Motivations of Iranian University Students for Participation in Sporting Activities

Authors' contribution:

A) conception and design of the study

B) acquisition of data

C) analysis and interpretation of data

D) manuscript preparation

E) obtaining funding

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to reveal university students' motivations for sport. A sample of 934 students (male: 47.4%; female: 52.6%) with different educational levels and fields of study were involved in our research. A revised and developed scale was employed for measuring the students' motivation. Inferential and descriptive statistics were used to describe the differences in students' motivations for sport. The results indicated that having fun and experiencing joy, maintaining physical and mental health, and having a fit body were rated most frequently as the students' motivations for sport; whereas spending leisure time, being with friends, and participating in competitions were found as the lowest motivational dimensions. Furthermore, various motivational differences could be observed between students regarding their gender, age, educational level, and field of study. In conclusion, it is suggested that preparing special plans based on the students' different motivations and on their special needs for sport could improve their participation rate in sporting activities.

KEYWORDS

motivation, Iranian public universities, level of education, study field, students

Introduction

The maintenance of physically active leisure-oriented lifestyles has been increasingly important in society (Hannon & Ratliffe, 2005). Although most people are aware of the benefits of regular active recreation and wish to be more active physically, many of them remain sedentary (Attarzadeh & Sohrabi, 2007). One key factor that may determine whether people adopt an active lifestyle is if they are optimally motivated for doing sport (Haerens et al., 2010).

Motivation is understood as an impetus for exercising (Biddle, 1995). People with greater motivation participate more regularly over a sustained period of time than people with low motivation (Frederick et al., 1996). Therefore, a study on people's motivations is an appropriate way to understand their participation and their non-participation in sport better (Seo et al., 2007).

Various studies indicated that people with different demographic and socioeconomic characteristics have different motivations for participating in sport. For instance, such motivations as spending leisure time, displaying masculinity, and enjoying therapeutic benefits have been reported by members of different socioeconomic groups (Garcia et al., 2009). In addition, having fun and experiencing joy (Attarzadeh &

Sohrabi, 2007; Bernstein et al., 2011; Mozafari et al., 2010), having perfect body shape and good appearance (Tergerson & King, 2002), and improving physical and mental health (Safania, 2001) are reported by different age groups and genders.

Various research was also carried out with the involvement of university students, which indicates how important this topic is at institutions of higher education (Kamarudin & Fauzee, 2007; Kimbrough et al.; 2005; Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008). Based on his study with the involvement of 2716 female students, Safania (2001), discovered that having fun and experiencing joy, having a healthy body, and becoming fit were the major factors that motivated them to participate in sport. Similarly, Azizi et al. (2011), reported that having a fit body, enjoyment and having fun, and improving physical and mental health, were respectively the main motivations of students for practicing sport.

Egli et al. (2011) found that male students were motivated more frequently by enjoyment, affiliation, competition, and improving body abilities, whereas females showed higher motivation for protecting and maintaining health as well as paying attention to weight management and to appearance. According to his study, younger students (younger than 20 years of age) were more likely to be motivated by health protection and ill-health avoidance, while older students (older than 20) were more likely motivated by affiliation with sports teams or sports organizations. Ramezanejad et al. (2010) showed that having good physical and mental health as well as improving physical fitness were respectively ranked as factors that motivated people the most for doing sports. They found that females were motivated more than males for participating in sport. Education and income levels also affected the direction of the motivations.

The effects of gender and class level were studied by Kilpatrick et al. (2005). They argued that females were motivated more by managers, whereas males were motivated more often by challenges and by the wish to improve their appearance. However, in another study, the authors discovered that both genders were similarly influenced to participate in sports by the idea of improving their body shape and their skills, and by the idea of protecting their healthy body (Furjan-Mandic et al., 2010). The grade level (Azizi et al., 2011; Bryan & Solmon, 2012) and the field of study (Fathi, 2010) were also reported as factors which have an impact on students' motivations for involvement in sport.

The motivation of Iranian university students for participating in sporting activities has hardly been investigated. Therefore, we have recently examined this issue. The major objective of this paper is to reveal Iranian university students' motivations for sports and exercise on the basis of our investigation, and to discover whether there is any connection between the nature of their motivations and some of their social-demographic characteristics. In Iran, sporting activity is compulsory at universities, so in our research the questions about students' motivations referred to the sport and exercise that every student practices during their studies at higher education institutions.

Methods

Research sample

Our research was carried out by survey. Students at Tehran public universities (n=12) were regarded as the total population. The research sample (n=934) was selected gradually. As a first step, two classes were selected from each faculty and from each level of education (BSc, MSc, PhD) at every participating university. As the second step, the students were selected from the two classes by stratified sampling according to the students' level of education (BSc students, n= 420; MSc students, n= 306; PhD students n=208) and to the faculty they attended (students' major in natural science, n=217; students' major in human science, n=230; students' major in technical science, n=235; students' major in medical science, n=140; students' major in art, n=112). The gender distribution was the following: male=443, female=491. The youngest student was 18 years old whereas the oldest one was 41 years old.

Data collection

The data was collected by a standardized questionnaire which consisted of two parts. The first part requested information about the students' age, gender, educational level, and field of study. In the second part, a modified version of Ramezanijad et al.'s questionnaire (2010), which measured people's motivation for sport in six dimensions with thirty items, was adapted to the Iranian situation. The questionnaire modified by us contained nine dimensions: *maintaining physical and mental health, having fun and experiencing joy, improving self esteem, preventing diseases, having a fit body, participating in competition, spending leisure time, being with friends, and reducing stress*. All dimensions comprised three items. The internal reliability of the questionnaire is 0.89.

The data collection was conducted with the assistance of university sport managers in each of the 12 selected universities in a 4-week period, during the 2008-2009 academic year. Students from the same classes were invited by the managers and they answered the questionnaires in groups. They were asked to respond to the questions on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5; *strongly agree* to 1; *strongly disagree*.

Statistical Analyses

For analyzing the data, descriptive statistics, independent samples *t*-test, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used. With the help of these methods, the students' motivations were compared according to their gender, age, educational level, and field of study ($p < 0.001$). For the data analysis, an IBM SPSS Statistics Version 19 was employed.

Results

The results indicate that the different motivations for participation in sports have different importance with the students. They are more interested in having fun and experiencing joy (4.27 ± 0.71) and in maintaining their physical and mental health (4.18 ± 0.67). They show less interest in the following motivations: having a fit body (3.81 ± 0.95), improving self-esteem (3.77 ± 0.96), preventing diseases (3.53 ± 1.33), reducing stress (3.35 ± 1.09), spending leisure time (3.05 ± 1.32), being with friends (2.65 ± 0.96), and participating in competition (2.55 ± 1.07). The different dimensions of the students' motivations are presented in Table 1 (according to gender and age) and Table 2 (according to the level of education and study field).

Table 1. Students' motivations for participating in sport according to gender and age (mean $\pm$ SD)

Motivational Factor	Gender			Age			
	Total	Male	Female	18-21	22-25	26-29	>30
Preserving physical and mental health	4.18 $\pm$ 0.67	4.23 $\pm$ 0.54	4.14 $\pm$ 0.78	4.33 $\pm$ 0.61	4.20 $\pm$ 0.59	4.13 $\pm$ 0.48	4.01 $\pm$ 0.89
Having fun and experiencing joy	4.27 $\pm$ 0.71	4.28 81	4.25 $\pm$ 0.59	4.27 $\pm$ 0.69	4.44 $\pm$ 0.54	4.34 $\pm$ 0.75	4.09 $\pm$ 0.74
Improving self-esteem	3.77 $\pm$ 0.96	3.81 $\pm$ 1.10	3.73 $\pm$ 0.80	3.54 $\pm$ 0.95	4.17 $\pm$ 1.03	4.10 $\pm$ 0.86	3.55 $\pm$ 0.87
Preventing diseases	3.53 $\pm$ 1.33	3.52 $\pm$ 1.36	3.54 $\pm$ 1.30	3.44 $\pm$ 1.37	3.04 $\pm$ 1.22	3.94 $\pm$ 1.35	3.56 $\pm$ 1.18
Having a fit body	3.81 $\pm$ 0.95	4.13 $\pm$ 0.75	3.49 $\pm$ 1.02	4.18 $\pm$ 0.77	3.45 $\pm$ 1.12	3.65 $\pm$ 0.99	3.62 $\pm$ 0.86
Participating in competition	2.55 $\pm$ 1.07	2.60 $\pm$ 1.20	2.50 $\pm$ 0.92	2.60 $\pm$ 0.02	2.31 $\pm$ 0.52	2.64 $\pm$ 1.01	2.54 $\pm$ 1.39
Spending leisure time	3.05 $\pm$ 1.32	2.90 $\pm$ 1.30	3.20 $\pm$ 1.32	3.78 $\pm$ 1.18	1.80 $\pm$ 0.81	2.58 $\pm$ 0.49	3.15 $\pm$ 1.57
Reducing stress	3.35 $\pm$ 0.9	3.05 $\pm$ 0.97	3.66 $\pm$ 1.12	3.35 $\pm$ 1.19	3.47 $\pm$ 0.86	3.48 $\pm$ 0.94	3.18 $\pm$ 1.19
Being with friends	2.65 $\pm$ 0.96	2.50 $\pm$ 0.92	2.80 $\pm$ 0.98	2.45 $\pm$ 0.87	2.69 $\pm$ 0.56	2.57 $\pm$ 1.09	3.00 $\pm$ 1.12

Source: own study.

Table 2. Students' motivations for participating in sport according to level of education and field of study (mean $\pm$ SD)

Motivational Factor	Educational level			Field of study				
	BSc	MSc	PhD	Human Science	Natural Science	Medical Science	Technical Science	Art
Preserving physical and mental health	4.25 $\pm$ 0.55	4.13 $\pm$ 0.77	3.83 $\pm$ 0.64	4.19 $\pm$ 0.51	4.91 $\pm$ 0.41	4.23 $\pm$ 0.74	4.24 $\pm$ 0.57	3.93 $\pm$ 0.65
Having fun and experiencing joy	4.25 $\pm$ 0.81	4.27 $\pm$ 0.60	4.54 $\pm$ 0.59	4.05 $\pm$ 0.88	4.13 $\pm$ 0.34	4.26 $\pm$ 0.44	4.72 $\pm$ 0.45	4.20 $\pm$ 0.89
Improving self-esteem	3.82 $\pm$ 1.12	3.74 $\pm$ 0.79	3.50 $\pm$ 0.72	3.90 $\pm$ 1.08	3.91 $\pm$ 0.40	3.92 $\pm$ 0.83	2.95 $\pm$ 0.82	3.91 $\pm$ 0.96
Preventing diseases	3.53 $\pm$ 1.37	3.53 $\pm$ 1.30	3.58 $\pm$ 1.28	3.13 $\pm$ 1.07	3.40 $\pm$ 1.17	3.49 $\pm$ 1.31	3.73 $\pm$ 1.48	3.82 $\pm$ 1.39
Having a fit body	4.12 $\pm$ 0.77	3.51 $\pm$ 1.01	3.79 $\pm$ 0.88	3.81 $\pm$ 0.74	3.34 $\pm$ 0.74	4.04 $\pm$ 0.80	4.25 $\pm$ 0.82	3.32 $\pm$ 1.14
Participating in competition	2.54 $\pm$ 1.17	2.54 $\pm$ 0.96	3.12 $\pm$ 0.95	2.50 $\pm$ 1.50	4.00 $\pm$ 0.00	2.29 $\pm$ 0.88	2.33 $\pm$ 1.25	2.80 $\pm$ 0.40
Spending leisure time	2.92 $\pm$ 1.31	3.23 $\pm$ 1.32	2.00 $\pm$ 0.88	2.50 $\pm$ 1.12	5.00 $\pm$ 0.00	3.00 $\pm$ 1.41	3.33 $\pm$ 1.25	3.00 $\pm$ 1.10
Reducing stress	3.09 $\pm$ 0.97	3.65 $\pm$ 1.14	2.87 $\pm$ 1.07	3.32 $\pm$ 1.23	2.85 $\pm$ 0.50	3.02 $\pm$ 1.07	3.18 $\pm$ 0.68	4.05 $\pm$ 0.98
Being with friends	2.50 $\pm$ 0.90	2.81 $\pm$ 1.00	2.37 $\pm$ 1.01	3.00 $\pm$ 0.71	2.00 $\pm$ 0.00	2.28 $\pm$ 0.70	2.00 $\pm$ 0.82	3.39 $\pm$ 1.02

Source: own study.

Based on the results of the independent samples' t-test, males show significantly higher motivation than females for preserving their physical and mental health ($t=2.15$; mean= 4.23 ± 0.54), and for having a fit body ($t=0.67$; mean= 4.13 ± 0.75), whereas females have higher motivation for spending leisure time ($t=3.54$; mean= 3.20 ± 1.32), reducing stress ($t=4.84$; mean= 3.66 ± 1.12), and for being with friends ($t=8.86$; mean= 2.80 ± 0.98).

Regarding the students' age, the results of the ANOVA analysis indicate that the youngest students (aged between 18-21 years) are significantly more frequently motivated for participating in sport by maintaining their physical and mental health ($F=10.91$, mean= 4.33 ± 0.61), having a fit body ($F=32.18$, mean= 4.18 ± 0.77), and by spending leisure time ($F=117.54$, mean= 3.78 ± 1.18). Students in the 22-25 age group have stronger motivations for having fun and experiencing joy ($F=8.30$, mean= 4.44 ± 0.54) and for improving self-esteem ($F=28.82$, mean= 4.17 ± 1.03). Older students (26-29 years old) are motivated more frequently by preventing disease ($F=14.41$, mean= 3.94 ± 1.35), participating in competition ($F=2.99$, mean= 2.64 ± 1.01), and by reducing stress ($F=16.13$, mean= 3.48 ± 0.94). The oldest students (30 years old or more) are rather motivated for practicing sport by being with friends ($F=3.40$, mean= 3.00 ± 1.12).

Comparing students with different levels of education, the results of the ANOVA analysis show that bachelor's degree students are significantly more frequently motivated by maintaining their physical and mental health ($F=6.55$, mean= 4.25 ± 0.55) and by having a fit body ($F=1.88$, mean= 4.12 ± 0.77). Master's students' motivations are stronger for spending leisure time ($F=13.91$, mean= 3.23 ± 1.32), reducing stress ($F=13.25$, mean= 3.65 ± 1.14), and for being with friends ($F=34.11$, mean= 3.41 ± 1.00). Doctoral students are more frequently motivated by participating in competition ($F=3.53$, mean= 3.12 ± 0.95).

The results of the ANOVA analysis according to the study field of the students indicate that students majoring in natural science are significantly more frequently motivated by maintaining their physical and mental health ($F=25.07$, mean= 4.91 ± 0.41), participating in competition ($F=35.51$, mean= 4.00 ± 0.00), and by spending leisure time ($F=41.61$, mean= 5.00 ± 0.00). Medical students have stronger motivations for improving self-esteem ($F=34.21$, mean= 3.92 ± 0.83). Students in technology are better motivated by having fun and experiencing joy ($F=21.49$, mean= 4.72 ± 0.45), and by having a fit body ($F=34.59$, mean= 4.25 ± 0.82). Whereas students studying in the field of art are motivated more frequently by preventing disease ($F=8.08$, mean= 3.82 ± 1.39), reducing stress ($F=108.53$, mean= 4.05 ± 0.98), and by being with friends ($F=40.22$, mean= 3.39 ± 1.02).

Discussion

As is known, there are two sources of motivation for practicing sport: external and internal. Intrinsic motivations mean an internal desire to do something because it is enjoyable, it gives pleasure, and/or it is the right thing to do. Extrinsic motivations refer to factors which are external, that is, they are not related to the activity somebody is doing. Generally speaking, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are combined and their optimal combination in sport depends on the particular area of sport in question; the balance of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations should obviously differ between athletes in elite sport and those in recreational sport.

This study discovered that Iranian university students are not motivated by external factors to a great extent, they are rather stimulated internally. They do not practice because they want to call attention to themselves or because they expect rewards for their participation in sport. Having fun and experiencing joy, maintaining physical and mental health, and having a fit body, were respectively rated by the students as the three most important motivations for participation in sport. These findings are similar to the results of previous research (Kamarudin & Fauzee, 2007; Azizi et al., 2011; Furjan-Mandic et al., 2010; Ramezaninejad et al., 2010; Safania, 2001). These motivational factors comprise the most important values and benefits of physical activities reported in various studies. Regular participation in sport is one of the most powerful means for promoting public health (USDHHS 1996, 2000). Moreover, people who seek enjoyment and fun in their lives have better mental health (Attarzadeh & Sohrabi, 2007). The fact that the students focus on sport as source of enjoyment and fun could not only be helpful in improving their physical and mental health but also their academic achievements, and it could also positively influence several other aspects of their lives.

The top values of the Iranian students' motives are in harmony with the aims and standards of physical education officially formulated even by Western experts (NASPE, 2004). Similarly to the findings of Attarzadeh & Sohrabi (2007), they reflect the students' increased knowledge and awareness of the positive effects of sport and exercise on the human body. In our case, the older students are more self-conscious, but at the same time they tend to have a meaningful relationship with other students and they seem to be under stress more often than the younger students. In other words, this also means that external motivational factors energize and sustain their behavior. Generally, the older the students are, the higher the educational level they study at. This shows that individual factors have an impact on a person's motivational set, not separately but closely interrelated with each other.

We found it logical that students majoring in natural science are the most conscious about maintaining their physical and mental health; however, we expected similar views from the medical students whose strongest motivation is connected to improving self-esteem. One of the potential explanations of this result may be that medical students' self-esteem is often challenged by professional problems and they might regard sport as a source for promoting their self-assurance.

According to our research findings, gender differences between Iranian male and female students manifested themselves in a special way in five motivational factors. The main reason for this phenomenon might be rooted in the dominant culture of Iranian society. Old beliefs concerning both the role of women in society in general and in sport in particular survived and resulted in many people's negative attitude to women's sport (Mozafari et al., 2010). As a consequence of the cultural traditions related to women's sport, sporting opportunities are not equal for male and female students at Iranian universities. There is no doubt that male students have a much greater opportunity to choose sports and occasions for practicing sport than female students. The different social expectations towards women and men in society also might have an impact on the students' motivational factors. Our results are consistent with the findings of previous research carried out about Iranian sport (Ramezaninejad et al., 2010).

Conclusions

Persian sport has long and rich traditions, although high value was attributed, at the beginning exclusively, later mostly, to male sport. The unfavorable status of women's sport has been changing slowly. Nevertheless, both male and female Iranian students are aware of the necessity and importance of physically active lifestyle and they have conscious, positive motivations for participation in sport. This is due partly to the fact that, similarly to many other countries, students enter universities from families with better socioeconomic backgrounds than the national average, including more cultural capital which comprises the recognition of the significance of sport and exercise in life, at least for young men but also not too rarely for young women.

Students' motivations are multifarious, but they are intrinsic in most cases. Students tend to maximize their pleasure and to optimize their physical well-being with the help of sport. Their inner drive focuses on many spheres of enjoyment and on the extensive protection of their health through exercise. Their motivational guide is established at home, but it is further developed during their studies. According to the findings of our research it can be stated that the motivational climate is probably very good at the universities they attend. Although they apply a double standard for male and female students, generally speaking, Iranian public universities create favorable sporting environments. They have effective ways of building and developing students' positive motivation for practicing sport and thereby promoting a positive attitude and desirable behavior in connection with sporting activities.

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