

The Importance of Sport in Students' Lives and the Frequency of Sport Participation Among Students - Gender Differences

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research was to analyse the gender differences among students at the University of Ljubljana in the importance of sport in their lives and the frequency of sport participation. The research was done in the 2013 academic year on a random sample of 3% of the students (N = 1390); a questionnaire about students' lifestyles was used (Majerič, 2013). In this study, two variables were analysed: the importance of sport in students' lives and the frequency of sport participation; the data were analysed with SPSS for Windows. The basic statistical parameters for both variables were calculated. To calculate the gender differences, a t-test for independent samples and the Mann-Whitney U test were run. For the variable 'importance of sport in students' lives', 61.95% of male and 53.20% of female respondents reported that sport is important and very important in their lives. The gender differences were small but statistically significant ($p=0.013$). For the variable 'frequency of participation in sport activity', 79.61% of male and 77.10% of female respondents reported that they were sport active every day, 4 to 6 times a week or 2 to 3 times a week. The gender differences in this variable were also statistically significant ($p=0.000$). Our findings and conclusions provide useful guidance to the closer and wider professional public who organize sport programmes for students.

Key words: sport activity, students, importance, frequency, gender differences

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010), human health depends on ecological conditions (21%), genetics (21%), the quality of the health care system (8%), and lifestyle (50%). From this perspective, it is the lifestyle of the individual that is crucial for health and quality of life. In this context, physical activity plays an important role in all stages of the life of the individual. It is necessary for the normal biological, social, and psychological development and health of young people. It is also known that regular and appropriately selected sport activity for adults and the elderly can maintain their vitality and protect them against disease; it also allows them a better quality of life (Škof, 2010). Therefore, it is vital that young people are aware of the importance of a healthy lifestyle, of which physical activity is an integral part. Young people should have good conditions for physical activity. They should be engaged in different sport activities as often as possible. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010), to maintain health, people aged 18–64 should do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week or do at least 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week or an equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity activity. This is not only important for the student years, but also for all later stages of life. Only in such a way can physical activity be an important part of a healthy lifestyle.

Various studies have revealed sport activity to be an important factor in the lifestyle of students at the University of Ljubljana. Majerič (2002, N = 1614) observed that 62.4% of interviewed male students and 54.2% of female students regard

sport as an important factor in their lives. Similarly, Markelj (2004, N = 705) stated that 53% of all students share this belief; however, men consider sport activity to be a more important part of their lives than women do. Likewise, Majerič and Markelj (2010, N=1116) found that 63.5% of interviewed students of both genders regard sport as an important factor in their lives, although the authors reported that men often consider sport to be very important whereas women were mainly less explicit in defining its importance. Several other studies on students also revealed sport activity as an important lifestyle factor during the student years (Bettina, 2000; El Ansari et al., 2013) with the authors claiming sport activity to be more important for male students. Altogether, it could be concluded that sport activity represents an important value for students whilst indicating that the motives for it also need to be examined. Some analyses on the motivation of Slovenian students for sport participation revealed that students participate in sport not only to spend their free time in a useful way but mostly for reasons of health, fitness, achieving good looks, and as a way of socializing (Petkovšek, 1980; Majerič, 2002; Markelj, 2004; Cerar, 2014). These findings have been confirmed by studies in other countries, indicating that the main motive for the sport participation of students carries a social note combined with health prevention, re-energizing oneself, internal motivation, teamwork, fun, followed by external motivation and competition (Shao-Hua et al., 2006; Santos Legnani et al., 2011; Afsanepurak et al., 2012; Cerar, 2014). When attempting to understand the importance of sport activity among students, the findings of researchers reporting on various motives for sport participation of different genders should also be considered. Sirard, Pfeiffer, and Pate (2006) found that the main motivational factors for

sport participation in men are competition, social contacts, and health, whereas among women social contacts come first, followed by health and then competition. Egli, Bland, Melton, and Czech (2011) as well as Guedes, Santos Legnani, and Legnani (2012) stated that men are more motivated for sport by internal factors (strength, challenge, body fitness), whereas women are more motivated by external factors (weight watching, achieving good looks). In these studies, a comparison between the genders of all age groups has revealed higher motivation and a higher degree of sport participation in men in comparison to women. According to the findings, it could be concluded that sport activity is an important factor in the lifestyle of students of both genders; however, the motivation for participation in men and women is different.

Available research on the sport participation of students at the University of Ljubljana, which was performed on representative samples, shows the increase in the proportion of sport active students. According to the data from Petkovšek (1980, N=1061), 56% of male and female students were sport active in 1979. Majerič (2002) found that 70.3% of enlisted students of both genders were sport active in 2002. Observing a sample of students from 2006 at three Slovenian universities, Majerič and Markelj (2010) found that 81.2% of the interviewed subjects participated in sport. All of these studies indicate that male students participate in sport more often than the female students do; similar conclusions have been reached in some studies from other countries. In the research among students from seven UK universities. El Ansari et al. (2013) found that 40% of females and 66% of males participated in vigorous exercise for at least 20 minutes on ≥ 3 days in the week, or participated in moderate exercise for at least 30 minutes on ≥ 5 days in the week. This is analogous to reports from the USA, where 44.2% of students exercised vigorously for at least 20 minutes or moderately for at least 30 minutes on at least three out of the previous seven days (American College Health Association, 2007). However, some findings are less positive. In Hong Kong, only 9% of female

and 26% of male university students exercised vigorously for 20 min or more, at least three times a week (Lee & Loke, 2005).

Based on this theoretical introduction, the main purpose of this empirical research was to analyse the gender differences among students at the University of Ljubljana regarding the importance of sport in student's life and frequency of sport participation.

Methods

The research was conducted in March and April in the 2013 academic year on a random sample of 3% of the students of the University of Ljubljana (N = 1390). A questionnaire on student lifestyles was used (Majerič, 2013). The survey was based on the consideration of ethical aspects of research involving human studies, in accordance with the principles of the Helsinki-Tokyo Declaration. Before the start of the implementation of the survey, participants gave written consent to participate in the survey. The survey was voluntary. In accordance with the relevant legislation, the protection of personal data and the anonymity of participants was considered. In this study, two variables were analysed: 1) the importance of sport in students' lives, and 2) the frequency of participation in sport. In the first variable, respondents had to choose one answer on a six-item Likert scale. In the second variable, students had to choose one answer from among seven. The data from the variables was analysed with SPSS for Windows, and the basic statistics parameters for both variables were calculated. For the variable 'importance of sport in student's life', a t-test for independent samples was run to calculate the gender differences. To calculate the gender differences for the variable 'frequency of sport participation', a Mann-Whitney U test was run.

Results

Table 1. The importance of physical activity in student's life for male and female – basic statistics

		<i>Six-Likert scale</i>						
Gender		1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Male students	N	18	30	58	109	160	190	565
	%	3.19	5.31	10.27	19.29	28.32	33.63	100.00
Female students	N	10	47	136	180	212	212	797
	%	1.25	5.90	17.06	22.58	26.60	26.60	100.00

Legend: N – number of respondents; % – percentage of respondents; Six-Likert scale – '1' means that physical activity is not important and '6' that it is very important

Table 2. The importance of physical activity in student's life – gender differences

Gender	N	M	SD	SEM	p
Male students	565	4.65	1.345	.057	0.013
Female students	797	4.47	1.276	.045	

Legend: N – number of respondents, M – mean; SD-standard deviation; SEM – Standard Error Mean; p – value for statistically significant differences; * $p \leq 0.05$.

The first analysis (Table 1) shows that sport is a very important part of students' lives for both sexes. For the variable 'importance of sport' in students' lives', 61.95% of male and 53.20% of female respondents reported that sport is important

and very important in their lives (the highest values: 5 and 6 on a six-item Likert scale). The analysis (Table 2) of mean values for the same variable showed that the mean values were slightly higher for male students (male students' mean values = 4.65;

female students' mean values = 4.47). Although small differences in mean values were found, the t-test for equality of means

showed that gender differences were statistically significant ($p=0.013$).

Table 3. The frequency of participation in physical activity for male and female students – basic statistics

Gender		Never	Once or several times a year	Once or twice per month	Once a week	Two to three times per week	Four to six times per week	Every day	Total
Male students	N	13	17	22	62	175	189	81	559
	%	2.33	3.04	3.94	11.09	31.31	33.81	14.49	100.00
Female students	N	8	16	48	111	331	202	83	799
	%	1.00	2.00	6.01	13.89	41.43	25.28	10.39	100.00

Legend: N – number of respondents; % – percentage of respondents

Table 4. The frequency of participation in physical activity – gender differences

	Me	SD	MR	Sum of Ranks	U	Z	p
Male students	5.44	1.326	723.41	404385.00			
Female students	5.18	1.188	648.78	518376.00	198776.000	-3.597	0.000

Legend: Me – median; SD-standard deviation; MR – mean rank; SR – sum of ranks; U – value for the calculation of statistically significant differences; Z – value for approximation of U for large samples; p – value for statistically significant differences; * $p \leq 0.05$.

The second analysis (Table 3) showed that students of both genders practice sport very often. For the variable frequency 'participation in sport activity', 79.61% of male and 77.10% of female respondents reported that they were sport active every day, 4 to 6 times a week or 2 to 3 times a week. Sport participation included a variable in a range of different activities from walking to cycling and various games. The analysis (Table 4) of median values showed that male students were practicing sport more often (median values = 5.44) than females did (median values = 5.18). Although the differences are not large, the Mann-Whitney U test confirmed that gender differences in variable frequency of sport participation were statistically significant ($p=0.000$).

Discussion

When analysing the importance of physical activity in students' lives, the findings of this study support previous research conducted among students in Slovenia (Majerič, 2002; Markelj, 2004; Majerič & Markelj, 2010; Cerar, 2013). The findings are also comparable with other studies (Bettina, 2000; El Ansari et al., 2013). We have confirmed that sport at the University of Ljubljana remains a very important part of the lives of both male and female students; students of both sexes were practicing sport very often. Nevertheless, male students were more sport active than female ones were. In this paper, we did not analyse the motivation for sport participation among students, but we propose understanding the gender differences in the contexts and findings of Majerič (2002), Markelj (2004), and Cerar (2014). They found that motives for physical activities among male and female students were different. Male students were involved in physical activity due to competition, socializing, and health; but female students, due to health, socializing and then competition. These findings also support research conducted in other countries (Sirard, Pfeiffer, & Pate, 2006; Egli, Bland, Melton, & Czech, 2011; Guedes, Santos Legnani, & Le-

gnani, 2012).

If we consider the last Bologna reform, done in 2010, which has transformed organized sport programmes from compulsory, curricular activity to non-compulsory, extracurricular activities, the frequency of physical activity among students at the University of Ljubljana in 2012 was still very high. In our study, we found that 79.61% of male and 77.10% of female respondents reported that they were sport active every day, 4 to 6 times a week, or 2 to 3 times a week. We also found that male students were more sport active than female students were. Our findings support the findings of El Ansari et al. (2013) and data from the American College Health Association (2007). Regardless of the Bologna reform in Slovenia, we hope that we will never report such a small proportion of sport active students as reported by Lee and Loke (2005), with only 9% of female and 26% of male university students exercising vigorously for 20 min or more, at least three times a week.

In our research, we did not analyse the frequency of sport activity participation in such a way that we could compare the data with the recommendations of WHO (2010). However, we think that the frequency of sport activity participation among male and female students at the University of Ljubljana remains sufficient so that it can be said that the majority of students were physically active enough to maintain their health.

Our conclusion is that there were many reasons for these positive findings of sport activity as an important part of student's life and the high frequency of participation in sport activity among male and female students. Examining the findings in greater detail reveals that a systematic and planned implementation of physical education in elementary and middle school, which is based on carefully prepared curricula, is definitely a highly important factor. Another significant factor is a rich sport tradition, which is one of the reasons that Slovenia is known as a 'sport nation'. Ultimately, we can conclude that sport activity is currently one of the main focal points of a healthy lifestyle, of which young people, future intellectuals, are apparently aware.

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