

## Mini Review

# The Motives for Triathlon Participation from an Aging Black Woman

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## Abstract

According to the National Health Interview Survey half of adults (18+) sufficiently met the recommended time of Physical Activity (PA) in 2014. Black women are among the lowest of all age adjusted percentages of adults who met the guidelines. Previous studies have documented the effects of sedentary lifestyles among aging Black women; however, there have not been as many studies on motivation of those who continuously engage in PA. This report demonstrates the motivations of an aging Black woman who participates in triathlons. She completed a modified version of the 56 item Motivations for Marathoners Scale (MOMS) and was subsequently interviewed using the Motivations for Triathletes Interview Guide. Using crossover analysis, data demonstrates that Physical Health motives, including 'to lose weight' and 'to improve health', due to family history of heart attacks, are her most motivating reasons for participation. Achievement motives, including 'to compete with others' and 'to beat someone I've never beaten before,' were among the lowest motivators for participating. The participant revealed that self-competition, which is not assessed in the MOMS, is more of a motivation rather than competing with others.

**Keywords:** Black women; Triathletes; Motivation; Exercise

## Introduction

To increase Physical Activity (PA) among adults (18+), national guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity weekly, or an equivalent combination of both intensities [1]. According to the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) half of adults (50%) sufficiently met the recommended time of PA, in 2014, demonstrating a 5% increase in the number of Americans who are physically active since 2008 [2]. However, women continue to be more sedentary and less likely to meet the guidelines than men. Black women are among the lowest of all age adjusted percentages (41.7%) of adults, only slightly lower to that of Hispanic women (42.0%) who meet the guidelines [2,3] and by age >75 years, one in two Black women engages in no exercise [4].

Previous study results have documented the effects of sedentary lifestyles among aging Black women and its long term consequences of heart disease and an increase in mortality when compared to physically active peers [2]. However, there have not been as many studies on motivation of aging Black women who continuously engage in PA; therefore, the long term effects of PA among aging Black women is unknown [5]. Motivation is self initiated direction for the maintenance of actions toward an achievable goal [6]. The gap in the literature, in relation to understanding PA motivation and its long term effects, lends to further examine aging Black women who regularly engage in PA.

In the past 11 years, there has been an increase in the number of people motivated to participate in triathlons through group programs [7]. To date, there has not been published literature to understand PA motivation among Black women who participate in triathlons. One known presentation on a study of Black women triathletes indicated improving health and fitness as the top motivational response for participation in events sponsored by a minority based triathlon group. Participants also felt that participation would improve their psychological health as they were motivated by the group to prepare for a triathlon [8]. The following report illustrates the motivational reasoning of participation in PA, including triathlons, through the lens of a Black woman triathlete.

## Triathlons

Triathlons are a multi-sport endurance event consisting of swimming, running, and cycling with varying distances. Amateur athletes may compete against others either by age group or weight [9]. Age groups are separated in groups of 5 years (e.g. 35-39; 40-44) and the weight divisions include men over 220 lbs. (Clydesdales) and women over 165 lbs. (Athenas) to compete against others in their weight standard. Distances most often completed in the United States, include Sprint, Intermediate distance, the Half Ironman, and Ironman [10].

The majority of research on triathletes in the United States has included White males due to their greater numbers of sport participants. USA Triathlon (USAT) reports more than 5% of its members, are >60 years old, including more than 900 members who are >80 years old [8]. Additionally, from 2000 to 2011 there was a 9% increase in the number of women who compete and participation within USA Triathlon's membership, in particular, reached 37.1 percent in 2014 [8]. Reported factors leading to this growth are society's acceptance of "active" women and women feeling more comfortable living an active lifestyle [8]. While, the number of Black members of USAT is low at 0.5% [11], it is projected to increase due to nationally emerging triathlon based infrastructures like the Black Triathletes Association (BTA) [12].

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## Study Participant

The following case study is from a parallel design, mixed methods study of Black women triathletes (N= 121) and participants (n =12) that were interviewed. B.C. A. is a 54 year old married Black woman who has been racing in triathlons since 2008 and is a member of USAT and BTA. At the time of the study, she had completed 20 triathlons and including 9 Sprints, 7 Intermediate, and 4 Half-Ironman distance races. She is 63 inches and weighs approximately 160 pounds.

## Procedures

Upon approval from the Virginia Commonwealth University Institutional Review Board, B.C.A. completed the Motivations of Marathoners Survey (MOMS), a survey previously modified for triathletes [10,13]. The Likert scale survey measures 56 items related to the Physical Health motives of general health orientation and weight control; Psychological motives of life meaning, psychological coping, and self-esteem; Social Motives of affiliation and recognition; and, the Achievement motives of competition and personal goal achievement [13]. B.C.A. was subsequently interviewed using the Motivations for Triathletes Interview Guide (MOTIG). Developed using survey transformation the MOTIG captured additional data not surveyed in the MOMS.

## Results

Following a separate analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, a crossover analysis was conducted to understand how the quantitative and qualitative data merged.

### Quantitative

A scale analysis indicated that the Physical Health motives 'to control weight', 'to improve health', and 'to reduce the chance of having a heart attack' were high (a most important reason = 7) motivating reasons for participating in triathlons. She gave a low score (not a reason = 1) to 17 items including, 'to compete with others'; 'to see how high I can place in races'; 'to get a faster time than my friends'; and, 'to beat someone I've never beaten before', which are all competition items within Achievement motives.

### Qualitative

Thematic analysis indicated Physical Health motives as introductory reasons why B.C.A. began participating in triathlons. Her family name is, "notorious among cardiologists," in her home state because family members, like her brother and cousin, often suffer from sudden catastrophic heart attacks after turning 50 years of age.

B.C.A. was an overweight smoker and nearing 50, "was traumatic." She made a bucket list and although she did not swim, and had not biked since she was a kid, she had run half marathons. She made it a goal to train and complete her first Intermediate distance (1500 meter swimming, 26.2 miles cycling, and 6.2 miles running) triathlon.

After completing her first year of racing she had not lost any of the 40 pounds gained after years of inactivity and cessation of smoking. As an older aspiring triathlete, she needed to teach her body how to recreate a new form of athleticism. As a younger dancer she would push her body to the limits and as an older triathlete she became

proactive in altering her training and race schedule. She visited an endocrinologist, changed her eating habits, and made a new goal to complete triathlons, in her second season, at a lighter weight. When it was time to increase her triathlon training time, her, "mind set just clicked in," and former beliefs of work ethic "...made my work better. It made my focus different. Like, everything came back into place for me".

Now entering into her 8<sup>th</sup> race year, a torn LCL and lateral tear to her meniscus will not allow her to run. But, choosing rehabilitation, instead of surgery, allows her to walk up to 8 miles comfortably. She is confident in this decision because she does not participate in triathlons to compete with other people. She finishes, "... so it's about me, it's not about anybody else." She chooses to use her times at a race to gauge on how much faster she can be in the next race. B.C.A. is proud of her abilities and is aware there are, "other people my age who just...can't do half the stuff they used to be able to do. I can".

### Crossover analysis

The quantitative data from the MOMS revealed that many of Physical Health motives were most important (Likert scale =7) while all the measured Achievement motives (Likert scale = 1) were not. Out of 18 themes, 22% of her answers were related to Physical Health motives, including weight control and nutrition. These references supported her reasoning for beginning to race and continuing to do so as she ages. She did not respond to Achievement motives in the MOMS, yet, she talked about competition. Competition manifested in 11% of her answers during the interview but was directly related to self-competition. The crossover analysis validates that what B.C.A. perceives as her motives through the MOMS is, in fact, how she genuinely feels when discussing her motives.

## Conclusion

Black women are sedentary and less likely to engage in exercise activities as they age. However, there is a gap in literature understanding motivation to exercise because researchers have not sought out Black women exercisers. This case study described the motives of an aging Black woman, who participates in triathlons. After completing the triathlete modified version of the Motivations of Marathoners Scale, the participant was subsequently interviewed using the Motivations of Triathletes Interview Guide. A crossover analysis revealed the importance of Physical Health motives in the MOMS are congruent with her themes revealed in the interview. She was not motivated by the Achievement motives related to competition, inquired in the MOMS, but offered an alternative to assessing Achievement by measuring personal competition.

Information revealed in this study helped to identify motives to exercise. Understanding motives may be key in the formation of future groups with specific interests in exercise activity. Additionally, this data could be used when developing interventions aimed at encouraging more aging persons, including Black women, to engage in exercise. Information on motivation should be considered when encouraging sedentary persons to begin an exercise program or participate with groups with specific interests, like triathlons.

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