

Constraints to Participation in Physical Activity and Sport: A Comparative Study between Hungarian and Iranian Students

Abstract of PhD thesis

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1. INTRODUCTION

The maintenance of physically active leisure-oriented lifestyles has become increasingly important in developed societies. Despite of all benefits of sport and physical activity, large number of students is not regularly active. It might be related to different constraint factors that interfere with their decision making for participation in sporting activities.

Various discussions have extended well beyond the original purpose of constraints research, proposing that leisure constraints can help understand broader factors and influences that shape everyday leisure behaviors. Leisure constraints have been used to explain changing trends in leisure preferences over time and to understand variation in leisure choices and experiences for different segments of the population. It is argued that studies among specific population groups, such as university students, contribute to investigating constraints more systematically and helping people manage such factors more effectively. Several studies indicated that the perception of constraints differs in different persons; it is more related to the type of activity selected, as well as to the situation within which the activity is performed. That is why studying the leisure constraints should be carried out within the framework of specific population groups as well as specific activities. These ideas could be realized at universities if the officials had a proper understanding about the constraints perceived by students to participation in sporting activities. However, there is little knowledge about whether officials correctly understand what the students' perceived constraints are and whether their views are consistent with the students' experiences.

The thesis tries to answer the above problems. It is based on a comparative research between two countries, Hungary and Iran. Since research with similar topic has scarcely been done in this regard until now, the results could be valuable for those responsible for university sport in both countries.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are a great number of publications related to people's constraints to participation in recreational activities, however, comparative research works have rarely been studied related to this subject. Moreover, the students' perceived constraints to participation in sporting as well as in physical activity have never been investigated, and a comparison of students' and sport staff's

opinions about these issues at universities has never been made. Throughout the review of related literature which is enormous the author has chosen some important literature and categorized it into four chapters.

The first chapter involves international articles related to leisure constraints.

The second chapter is related to literature in connection with PA and leisure constraints and involves international articles which are grouped into five brief subchapters. The first subchapter includes literature related to sporting activity and constraints. The second subchapter is about gender's constraints which are completed by two more subchapters about the situation of women's sport in the Iranian society and at the Iranian universities. The next subchapter consists of references to articles related to cultural diversity and constraints. The fourth subchapter is about the perception of constraints and the level of participation in physical activity and sport. The last subchapter includes research studying the students' constraints in sporting activities.

The third chapter comprises the theoretical framework of the thesis. It contains the constraint modeling development and it is grouped into six brief subchapters as follows: constraint model development, model of nonparticipation, structural leisure constraints model, intrapersonal leisure constraints model, interpersonal leisure constraints model, and hierarchical model of leisure constraints.

The fourth chapter is related to the recent situations of university sport in Iran and Hungary which includes two subchapters as follows: university sport in Iran and university sport in Hungary.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Crawford and Godbey (1987) model of leisure constraints was used as the theoretical framework of this thesis. Constraints in this model were grouped in three categories (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural).

Intrapersonal constraints involve psychological states and attributes which interact with leisure preferences rather than intervening in preferences and participation. Intrapersonal constraints refer to those psychological conditions that arise internal to the individual such as personality factors, attitudes, or more temporary psychological states such as moods.

Interpersonal constraints arise from the interactions with other people or from the concept of interpersonal relations in general. A person who feels that he or she lacks a friend with whom

he or she shares an interest in a common activity may encounter an interpersonal constraint if he or she is unable to locate a partner with whom to participate in a specific leisure activity.

Structural constraints include such factors as the lack of opportunities or the cost of activities that result from the external conditions in the environment. These constraints are commonly conceptualized as intervening factors in leisure preferences and participation.

3. OBJECTIVES

This thesis aimed to discover the students' perceived constraints toward participation in sporting activities at Hungarian and Iranian universities. The author also made an attempt to find the relationship between the students' perceived constraints toward participation in sport and exercise and their socio-demographic characteristics.

Another aim was to measure the opinion of sport staff working at Hungarian and Iranian universities about the students' constraints toward participation in sport at the universities and to find the relationship between their ideas and their socio-demographic characteristics, as well as the perceptions of the students themselves.

3.1 Research Questions

In order to reach the objectives of the current thesis, an empirical research was carried out by the author. The aim of the investigation was to obtain answers to the following research questions:

Q1 What are the students' perceived constraints toward participation in sporting activities at the Hungarian and Iranian universities?

Q1.1 What are the attitudes and motivations of female students for participating in sport and exercise at Iranian universities?

Q2 What are the students' constraints toward participation in sporting activities at the universities according to the opinion of sport staff working at the Hungarian and Iranian universities?

Q3 What is the difference between the opinion of students and sport staff regarding the students' perceived constraints toward participation in sport and exercise at the Hungarian and Iranian universities?

Q4 What is the relationship between students' perceived constraints and their different demographic characteristics at the Hungarian and Iranian universities?

Q5 What is the relationship between the staff's opinion about students' perceived constraints toward participation in sporting activities and their different demographic characteristics at the Hungarian and Iranian universities?

Q6 What is the difference between Hungarian and Iranian students regarding their perceived constraints toward participation in sport and exercise?

Q7 What is the difference between the opinion of Hungarian and Iranian university sport staff regarding the students' perceived constraints toward participation in sporting activities at the universities?

Q8 What are the Iranian students perceived constraints toward the involvement of physical activity (walking, shopping, gardening, housework, etc.) in their everyday life?

3.2 Hypotheses

It was assumed that:

H1 Students in both countries perceive all types of constraints toward participation in sport and exercise at the universities.

H1.1 The Iranian female students do not have positive attitudes regarding sporting activities. Engaging in social interaction as well as having a fit body is the most frequent motivations for participating in regular activities.

H2 The opinion of university sport staff reflects that students perceived several intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints toward participation in sport and exercise in both countries.

H3 The opinion of the students and the staff about the students' perceived constraints toward participation in sport and exercise are different in both countries.

H4 Students in both countries experienced different constraints according to their socio-demographic characteristics.

H5 The staff of sport affairs at the universities has different opinion concerning the students' perceived constraints according to their socio-demographic characteristics in both countries.

H6 The Hungarian and the Iranian students experienced different constraints toward participation in sporting activities.

H7 The opinions of the Hungarian and Iranian university sport staff on the students' perceived constraints toward participation in sporting activities are different.

H8 The Iranian male students do not perceived constraints toward the involvement of physical activity in their everyday life; however the Iranian female students have some barriers to be physically active under certain circumstances.

4. METHODS

The major method of this research was survey and it was completed by in-depth interviews.

4.1 Survey

In both countries all full time students studied at the public universities in Hungary (n= 214344) and Iran (n= 539579) in the academic year of 2011-2012, and all universities sport staff employed at the same universities in the same period (in Hungary: n= 280; in Iran: n= 600) were regarded as the total population of the research.

The method of sampling was gradual. In the first round the universities were selected by stratified random sampling, based on the geographical location of the universities in both of countries. Then the students and the staff members were selected at the selected universities both in Hungary and in Iran. The students were selected also by stratified random sampling at the previously selected universities according to the major and the level of their studies (in Hungary: n= 793; in Iran: n= 1398). The sample of the students fairly represents the total population according to the region of their university, their gender, their age as well as the field and the level of their studies at the university.

In order to collect data from the sport staff, all staff members employed at the departments of PE and sport at the selected universities were regarded as the research population. The research population of the Hungarian and Iranian staff members fairly represents the total population of the sport staff according to the region of their university, their gender, their age, their management history, their position in university as well as the field of their former studies at higher education.

Based on the aim of the study, two corresponding self administrated questionnaires were created with two distinct parts for students and university sport staff members. The first part requested demographic information. The second part of the questionnaire referred to the most important constraint factors reducing the participation of students in sporting activities. It consisted of 40 questions within three dimensions: intrapersonal (15), interpersonal (5), and structural (20). With the Iranian students 1315, with the Hungarian students 793 questionnaires were completely returned. With the Iranian sport staff 86, with the Hungarian sport staff 48 questionnaires were returned in a complete form.

To obtain means, percentages, and standard deviations descriptive statistics were calculated. For an inferential analysis of the data, a one-sample t-test was used to find and to compare the constraints toward participation of students in sports. Also, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used for comparing the students' and sport staff's opinions based on various variables ($p \leq 0.05$). The IBM SPSS Statistics 19 was employed for data analysis.

4.2 In-depth interviews

In order to get a better insight, the quantitative data of the survey were supplemented by in-depth interviews ($n = 50$) with Iranian female students on different educational levels (BSc: 24; MSc: 15; PhD: 11) and study fields (natural sciences: 13; human sciences: 16; technical sciences: 12; art: 9) at the selected universities.

5. RESULTS

The results of the MANOVA test indicated significant differences between the students' and the staff's ideas. In Iran the differences between the students' perception and the staff's views were the strongest regarding intrapersonal and structural constraints ($p \leq 0.05$); however, no difference was found related to interpersonal barriers. At the Hungarian universities differences in perceptions and views were significant concerning intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints ($p \leq 0.05$); however, students and sport staff did not have different opinions regarding structural constraints

5.1 Intrapersonal Constraints

The results indicated that intrapersonal barriers prevent the Iranian students from participating in sports ($p \leq 0.05$). The Hungarian students did not experience intrapersonal constraints; therefore this type of constraints did not have a significant effect on their participation in sporting activities ($p \leq 0.05$). Also, it is found that sport staff in both countries believed that intrapersonal constraints affect students' participation in sports ($p \leq 0.05$).

5.2 Interpersonal Constraints

Regarding interpersonal constraints it was found that this type of barriers affects the participation of Iranian and Hungarian students in sport ($p \leq 0.05$) in a similar way. However, Hungarian students are more affected by these constraints. It was also discovered that, according to the Iranian staff, interpersonal constraints affect the participation of students in sport activities ($p \leq 0.05$). In contrast, in the opinions of Hungarian university sport staff, this category of constraints have no effects on the participation of Hungarian students in sport ($p \leq 0.05$).

5.3 Structural Constraints

The results indicated that structural barriers were perceived by both the Iranian and the Hungarian students, however, there were more frequently experienced perceived by the Iranian students ($p \leq 0.05$). On the other hand, according to the Iranian staff's views, structural constraints have no effect on the students' participation, whereas the Hungarian sport staff believed that structural barriers affect the students' participation in sporting activities ($p \leq 0.05$).

5.4 Differences Based on Demographic and Social Characteristics

The results of the MANOVA test indicated that some demographic and social characteristics influenced both the students' and the sport staff's opinion on the importance of the various barriers.

The Iranian students showed differences in experiencing intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints according to their gender, age, study field, and educational level. Also, they differently experienced intrapersonal and structural dimensions based on the level of participation in sporting activities.

In Hungary there was a significant difference between students in various age groups and with different frequency of sport involvement in all of the constraint dimensions. The results also indicated a significant difference in interpersonal constraints regarding the students' study field. Students on different educational levels showed differences in intrapersonal and structural constraints. The findings revealed significant differences in intrapersonal constraints according to the Hungarian students' gender ($P \leq 0.05$).

The results discovered significant differences between the sport staff's opinions based on demographic and social characteristics in both countries. Age, study field, and personal management history influenced significantly the sport staff' views on the students' barriers preventing them from sport participation in both in Iran and in Hungary. However, gender and personal organizational position had a significant impact only on the Iranian sport staff' opinion, these characteristics did not play a considerable role in the formation of the sport staff members' views.

5.5 Perceived Constraints to Participation in Sporting and Physical Activities by Female Students in Iran

The results of the interviews by the female students revealed some perceived barriers to participation in sport and exercise and to the involvement of certain physical activity. The majority of the respondents (73 percent) reported that they were not physically active. They

preferred to be involved in other leisure activities. Students referred to the following factors affecting their participation in physical activity and sport:

- Social factors. The negative attitudes of people in society to women's sport affect the sporting behavior of the interviewees. Female students also reported that their involvement in sport and exercise would be prohibited by the government based on some unwritten regulations.
- Cultural factors. The cultural constraints in women's sport in Iran are related to the issue that sport in people's idea is a masculine activity, established only for men.
- Structural factors. The lack of sport facilities, the lack of proper time for using the existing ones, and especially the lack of sport facilities adequate in nature for women are the main structural factors affecting female students' participation in sport and exercise.
- Media. Lack of proper information about women's sport in media, and the lack of covering various types of female sport competitions and championships also hinder female university students from sport involvement.
- Personal factors. Laziness, the lack of sporting habits, and the impact of the traditional and stereotypical ideas also affect women participation in sport and exercise at Iranian universities.

6. Discussion

Various factors affect how the Iranian and the Hungarian students perceive the barriers hindering them from sport involvement and how the sport staff with different nationality think about the students' perception. In Iran the impact of intrapersonal factors proved to be very strong. Generally social and cultural limitations reduce the students', especially the females' participation in sporting and physical activity. The survival of old beliefs, traditions, values and norms influence the students' and the staff's attitude and behavior related to sport. In the Iranian society and at the Iranian universities sport is still often regarded as a masculine activity, and this concept have a high negative impact on the Iranian university sport. In contrast, this type of constraints did not have a significant effect either on the Hungarian students' participation in sport or on the sport staff's views about it.

Both the Iranian and the Hungarian students experienced interpersonal constraints, however, Hungarian students were affected more by this type of barriers. At the Iranian universities there is a huge gap between the students and the sport staff, and the social interaction between male and female students is limited. Although social interaction is legally free in Hungary, social communications between young adults in Hungarian society in general, and at the Hungarian universities are less frequent and less intense than it used to be a few decades earlier. Besides, young people have the possibility for selecting out of a large variety of leisure activities. These circumstances have a hindering impact on the students' interest in, motivation for and behavior related to sport and exercise.

Structural constraints are commonly conceptualized as intervening factors in sport preferences and participation. Both the Iranian and Hungarian students experienced structural constraints, but the Iranian students, especially the female students seemed to be affected more by these barriers. Although there are sufficient female sport staff members, most of managing positions are hold for men at the Iranian universities. Also, based on the Iranian regulations joint participation of males and females in sporting activities is forbidden. Most male sport managers are not aware of the problems of women in sport at universities.

Structural constrains are perceived both by female and male students in Iran because sport facilities at Iranian universities are mostly used by PE faculties for holding official PE courses for PE students. Common students' time for using sport facilities and equipments is strongly limited.

In Hungary, the universities' and the students' poor economic situation is a very important factor influencing negatively the sport involvement. This structural constrain is perceived by the Hungarian students the most frequently. In connection with poor economic situation the low quality of sport facilities at many universities also is an important hindering factor reducing the students' participation in sport.

It does not mean at all that the economic situation is worse in Hungary than in Iran. It refers rather to the fact that other constrain dimensions, comprising social, cultural and religious factors play more important role in Iran and the Iranian students' sporting behavior, many of them do not even realize that if there were not other hindering factors, their also poverty also could prevent them from participating in sport and exercise.

7. Conclusions

This thesis aimed to measure and to compare the perceived constraints toward the students' participation in sports at Hungarian and Iranian universities. It is based on an empirical research carried out by the author with the same objectives, research questions, and hypotheses, as well as by the same methods in the two countries.

The results indicated that the students experienced various types of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints in both countries but in different ways and to different degrees. The findings revealed the role of the different types of constraints perceived by the students and identified their importance in the two countries with different social, cultural and religious background. The differences between the staff's opinions regarding the students' perceived constraints toward their participation in sports and the impact of some major demographic and social characteristics on the students' perceptions and on the sport staff's views on the students' opinion were also discovered both in Iran and in Hungary.

With full knowledge of the results, it can be stated that, with the exception of the first hypothesis which had to be rejected, all other hypotheses set up at the beginning of the empirical investigation can be accepted since the findings verified them.

Based on the major findings of this study the following recommendations were formulated in order to delete or at least to diminish the importance of the barriers preventing the university students in the two countries:

Decision makers in sport at the university should pay more attention to the students' beliefs, traditions, religions, values and to the effects of those factors on the students' participation in sports. Also, attention to the students' dominant culture and interests in the different regions of countries could be effective.

Sport decision makers should pay more attention to social factors involved in sports. Social communication and social interaction during participation in sports is one of the most effective factors motivating the students for participation. Generally, this issue is not considered sufficiently in university sport. In this regard the following actions might be important:

- Creating proper and enjoyable environments in sport programs for students.
- Trying to improve the students' knowledge and awareness regarding the social benefits of sport and exercise.

- Encouraging the students to engage in group activities and activities emphasizing the social benefits of sport and exercise.
- Encouraging the students, especially females, to develop a “buddy system” in which peers motivate, encourage, and support one another to engage and remain in sport.
- Encouraging universities’ academics and official staff to serve as positive role models of sport by becoming active and engaging at the university sport programs.

Structural constraints were one of the most serious barriers affecting the students’ participation in sports. The sport responsible and administrators should intervene in reducing or removing these types of constraints.

The following issues might be the key factors for improving the students’ participation in sport activities.

- Proper managing and organizing the sport programs at the universities with considering the students’ perceived constraints.
- Trying to allocate a higher budget for recreational sport activities.
- Trying to involve students in managing and organizing sport programs and sport events.
- Trying to use various methods of advertising for increasing the participation of students in sport and exercise.
- Trying to develop university sport programs that address the students’ mostly perceived benefits of sport and exercise, such as enhanced strength and safe and effective weight loss.
- With the aim of increasing regular activity for male and female students, designing strategies that focus on their interests.
- Also, universities should offer programs after official working time and at weekends for students interested in becoming physically active, but not necessarily interested in participating in solely in university sports.

PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE TOPIC OF THE THESIS

- **Mirsafian, H.**, Doczi, T. and Mohamadinejad, A. (2013). Attitude of Iranian Female University Students to Sports and Exercise. *Iranian Studies*. In Press. DOI: 10.1080/00210862.2013.823790
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