

Body Image of Pupils of Older School Age in Relation to Leisure Time Activities and Healthy Lifestyle Choices

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the importance of body image as a criterion for preventing the abuse of habit-forming substances. Within this context, spending leisure time actively is considered to fit in with the general trend of following and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, which is an essential contributory factor to the health status of an individual. At present, the expectation is that the ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle and prevent lifestyle diseases will be seriously affected by the Internet and by other interventions. The study found that there is indeed a close correlation between body image and the hazardous behaviour of children and adolescents, in particular with regards to eating disorders, thereby confirming the results of many other studies. Children that practice organised sports were also found to have a greater physical and emotional self-concept. However, no evidence could be found for a link between body image and sports, although sports constitute organised leisure time activities. Nevertheless, the correlation between the dissatisfaction with one's body image and a healthy lifestyle definitely warrants greater interest to be shown in this topic.

Key words: body image, older school age, healthy lifestyle, leisure time activities.

Introduction

How an individual spends their leisure time contributes to and is indicative of their quality of life. It is therefore important that citizens should be provided with access to a sufficient array of appropriate services and activities (Hawkins 1996). Spending leisure time actively is considered to fit in with the general trend of following and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, which is an essential contributory factor to the health status of an

individual. The promotion of healthy lifestyle activities, exercise and prevention programmes can be found in both public institutions, e.g. the Ministry of Health announced the start of a new programme called *Malignant tumours of the gastrointestinal tract: a healthy lifestyle challenge, screening and organising healthcare* (MH CR 2017), and private organisations, e.g. health insurance companies and their programmes for supporting the prevention of the adverse impact of risky lifestyle choices on the health of their clients. It is against this background that this article focuses on the correlation between lifestyle choices, the level of leisure time activity, the consumption of illegal habit-forming substances and the psychological concept of one's body image, i.e. the attitude to one's physical appearance. Due to the risky behaviours linked to these particular issues and the fact that adolescents are considered to be one of the most at risk groups, the research that forms the basis of the analysis was therefore conducted among populations of sixth- and ninth-graders in secondary schools (in České Budějovice). Based on the results, an explanation is given of the adolescents' present level of (dis)satisfaction with their body image and the correlation with behaviours that support a healthy lifestyle.

Healthy life style

A healthy lifestyle involves eating healthy food, regular exercise and maintaining a healthy weight, as well as avoiding smoking and consuming excessive levels of alcohol. Adhering to these principles can lead to a significant decrease in the risk of so-called lifestyle diseases (Chiuve et al. 2006). At present, the expectation is that the ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle and prevent lifestyle diseases will be seriously affected by the Internet and by other interventions. According to Brouwer (2011), this will particularly affect the younger population. However, the adoption of a healthier lifestyle that involves increased exercise, non-smoking and a healthier diet may influence an individual's life expectancy (Ford, Spallek and Dobson 2008).

It can be stated that the attitude towards health and the prevention of lifestyle diseases is at a very good level today. However, living in a so-called culture of health, whereby health constitutes a part of our morals and is equivalent to a preventive health check, contrasts starkly with the fact that people are being overwhelmed with information on what they should and shouldn't do, whereby such suggestions often change. Despite this, almost all people have the goal "to be healthy" and there is an extensive general awareness of what a healthy lifestyle means and is (Parusnikova 2000).

Active leisure time

The main motivation behind individuals spending leisure time actively is the need to improve or maintain their health and fitness.

The positive effects of doing sport include weight loss, improved cardiovascular fitness and patency, decreased feelings of anxiety and depression, an improved relationship with oneself, better muscle balance and body posture (Blahutková 2005).

In 2014, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) set aside CZK 15 million to support leisure time activities for children and youth. The support was directed towards non-profit organisations providing leisure time activities (MEYS 2014). The activities included not only sports and exercise, but also activities that supported social integration.

In 2017, the MEYS announced the start of a new programme called *Building capacities for the development of schools II*. The ministry has put aside CZK 266 million for applicants, e.g. schools, leisure facilities and other institutions, to draw from. The aim of the submitted projects must be to connect leisure time activities with school education (MEYS 2018).

Self-concept

The term self-concept is a general term used to refer to how someone thinks about, evaluates or perceives themselves. Generally speaking, self-concept embodies the answer to the question "Who am I?" (Myers 2009). Baumeister (1999) provides the following definition of self-concept: "The individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what that self is". This includes elements such as academic performance, gender identity, sexual identity, and racial identity. (Bong and Clark 1999; Byrne and Gavin 1996). Worldviews about self in relation to others differs across and within cultures. Western cultures place particular importance on independence and the expression of one's own attributes (Markus and Kitayama 1991). In Asian cultures, interpersonal relationships are more important than one's individual accomplishments, and individuals experience a sense of oneness with the group (Swan et al. 2012). Gender differences of self-concept are described as well. Cross and Madson (1997) suggest that men tend to be more independent, while women tend to be more interdependent. However, a study conducted in 1999 showed that men and women do not differ in terms of independence or interdependence, but that they differ in terms of the types of interdependence. Women utilise relational interdependence, while men utilise collective interdependence (Gabriel and Gardner 1999). One's self-concept is a collection of beliefs about oneself (Leflot, Onghena and Colpin 2010). One's self-image is one of the most important components of self-concept.

Body image

Body image includes an individual's concepts of their own body (Štajnochrová 2009). The perception of the physical component of one's self is one of the most important components of self-concept, which plays an essential role in the development process of self-respect. The ability to manage and improve one's corporality and the perception of that ability is the foundation of healthy personality development from childhood onwards (Bandura 1997). This implies that first impressions are usually determined by physical appearance and that this is used as a reference point for identifying oneself in the present. "Maturity, stature, appearance and physical fitness rank among the most public attributes and are used as reference points for our identity more and more frequently" (Tomešová 2003, p. 4).

People perceive their own bodies and the image thereof in different ways:

- cognitively - by discovering shapes, sizes, composition, proportions;
- emotionally - by assessing appearance, competences, performance, functionality, fitness; and with respect to
- actions: lifestyle choices, eating and exercise habits, control of physical fitness

(Fialová and Krch 2012).

Like self-concept, the perception of one's own body is influenced by a number of factors. Girls aged 11-15 years have a significantly worse perception of their own body than boys (Inchley, Kirby and Currie 2011). However, this differs from the results described by Bandayan, et al. (2012) who did not register any significant differences between the life satisfaction of girls and boys. The study by Fenton, Brooks and Spencer (2010) revealed that positive body image is connected with the perception of good social status of the family and with life in a two-parent family. The positive perception of one's own body also correlates positively with sports club membership (Inchley, Kirby and Currie 2011), less time spent in front of the TV and being a non-smoker (Schneider et al. 2013).

The life satisfaction of children of older school age is primarily connected with a functional family environment and communication (Levin, Dallago and Currie, 2012) and with the school environment (Mareš 2010). Bonds between friends also have a role play (O'Dea and Abraham 1999).

Methods

The data presented in this paper are a sub-set of data drawn from an extensive piece of quantitative research conducted in 2017 on the lifestyle and hazardous behaviour of children of older school age. In total, 1113 sixth (N=639) and ninth grade (N= 474) pupils, both male and female, participated in a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire survey, which included a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions, was distributed in schools during lessons, and only with the consent of the schools' headmaster and parents. This helped to achieve a 100% return rate. The research was conducted in 14 schools across the Region of South Bohemia (Czech Republic). The survey was constructed on the basis of the demands of the administrative bodies that are responsible for officially overseeing the schools and focused on the different aspects of the pupils' lifestyle, in particular on the hazardous aspects thereof. However, this article deals with the students' view of their own bodies, the way they spend their free time and their physical activity. The statistical data collated from the results of the questionnaire survey were subsequently processed in the SPSS programme. The descriptive statistics and the results of the statistical tests with regards to the relationships between the selected variables are presented below.

Results

Of the 1113 pupils that participated in the survey, 75.5% were satisfied with their body, with the remaining 24.5% being dissatisfied (see Table 1).

Table 1: Are you satisfied with your body?

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Yes	840	75.5%
	No	273	24.5%
	Total	1113	100.0%

Source: Authors

No statistically significant relationships were found between the pupils being either sixth- or ninth-graders (Chi-square; $p=0.75$) or between genders (Chi-square; $p=0.77$). Satisfaction with their body was also neither related to whether the pupils go in for sports (Chi-square; $p=0.69$) nor with their general satisfaction with life (Chi-square; $p=0.29$).

In contrast, statistically significant relationships were found with respect to body satisfaction and the pupils' own opinion on how healthy their lifestyle is (Chi-square; $p<0.01$) (see Table 2) and to their level of satisfaction with their leisure time activities (Chi-square; $p<0.01$) (see Table 3). A statistically significant relationship was also found between body satisfaction and membership of hobby clubs (Chi-square; $p<0.01$) (see Table 4).

Table 2: Leisure time activities x body satisfaction

		Are you satisfied with your body?		Total
		Yes	No	
Are you satisfied with your leisure time activities?	Yes	550	120	670
		82.1%	17.9%	100.0%
	Rather yes	236	118	354
		66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
	Rather no	39	27	66
		59.1%	40.9%	100.0%
	No	15	8	23
		65.2%	34.8%	100.0%
Total		840	273	1113
		75.5%	24.5%	100.0%

Source: Authors

Table 3: Healthy lifestyle x body satisfaction

		Are you satisfied with your body?		Total
		Yes	No	
Do you think you have a healthy lifestyle?	Yes	202	40	242
		83.5%	16.5%	100.0%
	Rather yes	451	137	588
		76.7%	23.3%	100.0%
	Rather no	155	82	237
		65.4%	34.6%	100.0%
	No	32	14	46
		69.6%	30.4%	100.0%
Total		840	273	1113
		75.5%	24.5%	100.0%

Source: Authors

Table 4: Membership of hobby club x body satisfaction

		Are you satisfied with your body?		Total
		Yes	No	
Do you go to a hobby club?	Yes	367	140	507
		72.4%	27.6%	100.0%
	No	473	133	606
		78.1%	21.9%	100.0%
Total		840	273	1113
		75.5%	24.5%	100.0%

Source: Authors

Body satisfaction can also be influenced by other social pathological behaviours like alcohol and energy drink consumption, and smoking. For all three, the relationship proved to be statistically insignificant: alcohol consumption (Chi-square, $p=0.74$); experience with cigarettes (Chi-square, $p= 0.29$); consumption of energy drinks (Chi-square, $p= 0.5$). In contrast, there is a statistically significant relationship between body satisfaction and experience with drugs (Chi-square, $p<0.05$) (see Table 5).

Table 5: Experience with drugs x body satisfaction

		Are you satisfied with your body?		Total
		Yes	No	
Have you ever tried any drugs?	No	785	264	1049
		74.8%	25.2%	100.0%
	Yes	55	9	64
		85.9%	14.1%	100.0%
Total		840	273	1113
		75.5%	24.5%	100.0%

Source: Authors

Discussion

Different studies in the field of body image have produced different results, including those related to fundamental socio-demographic characteristics. While our study did not demonstrate any significant connection between the age difference of the children and their body image, O'Dea and Abraham (1999) point out that older (pubescent) children have significantly worse body image than pre-pubescent children. They also found that girls in both groups had worse body image than boys, which was not the case in this study.

The results of most research studies confirm that the view of one's body is determined by one's gender (Grogan 2016). However, the concept of the ideal body is very different for males and females. While girls and women tend to wish they were slimmer, male respondents usually want more muscles (Gillen 2015). Furnham, Badhim and Snaede (2002) state that only girls associate body dissatisfaction with the concept of self-esteem. Male self-esteem is not affected by body dissatisfaction. The specific reasons for exercising were found to correlate with low self-esteem and eating disorders, regardless of gender.

In our study, pupils without organised leisure time activities were dissatisfied with their bodies. This is similar to the results presented by Santiago et al. (2017). The children most satisfied with their body image had a greater academic and physical self-concept. The children that practised organised sports had a greater physical and emotional self-concept. The children most dissatisfied with their body image and who practised organised sports had a lower self-concept of family. However, the study did not find any evidence for a link between body image and sports, even though sports constitutes an organised leisure time activity. Unfortunately, comparable studies that focus on the relationship between body image and habit-forming substances are not available for this target group. However, the results do provide data about the relationship between dissatisfaction with own body image and unhealthy lifestyle choices. This data can be important to both governmental and non-governmental organisations that are responsible for public health and can serve as a stimulus to integrate the concept of body image in promotional and marketing events aimed at popularising healthy lifestyle choices. The fact that the adolescents who are dissatisfied with their body image tend to also be dissatisfied with how they spend their leisure time, provides a relevant focal point for campaigns aimed at the target group in question.

Conclusion

Many studies have confirmed that there is a close correlation between body image and the hazardous behaviour of children and adolescents, in particular in relation to eating disorders. This study showed that body image is an important criterion for preventing the abuse of habit-forming substances. Furthermore, the link between dissatisfaction with own body image and healthy lifestyle choices warrants extended research into the topic. The suggestion is therefore to include this concept more intensively in future studies and events focused on the support of a healthy lifestyle.

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