

MARATHON RUNNING BEHAVIOR AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION AMONG GENERATION Z

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine marathon running behavior and intrinsic motivation among Generation Z. The sample consisted of 400 individuals aged 18–24 years who had participated in marathon running for at least one year. A questionnaire was employed as the research instrument, and the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentage, mean, and standard deviation, as well as multiple regression analysis. The results indicated that marathon running behavior among Generation Z was at a very high level ($\bar{x} = 4.71$, S.D. = 0.62), while intrinsic motivation was found at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.22$, S.D. = 0.78). Hypothesis testing further revealed that intrinsic motivation exerted a significantly positive influence on marathon running behavior among Generation Z at the .05 level of statistical significance ($\beta = 0.45$, $t = 6.78$, $p < .001$), indicating that internal drives play a crucial role in encouraging their participation in marathon running. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation in promoting exercise behavior and sustained engagement in marathon running among young adults.

Keywords: Behavior, Motivation, Generation Z, Marathon Running

INTRODUCTION

Marathon running has become an increasingly popular form of physical activity over the past decade, both in Thailand and worldwide, driven by rising public health awareness and efforts to enhance quality of life (Wang & Liu, 2020). The global surge in recreational running—intensified after the COVID-19 pandemic—has shaped marathons into a social movement that emphasizes health, personal resilience, and community connection. Beyond improving physical fitness, marathon running embodies participants' determination, psychological resilience, and a profound sense of personal accomplishment. It has also become a lifestyle symbol for many young adults, representing discipline, self-improvement, and identity expression.

Generation Z, defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, has emerged as a key demographic participating in various forms of physical activity, including marathon running. Growing up in the digital era—where technology, the internet, and social media heavily influence lifestyle choices—this generation displays motivational patterns and behavioral expressions distinct from earlier cohorts (Turner, 2015). Their engagement with physical activity is often intertwined with digital platforms, wearable technologies, and online communities that provide real-time performance tracking, virtual encouragement, and social validation. These digital-era characteristics shape their identity expression, personal challenges, and pursuit of peer recognition through online platforms (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Chonthicha Punyapat, 2022).

Beyond the sports domain, research has shown that digital transformation significantly influences consumer behavior and future service usage. Pahasing, Girdwichai, Kulwanich, and Siriyanun (2022) found that business innovations within the digital economy—such as seamless online platforms, personalized services, and interactive digital experiences—strongly affect online shopping behavior and shape future service trends among consumers in Bangkok. Their findings highlight how digital convenience, system efficiency, and user experience play critical roles in shaping behavioral intentions. These insights are directly applicable to marathon participation in the digital age, where technology enhances every phase of engagement—from event registration and mobile training applications to virtual running communities and social media storytelling. Such digital features not only streamline participation but also strengthen intrinsic motivation through feedback, recognition, and community belonging.

Research by Terason and Pahasing (2025) further underscores the role of digital media in shaping identity and national pride through sports participation, demonstrating the substantial influence of online environments on perceived value and self-concept among digital-era sports consumers. Likewise, marathon running has evolved into a “social space” where young people express their identity through digital platforms, share performance achievements, and engage with running communities in ways that extend far beyond the physical event itself. Phonsri, Pahasing, Wantayakul, and Trusjaithum (2023) also reported that motivations for esports participation—such as personal challenge, achievement, and enjoyment—closely parallel the intrinsic drivers associated with marathon running, reinforcing the idea that digital-era motivations transcend specific activity types.

Furthermore, the growing integration of sport, technology, and lifestyle culture has positioned marathons as a hybrid digital-physical experience for Generation Z. The blending of fitness apps, social media engagement, wearable technologies, and event branding creates a multidimensional environment that supports both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. For many young individuals, marathon participation is not solely an athletic endeavor, but also a means of self-expression, social connection, and digital identity construction. Wantayakul, N. (2025).

Given this context, understanding the behavior and intrinsic motivation of Generation Z toward marathon running is essential. Such insights explain the factors influencing physical activity participation among digital natives and provide valuable guidance for designing marathon events that align with their lifestyles, interests, and social environments. Ultimately, this understanding contributes to fostering a strong and sustainable health culture in contemporary Thai society.

OBJECTIVE

To examine the marathon running behavior and intrinsic motivation among Generation Z.

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative research aimed to examine marathon running behavior and intrinsic motivation among Generation Z. The sample consisted of 400 individuals aged 18–24 years residing in Bangkok who had participated in marathon running for at least one year. Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants. The research instrument was a questionnaire developed based on a review of relevant literature and related empirical studies. Content validity was assessed by experts, yielding item–objective congruence (IOC) values ranging from 0.81 to 1.00, and reliability analysis indicated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.81 and 0.89. Data were collected through both online and offline channels. Descriptive statistics, including percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were used to analyze the data, along with multiple regression analysis to examine marathon running behavior and intrinsic motivation among Generation Z at the .05 level of statistical significance.

RESULTS

1. The assessment indicated that Generation Z exhibited a very high level of marathon running behavior ($\bar{x} = 4.71$, S.D. = 0.62). The highest mean scores were observed for satisfaction with running consistency ($\bar{x} = 4.78$, S.D. = 0.65) and running at least once per year ($\bar{x} = 4.78$, S.D. = 0.56), followed by having a clear training plan ($\bar{x} = 4.75$, S.D. = 0.55). Intrinsic motivation was also found at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.22$, S.D. = 0.78). The highest mean score was running to develop abilities and challenge oneself ($\bar{x} = 4.32$, S.D. = 0.95), followed by enjoyment ($\bar{x} = 4.25$, S.D. = 0.98) and increased self-confidence ($\bar{x} = 4.25$, S.D. = 0.75). Overall, both marathon running behavior and intrinsic motivation were high, supporting sustained participation among Generation Z, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Levels of Marathon Running Behavior and Intrinsic Motivation

No.	Marathon Running Behavior of Generation Z	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpretation
1	Marathon Running Behavior			
	Ran at least once per year	4.78	0.56	Most
	Followed a clear training plan	4.59	0.84	Most
	Participated in marathon training regularly	4.75	0.55	Most
	Joined marathon events with friends or peers	4.65	0.48	Most
	Felt satisfied with personal running consistency	4.78	0.65	Most
	Total	4.71	0.62	Most
2	Intrinsic Motivation			
	Ran to improve physical fitness and health	4.25	0.98	More
	Ran to achieve personal goals	4.15	0.64	More

No.	Marathon Running Behavior of Generation Z	$\bar{x}$	SD	Interpretation
	Ran to challenge themselves and develop abilities	4.32	0.95	More
	Enjoyed marathon running	4.25	0.75	More
	Felt confident and proud of their running ability	4.11	0.55	More
	Total	4.22	0.78	More

2. Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that intrinsic motivation had a significantly positive influence on marathon running behavior ($\beta = 0.45$, $t = 6.78$, $p < .001$). This finding indicates that intrinsic motivation—rooted in pride, personal challenge, and a sense of accomplishment—is a key determinant of sustained participation in marathon running, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analysis of Intrinsic Motivation

Independent Variable (X)	(β)	t	p-value
Intrinsic Motivation	0.45	6.78	< .001

Discussion

The findings of this study on marathon running behavior and intrinsic motivation among Generation Z can be discussed as follows:

1. The results revealed that most respondents were adolescents and young adults in Generation Z, with an average age between 18 and 24 years, and had at least one year of marathon running experience. Their overall marathon running behavior was at a very high level ($\bar{x} = 4.71$, S.D. = 0.62). At the item level, the highest mean scores were found for satisfaction with the consistency of their marathon running ($\bar{x} = 4.78$, S.D. = 0.65) and running a marathon at least once per year ($\bar{x} = 4.78$, S.D. = 0.56), followed by having a clear training plan for marathon running ($\bar{x} = 4.75$, S.D. = 0.55). The next highest item was regularly participating in marathon events ($\bar{x} = 4.65$, S.D. = 0.48), and subsequently setting clear goals for each marathon ($\bar{x} = 4.59$, S.D. = 0.84). These findings are consistent with Funk, Beaton, and Alexandris (2011), who indicated that physical activity and sport participation behaviors are often linked to intrinsic motivation and personal goal-setting, which help foster consistency and commitment to long-term training. They are also in line with Clarke, Geurin, and Burch (2019), who found that sport fans or sport consumers with clear goals and structured training plans are more likely to maintain physical activity behavior over time.

Regarding intrinsic motivation toward marathon running, the overall level among Generation Z was high ($\bar{x} = 4.22$, S.D. = 0.78). At the item level, the highest mean score was for running a marathon to develop one's abilities and to challenge oneself ($\bar{x} = 4.32$, S.D. = 0.95), followed by finding marathon running fun and enjoyable ($\bar{x} = 4.25$, S.D. = 0.98), and feeling that marathon running increases self-confidence ($\bar{x} = 4.25$, S.D. = 0.75). The next items were that marathon running improves one's health ($\bar{x} = 4.15$, S.D. = 0.64) and that completing a marathon leads to feelings of satisfaction and pride ($\bar{x} = 4.11$, S.D. = 0.55). These results are consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which posits that intrinsic motivation is a core driver of sustained behavior because it arises from feelings of pride,

challenge, and personal satisfaction. The findings also align with Sung, Son, and Choi (2022), who examined the motivations of online sport fans in Korea and reported that developmental motives and self-satisfaction influence intentions to participate in future sport activities. Similarly, Podlivaev and Grigolia (2012) noted that personal development and a sense of achievement are closely related to motivation for continued participation in sports activities. In addition, the results correspond with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, which suggests that the highest level of human needs is self-actualization, or the fulfillment of one's potential. This perspective reflects how Generation Z perceives marathon running as an activity that satisfies their needs for achievement, challenge, and self-pride.

2. The multiple regression analysis further revealed that intrinsic motivation had a significantly positive influence on marathon running behavior among Generation Z at the .05 level of statistical significance ($\beta = 0.45$, $t = 6.78$, $p < .001$). This indicates that when individuals possess higher levels of intrinsic motivation, they are more likely to participate in marathon running. These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which posits that internal psychological needs—such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness—serve as key factors driving sustained engagement in activities. In addition, the results align with the study by Wang and Liu (2020), who found that intrinsic motivation is a critical determinant of exercise participation and physical activity, particularly among younger generations who place strong emphasis on self-development and personal achievement. Such motivation not only enhances feelings of pride but also generates happiness derived from attaining one's goals.

Overall, intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in shaping marathon running behavior among Generation Z. This suggests that promoting running activities for younger generations should focus on fostering internal sources of inspiration, such as encouraging personal goal-setting, designing meaningful and challenging experiences, and recognizing or celebrating individual achievements. These approaches can help stimulate continuous and sustainable participation in marathon running in the future.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The findings of this study demonstrate that Generation Z exhibits a remarkably high level of marathon running behavior, supported by consistent participation, clear training plans, and regular engagement in marathon events. Their intrinsic motivation was also found to be strong, particularly in areas related to personal challenge, enjoyment, and the development of self-confidence. These results reinforce Self-Determination Theory, suggesting that intrinsic motivation—driven by autonomy, competence, and personal fulfillment—plays a central role in sustaining long-term physical activity. The regression analysis further confirmed that intrinsic motivation significantly influences marathon running behavior, indicating that individuals with higher intrinsic motivation are more likely to maintain consistent participation in marathon running.

Drawing on these insights, the study highlights the importance of fostering internal motivation among young adults by encouraging personal goal-setting, offering meaningful and challenging running experiences, and recognizing individual achievements to promote ongoing engagement in marathon activities. However, while the present research provides a valuable understanding of Generation Z's behavior and motivation, future studies could broaden the scope by including participants from diverse geographic regions or cultural contexts to enhance generalizability. Additionally, employing mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches may offer deeper insights into how intrinsic motivation evolves over time and how life transitions influence marathon participation. Further research may also examine the role of digital platforms, wearable technologies, and virtual running communities in strengthening

motivation and supporting sustained involvement. Such extensions would contribute to the development of more effective strategies for promoting long-term physical activity and enhancing marathon participation among Generation Z in an increasingly digital world.

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