Meeting new people" or "Feeling part of the community".
7. Could you describe a time when you had a positive/good interaction with someone else at parkrun?
8. Have you ever had any negative/bad interactions with other people at parkrun?
9. Do you ever meet parkrun people outside of the event? Is it a planned meeting or accidental?
 - 9a. Does this have any impact on how you feel about your sense of belonging?
10. Have you linked with a new parkrunner acquaintance via any types of social media?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add about parkrun participation and mental wellbeing?

Ethical approval for this project was granted by Sheffield Hallam University on 16/9/2022 (Ethics Review ID: ER42513594). Purposive participant recruitment took place from 21/09/2022 to 09/02/2023 via parkrun event Facebook pages and in-person visits to parkrun events across Ireland. Recruitment ceased when the lead researcher (AD) was satisfied with the geographical spread of participants and information power of the interview data (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power indicates the richness and detail of the data, and its suitability to answer the research question and is more appropriate than data saturation, for the reflexive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Malterud et al., 2016).

Each participant completed a short demographics questionnaire using Qualtrics survey software after giving online informed consent. Demographics included date of birth, Eircode (Irish postcode) and parkrun participation type (runner/walker, runner/walker/volunteer or volunteer only).

Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams video conferencing software and took place between 24/09/2022 and 16/02/2023. The interviews were between researcher AD and the interviewee only, with no non-participants present. AD used Teams from a home office and the interviewees used their own choice of location, either their own home or workplace office. A single interview was conducted with each interviewee, with no repeat

interviews. Audio was recorded on an encrypted Dictaphone for all participants. Those who gave consent for video recording also had their Teams video saved. Handwritten notes were made during and immediately after each interview to capture the researcher (AD) observations. Auto transcription on Teams was used, with transcription manually checked by AD before sending to each participant for final approval. Names, specific locations and any identifiers were redacted from the transcription. At the time of reporting the interviewees did not provide feedback on the final findings.

Reflexive thematic analysis used the six step, iterative, process described by Braun and Clarke (2022). The lead researcher (AD) was the sole coder, a recommended feature of this type of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Two critical friends were consulted during the theme development process (Costa & Kallick, 1993). NVivo 12 (Lumivero) was used as a tool to manage the inductive coding process. The report was written following the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007). When the findings of reflexive thematic analysis are reported there is an option to report the results and discussion together or separately (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For this study the latter style was chosen.

Results

By the end of the recruitment period 41 interviews had been conducted. Two interviews were not used in the final data set as information regarding study eligibility became apparent during the interview (one participant was not living in the Republic of Ireland at the time and one participant did not take part in parkrun as runner/walker/volunteer, although had observed events without participating. The final number of interviews used for the study was 39.

The mean length of interviews was 32 minutes 12 seconds (with a range of 9 mins 58 sec to 53 mins 15 sec). All 39 interviewees identified as male and had a mean age of 54 years and 3 months (with a range of 45 to 64 years). 33 interviewees (84.6%) self-identified their parkrun participation type as runners or walkers who volunteer. The remainder self-identified as runners or walkers (who did not volunteer). All but one of the men had done more than ten events, a threshold used to describe an 'established' parkrunner in previous studies (Morris & Scott, 2019). The men lived in nine counties across Ireland (Clare, Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Mayo, Meath, Roscommon and Sligo). Seven men had moved to Ireland from other countries across the UK and Europe: England (two men), Italy, Poland, Scotland and Wales (two men).

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts generated three themes, each with several subthemes: these, with example quotes, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes and subthemes from reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with 39 parkrun participants, all male, aged 45 to 64 years living in Ireland (rwv = runner or walker who volunteers rw = runner or walker only)

Theme	Subthemes	Description	Example quote
1. parkrun offers a supportive environment for health	a. parkrun takes place in a familiar area	The location of parkrun is close to where parkrun participants live and a place they feel comfortable in.	"It's just a nice, nice area and as kids, we'd have grown up there, so like it was just nice to go back to it again." Jimmy, age 56, rwv.
	b. parkrun offers something for all the family	Participants of any age can attend parkrun as a runner, walker, volunteer or riding in a baby buggy. Families can attend together.	"...seeing grandparents, their kids and their grandchildren out running... that's great to see." Séamus, age 62, rwv.
	c. parkrun events offer a warm welcome	Participants at parkrun are friendly and make an effort to welcome new people.	"Rather than it being a running group it's a community group and it has that sense, about it that it's not just you know elite athletes [...] It's open to everybody." Jarleth, age 52, rwv.
	d. parkrunners are a diverse community	People from marginalized groups are able to participate at parkrun without judgement or stigma.	"...being a gay man and not entering sports or not entering competitions...with parkrun...there's a sense of community there and non-judgmental..." Don, age 47, rwv.
	e. parkrun events are a place to meet people	The way parkrun operates allows time and space to meet other people.	"You may get about 20 or 30 people...over there afterwards having a coffee and it's just a nice way to finish off the morning." Mike, age 64, rwv.
2. Men who attend parkrun can choose the level of sociability	a. Deep connections can occur between parkrun participants	Shared experiences allow parkrun participants to form strong friendships with other parkrunners, if they wish to.	"I also had prostate cancer... I'm 100% okay...I've been talking to quite a few people at parkrun.... You might know somebody who regularly comes to parkrun and then suddenly they're not coming and then one of their friends might say "oh, they're having treatment for cancer" ... parkrun is a place you can talk about that kind of stuff." Derek, age 60, rwv.
	b. Casual social bonds can be built between parkrun friends	parkrun provides a social environment where participants can have casual conversations and form bonds without any commitment outside the parkrun setting.	"These are these are lads and girls you'd meet ... it's all small talk. "How did your week go?" And the usual easy stuff. And then afterwards again, "how did you get on? How's your run, how's training going?" Jimmy, age 56, rwv.
3. The parkrun experience can change over time	a. Engagement with parkrun changes over time as confidence, skills and social connections develop	From being anxious at first parkrun to becoming an event director, there are a range of participation types at parkrun which allow participants to engage in different ways at different times in their lives.	"This year I could ... get 50 in a year, but I think next year then I haven't really done much volunteering. So my next idea is that I will start volunteering more... I've recently been looking into training as ...a guide for visually impaired people... I'm always looking for what's the new spin on it." John, age 57, rwv.
	b. Perception of parkrun can change after participation	As an outsider to parkrun some participants felt it was not for people like themselves. As they began to participate they found their place in the parkrun community.	"I have run maybe all my life... I heard of parkrun for a number of years and but I always felt it was ... too short for my own running. ... over a few years with injuries and that type of thing, your body changes and is no longer as easy to do longer runs. And once I started the parkruns I just, I just absolutely love them." Rob, age 57, rwv.
	c. Being a member of the parkrun community gives a sense of pride	Participants are proud of their local parkrun, particularly if they are involved in the organising team or if they often welcome visitors to the event.	"We were the first one in the county and lets maintain that tradition...There's only myself and one other guy who regularly participate in parkrun in [town] that were there on the first day and every anniversary ...we take great pride and credit and say, "Oh yeah, we were there for the first one"...We are the only two originals left around the place." Garrett, age 52, rwv.

In the following narrative, quantifying language such as *occasionally*, *many* or *most* is used to give an approximation of the strength or consistency associated with each theme, using proportions suggested by Terry (2010). When the term *occasionally* is used it will refer to themes or subthemes which involved a quarter or less of the interviewees (10 or less). When *some* is used it describes 11 to 25 interviewees. When the term *many* or *often* is used, it refers to two thirds or more of the interviewees (26 or more). Each respondent was given a pseudonym. Age in years at the time of the interview is noted. The abbreviations *rwv* for runner or walker who volunteers and *rw* for runner or walker only are used.

Theme 1: parkrun offers a supportive environment for health

Theme 1 encompasses the way that many men in the study positively described the operational characteristics of parkrun such as free access, weekly events, worldwide locations and gender mix.

The interviewees occasionally described the location of the parkrun as being in a familiar place where they felt comfortable and welcome (Theme 1a). "It's just a nice, nice [sic] area and as kids, we'd have grown up there, so like it was just nice to go back to it again" (Jimmy, age 56, *rwv*).

Many of the men described attending parkrun events with members of their family such as partners or children (Theme 1b). Occasionally this had also been their route into parkrun; they had attended for the first time with a family member, or had been encouraged by them. "Three generations of families, we're actually seeing grandparents, their kids and their grandchildren out running" (Séamus, age 62, *rwv*).

Some men described parkrun as being welcoming (Theme 1c), especially the first time attending "I've done probably eight different locations. Something like that. But anywhere I was ... always welcomed with the smile" (Jakub, age 47, *rwv*, originally from Eastern Europe). Occasionally, the men specifically stated that inclusiveness at parkrun is one of the things that supports their mental wellbeing (Theme 1c). "I enjoyed the, you know, the camaraderie, the atmosphere and the inclusiveness of parkrun" (Eric, age 64, *rwv*).

The men often noted that parkrun is open to anyone, regardless of their age, physical ability, mental health status or sexuality and that they are all part of the parkrun community (Theme 1d). "...sexuality for me would have been probably a challenge for me, like being a gay man and not entering sports or not entering competitions ... with parkrun there's kind of, there's a sense of community there, and non-judgmental" (Don, age 47, *rwv*).

The men often described being able to interact with new people at parkrun. The way parkrun events are organised gives time for social contact before, during and after the run/walk

(Theme 1e). “The buzz is the connection with all the different people. That’s the key for parkrun. All the different people ... all the new friends I’ve met” (Pat, age 59, rwv). The people the men met at parkrun ranged from those within their existing networks (e.g. colleagues and neighbours) to ones that they didn’t know from any other setting.

Some men described interacting with people outside of the parkrun setting, after originally meeting at parkrun (Theme 1e). Diarmuid describes how he learned about an adult education group at parkrun; “I didn’t know anybody there at all. At the end of the parkrun I heard a guy talking about doing Irish language classes... I’m going to go to his class tomorrow evening” (Diarmuid, age 52, rw).

The men were asked about negative social interactions at parkrun, including cliques. Only one participant said he had experienced cliques at parkrun, but was not negatively impacted (Theme 1e). “Sometimes if there’s an in-group, and you’re not in it you’ll just head for the car, which is also fine” (Karl, age 46, rwv).

These five subthemes were grouped to form Theme 1 as researcher AD felt that they were all describing the conditions and atmosphere at parkrun events which allow social contact to take place. These conditions may contribute to an environment which can support mental wellbeing directly or indirectly. These concepts will be described in more detail in the discussion section.

Theme 2: men who attend parkrun can choose the level of sociability

Theme 2 demonstrates that many men in the study described a range of social connections between themselves and other parkrun participants. Whilst parkrun events support socialisation, there is no requirement to socialise; it is possible to turn up, run or walk and go home without speaking to anyone. “At parkrun you don’t have to be friends with everyone...it can be at your own kind of level” (Jarleth, age 52, rwv).

For men who did wish to have social contact, they described two different levels of sociability: deep connections (Theme 2a) and casual social bonds (Theme 2b).

Some men talked about deep connections with people they spoke to at parkrun (Theme 2a). These were either with people they had met at parkrun and developed a friendship with over time, or a strengthening of relationships with people they already knew. These deep connections at parkrun were identified by the men as being good for mental wellbeing. After describing a parkrun participant who had been recently diagnosed with cancer, Derek notes “Definitely the social side of it and being able to talk about stuff and actively talking about stuff, it’s a positive... in terms of mental wellbeing” (Derek, age 60, rwv).

One man, who had moved to Ireland from the UK, described parkrun as a route to making new, deep, friendships which help his mental wellbeing (Theme 2a). “Some of my best friends now in Ireland are people I didn't know at all in parkrun a few years ago. So that's what helps ... I think it's the social aspect that helps you” (Dylan, age 64, rwv, originally from the UK).

When talking about casual social bonds at parkrun the men would occasionally use the phrase “parkrun friends” (Theme 2b). This is not an official term from the parkrun charity but seems to have developed organically. “It's actually created a kind of a separate friend group or peer group for me. ... There are parkrun friends who are only parkrun friends” (Finbarr, age 49, rwv). parkrun friends (Theme 2b) were described as people that the men meet at parkrun on Saturday mornings. They chat at the start line, while volunteering or at the café afterwards. However, they would not make any effort to meet up with those people outside of the parkrun setting. “You may say hello to lots and lots of people and that you may know over a period of time because of parkrun, but ... you don't have to develop any huge relationship” (Stefan, age 51, rwv).

Many men noted that topics of conversation among parkrun friends is light-hearted and personal issues are not usually discussed (Theme 2b). “A lot of the chat is [about] health and fitness” (Jimmy, age 56, rwv).

Some men stated directly that the social aspects of parkrun participation were good for their mental wellbeing (Theme 2b) “It's meeting people and getting out there...you can see what it does, especially if you're crew [a volunteer]... so many stories, that gives you good feeling...You do really, really, really feel great after. You know, a real buzz” (Mike, age 64, rwv).

Theme 3: the parkrun experience can change over time

Although it is possible to attend just one parkrun event and not return, all but one of the men in this study were regular parkrunners who had attended ten or more events. Theme 3 captures how they described their feelings before their first parkrun event and how their social experiences had changed over months and years of regular attendance.

One man, Ken, described his journey from a new parkrunner to now being an Event Director (the volunteer responsible for parkrun operations at a particular location) (Theme 3a). Talking about his first time attending a parkrun; “I was pretty, bit [*sic*] nervous going up because I wouldn't have ran with a group of people before... So the bit of running I would have done would have been on my own and well away from people” (Ken, age 55, rwv). Ken continues to describe how he came to take on the role of Event Director at the same parkrun

several years later; “With the Event Director like, nobody was stepping up to do it. And I said I’ll do it just for the sake of the run not being, you know, cancelled then” (Ken, age 55, rwv).

The social connections made at parkrun didn’t always happen immediately. Some of the men described gradually getting to know other people at parkrun over months or years (Theme 3a) “I met nobody the first time, you know, but you know how it is, you go and you talk to one or two people, you run with people, you complain about the hills ... and you get to know people” (Dylan, age 64, rwv, originally from the UK).

Occasionally the men explained how their perception of parkrun changed as they became regular participants (Theme 3b). “I heard of parkrun for a number of years but I always felt it was ... too short for my own running. ... once I started the parkruns I just absolutely love them” (Rob, age 57, rwv).

The final subtheme describes the sense of pride that comes with being a member of the parkrun community (Theme 3c). Garrett describes his pride in being on the team that set up a new parkrun in a rural area of Ireland “We take great pride and credit and say *We were there for the first one*” (Garrett, age 52, rwv).

The key concept for these three subthemes is *change*. The social benefits of parkrun described by the men didn’t usually happen on the first visit. Their repeated participation allowed social contacts to develop and feelings like pride to grow.

Discussion

This study focussed on the social experience of middle-aged men at parkrun, as this is a population who are at risk of social isolation and poor mental wellbeing and could therefore potentially benefit from community initiatives which combine an activity with social interaction. The results suggest that the men perceived parkrun as a suitable place to make or enhance social connections while participating as runners, walkers or volunteers. Regular participation may maximise the social element of the parkrun experience.

The operational characteristics of parkrun appear to be important in encouraging social interaction (Theme 1). These include: time for social interaction before, during and after the parkrun; a welcoming atmosphere; opportunities to volunteer; and regular events. These elements combine to create a supportive environment for health, one of the five action areas for health promotion described in the Ottawa Charter (World Health Organization, 1986).

The results of the current study show that the universal nature of parkrun, with access for all genders, is important for building social connections for middle-aged men in Ireland (Theme 1). Many health promotion initiatives aimed at improving the wellbeing of Irish men take

place in a single gender environment, for example Men's Sheds and the physical activity programme Men on the Move (Kelly et al., 2019; McGrath et al., 2022). While there is certainly a place for single gender activities (Health Service Executive, 2016), the study by Lefkowich noted that single-gender activities are not always desired by Irish men (Lefkowich et al., 2017). Men from the current study described attending parkrun with friends, partners and family members of all genders, supporting previous parkrun research about the facilitators of participation (Wiltshire & Stevinson, 2018).

The two openly gay men in the study found that parkrun was a welcoming environment. Gay men in Ireland are a group which are vulnerable to poor mental wellbeing (Ceatha et al., 2019) so an initiative like parkrun gives an opportunity for this population group to build social connections and support their mental wellbeing. Developing activities which are supportive of men, and that are also welcoming to women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQ+) communities will minimise the chance that groups may feel excluded from attending. The parkrun charity have recently acknowledged this opportunity for inclusivity by adding an option for gender for new registrants "prefer not to say" and (in the majority of parkrun countries) an additional option of "another gender identity": previously there had been only options for "male" or "female" (parkrun Global, 2023). Further research on the inclusivity of all-gender community initiatives compared to men-only groups is recommended.

The men from this study described having a choice of whether to interact socially with other parkrunners or avoid social contact (Theme 2). For those that did wish to socialise, the type of social interaction can be split into two types: casual social bonds and deep connections. These types of interactions echo those described by Granovetter as weak or strong ties, taking into consideration the time investment, emotional intensity, intimacy and reciprocity involved (Granovetter, 1973). Weak ties are valuable in forming connections between people from diverse groups and strengthening communities (Granovetter, 1973). The descriptions of weak social ties between the study participants and other parkrunners reinforces Hindley's proposal that parkrun is a suitable place for casual sociability (Hindley, 2020). The men in the current study explicitly described weak social ties as being beneficial for their mental wellbeing and for their continued engagement with parkrun events. This link between weak ties and mental wellbeing is similar to that described in previous research in the community setting where brief interactions with strangers were shown to positively impact happiness and wellbeing (Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021; Van Lange & Columbus, 2021). Social support from both strong and weak ties is well-established as beneficial for mental wellbeing (Berkman et al., 2000; Golden et al., 2009; Moreton et al., 2023; Thoits, 2011) with an even balance of strong and weak ties being ideal (Collins et al., 2022).

One finding of this study was that it took repeated visits to parkrun events for the men to see the full benefit of social connections (Theme 3). A feature of parkrun is that it takes place in multiple locations, every week, 52 weeks of the year, which facilitates regular attendance. Other initiatives aimed at Irish men, such as Men on the Move, do not continue through the summer, with research by L Kelly et al (2019) noting that a long summer break contributed to men permanently discontinuing the physical activity programme. The continuous nature of parkrun would minimise the risk of this happening. The “practice makes perfect” strategy of repeatedly attempting social contact with strangers to reduce discomfort and build weak ties was recommended by Sandstrom and Boothby (2021) and is an appropriate practice for new parkrun participants wishing to develop social interactions at parkrun events. A health promotion initiative to promote this strategy is an area for future consideration.

The results of the current study suggest that middle-aged men in Ireland could participate in parkrun to increase the number of social connections and develop weak or strong ties with those connections. This has the potential to support their mental wellbeing via the mechanism of social support or social capital. The topic of loneliness was not specifically discussed in this study but the results suggest that this could be an additional benefit from parkrun participation and is an area of further exploration.

The focus of this study was the experience of middle-aged men in Ireland. It is possible that some or all of the benefits described by the men may be experienced by men of different age groups or women who participate in parkrun and these are areas for further exploration. Grunseit et al (2017) showed that there appear to be gender differences in the social experiences of parkrun participants so it could be worthwhile repeating this study with a female population to explore this in more detail. Additionally a further study with men who are over 65 years could explore the social experiences of this group, another population at risk of social isolation following retirement (Abramowska-Kmon & Łątkowski, 2021).

Policy and practice recommendations

Community initiatives which provide social support have been identified in Ireland as a national and international health promotion priority, particularly for men at risk of social isolation. Using parkrun as an example of a community initiative allows for application of the learnings to other community-based events which combine a purposeful activity with time for social interaction for middle-aged men. This type of initiative is often recommended by social prescribing (community referral) schemes (Alison & Simon, 2022; Fleming et al., 2020). The results of this study suggest that activities which are gender neutral, provide a supportive environment for social interaction and offer a continuous service to maximise the social and

mental wellbeing benefits could be included as social prescribing options for men at risk of social isolation. Newcomers to this type of activity should be advised that repeated attendance may be necessary to gradually build social connections.

Methodological considerations

One consideration is that all but one of the men interviewed were regular parkrunners (who had participated in more than ten events) so assumptions cannot be made about the application of these results to men who are new to parkrun participation. All men in the study were runners or walkers at events, at least some of the time. An extension of the study could include interviews with men who volunteer at parkrun without running or walking to explore their insights into the social aspects of parkrun.

This research took place in a post-COVID-19 pandemic environment. Research by Quirk et al (2022) showed that happiness and life satisfaction among the parkrun population in the UK declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, although the effect was felt more strongly by females and younger adults. The current study took place in 2022/23 when parkrun events had been back in operation for at least 12 months following the COVID-19 pause (since September 2021) (parkrun Ireland, 2021). As the long-term impact of the pandemic on men's health and wellbeing is currently unknown, it is prudent to consider the results in light of the post-pandemic recovery period.

The current study explored the experiences of middle-aged men in Ireland without defining their socioeconomic status. More research into the barriers to participation for this population group is clearly indicated, particularly as men from areas of deprivation may have the most to gain from social connections at parkrun.

The men in the current study perceived that parkrun in Ireland has a diverse community and the demographics of the men in the current study did reflect some diversity in country of birth. Future studies could extend this further, in particular to include under-represented groups in this study, and in the wider parkrun community, such as Irish Travellers and people with Asian or African racial backgrounds.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that parkrun provides a supportive environment for middle-aged men in Ireland to form strong and weak social ties. These social ties may be beneficial to mental wellbeing through the mechanism of social support. The universal (all gender)

nature of initiatives such as parkrun allow for family involvement, and a diverse group of participants, which may both be important for initial and continued participation. New participants for this type of activity should be advised that repeated attendance may be necessary to gradually build social connections. Given parkrun's global reach and the increase in loneliness since the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns the results may be relevant outside of the Irish setting. The findings from this study can be applied to other community initiatives which combine a purposeful activity with social connection to provide appropriate health promotion opportunities for middle-aged men at risk of poor mental wellbeing.

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Declaration of interest

AD, AB, HQ, SH (author initials) are all parkrun registrants. AB, HQ, SH were members of the parkrun Research Board (<https://awrcparkrunresearch.wordpress.com/>) based at the Advanced Wellbeing Research Centre (AWRC) at Sheffield Hallam University (UK) at the time of writing this paper. SH is the Chair and, HQ and AB are the deputy Vice Chairs of the parkrun Research Board.

Author contributions

AD, SH, AB and HQ designed the study. AD completed the data analysis with the assistance of HQ. AD drafted the manuscript. All authors contributed to the writing of and approval of the final manuscript.

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views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the manuscript belong solely to the author/s, and do not necessarily reflect the position of parkrun, the parkrun Research Board or any funder(s).

Open access declaration

For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The research design and consent procedures for this study were reviewed and approved by Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: ER42513594). Written and verbal informed consent was received from all participants before the online interviews. Final transcripts were approved by the participants before use in the study.

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