
Leisure Sport Participation in Cyprus

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Abstract

This study contributes to the limited existing research on the participation patterns of Cypriots in leisure and sports. Leisure and sport are viewed collectively while adapting the notion put forth by The Council of Europe (2007) defining leisure sports as sports activities aimed at the preservation and improvement of physical condition, health and fun. The purpose of this paper is to examine the leisure sport participation patterns of Cypriots, specifically: (1) participation patterns in leisure sports, (2) reasons for participating in leisure sports, (3) cost and participation in leisure sport, (4) leisure sport spectatorship, and (5) vacationing and leisure sport experiences. Data was commissioned and collected by the Centre for Leisure, Tourism and Sports (University of Nicosia) for the Cyprus Sport Organisation. A telephone-survey of 1000 Cypriots, men and women, aged 15+, from coast-to-coast in Cyprus using stratified random sampling was employed. The sample was weighted by gender, age, district and region of residence. The results indicate that: (1) almost half of the Cypriot population participates in leisure sports, (2) participation in leisure sports decreases with age, (3) participation in leisure sports tends to be driven by health benefits, (4) most Cypriots participate in leisure sport at no cost, (5) television is the most common means reported for spectatorship, and (6) some Cypriots plan their vacations around leisure sport experiences. The results indicate the relevant importance of the leisure sport culture in Cyprus while also reflecting on age and cost related factors that may influence participation in leisure sports.

Keywords: leisure, sport, participation, Cyprus

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Introduction

Leisure and sport are commonly recognized as providing a “positive” both to participants and spectators (Karlis, 2011). Leisure and sport activities have been accepted for long as activities that assist individual and community development, improve social functioning, and enhance quality of life for citizens of a society. Indeed, most, if not all, societies globally have come to recognize that leisure and sport are vital to the wellbeing of citizens, as well as contributing to the social and economic development of societies.

Cyprus is one of these societies that have recognized the value of leisure and sport both for and amongst its people as well as for the community as a whole. Tourism, sport, and active living are all vibrant endeavours pursued in by visitors and residents of this modest sized Mediterranean island. In the recent past, research presents the increasing value of leisure and sport for Cypriot society. For instance, research by Kartakoullis, Pouloukas, Loizou, Karlis, and Kriemadis (2010) emphasizes the growing need for sport tourism for Cyprus and its people. Furthermore, Kartakoullis, Karlis, and Karadakis (2009) found that there is increased participation in Sport for All programs by Cypriots. Whereas, subsequent research by Loucalidis, Jago, and Theouphanous (2011) found that roughly half of the children in Cyprus met physical activity guidelines, meaning that sport is somewhat valued by the younger generation and by those responsible for administering physical activity programs for boys and girls. Most recent research - although justifying an increasing value for leisure and sports in Cyprus - do little in the way of depicting what Cypriots actually do for leisure and sport.

Common sense has it that leisure and sport should automatically be popular in Cyprus, considering the fact that it is a developed nation, a highly educated society, and a land offering a plethora of outdoor activities with a climate of vast sunshine and plenty of sea shores. Although this society has recently encountered difficult economic times, accessibility and availability of outdoor recreational resources may lead to sustaining participation in leisure and sports. Indeed, if leisure and sport is truly valued by the citizens of this society, participation should be sustained through difficult economic times as the outdoor opportunities offered by Cyprus – such as sand, sea, and boardwalks for walking and jogging - are comparable to a giant playground.

Leisure and sport are sometimes viewed as being distinct notions, yet they do overlap (Karlis, 2011). For the purpose of this study, “leisure sport” is the key term that has been used for data collection. “Leisure sport” is a notion that attempts to fuse together the notions of leisure and sport, while emphasizing the free-choice and fun dimension of leisure, and the activity focus of sport. Specifically, for the purposes of this paper the definition provided by The Council of Europe (2007) has been used as the operant definition. Specifically, The Council of Europe (2007) defines “leisure sport” as sports activities aimed at the preservation and improvement of physical condition, health and fun. This paper applies the definition put forth by The Council of Europe as a basis for data collection of the Cypriot population. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine the leisure sport participation patterns of Cypriots (men and women aged 15+), specifically: (1) participation patterns in leisure sports, (2) reasons for participating in leisure sports, (3) cost and participation in leisure sport, (4) leisure sport spectatorship, and (5) vacationing and leisure sport experiences.

The available research exploring the leisure sport participation patterns of Cypriots is rather scarce. This research intends to be among the first to report the degree to which the Cypriot population participates in leisure sports activities on a national scale. Nevertheless, some research has, to date, examined participation patterns and behaviours of Cypriots in leisure sports. However, some of this research examines participants from Cyprus in comparison to other countries as opposed to examining Cypriot’s exclusively. Furthermore, there is a clear need for more research to look at the leisure sport participation behaviours of adult Cypriots.

Review of the Literature

Leisure Sport Behaviours of Cypriots

Bathrellou, Lazarou, Panagiotakos, and Sidossis (2007) explore the physical and sedentary activity behaviors of children from urban and rural areas of Cyprus. One of their findings was that rural children reported spending significantly more time in physical activity (of any kind) than urban children after school. However, rural children reported being more occupied with outdoor chores during the week. On the other hand, urban children reported being engaged more in after school sports than rural children. Nevertheless, urban and rural children showed very few differences regarding their engagement in physical activity. The average weekly time spent on vigorous activities and moderate-to-vigorous activities did not differ significantly between urban and rural children. The percentage of children participating in physical education classes at school

and in public (on a weekly basis) also did not differ significantly between urban and rural children. This same lack of a significant difference applied to weekly afterschool sports as well. Urban and rural Cypriot children also demonstrated similar patterns in sedentary behaviours such as time spent in front of a screen (TV, computer, and electronic or video games) during the weekdays and the weekends. With regards to the parents of both rural and urban Cypriot children, almost one-third did not regularly take their child out to play even though a greater number of rural parents reported an available playground in the neighbourhood. Due to these very similar activity patterns between urban and rural children it would appear that such contexts do not provide the basis for variation between leisure sport participation rates and behaviours, at least for the Cypriots in this particular age group. However, Bathrellou et al warn that their comparative research of urban and rural children did not examine the possible effects of socio-economic class or urbanization.

Walker, Crawford, and Taylor (2008), on the other hand, do provide research examining the effects of socio-economic class on children's leisure sport participation. Specifically, these authors explore how the experiences of poverty and social exclusion affect children and young people of single-parent families in various aspects of their lives including participation in leisure sports. It should be noted, however, that this study took place in England, Greece, and Cyprus and does not examine the experiences of Cypriot children and youth exclusively. What these authors found was that living with poverty and in single-parent homes does provide barriers on children and youth's capacity to engage in play. In low income neighbourhoods homes often provide little space for children to play while there are also hardly any parks in the immediate vicinity of these homes. "Lack of play and leisure facilities such as parks and sports centres in the local vicinity means that leisure activities are often more indoors than outdoors, and passive rather than active" (Walker et al., 2008, p. 435). Additionally, few children in this study indicated being a member of clubs offering forms of leisure activities (e.g., sea cadets or sports clubs) since there are limited opportunities available for these organised activities in low income neighbourhoods. Above all, having insufficient amounts of money provides a critical barrier towards single-parent children's ability to participate in leisure activities. "Transport costs are especially problematic for children living in rural areas, where long distances need to be travelled to meet friends or to access any leisure facilities" (Walker et al., 2008, p. 434). A low socio-economic standing was associated with reduced

physical activity and increased sedentary behaviors (e.g., television) of children and their families.

Another paper by Kraak and Story (2010), reporting on data collected all over Europe on children's physical and sedentary activity patterns, further explains that children living in urban areas are more at risk of being overweight and obese when experiencing lower socio-economic conditions. These results quantitatively reflect the qualitative results found in Walker et al. (2008). In regards to these findings it is understood that the socio-economic conditions of the Cypriots in this current study may influence their leisure behaviours. However, it was not the intention of this research to have participants declare their socio-economic status through telephone interviews, though this could be a topic of interest in future research of the Cypriot population's leisure activity behaviours.

Gibbons, Lynn, and Stiles (1997) explore how gender affects participation in adolescents' leisure activities in the United States, Netherlands, India, and Cyprus. In the case of all four nations examined, it was found that a significantly higher participation rate in leisure activities existed for adolescent boys than for girls. Specifically, for the case of Cypriot adolescents, only 444 activities were identified as leisure possibilities, which is a significantly less amount than what was reported by the Netherlands (2,655), United States (3,327), and India (824). However, the tendency for Cypriot boys to be more likely than girls to indicate participation in sports and groups activities was a shared trend in the data collected from all four countries. Gibbons, et al. (1997) do stress, however, that the data collected is more reflective of urban populations in the four countries.

A subsequent study by Kartakoullis, Kriemadis, and Pouloukas (2009) examined the leisure sports of Cypriots at a spectator level. This study measured and reported the perceptions of adult Cypriot men on basic issues concerning football in Cyprus, an immensely popular sport in this country. It was found that 79% (166,000) of Cypriot men in the age range of 21–70 are interested in Cypriot football to some extent. Furthermore, 77% (n = 162,000) of men aged between 21 and 70 years support some football club and were well informed about Cypriot football. From the 162,000 men who support some teams, 53.4% (86,500) went to see at least one football match during the 2003–04 season. Moreover, 40% of Cypriot men between 21 and 70 years watched at least one TV programme on Cypriot football on weekends, while 21% did not watch any of these programmes. 42% of men between 21 and 70 years old watched more than 10 live

matches while 21% had not watched any live football. Also reported in this study was that a large number of Cypriot men (57%) think that their society benefits from the soccer culture while 16% had the opinion that this benefit is either minimal or non-existent. Indeed several issues with the sport, in a Cypriot context, were identified including: violence inside and outside the stadiums, financial problems, poor refereeing, corruption of officials and fixed games, the presence of too many non-Cypriot players and the over-involvement of political parties in football.

In sum, research identified above, has made a subsequent initial attempt to examine leisure sport – or leisure and sport – in Cyprus. However, more is needed. The current study is important as it aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by going beyond a comparative analysis of leisure participation patterns of Cypriots with non-Cyprus, and the active versus sedentary behaviour of school-aged children. This study is important as the data collection focuses specifically on The Council of Europe's definition of leisure sport while attempting to present a broad overview of the current state of condition of leisure sport behaviours of Cypriots.

Methodology

Sample

This research was commissioned by the Cyprus Sport Organisation and was conducted by the Centre for Leisure, Tourism and Sports of the University of Nicosia. Participants in this study included Cypriot Men and Women (N = 1000). The sample size deals with roughly 0.2% of the population of Cyprus which as of the time of data collection in May to June of 2012 was approximately 552,000.

Procedure

Participants were reached by telephone and were chosen using a stratified random sampling methodology in order to draw a representative sample. The sample was weighted by gender, age, district and region of residence.

Statistical analysis

Statistics are reported in order to illustrate the participation behaviours of the Cypriot population. The statistics reported include total participation rates and differences overall and by (1) gender, (2) team and individual sports participated in overall and by (3) gender, (4) frequency of exercise by age (one to two times per week vs. greater than three times per week), (5) reasons for exercising overall and by gender, the (6) percentage of those who pay zero Euros monthly for engaging in leisure sports

overall, by gender and by age, (7) the percentages of those who pay zero Euros annually for equipment in leisure sports overall, by gender and by age, (8) how often participants watch sports events at stadiums or on TV overall and by gender, and the (9) percentage of Cypriots who combine their vacation with leisure sports and physical activity overall, by gender, and by age.

Results

The data shows that the general level of participation of the Cypriot participants, aged 15 and over, in leisure sport activities is 39.8%. This percentage for male participants is 42.1% while 37.6% of women reported being involved in leisure sports. However, these participation numbers pale in comparison to Cypriots between the ages of 5 – 14 (72.7% participation rate) though individuals in this age range make up roughly 14.3% of the Cyprus population. All together 44.5% of individuals in this study, which includes those aged 5- 14 and 15 and over, participate in leisure sports activities.

Data collected also shows participation rates of Cypriots in a variety of team and individual sports. The leisure sport activity that was most participated in by participants was walking (47.6%) which was followed by going to the gym (26.4%), football/soccer, (13.2%), swimming (9.2%), jogging (5.9%), dancing (5.0%), basketball (3.8%), tennis (3.4%), volleyball (2.7%), futsal (1.7%), and cycling (1.7%). Data also shows that more women than men participated in walking, gym, and dancing while more men participated in football compared to women. Furthermore, roughly similar numbers of men and women participated in swimming and jogging (see Table 1).

Table 1. Team and Individual Sports that Cypriots 15+ engage in (by gender).

Sports	%
<i>Walking</i>	
Males	36
Females	60
<i>Gym</i>	
Males	23
Females	30
<i>Football</i>	
Males	24
Females	2
<i>Swimming</i>	
Males	9
Females	9
<i>Jogging</i>	
Males	6
Females	6
<i>Dancing</i>	
Males	2
Females	8

The frequency of which participants engage in exercise was also recorded in this study. Data collected shows that frequency of exercise engaged by those who exercise one to two times per week diminishes as their age increases starting from 36% in the ages 15–24 down to 14% in the ages 60 and over. However, the frequency of exercise engaged in by those who exercise three or more times per week, for the most part, rises as age also increases starting at 63% in the ages of 15-24 up to 82% in the ages 60 and over. Refer to table 2 for specific numbers.

Table 2. Frequency of Exercising (by age).

Age	%
<i>15 - 24</i>	
> 3 per week	63
1 – 2 per week	36
<i>25 - 34</i>	
> 3 per week	60
1 – 2 per week	36
<i>35 - 44</i>	
> 3 per week	67
1 – 2 per week	30
<i>45 - 59</i>	
> 3 per week	73
1 – 2 per week	23
<i>60+</i>	
> 3 per week	82
1 – 2 per week	14

The reasons for which participants took part in leisure sport exercise were also recorded in this study. Respectively, most participants indicated health status (60%), leisure (45%), form (21%), and weight control (21%) as their main reasons for exercising. Furthermore, Cypriots in this study also indicated, to a lesser extent, appearance (7.7%), performance (5.0%), looking young (2.6%), being with friends (2.2%), self-esteem (1.8%), and new skills (1.5%) as reasons why they engage in leisure sport exercise (see Table 3).

Table 3. Reasons for Exercising (by gender).

Age	%
<i>Health status</i>	
Males	55
Females	65
<i>Leisure</i>	
Males	54
Females	35
<i>Form</i>	
Males	23
Females	20
<i>Weight Control</i>	
Males	18
Females	24
<i>Appearance</i>	
Males	8.2
Females	7.2
<i>Performance</i>	
Males	8.3
Females	1.4
<i>Look Young</i>	
Males	4.4
Females	0.7
<i>Be With Friends</i>	
Males	2.5
Females	1.9
<i>Self-Esteem</i>	
Males	3.3
Females	0.3
<i>New Skills</i>	
Males	2.5
Females	0.4

This study also sought to record the extent to which participants engage in leisure sport activities at no cost. In total, 63% of participants (53% of men and 73% of women) indicated paying zero Euros, monthly, for engaging in leisure sport (see Table 4). Furthermore, data collected illustrates how many individuals have no annual cost on equipment for leisure sports. In total, 66% of participants (58% of men and 75% of

women) indicated paying zero Euros for leisure sports equipment within the year. (see Table 5).

Table 4. Percentages of those who pay zero Euros monthly for engaging in leisure sports (by age).

Age	%
15 - 24	49
25 - 34	30
35 - 44	68
45 - 59	84
60+	92

Table 5. Percentages of those whose annual cost for equipment for leisure sports is zero Euros (by age).

Age	%
15 - 24	62
25 - 34	42
35 - 44	69
45 - 59	74
60+	88

Data collected also documented whether and how often Cypriots watch sports events both in person at the stadiums in which they take place and on TV. In total, 19% of participants (30% of men and 8% of women) reported watching sports events at stadiums weekly, while 37% of participants (22% of men and 53% of women) reported never watching sports events at stadiums. Meanwhile, 23% of participants (35% of men and 9% of women) reported watching sports events on TV daily while 14% of participants (6% of men and 23% of women) reported never watching televised sports events. Lastly, data collected shows the proportion of Cypriots who engage in leisure sports and physical activity during their vacation time. In total, 26.8% of participants (31.8% of men and 21.3% of women) combine their vacation with leisure sports and physical activity (see Table 6).

Table 6. Percentage of Cypriots who combine their vacation with leisure sports/ physical activity (by age).

Age	%
15 - 24	38.1
25 - 34	18.9
35 - 44	21.0
45 - 59	24.0
60+	24.9

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the participation patterns of the Cypriot population in mass and grass roots leisure sports activities. The percentage of participants aged 5 and over who reported that they participate in leisure sport activities (44.5%) is similar to the percentage collected by Scheerder, Vandermeerschen, Van Tuyckom, Hoekman, Breedveld, and Vos (2011) whose data reported participation rates from all over Europe indicating that 48.2% of individuals from Cyprus participated in leisure sport. This placed Cyprus as the eighth lowest in leisure sport participation rates compared to other European countries in their study.

Overall, around 40% of Cypriots aged 15 and above reported that they engage in leisure sports activities with the men reporting approximately 42% and the women reporting around 38%. In comparison to data from other countries, Păunescu, Gagea, and Păunescu (2012) found that around 21% of their adult participants from England participate in sports activities for 30 minutes a day around three times a week in 2006, 50% of their Austrian participants practice recreational physical activities once a week in 2009, and in Romania participants reported a much lower proportion (approximately 13%) of engagement in recreational sports in 2010. Furthermore, one third of the men and one quarter of the women in Austria practiced recreational sport at least three times a week. Research by Wiley, Shaw, and Havitz (2000) coming out of Canada, looking at participation rates in hockey and figure skating, determined that differences between gender in sport involvement overall were not significantly different. A minor difference, such as that seen in the Cypriot population, existed but was not very dominant. On the other hand, recent research by Taniguchi and Shupe (2014) from the U.S. found that women spend significantly less time than men on sports/fitness participation. These authors explain that, married men typically spend less time than married or single

women on unpaid work, and the reduced time spent in this life domain can greatly promote their participation in sports/fitness. However, this finding is not all encompassing and even married men who compartmentalize their lives with priorities will find little time left over for leisure overall.

Another main finding of this study was that participation in leisure sports generally diminishes as the age increases, starting from 56% in the ages 15–24 down to 32% in the ages 60 and over. However, this finding is made more complicated when comparing individuals reporting more frequent participation with less frequent participation. Individuals that reported exercising over three times a week show increased participation rates by age from 63% in the ages of 15-24 up to 82% in the ages 60+. Furthermore, individuals that reported exercising between 1-2 times per week show decreased participation rates by age from 36% in the ages 15-24 down to 14% in the ages 60 and over. Research by Casper and Stellino (2008), looking at the demographic predictors of recreational tennis participants, may aid in helping to explain these trends. Specifically, these authors found that the youngest tennis players (ages 34 and under and 35 - 44) reported significantly lower commitment levels than the two older age groups (ages 45-54 and 55 and up). One explanation offered is that as older participants are involved in a sport longer, they have more time to develop a deep-rooted commitment and loyalty. This may explain why, in this study, individuals reported participation rates in exercise increased according to age in the more frequent participants. It can also be implied that those engaged in less frequent participation (1-2 times a week) fail to develop the same levels of commitment resulting in lower participation levels by age such as that found in this study's sample. However, this assertion is not necessarily reflected in Casper and Stellino's (2008) research. Though measuring commitment levels may have provided an informative explanation for this finding, such data would have been difficult to measure by means of phone interviews. Future research looking into the leisure sport behaviours of Cypriots should consider measuring the commitment levels of sport participants by age to explain the statistics reported in this study from a psychological angle.

It was found that the majority of Cypriots (68%) reported exercising more than three times per week. It seems as though much of this exercise consists of walking which was reported as the most popular leisure sport among the Cypriot sample. Walking is the most popular activity in both men (36%) and in women (60%) followed by attending the gym. Football was the third most popular leisure sport reported by the sample which, in turn, makes it the most popular team sport among the Cypriot

population. However, it should be noted that football in Cyprus appears to be a male dominated leisure sport (24%) with very few women indicating participation in this activity (2%). This gendered aspect of the sport seems to be reflected in Kartakoullis et al. (2009) whose football centric study on perceptions and spectator participation levels of Cypriot's utilized only male participants. A clear gender disproportion is also reflected in this study's data reporting how often participants watch sports events at a stadium and on TV. Significantly more men (30%) than women (8%) attended stadiums on a weekly basis while significantly more women (53%) than men (22%) reported never attending a stadium. Furthermore, men (33%) show a much clearer interest in watching sports on TV than women (9%) while significantly more women (23%) than men (6%) reported never watching sports on TV. More research examining the reasons for such a vast difference in gender towards participation in, and spectatorship of, football in Cyprus would contribute greatly to this knowledge.

The important role of sport culture in the Cypriot society is well accepted and well justified by the data available. Health status (60%), leisure (45%), form (21%), and weight control (21%) are the top ranked reasons reported in this study as to why Cypriots engage in exercise behaviours. It is clear that Cypriots understand the necessity of leisure in their lives and that sport is positively linked to physical and health benefits. However, the data available also points towards a greater need for more systematic work in cultivating a sporting culture in Cypriot society, especially amongst adults and the elderly. Actual participation in sports and physical activities remains an issue and a systematic promotion of sport and an active lifestyle is needed.

Li and Luk (2011) suggest factors that helped increase leisure sport participation in their study of Macau, China which was chosen to host an athletic event 'The 4th East Asian Games'. One of these was the development of new sport facilities and city infrastructure for sports which helped reduce residents' structural constraints for participation in leisure sports. However, the means to participate in leisure sports is not enough to encourage higher participation rates. Another factor was the various sports initiatives that helped stimulate residents' interest in participating in sports related physical activities. In particular, sports promotion programs and public promotional campaigns were found to be essential in nurturing a community culture surrounded around sports and a healthy lifestyle. It cannot be understated that initiatives aimed at stimulating sport participation are necessary in addition to the provision of sport facilities as Prins, Mohnen, van Lenthe, Brug, and Oenema (2012) explain in their study that

observed availability and density of parks or sports facilities could not, alone, account for leisure time sport participation rates. It is also recommended that life time sport participation should become a major pillar of development in the Cypriot educational system. This entails the teaching and acquisition of skills (at a very young age) that will enable adults and the elderly to remain physically active.

Besides the recommendations already made, future research should consider seeking to explain several of the interesting findings derived from this study's data. First, the data reporting Cypriots' reasons for exercising show greater gender based differences in reasons: health status, leisure, performance, looking young, self-esteem, and developing new skills. Any research that intends to explore the leisure sport behaviours of Cypriots should further examine why these differences exist. Research in the qualitative realm could also determine whether Cypriots identify other reasons as to why they participate in sports on their leisure time.

Second, it is also apparent in the data that differences exist in the percentage of Cypriots who pay zero Euros for engaging in leisure sports on a monthly basis and zero Euros a year for the equipment needed in leisure sports with regards to age. In both sets of data, nearly half of individuals between the ages of 15-24 fit into the zero cost categories. However, this number decreases between the ages of 25-35 making this age group the lowest proportion of individuals who spend no money monthly on leisure sports or yearly on leisure sport equipment. However, as age increases from 35 and on (groups of 35-44, 45-59, 60+ respectively) the number of individuals who spend no money monthly on leisure sports or yearly on leisure sport equipment increases. Scholars seeking to understand the leisure sport behaviours of the Cypriot population may also consider explaining why increasingly older individuals spend less on their leisure compared to younger individuals.

Lastly, this research found that the percentage of Cypriots who combine their vacation time with leisure sports and physical activity gradually increases from age 25 and over. However, it is also reported that those aged 15-24 have the highest tendency to combine their vacation with leisure sports and physical activity compared to all the other age groups. Future research on the leisure sport behaviours of Cypriots should further explain why this trend exists in addition to discovering what leisure sport activities are specifically being participated in during their vacation.

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