

Recreation Culture in the Consumer Society

Abstract of the PhD thesis

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1. Introduction

1.1. Aim of the dissertation

The postmodern consumer society offers virtually unlimited possibilities to live up leisure attitudes mirroring individual characteristics. These options, however, have not naturally brought up spreading of recreative and variable forms of the leisure activities. The individuals may freely decide how to spend leisure time, but this freedom is frequently nothing else than the freedom of the consummation. Globalised, uniform products of the show-business dominate the structure of leisure.

In our country, research of the power of recreative leisure is in its rudimentary form. The qualitative side of the leisure activity regarding individual effects of the chosen activities is also less studied. In my thesis, I have tried to find out how one can turn leisure into recreation and thus let it serve better quality of life. I think, that when studying recreation – despite its strong dependence on personality and situation, respectively -, I could find characteristic features which contribute to improving one's feelings. Probably, these characteristic feeling improving activities do not appear in the general leisure activities.

1.2. Specificity of the thesis

Recreation is a young, developing area, thus the most important task seems to be a theoretical groundwork and revealing interdisciplinary relationships. The core part of the thesis consists of two voluminous theoretical chapters dealing with contact points of the recreation with some key terms (e.g. life-style, quality of life, culture, health), and also analyses consumer culture as the dominant environmental influence to recreation. In the theoretical part, I also deal with the main leisure activities in the light of the results of time-balance studies. In my thesis, therefore, I have selected a way to work based on deductive thinking, in which empirical approach plays an inferior role as compared to the theoretical parts.

1.3. Theoretical frames

Recreation is a whole of such leisure behaviours that aim at and result in the improvement of mood and feelings. Leisure, in itself, is not yet recreation, only a possibility of it (Ábrahám, 2010). Transition from work to leisure and to recreation is gradual. The more strong is the feeling of free choice in the individual, the more we may talk about leisure activity. The more the behaviour is innately motivated, the more it is like recreation (Iso-Ahola, 1980, Neulinger, 1981). Recreation culture – on a micro level – is the sum of the recreational

activity and of the lived-up recreative effects of the individual. We cannot pursue to speed up postmodern changes by cultural accommodation, thus the slow and occasional cultural development must be supplemented by conscious expansion (Gergely, 1991). Life-style is the mediating media and everyday appearance of the culture, although, at the same time, cultural patterns themselves also represent drives to change conduct. Conduct is a sort of subjective life-style composed of a group of activities chosen with a larger degree of freedom. By disappearing cultural handholds, one has to construct his/her own life and to form his/her style (Hitzler, 2008). In the western welfare societies – starting in the sixties – the concept of quality of life has come to the front, which stresses the satisfaction of mental, immaterial needs instead of welfare aiming at satisfying material goods (Fekete, 2006). The way one spends leisure significantly determines the quality of life (Mannell, 2007; Haworth és Roberts, 2008; Pressmann, 2009; Kim, 2010/b). It affects subjective quality of life primarily through improving mood and feelings, but may – by strengthening personal resources (developing health, fitness, literacy and creativity) – also improve objective quality of life. Health is the primary resource of the everyday life, whereas fitness is an elevated level of health, optimum of physical and

mental productivity (Kovács, 2004). For the middle class members of the consumer societies, health and fitness have become outstanding factors of the life-style and have been impregnated with moral connotations.

In the modern societies, system of consummation and the associated attitudes and values are regarded as central elements (Tomka, 2011). People become capable and eligible to be part of the society by completing their consummative role (Giddens, 1990; Maffesoli, 1996; Bauman, 2001). In the so called consumism (consumer life-style) more and more aspects of the social life turn into merchandise. The consumer society represses everyday productivity of the people, individual abilities and social contacts pinch and wither. The globalised and urbanised consumer existence creates unhealthy life conditions and cause environmental damages. More and more researchers (Lane, 2001; Kasser, 2005; Layard, 2007; Fromm, 2010; Skidelsky, 2014) state that the consumer life-style that prefers material goods does not lead to happiness, but, on the contrary, frequently dissatisfaction, depression, solitude become typical characteristics of the consumer life. The consumer values have become deterministic in the area of leisure, too, and has transformed its content and formal elements. Based on these premises, general characteristics of

the consumer leisure-culture are: industrial character, directed mass consumption, instrument-needs, uniformity, passiveness, pseudo-participation, deviant behaviours, infotainment, non-structured leisure-blocks, mass tourism, experience orientation.

Rank order of the national leisure activities is led by watching TV, videos or using internet. 57% of the total leisure-time, i.e. more than 2 and a half hours one spends in front of the monitors. Time spent with physical recreation has shown in essence decreasing tendency, the national average of physical activity (including walking) is only 15 min per day. In an international comparison, we belong – together with England – to the “laziest” nations in Europe. Regarding social leisure activities, the picture is no more favourable: men spend an average 50 min, women 46 min with social togetherness. 46% of the Hungarians have never engaged into any social activity. Based on available data, other countries – except Spain – are more social; Norwegians, for example, spend three times as much time with each-other than us. In 1986 half, in 2010 only $\frac{1}{4}$ of the Hungarian population read books in their leisure time, thus we also belong to the worse countries in this respect. Those interested in cultural institutions do not reach 1% in our country. Citizens of the European countries, on the average,

twice, Germans more than three times as much attend entertaining or cultural events than Hungarians (KSH 2000, 2012, European Communities, 2004). 43% of the national population belongs to the “Passives” socio-cultural category, who mostly spend their leisure time in front of the TV and go, as a maximum, to the pub, to parties or to local sport events (Vitányi, 2003). Based on all of these, we may say leisure culture of the Hungarian people raises serious solicitudes regarding both health and quality of life. This is supported by the Eurostat (2013) data, according to which only Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia show lower satisfaction indices than Hungary regarding the use of leisure-time.

2. Aims

The aim of my empiric research has been to reveal the relationship between the way one spends leisure time and the mood and feelings of the individual. I have examined internal feelings and quality of life improving effects of some recreational activities in an explorative study of leisure attitudes.

3. Methods

In my study, since I haven't found any standard questionnaire that fitted to my aims neither in the Hungarian nor in the foreign literature, I have used a self-constructed questionnaire, which consisted of 13 (6 open questions, 4 with Likert-scale, 2 with nominal scale, and 1 true/false type) items.

For the open questions, we had constructed a code-table and took maximum 5 possible answers. In addition, we arranged the answers into larger summary categories. Where appropriate, samples were compared by a t-probe, and, if possible, we calculated Pearson's correlation coefficients. The scale results were averaged and arranged in the rank-order of the "marks".

Statistical analyses had been carried out using the SPSS 19.0 software. The level of significance was uniformly set at $p \leq 0.05$.

The study had been carried out in three steps. In the first step (2009-2012), we used a "general" sample (383 participants), in the second step (2012) students specialised to fitness of the Fitness Academy (middle level) were involved (78 participants), finally in the third step (2012) data from the recreation-manager BSc students of the Eötvös Loránd University (98 participants) had been collected. The first sample – regarding leisure characteristics – had been aimed to

mirror the views of the general population. By taking the two other samples, we had intended to learn whether the more competent and specially trained cohort differs from the general population. Due to the relatively small sample size, data of the Fitness Academy and of the Eötvös University have been grouped and were called “special” sample.

Participants of the first, general sample had been invited by the snowball method, and were asked to fill out a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Members of the special sample answered the questions on-line.

4. Results

Because of the demographic properties of the participants included into the sample (mostly young, educated people with city-associated life-style), our results reflect leisure attitude only of a narrower social group. Since I have had no chance to collect a representative sample, my results– in addition to the group-specificity - have limited validity.

Below I summarize testing of my hypotheses.

H1: Lay definition of the good internal feelings differs from that found in the special literature.

Results mostly support the hypothesis. If we would focus on the official definition – according to which internal feelings are the variable, non-conscious feelings about our internal state -,

the hypothesis seems to be correct. Members of both sample groups listed the factors that represent the terms internal feelings and mood alike: positive mental state, harmony and balance, fitness and health, respectively. If, however, we appreciate that, in the common sense, the three terms (internal feelings, mood, and well-being) are regarded as synonyms, we may say that members of both groups have a clear picture about the term and the hypothesis falls.

H2: For the good internal feelings, health and good social relationships play the most important role.

H3: For improving internal feelings, sport (physical activity) seems to be the most important activity.

These two hypothesis point essentially to the same direction: what determines good feelings? Results evidently show that both hypotheses were correct. Most of the respondents preferred and put forward health and health-associated physical activities (sport, activity, dancing, excursions, etc.) as well as good social relationships. Physical and social activities have been preferred everywhere, independently of whether the question asked for general feelings (well-being, internal feelings, energizing) or for actual forms of activity. Results of my research support maximally those opinions in the literature

according to which health and good social relationships represent the highest values for everybody.

H4: Members of the sports-associated sample mention general feelings improving character of the physical activity more than those of the general sample.

I had supposed that I would get the largest difference between the two samples. The hypothesis have proven to be correct by all kinds of analysing methods (first and summarized answers, basic and aggregated categories), however, the difference is much smaller (below 10%) than expected. The results were significant in many cases which clearly shows that the special sample systematically prefers physical activity. This, on the other hand, does not mean that sport had not been regarded as the most important way improving internal feelings in the general group, at least on the level of stereotypic (i.e. very first) replies.

H5: If the respondents have a chance to freely choose how they want to spend a longer holiday, most of them would choose travelling.

This hypothesis have proven being fully correct in both groups and by all methods (first and all mentions). Travelling is the most preferred long-term leisure activity. Maybe this is one of the stereotypes of the general thinking, although these

preferences are also generally realised in the practice since anybody, who could, would choose travelling for a longer term (holiday) leisure.

H6: Sport is placed in the front of a summarised rank-order of terms representing positive emotions associated to leisure.

The hypothesis seems to be correct, respondents have most frequently associated sports with the leisure terms mirroring positive emotions. Sports have been placed to the front of leisure activities, and have also been one of the leading terms regarding activities that bring good experiences, enjoyment and joy. Physical activity has been mentioned among the first 5 answers except in the case of rest. These statements were accepted by both groups i.e. there were no essential differences between the “lay” and special groups regarding positive leisure attitudes toward sports. We may conclude that sports and leisure are very much positively associated. It is an important result that the most characteristic leisure activity of our days, watching TV, only appears statistically significantly associated with the term disengagement, and no other positive effect have been due to the television.

H7: Rank-order of leisure associated terms representing positive emotions are correlated with each-other.

Rank orders of activities belonging to individual terms correlate in many but not all cases with each-other. The highest correlation have been found in both groups between joy and happiness. As we expected, disengagement has proven to be a general category including virtually anything, since it correlated with good experiences, enjoyment, amusement, and somewhat less with rest and joy. Striking is the correlation between enjoyment and happiness which seems to support those written in the theoretical part of the thesis. It is interesting that there is no connection between experience and happiness which raises the possibility that the experience-based society does not support our intentions for improving well-being.

H8: I had supposed that structural (affective, cognitive, behavioural) elements of the attitudes regarding leisure activities would correlate with each-other.

This hypothesis was correct, all components highly correlated. As expected, the cognitive element of the attitude (importance) correlates less with the behavioural element (intentions to choose) than with the affective factor (enjoyment). Surprisingly, at the same time, enjoyment and importance have highly correlated with each-other. If we compare content of the questions (qualifying the leisure activities) to the time-balance

data, we may see that affective (enjoyable) and cognitive (important) aspects of the attitudes do not fit to the everyday activity, that is we would not do what we have positive experiences about. It is even more surprising that the behavioural element of the attitude (how easily one chooses) differs significantly from the practice. Our results show that the respondents evaluate the highest different forms of the social activities (family, pairwise and friendly connections) in all three dimensions. Based on the time-balance studies, we have not really expected that sports and excursions appears among the most preferred activities regarding enjoyment and usefulness. Activities mostly representing the postmodern consumer culture (e.g. mall-visiting, TV, video, movies, commerce media, and rest-laziness) have received low marks regarding both factors. It is rather startling how much the rank-order of choosing differs from the actual leisure structure known from Hungarian time-balance studies.

H9: There are no essential differences between the general leisure attitudes of the respondents of the two samples.

Questions about regarding objective value of the leisure and self-rating of the individual leisure culture have been answered by the two groups essentially identically and unexpectedly positively. For example, 85% of the participants spends leisure

time in a variable way and likes to try new things, more than 90% is in a good mood in the leisure time, and only 20% cannot find out what to do in the leisure time.

5. Conclusions

In summary, it looks like activities mostly regarded as improving internal feelings and leisure activities preferred by the consumer society do not fit to each-other. Based on the literature and on the results of the research, we may outline those characteristics that let well-being improving function of leisure to be realised with the largest probability. Based on this, the most important features of leisure are value (according to the Nash-pyramid), good experiences, concentration, control (self-direction), productivity, activity, health-orientation, balance, community orientation, tourist niches and natural proximity.

Research results also show that those activities that help to realize the possibilities for life quality involved in recreation are “coded” in the individual attitudes. Statistics mentioned in the theoretical chapter also show that these positive attitudes do not initiate recreative behaviour automatically. I use to call this contradiction “leisure-paradox”, which requires more and further research.

One of the basic motives to prepare the dissertation have been to traverse Horkheimer and Adorno's (2011) statement, according to which there is no protection gear against the pressure of the consumer culture. I believe there is. Consumption should not be negated but consciously directed within certain frames and its positive features being lived up. This, however, requires significant changes of our mind and behaviour, with is a common task of the individuals, of the small communities, of the institutional system and of the politics. The possible solutions exceed the frames of this thesis, therefore I have suggested further research directions (motivational system of recreation, conscious leisure consumption, recreation education, and recreation-politics). Developing recreation culture seems to be one of the most important factors for the well-being and for the holistic health of the people, thus requires outstanding attention of both specialists and decision-makers.

List of my publications

Publications associated with the dissertation:

Ábrahám J., Bárdos Gy. (2014) Szabadidő és rekreáció. *Kultúra és Közösség*, 5. évf. 1. sz./2014, 25-30.

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Other publications:

Ábrahám J. (2006) A középfokú rekreációs sportszakemberképzés megújítása. *Kalokagathia*, 3-4, 45-55.