

## **MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS AND EXPERIENCES OF SWIMMERS IN THE LAKE BALATON CROSSING**

**KRISZTINA MAYER**

*Institute of Applied Health Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences,  
University of Miskolc*

*e-mail: [krisztina.mayer@uni-miskolc.hu](mailto:krisztina.mayer@uni-miskolc.hu)*

**Summary:** This research paper examines the motivational factors and experiences of swimmers participating in the Lake Balaton Crossing, a 5.2 km open water event held annually in Hungary. The study aims to understand why swimmers persistently engage in this recreational sporting activity over time. A cross-sectional online questionnaire survey was conducted, targeting swimmers who had completed the Lake Balaton Crossing at least five times. The questionnaire collected information on participants' demographics and explored their motivations for returning to the event. Content analysis was used to analyze the data collected from 398 participants. The results revealed several common motivating factors, including the desire for challenge and competition, the pursuit of personal goals, the experience of flow, the pleasure and relaxation derived from swimming, the sense of belonging to a community, and the positive impact of swimming on health and well-being. These findings align with previous research and highlight the importance of adventure, personal growth, and community in motivating swimmers to participate in the Lake Balaton Crossing. Understanding these motivations can inform event organizers and contribute to strategies that enhance participation and engagement in recreational sporting events.

**Keywords:** *open water swimming, motivation, Lake Balaton crossing, swimmer experiences, community engagement*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Endurance is a crucial factor in determining an individual's sense of well-being [1, 2]. Many recreational sporting activities place a significant emphasis on endurance training. Physical recreation involves engaging in exercises aimed at maintaining and improving an individual's health, restoring their abilities, and, if necessary, enhancing their performance [3]. Recreational sports focus on moderate physical exertion to achieve well-being and improve health, rather than aiming for peak performance. Examples of hobby sports include urban running races, amateur football, and swimming across Lake Balaton [3].

Regular physical activity offers various solutions to health problems [4]. Exercise helps reduce obesity rates, the risk of muscle weakness, and the likelihood of developing osteoporosis [5]. Moreover, physical activity has beneficial effects on the cardiovascular system. Exercise enhances blood circulation throughout the body, including the brain, promoting mental freshness and cognitive abilities [6]. For amateur athletes, maintaining health serves as a significant motivating factor for

engaging in sports. Regular physical activity positively influences the body, serving preventive and protective purposes. It also contributes to the prevention of diabetes, respiratory problems, and cancer [7]. The health and physical well-being of an aging society heavily depend on preventing chronic diseases, which can be achieved through conscious health promotion and fitness development [8].

Swimming holds particular importance in maintaining health, as it improves posture, induces positive changes in the musculoskeletal system, safeguards against osteoporosis, and enhances bone strength and mineral content [9]. In addition to physical health benefits, recreational exercise can also aid in mental recovery and promote mental health [3]. Exercise helps individuals cope with stress and effectively reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety [10]. Furthermore, engaging in physical activity contributes to an overall sense of well-being [11]. Participating in sports alongside peers and within a community significantly enhances feelings of well-being [5].

In Hungary, swimming is an exceedingly popular sport. According to a 2016 survey conducted among students at the University of Debrecen (N = 214), swimming ranked as the second most popular sport for both active and passive sport consumption [12]. The Balaton Crossing, a prestigious open water sports event held at Lake Balaton, is particularly renowned. The event, scheduled to take place for the 40th time in 2022, attracted 12,000 participants in that year. Competitors came from 1,073 municipalities in Hungary, and nearly 500 swimmers from 43 countries competed, with the oldest swimmer being 85 years old. Every year, the event sees the participation of organ transplanted athletes, dialysis swimmers, and para-swimmers [13]. Multiple studies have shown that sports serve as a privileged tool for the social inclusion of people with disabilities [12].

This research aims to address the question of what motivates swimmers who regularly participate in the Lake Balaton Crossing to complete the 5.2 km distance year after year. It seeks to understand why they embrace the challenge and identify the factors that contribute to their persistence and continued participation in this recreational sporting event over the years.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### ***Study participants***

A cross-sectional online questionnaire survey was conducted to gather data for this study. The participants included swimmers who had successfully completed the 5.2 km Balaton Crossing at least 5 times. To recruit participants, we contacted individuals through the social media groups “Lake, Sea, River” and “Balaton Crossing Swim”. Prior to participating in the survey, the subjects provided their informed consent at the beginning of the questionnaire.

The study sample consisted of 398 participants, comprising 151 men and 247 women, with an average age of  $41.35 \pm 11.78$  years. On average, the swimmers reported having completed the Lake Balaton swim  $7.05 \pm 5.07$  times. The most frequent swimmer in the sample had completed the 5.2km distance a remarkable 39 times.

### **Methods**

Participants were asked to provide information on their gender, age, and the number of times they had swum across Lake Balaton. The survey questions focused on understanding the motivations behind their decision to return year after year and swim repeatedly.

The questionnaires were subjected to content analysis, a non-intervention research method that was used for data analysis. Content analysis offers the opportunity to uncover deeper, hidden messages and connections within the responses. This method involves defining units of analysis and categorizing them accordingly. In the case of qualitative content analysis, coding is not based on pre-established categories but rather emerges during the analysis process [14].

### **RESULTS**

The results regarding the motivation for participating in the Lake Balaton Crossing revealed several common factors. One of the most prominent motivating factors was the search for a challenge, competition, and the desire to experience the thrill of success. Participants expressed their motivation to push their limits, achieve personal goals, beat previous records, and enjoy the competitive atmosphere.

“I am motivated by the distance and by beating myself.” 50-year-old man

“I like long distance, pushing my limits.” 62-year-old woman

“Swimming across Lake Balaton is a challenge for me and my goal is always to achieve a better result than the previous year.” 61-year-old woman

“I’m motivated by breaking my previous personal best.” 48-year-old man

“I’m motivated by the atmosphere of the race, by competing against myself. (I have a target time.)” 54-year-old woman

“I love swimming, even knowing I could swim faster, it motivates me.” 50-year-old man

“The first swim was a challenge to myself, since then I’ve tried to improve my times, always with success.” 34-year-old man

“It gives me a goal to prepare, motivates me to do regular sports all year round, shows me how my physical condition is compared to previous years. Plus it’s a great feeling of achievement to swim across the lake every year.” 39-year-old male

“It’s a great feeling to beat myself. Once again, I can say that I’ve done it. I think it’s not enough to just be able to do it physically, you have to be able to do it mentally.” 29-year-old man

“The combination of open water and distance is a challenge in the Lake Balaton crossing and it feels good to overcome that.” 30-year-old woman

The concept of flow, characterized by complete immersion and concentration in the activity, was also highlighted as a significant motivating factor. Swimmers mentioned the pleasure and relaxation they derived from swimming, the love for open water, and the overall experience of being in the water.

“I really like swimming.” 53-year-old man

“Swimming is wonderful! I love the water, I love swimming!” 48-year-old woman

“I love swimming. Even in open water.” 69-year-old man

“Relaxes me, recharges me.” 40-year-old woman

“The love of Lake Balaton motivates me year after year.” 57-year-old man

“I love swimming in natural water. It gives me pleasure.” 42-year-old woman

“It feels good.” 67-year-old man

“The water, the movement in the water relaxes me, recharges me.” 61-year-old woman

“Ticking off a bucket list for the first time, then falling in love with the whole situation, which is great to dissolve into.” 67-year-old man

“Caressing the water is the best.” 60-year-old woman

“Relaxing.” 57-year-old woman

“Feels good, puts you in a good mood, gives you energy.” 28-year-old woman

“A wonderful experience.” 52-year-old man

“The flow experience, the nature, the floating, the progression through the rhythm of breathing in and out, I love it.” 38-year-old woman

“Swimming is very relaxing, relaxing for me.” 52-year-old woman

“It gives me security, calm, stability, it can completely switch me off.” 35-year-old woman

“Flow and the effect of movement on my physical and mental well-being.” 51-year-old woman

“It’s a wonderful feeling to be in the water, to feel the sunshine, to feel the ‘embrace’ of Lake Balaton.” 36-year-old woman

The flow experience, also known as the perfect experience, can be described as an immersive state where individuals feel capable of handling the task at hand within a structured action system that provides continuous feedback. They become so engrossed in their activities that they are unable to think about anything else. Their focus is not on themselves or their problems. The sense of self temporarily fades away, and their perception of time becomes distorted. The intrinsic reward of engaging in such an experience is so fulfilling that individuals pursue the activity

purely for its own sake. It is a state where individuals are fully absorbed in what they are doing, disregarding their own self and devoting all their attention to the activity, utilizing their resources for its benefit. In the flow experience, one's abilities are aligned with the goals, and there is a harmonious balance between the individual's skills and the task's level of difficulty. The flow experience is characterized by intense concentration, a distorted sense of time, and a sense of control over the situation [15].

The sense of belonging to a community of fellow swimmers and the opportunity to meet friends were additional motivating factors.

"It's good to meet lots of people you know." 40-year-old woman

"It's the exercise. I get to meet friends and acquaintances." 78-year-old man

"It's an experience, a day out with friends." 45-year-old woman

"I like that it brings the swimming community together as one big team." 56-year-old man

"The atmosphere of the event is engaging, much more enjoyable than swimming on your own." 34-year-old man

Furthermore, health was mentioned as a motivating factor due to the positive effects of swimming on stamina, posture, and overall well-being.

"Due to knee injuries and a lot of sedentary work, this is a sport that I can do without any particular problems. The movement itself improves my stamina and posture a lot." 55-year-old woman

"Water gives me freedom, motivates me to improve, and is excellent for health." 54-year-old man

## **DISCUSSION**

The present research aimed to investigate the motivations of swimmers who actively participate in the Lake Balaton Crossing. The results revealed that these swimmers are primarily driven by the desire for adventure and challenge. This finding aligns with previous studies that have shown a correlation between participation in sports and the inclination for sensation-seeking behavior, as athletes tend to exhibit higher levels of sensation seeking compared to non-athletes [16]. The responses from the swimmers in this study indicate that the appeal of the Balaton Crossing sport event is also associated with maintaining motivation to swim and experiencing a sense of accomplishment. Many participants are attracted to the event due to the opportunity to explore and push their personal limits, continuously improve their performance, and set new personal records year after year.

For the swimmers, the experience of flow holds significant importance. They value the feeling of mental clarity and complete concentration on the activity at hand. During this state of flow, everyday realities, worries, and troubles fade into the

distance [16]. This flow experience allows the swimmers to transcend their ordinary self and fully engage with their swimming. They become one with the activity, experiencing a self-identical state.

Furthermore, the results suggest that the mass event of the Balaton Crossing fosters a positive sense of belonging to the swimming community. Individuals are part of numerous groups, and these affiliations contribute to their self-definition. Belonging to a group can be essential for individuals, serving various purposes such as achieving life goals, fulfilling personal needs, engaging in leisure activities, fostering personal development, and even shaping one's identity. The need for belonging is inherently strong in people, and being accepted by a group can empower individuals and enhance their self-esteem.

Another motivating factor identified in this study is the sheer pleasure of swimming in the open water, contrasted with the monotony of pool swimming. The sight of Lake Balaton amplifies this enjoyment. Additionally, the year-round preparation and regular swimming undertaken by the participants serve as a means of maintaining and promoting their health, all leading up to the “big day” of the event.

## CONCLUSION

This research has shed light on the sport motivation of swimmers engaged in the Lake Balaton Crossing. The findings suggest that the participants are driven by intrinsic motivations, including the pleasure of moving in water, relaxation, the experience of flow, and the desire to maintain good health. Additionally, the sense of belonging to a community of individuals with shared interests contributes significantly to their motivation. These insights deepen our understanding of the reasons why swimmers actively participate in the Balaton Crossing and provide valuable implications for event organizers, highlighting the importance of catering to these intrinsic motivations to ensure continued participation and engagement in such sporting endeavors.

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