

B. Akhmetkazy*, K. Mamirova

Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

*e-mail: bekszahmetkazy@gmail.com

THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF MARATHON PARTICIPATION: EXAMINING COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT, AND WELL-BEING

Received: February 20, 2025

1st Revision: March 5, 2025

Accepted: March 18, 2025

Abstract. This study investigates the impact of social media engagement on the well-being of marathon runners in Kazakhstan. Additionally, it explores the mediating role of intention to participate in this relationship, providing insights into how online interactions influence individuals' motivation and overall well-being.

A structured survey was employed to collect primary data from 252 individuals who have participated in marathon events. The study utilized a quantitative approach to analyze the relationships between key variables, ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings.

The analysis confirmed that intention to participate acts as a significant mediator between social media engagement and well-being. The results support the hypothesized model, demonstrating that increased interaction on social media fosters a stronger intention to engage in marathon activities, which in turn enhances well-being.

This research contributes to the existing literature by examining the psychological and behavioral effects of social media engagement in the context of marathon participation in Kazakhstan. The findings provide valuable insights for event organizers, policymakers, and researchers interested in promoting physical activity and well-being through digital platforms.

Key words: Social Media Engagement; Intention to Participate; Well-being; Marathon Runners; Quantitative.

Introduction

Marathon running has emerged as one of the most popular sports activities worldwide, attracting millions of participants each year (Vitti et al., 2020). Over the past few decades, the number of marathon runners has increased significantly, with participants from diverse nationalities, competitive levels, and age groups taking part in the same events (García Vallejo et al., 2020). One prominent example is the Almaty Marathon, the largest marathon in Central Asia, which had over 15,600 registered runners in 2024 (Tengrinews, 2024). Beyond being a physical challenge, marathon running has also been linked to broader social, psychological, and emotional dimensions, making it a compelling area of study in sports sociology.

The ability to perform well in a marathon is influenced by multiple factors, including biological,

psychological, and environmental conditions (Sjödin & Svedenhag, 1985). Physiologically, marathon runners must develop endurance strategies to counteract exercise-induced fatigue and optimize energy expenditure through self-pacing (Sperlich, 2016). Psychologically, they must regulate their emotions to cope with the mental strain and motivational challenges associated with covering long distances (Jaenes & Caracuel, 2016). These aspects highlight the complex interplay between physical readiness, mental resilience, and external influences in marathon participation.

Beyond the physical and psychological aspects, marathon participation has been described as a social phenomenon, with its growing appeal often referred to as “marathon fever.” This trend is particularly common among middle-aged, non-elite runners who perceive marathon running as a transformative challenge during life transitions, such as a midlife crisis

(Summers et al., 1982). Runners are often driven by personal development, self-awareness, and the pursuit of achievement. Completing a marathon is associated with higher self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, and social recognition, further reinforcing motivation (Ogles, 2003).

One of the most influential external factors in modern marathon participation is social media engagement. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok provide runners with a space to share their experiences, connect with other athletes, and receive encouragement to participate in future races. Previous studies suggest that social media enhances offline relationships (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007), making it a powerful tool for race organizers to engage past participants and attract new runners through digital communication strategies. The role of social media in influencing behavior, motivation, and well-being in the marathon-running community, however, remains an area that requires further investigation.

This research aims to explore the relationship between social media engagement, intention to participate, and well-being among marathon runners. Specifically, it examines intention to participate as a mediating variable, determining whether engagement with social media increases the likelihood of participation, which in turn contributes to enhanced well-being. The study is framed within the sociological context of digital engagement and sports participation, shedding light on how online interactions influence real-world athletic behaviors. By analyzing these relationships, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and psychological effects of marathon participation, with implications for sports event organizers, policymakers, and public health advocates.

Literature review

Social media encompasses a wide range of digital platforms, tools, and applications that facilitate social interaction, collaboration, and creative content sharing on the Internet (Nada & Rick, 2011; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). With the increasing adoption of smartphones, social media has become an essential part of daily life, serving as a primary source of communication, news consumption, and entertainment, particularly among younger generations.

These platforms function as interactive spaces where users can create, exchange, discuss, and modify content generated by themselves or others (Ki-

etzmann et al., 2011). As a result, social networking has emerged as one of the most prevalent online activities, with individuals using the Internet primarily to engage in social interactions (Correa et al., 2010). Social media enables people to maintain connections, communicate, and actively engage with both their real-world social circles and broader online communities (Correa et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2011). Notably, social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn are among the most widely used platforms for fostering social engagement.

Engagement with social media can significantly influence behavioral intentions, including the motivation to participate in events such as marathons. When users interact with content related to running events—such as posts from friends, promotional materials from event organizers, or success stories from past participants—they are more likely to develop an interest in joining similar activities. Research suggests that digital interactions not only reinforce social belonging and peer influence but also serve as a source of inspiration and encouragement for event participation (Ellison et al., 2011). Moreover, platforms like Facebook and Instagram enable event organizers to promote marathons, share training resources, and create a sense of community, all of which may strengthen a person's intention to participate. Therefore, based on existing literature and the role of social media in shaping participation behaviors, we hypothesize that:

H1: Social Media Engagement positively affects Intention to Participate.

Existing research has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between an individual's intention to participate in activities and their overall well-being (Meier & Stutzer, 2008; Soukiazis & Ramos, 2016). Thoits and Hewitt (2001) argue that individuals who actively engage in community-based activities tend to experience higher life satisfaction, increased self-esteem, a stronger sense of purpose, and improved mental and physical health. This suggests that participation not only fosters social connections but also contributes to an individual's emotional and psychological resilience.

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations behind participation can lead to greater happiness, self-efficacy, and self-worth (Jahoda, 1958). In the field of sports psychology, research has recognized that people engage in sporting activities for diverse reasons (Pauline & Pauline, 2009). Some individuals are driven by external motivations, such as a sense of duty or responsibility toward others (Piliavin &

Charng, 1990), while others participate due to self-oriented motivations, such as personal enjoyment, interest, or perceived benefits. In the context of marathon events, runners may take part either because they are genuinely passionate about the sport or because they want to share the experience with friends and peers.

The psychological and social nature of participation makes it particularly appealing to younger individuals, offering them opportunities for self-growth and positive psychological effects (Morrow-Howell, 2010). When young marathon runners participate in such events, they not only develop their physical abilities but also experience both hedonic enjoyment (pleasure and fun) and eudaimonic well-being (a sense of meaning and fulfillment) (Waterman et al., 2008). Understanding how participation influences psychological well-being can provide valuable insights for event organizers and sports organizations, particularly in terms of strategies for recruiting and retaining participants in marathons and similar en-

duration events. Based on the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Intention to Participate is Positively Associated with Well-Being.

H3: Intention to Participate can mediate the relationship between Social Media Engagement and Well-Being.

Material and Methods

We gathered primary data using the official participant list of the Almaty Marathon. To ensure diverse representation, we randomly invited over 1,000 runners to take part in an anonymous survey. Out of those contacted, 252 participants completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 23.7%. The collected data includes insights into demographic characteristics, which are summarized in Table 1. This dataset provides a comprehensive overview of the runners' backgrounds, helping to contextualize the analysis.

Table 1 – Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demograohic	Category	N=252	Percentage
Gender	Male	140	55,6%
	Female	112	44,4%
Age	18-24	45	17,9%
	25-34	95	37,7%
	35-44	70	27,8%
	45+	42	16,6%
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	180	71,4
	Master's Degree or Higher	72	28,6%
Previous Marathon Participation	First-time runner	98	38,9%
	2-3 marathons	85	33,7%
	More than 3 Marathons	69	27,4%

To ensure validity and reliability, all measurement items were adapted from previously validated scales, with slight modifications to align them with the context of this study. Each construct was assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represented “strongly disagree” and 7 represented “strongly agree”. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of participants' attitudes and behaviors.

The independent variable, Social Media Engagement, was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from Mosteller and Poddar (2017). This scale evaluates the extent and frequency of participants' engage-

ment with social media platforms related to marathon events. Respondents indicated how often they interact with social media using a 7-point scale (1 = “never do,” 7 = “always do”). Sample items included: “When I participate in a marathon, I post pictures on social media to share my experience.”; “I log onto social media sites at least once per day.”; “My social media profile (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) is complete and reflects my personal interests, including sports preferences.” etc.

Since social media plays a crucial role in event promotion and community engagement, measuring

this variable helps assess how digital interactions influence intention to participate in marathon events.

The mediating variable, Intention to Participate, was measured based on participants' likelihood to act upon social influences and recommendations within the marathon community. This measurement was adapted from Tseng (2022), which originally examined how individuals respond to support from online health communities. Since marathon participation is often influenced by peer encouragement, online discussions, and shared experiences, this scale captures the extent to which social interactions drive participation intentions.

The dependent variable, Well-Being, was assessed using the 5-item WHO-5 Well-Being Index (Heun et al., 1999), a widely used psychological measure with strong internal reliability. This scale evaluates participants' overall emotional and physical well-being. Sample items included: "In the past

two weeks, I have felt cheerful and in good spirits."; "In the past two weeks, I have felt active and vigorous." etc.

Results and Discussion

The correlation coefficients indicate significant positive relationships among the three variables. Specifically, Social Media Engagement exhibits a moderate positive correlation with Intention to Participate ($r = 0.435$) and Well-Being ($r = 0.404$). Additionally, Intention to Participate demonstrates a moderate correlation with Well-Being ($r = 0.484$). These findings suggest that increased engagement with social media is associated with a stronger intention to participate in marathon events, which in turn is linked to higher levels of well-being. The results provide initial empirical support for the hypothesized relationships within the research framework (Table 2).

Table 2 – Latent variable correlation matrix, internal consistency, and average variance extracted

Variable	Social Media Engagement	Intention to Participate	Well-Being	Composite reliability	Cronbach's coefficient	AVE
Social Media Engagement	1			0,871	0,851	0,626
Intention to Participate	0,435	1		0,806	0,784	0,607
Well-Being	0,404	0,484	1	0,967	0,965	0,878

The internal consistency of the constructs was assessed using composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha. The composite reliability values for all constructs exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.806 to 0.967. Similarly, Cronbach's alpha coefficients are well above the accepted standard of 0.70, with values between 0.784 and 0.965. These results confirm that the constructs demonstrate strong internal consistency and reliability, ensuring that the items within each construct reliably measure the intended concept.

Convergent validity was examined through AVE values, all of which surpass the acceptable threshold of 0.50, ranging from 0.607 to 0.878. These values indicate that the constructs account for a substantial proportion of variance in their respective indicators. The results confirm that the measurement model ex-

hibits adequate convergent validity, suggesting that the items effectively capture the underlying constructs.

The analysis indicates a significant direct effect of Social Media Engagement on Intention to Participate ($\beta = 0.435$, $p = 0.000$), with a t-statistic of 6.254, confirming a strong positive association. This suggests that higher engagement with social media platforms is associated with an increased intention to participate in marathon-related activities. Similarly, the direct effect of Intention to Participate on Well-Being is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.484$, $p = 0.000$), with a t-statistic of 5.215. This finding suggests that individuals with a higher intention to participate in marathon events tend to report greater well-being (Figure 1).

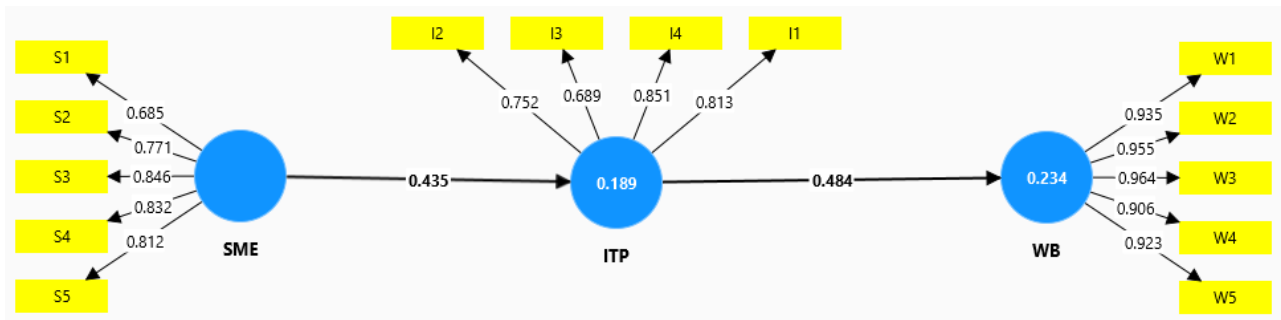


Figure 1 – Research model

Table 3 – Direct and indirect effect

Paths	Original sample	SD	T statistics	P value	Hypthesis
Social Media Engagement -> Intention to Participate	0.435	0.070	6.254	0.000	supported
Intention to Participate -> Well-Being	0.484	0.093	5.215	0.000	supported
Social Media Engagement -> Intention to Participate -> Well-Being	0.210	0.061	3.475	0.001	supported

The mediation analysis further confirms that Social Media Engagement has an indirect effect on Well-Being through Intention to Participate ($\beta = 0.210$, $p = 0.001$). The significant t-statistic (3.475) supports the mediating role of Intention to Participate, indicating that social media engagement contributes to individuals' well-being not only directly but also indirectly by fostering their participation intention (Table 3).

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between social media engagement, intention to participate, and well-being within the context of marathon participation. The findings confirmed that social media engagement positively influences individuals' intention to participate, which, in turn, enhances their well-being. These results contribute to the growing body of literature on the role of digital communication in promoting sports engagement and psychological well-being.

This research extends the understanding of social media's influence on intention to participate and well-being by integrating concepts from digital engagement, motivation, and sports psychology. The findings support previous studies that highlight the role of online interactions in shaping offline behaviors (Mosteller & Poddar, 2017; Tseng, 2022). By

establishing intention to participate as a mediating variable, this study provides new insights into how digital platforms facilitate personal motivation and long-term well-being outcomes in marathon settings. The results also align with self-determination theory, suggesting that social influence and digital engagement can serve as intrinsic motivators for participation in endurance sports.

The findings offer valuable insights for event organizers, policymakers, and digital marketers in the sports industry. Given the strong relationship between social media engagement and participation intentions, marathon organizers should leverage social media campaigns to encourage involvement. Strategies such as user-generated content, interactive challenges, and influencer partnerships can increase engagement and drive participation. Additionally, since marathon participation contributes positively to well-being, policymakers and public health officials could use sports events as a tool for promoting active lifestyles and mental health benefits. Universities, fitness communities, and sports organizations can also use these insights to design interventions that encourage digital engagement as a pathway to physical activity and well-being enhancement.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to participants of the Almaty Marathon, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other sporting

events or geographic regions. Future research could expand the scope by including multiple marathon events or comparing different types of endurance sports. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may introduce social desirability bias. Incorporating objective measures, such as actual social media activity logs or physiological well-being indi-

cators, could enhance the robustness of future studies. Lastly, while this research confirmed the positive link between social media engagement, participation intention, and well-being, future studies could explore additional psychological and social factors, such as sense of community, identity formation, or long-term behavioral changes.

References

- Correa, T., Hinsley, A. W., & Gil de Zuniga, H. G. (2010). Who interacts on the Web? The intersection of users' personality and social media use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26, 247–253.
- Dabbagh, N., & Kitsantas, A. (2012). Personal learning environments, social media, and self-regulated learning: A natural formula for connecting formal and informal learning. *Internet and Higher Education*, 15, 3–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2011.06.002>
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4).
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2011). Connection strategies: Social capital implications of Facebook-enabled communication practices. *New Media & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810385389>
- Heun, R., Burkart, M., Maier, W., & Bech, P. (1999). Internal and external validity of the WHO well-being scale in the elderly general population. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 99(3), 171–178.
- Jaenes, J. C., & Caracul, J. C. (2016). *Marathon: Psychological preparation for training and competition* (2nd ed.). Almuzara.
- Jahoda, M. (1958). Current concepts of positive mental health. Basic Books.
- Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, 54, 241–251.
- Meier, S., & Stutzer, A. (2008). Is volunteering rewarding in itself? *Economica*, 75(297), 39–59.
- Morrow-Howell, N. (2010). Volunteering in later life: Research frontiers. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 65B(4), 461–469. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbq024>
- Mosteller, J., & Poddar, A. (2017). To share and protect: Using regulatory focus theory to examine the privacy paradox of consumers' social media engagement and online privacy protection behaviors. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 39, 27–38.
- Nada, D., & Rick, R. (2011). Back to the future: Tracing the roots and learning affordances of social software. In J. W. L. Mark & M. Catherine (Eds.), *Web 2.0-Based E-Learning: Applying Social Informatics for Tertiary Teaching* (pp. 1–20). IGI Global.
- Ogles, B. M., & Masters, K. S. (2003). A typology of marathon runners based on cluster analysis of motivations. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 26(1), 69–75.
- Pauline, G., & Pauline, J. S. (2009). Volunteer motivation and demographic influences at a professional tennis event. *Team Performance Management*, 15(3/4), 172–184.
- Piliavin, J. A., & Charng, H.-W. (1990). Altruism: A review of recent theory and research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 16, 27–65.
- Sjödin, B., & Svedenhag, J. (1985). Applied physiology of marathon running. *Sports Medicine*, 2, 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.2165/00007256-198502020-00002>
- Soukiazis, E., & Ramos, S. (2016). The structure of subjective well-being and its determinants: A micro-data study for Portugal. *Social Indicators Research*, 126(3), 1375–1399.
- Sperlich, B. (2016). Physiological aspects of marathon running. In C. Zinner & B. Sperlich (Eds.), *Marathon Running: Physiology, Psychology, Nutrition and Training Aspects* (pp. 1–12). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29728-6_1
- Summers, J. J., Sargent, G. I., Levey, A. J., & Murray, K. D. (1982). Middle-aged, non-elite marathon runners: A profile. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 54(3), 963–969. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.1982.54.3.963>
- Thoits, P. A., & Hewitt, L. N. (2001). Volunteer work and well-being. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 42, 115–131.
- Tseng, H. T., Ibrahim, F., Hajli, N., Nisar, T. M., & Shabbir, H. (2022). Effect of privacy concerns and engagement on social support behaviour in online health community platforms. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 178, 121592.
- Vitti, A., Nikolaidis, P. T., Villiger, E., Onywera, V., & Knechtle, B. (2020). The "New York City Marathon": Participation and performance trends of 1.2M runners during half-century. *Research in Sports Medicine*, 28, 121–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15438627.2019.1586705>
- Waterman, A. S., Schwartz, S. J., & Conti, R. (2008). The implications of two conceptions of happiness (hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonia) for the understanding of intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9(1), 41–79.
- [Almaty Marathon 2024]. (2024). *Tengrinews.kz*. https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/almaty-marathon-2024-proshlo-samoe-masshtabnoe-begovoe-549716/?ysclid=m82uvmwh7g54407452

Information about authors:

Akhmetkazy Bekzat (corresponding author) – 4th year student at the Department of journalism, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: bekzatahmetkazy@gmail.com)

Mamyrova Kulaiym – senior lecturer at the Department of journalism, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: mamyrova1801@gmail.com)