Original article

Attitudes and Activities of Primary and Secondary School Pupils and Medical Students in Relation to Social Networks, Sport, Friends and the Use of Mobile Phones

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Abstract

Aim of the study: The aim of the work is to find out what primary and secondary school pupils and medical students think and talk about most often, how they use mobile phones and social networks, and to identify possible interventions that could promote socialising with friends and sporting activities.

Methods. The attitudes and behaviours of primary school pupils (N = 51), high school pupils (N = 69), and medical students (N = 108) were compared using a questionnaire on the frequency of activities during the long breaks between lectures. Answers were provided on a 1 to 5 Likert scale.

Results. The topic most frequently discussed by all respondents was school (median 4 [IQR 3-5], P = 0.77), while primary school students most frequently discussed and thought about sport (3 [2-4]). High school pupils and medical students discuss and think about food (4[3-4]) and love (4[3-4]) as well. Primary school pupils rarely use social networks (1[1-2]), while high school pupils and medical students use them frequently (4[3-5]) and often search in the networks (4[3-5]) (P<0.001 between primary school pupils and older pupils and students). All respondents believe they should spend more time with friends in person (5[4-5] for all, P = 0.485, ns).

Conclusion. Primary school children have the greatest interest in sport and it is at this age that systematic educational programmes should be implemented to encourage participation in sport. Older respondents are more likely to think about having fun. Leisure activities can be a more effective motivator to stimulate their interest in sport and build personal bonds.

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Introduction

The long break in schools and the break between lectures at universities are traditionally served to establish personal contacts between pupils and students, make new acquaintances, and exchange information about the educational institution they attend. During these breaks, conversations are held not only about lessons but also about current social and personal issues. With the development of digital technologies and the increasing popularity of social networks, the way people spend their free time during school and study breaks has undergone significant changes. On the one hand, social networks enable faster and more comprehensive communication, and facilitate contact with peers. On the other hand, they reduce the time spent on direct, personal interaction. Instead of talking to friends, people are increasingly surfing the internet, playing video games, or shopping online (1).

Leisure is a time of active rest, entertainment, positive development, socialization, humanization and creative affirmation of personality. Its essential characteristics are freedom, voluntariness, creativity, individuality, amateurism, self-realisation, self-activity (1).

Long breaks in primary and secondary education, as well as breaks between lectures for students, play a crucial role in the physical, social, and academic development of students. They are not only an opportunity for a short break from school obligations but also an important part of the learning process, socialization, and maintaining mental health.

In primary and high schools, long breaks have several functions. They allow children and adolescents to engage in physical activity, which is essential for their health and the development of motor skills. Exercise during breaks helps reduce to stress, improves concentration, and has a positive effect on further learning after the break. In addition, a long break provides the opportunity to socialize and build social relationships, which in turn contributes to the development of communication skills and emotional intelligence. Although technology is increasingly becoming an integral part of students' lives, it is recommended to encourage activities that involve direct interaction with peers, rather than relying exclusively on digital content. Free time is a part of everyone's life that exists every day and in every environment and is used for rest, entertainment, acquiring new knowledge and experiences, and cultural enrichment. It differs according to age, gender, occupation, place of residence, level of development of the environment, interests, goals of the social order, and its possibilities. (2)

For students, the breaks between lectures have a similar function, but also additional academic and professional aspects. They enable reflection on the acquired material, preparation for upcoming teaching activities, and organization of obligations. Breaks are also an opportunity for informal networking with colleagues, exchange of ideas, and development of professional contacts. In addition, breaks between lectures help to reduce cognitive fatigue and improve the ability to absorb new information.

In the modern digital age, both pupils and students are increasingly using breaks to browse social networks, play games, or shop online. Although technology can facilitate communication and information sharing, excessive digital engagement can diminish the quality of direct social interaction. Therefore, it is essential to strike a balance between the use of digital tools and direct communication, ensuring that long breaks and breaks serve their primary purpose: physical and mental rest, regeneration, and quality socialization.

Activities during the long break for students should be organized in advance. In this way, playing computer games, the possibility of straying into socially unacceptable forms of behavior and other unwanted passive activities that inadequately affect their physical health may be avoided. Education and training are powerful factors in the process in which society's "desirability" influences the development of individual "desirability"(2). Accordingly, the decisive factors in children's development are the educational environment and the quality of education in individual

activities. Therefore, the main role in organizing and implementing activities during the long break for students is played by teachers and the school (3).

The activities that students engage in during breaks between lessons have a significant impact on their physical and mental wellbeing, academic performance, and social skills. Free time provides an opportunity to rest, recharge, and improve concentration, but the way it is used can vary depending on individual preferences and the environment. The way in which breaks are used significantly impacts productivity and overall wellbeing. Encouraging physical and social activity during breaks can contribute to better concentration, reduced fatigue, and improved quality of learning, while excessive use of digital devices can reduce face - to - face social interactions and physical activity (4).

Since a sedentary lifestyle represents one of the challenges of modern society, education systems have a responsibility to promote healthy exercise habits and physical activity, especially during leisure time, as a source of positive emotions and general wellbeing. A study of students' activities during long school breaks and breaks between lectures is useful for several reasons:

Changes in leisure activities – Traditionally, long breaks were used for social interaction, physical activity and relaxation. With the development of digital technologies, personal communication is often replaced by virtual interactions, which can have various effects on the social skills, emotional state and physical health.

Effect of a sedentary lifestyle – Increased screen use and reduced movement lead to an increase in problems such as obesity, poor posture and reduced physical fitness. Analysis activity during school and study breaks can provide insight into how active young people are and whether there is a need to promote physical activity.

Developing social skills and interpersonal relationships – Breaks between lessons are an opportunity to make friends and develop communication skills. As time is increasingly

spent online, there is a need to explore how this impacts the quality of peer relationships and whether activities that support direct interaction can be encouraged.

Impact on academic performance and mental health – Breaks between lessons play an important role in rest and regeneration of cognitive abilities. Activities such as physical activity, chatting with friends, or simply taking a break can have a positive effect on concentration and motivation to continue working, while excessive screen use can have the opposite effect.

The opportunity to shape educational policies and school programs – Understanding how students use their free time during the school day can help make decisions about structuring breaks, introducing organized activities, or limiting screen time.

This study aims to analyse how primary and secondary school pupils and medical students, use their time during long breaks and breaks between lectures. The aim is to analyze their habits, determine how they perceive themselves online, and assess the extent to which social networks are integrated into their leisure time. The aim is to analyse how much physical activity is carried out during these breaks and whether there is a need for greater promotion of exercise and sport. Researching this phenomenon can provide valuable data that can help primary and high school leaders to create a more supportive environment for students, and promote a balance between the digital world, social interactions, and physical activity (5).

Methods

Before the study commenced, informed consent was obtained from the parents of primary school children at Šećerana Primary School, Beli Manastir (Supplementary file 1). The consent of the Chairperson of the Šećerana Primary School, Beli Manastir, Technical School and Science High School Ruđer Boškovića Osijek was obtained. The Ethics Committee of the Medical Faculty Osijek granted permission

for the preparation of the scientific paper for the study on March 19, 2025, No 602-04/25-08/07 (UR. No. 2158-61-46-25-66) approved by chairperson Prof. Suzana Mimica, MD.

The subjects were pupils from grades 5 to 8 of the Šećerana Primary School, high school graduates of the Ruđer Bošković High School, and students of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of J.J. Strossmayer in Osijek. Therefore, a sample of students was selected to examine the difference between students, high school and primary school pupils. The study included 51 primary school children, 69 secondary school pupils and 108 students.

A printed questionnaire was used for primary school pupils, and the same online questionnaire was used for high school pupils and medical students. Secondary school pupils and medical students accessed the questionnaire online, via their mobile phones. The answers were given on a Likert scale from 1 never to 5 always, which was analysed as an ordinal scale. The study was conducted during the academic year 2024/25. Statistical analysis was performed using the

analysis of variance (Kruskal-Wallis test) (6) using IBM SPSS 20.0 Statistics for Windows, manufactured by IBM, USA. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant Significance values for intergroup comparisons have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction.

Results

A total of 228 respondents completed the questionnaire. Of these, 51 were primary school children (27 male, 24 female), 69 were secondary school pupils (10 male, 59 female), and 108 were students of the Faculty of Medicine (38 male, 70 female). Among primary school pupils, the majority were boys (53%), whereas girls comprised most of the secondary school population (85%) and students (65%) (P < 0.001).

The responses to the questions about what they discuss during the long break or between lectures are shown in Table 1. Statistically significant differences were observed between groups in the frequency of conversations about sports, music, love, books, and travel (Table 1).

Table 1. Responses to questions about how often they discuss certain topics during the long break or break between lectures.

Conversations during the long break / between lectures about	Primary: high school, $P^{\ddagger}$	Primary vs. students, $P^{\ddagger}$	High school: students, $P^{\ddagger}$	P
Sport(s)	3[2-4]: 2[2-3], 0.976‡	3[2-4]: 2[2-3], 0.012‡	2[2-3]: 2[2-3], 0.286‡	**0.012**
Music	2 [1-3]: 3[2-3], 0.120‡	2 [1-3]: 3[2-3], 0.120‡	3[2-3]: 3[2-3], 0.603	**0.014**
Food	2.5 [2-3]: 4[3-4], 0.000‡	2.5 [2-3]: 4[3-4], 0.000‡	4[3-4]: 4[3-4], 1.000	**0.000**
Films	3 [1-3]: 3[2-3]*	3 [1-3]: 3[2-3]*	3 [2-3]: 3[2-3]*	0.634
Love	2[1-4]: 4[3-4], 0.000‡	2[1-4]: 4[3-4], 0.559‡	4[3-4]: 3[2-3.5], 0.002	**0.000**
School	4[3-5]: 4[3-5]*	4[3-5]: 4[3-5]*	4[3-5]: 4[3-5]*	0.772
Books, school reading	3[2-4]: 3[2-3], 1.000‡	3[2-4]: 1[1-2], 0.000‡	3[2-3]: 1[1-2], 0.000‡	**0.000**
Travels	2[1-3]: 3[2-3], 0.071‡	2[1-3]: 3[3-4], 0.000‡	3[2-3]:3[3-4], 0.163‡	**0.000**

Differences between groups were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney test for independent samples. ‡Significance values for intergroup comparisons have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction. *Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across groups. Statistically significant differences are in bold.
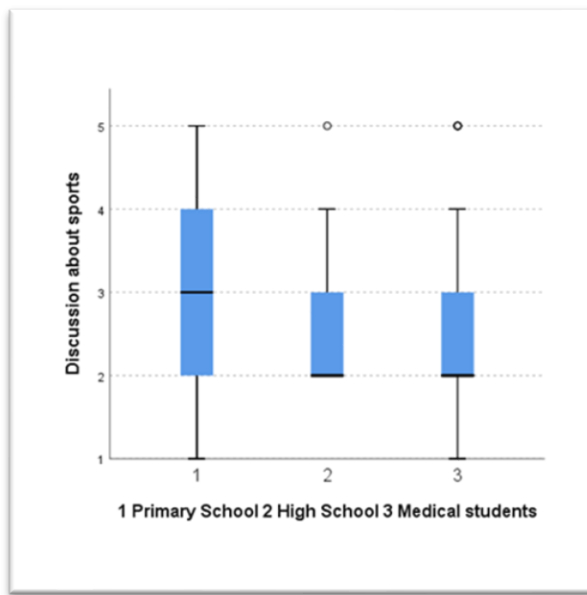
Figure 1. Frequency of conversations about sports as reported by primary school, high school and medical students. Boxes represent medians and interquartile ranges.

Primary school children reported talking about sports the most compared to their older peers. There were significant differences between groups with a median of 3[2-4] for primary school children, 2[2-3] for high school children, and 2 [2-3] for medical students, respectively (P=0.012) (Figure 1).

The responses to the questions about what they think about during the long break / between lectures are shown in Table 2. Responseds from all groups did not differ in their thoughts about school or college, while statistically significant differences in the frequency of responses were recorded for other questions. The most significant statistical difference in responses was observed in the question about thinking about sports, where primary school children reported thinking about sports significantly more often than high school pupils and medical students. In contrast, high school pupils and medical students think significantly more about social networks and love than primary school children (Table 2).

Table 2. Statements about the topics discussed during the long break or breaks in between lectures.

Thoughts during the big break / between classes	Primary: high school	Primary vs. students	High school : students*	P
Sport(s)	3[2-4]: 1[1-2]	3[2-4]: 2[1-3]	1[1-2]: 2[1-3]	**0.000**
	0.000	0.000	0.239	
Music	2[1-4]: 2[1-3]*	2[1-4]: 3[2-3]*	2[1-3]: 3[2-3]*	0.132
Films	2[1-3]: 2[1-3]	2[1-3]: 2.5[2-3]	2[1-3]: 2.5[2-3]	**0.020**
	0.348	1.000	0.016	
Love	2[1-3]: 3[2-4]	2[1-3]: 3[2-4]	3[2-4]: 3[2-4]	**0.009**
	0.017	0.018	1.000	
School /Medical faculty	3 [3-4]: 3 [2-4]*	3[3-4]: 3.5 [3-4]*	3[2-4]: 3.5 [3-4]*	0.240
Travels	2[1-3]: 3[2-4]	2[1-3]: 3[2-4]	3[2-4]: 3[2-4]	**0.002**
	0.444	0.002	0.126	
Pets	2[1-3]: 3[2-4]*	2[1-3]: 2[1-4]*	3[2-4]: 2[1-4]*	0.057
Social networks	2[2-3]: 3[2-4]	2[2-3]: 3[2-4]	3[2-4]: 3[2-4]	**0.001**
	0.000	0.015	0.413	

The answers are presented on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents the answer "never" and 5 "always". Differences between groups were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney test for independent samples. ╪Significance values for intergroup comparisons have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction. *Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across groups. Statistically significant differences are in bold.

The activities for which pupils and students use mobile phones during breaks at school are shown in Table 3. Differences were noted in the frequency of all activities examined, except for posting content on social media (Table 3).

Table 3. Responses about the types of activities they do using their mobile phones during breaks between lectures.

Cell phone use during the big break / between classes	Primary : high school*	Primary vs. students*	High school : students*	Difference all
Mobile phone search	1[1-2]: 4[3-5] 0.000	1[1-2]: 4[3-5] 0.000	4[3-5]: 4[3-5], 0.573	**>0.001**
Using social networks	1[1-2]: 4[3-5] 0.000	1[1-2]: 4[3-5] 0.000	4[3-5]: 4[3-5] 0.833	**>0.001**
- for relaxation	1[1-1]: 3[2-4] 0.000	1[1-1]: 4[3-4.25] 0.000	3[2-4]: 3[2-4] 0.204	**>0.001**
-to keep up with the news	1[1-3]: 3[2-4] 0.000	1[1-1]: 4[3-4] 0.000	3[2-4] : 4[3-4] 0.068	**>0.001**
- to stay connected with friends	1[1-3]: 4 [3-5] 0.000	1[1-3]: 4 [3-5] 0.000	4 [3-5]: 4 [3-5] 0.503	**>0.001**
-for fun	1[1-3]: 4 [3-5] 0.000	1[1-3]: 4 [3-5] 0.000	4 [3-5]: 4 [3-5] 1.000	**>0.001**
- Look at friends' posts on social media	1[1-2]: 3[2-4] 0.000	1[1-2]: 3[2-4] 0.000	3[2-4] : 3[2-4] 0.436	**>0.001**
- watch videos on social media	1[1-1]: 3[2-4] 0.000	1[1-1]: 3[2-4] 0.000	3[2-4]: 3[2-4] 1.000	**>0.001**
- post on social networks	1[1-1]: 1[1-2]*	1[1-1]: 1[1-2]*	1[1-1]: 1[1-2] *	0.154
- Comment and send messages to friends.	1[1-2.5]: 3[3-5] 0.000	1[1-2.5]: 4[3-5] 0.000	3[3-5]: 4[3-5] 0.209	**0.000**
- playing games	1[1-1.5]: 2[1-3] 0.012	1[1-1.5]: 2[1-3] 0.024	2[1-3] : 2[1-3] 1.000	**0.008**

The answers are presented on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents the answer "never" and 5 "always". Differences between groups were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney test for independent samples. ‡Significance values for intergroup comparisons have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction. *Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across groups. Statistically significant differences are in bold.

Table 4. Responses on the impact of social media on their lives and their desires related to the listed activities.

	Primary : high school*	Primary vs. students*	High school : students*	Difference all
Social media affect my real-life socialization	2[1-3]: 2[1-3]*	2[1-3]: 2[1-3]*	2[1-3]: 2[1-3]*	0.965
I want to play games more	3 [2-5]: 1 [1-3]. 0.000	3 [2-5]: 3 [2-3.5] 0.000	1 [1-3]: 3 [2-3.5] 0.032	**0.000**
I want to join the workshops	3 [2-4]: 1 [1-3]. 0.000	3 [2-4]: 1 [1-3]. 0.023	1 [1-3]: 2 [2-3]. 0.007	**0.000**
I want to read books more	3 [2-4]: 1 [1-2] 0.000	3 [2-4]: 2 [1-3] 0.164	1 [1-2]: 2 [1-3] 0.000	**0.000**
I want to use cell phone more	2 [1.5-3.5]: 4 [3-5] =.000	2 [1.5-3.5]: 3 [2-4] 0.132	4 [3-5]: 3 [2-4] 0.020	**0.000**

The answers are presented on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents the answer "never" and 5 represents "always". Differences between groups were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney test for independent samples. ╪Significance values for intergroup comparisons have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction. *Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across groups. Statistically significant differences are in bold.
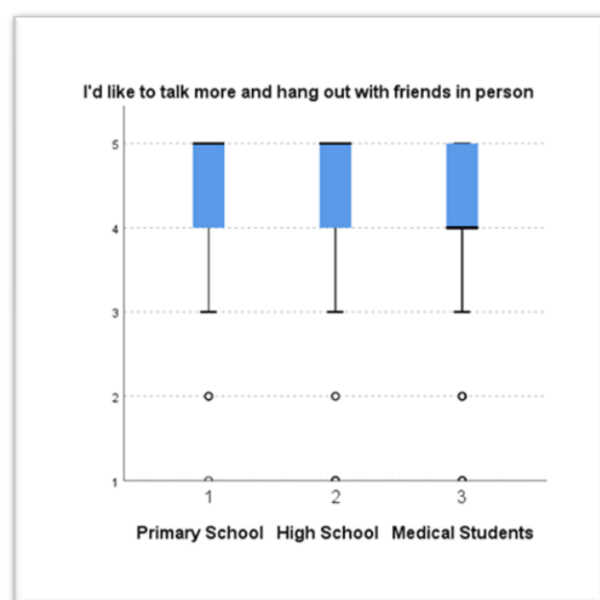

Figure 2. Students' responses to the question of whether they would like to talk and hang out with friends more in person. The answers are presented on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represents "never" and 5 represents "always".

All groups reported that they rarely felt social media affected their in-person communication with friends (Table 4).

They also responded in all groups that they would like to communicate with friends in person more (5[4-5] in all groups, P=0.485) (Figure 2). There were no differences between the groups regarding these responses (Table 4).

Discussion

In this study, significant differences were found between primary school pupils, secondary school pupils and university students in terms of leisure activities and thinking about activities during the long break. We confirmed that primary school students think significantly more about sport than secondary school pupils and university students. Although all respondents think that they should spend more time with friends, older groups use their mobile phones and communicate via social networks most often in their free time.

Although it is expected that schoolchildren and students spend more time in front of screens and on social networks when they are at home, our study confirmed that they also spend a a lot of time on their mobile phones at school. Results on the high frequency of using video games and spending time in front of various screens were also obtained by the authors Balantoni et al. (5). In their paper, they confirmed that the longest time spent in front of a screen is on weekends, with a median of 3.7 ± 2 hours on weekends (5).

The authors Baldwin and colleagues identified the possibilities of influencing the use of free time based on the personal characteristics of students. Students who are withdrawn, peer influenced, and unmotivated are expected to have poorer intervention outcomes and are more likely to engage in unacceptable behaviours such as drug and other substance use. Additionally, secondary school students are encouraged to consider the impact of organizing their free time on their own wellbeing (7).

Activities related to leisure, sports, and recreation can be successfully carried out in the school as a center of socialization and a methodical and systematic education. According to the author, the officially adopted ways of behaving and creating free time for primary school pupils have better success if principals support them (8).

Health reasons, including the increased incidence of myopia with increased screen use, could also be a reason to motivate students to improve personal communication, reduce screen time, and engage in sports activities (9).

A statistically significant result of this study is that all respondents believe that mobile devices do not affect their communication. On the contrary, all of them equally believe and want to socialize more with their peers. This is the answer with the highest response strength (median 5). The solution offered could be sports, games, folk dances, board games, and quizzes.

Primary school children are the only ones of the three groups surveyed who talk and think about sports. They are the only group for whom active interventions could bring lasting success, in a way that enables them to maintain their attitudes. Their orientation to selected sports activities should be encouraged as early as possible during primary school. Schools have a key role in inspiring students, parents, and the entire community to support youth, healthy activities and social connections. Schools directly encourage students to participate in sports, improve physical fitness, strengthen self-confidence and develop social skills. In this sense, schools should offer children and introduce them to sports that would best suit their desires and abilities. This education already exists in the curriculum of physical education and health education. In this sense, it would be desirable to go beyond the framework of the curriculum provided so far and offer children presentations of sports that are not provided for in it. This would be possible in physical education classes in high school and at university.

A disadvantage of this study is the relatively small number of respondents and the potential unrepresentativeness of the sample. The population of rural schoolchildren may not share the same habits as their urban counterparts. Furthermore, since the questionnaire covered a wider range of topics, it was not focused on any one particular topic. It would also be useful to see what the teachers of the same students think about the same issues and how they see the possibility of influencing the free time of school children. These are questions to which future targeted studies can provide better answers.

The motivation that schools can enable to encourage activities are e.g. running, concerts, quizzes, and education on sports and healthy lifestyles. For older groups, such as students who will soon enter the workforce, the motivation may be to appear attractive and secure employment more easily (10). This can be achieved by being well and preventing or treating obesity, which has become a global pandemic. Promoting physical activity and healthy living may also contribute to the reduction of insurance premiums for the working population that prioritizes their health (11, 12).

Conclusion. This study has confirmed that there are significant differences in the self-assessment of leisure time between primary school and university students. We expect that the research results will enable interventions in the behavioural patterns of young people in the context of modern digital technologies. Based on these findings, recommendations can be made to improve school policies and educational programmes that promote a balanced approach to the use of social networks, the development of social skills and participation in sports activities.

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Stavovi i aktivnosti učenika osnovne i srednje škole i studenata medicine u odnosu na društvene mreže,sport, prijatelje i upotrebu mobilnih telefona

Sažetak

Cilj istraživanja: Cilj rada je ispitati o kojim temama najčešće razmišljaju i razgovaraju učenici osnovnih i srednjih škola te studenti, kako koriste mobitele i društvene mreže, i identificirati moguće intervencije koje bi mogle potaknuti druženje s prijateljima i bavljenje sportskim aktivnostima.

Metode: Stavovi i ponašanja učenika osnovne škole (N = 51), srednje škole (N = 69) i studenata medicine (N = 108) uspoređeni su pomoću upitnika o učestalosti aktivnosti tijekom velikih odmora između predavanja. Odgovori su davani na Likertovoj ljestvici od 1 do 5.

Rezultati: Najčešća tema o kojoj svi ispitanici razgovaraju je škola (medijan 4 [IQR 3–5], P = 0,77), dok učenici osnovne škole najviše razgovaraju i razmišljaju o sportu (3 [2–4]). Učenici srednjih škola i studenti medicine također često razgovaraju i razmišljaju o hrani (4 [3–4]) i ljubavi (4 [3–4]). Učenici osnovne škole rijetko koriste društvene mreže (1 [1–2]), dok ih učenici srednjih škola i studenti medicine koriste učestalo (4 [3–5]) i često pretražuju sadržaje na mrežama (4 [3–5]) (P < 0,001 između osnovnoškolaca i starijih ispitanika). Svi ispitanici smatraju da bi trebali više vremena provoditi s prijateljima uživo (5 [4–5] za sve, P = 0,485, nije značajno).

Zaključak: Učenici osnovne škole pokazuju najveći interes za sport, stoga bi u toj dobi trebalo provoditi sustavne edukativne aktivnosti usmjerene na poticanje bavljenja sportom. Stariji ispitanici skloniji su razmišljanju o zabavi. Slobodne aktivnosti mogu biti učinkovitiji motivator za njihovo uključivanje u sport i razvijanje osobnih odnosa.