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Educational Value and Consumer Behavior in Endurance Sport Events: Insights from Quantitative and Qualitative Research

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Abstract: ***Background:*** *Endurance sport events have evolved into platforms that integrate health promotion, education, and community building, while serving as strategic tools for sport marketing. Yet, little is known about how smaller-scale endurance events influence participant motivations, perceptions, and loyalty. Beyond their sporting and promotional roles, such events act as non-formal educational contexts that cultivate discipline, resilience, and social engagement.*
Purpose: *This study examines the key drivers of participation, satisfaction, and return intention in a local endurance event, focusing on the interaction between health, social, and digital dimensions of consumer behavior.*
Methods: *A mixed-methods design was used, combining a structured questionnaire (n = 120) with semi-structured interviews (n = 5). Quantitative data analyzed motivations, satisfaction, and loyalty, while qualitative insights explored atmosphere, social value, and digital expectations.*
Results: *Health improvement (65%), personal achievement (20%), and social interaction (10%) were the main participation motives. Over 90% reported high satisfaction with event quality, especially logistics and atmosphere. Social media was the dominant promotional channel (72%), and satisfaction strongly predicted loyalty, with 82% intending to return and 78% willing to recommend the event.*
Conclusion: *Local endurance events function not merely as athletic competitions but as holistic lifestyle and learning experiences that foster health, social cohesion, and digital engagement. High satisfaction enhances loyalty and advocacy, emphasizing the importance of quality, inclusivity, and educational value in designing sustainable sport events.*

Keywords: *health promotion through sport; event marketing; digital engagement in sport events; community building through endurance events; participant experience; loyalty drivers.*

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Introduction

In recent years, the role of sport events has expanded beyond competition and entertainment to become strategic instruments for promoting health, fostering educational experiences, and strengthening community cohesion (Davids et al., 2021). Organized sport events, particularly at local and regional levels, provide valuable opportunities to engage citizens in active lifestyles, transmit values such as discipline and perseverance, and reinforce social capital (Lora, 2024; Geidne and Van Hoye, 2021). Sport thus functions not only as a leisure activity but also as a pedagogical and public health tool (Rata et al., 2022). Simultaneously, sport events have emerged as powerful platforms for identity building, community engagement, and marketing (Stefanica & Rosu, 2018), creating distinctive spaces for social identity formation and value co-creation (Lee et al., 2016). These events also support destination branding by showcasing community spirit through tangible sport experiences (Nešić et al., 2021). Small-scale events, especially in rural areas, can strengthen local identity and social capital while facing specific organizational challenges that require strategic management for sustainable outcomes (Perić et al., 2016). The evolution toward "sportainment" further illustrates how sport organizations must integrate entertainment and experience value through innovative marketing approaches (Richelieu & Webb, 2024; Amzar & Stefanica, 2017).

Despite the growing popularity of endurance events, empirical research on how smaller-scale competitions influence participants' perceptions, behaviors, and educational outcomes remains scarce. Most studies focus on mega-events, leaving participant-level and educational impacts underexplored (Teare & Taks, 2021). Recent theoretical contributions have emphasized integrating sport, health, and education through models of active participation and feedback-based engagement (Wang et al., 2025) and through the concept of "health-promoting sports organizations" that embed health education and social inclusion in their structures (Van Hoye et al., 2023).

Research on half-marathon participation indicates that motivations commonly include physical and psychological health, enjoyment, and personal achievement (Tjelta et al., 2018; Stefanica, 2022). Gender differences are evident, with men emphasizing competitiveness and health-related goals, while women focus more on self-improvement and surpassing personal limits (Tjelta et al., 2018; Ramos-Ruiz et al., 2024). Contextual factors also play a role: urban runners often prioritize enjoyment, whereas rural participants highlight emotional engagement (Poczta and Malchrowicz-

Mośko, 2018). Recent studies underscore the importance of inclusivity and digital engagement, particularly through social media and image sharing (Ramos-Ruiz et al., 2024; Rosu et al., 2022), and highlight women's growing participation in mass running events (Malchrowicz-Mośko & Rozmiarek, 2018).

In Romania, the transition from state-controlled sport to market-oriented systems reshaped the management and organization of sport events (Stefanica et al., 2024a). This shift replaced centralized funding with private initiatives and community partnerships, encouraging entrepreneurship and civic engagement in sport (De Waele and Husting, 2005; Chin, 2008; Stefanica et al., 2024c). Local actors and private organizers now play a key role in hosting marathons, triathlons, and cycling events that combine economic sustainability with social and educational goals. Studies show that events like the Bucharest International Marathon attract educated, financially stable participants, demonstrating both health and economic benefits (Cernaianu et al., 2021; Stefanica et al., 2024b). Many organizers also reinvest participation fees in environmental or social causes, aligning with sustainable entrepreneurship principles (Dan, 2019; Czegledi et al., 2021). Beyond economic impact, endurance events promote civic pride, social inclusion, and local identity (Parra-Camacho et al., 2020).

In this context, the Piteşti Half Marathon represents an instructive case for exploring endurance events as platforms for education, health promotion, and community development. The study examines participants' motivations, satisfaction, and loyalty, guided by the following hypotheses:

H1: Motivational drivers such as achievement, health improvement, and social interaction significantly influence participation.

H2: Event-related factors, including organizational quality and atmosphere, positively impact satisfaction.

H3: Digital promotion and social media communication channels play a decisive role in shaping awareness and participation.

H4: Higher satisfaction levels are positively associated with loyalty and intention to return.

Beyond its managerial and marketing relevance, this research contributes to the educational field by examining endurance events as experiential learning contexts that nurture resilience, teamwork, and social responsibility. Such events offer participants and volunteers informal educational opportunities to develop transversal competencies and civic engagement, supporting the broader view of sport as a multidimensional tool for personal growth and lifelong learning.

Methodology

Research DESIGN

The study employed an exploratory–descriptive mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture participants' motivations, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. The integration of both methods allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in endurance events, in line with prior sport event research frameworks (Trail & James, 2001; Yoshida & James, 2010).

Presentation of the event

The Piteşti Half Marathon, held on May 25, 2025, is one of the most significant endurance running events in southern Romania, attracting both amateur and professional athletes. The event includes multiple race categories (21 km, 10 km, 5 km, and children's races) and integrates competitive and community-oriented components. Its objectives extend beyond competition, aiming to promote health, foster participation across age groups, and enhance the visibility of Piteşti as a regional hub for endurance sports. The growing participation mirrors the rising popularity of mass running events in Romania and the shift toward privately organized, fee-based competitions that balance business ventures with community benefits.

Decision problem and research questions

Against the backdrop of the expanding sport event industry, this study sought to identify the factors influencing participants' decisions to engage in the Piteşti Half Marathon. Specifically, the decision problem was formulated through four guiding questions:

1.What are the primary motives driving participation?

2.How do prior experiences and perceptions of the event affect intentions to return?

3.To what extent do promotional channels and digital marketing campaigns contribute to participation?

4.What expectations shape participants' evaluations of the overall experience?

These questions framed the operationalization of the research hypotheses.

Sampling and respondent profile

The sample was obtained through a non-probability, snowball sampling method, using official event channels and social media running groups. A total

of 120 respondents completed the questionnaire. The sample included 55% male and 45% female participants, with the majority (70%) aged 20–40 years. Notably, 65% had previously participated in at least one edition of the Piteşti Half Marathon, providing a balanced mix of first-time and recurring participants. However, since the snowball sampling technique relies on participant referrals, the resulting sample may not be fully representative of the broader population of event participants. Consequently, findings should be interpreted with caution and viewed as exploratory rather than generalizable.

Data collection procedures

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. A structured questionnaire consisting of 14 items was distributed both online (via Google Forms) and on-site during the event. It captured participants' socio-demographic profiles, motivations, satisfaction with organizational aspects, and perceptions of health and community benefits, with items adapted from validated instruments in sport consumer behavior research (Trail & James, 2001; Yoshida & James, 2010). To complement these data, five semi-structured interviews were carried out with recurrent participants (3 men and 2 women, aged 25–40). Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and explored loyalty drivers, comparisons with other national running events, and the role of digital platforms in shaping participant engagement.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively to identify motivational patterns, satisfaction levels, and behavioral intentions. Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis following the framework of Nowell et al. (2017), enabling triangulation with survey findings and richer interpretation of participant experiences. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the relatively small sample size, the analysis focused on descriptive statistics (percentages) rather than inferential testing. This approach was chosen to provide an initial understanding of participation trends, which can inform more robust statistical modeling in future research.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Table 1 presents a concise overview of the main quantitative results obtained from the survey conducted among 120 participants of the Piteşti Half Marathon. The data summarize respondents' motivations, sources of information, satisfaction levels, and behavioral intentions related to the

event. The dominance of health-related motives and social media influence suggests that participants value both personal well-being and digital community engagement. The consistently high levels of satisfaction and loyalty indicate that the event successfully meets participants' expectations, offering a well-organized and socially rewarding experience.

Table 1. Summary of Quantitative Findings – Piteşti Half Marathon (N = 120)

Variable	Category / Response	Percentage (%)
Main Motives for Participation	Health & Fitness	65
	Achievement / Personal Challenge	20
	Social Interaction / Community	10
	Other (Leisure, Friends)	5
Sources of Information	Social Media	72
	Official Website	18
	Friends / Colleagues	10
Satisfaction with Organization	Very Satisfied	52
	Satisfied	38
	Neutral	7
	Dissatisfied	3
Additional Activities & Services	Food & Beverage Stands	55
	Wellness & Recovery Areas	25
	Children's Races / Community Activities	20
Importance of Location	Very Important	68
	Important	22
	Less Relevant	10
Influence of Ticket Price	High / Very High	18
	Moderate	42
	Low	30
Importance of Social Media Promotion	Very Important	50
	Important	30
	Neutral	15
	Unimportant	5
Intention to Participate Again	Yes	82
	Undecided	12
	No	6
Recommendation to Others	Yes	78

	Undecided	17
	No	5

Health improvement and fitness emerged as the main motives for participation (65%), while achievement and personal challenge were also important (20%) (Figure 1).

Social media was the dominant information source (72%), underscoring the effectiveness of digital communication channels. In contrast, only 18% cited the official website, and 10% relied on word-of-mouth, indicating a shift toward online community influence in promoting local sporting events.10% (Figure 2).

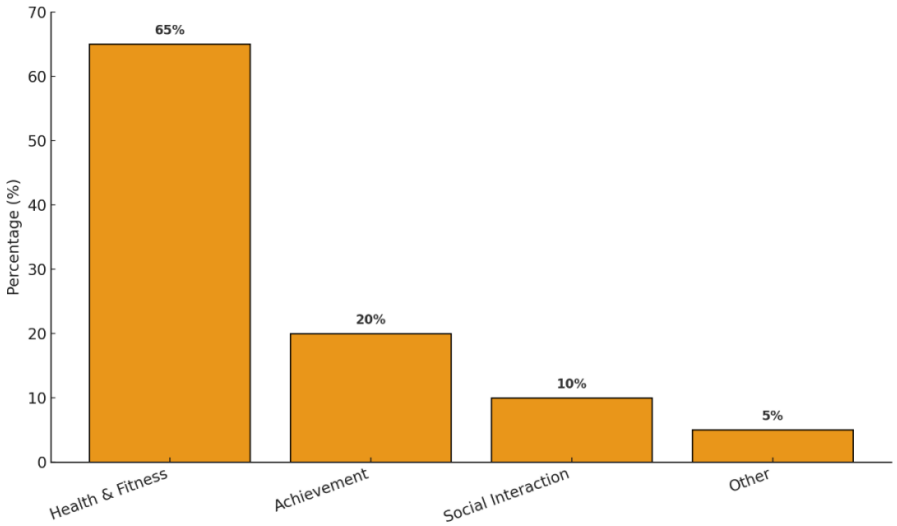
Participants expressed high satisfaction with event organization, with 90% reporting they were satisfied or very satisfied (Figure 3). This positive experience translated into strong loyalty indicators - 82% stated their intention to return (Figure 8), and 78% would recommend the event to others (Figure 9).

Additional activities such as food & beverage stands (55%) and wellness areas (25%) contributed meaningfully to the overall event experience (Figure 4).

While the location and route were crucial for 68% of runners (Figure 5), ticket price was not a major barrier, with only 18% reporting a high or very high influence of cost on participation (Figure 6).

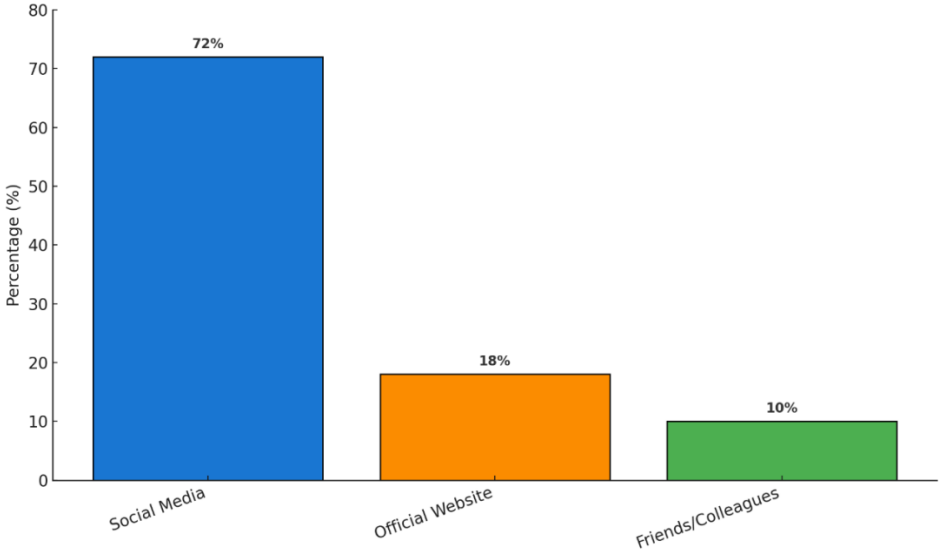
Finally, social media promotion proved highly impactful, with 80% rating it as important or very important, confirming its strategic importance in maintaining engagement and loyalty among participants (Figure 7).

Figure 1. Main motives for participation in Pitesti Half Marathon



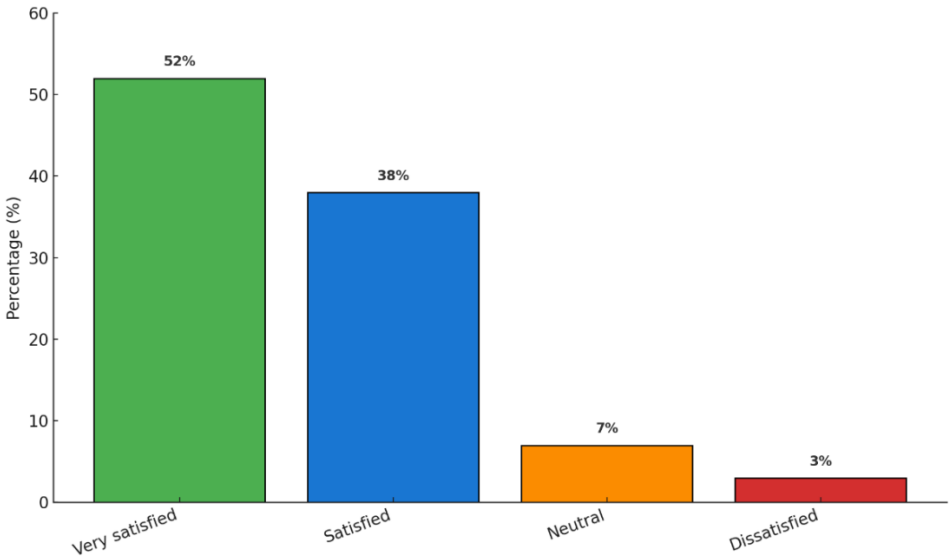
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Figure 2. Sources of information about Pitesti Half Marathon



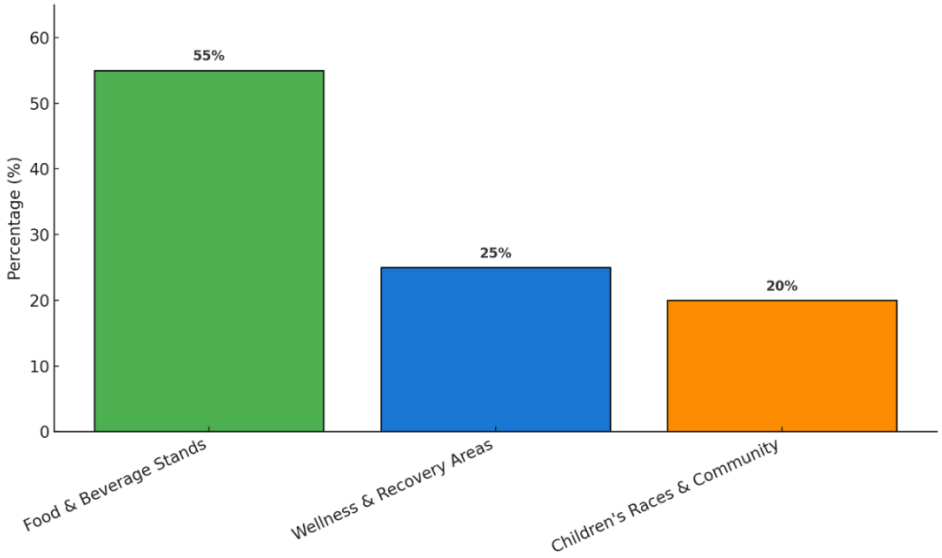
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Figure 3. Satisfaction with event organization



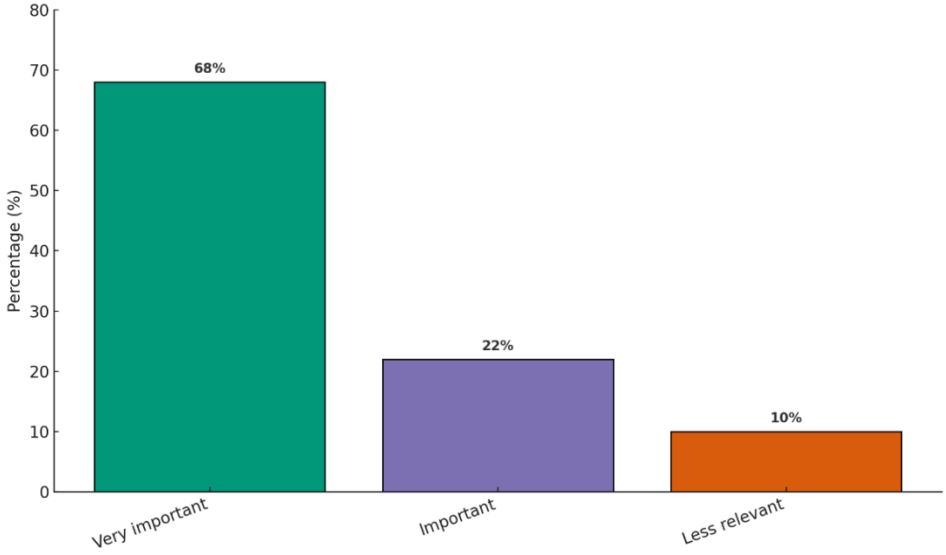
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Figure 4. Additional activities and services



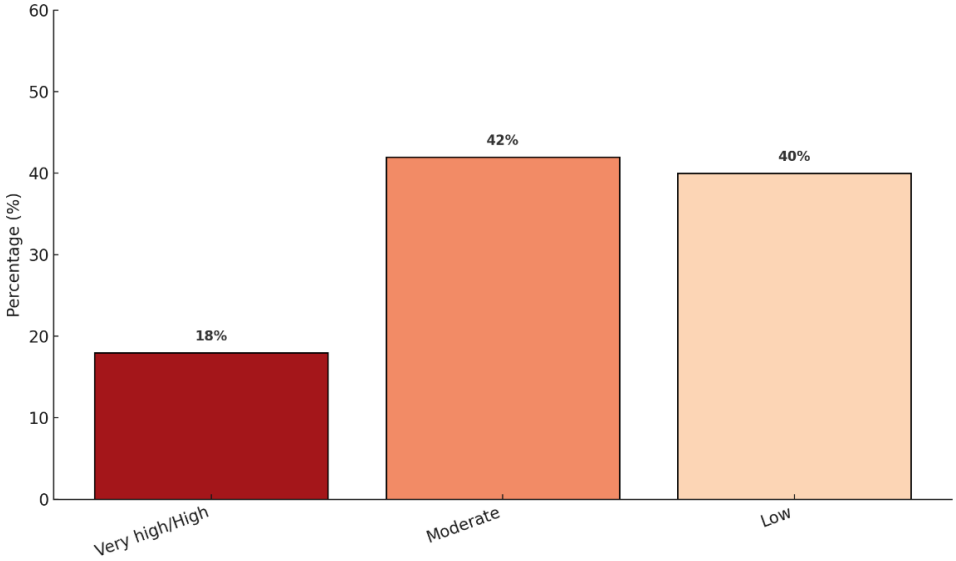
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Figure 5. Importance of location in decision to practice



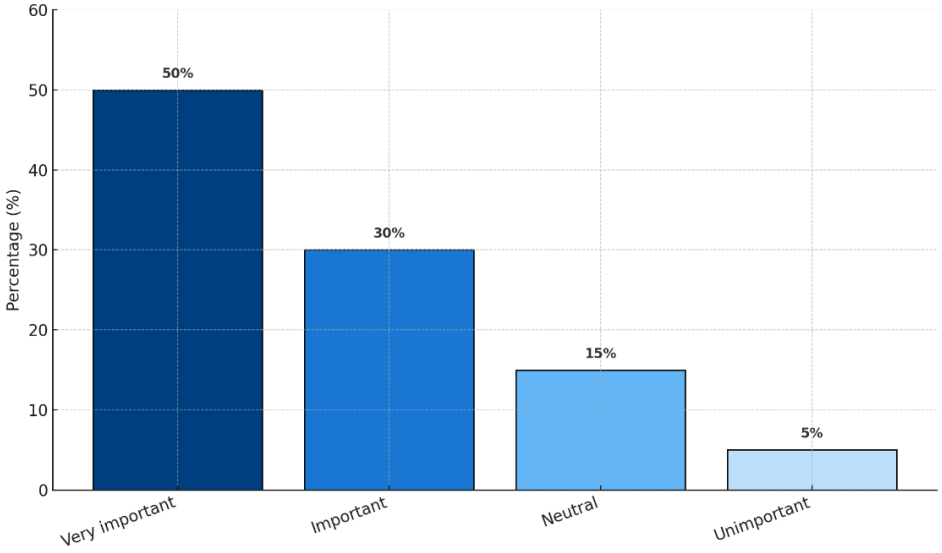
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Figure 6. Influence of ticket price on decision to participate



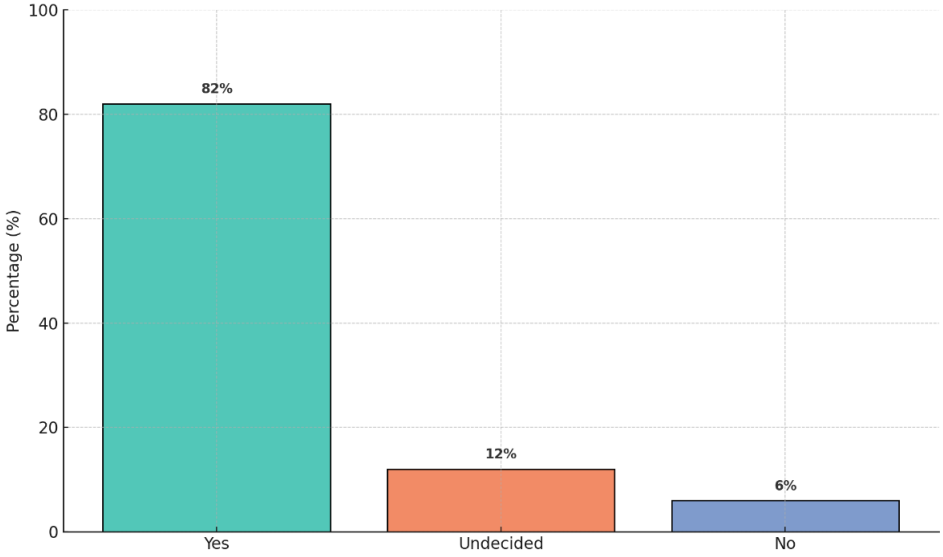
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Figure 7. Importance of Social Media Promotion



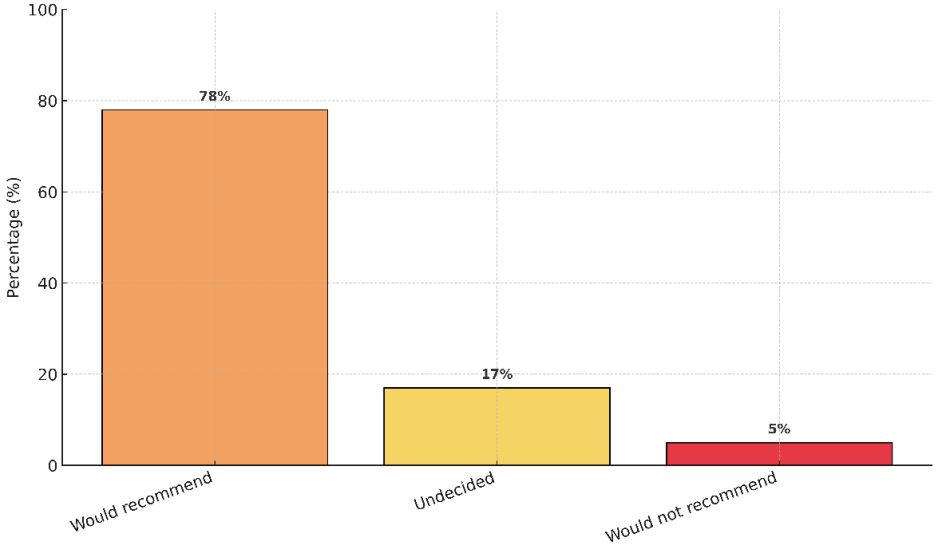
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Figure 8. Intention to participate again



Source: Author's own elaboration

Figure 9. Recommendation to others



Source: Author's own elaboration

Qualitative findings

The semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 20 minutes, were conducted with loyal participants of the Piteşti Half Marathon to complement the survey data. Thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) revealed four recurring themes that highlight how participants interpret the identity of the event and envision its development. These themes reinforce the quantitative results while providing deeper insights into the experiential and emotional dimensions of participation.

These themes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Themes from Semi-Structured Interviews with Pitesti Half Marathon Participants

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Interpretation
Event atmosphere and accessibility	"It feels less crowded and more welcoming compared to the Bucharest Marathon."	The event is perceived as a community-oriented and accessible alternative to larger marathons.
Social and emotional motivations	"I run more for the atmosphere and the community spirit than for competitive results."	Participation is driven primarily by belonging and social connection rather than by competitive outcomes.
Expectations for digital support	"I appreciated the registration app, but I think it could recommend training plans or nutrition tips before the race."	Participants value existing digital tools but expect more personalized features to enhance preparation.
Demand for enhanced digital interaction	"I would like more digital interaction, such as live race tracking or real-time updates for family and friends."	There is a clear demand for advanced digital services that enrich both participant and spectator experience.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze participants' motivations, perceptions, and satisfaction in the context of a small-scale endurance event, with a particular focus on how educational and health-related values intersect with consumer behavior. Four hypotheses were formulated, and both quantitative and qualitative findings provide supportive evidence for their plausibility, while also highlighting areas for future investigation and development.

Motivational drivers (H1).

Quantitative data showed that health improvement and fitness were the most important reasons for participation, followed by achievement and social interaction. These findings are consistent with prior studies identifying physical and psychological well-being, resilience, and social belonging as dominant motives in endurance sports (Tjelta et al., 2018; Kennedy et al, 2020; Poczta & Malchrowicz-Mośko, 2018; Stefanica et al., 2024b; Aouani et al., 2024). Demographic differences highlighted in the literature were reflected in our results, as female participants valued enjoyment and self-improvement, while men emphasized competitiveness (Ramos-Ruiz et al., 2024). Qualitative interviews confirmed that participants perceived the event as more than a race, rather as a communal platform promoting a healthy lifestyle and long-term resilience. This supports the growing view that endurance events serve not only athletic but also educational and social purposes (Geidne & Van Hoye, 2021).

Event quality and satisfaction (H2).

Over 90% of respondents reported high satisfaction with organizational quality, pointing to logistics, race signage, hydration stations, and volunteer support as decisive factors. These results align with previous research showing that service quality and atmosphere are central to positive consumer evaluations and loyalty (Yoshida & James, 2010; Kaplanidou et al., 2012; Min & Woo, 2023; Bougrine et al., 2025). Interviewees reinforced this view, contrasting the event's intimate, community-oriented character with the overcrowding often reported at large-scale marathons. This confirms that small-scale events can secure a competitive advantage through personalization, inclusivity, and quality of experience—findings consistent with studies linking event quality to satisfaction and destination promotion (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2022; Jeong & Kim, 2020).

Digital engagement (H3).

Digital channels, particularly social media, were the dominant means of discovering the event (72%), confirming the decisive role of online platforms in sport marketing (Filo et al., 2015; Thomson et al., 2020). Qualitative findings indicated that participants expect more than promotion: they seek real-time tracking, interactive maps, and AI-based training recommendations, echoing trends in global marathons like Berlin and London. These insights extend the literature by highlighting how digitalization is not only a promotional tool but also an experiential dimension that enhances education, personalization, and participant engagement (Ramos-Ruiz et al., 2024).

Satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth (H4).

A strong loyalty tendency was observed, with 82% of respondents planning to return and 78% willing to recommend the event. This finding suggests a robust satisfaction–loyalty relationship, consistent with patterns widely discussed in sport consumer behavior research (Thompson et al., 2020; Biscaia et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2016). Word-of-mouth also emerged as an influential factor in event growth, as loyal participants often act as brand advocates within their communities. These results align with prior evidence showing that participant satisfaction not only predicts repeat participation but also fosters community cohesion and destination branding (Jeong and Kim, 2019).

Educational and social implications.

Both strands of evidence suggest that endurance events function as informal learning environments where participants cultivate discipline, resilience, and health literacy (Grix, 2017). From a societal perspective, these events also contribute to community development, particularly through volunteer involvement, which fosters skills, social integration, and health-oriented behaviors (Michalska et al., 2025; Stefanica et al., 2024c). In transitional economies, privately organized events increasingly combine profit with social responsibility by channeling revenues toward ecological or community projects (Dan, 2019; Czegledi et al., 2021). This dual economic and social relevance underlines their broader role in sustainable entrepreneurship and local identity-building.

Taken together, the findings suggest that small- and medium-scale endurance events are perceived not merely as athletic competitions but as multidimensional experiences that integrate health promotion, educational value, and community engagement. Motivational drivers encourage participation, organizational quality enhances satisfaction, and digitalization increases awareness and interaction—together contributing to loyalty and advocacy. By aligning with and extending the existing literature, this study indicates that endurance sport events have the potential to serve as lifestyle brands that promote both individual well-being and collective development.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for sport event organizers, marketers, and policymakers. Since health improvement and personal achievement emerged as primary motivators, promotional strategies should position endurance events not merely as competitive races, but as holistic lifestyle experiences that integrate wellness, resilience, and community

belonging. At the same time, organizational quality is confirmed as a critical driver of loyalty. High levels of satisfaction associated with infrastructure, logistics, and volunteer engagement underscore the importance of operational excellence, suggesting that consistent investment in clear communication, accessible facilities, and volunteer training can distinguish local events from mass competitions.

Another key implication lies in digital innovation. While social media continues to dominate as the main awareness channel, participants increasingly expect interactive tools that extend beyond promotion, such as real-time tracking, AI-based training advice, and performance feedback platforms. Meeting these expectations would align local events with international best practices and enhance participant engagement (Filo et al., 2015; Ramos-Ruiz et al., 2024). Moreover, the strong loyalty and willingness to recommend identified in this study indicate that participant advocacy functions as a cost-efficient and highly effective growth strategy. Creating memorable and shareable experiences can amplify word-of-mouth and extend the event's reach, particularly in contexts with limited marketing resources.

Finally, the results suggest that endurance events should be leveraged not only as consumer experiences but also as platforms for health education, volunteerism, and sustainable entrepreneurship. Integrating these broader community and educational dimensions reinforces their long-term social impact and secures their position as catalysts of both individual and collective development.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights into the interplay between health, education, and consumer behavior in a small-scale endurance event, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the survey sample was limited to a single edition of the Piteşti Half Marathon, which restricts the generalizability of findings across different years, event contexts, or endurance disciplines. In addition, because the snowball sampling technique relies on participant referrals, the resulting sample may not be fully representative of the broader population of event participants. As such, the results should be interpreted with caution and viewed primarily as exploratory rather than definitive.

Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, including recall errors and social desirability effects, which may have influenced participants' responses regarding their motivations and

satisfaction. Although efforts were made to ensure anonymity and honest reporting, these inherent biases cannot be fully eliminated.

Third, the qualitative component of the study, while enriching the interpretation of quantitative results, was based on a modest number of interviews (n = 5). Although this small sample provided valuable, in-depth insights into participant experiences, it may not capture the full diversity of perspectives within the running community. Future research should therefore expand the qualitative dataset to include a broader and more heterogeneous group of participants, enhancing both the credibility and the transferability of findings.

Finally, the study relied solely on descriptive statistical analyses, which limits the capacity to empirically test the proposed hypotheses through inferential methods such as correlation or regression analysis. While the descriptive approach aligns with the exploratory aim of this research and provides a clear overview of participation trends, future studies should employ larger samples and advanced statistical models to validate the observed relationships with greater rigor.

Overall, these limitations do not undermine the relevance of the findings but rather highlight the need for continued, theory-driven investigations that combine quantitative robustness with qualitative depth to better understand the educational, motivational, and behavioral dimensions of endurance sport participation.

Future research directions

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to track motivations, satisfaction, and loyalty across multiple event editions. Expanding the sample to include diverse demographic groups and comparing results across different endurance disciplines (e.g., triathlons, marathons, ultramarathons) would enrich understanding of participation drivers. Cross-national research in post-communist and transitional economies could illuminate how cultural, economic, and political contexts shape consumer behavior in sport events.

Moreover, future work should investigate the role of digital innovation more systematically, examining how tools such as mobile apps, AI-based training platforms, and real-time race tracking influence engagement, satisfaction, and retention. Finally, integrating sustainability and educational outcomes into research frameworks would allow scholars to better capture the multidimensional contributions of endurance sport events to individual development and community resilience.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate participants' motivations, perceptions, and satisfaction at the Piteşti Half Marathon, with the aim of understanding how educational and health-related values intersect with consumer behavior in a local sporting event. Guided by four hypotheses, the research combined quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive picture of participant experiences.

The findings confirm that motivational drivers—particularly health improvement, achievement, and social interaction—play a central role in influencing participation decisions. Organizational quality and event atmosphere significantly enhanced satisfaction, while digital promotion through social media emerged as the most effective communication channel. Participants also expressed growing expectations for interactive, technology-based tools that could personalize training and engagement experiences. Finally, high satisfaction levels were strongly associated with loyalty and recommendation intentions, emphasizing the strategic role of participant experience in event sustainability.

Beyond these managerial implications, the study demonstrates that endurance sport events can function as informal and non-formal educational environments, promoting health literacy, emotional regulation, teamwork, and social responsibility. Such events offer learning experiences that complement formal education by cultivating transversal competencies aligned with lifelong learning goals. To further enhance this educational impact, event organizers could develop structured collaborations with schools, universities, and local educational institutions — for example, by involving students as volunteers, creating service-learning projects, or integrating endurance events into physical education curricula. These partnerships would reinforce the dual mission of sport events as both community and educational platforms.

From an international perspective, this research contributes to the growing body of literature linking sport management, education, and public health promotion. By focusing on a small-scale endurance event in a post-communist European context, it extends existing models largely developed in Western or mega-event settings, highlighting the educational and civic potential of localized, community-oriented sport initiatives. As such, the findings underscore that even modestly scaled events can yield significant educational and social benefits when designed around principles of inclusion, reflection, and experiential learning.

In sum, the Piteşti Half Marathon exemplifies how local sport events can transcend their competitive nature to become educational laboratories

for life skills and community development, offering a replicable framework for organizers and educators worldwide seeking to integrate sport, learning, and social engagement.

Statement on the Use of AI Tools | *The authors disclose that ChatGPT-4 (OpenAI) was used on August 5, 2025, exclusively to improve the language quality of the manuscript. The tool assisted in refining grammar, phrasing, and academic style in selected sections. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of original scientific content. All authors have thoroughly reviewed and verified the final version of the manuscript and assume full responsibility for its content.*

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