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ORIGINAL

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN URBAN GREEN AREAS: A CASE STUDY

ACTIVIDAD FÍSICA EN LAS ÁREAS VERDES URBANAS: ESTUDIO DE CASO

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ABSTRACT

Outdoor physical activity has become one of the main trends in Europe, particularly in informal places such as parks, streets, and natural areas. The purpose of this study is to look in detail at sporting activities carried out in urban green areas, their meanings and the motivations behind them in the context of a medium-sized Spanish city.

Considering the nature of the subject, a case study was designed in the city of Zaragoza (Spain). This work presents qualitative research, involving three focus groups with 23 participants.

The results indicate that the phenomenon of increasingly common sporting activities in urban green areas could be due to the expansion of the city, the

promotion of green areas, the economic situation of the population, links between sport and health, the evolution of the sporting culture, and trends and fads.

KEY WORDS: Physical activity, parks, qualitative, motives

RESUMEN

La actividad física al aire libre se ha convertido en una de las principales tendencias en Europa, especialmente la practicada en espacios informales tales como parques, calles o entornos naturales. Este estudio tiene como finalidad profundizar en el conocimiento de la práctica físico-deportiva en áreas verdes urbanas, sus significados y motivaciones, en el entorno de una ciudad española de tamaño medio.

Dada la naturaleza del objeto de estudio, se optó por un diseño de estudio de caso en la ciudad de Zaragoza (España). En este trabajo se presenta una investigación de tipo cualitativo donde se realizaron tres *focus group* con 28 participantes.

Los resultados indican que el aumento de la práctica físico-deportiva en espacios verdes urbanos podría deberse a la expansión de la ciudad, la promoción de zonas verdes, la situación económica, los vínculos entre deporte y salud, la evolución de la cultura deportiva, y las tendencias y modas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Actividad física, parques, cualitativa, motivos

1 INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations, in recent years the urban population has globally outpaced the rural population, with 54% of the world's population living in cities in 2014 (United Nations, 2014; Ali, Nardo, Harrison and Vela, 2017). Urban green spaces (especially parks) have become vitally important for the health and quality of life of the population, and parks have been identified as the "lungs" of cities. Urban parks, due to their proximity to places of residence or work, have traditionally been considered stimulating factors for physical activity, and function as "local recreation" areas (Alonso-Monasterio, Alonso-Monasterio and Viñals, 2015), where people can also enjoy nature without the need for making long journeys.

As such, urban green spaces are, fundamentally, important nodes of contact with nature for city dwellers, with renewal and social bonding being added benefits (García-Pérez and Lara-Valenzuela, 2021; Home, Hunziker and Bauer, 2012). However, the motives for using these green spaces vary according to the age of the users; some studies have found that the need for social bonding is greater in older adults than in younger age groups who visit parks, mainly because of their desire to escape and be alone (Home et al., 2012). In many cases, they become places for sporting leisure activities where experiences can

be shared with others (Burrows, O'Mahony and Geraghty, 2018; Hindley, 2018; Mayers and Glover, 2019).

Outdoor sport has become one of the main trends in Europe, while there is also a growing abandonment of traditional sports facilities (Nuviola, et.al., 2016). The Special Eurobarometer on Sport and Physical Activity (European Union, 2017) shows that, despite the high incidence of sedentary lifestyles (46% of the European population), physical activity and sport are part of the daily lives of many citizens. It is striking that the traditional places for physical activity are becoming less and less popular, to the benefit of activities in locations where, until a few years ago, it was unusual to do physical exercise, such as parks, streets, reservoirs and mountains, among other places (Arbones, 2018; García Ferrando and Llopis, 2017; Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2020). This same study indicates that 40% of those who engage in physical activity and sport in Europe do so in green public spaces similar to those mentioned above and, moreover, indicates that 23% of those surveyed travel from home to work or their place of study using active transport (bicycle, skateboard) or on foot. In a large number of European countries, the main venues for these practices are outdoor green spaces, and in the case of Spain 53% of exercisers use this type of space.

In the period 2010-2015, the practice of individual outdoor sports activities has increased markedly, accompanied by a decrease in the competitive sporting concerns of many participants (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2015). Participation in *lifestyle sports* (types of sports that originated "outside" or "in resistance to" traditional sporting activities) and action sports has increased during this period across all population groups, supported by a buoyant industry and the rise of a particular sports culture (Cortés Murillo, 2020; Gillchrist and Wheaton, 2017; Marcén-Muño, Murillo-Regaño, Arbones-Arque and Pelegrín-Paracuellos, 2018; Taïpe-Nasimba and Cantón Chirivella, 2020) which has, in turn, led to a decline in traditional competitive sports. We understand that, as Gillchrist and Wheaton (2017) point out, *lifestyle sports* are forms of sport that originate "outside" or in resistance to the control of the traditional sporting establishment, and are often confused with informal sport. However, these are sports with a long tradition that have evolved informal forms of organisation (Jeanes, Spaaij, Penney and O'Connor, 2019; Wheaton and O'Loughlin, 2017).

In Spain, over the same period, the percentage of participants involved in recreational cycling has almost doubled (from 19.8% to 38.7%), almost tripled in the case of running (from 13.4% to 30.4%), and seen a very significant increase in sports such as hiking and mountaineering (from 8.7% to 31.9%), in addition to Nordic walking owing to its reported benefits (Jódar Reverte et al., in press). There has also been an increase in the percentage of people participating in minority urban sports, such as rollerblading and skateboarding (from 1.9% to 9.8%) (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2015). Among the most widely-practiced sports at the national level in Spain are cycling, swimming, hiking and mountaineering, running and different types of gymnasium-based activities. In other words, of these five most popular activities, three are conducted outdoors, and a fourth (gym-based activities) also includes an

outdoor element (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2020). These studies point to the fact that a sporting transition is taking place from the competitive-federated sports model, which has been traditional in the national context, towards recreational-non-federated sports activity, which is emerging as a new sporting model specific to today's society.

Some studies point to the different categories in which participants in physical-sporting activities in urban green spaces derive benefits: physical health, mental health and well-being; education and lifelong learning; active citizenship; the reduction of crime and antisocial behaviour; and various other additional benefits (D'Alessandro et al., 2015; Eigenschenk et al., 2019). Moreover, it has been shown that the positive effects on self-perceived health status are greater when this activity is performed during a person's leisure time, in a self-managed manner, compared to rehabilitation programmes (Lera-López et al., 2017). In this sense, the attractiveness and aesthetics of urban green spaces influence people's perception of them and their opportunities as recreational and physical-sporting spaces, in such a way that poor aesthetics or inadequate maintenance of these spaces can become a barrier to sporting activity, for both novice and more experienced athletes (Deelen, Janssen, Vos, Kamphuis, & Ettema, 2019; Domínguez-Alonso, López-Castelo, & Portela-Pino, 2018). Despite this, certain drawbacks have been encountered regarding the sporting and recreational use of urban green spaces, given the varied nature of their visitors. Conflicts of use have been reported between a variety of users (pedestrians, cyclists, runners, etc.) in terms of the use of the same trails, paths and routes, as the reasons for using these tracks can be different, ranging from performance improvement to casual walking (Bicicleta Club de Catalunya, 2011).

1.1 Sport in the green areas of the city of Zaragoza (Spain).

The city of Zaragoza is located in northeastern Spain, it has 716,040 inhabitants and a population density of 740.43 inhabitants/km² (Zaragoza City Council, 2020).

As in other cities across the country, in recent years Zaragoza has witnessed an increase in both outdoor sport (38.2% did sport in public places in 2015) and informal sport (48.5% of those who did sporting activities did so "on their own account" in 2015) (Zaragoza Deporte Municipal, 2016). In this paper, informal sport is considered to be sport that is self-organised and not based on the traditional structure of clubs and/or federations. Unlike *lifestyle sports*, with which it is often confused, informal sport is rooted in long-established sporting modalities that have evolved into informal models of organisation (Jeanes et al., 2019; Wheaton and O'Loughlin, 2017).

In an observational study, using the URBANS-OS (*Urban Sports Observational System*) tool, in one of the city's main green areas (Parque del Agua Luis Buñuel, a free-access urban park covering more than 120 hectares, situated next to the Expo 2008 site and built as part of this macro-project), Arbonés, Lozano and Marcén (2019) found that the most popular physical activities were walking, running, cycling, using children's playground facilities, fitness

equipment, Nordic walking and football, in that order. The majority of the sports were performed by individuals on their own or in informal groups (96.4%). Seventy-five per cent of the subjects observed were active, although this study was unable to determine whether the reason for going to the park was to engage in physical activity, or whether the environment itself encouraged this activity.

Taking into account the above context, the aim of this study is to discover the associated meanings and experiences of the people who practice physical and sporting activity in Zaragoza's urban green spaces, to explore the symbolism and the role played by these spaces in the practice of sport.

2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH

This work is based on two previous studies, carried out in the same city. The first study, "*Análisis de hábitos, demandas y tendencias deportivas de la población zaragozana 2015*" (An analysis of the habits, demands and sporting trends among the population of Zaragoza 2015), helped to identify the most common places in which the people of Zaragoza did sport, the socioeconomic profile of the participants, the types of sport performed, and trends towards physical and sporting activities in the open air and natural surroundings (Zaragoza Deporte Municipal, 2016). The second study was observational, and identified the profile of park users, as well as the time zones and schedules utilised for the various activities (Arbonés et al., 2019). The aim of this study is to understand the meanings that urban green areas have for physical and sporting activities, based on the opinions of the sportspeople themselves.

Given the nature of the research question, we opted for a case study in the city of Zaragoza, designed as a qualitative and exploratory study, using triangulation to support the validity of the findings (Patton, 1999), and an inductive and descriptive analysis through inter-rater content analysis (Escobar-Pérez and Cuervo-Martínez, 2008).

This type of study focuses on qualitative research, as this allows us to gain a deeper insight into people's perspectives and motives for participating in the practice. This research approach allows us to understand the meanings that urban green spaces have and the role they play in people's everyday lives (Johnson and Glover, 2013; Kianicka, Buchecker, Hunziker and Müller-Böker, 2006).

2.1 Research design

The data was collected using the *focus group* technique, which consists of a semi-structured group interview with various participants, in which data is obtained from the interaction and social dynamics produced among the group members (Noaks and Wincup, 2004). This approach is very useful when trying to discover people's perception of what motivates or inhibits a behaviour, as well as their reaction to different ideas or conduct (Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Liao, 2003; Rigler, 1987).

A total of three focus groups were run under the criteria of intra-group homogeneity and inter-group heterogeneity. To create a heterogeneous group that reflected the characteristics, demands and interests of outdoor sports practitioners, a non-random deliberate sampling method (convenience sampling) was adopted. Heterogeneous groups facilitate an in-depth study based on different perspectives of the problem (Escobar and Bonilla-Jiménez, 2009). However, some authors defend homogeneous groups (Greenbaum, 1990; Krueger, 1991; Morgan, 1997), as the feeling of being among people from similar backgrounds makes participants feel comfortable in the group and generates a context where they can discuss the issues more freely. Furthermore, this type of group enables information to emerge regarding knowledge, attitudes and social practices specific to the groups being studied and, at the same time, the interaction between the participants can lead to new ideas, observations or comments that enrich the debate and data collection (Kotler, Armstrong, Brown, Adam, & Chandler, 2001).

With the aim of ensuring that the group was homogeneous and allowed for an in-depth study of the problem from multiple perspectives (Flick, 2014; Morgan, 1997), the participants were selected based on their age, gender, socioeconomic status, educational background, type of sport and experience levels, and frequency of participation (Kitzinger, 1995). Furthermore, in the interest of a homogeneous group, we decided to conduct a separate focus group for each of the sport modalities, as this allowed the participants to engage in an honest and thoughtful conversation with people who were knowledgeable in the field, in order to increase the real applicability of the study findings by providing quality information (Escobar and Bonilla-Jiménez, 2009).

2.2 Sample and recruitment

Based on the data and results obtained in the two previously mentioned studies (Arbonés et al., 2019; Zaragoza Deporte Municipal, 2016), we decided to address the two outdoor sporting disciplines that have grown the most over recent years, running and cycling, as well as considering a third group comprising urban minority sports, which are booming in the city.

Federations and clubs linked to these sports were invited to participate, and they nominated people who met the established criteria. The research team contacted the individuals who agreed to participate in the groups, and kept two individuals per group in reserve. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidad San Jorge. All participants signed an informed consent document and agreed to their conversation being recorded.

Based on the procedures of Wells (1974), Morgan (1997) and Juan and Andrés (2010), 10 candidates were selected for each of the focus groups (8 participants plus 2 reserves), and all of these people were contacted by email. Ultimately, 23 people who did sport in the city's green spaces or were involved in one of the activities took part: 8 people in the running-sports group, 8 people in the cycling-sports group, and 7 people in the emerging minority-sports group (only 8 participants met the criteria for this group, and a last minute withdrawal left only 7 participants). A breakdown of the participant characteristics is shown in Table

1. Each participant was assigned a code indicating their group with a capital letter (C: running; B: cycling; M: urban minority sports) and a number to relate the information to the sociodemographic profile of the participant.

Table 1. Participant characteristics. SD: standard deviation.

Characteristics	Mean (\pm SD)
Age	38.4 (\pm 13.9)
Years of doing sports	15.7 (\pm 15.4)

Sex	n (%)
Men	14 (60.9)
Women	9 (39.1)

Type of sport	n (%)
Athletics	4 (17.4)
Rhythmic gymnastics	1 (4.3)
Handball	1 (4.3)
Running	8 (8.7)
Cycling	5 (21.7)
MTB	1 (4.3)
Triathlon	2 (8.7)
Biketrial	2 (8.7)
BMX	1 (4.3)
Parkour	1 (4.3)
Nordic walking	1 (4.3)
Ultimate	1 (4.3)

2.3 Procedure and data collection

The three focus groups were held between September and November 2017, each lasting 80-90 minutes.

The focus groups kicked off with a preliminary explanation of the objectives and topics to be addressed, the procedures, and the resolution of any possible doubts that the participants might have had. They were all carried out in the appropriate conditions for them to work effectively.

For the interview script, we used the most relevant data from the survey on the sporting habits of the inhabitants of Zaragoza (Zaragoza Deporte Municipal, 2015) to formulate the introductory questions (Annex 1).

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview script, with the intention of directing the conversation towards the topics of interest to the study, but allowing for the possibility of new topics of interest to the group.

The topics of interest were:

- The increase in the practice of physical activity in urban green spaces: the reasons, meanings, and opportunities for public health.

- The reasons for doing outdoor sports in urban environments and trends.

2.4 Data analysis

The recordings from the three focus group meetings were transcribed verbatim, and the recordings were downloaded into the qualitative analysis software Nvivo v.11. To analyse the data, thematic analysis categories were constructed in an emergent way (Flick, 2014; Guba, 1989), through content validation by inter-rater consensus (Escobar-Pérez and Cuervo-Martínez, 2008; Marcén, Gimeno and Gómez, 2013). Three experts with complementary profiles (social research, physical activity and sport sciences, and research methodology) carried out a blind analysis of the transcripts. Based on a systematic procedure involving several phases of review and discussion, the final version of the analysis categories was agreed upon. Each expert identified the analysis units and classified these into topics, subtopics and variables. The principal investigator compiled the three analyses and checked for overlaps and discrepancies. A review meeting was convened to discuss any discrepancies that arose in the second analysis, and a final version was produced.

3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Common factors

From the two main topics identified, six subtopics were extracted from the qualitative analysis of the data as key factors contributing to the increase in physical and sporting activities in urban green spaces:

- Expansion of the city.
- Promotion of the green areas.
- Economic situation.
- Relationship between physical activity and health.
 - Sporting culture.
 - Social trend.

Figure 1 summarises the topics and subtopics resulting from the three focus groups.

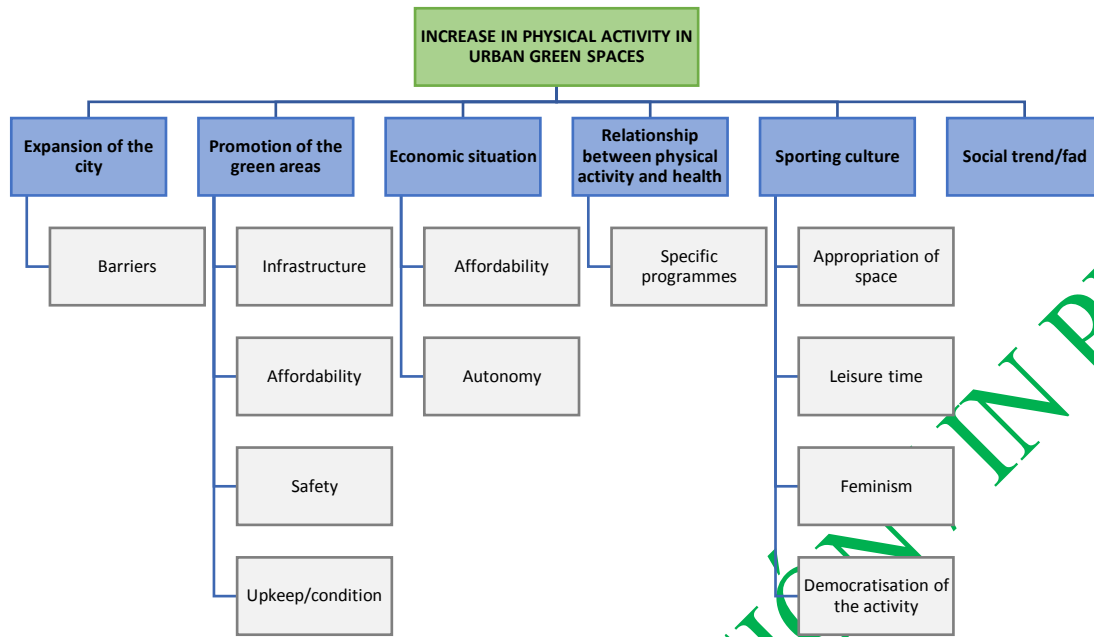


Figure 1. Key factors for the increase in physical-sporting activities practiced in urban green areas.

3.1.1 The expansion of the city and the promotion of urban green areas

The participants in the different groups coincided in highlighting the expansion of the city as a determining aspect in the increase of physical-sporting activities practiced in urban green areas. The respondents stated that "[...] a good outdoor space for sport invites people to do sport" (B8), and highlighted that "[...] it has given us a lot of visibility, if visibility is the clean-up of the riverbanks that was done for the Expo, which were restored and people started to look towards the river" (M3). In this sense, they pointed out that the 2008 Expo "[...] was a turning point in the expansion of Zaragoza" (C3).

Along similar lines, the participants stated that the creation of new green spaces and infrastructure by the authorities is a fundamental factor in increasing physical and sporting activities in urban areas. In the case of Zaragoza, the 2008 Expo was a major boost in terms of creating infrastructure and green areas along the banks of the river Ebro that were planned within the Expo site. Despite this, the expansion of the city has in turn led to the appearance of architectural barriers to physical and sporting activity in the city, which has stimulated and concentrated the use of green areas, as explained by M3: "Runners don't like crossing zebra crossings, eating car fumes, *et cetera, et cetera, et cetera*. [sic] And they look for green areas, and those green areas are in the Parque del Agua, in the Parque Grande..."

Ali et al. (2017), show that the creation of parks and green areas is not enough in itself and necessitates that, in addition to promotion by the public authorities, these places are comfortable, pleasant, aesthetically pleasing, safe and delimited with respect to other spaces, in order to increase the practice of

physical and sporting activities in these areas, regardless of the performance level of the users (Deelen, 2019; Domínguez-Alonso et al., 2018). In this sense, some of the participants indicated that the promotion of these areas by the various institutions is another key element for the physical-sporting activities in these spaces. In this way, they stated that "[...] there is also political support, and pressure from associations [...]" (B3) and added: "[...] I get the feeling that these spaces are being promoted by the City Council, in some way they are taking care of them, the parks are nice and you actually feel like being there, you fancy doing sport there [...]" (M7).

This promotion by the public authorities is not only limited to the creation and maintenance of green areas; access and support infrastructures also play an important role, as these allow people to reach the green areas on foot, or by running or cycling: "[...] the city is becoming better connected, you can get to all the green places more easily, and the connections, worked on by another cycling group, have made everything more bike-friendly and it is easier to get to the parks now" (B6).

Alonso-Monasterio et al. (2015) indicate that proximity is a determining factor as it is an incentive for physical activity and recreation, since urban green spaces act as a pull factor and it is easier to travel to these areas. However, Ali et al. (2017) point out that no clear relationship can be established between the distance from home to the green space for physical activity, and indicate that it is possible that this is due to the comfort characteristics noted above.

Our results suggest that the practice of physical activity and sport in the city of Zaragoza increases in urban green areas due to the good condition and upkeep of these areas, along the lines indicated by some authors (Ali et al., 2017), but it seems that the distance between the home and the green area has lost its influence due to the extension and improvement of infrastructure dedicated to active transport such as bicycle lanes, urban spaces with no motorised traffic, and the pedestrianisation of streets that allow quicker and easier access to green areas. Thus, as Gillchrist and Wheaton (2017) point out, these active transport practices and the use of urban green spaces are related to the transformation of the physical-sporting practice models, in which a new form of physical activity seems to be originating that also encompasses everyday life. In other words, the infrastructure focused on promoting active transport makes it possible to connect the various green areas with one another, as well as with other areas of interest that facilitate access and, at the same time, also make it possible to carry out physical and sporting activities while travelling to these green areas, thereby increasing the amount of time spent doing them.

Furthermore, as mentioned by C2 and M6, the green areas have facilitated physical and sporting activities due to the lower cost of using these green areas. Hence, in relation to these spaces: "[...] it makes it easier that there are parks where you can do this specific activity, you don't need to rent anything, pay for a court, book a pavilion... This is one of the advantages that we "sell" in inverted commas, it is affordable for the practitioner" (M6). "I think the greatest change is the economic situation. Before, people who did sport went to a gym... And now we don't have, let's say, so much money. Outdoor physical activity is much cheaper" (C2).

3.1.4 Physical activity and health

The link between health and sport, as well as the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, was also seen as another of the main reasons for the increase in sport in urban green spaces, as they promote relaxation and socialisation: "[...] it's a good excuse or a good reason to do things with other people and have a good time, and, for me, an outdoor environment is much nicer than an indoor space" (B6).

Along similar lines, they commented that: "Today, we are looking for healthy habits. A park, a public space, it's free and the easiest [...]" (M2). And they stated that: "[...] I think today's society is very much focused on health and fitness; and also, not only on being fit, but also on doing something, for example, to achieve challenges and improve yourself (M5); "[...] I think people have seen that these sports have the potential to make them better physically, by improving their health, their abilities, but also by doing a social sport [...]" (B8).

In this respect, the users perceive the green spaces as a place where they can increase their physical and sporting activity, and there is a desire to do this because of the health benefits of physical activity (WHO, 2018). In addition to the personal health benefits of physical activity, it has also been suggested that physical activity in green urban areas reduces stress levels (D'Alessandro et al., 2015) and increases social cohesion, facilitating the improvement of health-related social aspects (Eigenschenk et al., 2019). Thus, by taking a holistic approach to health, it seems that physical activity and sport in urban areas is able to facilitate the improvement of individual health indicators as well as the social benefits of physical activity and sport (Home et al., 2012). Some participants pointed out that their commitment to physical activity has been supported by the emergence of specific programmes that are self-managed by the participants themselves, along the lines indicated by Lera-López et al. (2017): "I signed up for swimming. I would eat my meal, leave my children and go swimming. Because I had no-one to run with until the challenge came up. You never saw a woman running. Thanks to the challenge, now a lot of women run. It started then, I can assure you, because I didn't have people to run with. What I was looking for was someone to do sport with or to go cycling with, but if you were not very proficient or you were good..." (C6).

As C6 says, these programmes have enabled users of green spaces with different motivations to come together and manage their own activities freely through non-formal institutionalisation, generally based on social networks or instant messaging groups.

3.1.5 Today's sporting culture

The social change that has taken place in recent years has also generated considerable transformations in the practice of physical and sporting activities among the Spanish population (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2015). Indeed, it has been observed that women in almost all age ranges have

increased their physical and sporting activity and that, in addition, their participation in sports that were previously almost exclusively the preserve of men has increased in both number and percentage (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2015). The participants indicated this fact in the following ways: "[...] girls have... there is another culture for girls. I was the tomboy [sic]" (C6); "[...] there is another sports culture [...]" (C2); "[...] my niece cried every time she had to do sports and now you should see her, because she is getting ready to run a marathon. A change in the culture and way of seeing things" (C6).

One of the participants (C4) indicated that this transformation was not only generational, but also due to personal changes, especially in women, through what has been called female empowerment. Mayoh, Jones and Prince (2020) indicate that women who take part in leisure and free time activities generate changes in their own body image and bodily possibilities, increasing their ability to cope successfully with the various social conflicts that arise around their role as women. In this sense, one of the participants expressed that: "Probably, an 18-year-old girl brought up in today's culture, who has been educated in another kind of society, is no longer influenced by that. But of course, for people who are now 35-45 years old, the sporting culture they were exposed to is not the one we are talking about now, and it is still very much internalised. They are ashamed to run, to start, they think that running is such and such a thing, where should I go, what are these tights for... Then they evolve and see it differently, right?" (C4).

In addition, the rise of "sport for all" and access to sport for traditionally excluded population groups was also highlighted by the participants, as well as the need to occupy their leisure time or to share their free time with their partner, children or friends. In this vein, employment type appears to be a determining factor in the time that can be devoted to physical and sporting activity and, to a certain extent, in the choice of one sport or another: "[...] there used to be a way of life in which you'd work hard, and maybe you'd have a bit of time and go and have a beer. Now all that has changed" (C2); "[...] two decades ago it wasn't very common to see someone doing physical activity in the street. Physical activity was very much reserved for indoor places and the idea of intimacy" (C7).

These statements support the findings of the survey on the sporting habits of the Spanish population, which show that the majority of people who engage in sporting activities do so freely and without a clear competitive goal (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2015). As the participants point out, it seems that in recent years, sport has moved out of its traditional venues to occupy public spaces and urban green areas. B6 explains that "This boom in outdoor sport in general is, I think, fundamentally due to the culture of individual sport. [...] you start to realise that you have to make sport part of your life [...]" (B6). Some physical and sporting modalities even have a strong link with these urban public spaces, as one of the participants points out: "[...] parkour is something quite urban that belongs to urban culture... I am happy that public spaces are being used [...]" (M4).

3.1.6 Fads or social trends

Social trends or fads also emerged as one of the reasons behind this increase in the use of urban green spaces: "It's a fad... And because it's fashionable, it's what's trending" (C2); "[...] there's a boom where, perhaps, gyms were the first thing. Now it is true that running has become the thing to do, but not across Spain. It's got here later than in Europe" (C4).

They even discussed the financial impact of this trend and the emergence of companies linked to these fads: "[...] it has encouraged many companies, and that makes more people go out on the streets" (B1); "[...] many businesses have emerged as a result of sport, we get companies like [Business name] that exploits the model. There is also the issue of tourism, the discovery of the region [...]" (B3).

3.2. Distinguishing aspects of each of the groups/modalities:

3.2.1 Running:

- In the group that analysed the practice of running in urban green areas, the following aspects were highlighted: the accessibility that running offers in terms of the cost of equipment (trainers and ordinary sports clothing); the ease of being able to reach these green areas independently by running; being able to run alone or in a group, and at any time of the day or night.
- The creation of training groups in parks, or based in nearby facilities with access to green areas, is related not only to the amenities that these spaces offer for safe training (no motor vehicles, lighting, signage, etc.), but also to the institutional support given to the first companies that organised urban races: "[...] groups were created to train for these races, which had a lot of backing [...]" (C7).

3.2.2 Cycling:

- The opportunities offered by cycling, by combining different reasons for using a bike were: for sport; as an economical and healthy means of transport; and for recreation or tourism, which is not fully exploited. "The City Council has a plan for periurban paths, which are essentially bikeable trails, and this is quite important. It has not sold it, or it has sold it badly; it hasn't exploited it for the potential opportunities that it could offer in terms of cycling...". (B3).
- The construction of cycle lanes and improvement of areas connecting residential areas with parks and green areas of the city, the overhaul and signposting of routes, as well as the promotion of bicycle rentals, highlights the institutional support and

citizen pressure applied through associations: "[...] there is also political support, and pressure from associations [...]" (B3).

- To the health and accessibility reasons, the group analysing the use of bicycles added another component, the feeling of freedom that cycling offers: "[...] as far as cycling is concerned, it is the freedom it gives [...] that you can go to such and such a place, and you can enjoy nature with your children or with your grandchildren, and cycle around" (B1).
- Another prominent aspect is the possibility of intergenerational practice in natural and safe environments (parks where family cycling is possible).

3.2.3 Urban minority sports:

- One of the keys to the rise of these modalities linked to the outdoors is the promotion of socially desirable values, such as a greater focus on experience rather than competition.
- The participants in this group connect these outdoor activities, in green areas, mainly with the idea of autonomy, of being able to learn and practice on their own in a pleasant environment.
- The relationship between some of these sports and health is complex, due to the greater risk of accidents and injuries involved, although the participants highlight their benefits on a mental and social level: "[...] well, mentally yes, but physically there are sprains, injuries, back hernias..." (M5); "The strength of the human being does not lie in the fact that a machine trains you and improves your physical capacity, but in the fact that you prepare yourself morally and mentally to be able to overcome obstacles" (M4).

4 CONCLUSIONS

Physical activity has become a key factor in the present and future quality of life of the population, and is considered a preventive method for various physical, psychological and social diseases and disorders. Our results show that there has been an increase in the number of physical activities performed outdoors and in contact with nature, which could be due to the perception that users have of the benefits of doing physical and sporting activities in urban green spaces during their leisure time, as well as a greater adherence to the exercise itself. Similarly, the information collected indicates that this type of activity improves the quality of life in general, but only if it does not tend towards obsession with the activity or the improvement of performance, excessive competitiveness or the avoidance of responsibilities, as exemplified in the following transcripts:

- C6: *it's a healthier way to spend your free time...*

- C8: *I would say yes, but with provisos, I see a pattern..., an obsessive tendency... those people my age, around 40, who are fixated on highly professional jobs, who have a lot of stress, and what they do when they leave their jobs is to add yet more stress on a sporting level...*
- C5: *many people miss out on the quality that family brings, for example... I leave my children with their grandparents and go running... I mean, you had children for a reason!*

In terms of public policies for promoting physical activities in urban green areas, it seems essential that this promotion is linked to sustainable urban development strategies. In this sense, and in the case of Zaragoza, it could be assumed that Expo 2008 (International Exposition on Water, which led to improvements and the construction of new infrastructures in the city, including green areas, more kilometres of cycle lanes, and bypasses to reduce internal traffic congestion) was a key moment in the expansion of the city and the creation of new green spaces. However, it should be noted that merely constructing these facilities is not enough, and that both their care and, above all, their promotion (through sporting events, sports facilities, services, etc.) is essential in order for the local population to effect their preference for these areas. It can also be concluded that, although the city's promotional policies are adequate, there are still aspects that could be improved, and that the city's sporting culture could be further developed both towards traditional models of federated sports and new models of emerging activities (such as urban sports), particularly considering the new means of dissemination (*instagrammers, youtubers and influencers*).

Finally, this development of sport in green spaces has led to a cultural change, especially among women, which has made it possible to normalise the practice of physical and sporting activities in the streets and parks for this group, and has turned something that was private a few decades ago into something that is now public. In this sense, it emphasises its relationship with citizens' rights, and there are certain aspects that should be taken into account, such as the democratisation of the practice of sport, the occupation of leisure time, equality between men and women, and the appropriation of public places.

Limitations

The data for this study was collected in 2017; in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the perceptions and uses of the different spaces for sports practice may have undergone substantial changes (for example, the boom seen among non-regular practitioners at the end of lockdown).

On the other hand, although the sample is limited to the city of Zaragoza, the data obtained has a certain convergence with quantitative data from the local (the survey on habits of the population of Zaragoza from 2015), national (the survey on sporting habits in Spain from 2015) and European level

(Eurobarometer 472 from 2017). These studies quantify the phenomena that have been analysed in this work without exploring their motives and meanings, which was the aim of this study. The results obtained will be useful for explaining the rise of physical activity in urban green areas, both in the city of Zaragoza, the subject of the study, and in other cities with a similar sociocultural context.

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ANNEX 1

INTRODUCTORY SCRIPT FOR THE FOCUS GROUP

Well, first of all, thank you very much for being here, I know you've all made a huge effort to take time out of your schedules to join us for this session. Today is the (day) of (month), (year), it is (time), and we are in (place) for this focus group on the meanings and experiences related to sports undertaken in urban green areas. The research we are doing refers to non-institutional sports that are being carried out in the city of Zaragoza.

We have formulated some questions that are really guidelines to help motivate the discussion. We are interested in knowing how you think and feel about some of the issues we will be looking at. It is important that you realise that there are no right or wrong answers. We are especially interested in what you think, and your views on the issues we are going to analyse.

To begin with, I would like to talk about some of the results from the sports habits survey, which show us that 38.2% of the population of Zaragoza do physical activity outdoors, in the streets, parks, and so on. Indeed, the majority of the surveyed population say that they exercise outdoors (73.4%). Why do you think this is?

Starting from this question, and according to the participants, the conversation is guided towards the topics under study: physical activity in green areas, what this practice means, the uses of the different spaces, boosters and barriers to the activities, organised or non-institutionalised activities, types of formal and informal organisations in the sport, future trends, etc.