



# RACIAL DIVERSITY IN TRAIL RUNNING

Understanding the underrepresented  
experience in trail and road running and  
racing

NEW RESEARCH FROM [THE RUNNING INDUSTRY DIVERSITY COALITION](#)

Funded by **patagonia**

saucony

SALOMON

STRAVA

Smartwool



ALTRA

BROOKS

# FIGHTING FOR THE FREEDOM TO RUN.



Growing up as a Black kid in my Philadelphia neighborhood, I never saw runners. You ran because you were in danger or because you thought you were in danger. There were no school programs or resources for sports, our teachers didn't take gym class seriously, and my parents and grandparents didn't have time to think about running for fun or for health while fighting for our basic needs.

It wasn't until college that I started learning about—and experiencing—the benefits of running. Since then I've run every distance up to and including the 26.2-mile marathon. Running gave me the freedom to rise above some of the challenges from my upbringing and exposed me to endless opportunities for my health and career goals. Fast-forward to today: I have made a career in the running industry as the Executive Director of the Running Industry Diversity Coalition (RIDC), and I am the cofounder of a local running club started over a decade ago.

Despite my individual success, there are systems in place that prevent Black people and other people of color from participating in and advancing in the business of running. This includes systemic racism, implicit bias, discriminatory practices, and arbitrary barriers. The RIDC aims to change this, and it is with great pride that we announce new research that centers on the experiences of people of color across the entire running industry. In collaboration with Bentley University, these studies establish a baseline for measuring collective progress.

The report you're reading is one of three in a series. It provides particular insights about the status quo of the running industry today, as well as key questions and recommendations to make transformative change towards racial justice.

More than anything, these research studies are a call to action.

We need leaders and community members—of all identities, geographies, and positions of power—to not only speak up about the importance of achieving racial justice but to also use RIDC's research findings to make the running industry more accessible, inclusive, and safe for all runners. We need you to share what accountability looks like for you and your company to do this. We need you to ask critical questions about your current systems, engage in new learnings with your colleagues, and, most importantly, collaborate with the RIDC to build a running industry and culture that leaves no one behind.

We all deserve the #FreedomToRun, and it's our shared responsibility to fight for it.

Thank you to our research funders and partners—Altra, Brooks, New Balance, On, Patagonia, Salomon, Saucony, Smartwool, and Strava—for helping to make this work possible. Thank you to our research team and study participants, board members, and staff for helping the RIDC launch necessary research that will positively impact generations to come. And thank you, reader, for being on the path to progress with us.

In partnership,  
Kiera Smalls  
Executive Director, Running Industry Diversity Coalition

***“We've got to be as clear-headed about human beings as possible, because we are still each other's only hope.” —James Baldwin, in A Rap on Race***



# Over the past three years, the Running Industry Diversity Coalition has driven awareness, conversations, and action in the running industry regarding issues of racial diversity, equity and inclusion.

We know that achieving racial justice is a marathon, not a sprint, and we know that to affect real change we have to fully understand our starting line. As part of our five-year strategic plan, we partnered with Bentley University to produce quantitative and qualitative baseline measures for racial diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as it relates to running industry employment, accessibility, inclusion, and belonging. We are looking for progress, not perfection. Let's get into the data!

*See other RIDC studies titled "The Future of Running: Connecting with the Next Generation of Racially Diverse Runners" and "Racial Diversity And The Business of Running: Mapping a Path to Equitable Employment, Leadership, and Ownership"*



Photo courtesy of RIDC

# IMPORTANT TERMS AND DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS STUDY

## **RACIAL JUSTICE**<sup>1</sup>

A vision and transformation of society in which racial hierarchies are eliminated and collective liberation is advanced, where Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in particular have the dignity, resources, power, and self-determination to fully thrive.

## **BIPOC**

When you see ‘BIPOC’ throughout RIDC materials, we are talking about Black, Indigenous, and people of color. We also use “people of color” as well.

## **TRAIL RUNNING**

Running on dirt paths, wooded trails, or a similar surface, usually in parks or areas with significant tree cover.

## **ROAD RUNNING**

Running on paved surfaces, concrete roads, sidewalks, or a comparable surface, in urban, suburban, or rural areas.

## **UNORGANIZED PARTICIPATION**

Participation in trail or road running outside an organized race (i.e., recreationally, by oneself, with friends, etc.)

## **TRAIL/ROAD RACES**

Participation in trail or road running in an organized event.





Photo courtesy of Strava

## **OBJECTIVES**

The Running Industry Diversity Coalition initiated a baseline qualitative and quantitative exploration of BIPOC trail runners in the US.

The study explored sentiments regarding:

- Barriers to access
- Safety and inclusion during trail races and unorganized participation
- Unaddressed product needs
- Comparisons to road running experiences

# METHODOLOGY

**This study included 8 focus groups and one survey.**

**Focus group participants** were sourced through outreach on RIDC's communication platforms and were confirmed based on the following criteria:

Participants must identify as Black, Hispanic, Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Native American, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Indigenous or a combination of these races/ethnicities.

Participants must run on trails or roads at least once per month.

All focus group participants are US runners.

**Survey participants** were sourced through Qualtrics with the goal of securing a minimum of 100 participants in each of the following racial or ethnic identity categories: Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native/Indigenous, White. Additional respondents, above our 100 minimum per category, were sourced using RIDC's communication platforms. We were unable to secure the 100 minimum for Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander respondents, landing at 64 total respondents.

**Fun fact:** our final response count was nearly twice our minimum target.

All survey participants are US runners who run on trails or roads at least once per month.

Note that the survey provided more detailed response options for racial and ethnic identity categories than those listed in our recruiting efforts. The racial and ethnic identity categories, and the number of respondents in each category, are featured on the next slide.

# STUDY OVERVIEW

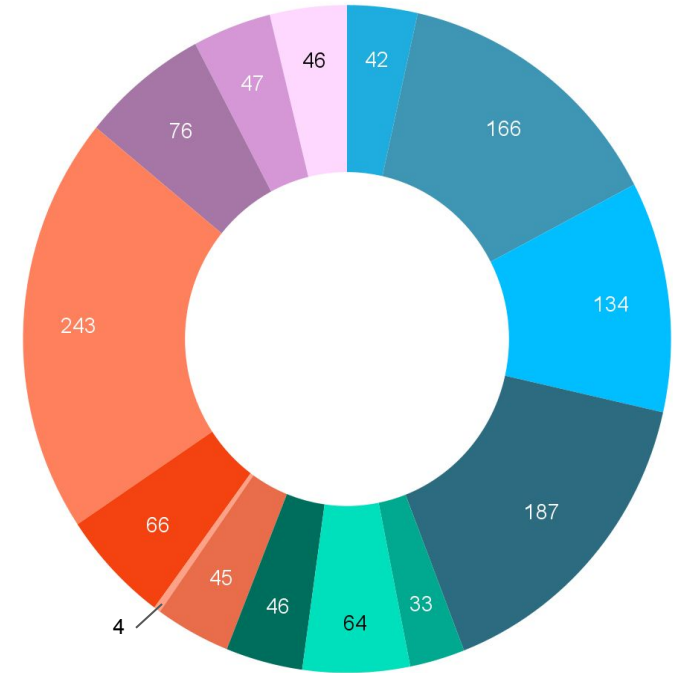
## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

- **Racial identities:** Black/African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American/Indigenous, Hispanic/Latinx
- **Gender:** women, men, and gender expansive
- **Ages:** 18–55
- **Geography:** Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Pacific Northwest, and the Southern US
- **Behavior:** run on trails or roads at least 1x per month

## SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

- **1,138 total respondents**
- 59% women; 39% men; 1% nonbinary; 1% genderfluid; < 1% transgender, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, agender, two-spirit, bigender, prefer not to answer, a gender not listed
- Respondents from 49 states
- 40% urban, 42% suburban, 18% rural
- Household Income: 48% under \$50k, 34% \$50k–\$99.9k, 15% \$100k+\*
- Ages: 18% 18–24; 46% 25–40; 25% 41–55; 10% 56–70; 1% 71+
- All respondents run on trails or roads at least 1x per month

## 79% of survey respondents were BIPOC



- African
- African American, Black
- First Nation, Aboriginal, Indigenous
- Latina/o/x or Hispanic
- Middle Eastern, North African, Arab
- Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander
- South Asian
- Southeast Asian
- Central Asian
- East Asian
- White or Caucasian
- Multi-racial
- Alaskan Indian, Alaska Native, American Indian, Native American
- Other



KEY INSIGHTS:

# WHY/HOW DID BIPOC RUNNERS GET STARTED TRAIL RUNNING?

## WHY



Physical health  
32%



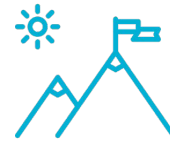
Connecting with nature/outdoors  
25%



Mental health  
12%



New activity  
7%



Discovering new places  
5%

## HOW



Running groups/trusted sources

76%

of BIPOC respondents began trail running at age 29 or under.

47%

of BIPOC respondents began trail running **before** age 20.

KEY INSIGHTS:

## WHY DO BIPOC RUNNERS RUN ON TRAILS?



### FUNCTIONAL

Works different muscles than road running

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Improving/maintaining physical health



### EMOTIONAL

Engages mind and body

---

Connecting with nature

---

Less pressure than road running, “no shame zone”

*BIPOC survey respondents are far more likely than white runners to cite the FUNCTIONAL benefits of trail running (47% selected improving or maintaining physical health) as their primary reason they continue to run on trails. Connecting with nature is the most frequently selected answer for white trail runners (21%).*

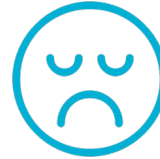
KEY INSIGHTS:

## **DESCRIBING THE TRAIL RUNNING CULTURE**



### **FRIENDLY ...**

BIPOC trail runners describe the culture as friendly and less competitive than road running.



### **... BUT CLIQUEY**

“It’s a community but not one I’m part of.”



KEY INSIGHTS:

## DESCRIBING TRAIL RUNNING

### BIPOC RESPONDENTS



### WHITE RESPONDENTS



For the most part, BIPOC and white runners use similar language when describing trail running, focusing on “fun,” “health,” and other positive words.

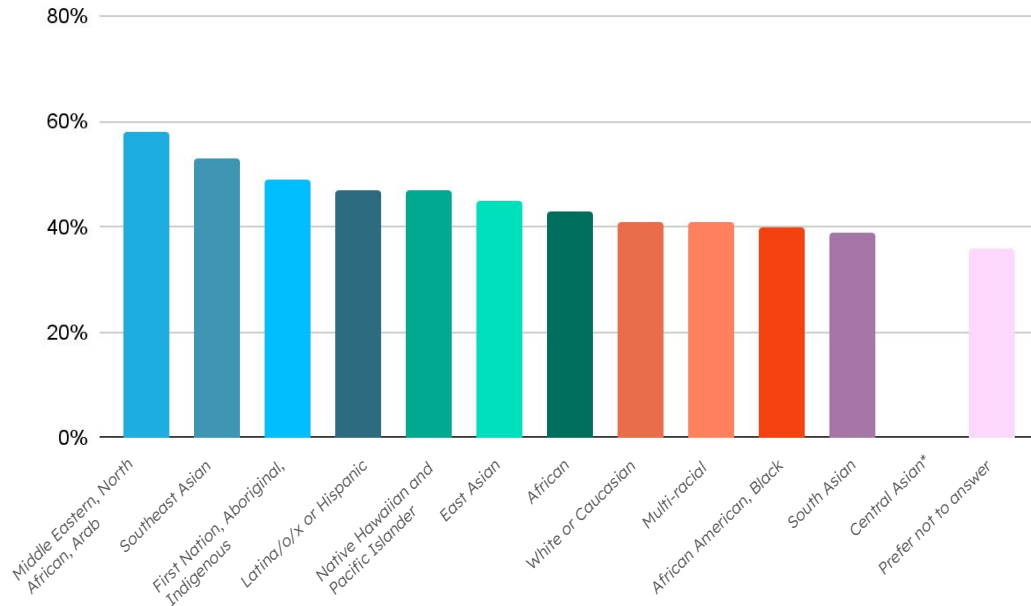
Notably, “inclusive” is frequently used by white runners and nearly absent from BIPOC language.



Photo courtesy of RIDC

**SAFETY, INCLUSION,  
AND ACCESS**

## Percentage of respondents within each racial identity group who feel at least somewhat unsafe while trail running during unorganized participation



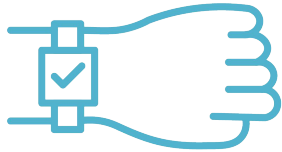
\*Note that none of our Central Asian respondents indicated that they feel unsafe while trail running.

## KEY SAFETY INSIGHTS FOR BIPOC TRAIL RUNNERS

- **Gender.** Of the BIPOC respondents who report feeling unsafe at least *some* of the time on trails, 63% are women, 31% are men, and 6% are nonbinary.
- **Fear of running alone.** “Going out to the trails can be a really scary thing, you’re not going to do it on your own if you don’t have people introducing you.”
- **Fear of wild animals, running in the dark, and getting lost** are other top concerns for BIPOC runners while running during unorganized participation.



# BARRIERS TO ACCESS: TRAIL RUNNING UNORGANIZED PARTICIPATION



**Access to trailheads and preparation:** “It’s a process to get to a trail, with [road] running you can get out the door in 30 seconds.”



**Cost:** Perceived to be a gear- and time-intensive sport. “You need to be able to afford it—and afford to have the time—to do it.”



**Not being raised “outdoorsy”:** “Your parents told you not to go into sketchy wooded areas when you were little.”

The background of the slide features a light blue topographic map with contour lines, primarily visible in the top right and bottom left corners.

# **BIPOC RUNNERS HAVE A LOWER SENSE OF SAFETY ON ROADS THAN TRAILS**

*“Predators on roads are humans, predators on trails are animals.”*

**BIPOC and white runners alike report feeling a lower sense of safety on roads compared to trails during unorganized participation.**

**47%**

*of BIPOC runners  
always feel safe on trails*

**41%**

*of BIPOC runners  
always feel safe on roads*

**49%**

*of white runners  
always feel safe on trails*

**39%**

*of white runners  
always feel safe on roads*

**Sentiments about safety during races are dramatically different . . .**

**BIPOC runners report feeling *significantly* less safe than white runners during both trail and road races.**

**56%**

*of BIPOC runners always feel safe at trail races*

**80%**

*of white runners always feel safe at trail races*

**53%**

*of BIPOC runners always feel safe at road races*

**80%**

*of white runners always feel safe at road races*

*BIPOC respondents report participating in trail and road races less frequently than white respondents.*

## BARRIERS TO ACCESS:

# TRAIL RUNNING RACES



### Lack of diversity

Trail racing is extremely white, from participants to race staff to sponsors.



### Negative experience for beginners

If you're not elite, you miss out—water runs out, food/swag are packed up. Cutoff times are discouraging.



### Perceived to be expensive

Trail racing requires lots of gear and race entry fees are high (and lack refund options). Training requires a greater investment of time due to the longer distances of trail races compared to road races.



### Safety concerns

Only **56%** of BIPOC runners report feeling safe in trail races, compared to **80%** of white runners. Fear of wild animals, running alone, and getting lost are top safety concerns during trail races for BIPOC runners.





Photo courtesy of Strava

# **UNIQUE THEMES BY RACIAL/ETHNIC FOCUS GROUPS**

**Hispanic/Latinx trail runners,** particularly women and gender-expansive runners, noted heightened concerns about safety and reported taking extra precautions as a result.

Focus group participants reported sharing their location with spouses/friends, sending photos of the trail, bringing ID cards with them, and sharing expected timing of turnaround and arrival at home.

**“Your parents told you not to go into sketchy wooded areas when you were little.”**

—Focus group participant



**“The solitude of the trails feels scary.”**

—Focus group participant



**Native American, Indigenous, American Indian, Chicano/a trail runners** spoke about trail running as a spiritual, ceremonial, noncompetitive and healing experience.

A connection to the land and nature was central to the trail running experience. Focus group discussions centered around the impact of colonial history, the importance of land use, and land acknowledgment. Access to trails was mentioned as a barrier.

**“Running is ceremony, medicine. It’s about love, community, honor, self love—white culture misses that.”**

—Focus group participant



**“White people run on trails and show up to road races just for fun. Native people don’t have that luxury.”**

—Focus group participant

### **Black/African American trail runners**

spoke a lot about the *experience* of trail races and events. The experience needs to be shareable on social media.

The team dynamic is a catalyst for building close friendships. Music and the post-race experience are very important and should be celebratory in nature.

**“This experience needs to be positive, memorable.”**

—Focus group participant



**“The team element is what makes the experience.”**

—Focus group participant



### **Asian/Pacific Islander trail runners**

noted the current social climate and anti-Asian hate impacting their sense of safety while trail running.

Lack of representation at organized events was also noted as a reason why Asian trail runners don't feel a sense of inclusion.

**“There aren't a lot of Asian elite runners at the Olympic Trials or at races.”**

—Focus group participant



**“Representation—what is visible to the trail running community—is important.”**

—Focus group participant





Photo courtesy of RIDC

# TRAIL RUNNING PRODUCTS

KEY THEMES:

## **TRAIL RUNNING PRODUCTS**

### **BIPOC RUNNERS HAVE UNMET PRODUCT NEEDS**

- BIPOC runners have strong feelings about the cost, style, fit, and function of trail running products.

### **FOOTWEAR BRAND PREFERENCE IS INCONSISTENT**

- BIPOC and white runners have some different preferences on their trail running footwear in terms of relevance, performance, fit, and quality.

### **ACCESSORIES ARE KEY!**

- BIPOC trail runners focus heavily on gadgets such as GPS watches and hydration vests (a topic that was almost absent from road running conversations). Garmin was the brand most commonly mentioned in our focus groups when runners were asked which brand they most frequently use to support their trail running.

KEY THEMES:

# UNMET NEEDS OF BIPOC TRAIL RUNNERS

## PRODUCT RELEVANCE

- **Cultural relevance:** “You make a 4th of July running shoe, why can’t we have a Black/Latinx theme? [The brands] aren’t marketing to us.”
- **Values:** Respondents suggested technical shirts with bold statements: “Abortion is healthcare,” “You are on native land,” “F\_\_ white supremacy.”
- **Price** is the #1 concern for women with both trail running footwear and apparel.
- **Color and style** are among the chief complaints for trail running shoes.

## PRODUCT FUNCTION

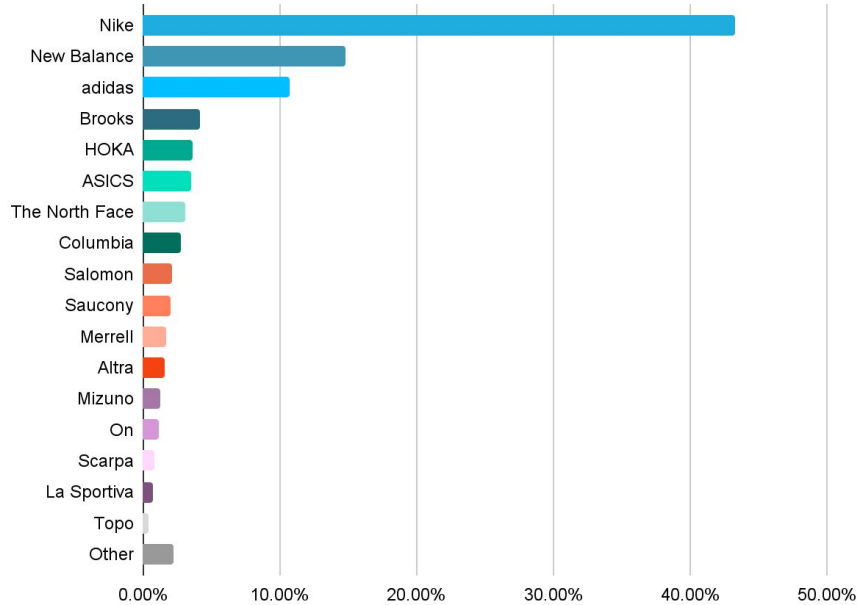
- **Sizing:** Most apparel is not made for fuller body types or for shorter individuals.
- **Sports bras:** Ditch the pads for smaller breasted women. Make the pockets deeper for those who need it.
- **Better features:** BIPOC trail runners requested places on apparel to put stuff (i.e., pocket that’s waterproof that can hold a phone), ear warmers that comfortably fit over earbuds and sunglasses.
- **Hair:** Women requested products that fit over different hair types and styles, and hat styles with holes for ponytails.

## KEY THEMES:

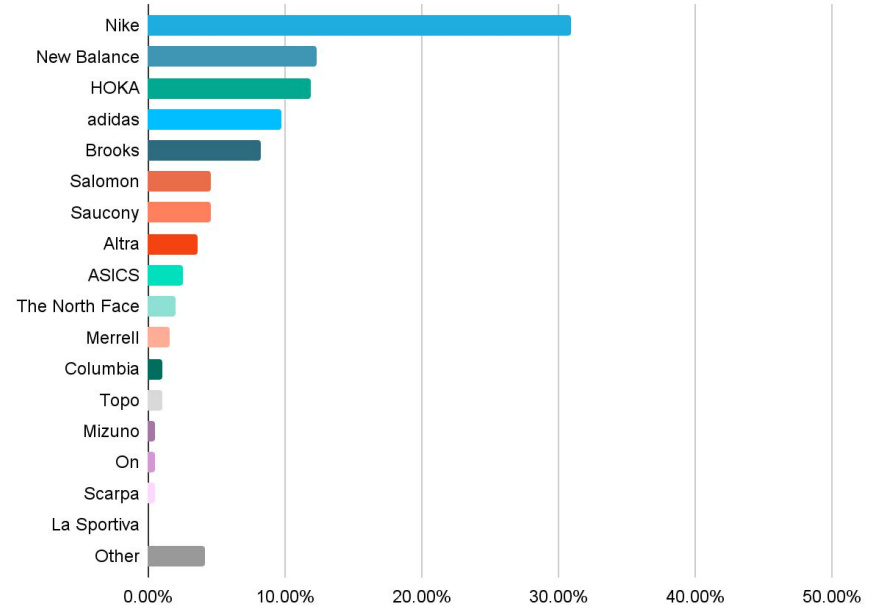
# TRAIL RUNNING FOOTWEAR BRAND PREFERENCES

“Please select the footwear brand that you most commonly purchase to support your trail running.”

### BIPOC Respondents



### White Respondents



# TRAIL RUNNING FOOTWEAR: UNMET NEEDS OF BIPOC RUNNERS

- We asked BIPOC runners to rate each product attribute below using a scale that assesses whether or not each attribute meets their current trail running footwear needs.
- **Price** is the biggest unmet need. Nearly  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the respondents report unmet needs (4x the baseline for footwear).
- Nearly  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the respondents do not agree that their **style** needs are met (3x the footwear baseline).

## FOOTWEAR BASELINE\* FOR UNMET NEEDS

16%

Trail Footwear Rankings by Attribute	Percentage of Respondents with Unmet Needs
Fit	28%
Comfort	34%
Color	39%
Style	<b>47%</b>
Performance	32%
Features	36%
Price	<b>62%</b>
Quality	31%

\*Benchmark used to measure respondents' level of unmet footwear needs; 16% of survey respondents indicated that current footwear offerings on the market are not meeting their overall trail running needs.

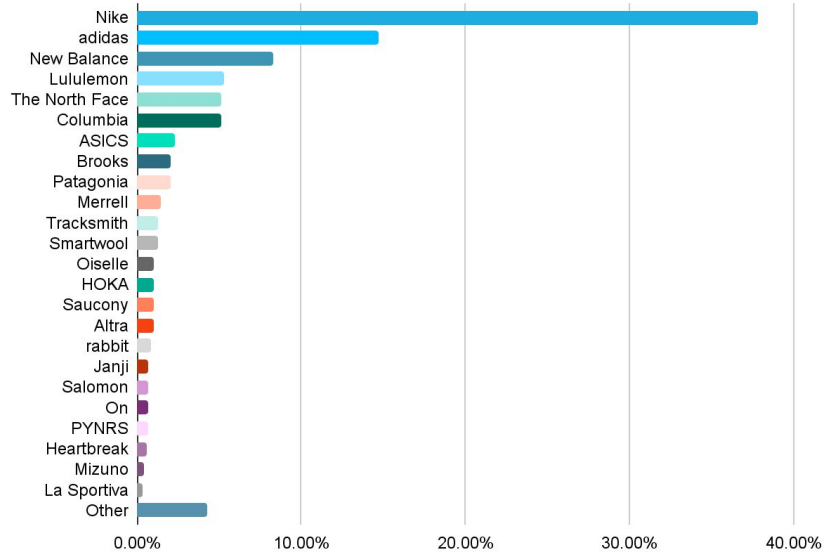


## KEY THEMES:

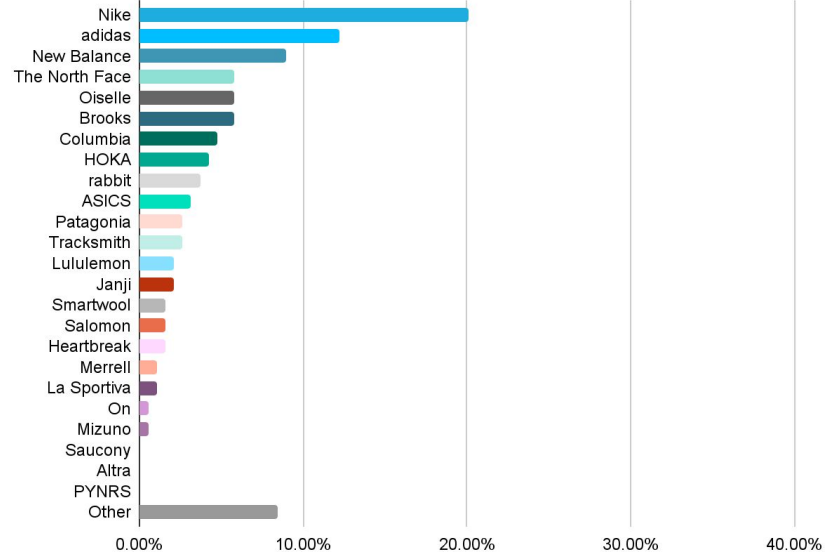
# TRAIL RUNNING APPAREL BRAND PREFERENCES

“Please select the apparel brand that you most commonly purchase to support your trail running.”

### BIPOC Respondents



### White Respondents



# TRAIL RUNNING APPAREL: UNMET NEEDS OF BIPOC RUNNERS

- We asked BIPOC runners to rate each product attribute below using a scale that assesses whether or not each attribute meets their current trail running apparel needs.
- **Price** is the biggest unmet need. Nearly  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the respondents note unmet needs (3x the baseline for apparel).
- **Style, Size Offerings, and Features** are in the same unmet range, with ~40% of respondents indicating they do not agree that current apparel offerings on the market meet their trail running needs.

## APPAREL BASELINE\* FOR UNMET NEEDS

23%

Trail Apparel Rankings by Attribute	Percentage of Respondents with Unmet Needs
Fit	34%
Size Offerings	39%
Comfort	33%
Style	41%
Performance	37%
Features	39%
Price	68%
Quality	35%

\*Benchmark used to measure respondents' level of unmet apparel needs; 23% of survey respondents indicated that current apparel offerings on the market are not meeting their overall trail running needs.

# WHAT YOU CAN DO

Now that you've read all that data... what's next? We have some things for you to consider.

## IMPROVING ACCESS

- Support run clubs led by people of color, which provide alternatives to isolated running, increasing feelings of safety
- Share education about the wildlife that surround local trails and greenspaces, including facts about the odds of an encounter and safety measures to take
- Consider programs to reduce cost for runners who need it, such as an allocated number of discounted or free admissions, covering travel expenses, etc
- Extend cut off times for trail races, ensuring there will be volunteers/staff for watering stations and celebration around the finish line
- Have a wider variety of pacing groups to ensure no runner is left behind

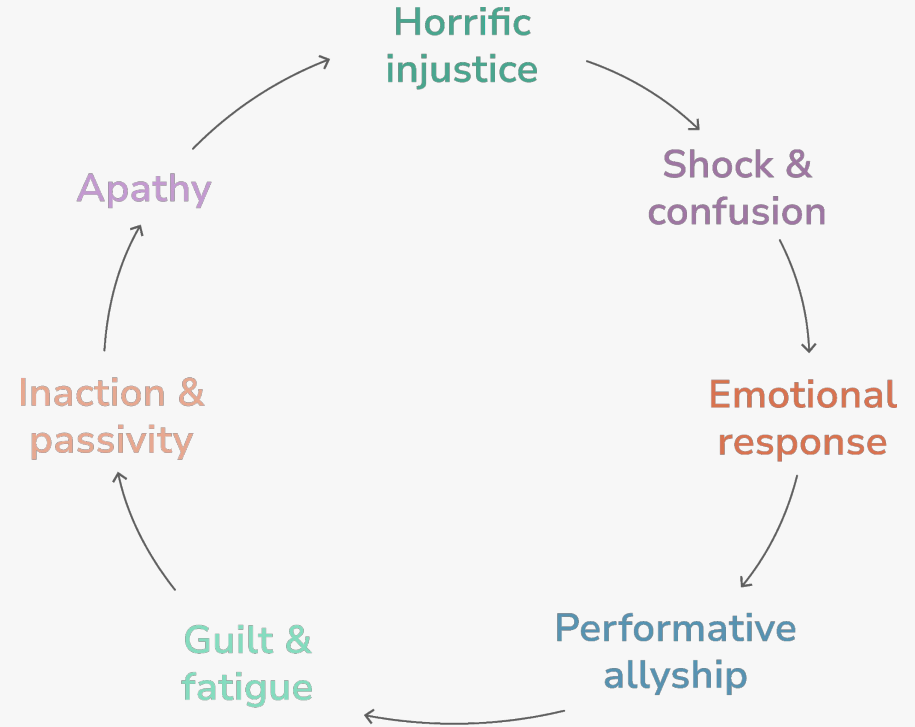
## PRODUCT FUNCTION

- Build a network of people of color (staff, run clubs, consultants) who inform your organization's definitions of style
- Engage runners of color in product testing and development. Invite staff to engage in experiences of different cultures to expose them to a wider variety of color palettes, textures, fit considerations, and other design elements
- Incorporate a wider range of skin tones, body sizes, hair textures, and other elements during product testing to better represent racially diverse consumers
- Have the racial diversity of product testing groups and models mirror, or exceed, national demographics

## The Cycle of Inaction

This cycle has been repeated **throughout history** in response to horrific injustice. The running industry can – and must – break the cycle.

The running industry is at risk of falling into the back half of the cycle. With continuous intentional action, we can avoid that.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR YOUR TEAMS

When your organization thinks about safety and trail running, how are you considering perspectives of **runners of color**?

How can you make trail racing more **inclusive for beginners**, particularly beginners from underrepresented backgrounds?

What role can you play in **expanding access** to trails and green spaces?

How can you help **lower the costs** associated with trail (and road) running and racing? (Reminder: costs = money *and* time)

How can you **change the narrative** on what it means to be “outdoorsy” and who gets to be “outdoorsy”?

When **planning a trail or road running event**, how can you consider racial equity and DEI throughout each step of the planning process?



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The RIDC, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, would like to express our gratitude to everyone who made this research possible. Your investments in this project have advanced our knowledge and understanding of the impacts on the running communities we serve. This research is the beginning of envisioning something better – a more inclusive and racially diverse running industry.

Thank you Patagonia for their leadership, and for leading the generous funding that helped us to see what's possible. Special thanks to our additional funders Altra, Brooks, On, Salomon, Saucony, Smartwool, and Strava for their financial support of this study.

We are extremely grateful to each and every participant in this study. Your willingness to share your experiences and insights, be vulnerable, and meaningfully engage with us is a significant contribution to not only the RIDC but is deeply impactful for the running industry. The RIDC would also like to recognize the dedication, expertise, and work of the research team:

**Erin Flynn: Professor, Bentley University**

**Shelle Santana: Professor, Bentley University**

**Fikayo Babatunde: Consultant, RIDC**

**Jenna Klein Jonsson: Partner, Blaze Partners**

In addition, we would also like to acknowledge the following who help the RIDC make continuous progress:

**Staff: Abigail Sharpless, Betsy Rathwell, Kiera Smalls, and a host of volunteers and consultants.**

**Board of Directors: Chris Lampen-Crowell, Glendean Hamilton, Jason Faustino, John Benedict, Kathy Dalby, Sergio Avila, Shannon Woods, Song Anh Nguyen, and Tom Carleo. Former members: Alison Mariella Désir, Martha Garcia, Robyn Goby, and Verna Volker.**

**Multi-year Corporate Donors: Altra, Brooks, Charm City Running, Feetures, Fleet Feet, GU, HOKA, Mill City Running, Mizuno, New Balance, New York Road Runners, Patagonia, Pacers Running, Playmakers, REI, Salomon, Saucony, Smartwool, Superfeet, and Tracksmith.**

# REFERENCES

Race Forward. (n.d.). *What is racial equity? Understanding key concepts related to race*. Retrieved March 8, 2023, from <https://www.raceforward.org/about/what-is-racial-equity-key-concepts>

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**THANK  
YOU**

Photo courtesy of HOKA



## **ABOUT THE RIDC**

The RIDC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that unites the running industry by providing resources, measuring progress, and holding the industry accountable to equitable employment, leadership, and ownership positions and improving the inclusion, visibility, and access for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC).

[Learn more at \*\*RUNNINGDIVERSITY.COM\*\*](https://www.runningdiversity.com)