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Running Head: Motives of amateur triathletes

A qualitative exploration of participant motives among committed amateur triathletes

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A Qualitative Exploration of Participant Motives among Committed Amateur Triathletes

Abstract

This study explored motivations of amateur triathletes using an interpretive approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 triathletes in two Australian east coast states. Data were interpreted through the theoretical lenses of self-determination theory and flow. Nine motivation themes emerged. The triathletes were motivated to participate in triathlon partly for intrinsic reasons, though extrinsic motives were also extensively prevalent. Different motivations were found to be cyclical in directing behavior, contingent upon individual goals, event schedules, and personal circumstances. There is a need for further inquiry into endurance sport participants' endorsement of intrinsic versus extrinsic motives.

Keywords: motivations, triathlon, self-determination theory, flow, amateur athletes

Introduction and Objectives

According to Ryan and Deci (2007), “Sport and exercise epitomize motivation – people being moved to act – for these activities require exertion, energy, focus and sometimes a great deal of discipline” (p. 1). Endurance sports such as marathon running, cycling, and triathlon can consume vast amounts of leisure time in preparation and training, particularly among amateur (i.e. non-professional) participants (Lamont & Kennelly, 2011; Lamont, Kennelly & Wilson, 2012; McCarville, 2007). Further, Smith (1998; 2000) noted that there is great variance in the ability of those who register for marathon running events. Only a small proportion of elite competitors may harbor realistic visions of being victorious at the finish line. However, each year thousands of amateur athletes contest endurance sport events, tolerating physical and mental anguish for extended periods with little chance of gracing the winner’s podium.

Participants in endurance sport events may be engaged in what Stebbins (1992) calls *serious leisure*. That is, involvement in endurance sports may extend well beyond participation in events. Participation in the activity may become integrated with daily life, and form a central part of the individual’s social identity. Indeed, amateur triathletes have been reported to make significant lifestyle adjustments to accommodate their sporting endeavors (Hill & Robinson, 1991). Amateur athletes are not remunerated for their efforts, yet some treat their sporting endeavors as a second job. For leisure scientists, such behavior raises questions of *why*? Why do they participate? Why invest so many personal resources in this activity when there is no remuneration?

Numerous studies have examined motivations for participation in endurance sports. However, little knowledge exists regarding the motivations of amateur triathletes, despite exponential growth in the sport over the past decade. The literature addressing participant motivations in endurance sports is dominated by positivistic studies employing quantitative

methods. Further, the few studies that have taken an interpretive approach have lacked theoretical underpinning. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is an elaboration of classical human motivation theories such as drive theory and the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy. Based upon understandings of innate psychological needs in humans, self-determination theory focuses on the degree to which individuals engage in certain behaviors autonomously, or in a self-determined manner (Markland & Ingledew, 2007). This theoretical framework is useful for analysing the motives of amateur triathletes given their volitional participation and the dedication required to participate successfully in this sport.

Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow concept, describing autotelic experiences brought about through an actor's skill and ability meeting the demands of an activity, is also theoretically relevant to this study due to its relationship with the intrinsic motivation component of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

This study is significant because it is among the first to adopt an exploratory, interpretive research design in examining the motivations of amateur triathletes, informed by an accepted theoretical framework. It aims to contribute a rich description of amateur triathletes' motivations for participation in triathlon, and to provide a theory-driven interpretation of these motivations.

Literature Review

Studies of Participants' Motivation in Endurance Sports

Researchers have proffered a number of justifications for studying the motivations of endurance sport participants. Such reasons include facilitating construction of and adherence to training programs, promoting and/or marketing the activity in question, and promotion of regular exercise and a healthy lifestyle to the general public (Brown, O'Connor & Barkatsas, 2009; LaChausse, 2006; Markland & Ingledew, 2007; Ogles & Masters, 2003). Further,

Masters, Ogles and Jolton (1993) have previously cited centrality to lifestyle and the domineering nature of endurance activity as core reasons for studying the motivations of marathon runners. As they explained:

Running a marathon does not simply consist of arriving at the starting line at the designated time and enduring several hours of labor before arriving at the finish. Rather, the marathon is the result of months and sometimes years of daily preparation. Apart from the obvious physical and psychological effort that running a marathon requires, the participants may also alter work and eating schedules, cancel or postpone engagements, spend time away from family, and so on. Clearly, training for a marathon is not a trivial event in the lives of either the runners or those with whom they have significant relationships. (p.135)

Studies of participant motives in endurance sports have tended to centre mostly on runners (particularly marathon runners) (Bond & Batey, 2005; Masters et al., 1993; Ogles & Masters, 2000; 2003; Smith 1998; 2000), and to a lesser degree, cyclists (Brown, et al., 2009; LaChausse, 2006). Despite the growth of triathlon, very few studies have sought to explore the motives of amateur triathletes (e.g. Grand'Maison, 2004).

There is little consensus regarding which motivations for participation in endurance sports are most influential. However, the physical benefits of exercise resonate as a strong theme within the endurance sport motivation literature (Bond & Batey, 2005; LaChausse, 2006; Ogles & Masters, 2000; Smith, 2000). These benefits include weight loss, enhanced body image and maintenance of physical fitness. Smith (2000) observed that over half the 48 marathon runners he interviewed linked running with physical appearance. Meanwhile, changes in body shape were a commonly cited motivation among female recreational runners interviewed by Bond and Batey (2005). Similarly, enhancing mental health (including

improved self-esteem), has been reported as a motivation amongst endurance sports participants (Bond & Batey, 2005; LaChausse, 2006).

A further theme relating to the physical self is testing the limits of one's body, as identified amongst participants in 'iron-distance' triathlons studied by Grand'Maison (2004). Likewise, pitting oneself against others in physical contests, and pursuing performance-related goals have rated highly in some studies of runners (Ogles & Masters, 2000), cyclists (LaChausse, 2006), and triathletes (Grand'Maison, 2004). However, it has been suggested that competition is less prevalent as a motivation amongst older athletes (Ogles & Masters, 2000).

Endurance sport participants also appear to seek a range of social benefits, including ego-enhancement, sociability, and improved status and respect in the minds of others. For example, marathon runners have endorsed opportunities to engage with like-minded others at marathon events as a prominent reason for participating (Ogles & Masters, 2000; 2003). Constructing a social identity and enhancing social status have been identified as motivations for participation in running events. Bond and Batey (2005) reported that for the female runners they studied, "running, and participating in a women only race appeared to contribute to an altered awareness of themselves, their position in the family, and in some cases, their position as a woman in society" (p. 77).

This paper argues that the centrality of triathlon to the lifestyle of many amateur triathletes, in combination with strong social identification generally displayed by these people toward their leisure pursuit (Atkinson, 2008; Grand'Maison, 2004; Hill & Robinson, 1991; Lamont et al., 2012; McCarville, 2007), warrants exploration of their reasons for participation. Further, self-determination theory and flow are pertinent theoretical frameworks through which motivations of amateur triathletes can be studied. This is due to the wide range of intrinsic and extrinsic regulators of behavior they take into account.

Commendation by previous researchers (e.g. Fortier & Kowal, 2007; Markland & Ingledew, 2007) regarding the applicability of these two theoretical frameworks to sport and exercise participation also supports their use in this study.

Self-Determination Theory

Motivation research is concerned with understanding how human behavior is energized (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Early human motivation theories explained the actions of humans as responses to innate biological drives. Drive theories positioned human behavior as actions intended to reduce perceived tissue-based deficits (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Debate centered on the number and nature of drives that stimulate behavior. For example, Freud (1957) believed that sex and aggression were the two important drives, while Hull (1943) argued that there were four: hunger, thirst, sex, and the avoidance of pain.

As knowledge of human motivation developed, however, limitations of drive theories emerged, particularly that such theories accounted only for behavior that is reactive to unsatisfied needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Harvard psychologist Robert White (1959) proposed an alternate perspective, identifying a need for theory acknowledging that human beings develop a competence for interacting with their environment which is not present at birth. White's idea of effectance motivation formed the basis of what is now known as intrinsic motivation, accounting for non-drive-based motivations in humans (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Between the 1960s and late 1980s, the intrinsic-extrinsic motivation dichotomy (deCharms, 1968) was the dominant explanation for human behavior. It acknowledged that human behavior can be stimulated through internal and external stimuli. Motivation driven purely by enjoyment for the task at hand was referred to as intrinsic motivation, which is internally driven behavior performed by an individual autonomously (deCharms, 1968). In contrast, extrinsic motivation explains behavior where external rewards or contingencies are

present, such as monetary rewards or threats of punishment for non-compliance. This dichotomy laid the foundation for more advanced motivational theories, particularly self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy attracted criticism for polarizing explanations of human behavior (Rigby, Deci, Patrick & Ryan, 1992). Deci and Ryan (1985) subsequently developed self-determination theory (SDT), arguing that their concept of self-determination differentiates SDT from earlier motivation theories. Self-determination is described as a condition where choice, as opposed to extrinsic factors such as rewards or other pressures, ultimately determines the behavior(s) an individual engages in. Choice is seen as integral to intrinsically motivated behavior, though choice may also be a factor in some extrinsically driven behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The core argument underpinning SDT is that humans naturally interact with their inner and outer environments, and will engage in interesting activities in the absence of external stimuli (Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT is conceptualized as a continuum of motivational regulations that stimulate human behavior. This continuum consists of three motivational regulations: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation. These regulations vary according to the degree of autonomy, or choice, an individual has in performing a behavior (Fortier & Kowal, 2007).

Intrinsic motivation represents the most self-determined form of motivation (Vallerand, 2007). Intrinsically motivated behaviors are said to be those “that are freely engaged out of interest without the necessity of separable consequences” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 233). In their review of studies into motives for participation in sport and exercise, Ryan and Deci (2007) observed a general trend for sport participation to be mostly intrinsically motivated. However, some studies have concluded otherwise (e.g. Alexandris, Kouthouris & Girgolas, 2007; Alexandris, Tsorbatzoudis & Grouis, 2002).

Although intrinsic motivation is reportedly widespread in the context of sport and exercise, intrinsically motivated engagement can be interspersed with long periods where extrinsic motivation stimulates participation (Ryan & Deci, 2007). Extrinsic motivation is at play where an activity is engaged in “as a means to an end and not for its own sake” (Vallerand, 2007, p. 258); rewards and/or contingencies (such as punishment) direct behavior and there is a shift in the individual’s perceived locus of causality from internal to external (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In SDT, extrinsic motivation is seen as multidimensional. There are four types of extrinsic motivation, arranged in a continuum according to the degree to which they are *internalized* (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000). Internalization describes a tendency among humans to personally accept and endorse socially sanctioned customs and conventions over time (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, an individual may initially be extrinsically motivated to exercise, but over time may experience an attitudinal shift and begin to enjoy exercising, thus becoming intrinsically motivated.

The four extrinsic motivational regulations include *external*, *introjection*, *identification*, and *integration*. *External regulation* is the most highly controlled, or least autonomous, form of extrinsic motivation. It reflects behavior stimulated by external stimuli, particularly the offering of rewards and/or threat of punishment. In contrast, *introjected regulation* is behavior motivated by contingent consequences imposed by individuals on themselves. Feelings of guilt or shame for missing a training session are examples of these contingent consequences. *Identified regulation* occurs when an individual accepts a behavior’s purpose or value as their own. That is, there is some degree of autonomy. For example, an individual who exercises volitionally because they believe in the health benefits brought about by exercise is said to be motivated via identified regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2007). Lastly, *integrated regulation* represents the strongest form of internalized extrinsic

motivation, where the individual not only endorses the purpose or value of the behavior, but fully integrates it into his/her lifestyle and personality (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2007).

SDT also acknowledges instances where individuals lack intention to behave, referred to as *amotivation* (Ryan & Deci, 2007). Amotivated individuals lack both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and thus exhibit little or no self-determination to perform the behavior at hand (Ryan & Deci, 2007). Amotivation can arise through feelings of incompetence with the activity, a decrease in intrinsic motivation, or negative experiences/feelings toward the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2007).

Further, SDT holds that if health and wellbeing is to be fostered within the human organism, three innate psychological needs must be satisfied: *competence* (effectively interacting with one's environment), *autonomy* (freedom of choice in the activities one engages in), and *relatedness* (being connected with others) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000). Deci and Ryan (2000) argue that these three innate needs are essential to understanding the goals pursued by humans, or processes aimed at achieving them.

Using SDT to understand motivations for participation in sport and exercise is beneficial because it links type of motivation to quality of the experience (Markland & Ingledew, 2007). Markland and Ingledew observed that intrinsic motivation has been associated with positive outcomes such as persistence in participation, and effects on wellbeing. In contrast, the same authors note that reliance on extrinsic motivation (particularly in relation to body enhancement motives) are associated with "lower well-being and self-esteem, more negative affect, and body image disturbances" (p .31). Researchers have noted the rigor and advantages of SDT as a theoretical underpinning for studies examining human motivation, and physical activity is one area where this theory has been particularly recommended (Fortier & Kowal, 2007).

Flow Theory

As noted previously, SDT drew upon early theorizations of intrinsic motivation. Deci and Ryan (1985) have explained that when individuals are intrinsically motivated, “they experience interest and enjoyment, they feel confident and self-determining, they perceived a locus of causality for their behavior to be internal, and in some instances they experience flow” (p. 34). *Flow* is a concept conceived by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) to describe autotelic experiences, a mental state in which there is congruence between the challenges of the activity and the skills and/or abilities of the actor:

Flow is experienced when people perceive opportunities for action as being evenly matched by their capabilities. If however, skills are greater than the opportunities for using them, boredom will follow... It follows that a flow activity is one which provides optimal challenges in relation to the actor's skills. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 50)

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identified a number of characteristics associated with flow experiences. These include merging of action and awareness (deep absorption in the activity); a high degree of focused concentration; an altered sense of self-consciousness; a feeling of control over personal actions and the environment in which the activity takes place; congruency between action and demands, with unambiguous feedback regarding the actor's actions. Finally, the experience is autotelic; that is, it is intrinsically rewarding.

Flow theory is acknowledged in this paper because of its strong link with the intrinsic motivation component of SDT and the human organism's innate need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). As noted earlier, intrinsically motivated participation in physical activity has been associated with positive outcomes such as ongoing participation (Markland & Ingledew, 2007). As such, Fortier and Kowal (2007) have argued that pursuing and experiencing flow

through sport and exercise may strengthen autonomous motivation, leading to more self-directed participation. Flow may therefore be a salient concept in understanding participation in a physically demanding activity such as triathlon.

History and Growth of Triathlon

Triathlon combines swimming, cycling and running. It dates back to the 1970s when the first recorded triathlon events took place at Mission Bay, San Diego, organized by a local athletics group as cross training for runners (USA Triathlon, 2009). In 1978, the infamous Hawaii Ironman was conceived through an argument as to whether swimmers, cyclists, or runners were the superior athletes. Naval officer Commander John Collins proposed “combining three existing races together, to be completed in succession: the Waikiki Roughwater Swim (2.4 miles), the Around-Oahu Bike Race (112 miles, originally a two-day event) and the Honolulu Marathon (26.2 miles)” (World Triathlon Corporation, 2005, para.1). Collins suggested that whoever finished first would be named the ‘Ironman.’ Twelve people competed in the 1978 Hawaii Ironman. Today there are 23 Ironman[®] branded events worldwide (in addition to numerous other non-Ironman branded events over the same or similar distance).

Triathlon has experienced exponential growth since the mid 1990s, with events of various lengths being introduced (refer to Table 1). In Australia, demand for participation slots in the Noosa Triathlon, one of the largest Olympic distance triathlons in the world, has grown to the extent that supply cannot meet demand (USM Events, 2010). Further, all 1000 slots for the 2011 Ironman Australia Triathlon sold out within eight hours of online registration opening (World Triathlon Corporation, 2010). This prompted a triathlon news website to comment that, “plenty of people may be interested but unable to reach their dream in Australia” (First off the Bike, 2010, para. 5).

INSERT TABLE 1

Participation in triathlons typically "... involves a substantial amount of physical and psychological stress over several hours of continuous activity" (Atkinson, 2008, p. 165). Amateur triathletes typically tender an entry fee and compete in divisions according to their age and gender (Atkinson, 2008). Consistent physical training is necessary to maintain and improve fitness in swimming, cycling and running, and ongoing participation in triathlon events can consume significant personal resources (Atkinson, 2008; Lamont & Kennelly, 2011), to a point where training for and travelling to events exerts a dominant influence over the way an individual, and possibly their family, live their lives (McCarville, 2007).

Methods

Sampling

We used purposive sampling to invite amateur triathletes to participate in the study (Neuman, 2007). All those contacted were amateur triathlon competitors who did not hold a professional racing license issued by a national governing body of triathlon. Since the researchers were active triathletes themselves, prospective interviewees were contacted using the researchers' existing networks. These networks included triathlon clubs and training squads in the Northern Rivers, New South Wales and Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia. Snowball sampling was used to further penetrate this specialized population (Jennings, 2010).

Prospective interviewees were provided with information about the study and were requested to provide their informed consent if they wished to participate. Participants were then telephoned to arrange an interview time. Data were collected until the point of *literal replication* (Yin, 2003) – that is, to the point where no new information emerged.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 amateur triathletes between May and August 2010. The interviews were semi-structured in nature (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995), lasting between 20 minutes and one hour. Protocols of the study including the proposed interview schedule were reviewed and approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee. This research was conducted as part of a broader study into social aspects of participation in triathlon, thus the interviews were broad in scope. Questions addressed interviewees' initiation into triathlon; their training, travelling and competition experiences; reasons for ongoing participation; and the sacrifices they made to maintain participation.

Interviews were conducted in locations convenient to participants and were voice-recorded with permission. The triathletes spoke openly and enthusiastically about their chosen leisure pastime. The researchers' own participation in triathlon positioned them as 'insiders' within the triathlon social world. Some may argue this position could induce bias (Merriam, 1998), however, this insider's perspective seemed to facilitate open and frank responses from the triathletes. Interviewees were also able to utilize jargon terms without feeling obligated to provide technical explanations. Indeed, Sparkes (2002) believes that use of an insider's perspective in researching specialized populations can inject a unique depth and insight into understanding the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in a mass of textual data. A three-tiered qualitative analysis procedure was employed, consisting of open, axial, and selective coding (Neuman, 2007). This approach enabled rich data to be gathered, and allowed for

themes to naturally emerge from the data as opposed to being constrained by a preconceived theoretical framework (Creswell, 2003).

Open coding occurred through an examination of the interview transcripts. Broad emergent themes were identified and recorded during this process. Axial coding was undertaken through a re-examination of the transcripts, during which sub-themes were identified, and corresponding code labels assigned to textual descriptions. Coded blocks of text were then extracted and grouped for deeper analysis. During the selective coding phase deeper thematic patterns were identified and conclusions drawn (Neuman, 2007). A summary of the findings was circulated to interviewees following data analysis for verification, however no feedback was received.

The Interviewees

An effort was made to ensure a variety of triathletes were included in the study (older and younger triathletes, those with or without children, and those who had been involved for a short or long time in triathlon). A brief questionnaire was used to obtain demographic information about the interviewees.

Interviewees consisted of 14 males and seven females, ranging in age from 26 to 59, with a mean age of 43 years. Approximately half were in full-time employment, while around one-third were employed part-time. The remainder were retired or undertook full-time home duties. The mean number of hours worked each week was 37. Ten interviewees had one or more dependent children living at home with them, eight had no children, and the remaining three had non-dependent children living away from home.

Participation in triathlon ranged from less than one year through to 25 years, with a mean of eight years. In a typical year, the number of triathlon or multisport events in which interviewees participated ranged between three and 20, with a mean of eight. Training for and

competing in triathlon events was a central element in their lives. All 21 interviewees selected “important” or “extremely important” in response to the question “how important is training for and competing in triathlon events in your life?” The study made no differentiation between triathletes who participate in or concentrate on events of particular distance (e.g. Ironman, Olympic distance etc.); most had participated in events of varying distance. For example, all participants had competed in Olympic distance triathlons, while 15 of the 21 had done at least one Iron-distance event.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed a spectrum of motives for participating in triathlon. These fell into nine categories, which were subsequently categorized as intrinsic and extrinsic motivations according to the definitions offered by Deci and Ryan (1985; 2000) and Ryan, Frederick, Lepes, Rupio and Sheldon (1997). The range of motives identified precludes a detailed description of each. Thus, Figure 1 illustrates the various categories and sub-themes which emerged from the data. Sub-themes are identified in the ensuing sections using italics. Interviewees’ names are substituted with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Intrinsic Motivations

Competence.

Competence encapsulated a broad range of motivations surrounding goal setting, pursuit of goals, and feelings of accomplishment when goals were achieved. Competence was selected as the label for this category, as the sub-themes from which it was derived were reminiscent of Deci and Ryan’s (1985) description of competence: “the accumulated result of

one's interactions with the environment, of one's exploration, learning, and adaptation" (p. 27).

For the majority of interviewees, competing in triathlon was about challenging themselves (*challenge oneself*). When pressed about why triathlon satisfies their desire for challenge, a common response was that the demands of the sport are high, and therefore present a physical and mental challenge. As Jacob stated, "... it's sort of like climbing Mt Everest ... see if you can do it."

Further, being able to progressively increase the level of challenge (*progression in challenge*) was a factor sustaining their ongoing participation. For established participants, progression in challenge could occur in two ways. Firstly, by going faster over an existing distance; or secondly, by participating in longer triathlons. For example, Louise competed in short triathlons before stepping up to Half Ironman and Ironman distance events: "I conquered that, so it was time to move on so then I started to build into the Half Ironman."

Testing the physical limits of their bodies (*testing physical limits*) was an important motivation, particularly amongst more ambitious triathletes. Daniel had recently begun competing in Ironman triathlons, and for him participating in these events was "... about testing your limits and seeing how hard you can push." Similarly, experiencing a *sense of achievement or euphoria* was frequently mentioned. Andrew felt euphoric when running down the finishing chute at an Ironman event: "... you know it's going to be a hard day and you really appreciate coming down that finishing line." In this sense, good performances were seen as a reward for effort invested in preparing for an event.

Numerous triathletes explained that being able to *realize measurable improvements* in their overall time or in their run, cycle, and swim times, motivated them to train harder and continue competing. For example: "... [the thing] I love about triathlon over individual sports is the sheer fact that you are always trying to improve on something" (Stuart). *Realizing*

measurable improvements was linked with *goal achievement*, a sub-theme of Competence encompassing a variety of goals. For example, Louise wished “to compete for Australia” at the world amateur championships. Donald was among the many who stated they need a goal (such as an upcoming event) to remain motivated to train: “I have to have the goal otherwise I don’t have any focus.”

Enjoyment.

Enjoyment arose from triathletes’ descriptions of how training for and participating in triathlon created enjoyment in their lives. Enjoyment was considered an intrinsic motivation category as motivations relating to peoples’ desire to have fun, pursue their interests and to be stimulated have previously been categorized as intrinsic (Ryan et al., 1997).

A common discussion point was how the lifestyle associated with triathlon led interviewees to experience a sense of purpose or meaningfulness in life (*add purpose/meaning to life*). Damien said that “I feel ... almost a purpose in life while I’m training for one of them [Ironman]”, and Andrew lamented that “I’d be lost if I didn’t do it [training and competing in Ironman], I don’t know what I’d do.”

The sample included a mix of highly competitive athletes and others who were not concerned about their finish time or place. For these triathletes, *participation* and enjoying the triathlon lifestyle were prime motivations, as Mitchell explained: “I’m very realistic about my time in the races. I do it for enjoyment rather than [being] driven like that.”

Being able to complete a triathlon had been a long-held aspiration for some interviewees (*fulfil aspirations*). A number of interviewees had seen triathlon events on television previously, sparking their interest. Others were inspired by friends or acquaintances who were established triathlon competitors. Concomitant with the interviewees’ desire to fulfil their aspirations was the desire to minimize regrets (*minimize*

risk of regrets). Some triathletes were motivated to compete while they were still physically able to, such as Donald: “Why not? Why not while you’re able to?”

Descriptions of how training for and competing in triathlon injects pleasure into their lives gave rise to *sensory pleasure* as a sub-theme of Enjoyment. Sensory pleasure is a form of hedonism described by Feldman (2004) as “a feeling or sensation. You have it when you are experiencing ‘pleasurable sensations’” (p. 4). Comments such as “I just loved it” (William), and “I really like that feeling of being fit” (Daniel) were commonly expressed, and were representative of how the triathletes found this activity intrinsically enjoyable. However, there were differences in the type of sensory pleasures desired by the triathletes. Joe was unique in that he found the follow-on effects of a hard event or difficult training session enjoyable, perhaps in a quasi-masochistic manner: “... when you feel trashed you feel really good” (*masochism*).

Extrinsic Motivations

Wellbeing.

In a previous study of motivation and adherence to exercise regimes, Ryan et al. (1997) posited that body-related motivations, such as desires to improve physical appearance and fitness, are extrinsic in nature, “since their goals concern outcomes extrinsic to the activity *per se*” (p. 336). In this study, interviewees described how training for and participating in triathlon produced a wide variety of benefits to their physical and mental wellbeing. As these outcomes were driving the triathletes’ behavior, Wellbeing motives were categorized as extrinsic.

Many interviewees believed that exercise benefits of training and competing would help them maintain health and functionality as they age (*healthy ageing*): “I want longevity ... I want to be able to do swimming, biking, or triathlon to a small degree for another 10, 15

years” (William). Interviewees were motivated to participate in triathlon as they viewed it as a means to develop and improve their *physical fitness*.

Some were initially motivated to take up triathlon because they believed it would help them discard unhealthy habits such as drinking, smoking, drug taking, and excessive eating (*discard unhealthy habits*). Joe, for example, used to be overweight: “I weighed about 125kg.” He was drawn to triathlon to improve his health following a scare whilst body surfing: “I got caught in a rip ... and two people had to come out and rescue me ... I was so unfit.”

The healthy lifestyle associated with triathlon was appealing to many (*live a healthy lifestyle*). Damien stated that it “stops you from going to the pub”, and Daniel believed that the physical activity helped him manage his stress levels at work. The triathlon lifestyle was also seen as playing a role in offsetting sedentary occupations. A high proportion of interviewees worked in professional occupations and Mitchell explained that “I’ve got a sedentary job sitting down all day, so I have to keep moving to keep myself well and fit” (*offset sedentary occupations*). Finally, *stress relief* was an important benefit derived from physical training which assisted the triathletes in aspects of their life, particularly in resolving work and family issues.

Ego involvement.

Ego involvement is described by Deci and Ryan (2000) as attempts “to gain positive or avoid negative judgments about one’s abilities” (p. 259). The theme Ego Involvement related to the motivation of enhancing credibility in the eyes of others, and emerged through comments made mostly by the more competitive triathletes. For instance, *competition* motivated athletes such as Louise:

My first Ironman ... I came fourth. I stood in front of the results sheets with my sister and said that next year I was going to the next age category, and I pointed to the winner of the next age category and said 'next year I'm going to beat her'.

The desire to perform well and to be perceived favorably at events drove competitive triathletes to complete difficult training sessions. For example, Bradley described his internal dialogue in the lead up to events:

... if I don't do this training session, I'm not going to be in as good a condition come race day, and if I have a bad day on race day, how will I feel because I know that I've missed out on that training session.

Damien was similarly driven to train, despite the availability of more enjoyable leisure options:

I remember riding ... with another guy doing training for Forster [Ironman Australia] ... we're both caned after being out on a long ride, virtually beyond saying anything and he [training partner] said to me, in not the best language 'that's what we should be doing – that!' You know and there's people out in the water and it was holiday time.

Some interviewees explained that they preferred competing in events where their personal strengths could be leveraged (*leverage personal strengths*). For example, following an Ironman event, Amelia was disappointed by her poor performance and attributed that performance to the flat cycle course which did not suit her. She explained that in future she would target events that suited her strengths. Some explained that they competed in triathlon because it suited their body-type, unlike other sports: "... you feel like maybe you don't fit into some other sports ... typically perhaps your big team sports where you might have to be a bit bigger and a bit more robust" (Donald). In this sense, triathlon provided Donald with an opportunity to exploit his physical strengths.

Many triathletes spoke proudly about the variety of race destinations they have visited over time. Damien had competed in “... seven Australian Ironmans ... I’ve done two Western Australian ones, Busselton, and the one up north at Yeppoon.” Andrew spoke about achieving milestones at certain events: “I’d like to do two more to get to 20 Australian [Ironman] finishes.” Comments such as these suggested that developing an *event portfolio* was a motivation for ongoing participation in triathlon, which can be used as a vehicle for ego enhancement particularly when engaging in conversation with others within the triathlon social world.

External rewards.

External Rewards consisted of motives where an outcome influenced behavior, yet did not fit into other extrinsic motivation categories associated with outcomes. These included *opportunities to travel*, *equipment ownership*, and *food as reward*.

A global calendar of triathlon events presented opportunities for the triathletes to fulfil or work towards fulfilling long-held ambitions of travelling. Stuart explained that “... travel wise it’s been fantastic, there’s no way I would have done as much travelling without the triathlon.” For Rebecca triathlon provided overseas travel opportunities: “... there is a race in Texas, and then there is a race in Florida, and then go to Hawaii and do that. So in an ideal world I’d like to do that.”

Opportunities to own equipment, particularly expensive, technologically advanced equipment, was an aspect of the triathlon lifestyle enjoyed by some. Purchasing new equipment seemed to reinvigorate passion for the sport amongst athletes such as Scott: “I still want another bike (laughing), and some race wheels would be nice as well.”

A minor theme was the role of food and drink as rewards for hard work. Keith stated that, “... exercise results in the ability to eat more, and that went quite well for me because I

love to eat.” Andrew commented, “I normally have a couple of drinks after I finish it because you know you did it ... just reward yourself”. Meanwhile, Amelia succinctly stated that, “I train so I can eat.”

Sociability.

Despite being an individual sport, the triathletes spoke extensively about the social aspects of triathlon and how it facilitates ongoing participation. Friendships developed through triathlon networks were particularly noteworthy (*friendship*). Stuart described almost feeling compelled to change sports because of a breakdown in his triathlon social networks: “there was a time when our club folded down south and I actually thought ‘I’m going to do something else’ but luckily it reformed.” There was a general feeling that the interviewees valued their friendships with other triathletes because of the common lifestyle and interests they share, which can be difficult for outsiders to comprehend: “they just don’t get it” (Anna).

Participation in triathlon gave some of the triathletes an opportunity to enhance relationships with their spouse and/or children (*enhance family relationships*). For example, Kathy and her husband had taken up triathlon together, while Anna’s daughter developed an interest in the sport. These circumstances resulted in additional common ground for conversation and spending leisure time together, facilitating Kathy and Anna’s longevity in the sport.

Peer pressure appeared to influence some of the triathletes. At the time of his interview Damien was not particularly motivated to train, however felt obliged to because his training partners were preparing for an upcoming event: “I’m really forcing myself at the moment.” Similarly, Anna felt pressured to step up to longer distance events because many of those around her were: “It’s now like you’re not a triathlete unless you do [Ironman events].”

Self-transformation.

Not all triathletes interviewed had taken up triathlon in a progressive fashion following a life-long involvement in sport. In fact, some had led highly contrasting lifestyles and were drawn to triathlon as a means of transforming themselves. Within Self-Transformation, *lifestyle enhancement* was a strong sub-theme emerging from descriptions of lifestyles that were sedentary, and characterized by excessive drinking, eating, smoking, and in some cases drug taking: "... like I've been from one extreme to the next as far as lifestyle goes, and it's a good place to be, [the] triathlon scene" (Geoff). Anna described being bored and frustrated with full-time home duties. Her initiation into triathlon injected an interest into her life that now gives her great satisfaction: "... it's made me a better person because I am more relaxed. It's like, I don't vacuum the floor every day now, I don't iron now." Others, such as Keith, were previously consumed by their occupation. However, for Keith, his venture into the triathlon social world resulted in a considerable and deliberate career and lifestyle change to facilitate more time pursuing triathlon goals.

Finally, self-transformation was a motivation for some because of injuries precluding them from sports they had previously played (*substitution*). This was the case for William, who was attracted to triathlon following a knee injury playing squash: "I was told to do lesser impact sport, swim and bike and I'd still get a similar amount of enjoyment and endorphin rush out of it."

Enduring commitment.

Some interviewees described a range of perceived consequences of withdrawal from participation in triathlon. This led to Enduring Commitment as a motivational theme. Most triathletes in this study indicated that they would find it extremely difficult, if not impossible

to completely cease participation. Anna explained that even a temporary layoff brought about through injury had negatively affected her:

I haven't been able to run. I ran on Saturday and I had to walk home and I was like 'oh shit, it's still sore' and I'm cranky because it sore, I've just got to get something done about this so I can get back out there. At least I can ride, so that [has] sort of been the saviour, but to have a couple of days off ... I'm cranky and I'm quite a nightmare to be around!

Mitchell described maintaining his training and avoiding layoffs for fear of losing the fitness that he has worked hard to accumulate: "... after Taupo [Ironman New Zealand] I had six months off and got unfit again ... unfit for an Ironman, which I swore I would never do again because you get that fitness and lose it all." Joe simply described his participation in triathlon as "an addiction", and like many others interviewed, indicated that he could not live without triathlon being part of his life.

Consolidation.

Stories of the triathletes' previous participation in triathlon's discipline sports (swimming, cycling and running) were quite common. In some cases, interviewees' background in related sports prompted them to take up triathlon. David had a history of surfing and running, and with the addition of cycling, he felt competing in triathlons was a natural progression:

I'd say through a life surfing, the ocean, being in the water, I loved being in the water was a very big plus and the fact that I ran, running was part of it and I'd ridden a bike carrying my surfboard to the beach for 20 odd years when I was young.

Keith's situation was similar, having come to triathlon from a cycling background. His entry into triathlon was an act of consolidation, which also appeared to be influenced by his

friends: “I think it’s the natural progression of all the sports that I’ve done ... I could have just gone down the riding path but the people I knew were doing triathlons.”

Having presented the motivational themes that emerged from the data, we now turn our attention to discussing these findings in light of the extant literature addressing human motivation in sport and exercise.

Discussion

From a descriptive perspective, motivations which emerged from the data were largely consistent with previous studies that have examined motives for participation in endurance sports such as running (Bond & Batey, 2005; Masters et al., 1993; Ogles & Masters, 2000; 2003; Smith, 1998; 2000), cycling (Brown et al., 2009; LaChausse, 2006) and triathlon (Grand’Maison, 2004). Physical benefits such as weight loss, enhanced body image, and improved fitness were prevalent, along with maintaining physical and mental health, testing physical limits, ego involvement, competition, goal pursuit, social aspects, and friendship. However, additional motives emerged from the data that had not been presented in previous literature. Table 2 identifies the additional motivational sub-themes contributed by this study. The addition of these new concepts into research instruments may enhance the rigor of future quantitative studies.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Cross-case analysis suggested the triathletes’ motivations varied according to history of involvement (i.e. length of involvement) and level of ambition. For those new to the sport, motivations such as challenging oneself, progression in challenge, living a healthy lifestyle, and lifestyle enhancement were frequently cited. On the other hand, established and

ambitious participants appeared more motivated by pursuing measurable improvements, testing their physical limits, achieving increasingly challenging goals, competition, and participating in events that leverage their personal strengths. This supports Ryan et al.'s (1997) contention that "initial motives may themselves change over time" (p. 352). Longitudinal research therefore seems warranted to better understand the stability or otherwise of triathletes' motivations as they progress in their sporting career.

In reviewing previous research, Ryan and Deci (2007) noted a consensus that intrinsic motivation primarily underpins participation in sport and exercise, although some evidence exists to the contrary (e.g. Alexandris et al., 2002; Alexandris et al., 2007). Further, some studies have found that intrinsic motivation is associated with higher levels of adherence to sport and exercise (e.g. Ryan et al., 1997). In this study, the triathletes spoke of a range of factors that motivated them to participate in triathlon. Although they were intrinsically motivated to a degree, some explained it was difficult to sustain their motivation in the absence of short-term goals (such as an upcoming event). Indeed, a far broader spectrum of extrinsic than intrinsic motives emerged. While extrinsic motives were quite prevalent, none of the triathletes intended to withdraw their participation. In contrast, some comments suggested an enduring commitment to the sport. This finding therefore casts doubt over intrinsic motivation as a panacea explanation for ongoing involvement in endurance sports. As the qualitative methodology of this study precluded an assessment of the strength to which the triathletes were motivated intrinsically or extrinsically, research employing quantitative methods is required to further assess this issue.

McCarville (2007) noted that consistent physical training is required to maintain the levels of fitness necessary to compete in triathlons. Thus, in combination with work, family and other obligations, amateur triathletes may at times become overwhelmed to a point where extrinsic motives drive behavior. Short-term goals such as an upcoming event, as described

by some participants in this study, may act as an extrinsic motivator for individuals to maintain their training. Introjected regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) therefore becomes relevant as individuals act to avoid feelings of guilt or shame (contingent consequences administered by individuals to themselves) that may result through poor performances at upcoming events.

There was also evidence suggesting motivations for participation in triathlon are cyclical. This finding supports Ryan and Deci's (2007) contention that in sport, intrinsically motivated engagement can be interspersed with long periods of extrinsically motivated behavior. Intrinsic motivation appeared to be most influential when triathletes were competing in, or during the immediate aftermath of an event. This is evident in some cases, for example Joe, who explained that he enjoys the sensory pleasures of exhaustion and muscle soreness after a race. In contrast, however, other triathletes, like Damien and Bradley, described arduous training sessions as necessary for successful completion of events. For triathletes like Damien and Bradley training was, evidently, not being undertaken for intrinsic enjoyment. The training was a means to an end. It is therefore plausible that participation in triathlon is interspersed with long periods of extrinsically motivated behavior, followed by short-lived moments of intrinsically driven behavior in and around competition.

Other evidence of the cyclical nature of triathletes' motivations included Donald's explanation of how he needs a goal to remain motivated to train, such as an upcoming event. Therefore, once a targeted event has passed, amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) may set in. However, in the buildup to an event, extrinsic motivations may be at play such as friendship, or even peer pressure when individuals interact with other triathletes to undertake physical training sessions. Triathletes' behavior may then be influenced by wanting to avoid ridicule from training colleagues (external regulation), or to avoid self-administered consequences such as feeling inept (introjected regulation) should they miss arranged training sessions

Research assessing periodical intensity of intrinsic motivation and the various forms of extrinsic motivation would therefore be of value, and could perhaps be undertaken using diary methods.

Also worthy of discussion is the notion of internalization. In self-determination theory, internalization refers to a tendency among humans to “transform socially sanctioned mores or requests into personally endorsed values and self-regulations” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pp. 235-236). It was clear that some interviewees who came to triathlon in search of self-transformation had undergone a process of internalization with respect to the role exercise played in their life. For example, before taking up triathlon Joe was overweight and did not exercise. An event in which his life was threatened prompted him to improve his physical fitness. Regular triathlon training is a now way of life for him, to the point that his mood state is affected if he is unable to exercise. This study identified examples of behavior driven by integrated regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as exercise has become autonomous and fully integrated to people’s lifestyles, yet extrinsic motivation remains at play (i.e. maintenance of health).

Despite the apparent prevalence of extrinsic motives among the triathletes interviewed, themes such as intrinsic enjoyment, progression in challenge, testing physical limits, and experiencing a sense of achievement/euphoria all have an internal locus of causality and can be linked with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) flow concept. As flow is concerned with congruence between the challenges of an activity and the skills and/or abilities of the actor, progression in challenge can be seen as an attempt by the triathletes to optimize their level of challenge, particularly as their physical fitness and abilities develop over time. Progressing from competing in short triathlons to longer distance events such as Ironman, as observed in our study, is an example of this challenge optimization. Heightened levels of challenge presented by longer events could be seen as a quest to experience flow,

brought about through meeting increased demands in terms of endurance, strategy, and mental toughness not experienced by competing in shorter events.

Furthermore, participation in triathlon events presents an opportunity to satisfy one of the three basic needs of humans as postulated in self-determination theory: competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000). The influence of progression in challenge desired by the triathletes may be explained in part by the human organism's innate need for competently interacting with its surrounding environment:

Competence is the accumulated result of one's interactions with the environment, of one's exploration, learning, and adaptation. In the broad, biological sense, competence refers to the capacity for effective interactions with the environment that ensure the organism's maintenance ... the reward for competency-motivated behavior is the inherent feeling of competence that results from effective functioning, yet the motivation is such that the feelings seem to result only when there is some continual stretching of one's capacities. (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p.27)

This links to the notion of goal achievement. Many triathletes spoke of setting goals such as beating a nominated time for a specified distance. It could be that goals of this nature act as a benchmark by which they personally assess competence. Once completed, a sense of achievement or euphoria is triggered. Goal achievement may positively reinforce an individual's participation in triathlon, encouraging ongoing participation to pursue even more challenging goals. Deci and Ryan (2000) support this contention in stating that "Events such as positive feedback that signify effectance provide satisfaction of the need for competence, thus enhancing intrinsic motivation" (p. 234).

Finally, the finding that enduring commitment can drive ongoing participation is noteworthy. Maintaining ongoing participation in triathlon by virtue of enduring commitment may be considered extrinsically motivated behavior. More specifically, the behavior of

triathletes who continue to participate because of their enduring commitment may be attributable to introjected regulation. Data suggested that some interviewees felt unable to reduce or cease their participation in triathlon for fear of degrading the social identity they had built around their status as a triathlete. Others were reluctant to cease interacting with friends within their triathlon social world, while some were concerned about the impact reducing their volume of exercise would have on their physical wellbeing. These fears reflect self-administered contingent consequences (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which may play a role in driving triathletes' ongoing participation. Consequently, future research might consider relationships between intrinsic and extrinsic motives, obsession, enjoyment of the activity, and adherence among highly committed participants.

Conclusion

This study explored motivations for participation among amateur triathletes. Emergent themes were interpreted from two theoretical viewpoints: self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). While the qualitative data reflected a range of motives identified in previous studies of endurance sport motives such as physical fitness, goal achievement and friendship, other concepts emerged that can contribute to instrument development in subsequent positivistic research. By using an interpretive approach that extends more common quantitative work on motivations, this study also contributed rich descriptions of amateur triathletes' motivations to participate in this leisure activity.

An important contribution of this research is the prevalence of extrinsic motivations which appeared to drive ongoing participation among triathletes, contrary to previous research postulating sport participation is primarily intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2007). Further investigation is warranted to assess the degree to which amateur triathletes are

motivated intrinsically or extrinsically. Despite declarations regarding the importance of intrinsic motivation for sustained participation in physical activity (Ryan et al., 1997), the triathletes interviewed appeared extensively motivated by extrinsic factors. Further research is therefore needed to better understand relationships between intrinsic and extrinsic motives in ongoing participation in endurance sports.

In addition, the outcomes of this study may hold broader implications for public health policy. Some western countries face significant public health challenges by way of obesity, smoking, and excessive alcohol consumption (Courtney & Polich, 2009; Farrelly, Pechacek, Thomas & Nelson, 2008; Wang, Beydoun, Liang, Caballero & Kumanyika, 2008). A number of the triathletes underwent transitions where unhealthy behaviors were replaced by healthy lifestyles in which healthy eating and regular exercise became self-endorsed. Inspirational stories of self-transformation could inform development of positive promotional messages. In contrast to public health campaigns focusing on negative implications of poor health choices, messages could focus on positive aspects of sport and exercise participation such as wellbeing and lifestyle benefits (e.g. travel, social opportunities). While the present study provides a foundation for positive public health messages, further research is required to understand causal triggers for positive self-transformation.

In closing, the limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Most notably, the non-random, purposive selection of informants resulted in findings which cannot be inferred to a wider population. The extent to which the findings are representative of amateur triathletes is not known. Professional triathletes were purposely excluded from the study, therefore the findings are applicable only to amateur participants. The study also took a generic approach, and did not seek to isolate the motivations of triathletes who only participate in or identify with certain distance events (e.g. Ironman, Olympic distance etc.). While these limitations may reduce the representativeness of this study, they present

opportunities for future research into amateur endurance athletes' endorsement of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

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Table 1. Typology of triathlon events (adapted from Lamont et al., 2012).

	Swim	Cycle	Run
Sprint Distance	750m	20km	5km
Olympic Distance	1500m	40km	10km
Half Ironman	1900m	90km	21.1km
Ironman/Iron-distance	3800m	180km	42.2km

Figure 1. Motivational themes identified in the present study.

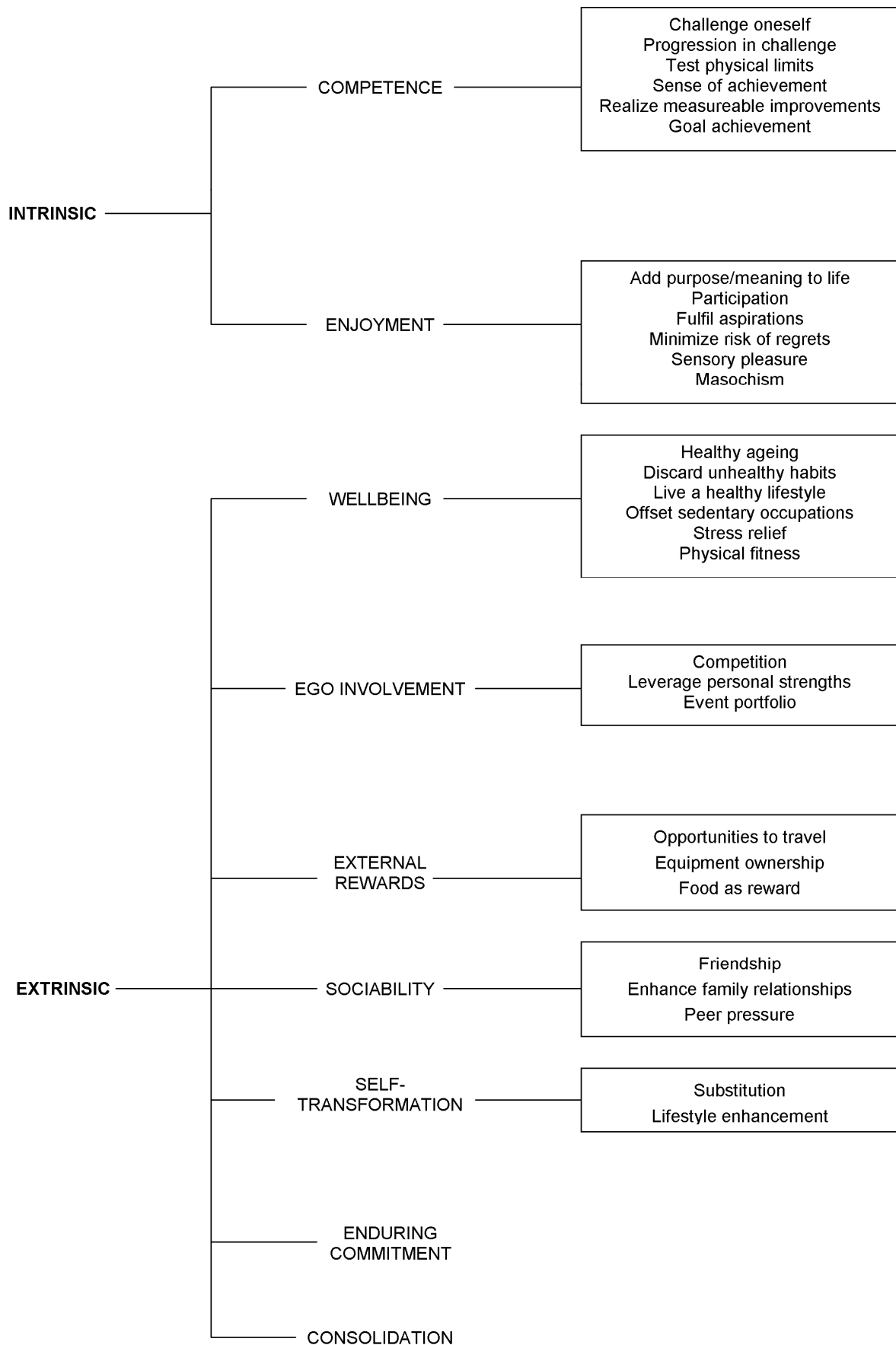


Table 2. Motives of endurance sport participants (amateur triathletes) identified in the present study, not identified in previous related studies.

Intrinsic motivations	Extrinsic motivations
Challenge oneself	Healthy ageing
Progression in challenge	Discard unhealthy habits
Sense of achievement/euphoria	Offset sedentary occupations
Realize measurable improvements	Participate in events that exploit personal strengths
Add purpose/meaning to life	Develop an event career portfolio
Participation	Personal incompatibility with other sports
Fulfil aspirations	Opportunities to travel
Minimize risk of regrets	Equipment ownership
Sensory pleasure	Food as reward
Masochism	Enhance family relationships
	Peer pressure
	Substitution
	Lifestyle enhancement