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MOTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION IN OBSTACLE COURSE RACE EVENTS AND THEIR SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DETERMINANTS: A POLISH CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

Introduction: Obstacle course racing (OCR) combines cross-country running with challenging obstacles, demanding high fitness levels and attracting those seeking physical exercise and skill development. Motivations for OCR vary based on individual factors. This study examines OCR participation motives and their relationship to selected sociodemographic factors.
Materials and Methods: Participants were recruited at mass OCR events and asked to complete a questionnaire. The sample included 144 individuals (53 women, 91 men) aged 18–70. The data collection involved sociodemographic questions and the MPAM-R scale to assess motivations.
Results: Fitness, Competence, and Enjoyment were the primary motivations, with Enjoyment being more significant for women. Financial stability and prior sports experience were key factors for participation.
Conclusions: The study concludes that OCR participants exhibit complex motivations, which highlights the need for further research on participation motives in OCRs. The results suggest that understanding these motives can enhance the development of OCR events and their promotion.
Key words: obstacle course racing, motivations, fitness

Introduction

The health benefits of regular physical activity (PA) are well established [1,2]. However, ongoing research on this topic reflects the complexity of PA and the need for continued exploration. PA is monitored across diverse populations, and health recommendations regarding its level are constantly updated [3,4]. The diversity of factors, manifestations, and consequences of PA continue to be the focus of scientific inquiry [5–8]. A significant body of research is devoted to the health risks associated with sedentary lifestyles [9–11], while widespread participation in mass sports events in many developed countries is a growing area of interest. An example of this is the increasing popularity of mass running events, half-marathons, and marathons held throughout the world [12]. Although competition is a fundamental aspect of sport, empirical research suggests that the desire to win is often not the primary motivation for participants in mass events [13,14]. Instead, participants are driven by the fulfilment of emotional needs associated with participation, self-testing, or a sense of unity and integration with others [15].

The phenomenon of mass participation also applies to off-road running, including obstacle course racing (OCR) [16–18]. However, the literature on this type of running is not extensive. One of the reasons for this is the diversity of activities that fall under the umbrella of off-road running, such as trail running, mountain running, skyrunning, fell running, orienteering, OCR and cross-country running. This has led to the use of different, often interchangeable and not always appropriate terminologies by researchers, which has prompted efforts to organize and provide a brief description of each form [19]. Additionally, due to the great diversity of OCR events, standardization has also been proposed [20].

The history of OCR is rich, with its roots dating back to ancient times when obstacle courses were used as a form of military training [21]. Today, it remains an element of military training, but also serves as a form of active recreation, which naturally attracts the attention of researchers [22–24]. Obstacle courses are diverse and varied, featuring natural and artificial terrain obstacles. The obstacles can include wall climbing, carrying heavy objects, traversing water tanks, crawling under barbed wire, jumping over fire, and many other challenging obstacles. This presents participants with significant challenges that require a range of motor skills. Many obstacles require cooperation among runners. Participants try to help and motivate each other, often disregarding the fact that they are competing with each other [25]. OCR require a high level of fitness, including muscular strength, endurance, agility, flexibility, coordination, balance, as well as creativity in effectively overcoming obstacles [26]. These versatile demands of OCR make it an excellent tool for use in school physical education systems [27–29]. The widespread participation in OCR events is evidence that it is also an attractive option for many people as a way to spend their leisure time. From a research perspective, the mass participation in various types of sports events that require a high level of endurance has become an important reason for conducting studies on the motives for participation in these events [30]. Therefore, studies and analyses of marathons and ultramarathons [31,32], cycling events [33,34], and triathlons [35–37] can be found in the literature. However, there is a lack of studies on the motives for participating in OCR events. Addressing this gap can be an essential element of research on the Theory of Participation in Recreational Sports [38].

The aim of the study was to investigate the motives for participation in obstacle course races (OCR) and to examine the relationship between selected socio-demographic variables and motives for engaging in this activity.

Materials and Methods

The study used a purposive sampling approach, and the participants were individuals who participated in mass OCR. Study participants were recruited during OCR events and were asked for their email addresses. A questionnaire was sent to these email addresses, enabling access to the target group of participants and ensuring the anonymity of the data obtained. Eventually, data from 144 individuals, including 53 women (36.81%) and 91 men (63.19%), meeting the age criteria (18–70 years) were collected.

The research tool used was a questionnaire consisting of a metric section in which selected socio-demographic data were collected, and the Motives for Physical Activities Measure – Revised (MPAM-R) questionnaire [39,40]. In the metric section, data on gender, age, height, and weight were collected, from which

the body mass index (BMI) was calculated. It was hypothesized that socio-demographic variables such as education (divided into vocational, secondary, and higher education), place of residence (rural, city with up to 100,000 inhabitants, city with over 100,000 inhabitants), self-assessment of financial situation (poor, average, good, very good), and self-assessment of activity level compared to peers before training and participating in OCR (less active, equally active, more active than peers) could be related to motives. The participants were also asked about their previous sports activities (regular training, participation in competitions).

Data were also collected regarding preparation and participation in OCR. The participants were asked about the duration of their training for OCR (in years) and to rate the average intensity of their training on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 represents very light training and 10 represents maximum intensity, exhausting training.

The MPAM-R questionnaire is used to estimate motives for sports activity. It consists of 30 statements related to motives for activity. Respondents indicate their level of agreement with each statement, rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The responses were grouped into five domains: Interest/Enjoyment, Competence, Appearance, Fitness, and Social. The domain score is the average score of the statements belonging to that domain. The higher the score, the stronger the motive.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the variables studied. Nonparametric statistics were used for comparisons. In comparisons concerning two groups, the Mann-Whitney *U* test was used, while when there were more groups the choice was the Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test. In the case of finding statistically significant differences, two-sided comparisons were performed. Correlations between variables were assessed using Pearson correlation coefficients. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. Analyses were performed using STATISTICA 13.3.

Results

The internal consistency of the MPAM-R was preliminarily checked and satisfactory results were obtained. The α-Cronbach coefficients for the individual domains were Interest/Enjoyment: $\alpha = 0.80$; Competence: $\alpha = 0.84$; Appearance: $\alpha = 0.86$; Fitness: $\alpha = 0.84$; Social: $\alpha = 0.89$.

Comparison of quantitative variables by gender showed differences in age: it was lower among women, while BMI was higher among men. Differences were also noted in terms of motivation: Interest/Enjoyment, which was stronger among women (table 1).

Table 1. Quantitative variables: gender comparison

Variable	Median (min–max)		*p*
	women	men	
Age	30 (18–44)	34 (18–70)	*
BMI	21.48 (16.73–35.86)	23.82 (18.93–33.03)	**
Interest/Enjoyment	6.71 (5.00–7.00)	6.29 (4.29–7.00)	*
Competence	6.71 (4.00–7.00)	6.43 (4.14–7.00)	
Appearance	5.67 (2.33–7.00)	5.83 (1.67–7.00)	
Fitness	6.80 (4.00–7.00)	6.80 (3.20–7.00)	
Social	5.60 (2.60–7.00)	5.40 (1.60–7.00)	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.0001$

The analysis showed that the motivations were correlated with each other, with the strongest positive relationships observed between Interest/Enjoyment and Competence in both women ($r = 0.570$, $p < 0.001$) and men ($r = 0.682$, $p < 0.001$), as presented in table 2.

Table 2. Correlations between motives: taking into account gender

Motives	Gender	Interest/Enjoyment	Competence	Appearance	Fitness
Competence	women	0.570***			
	men	0.682***			
Appearance	women	0.398*	0.323*		
	men	0.483***	0.494***		
Fitness	women	0.668***	0.695***	0.562***	
	men	0.424***	0.339**	0.550***	
Social	women	0.353*			
	men	0.536***	0.357**	0.496***	0.508***

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Comparison of motivations by sociodemographic variables showed differences only in two cases. The differentiating variables were self-assessment of financial situation and self-assessment of PA (table 3; figures 1, 2).

Multiple comparisons showed that the Fitness motive depended on the financial situation. The differences concerned people who assessed it as bad and good (figure 1).

On the other hand, self-assessment of PA differentiated the motive: Competences. The differences concerned the groups: lower-higher and same-higher.

Table 3. Sociodemographic variables and the motives of physical activity

Variable		*n*	% median	Interest/ Enjoyment		Competence		Appearance		Fitness		Social
				p	median	*p*	median	*p*	median	*p*	median	*p*
Education	a	9	6.25	6.86		6.71		6.33		7.00		5.60
	b	47	32.64	6.29		6.71		5.83		6.80		5.80
	c	88	61.11	6.43		6.57		5.67		6.80		5.20
Place of residence	d	29	20.14	6.29		6.57		5.33		6.60		5.40
	e	43	29.86	6.43		6.71		5.83		7.00		5.20
	f	72	50.00	6.64		6.64		6.00		6.80		5.60
Financial situation	g	5	3.47	6.43		6.00		6.33		6.40		4.80
	h	45	31.25	6.29		6.57		5.50		6.60	*	5.40
	i	74	51.39	6.50		6.71		5.83		6.80		5.60
	j	20	13.89	6.64		6.57		6.25		6.90		6.10
Self-assessment of physical activity	k	20	13.89	6.14		6.29		5.67		6.60		5.80
	l	34	23.61	6.29		6.29	**	5.42		6.80		5.50
	m	90	62.50	6.71		6.79		6.00		6.80		5.40
practising sport before the OCR	yes	115	79.86	6.43		6.71		5.83		6.80		5.40
	no	29	21.14	6.43		6.57		5.83		6.80		5.80

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Legend: a – vocational; b – secondary; c – higher; d – village; e – city < 100.00; f – city > 100.00; g – bad; h – average; i – good; j – very good; k – lower; l – same; m – higher

Figure 1. Motive differentiation: Fitness due to self-assessment of the financial situation

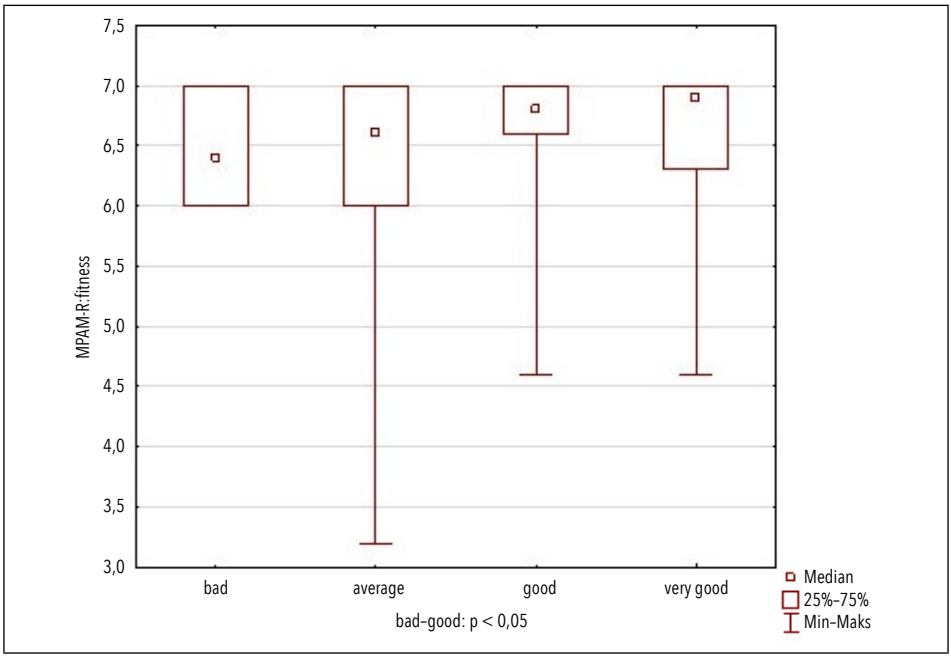
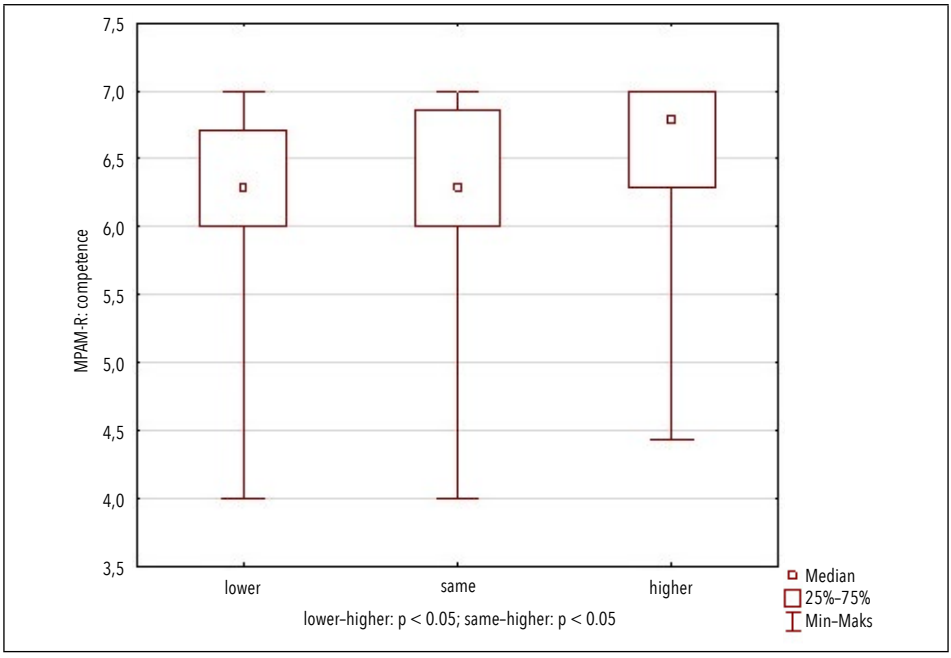


Figure 2. Motive differentiation: Competences due to self-assessment of physical activity



Discussion

Descriptive statistics of the participants indicate that this form of PA is preferred by young people. This is justified by the high demands of OCR regarding motor skills and endurance. However, this does not exclude the participation of older people, as evidenced by the oldest participant in the study, who was 70 years old. Among the participants, those who rated themselves as always more active than their peers dominated. For these individuals, professionalism regarding all aspects related to PA explains differences in motivation, specifically Competence. This explanation is supported by a large amount of evidence regarding the relationship between prior activity levels with both motor skills and attitudes towards PA in later life [41–44]. Thus, one can speak of a "translocation effect" [45]. This effect would not only relate to motor abilities but also expectations of oneself. This is evidenced by the fact that despite the relatively short preparation time for OCR, the median training load can be considered high.

There were also differences in the socio-demographic variables of the participants, based on their self-assessment of their material status (figure 1). It can be assumed that higher material status is a consequence of engagement in work. The need for compensation for work overload explains the higher level of Fitness motivation. This is confirmation of one of the types of motivational orientations among participants in mass sports events presented by Walter Freyer and Sven Gross. This is an orientation that refers to positive experiences as compensation for daily struggles [46]. This compensation is an important regulator of the physical and mental balance of these individuals [47–48]. Numerous studies regarding the beneficial relationship between material status and PA confirm this thesis [49–54]. The role of material status as a basis for creating opportunities for participation in various forms of PA (costs related to equipment, training, or entry fees for participation) should also be noted.

This study points to a higher level of Interest/Enjoyment motivation in women. This suggests that for female participants more than for men OCR is a way to satisfy emotional needs through participation in collective forms of PA. An analogy can be drawn to the conclusions of a study on the motivations of runners conducted by Ewa Malchrowicz-Mośko and Joanna Poczta [55]. These researchers found that the desire to escape from everyday reality was stronger among women than men. Previous studies by Jeffery J Summers et al. also indicate greater emotional benefits for women than men [56]. The results of these observations seem important in the context of generally lower levels of PA participation by women in their free time [57–59]. The main reason for this situation is reported to be the conflict of roles: household duties – work – leisure time activity [60,61]. These social changes, including those regarding the desired increase in PA for women's health, require motivational guidance for promoting healthy behaviours.

The analysis of the means and medians of the participants' motivations indicates slightly higher intensity of Interest/Enjoyment, Competence, and Fitness motivations and lower levels of Appearance and Social motivations. Earlier reports on reasons for participation in other forms of PA indicated the importance of appearance as a motivation for activity [62,63]. Here too, this motivation plays a significant role, but it is not paramount. Similar conclusions apply to social motivations.

There are noticeable correlations between the motives of both men and women, although the correlation coefficients differ. The theoretical models proposed by Nicole Mullins [21] only partially explain the motives for participating in OCR. In a comprehensive approach, they are an individual expression of concern for physical and mental health and are consistent with the idea of healthism, i.e. a lifestyle focused on health and fitness [15]. It should also be agreed with Sarah J Young et al.'s thesis that many people participate in these types of events because of novelty, fun, and diversity [16]. Social media and mass media also play a significant role in this process. The commercial significance of such events must also be noted.

As far as the authors know, this is the first study on this topic. Therefore, it should be treated as a pilot study. The limitations of this study relate to both the research area and its scale. Further analyses may also allow for the correction of research tools used in relation to this target group. The justification for this is the phenomenon and scale of OCR.

Conclusion

Participants in obstacle course races have a high level of motivation and their motives are complex, with Fitness, Competence, and Interest/Enjoyment being the leading factors. The motive of Interest/Enjoyment is more important for women than for men. Past sports experience and good financial situation are prerequisites for participation in OCRs. The issue of participation motives in OCRs requires further research.

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Motywy uprawiania biegów przeszkodowych oraz ich socjodemograficzne determinanty – polskie badanie przekrojowe

Streszczenie

Wprowadzenie: Biegi przeszkodowe (OCR) to rodzaj biegu przełajowego, który został urozmaicony przeszkodami terenowymi wymagającymi dużej sprawności do ich pokonania i który przyciąga osoby poszukujące aktywności fizycznej oraz rozwoju umiejętności. Motywacje do udziału w OCR są kwestią indywidualną i zależą od wielu czynników. Celem badania jest poznanie motywów udziału w OCR oraz ich związku z wybranymi czynnikami socjodemograficznymi.
Materiały i metody: Uczestnicy zostali wybrani podczas masowych wydarzeń OCR i poproszeni o wypełnienie ankiety. Próba obejmowała 144 osoby (53 kobiety, 91 mężczyzn) w wieku 18–70 lat. Zbieranie danych obejmowało pytania socjodemograficzne oraz skalę MPAM-R do oceny motywów.
Wyniki: Sprawność fizyczna, kompetencje i przyjemność były głównymi motywacjami, przy czym przyjemność miała większe znaczenie dla kobiet. Stabilność finansowa i wcześniejsze doświadczenie sportowe były ważnymi czynnikami, które sprzyjały rozpoczęciu przygody z OCR.
Wnioski: Badanie wykazało, że uczestnicy mają złożone motywacje, co podkreśla potrzebę dalszych badań nad motywami uczestnictwa w OCR. Wyniki sugerują, że zrozumienie tych motywów może wspierać rozwój i promocję wydarzeń OCR.

Słowa kluczowe: biegi przeszkodowe, determinanty socjodemograficzne, aktywność fizyczna