

In the light of social media: physical activity, eating disorders and well-being issues in young women

A közösségi média tükrében: fizikai aktivitás, étkezési zavarok és jól-léti kérdések fiatal nőknél



Section editor / Rovatszerkesztő:
Zoltán Szatmári

Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed
Church in Hungary
thend.2011@gmail.com



¹ **Dóra Skribanek**
Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed
Church in Hungary
MA student in Psychology
skribanek@gmail.com



² **Júlia Patakiné Bösze**
Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Education
and Psychology Institute of Health Promotion
and Sport Sciences
bosze.julia@ppk.elte.hu

Author / Szerző: **Dóra Skribanek** ¹, **Júlia Patakiné Bösze** ²

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Abstract: Based on an online questionnaire survey, we present the responses of 440 young women between the ages of 18 and 26 grouped according to different aspects. We grouped the examined persons based on their sports habits, and then, among other things, examined their eating attitudes, social media usage habits, especially Instagram, and their well-being. Among the respondents, the competitive aesthetic athletes showed the highest well-being values, while the almost never athletes had the lowest. Social media, especially Instagram, was found to be a significant risk factor for developing eating disorders, as those at risk for eating disorders spent more time on Instagram. For competitive athletes, the recommendations given by coaches are more important in the design of the diet, while in the case of recreational athletes, this effect is to a lesser extent. Our results also showed that regular sports, even if for leisure purposes, have a positive effect on well-being. In our article, we emphasize the importance of prevention in the treatment of eating disorders and the effects of social media.

Keywords: aesthetic athletes, well-being, nutritional advice, nutritional disorders, social media

Absztrakt: Online kérdőíves felmérés alapján 440 fiatal, 18 és 26 év közötti nő válaszait mutatjuk be különböző szempontok szerinti csoportosításban. A vizsgált személyeket sportolási szokásaik alapján csoportosítottuk, majd többek között azok evési attitűdjeit, közösségi média, különösen az Instagram használati szokásait, illetve jól-létét vizsgáltuk. A válaszadók közül a versenyszerű esztétikai sportolók mutatták a legmagasabb jól-léti értékeket, míg a szinte soha nem sportolók a legalacsonyabbat. A közösségi média, különösen az Instagram, szignifikáns kockázati tényezőnek bizonyult az étkezési zavarok kialakulásában, mivel az étkezési zavarokkal veszélyeztetettek több időt töltöttek az Instagramon. A versenysportolók számára az edzők által adott ajánlások fontosabbak az étrend kialakításában, míg a szabadidős sportolók esetében ez a hatás kisebb mértékű. Eredményeink azt is megmutatták, hogy a rendszeres sportolás, még ha szabadidős célú is, pozitívan hat a jól-létre. Cikkünkben hangsúlyozzuk a prevenció fontosságát a táplálkozási rendellenességek és a közösségi média hatásainak kezelésében.

Kulcsszavak: esztétikai sportolók, jól-lét, táplálkozási tanácsok, táplálkozási rendellenességek, közösségi média

Introduction

The focus of our article was the investigation of young adult women who play different types of sports at different levels and women who never or very rarely do physical activity. Everyone's life, but this age group in particular, is defined by the world of social media. In our article, we examine the well-being of the target group, the time they spend on social media, as well as the degree to which the interviewees are at risk of developing eating disorders, and how these factors may be related to each other. The authors also often encountered the phenomenon that some of the female competitive athletes believe that a thin body will clearly bring better results due to high performance expectations, so they adapt their eating habits to this, often even going in an extreme direction. We believe that this is a current topic, as many people struggle with such problems these days. Adequate nutrition greatly contributes to the development of athletes' performance, the maintenance of their already achieved results and the achievement of their goals (Figler, 2015). In order to prevent the development of eating disorders, the greatest efforts should be focused on athletes, parents, coaches and other professionals dealing with athletes, and it is especially necessary to expand and make known the views on healthy nutrition among them. According to Fritz et al. (2020), athletes suffering from an eating disorder should be banned from sports until the disorder is restored.

A healthy lifestyle is now very popular, one of the reasons being the growth of social media. Nowadays, smartphones are available to almost everyone (Jakopánecz & Törőcsik, 2018), we are informed less by television or newspapers, but rather by various technical devices. Everything can be found on the internet. The Instagram application, which has a great influence on young people, contains a lot of fake photos and videos of ideal figures that many people aspire to, and this also creates an ideal

image in the minds of young people of what the expected appearance is, as well as the misconception that the more the thinner they are, the more successful they can be (Jakó-páncz & Törőcsik, 2018).

In the introductory part, we consider it important to define the group of aesthetic sports, since the appearance of a competitive athlete is a particularly important component there. We consider all sports in which the main characteristic resides in the beauty and aesthetics of the execution of movements to be aesthetic sports. These include rhythmic gymnastics, gymnastics, ballet, figure skating, synchronized swimming, ice dancing, competitive dancing, acrobatic rock and roll and vaulting. A general characteristic of aesthetic sports is that they emphasize feminine qualities, unlike all other forms of exercise. Music is an indispensable tool for almost all aesthetic sports, in which rhythm plays the main role. In aesthetic sports, great emphasis is placed on the development of the sense of rhythm, either without or with hand tools (e.g. the hoop, ball and mace in rhythmic gymnastics) the athletes present their sequence of exercises (Boros, 2013).

The world of aesthetic sports is characterized by duality, because on the one hand, dance is one of the most ancient artistic forms, it contributes to personality development, self-expression, communication and the transfer of feelings and thoughts. The literature highlights its positive effects on body image, mood, self-esteem and the human body (Langdon & Petracca, 2010; Allen et al., 2019, Szászi & Szabó, 2021). The dark side of aesthetic sports mostly affects those who play it competitively. The frequency of eating disorders (Kovács & Boros, 2024), body image disorders, depression and anxiety, possible burnout, locomotor complaints, as well as deficiency diseases and maternal metabolic disorders related to insufficient calorie intake is high among competitors (Zulawa & Pilch, 2012).

When it comes to sports, the average person thinks of a healthy lifestyle. On the other hand, several researchers have found that sports and eating disorders often go together, the goal of which is to reduce weight more effectively and avoid gaining weight (Dukay-Szabó, 2008). Most people with eating disorders use sports as a means of controlling their bodies. In some sports, great importance is attached to body weight, body composition and the optimal design of the body shape, because it is believed that a thin body shape or maintaining an ideal weight is essential for success. Athletes are strongly affected by the risk of developing eating disorders (Dukay-Szabó, 2008). Competitors in aesthetic sports are exposed to the greatest danger. It is important to start sport-specific training at a young age, because the technical knowledge necessary for success would no longer be established at an older age. Even 5-7 year old girls who play aesthetic sports worry more than average about their weight (Davison et al., 2002). The occurrence of any tragic event can also be behind the body image disorders that develop among athletes. For example, illness, injury, change of trainer, loss of an important person, relationship problems, increase in the length and volume of training, or negative comments about body weight (Sundgot-Borgen, 1994).

Physical dissatisfaction plays a major role in the development of eating disorders, so it would be important to develop prevention programs in schools that increase physical satisfaction and reduce physical dissatisfaction (Lew et al., 2007). Szumska (2008) emphasizes that when preventing

eating disorders, special attention should be paid not only to clinical disorders, but also to prevention. Prevention programs should be expanded, body dissatisfaction, disturbed eating behavior should be addressed, and the risk factors involved in the development of eating disorders should also be reduced. The school age group can easily be included in programs within school frameworks, so the risk and frequency of the development of eating disorders could be pushed back with lectures and prevention programs. Prevention would require a holistic approach involving public health experts, school workers, food manufacturers, as well as doctors and those in the fitness-fashion industry (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006). However, it would be important to emphasize that school prevention programs should not only aim at rejecting thinness or being overweight. It would be necessary to emphasize a wide spectrum of body shapes in order to make other body shapes socially and aesthetically acceptable in the face of beauty ideals standardized by the media (Túry & Szabó, 2000; Túry & Kopp, 2009).

Social media plays an extremely large role in people's ideas about the body, in social expectations, in their transmission and construction. It has a specific interactive and performative nature (Bonah & Lakötter, 2020). The main role of the media is to provide the media consumer with an idealized body image. Due to the frequency of content about a healthy and aesthetic body, the represented body ideal is internalized and the unrealistic body reinforced by the mass media becomes a reference point, which can lead to serious self-esteem problems and lack of self-confidence (Pukánszky, 2012, 2014; Tiggemann, 2014; Ábrahám et al., 2017). The majority of Instagram users want a body shape that comes to mind when scrolling their phone, because in our age it is extremely important who has what shape and many people think that they can gain different advantages by doing so.

A number of preliminary studies have shown that the media has a negative effect on body image. Vaughan and Fouts (2003) conducted a 16-month longitudinal study of 9- to 14-year-old girls and found that those who spent more time using media had symptoms suggestive of an eating disorder. Media consumption predisposes individuals to compare their own figure with the perfect body seen in the media, and the greater the difference between the two bodies, the greater the degree of body dissatisfaction (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006).

According to Nagyvárad et al. (2018), the common feature of research dealing with the topic of well-being is that the majority of them examine the subjective state of health with some kind of questionnaire survey, but Patakiné (2023) suggests a more complex approach, since the types of measurements themselves follow three models (Scandinavian, American, mixed), the expression of whose content is often linked to an index, for example the objective-based HDI (Human Development Index), the WBI (Well-being Index) is subjective, while the HPI (Happy Planet Index) is mixed. For this research, we chose the WBI-5 test with a widely used subjective approach.

Methods

The results of our article come from an online questionnaire based on convenience sampling (social media sites, Neptun announcement), in which, in addition to our own questions, we used the „Eating Attitudes Test - shortened version”

(Eating Attitudes Test, EAT-26, Túry & Szabó, 2000) and the „WHO Well-being Questionnaire” abbreviated version (WBI-5, Susánszky et al., 2006). We received the research ethics permit required for the survey at the end of November 2022 from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. During the survey, the interviewees had to answer questions related to demographic data, their sports habits, their eating attitudes, their behaviors related to competitive sports and eating, and their use of Instagram, as well as the consequences of its possible influence. Answers received between December 1 – 30. (N=440), 2022 have been processed in this article.

The results of the sample are partly described with basic statistical indicators (average, standard deviation, frequency). To prove the hypotheses, we performed comparative statistical methods using the JASP program.

The respondents classified themselves as competitive athletes and recreational and hobby athletes. However, in order to successfully answer our questions, I had to separate within these two main groups which of them are explicitly or dominantly aesthetic athletes, and which are not. This categorization was carried out based on taking into account which specific sports or forms of exercise the respondent listed that they practice regularly. This is how dancers and cheerleaders were included in group 1 (competitive aesthetic), for example athletes and football players in group 2 (competitive, non-aesthetic), and group 3 (leisure, presumably for aesthetic and shaping purposes moving) for example those who write Zumba or gym sports, to group 4 (leisure, presumably those who do not move primarily for aesthetic purposes) for example those who name cycling and badminton. Group 5 includes those who never or almost never move.

The research has three important limitations related to the above. The first is that the composition of the test subjects reached does not represent a representative sample. The second is that if the classification in the subcategory had been done by someone else, it is possible that the respondents would not be classified in the same way, so the people in the subsamples may not be the same, so the subsample could yield slightly different results. The third is that body height and body weight were not determined by measurement, but by self-declaration, so these figures cannot be considered reliable or relevant.

Hypotheses

- (1) Young women who exercise a bit in their free time feel better than those who almost never do sports.
- (2) The use of social media, including Instagram, is a significant risk factor for the development of eating disorders.
- (3) Those who are at risk of eating disorders have a lower well-being self-assessment than those who are not at risk.
- (4) There is a significant difference between the four athlete groups in the extent to which the coaches influence the athletes’ eating habits.

Results

We will present the results of the responses of 440 young women between the ages of 18 and 26 after methodological cleaning. The averages and standard deviations of the number of employees, age, and physical data per group can be found in Table 1.

	Group size	Age (year) /SD/	Body height (cm) /SD/	Weight (kg) /SD/	BMI /SD/
Group 1	N=47	20,78 /2,39/	165,85 /6,10/	56,70 /6,58/	20,54 /2,21/
Group 2	N=31	20,29 /1,39/	170,54 /7,71/	65,07 /12,46/	22,28 /3,38/
Group 3	N=164	21,39 /1,90/	167,87 /7,11/	61,01 /11,37/	21,62 /3,69/
Group 4	N=62	21,19 /2,08/	167,71 /6,03/	59,06 /8,35/	21,05 /3,39/
Group 5	N=136	21,77 /2,24/	167,30 /7,46/	61,44 /13,24/	21,88 /4,17/

Table 1: Some basic data of the applicants (N=440) 1. táblázat: A kitöltők néhány alapadata (N=440) Source/Forrás: Own survey and redaction, 2024 / Saját felmérés és szerkesztés, 2024

Examining the general demographic data, we were able to determine that 73.6% of them are currently pursuing university/college studies, 14.6% have completed university or college education and 10.2% have a high school diploma, after which they have already started working.

To determine the level of well-being, we used the abbreviated version of the WHO Well-being Questionnaire, in which the respondents had to answer about their general well-being during the last two weeks, on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. We give a score of 3 for the most positive feelings, 2 for the next, 1 for the average, and 0 for the two least positive feelings. I also calculated the WHO well-being value separately for each target group, the results of which are presented in Table 2. The lowest average value was associated with those who are almost never athletes, and the highest with those who pursue competitively aesthetic sports.

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
WHO well-being average value	7,78	7,61	7,66	7,45	6,5
SD	2,47	2,66	2,65	2,35	2,78

Table 2: WHO well-being value per group. 2. táblázat: A WHO well-being értéke csoportonként. Source/Forrás: Own survey and redaction, 2024/Saját felmérés és szerkesztés, 2024

In the physical activity questions, the first question was how often you do sports, the answer options were almost never, 1-2 times a week, 3-4 times a week and 5 or more times a week. Their results are illustrated in diagram 1. The highest proportion of non-aesthetic competitive athletes indicated that they participate in 5 or more training sessions per week. There is a large proportion (almost 58 and 63 %) of those who attend training sessions for leisure purposes only 1-2 times a week.

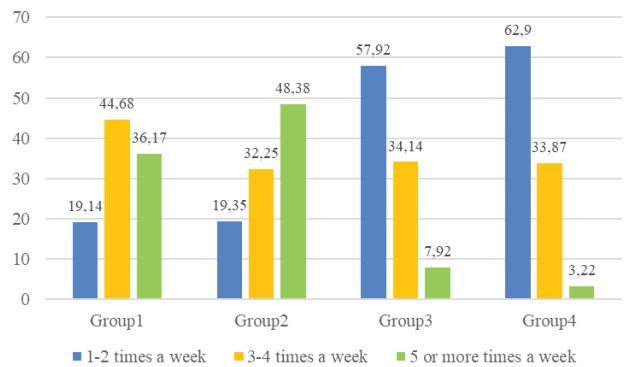


Diagram 1: Percentage distribution of respondents’ weekly exercise frequency 1. diagram: A válaszadók heti edzésgyakorlásának százalékos eloszlása Source/Forrás: Own survey and redaction, 2024/Saját felmérés és szerkesztés, 2024

Group 1 averaged 7.17 hours per week (standard deviation 3.97), group 2 7.74 hours per week (standard deviation 4.09), group 3 3.97 hours per week (standard deviation 2.68), while group 4 devotes 3.35 hours per week (standard deviation 2.36) spend to training. Those who are competitively aesthetic athletes spend more hours training than those who are recreational shapers, presumably for aesthetic purposes.

The questionnaire also included a question of our own, in which we asked: „How much does the following motivate you in regular sports activities: my coach will be satisfied with me. Respondents had to answer these questions on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1-does not motivate at all, 2-rather does not motivate, 3-both motivates and not, 4-rather motivates, 5-completely motivates among the answers it was necessary to give the characteristics of it to those who completed it. For these questions, the answer options 1-2, i.e. does not motivate at all and rather does not motivate, and 4-5, i.e. rather motivates and fully motivates, were included in the evaluation, as the two negative and positive evaluations, but the mean value “both motivates and not” categories were shown separately. The result of this is presented in Table 3. The aesthetic competitive athlete motivates the target group to the greatest extent so that their coach is satisfied with them when performing the sports activity.

	not motivating	it may or may not motivates	it motivates
Group 1	4,26 %	14,89 %	80,85 %
Group 2	19,35 %	35,48 %	45,17 %
Group 3	61,54 %	24,36 %	14,1 %
Group 4	67,27 %	18,96 %	13,77%

Table 3: How much does the statement „My coach will be satisfied with me” motivate the members of the target groups when performing sports activities
3. táblázat: „Az edzőm meg lesz velem elégedve” állítás mennyire motiválja a célcsoportok tagjait a sporttevékenységek végzésénél
Source/Forrás: Own survey and redaction, 2024/Saját felmérés és szerkesztés, 2024

We asked the respondents to what extent the advice they received from the trainer influenced them in terms of their eating habits. Respondents had to answer the questions on a scale from 1 to 6, where a value of 1 indicated no influence at all, and a value of 6 indicated the category of complete influence. Here, values 1-2 were analyzed as a negative response, values 3-4 as a moderate response, and values 5-6 as a strongly influencing response (diagram 2).

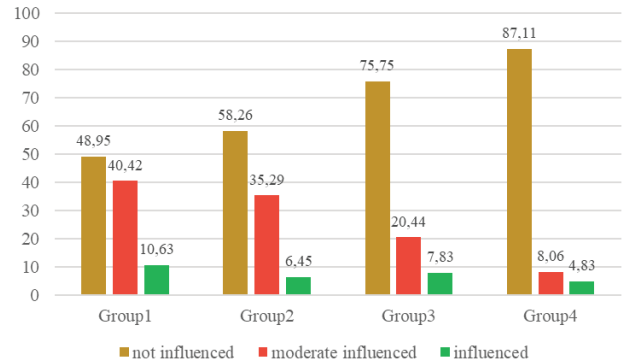


Diagram 2: The percentage influence of nutritional advice received from the trainer on the nutritional habits of the respondents
2. diagram: A edzőtől kapott táplálkozási tanácsok százalékos befolyása a válaszadók táplálkozási szokásaira
Source/Forrás: Own survey and redaction, 2024/Saját felmérés és szerkesztés, 2024

Based on diagram 2, among the groups, the diet of the group of competitively aesthetic athletes is most influenced by the dietary advice received from their coach.

To detect people at risk of eating disorders, we used the shortened version of the EAT-26 questionnaire. The EAT-26 is the most widely used standardized self-report measure of eating disorder symptoms and concerns. Our goal with the questionnaire was to assess the risk of eating disorders. Those who scored at least 20 are considered to be in a high risk group, while those who scored below 20 are considered to be a low risk group in terms of the development of eating disorders. Among competitive aesthetic athletes, 11 out of a total of 47 people belong to the at-risk category (23.4%), while among recreational athletes for shaping, presumably for aesthetic purposes, the number of at-risk people is 38 out of a total of 164 people (23.17%). 25.8% out of 31 people in the group of people who do sports competitively for presumably non-aesthetic purposes, 20.96% out of 62 people in recreational sportspeople who are presumably not for aesthetic purposes, and 19.85% out of 136 people in the group who hardly ever do sports are at risk, i.e. high risk for nutrition regarding the development of an eating disorder in our sample based on their fixed habits. Regarding the use of social media, we asked how much they spend on average per day, and how much time they spend using Instagram. Looking at the overall average, the respondents spent 3 hours on social media, and the average time spent on Instagram was 1 hour.

Conclusions

Our first hypothesis was that young women who exercise a bit in their free time feel better than those who hardly ever exercise. The sample was not normally distributed, so we compared the two groups using the Mann-Whitney test, where $W=13974.000$; $p < 0.001$, i.e. there is a significant difference between the two groups in the examined question, i.e. those who almost never played sports felt significantly worse in the last two weeks according to the WHO well-being questionnaire compared to those who do sports in their spare time, presumably for the purpose of getting in shape, so our hypothesis was confirmed. One of the reasons for this may be that those who regularly exercise in their free time have a higher level of endorphins in their bodies, which positively affects the feeling of happiness. Our research also proves that people should be supported in developing a sporty, active lifestyle, parents should ensure that their children participate in sports activities from an early age, that they have the opportunity to fall in love with forms of exercise, because playing sports shows a positive correlation with well-being. Even with regular physical activity twice a week, we got a significantly higher well-being index compared to the inactive ones.

According to our second hypothesis, the use of social media, including Instagram, is a significant risk factor for the development of eating disorders. The sample was not normally distributed, so we compared the studied groups using the Mann-Whitney test. $W = 20524$; $p < 0.001$, therefore, there was a significant difference between the investigated groups in the examined question, so those who were at risk of developing eating disorders spent significantly more time using Instagram on a daily basis than those who were

not at risk of developing eating disorders, so our hypothesis was confirmed. According to our experience, Instagram is full of fake body images, but when people see these fake images, they desire a similar figure and are willing to significantly modify their eating habits in order to achieve the desired figure. According to Szabó et al. (2011), you can follow many pages or people on Instagram who present a weight loss process, recommend diets and the necessary foods and practices, as well as training, training plans and tools that can lead to eating disorders. The results of Vaughan and Fouts (2003) also showed that young girls who spent more time using media produced symptoms suggestive of an eating disorder.

We recommend reducing the time spent on social media, especially Instagram, for individuals of all ages and at any level of physical activity, as it has shown a negative correlation with well-being, even though well-being is an important goal of recreation and the basis of a happier life.

As a third hypothesis, we examined that those who are at risk of eating disorders have a lower well-being self-assessment than those who are not at risk. The sample was not normally distributed, so we compared the endangered and non-endangered groups using the Mann-Whitney test, where $W=13205.000$; $p = 0.002$. Based on the results, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the examined groups, so those who were at risk of eating disorders felt significantly worse in the last two weeks according to the WHO well-being questionnaire than those who were not at risk of eating disorders regarding its formation, so our hypothesis was confirmed. Those who are at risk of developing eating disorders are most likely to keep their meals under control and this also carries a kind of mental pressure. They never dare to live well, that's why they can be more tense, or they excessively want to conform to the images broadcast by social media, and if they can't achieve this, then their negative thoughts increase. According to Eckler et al. (2016), body acceptance decreases as time spent on Instagram increases.

Looking to the future, we believe that preventive activities should be applied more widely to prevent nutritional problems, for each target group through the communication channel they use to obtain information, since the rate of tendency to eating disorders was high (between 19-23%) in all investigated groups. According to EAT-26, which can also mean a general social problem. This could be, for example, the creation and distribution of short video materials with specifically educational content on Instagram and TikTok, which partly support self-acceptance and, on the other hand, support healthier eating habits. Preventive activities could reduce the risk of developing nutrition-related problems, eating disorders, and body image disorders. Many influencers create content on this topic as well, which is followed by the younger generation. In this question too, we can find real and authentic success stories that could be promoted among the target group.

In the context of our fourth hypothesis, we examined whether there is a significant difference between the four groups of athletes in the question of the extent to which coaches influence the athletes' eating habits. Based on diagram 2, the diet of the group of competitively aesthetic athletes is more influenced by the dietary advice received from the

coach compared to the other groups. The reason for this may be that in aesthetic sports there is a particularly strong emphasis on physical appearance and achieving the best possible body image, so aesthetic competitive athletes are more likely to accept the dietary advice received from their coaches, as they may think that they will be able to achieve better results in competitions, which is the main goal of competitive athletes. Due to the multiple groups, we compared the respondents using the ANOVA method to find out whether the differences in response frequencies are statistically significant or not. The obtained result is $F = 6.902$; $p < 0.001$; Based on $\eta^2 = 0.109$, it can be stated that the obtained difference is significant, so there is a significant difference between the target groups in how much the coach influences the athletes' eating habits, so our hypothesis was confirmed.

When it comes to eating, there are certain sports that require athletes to follow a slightly more drastic diet, but basically the goal would be to keep the athletes' nutritional intake at a healthy level. We would recommend coaches to advocate proper prevention regarding eating habits to their athletes, regardless of their sport, so that the chance of developing eating disorders is as low as possible. We can also imagine a helpful solution here, where young girls with questions and insecurities could create „discussion groups” moderated by dietetics, where they could openly ask each other and the specialist, and share experiences.

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