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TITLE: RECREATION AWARENESS AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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PAGES: 170-182

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3717525>



SPORMETRE
The Journal of Physical Education and Sport Sciences
Beden Eğitimi ve Spor Bilimleri Dergisi



DOI: 10.33689/spormetre.1434330

Geliş Tarihi (Received): 09.02.2024

Kabul Tarihi (Accepted): 22.09.2024

Online Yayın Tarihi (Published): 30.09.2024

**RECREATION AWARENESS AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS: A
GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract: The positive influence of the leisure activity participation on the development of adolescents is emphasized by many researchers. However, participation in leisure activities among Turkish young people are still low. One of the reasons for the lower participation rate is the lack of awareness of recreation and its benefits. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to detect the level of recreation awareness among middle school students residing in Sapanca, Türkiye, and to investigate gender differences regarding recreation awareness. Quantitative research methods were employed in this study. The data were collected face-to-face from students attending two different schools located in Sapanca. In total, 283 questionnaires were obtained; 33 cases were excluded from the dataset due to normality issues and missing data. The analyses were conducted on 250 cases. The data were analysed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the software tools SPSS 21 and EQS 6.2, employing advanced confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Recreation awareness was measured in three dimensions: fun, achievement, and self-improvement. Results showed that the respondents had above-average scores in recreation awareness. While no difference was found in the 'pleasure-fun' dimension between males and females, females scored significantly higher in the 'social-success' and 'self-improvement' dimensions. In order to increase recreation awareness and participation, especially among male students, middle schools should organize seminars and other types of events to promote the benefits of recreational activities. School management should collaborate with local government to design such programs.

Key Words: Leisure, recreation awareness, recreational benefits, gender, Turkish youth

**ORTAOKUL ÖĞRENCİLERİ ARASINDA REKREASYON FARKINDALIĞI:
CİNSİYET PERSPEKTİFİ**

Öz: Rekreasyon aktivitelerine katılımın özellikle ortaokul dönemindeki öğrencilerinin gelişimi üzerindeki olumlu etkileri birçok çalışma tarafından vurgulanmaktadır. Buna rağmen Türkiye'de yaşayan gençler arasında serbest zaman aktivitelerine katılım oranı düşük düzeydedir. Bu durumun nedenlerinden biri de rekreasyon aktivitelerinin faydaları hakkında yeterince farkındalık ve bilgi sahibi olunmamasıdır. Bu bağlamda bu çalışmanın amacı, Sapanca'da yaşayan ortaokul öğrencileri rekreasyon farkındalık düzeyini belirlemek ve rekreasyon farkındalığı açısından cinsiyet değişkeni bağlamında farklılığı araştırmaktır. Bu çalışmada nicel araştırma yöntemi benimsenmiştir. Veriler, Sapanca'da bulunan iki farklı okula öğrenim gören 283 öğrenciden yüz yüze anket yöntemi ile toplanmıştır. Eksik cevaplanan ve normallik dağılımında problem olan veriler göz önüne alınarak 33 anket yanıtı veri setinden çıkarılmış, analizler 250 katılımcı üzerinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Elde edilen veriler, SPSS 21 paket programı ve EQS 6.2 yazılım araçlarını kullanarak Yapısal Eşitlik Modellemesi (YEM) ile gelişmiş Doğrulayıcı Faktör Analizi (DAF) kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Araştırmanın sonuçlarına göre öğrencilerin rekreasyon farkındalığında ortalamanın üzerinde olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Cinsiyet değişkenine göre 'eğlence' boyutunda fark bulunmazken, kadınlar 'başarı' ve 'kendini geliştirme' boyutlarında kadınların erkeklere oranla anlamlı derecede daha yüksek puan aldığı tespit edilmiştir. Rekreasyon farkındalığını ve rekreasyonel katılım oranını artırmak için ortaokul ve liselerde teorik ve uygulamalı eğitim ve seminerler düzenlenmesi önerilmektedir. Bu bağlamda okul yönetimlerinin, bu tür rekreasyon programları tasarlamak için yerel yönetimlerle işbirliği yapması önerilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Serbest zaman, rekreasyon farkındalığı, rekreasyonel fayda, cinsiyet, Türk gençleri

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INTRODUCTION

In the age of technology, it is well-established that individuals tend to spend their leisure time on passive and digital activities such as watching television, engaging with smartphones, and playing computer games (Urry, 2018). However, particularly for students in the developmental stage, sportive, cultural, and artistic recreational activities hold significant importance (Zorba & Yermakhanov, 2022). Considering the busy schedule of the students with classes lasting whole day and heavy homework which causes exam anxiety, and various negative emotional states associated with adolescence, the effective utilization of leisure time becomes even more crucial for the development of students.

Leisure activities are the activities undertaken during free time from work and other social obligations (Coşkun, 2022). The benefits of leisure activities include improvement of mental and physical well-being, relaxation, enjoyment, or learning, as the functions of recreation are recognized as relaxation, enjoyment, and self-improvement (Dumazedier, 1967). Through these functions of recreational activities, it can be asserted that students' physical health will improve, social skills will develop, a sense of responsibility will be fostered, and academic achievements will increase. Additionally, during the middle and high school phases, recreational activities play a significant role in the physical, cognitive, social, and academic development of students (Caldwell et al., 2004).

In a study conducted among middle school students aged between 11 and 14, it was determined that sports recreational activities enhance self-esteem (Bayazıt et al., 2020). Cotterill and Brown (2018) emphasize that outdoor sports improve the physical and mental health of 9-13-year-old students, providing perceived life skills and academic benefits. Morales et al. (2016) state that recreational activities have positive effects on the development of social behaviors in students aged between 9 and 14. In light of all this information, it can be said that there are numerous studies in the literature highlighting the positive effects of recreational activities on students. Therefore, it is known that recreational activities have positive benefits on individuals in elementary, middle, high school, and university levels in terms of physical, social, or psychological aspects (Tekin et al., 2017; Yayla & Güven, 2019). In this context, the importance of students' participation in recreational activities becomes evident. Previous research shows that there are various factors facilitating or hindering students' participation in recreational activities (Çavdar & Yıldız, 2020; Çiftçioğlu, 2022; Kaçay et al., 2023; Sarol, 2017). One of the factors hindering participation in recreational activities is identified as lack of information (Çavdar & Yıldız, 2020). In Türkiye, the absence of adequate knowledge and awareness is frequently identified as a significant impediment to active participation in different kinds of leisure pursuits (Çetinkaya et al., 2018; Kara & Özdeoğlu, 2017; Üstün et al., 2017). Therefore, increasing recreational awareness among students is crucial for their participation in recreational activities.

Recreational awareness is defined as the individual awareness regarding the benefits of recreational activities to be engaged (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Mannell & Stynes, 1991). Effective utilization of available time, planning for the management of leisure time, having knowledge on the benefits of recreational activities, active participation and engagement in preferred leisure activities, and tracking them, as well as recognizing one's own interests and abilities, fall within the scope of recreational awareness (Caldwell et al., 2004). The components of recreational awareness are classified as follows: (1) knowledge on the benefits of leisure time and recreational activities, (2) self-awareness (individual skills and experience influencing

participation), (3) individual and societal attitudes toward leisure time, and (4) planning skills in participating in leisure time (Han, 2008; Peterson & Stumbo, 2000).

Especially during middle school years, an individual's awareness towards oneself and the surrounding environment constitutes a significant step in personal development. Individuals with a sufficient level of cognitive recreational awareness during this period benefit from recreational participation in effectively utilizing their leisure time (Peterson & Stumbo, 2000). Indeed, it is crucial for an individual to be aware of the contributions of a particular activity prior to the decision of participation. This underscores the importance of recreation and leisure education/literacy (Mundy, 1998; Peterson & Stumbo, 2000). The awareness of how a recreational activity will bring satisfaction and contribute to individual development is crucial for facilitating participation in the activity (Barnett, 2005; Deci, 1985). Studies on recreation awareness, and its relationships with variables such as motivation and recreational activity preferences have gained more importance in recent years.

Research findings indicate a positively significant relationship between recreational awareness levels and quality of life (Satılmış et al., 2022) as well as mental well-being (Karademir, 2023). In a study conducted by Ersöz et al. (2023), it was reported that an increase in recreational awareness is associated with increased participation in recreational activities, and furthermore, women were found to have higher levels of recreational awareness compared to men. Studies conducted on students regarding also reported that women's recreational awareness is significantly higher than men's (Cöhce et al., 2022; Satılmış et al., 2022; Yalçın & Erzeybek, 2023). In contrast to these findings, there are also studies that have reported no significant difference in recreational awareness based on gender (Bülbül et al., 2021; Üstün & Üstün, 2020). In light of this information, it can be suggested that further research is needed to determine whether recreational awareness varies significantly based on gender. Indeed, considering societal or familial pressure, environmental expectations, social relationships, and the design of recreational programs, it is foreseeable that the level of recreational benefit awareness may differ according to gender.

When examining the literature related to recreational awareness, it is noted that there is a limited number of scientific studies conducted in Türkiye specifically among middle school students (Bayazıt et al., 2020; Cengiz, 2023; Uzuner & Turgut, 2023). Additionally, the common sample of the studies on recreational awareness is predominantly high school and college students (Cöhce et al., 2022; Ekinçi & Özdilek, 2019; Karademir, 2023; Satılmış et al., 2022; Üstün & Üstün, 2020). The inadequacy of studies on the recreational awareness of middle school students underscores the importance of addressing this gap in literature. Recreation education, leisure literacy, and awareness of recreational benefits play a significant role in increasing students' participation in recreational activities (Peterson & Stumbo, 2000). Indeed, considering that students who are aware of the benefits of recreational activities are likely to be more prominent in the participation process, recognizing the advantages of leisure activities becomes valuable (Caldwell et al., 2004). In this context, examining the recreational awareness of middle school students becomes crucial for cultivating generations with a consciousness of leisure. The purpose of this study is to detect the level of recreation awareness among middle school students residing in Sapanca, Türkiye and to investigate the gender differences with regards to the recreation awareness.

Within the scope of this research, the research hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Middle school female students residing in Sapanca have higher recreational awareness in enjoyment dimension than male students.

H2: Middle school female students residing in Sapanca have higher recreational awareness in achievement dimension than male students.

H3: Middle school female students residing in Sapanca have higher recreational awareness in self-improvement dimension than male students.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

In this study, which aims to determine the level of recreation awareness among middle school students living in Sapanca and to investigate this awareness in the context of gender variables, a causal-comparative method from quantitative research methods has been adopted. The study falls under the cross-sectional scope and employs a mixed approach that combines both positivist and interpretive perspectives. The survey method has been used for data collection (Coşkun et al., 2015). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to model the relationships between variables and to examine the structural effects of various factors. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was applied to validate the factor structure and assess the validity of the measurement model. These methods provided a robust foundation for examining the recreation awareness of the student group in relation to gender and other factors.

Study Group

The study group consists of a total of 250 middle school students, who are studying in the central district of Sapanca. The sample was selected to include individuals aged 10-14. The students participating in the study were selected from two centrally located middle schools out of 7 middle schools in Sapanca district. In this sample selection, cost, time, and accessibility constraints were taken into consideration, and the non-probability sampling method of convenience sampling was preferred.

Data Collection

Data were collected among middle school students between the age of 10 and 14 in Sakarya Region. Since it is stated that the Recreation Awareness Scale developed by Ekinçi and Özdilek (2019) can be used with middle school, high school, university students, and adults, no objections were raised regarding its application to middle school students in this study. Prior to data collection, official permissions were obtained from the Ministry of Education, and consent forms were secured from the parents of the students. A total of 283 questionnaires were distributed in two different schools in Sapanca. The school principal had administered the questionnaires to the students during their class time, and they were instructed to fill them out in the presence of their teachers. The study has received approval from the institutional review board of Sakarya University of Applied Sciences on 28/07/2022 decision/number of 52542. This paper was prepared as a result of the project funded by Scientific Research Process Coordination Unit of Sakarya University of Applied Sciences (SUBÜ BAP) financial assistance no: 099-2022.

Questionnaire Development

The survey questionnaire comprises three sections. In the initial section, participants are presented with screening questions such as 'Do you participate in any physical activity during your leisure time outside of your home?' 'Throughout a standard 7-day period (a week), how frequently do you engage in any physical activity during your leisure time?' and 'On average,

how many hours do you spend on physical activity each time?' Similar questions are reiterated for social activities.

The second section includes questions measuring recreation awareness in three dimensions; fun, achievement and self-improvement. The 'recreation awareness' scale developed by Ekinci & Özdilek (2019) was utilized. Thirty-one statements were listed after the sentence 'Participating in recreational activities.....'. statements were measured on a seven-point scale (1 strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). The statements are listed on Table 2. The reliability of the scale was previously reported as 0,94 for the pleasure-fun dimension; 0,88 for the social-success dimension and 0,90 for the self-improvement dimension in the previous studies (Ekinci & Özdilek, 2019). Demographic information of the respondents was collected in the last section.

Data Analyses

The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique was utilized to analyze the data using the software tools SPSS 21 and EQS 6.2, employing advanced confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The application of SEM proved beneficial in minimizing measurement errors and adopting a confirmatory approach, as opposed to an exploratory one (Byrne, 2006).

RESULTS

The study involved the collection of 283 questionnaires. Skewness, Kurtosis, Mahalanobis distance, and Cook's d were calculated to assess normality of the data. In total 33 cases were excluded from the dataset: six were eliminated due to elevated Mahalanobis distance, four due to high Cook's distance, and 23 due to a high number of missing values.

The Skewness values for all items fell within the acceptable range of -2 to +2, and Fisher kurtosis for all items ranged between -2 and +2, meeting the criteria set by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001). To handle missing data, EM imputation was employed. The analyses were conducted on the remaining dataset of 250 cases.

Demographics

The sample is composed of 51,6% females and 48,4% males. The respondents had an average age of 12.25, with a standard deviation of 1.19, and a median age of 13. With regards to the household income of the students, 22,9% of the families lives under minimum wage, 20,6% reported earning between 5,501 and 8,500 Turkish Liras (equivalent to \$203-\$314 at the time of the survey), 26,6% makes between 8,501 and 11,500 Turkish Liras (equivalent to \$314-\$426 at the time of the survey), 13,6% reported between 11,501 and 14,500 (equivalent to \$426-\$537) at the time of the survey) and 7,5% reported earning more than 20,501 Turkish Liras (equivalent to \$760 at the time of the survey) per month (Verified against the data in Table 1).

Descriptive Statistics

A significant portion of respondents (79%) reported engaging in some form of physical activity outside their homes every week. Among those participating in physical activities, 38% do so once or twice a week, 32% three or four times a week, 13% five or six times a week, and 16% more than six times a week. When it comes to the duration of each session, 47% of participants spend one to two hours, while 20% dedicate three to four hours.

Regarding social activities, over 85% of respondents participate in at least one social activity outside their homes each week. Among those engaging in social activities, 42% do so once or

twice a week, 34% three or four times a week, 11% five or six times a week, and 12% more than six times a week. In terms of time spent per social activity session, 46% of respondents spend one to two hours, while 22% allocate three to four hours for each social engagement. The mean score of the 'fun' was found to be 5.26 with a standard deviation of 1.61, 'achievement' 5.12 with a standard deviation of 1.60, and 'self-improvement' 5.33 with a standard deviation of 1.61.

Table 1. Demographics

	Frequency (N=250)	Percent %
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	128	51,6
Male	122	48,4
<i>Number of Siblings</i>		
1	68	28,2
2	75	31,1
3	60	24,9
4	25	9,4
5	7	2,9
0	6	2,5
<i>Age</i>		
10	32	12,8
11	25	10,4
12	68	28
13	87	36
14	37	12,8
<i>School</i>		
Kemalettin Sami Paşa Middle School	129	51,6
Alacam Middle School	121	48,4
<i>Income</i>		
Under Minimum Wage	49	22,9
5501-8500 ₺	44	20,6
8501-11500 ₺	57	26,6
11501-14500 ₺	29	13,6
14501-17500 ₺	11	5,1
17501-20500 ₺	8	3,7
20501₺ and more	16	7,5

Measurement Model

Measurement model was run to test the reliability and validity. The model demonstrated acceptable fit ($\chi^2=592.5826$, $df=347$, $NFI=0.881$, $CFI=0.936$ and $RMSEA= 0.048$ at 90% $CI=.042-.056$). Three items were eliminated from the scale as they predict more than two factors. The loadings are all over .6 and alpha, and composite reliability scores are all over .8, AVEs are all over .5 (table 2). The scale is reliable and valid according to the established standards (Fornell & Larcker, 1988).

Table 2. Factor loadings, reliability and validity

Recreation Awareness	Loadings	AVE	Alpha	Composite Reliability
Participating in recreational activities...		0,606		
Fun	0,773	0,592	0,886	0,944
1. provides physical satisfaction.	0,753	0,569		
2. enhances vitality.	0,722	0,551		
3. rests the soul.	0,779	0,605		
4. provides escape from daily problems .	0,776	0,602		
5. is fun.	0,768	0,587		
6. increases the quality of life.	0,806	0,587		
7. helps renewal	0,760	0,576		
8. purifies from negative thoughts.	0,800	0,653		
Achievement	0,754	0,574	0,900	0,961
9. helps to plan time better.	0,717	0,514		
10. decreases crime rates.	0,668	0,446		
11. increases academic capacity.	0,683	0,466		
12. provides opportunities to gain new skills and knowledge.	0,850	0,726		
13. fosters feeling of success.	0,829	0,687		
14. provides societal benefit.	0,782	0,612		
15. increase the feeling of belongingness.	0,687	0,472		
16. helps us in forming new friendships.	0,821	0,677		
17. increase academic success.	0,788	0,624		
18. fosters popularity among friends.	0,637	0,406		
19. assists in making productive use of leisure time.	0,829	0,687		
Self-improvement	0,805	0,650	0,889	0,965
20. enhances thinking, memory, learning and concentration.	0,818	0,671		
21. fosters a sense of openness to innovation.	0,811	0,658		
22. helps us to establish healthy communication.	0,817	0,667		
23. increases self-esteem.	0,831	0,692		
24. strengthens our connections with nature.	0,756	0,555		
25. helps me to cope with stress and anxiety.	0,791	0,626		
26. helps individuals to know themselves.	0,8	0,641		
27. increases self-respect.	0,811	0,658		
28. enables me to act independently.	0,830	0,690		

Structural Model

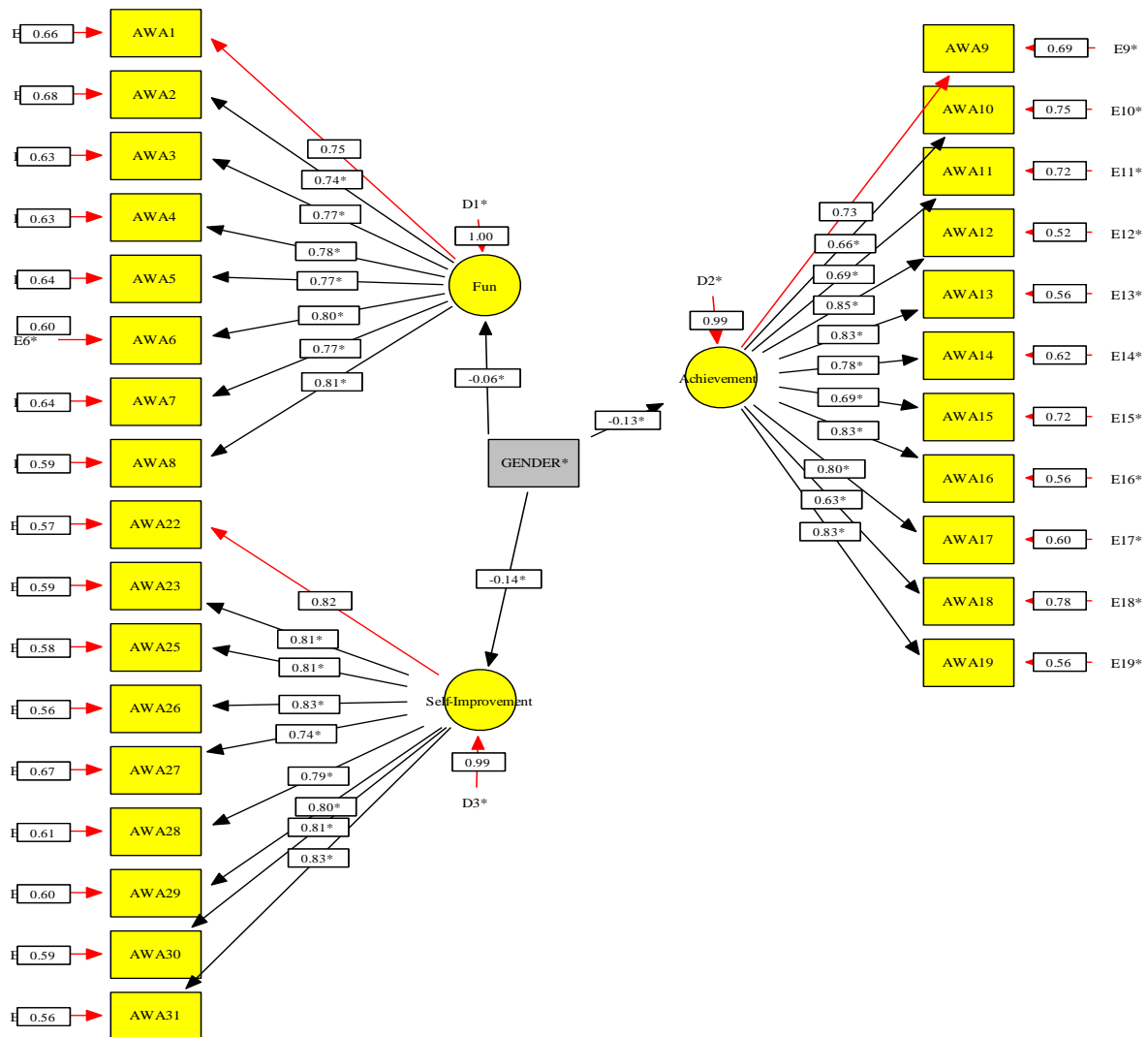
The structural model was executed to assess the gender differences in recreation awareness from three different dimensions: fun, achievement and self-improvement. The model exhibited satisfactory fit ($\chi^2=598.8796$, $df=372$, $NFI=0.873$, $CFI=0.948$, and $RMSEA=0.047$ at 90% $CI=0.042-0.056$). The findings indicate that females score significantly higher in ‘achievement’ and ‘self-improvement’ dimensions than males. However, no significant difference was found between males and females regarding to ‘fun’ dimension. Thus, while H2 and H3 are supported, H1 is rejected. Table 3 and Figure 1 demonstrate the results of the structural model.

Table 3. Hypothesis testing results

Path	Hypothesis	χ^2	β
Gender → Fun	H1	-1.101	-0.059
Gender → Achievement	H2	-2.090*	-0.125
Gender → Self-improvement	H3	-2.610*	-0.135

*Significant path

Figure 1. Structural Model



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to detect the level of recreation awareness among middle school students residing in Sapanca, Türkiye and to investigate the gender differences with regards to the recreation awareness. Study results showed that the students have above average scores in recreation awareness in all three dimensions. While there was no difference between males and females in the ‘fun’ dimension, females reported higher scores in ‘achievement’ and ‘self-improvement’ dimensions.

The findings of this research are consistent with studies indicating above-average levels of recreation awareness among middle school (Uzuner & Turgut, 2023), high school (Cöche et al., 2022), and university students (Üstün & Üstün, 2023). With regards to gender differences, study results partly align with previous research. Some studies support higher recreation awareness among females than males, both among college students (Ersöz et al., 2023; Satılmış et al., 2022; Yalçın & Erzeybek, 2023) and high school students (Cöhce et al., 2022). However, certain studies report no significant difference between females and males regarding recreation awareness (Bülbül et al., 2021; Uzuner & Turgut; Üstün & Üstün, 2020). Although there is no research suggesting that male middle school students exhibit higher recreational awareness than females in Turkish society, a study by Karademir (2023) found that male college students do

possess higher levels of recreational awareness compared to their female counterparts. More research focusing on the gender differences with regards to recreation awareness among middle school students is needed to have a clearer picture of the situation.

Considering the lower rate of participation to leisure activities among females in Türkiye (Albayrak et al., 2007; Demir, 2005), the results of the current study are surprising. Females experience constraints to participate leisure activities due to the traditional nature of Turkish society (Ayhan et al., 2018). The results of the current study enrich previous research by providing empirical evidence of higher awareness among female students. Based on the current study results, it could be argued that the lack of knowledge or awareness is not the root cause of limited leisure activity participation, especially among females. Although previous studies have shown otherwise (Çetinkaya et al., 2018; Kara & Özdeğlü, 2017; Üstün et al., 2017), the younger generation appears to have sufficient knowledge of the benefits of leisure activities. Further empirical research is necessary, especially among the younger population, to identify the root cause of the lack of activity in the general population.

The governmental bodies in Türkiye undertake several initiatives to increase leisure time activity among different age groups. However, these efforts should be based on the empirical data. Otherwise, the programs may not lead to long-term changes in the lifestyle of the general public, as observed currently. Governmental bodies and researchers should collaborate to create programs with lasting effects. The ease of access to information through social media may contribute to the high level of awareness among students. However, merely being aware of the importance of leisure activities is not sufficient to actively participate in them. Specific programs should be developed and implemented among elementary school and even preschool students to introduce them to the benefits of an active lifestyle and how they can shape their future accordingly.

The current study has revealed that females are more aware of the developmental benefits of leisure activities than males. While male students perceive leisure activities as a way of having fun, female students tend to view leisure as a means of self-improvement and achievement. Schools, especially middle schools, could organize events such as seminars, workshops, and field trips to present the different aspects of leisure activity and its benefits to students. In Türkiye, people usually perceive leisure as merely fun. Therefore, serious leisure programs should be implemented in elementary and middle schools, along with supporting events. This approach could potentially shift perceptions towards leisure activities. Furthermore, the curriculum of physical education classes may be improved including theoretical and practical content on the concept of leisure and time management.

The majority of research focusing on recreation awareness has been conducted among college students. By providing empirical results from an underrepresented sample, the current study contributes to the existing recreation literature. On the other hand, this study has some limitations. Due to time and budget constraints, the study was conducted only in three schools in Sapanca. Future research in this subject should explore different locations. Another limitation is that the sample is restricted to middle school students. Future studies could include elementary school students. Additionally, the relationship between recreation awareness and other demographic variables could be investigated in future studies.

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