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Study about the Perception and Practice of Nordic Walking as a Component of Active Tourism in Romania

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Abstract

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The paper addresses some general issues related to Nordic walking, a leisure sports activity with many positive influences on the body and mind, but unfortunately almost unknown in our country. The study has started from the hypothesis that if Nordic walking is systematically practiced, it will have multiple beneficial effects on the individual's health and social relations. But to prove it, we need theoretical arguments and concrete evidence coming to support this assumption. To this purpose, we used bibliographical documentation and we conducted a research in Campina, between 8 and 29 December 2013, on a group affiliated to the Association for Health and Performance, made up of practitioners of weekend tourism in Breaza-Nistoresti region. The participants in Nordic walking, 21 subjects aged 22 to 64 years, responded to an 18-item questionnaire designed to identify, among others, their perception about the natural conditions and those created for the practice of leisure sports activities, the dimension and use of their free time, about Nordic walking in general, they also being asked to give their reasons for practicing this sport. The collected data were processed and interpreted, our findings underlying some relevant aspects related to Nordic walking, which might be both necessary and interesting, as we have to do with a sports discipline at its beginning in our country.

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Keywords: Nordic walking; free time; leisure sports activities; benefits.

1. Introduction

Nordic walking dates back from 1966, when a woman gymnastics teacher from Finland started using “walking with ski poles” in her physical education classes with students. But only in 1997, she presented her ideas publicly for the first time, they being noticed by the Finnish Central Association for Recreational Sports and Outdoor Activities, which decided to experiment the activity in order to promote it. This new sport was surprisingly quickly adopted by many countries (people associating perhaps the Nordic lands with the concepts of fresh air, pure nature and healthy lifestyle), which

justified the foundation, in 2000, of the International Nordic Walking Association - INWA. If, in 2004, 3.5 million Nordic walkers were estimated in Europe, in 2013, their number increased to 10 million practitioners (Oulton, 2014).

Nordic walking, a non-competitive physical activity suitable for all, regardless of age, gender or physical condition, mainly aims at the general physical and mental wellbeing, its practice relying on many principles among which we mention: safe, healthy, bio-mechanically correct movements and gait; correct body alignment and posture; natural and fluid movements that engage the muscles of upper and lower body, and also the heart; symmetrical and complete training of the whole body; effective aerobic conditioning, by activating both large and small muscle groups that provide rhythmic and dynamic movements; increased blood circulation and metabolism; continuous alternation of muscle activation and relaxation, promoting relief in tight muscles; the intensity and training goals can easily be adapted to individual needs; the learned skills can be transferred to everyday life (INWA, 2015). At the same time, Nordic walking improves the state of mind, relieves anxiety and depression, provides mental balance, decreases apprehension, discharges muscular stress that may cause physical injuries etc. It is recommended to people suffering from heart diseases, osteoporosis, diabetes, hypertension, obesity etc. Moreover, in Nordic walking, fats are consumed first and carbohydrates only after, unlike the other sports where consumption is in the reverse order (Duțu, 2014).

All these arguments explain the expansion of Nordic walking, which is approached by an increasingly larger number of followers aware of its benefits on the body and mind, but also of the fact that it is enjoyable and even socialising, if performed as a component of active tourism. Due to this continuously upward trend, Nordic walking is nowadays deemed “to represent the sport with the highest growth rate in Western Europe, being ‘in fashion’ equally among healthy and disabled people” (*Mersul nordic*, 2012).

In Romania, Nordic walking has been “imported” in recent years, being still a “young” sport discipline: few are those who know about it and even fewer those who practice it, some of them trying to lose weight, others to heal their spine-related problems, while others perform it as a jogging exercise. It seems that neither the category of practitioners nor that of non-practitioners has sufficient information or is fully aware that “Nordic walking is 50% more efficient than simple walking, being considered the second sport, after swimming, which exerts most of the muscle groups (more than 90%)” (*Mersul nordic îi cucerește pe români*, 2010).

Another important concept for our paper is that of “free time” or “leisure (time)”, which is so widely spread nowadays that we shall not insist upon it, given the rich literature on this topic generated during the last decades and largely focused on the formative-educational potential of this component - sometimes a friend, other times an enemy of our daily life, depending on each individual’s ability to take advantage of it or to waste it irreversibly.

“Rational use of free time has a tonic effect on both the human body and the personality development, but most of all it contributes to maintain the individual’s physical freshness, a freshness diminished by the informational and transformable life stress” (Balint, 2010: 10). And also the individual’s mental freshness, we would add, because in the contemporary world the mental component is more exerted than any other and more than ever, by virtue of the rather static work

activities, as part of the amazing technological progress.

Finally, the third concept used in this study is that of “leisure sports activities”, little researched in Romania in the context of developmental psychology, but intensely explored in foreign literature, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon one. Taking into account this imbalance, our paper tries to prove that Nordic walking has multiple beneficial effects on its practitioners at the physiological, psychological and social levels, which leads to an increase in their quality of life. This study aims to promote its knowledge and recognition and implicitly to address psychologists the invitation of using leisure activities in human development. All the more since modern society has been confronted for a while to a constant, encouraging and probably one-way phenomenon, which is the growing interest of a large mass of people in movement performing.

It is known that people who go to the gym, the stadium or do jogging are more emotionally stable, more sociable and happier in their relations. This is actually the *premise* from which we have started our research: Nordic walking is a physical activity that facilitates relaxation and good mood through movement, promoting at the same time a lifestyle in harmony with nature.

The research *hypothesis* states that if Nordic walking is systematically practiced, it will have multiple beneficial effects on the individual’s health and social relations.

2. Materials and methods

Research subjects. Twenty-one subjects were included in the study, but the sample was not considered representative, because the project allowed the presence of all those willing to perform a given type of effort. Consequently, participants were aged between 22 and 64 years, most of them being adult women (95.5%), graduates from higher education institutions (60%).

Research period and location. The research was conducted between 8 and 29 December 2013, in Campina, on a group affiliated to the Association for Health and Performance, whose activities are promoted on the internet and through the site *Atlefitness (nature, health, beauty and physical vigour)*. This association, directly interested in the employers’ professional performances, designed a very flexible weekend programme called “A Healthy Weekend”. The group members, practitioners of weekend tourism in Breaza-Nistoresti region, were guided towards an organized physical activity, a sport easy to practice by any participant, namely Nordic walking.

Research methods. Bibliographical documentation, an 18-item questionnaire (basically related to Nordic walking, but also to other adjacent issues necessary for us to reach some findings and draw some conclusions), statistical processing and interpretation, graphical representation.

3. Results

Among the 18 items of the questionnaire, we shall analyse only 8, thought to be the most relevant for the topic addressed in this study.

Questions, responses and their interpretation

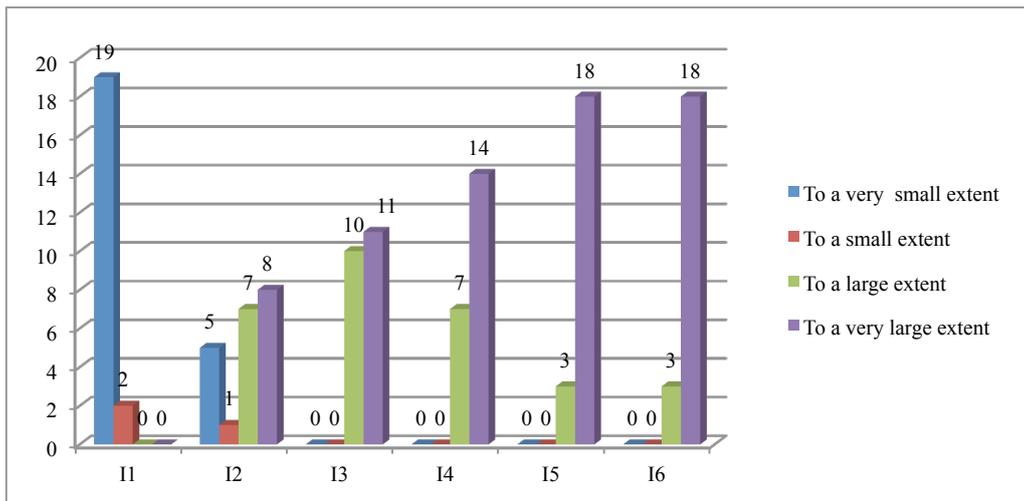
To Q1, “Do you think that you have enough free time?”, 19 subjects respond in the affirmative and 2 in the negative (90.5% vs. 9.5%), which means that almost all of them admit that they have free time

available, obviously to a greater or lesser extent, but sufficiently. This indicates that the investigated people have the opportunity to spend it in various ways, choosing the active or passive leisure activities that fit best their need for physical and/or mental relaxation. Therefore most subjects, eager to break the daily routine, try (and manage, in our case) to properly distribute the ordinary tasks so that they create a balance between their free time and the work performed. The other 2, for whom the free time is not enough, might have jobs requiring prolonged working hours, for instance, or might fail in well organizing their daily schedule.

To Q2, “Do you use to practice sports activities in your free time?”, 20 subjects respond “yes” and 1 subject responds “no” (95.2% vs. 4.8%), which shows clearly that they prefer active leisure activities (sports, in our case) in which they do get involved, as they have the habit to practice them, meaning that their sports activity is consistent, not accidental. Sport, in general, is favoured by our respondents, which might indicate that they are aware of its beneficial effects on the body and/or that they practice it because it is entertaining, relaxing and has a socializing role, allowing communication and relations with other participants. But whatever the reason may be, the most important thing is that the interviewed subjects dedicate their free time to sports practice, which is encouraging for the promotion of this activity field. The only subject who does not use to perform sports might be interested in other types of leisure activities or might be one of those who has not enough free time to do sports (according to Q1).

Q5, “To what extent do you agree to the following statements?”, is made up of 6 items (I1-I6):

I1: “When I hear the word ‘sport’, I remain indifferent”; I2: “I like the competitive side of sports”; I3: “The practice of Nordic walking gives me more energy”; I4: “The practice of Nordic walking gives me pleasure”; I5: “The practice of Nordic walking is beneficial to physical health”; I6: “The practice of Nordic walking is beneficial to mental health”. (Graph 1)



Graph 1. Presentation of the results for Q5

The collected data illustrate that the research subjects have recorded the highest scores to items 1, 5 and 6, which reveals the following aspects:

- I1: the word “sport” arouses the respondents’ interest in movement performing (19 people), a characteristic of those individuals with an active lifestyle, who search for challenges and accept them, unlike the 2 subjects who report that they remain somehow indifferent when hearing the word aforesaid, maybe because the sports practice is not yet a habit for them or they are more sensitive to words belonging to other spheres of life.

- I5 and I6: for each item, an equal number of subjects (18) declare that the practice of Nordic walking is beneficial to both physical and mental health, an opinion highlighting their awareness of the fact that human being, as a whole, can reach harmony only through the unity between body and mind; moreover, the respondents seem to have found the sports activity able to achieve this goal, namely Nordic walking. As to the remaining 3 people, who are not fully convinced of the assertions aforementioned, they might be beginners in this activity, which would justify their reticence in giving decisive “verdicts” before experiencing more deeply the positive effects of Nordic walking on their own physical and mental health.

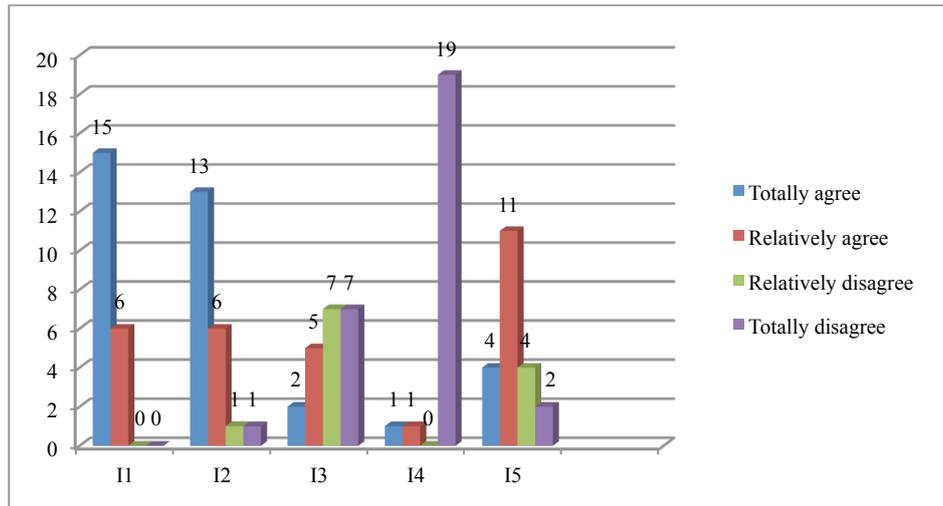
I2: in this case, responses are divergent, because the subjects have different opinions about the competitive side of sports, namely 8 of them like this aspect to a very large extent, while 1 participant is at the opposite pole, appreciating it to a very small extent, and the other 12 are in-between. We think that this wide distribution of responses reflects each individual’s personality, according to which life is regarded either as a competition inviting the protagonists to actively take part in or as a show inviting the viewers to passively watch it.

I3: respondents agree to a very large extent (11) and to a large extent (10) that Nordic walking gives them more energy, which can be explained by the fact that it engages most of the muscle groups, toning them up, and this increases the practitioners’ vigour and fitness condition. But their energy level also improves as a consequence of removing mental stress, whose accumulation and static presence decrease the inner potential of the human body.

I4: responses indicate that the practice of Nordic walking is pleasant to a very large extent for one third of the subjects (14) and to a large extent for 7 subjects. This means that the performed activity is agreeable for all the investigated practitioners, a minor difference being given by the presence, respectively the absence of the word “very”, which might actually be a way of perceiving the world with more or less realism, enthusiasm or optimism.

Q6, “To what extent do you agree to the following statements about physical and sports activities?”, includes 5 items (I1-I5):

I1: The region where I live offers me many opportunities to practice physical and sports activities; I2: Local sports clubs and other centres in my region offer many opportunities for the practice of physical and sports activities; I3: There are opportunities for the practice of physical and sports activities in my region, but I have no time to benefit from them; I4: I am not interested in the practice of physical and sports activities - I prefer doing something else in my free time; I5: Local authorities do not do enough for the citizens in the field of physical and sports activities. (Graph 2)



Graph 2. Presentation of the results for Q6

The collected data illustrate the following aspects:

I1: most subjects (15) totally agree that the region where they live offers them opportunities to practice physical and sports activities, while 6 relatively agree to this assertion, which means that there exist natural conditions allowing people to exercise, but the decision to do it is a personal matter, belonging to each individual.

I2: respondents have diverse opinions about the opportunities offered by local sports clubs and other centres in the region to practice physical and sports activities. Thus, 13 totally agree to the expressed idea, 5 are relatively content with the situation, 1 is not convinced that things are good enough and 1 definitely denies the existence of such opportunities. All these are difficult to interpret, because the results might be influenced by the economic development in the area where they live, by the number of inhabitants, their age and gender, their preference for the movement practice, but also, in our opinion, by the “claims” or exigencies of each individual.

I3: the opportunities for practicing physical and sports activities in their region are valued by an equal number of subjects, who respond that they totally disagree (7) and relatively disagree (7) to the assertion that they would not have free time available to benefit from them. Consequently, this category of people proves that “where there is a will, there is a way” and that man is the master of time, and not conversely. Five subjects tend to accept that their free time is limited, which hinders them to get involved in leisure activities, and 1 single declares that he/she has no free time. Overall, the situation is promising, as one third of the subjects succeed in having a time of their own and using it for their mental and physical relaxation.

I4: responses clearly demonstrate that most subjects (19) are interested in the practice of physical and sports activities, instead of doing something else in their free time. However, 1 subject relatively agrees to this statement, which might indicate a hesitation or a momentary indecision in responding more accurately, and 1 subject totally agrees that he/she dedicates his/her free time to other kinds of activities, obviously not related to movement performing. These 2 subjects, but especially the latter, are the “exceptions that prove the rule”, in our case the preference for physical and sports activities, as a source of wellbeing.

I5: subjects' opinions about the fact that local authorities do not do enough for the citizens in the field of physical and sports activities are again diversified, but, as we said before, this keeps to the individual's perception and exigencies related to the public services provided to a community and implicitly to each of its members. So, according to 15 subjects (4 totally agree and 11 relatively agree), more should be done in this regard, which might express a dissatisfaction with the current state of things and a desire for better involvement of the local authorities in solving the issues related to the practice of physical and sports activities. Their requests might be about facilities, equipment, schedules, management or many others. However, 6 subjects are more tolerant, as 4 relatively disagree and 2 totally disagree with the statement above-said, which might mean that they are almost, respectively fully content with what the decision-makers do at the local level. This is a good perspective and indicates a possible upward trend in people's perception about the satisfaction of their needs, which are not ignored any longer, but taken into consideration and fulfilled.

To Q7, "How did you find about Nordic walking?", 16 subjects (76.2%) mention their friends, 2 (9.5%) indicate Google, 2 (9.5%) report other sources and 1 (4.8%) says that as a response to an invitation. The obtained percentages lead to the conclusion that friends have a major role in influencing their group to practice Nordic walking, as an alternative to a sedentary lifestyle, in the case of non-athletes, or as a challenge to attempt something new, in the case of those who already practice one or many sports. This method seems to work best, because friends have the greatest power of persuasion, they are trusted and sometimes are examples to follow.

To Q8, "Do you use to practice Nordic walking in your free time?", 20 subjects respond in the affirmative and 1 subject in the negative (95.2% vs. 4.8%). The high percentage of practitioners can be explained by the fact that they act in a team spirit, within a group formed a few months before participating in the investigation. Therefore, it seems normal for them to spend their free time together, joined by a common passion called Nordic walking. The subject whose response is "no" is a retired woman at her first contact with this sport, but she does not exclude the possibility to perform it in the future.

To Q9, "If you respond 'yes', give the main reason for which you use to practice Nordic walking", out of the remaining 20 subjects (1 said "no", according to Q8), 9 (45%) declare that for socialization, 5 (25%) for keeping their physical fitness, 3 (15%) for improving their health state and 3 (15%) for meeting their friends. This statistic is somehow contrary to expectations, because we thought that the health-related reasons would be on the first place. Instead, the participants' need for socializing is stronger than any other reason, reaching almost half of their options. It is true that socialization contributes to identity building, social self-assertion, creation of (sometimes) long-lasting relations etc., but besides these benefits, modern man seems to feel a strong desire to be with humans in a world of machineries and devices, in an alienating virtual universe. Maintaining their physical fitness is also important to our subjects, who certainly know that the complete movements of Nordic walking tone up all the body muscles and allow the full strengthening of muscle and joint chains. Besides, the weight loss comes as a consequence of high energy expenditure: the Nordic walker consumes around 400 calories per hour compared to the 280 calories consumed during traditional walking (Duțu, 2014). And, finally, the subjects' interest in their health state registers the same percentage as meeting their friends

for practicing Nordic walking. This seems somehow bizarre to us, because to practice a sport just to meet one's friends is not a serious approach to movement performing. Logically, the health-related reasons should have enjoyed a better position, since Nordic walking is known to improve body functions, for example, breathing: the body posture allows a full opening of the thoracic cage ensuring greater pulmonary amplitude, therefore extra oxygenation and better irrigation, consequently an increase in both cardiovascular capacity and heart rate.

For *Q12*, "How often do you use to practice Nordic walking?", responses given by the 20 subjects (1 does not practice this sport, see *Q8*) are unevenly distributed, as follows: every day - 4 (20%), 3 to 5 times per week - 8 (40%), once or twice per week - 4 (20%), once or twice per month - 3 (15%), very rarely - 1 (5%). These statistical data show that only 4 people perform Nordic walking every day, therefore on a regular basis, which proves that they have acquired this habit, probably because they appreciate and are confident in its effects on multiple levels. Such a result confirms that people need to do something different from their usual work, so that they escape from banality and "recharge their batteries" for a new day. Unfortunately, the number of those who pay attention to the necessities of their own body, who carefully listen to it and try to fulfil its silent claims is still low; but "there is a beginning to everything", therefore a hope that things might change for the better in the case of Nordic walking too, with the full understanding of its benefits and with the help of a more "aggressive" popularization, if required by the poor health status of a category of people or even of a whole nation (it is not an exaggeration, because sedentariness tends to affect people from the most tender to the oldest age). Eight of the investigated subjects practice this sport 3 to 5 times per week, which is not bad at all and demonstrates that they treat Nordic walking seriously and rigorously, while enjoying its benefits as often as possible. Four people get involved in this activity once or twice per week, which is still good and shows that they are willing to continue performing this activity according to their schedule. The 3 participants in Nordic walking with a frequency of once or twice per month can be considered occasional practitioners, able to leave it and return to it anytime, maybe on the basis of some momentary moods or influences. For 1 subject, Nordic walking is a sporadic activity, which might indicate that he/she is not fond of it and remembers it when other variants are not available for various reasons.

4. Discussions and conclusions

Through this study, we wanted to identify the perceptions and experiences of the investigated sample regarding the conditions available to them for the practice of leisure sports activities, the dimension and use of their free time, their involvement in movement performing - with special emphasis on Nordic walking, their reasons for practicing this sport, and many others. The aim was to see whether this new and almost unknown activity in our country would be able to capture in the future the attention and interest of an increasingly number of people, so that it becomes as popular as in many Western countries, where lots of practitioners fully enjoy it.

The activity proposed in our research took into account that our modern technological society allows people much more free time to be used on each one's choice, but they must be provided alternatives and must be permanently stimulated to cope with new challenges, in our case Nordic

walking, as a component of active tourism or a leisure sports experience able to bring a “fresh breath” and a “welcome break” in the daily routine.

The fact that preponderantly the graduate adult women (95.5%) enrolled in our project is somehow surprising, because usually they are busier than men, having not only professional, but also everlasting domestic tasks. However, they were able to “reconcile” between their inner need for a personal life and the external constraints, and to “find” the free time for taking part in the research. They also have enough free time available, as shown by the questionnaire, to practice Nordic walking either to socialise or to be in shape, or to be healthier, or maybe all of them. Their higher instruction level might have had an important contribution to opening new perspectives on approaching and better managing the life issues.

Synthesising and regrouping the collected responses, we can draw some conclusions based on the “peak” trends revealed by the study: subjects have enough free time available during which they practice active leisure activities, sports (in our case), and particularly Nordic walking, on a relatively regular basis (3 to 5 times per week); they do it for socialization, while being aware of its beneficial effects on the physical and mental health; they found about it mainly from their friends; they are content with the opportunities for the practice of physical and sports activities existing in their region.

The obtained results seem to be encouraging for a leisure sports activity at its beginning in our country, but, in our opinion, an increased popularization of this sport, through media and within educational and professional environments, would be possible to bring throughout the years more and more followers willing to really practice or at least to try this sport and feel “live” its impact on their existence.

To conclude, the research hypothesis, stating that “if Nordic walking is systematically practiced, it will have multiple beneficial effects on the individual’s health and social relations”, has been validated by the theoretical arguments and the data provided by the investigated subjects.

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