Recreation Physical Activity in Popular TV Soap Operas

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Summary
The paper presents results of the study concerning patterns of participation in recreational physical activity in popular soap operas. The analysed material are the season 2014/2015 episodes of three soaps: „M jak miłość”, „Na dobrze i na złe” and „Barwy szczęścia”. The applied research methods are quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The author wanted to answer the following questions:
1/ Do the researched serials encourage overcoming cultural stereotypes constituting barriers to participation in physical culture, or do they act in the opposite way?
2/ Do their content reflects a late modern shift from the efficiency-oriented and the ascetic pattern of somatic culture to the hedonistic and the aesthetic one?
The conducted study proves that the analysed serials manifest a conservative attitude regarding the issue of sports participation of various social groups and categories. Males are shown in situations connected with recreational physical activity more often (94 cases) than females (74 cases) and the latter do not take up activities which are stereotypically recognized as masculine. Reproduction of conservative stereotypes takes also place regarding the age of physically active persons – in the analysed material there are only 4 cases of elderly persons’ sports activity (in comparison e.g. with 54 cases of young adults’ activity).
Taking into account the second research question, the conducted analysis confirms the supposition about the dominant role of the hedonistic and the aesthetic pattern of somatic culture, since they are referred to in almost two third (17 from 27) of justifications of recreational physical activity which appear in the analysed material.

Keywords: physical recreation in the mass media, sport for all in the mass media, leisure patterns in soap operas, sport in late modern society.

Introduction
Mass culture indubitably exerts a significant influence on social values in contemporary societies. Admittedly, development of new forms of popular culture connected with the Internet has partly undermined its hegemony, but it still remains a major factor shaping human behaviours.
It is also obvious that TV serial dramas called soap operas\(^1\) constitute a category of messages playing a special role in shaping patterns of everyday life – including the patterns of leisure – and it is both because of their popularity and the fact that their storylines are focused on everyday existence. It brings us to a question: what influence is exerted by them on the sphere of physical activity undertaken by ordinary people in their everyday life – that is, the sphere of physical recreation (or – using another term – of sport for all)?

There are two basic processes which transform the sphere of physical recreation in the contemporary Western world. The first of them is the process of popularization of that form of activity, which starts to be more and more often practised by social groups and categories which until recently had been significantly underrepresented in that field – or virtually excluded from it (Krawczyk 2007). It refers, among others, to women, the elderly, the disabled. The second is the process of hedonisation/aesthetisation of sport for all. Zygmunt Bauman (1995), while describing the process of transformations of the cultural status of the human body, which – according to his opinion – took place with the shift from modern to postmodern society, characterised it as replacing the producer body, used as a means for working and fighting, with the consuming body oriented on gathering pleasures offered by consumer society.
It is certain that such a shift must have entailed a change concerning the axiological background of sport for all and the motives for participating in it. Piotr Rymarzyk (2011) in his text on postmodern physical culture emphasises that old forms of sport for all – connected with an ascetic aspiration for controlling bodily desires and overcoming bodily weaknesses, and often oriented on serving collective ideological aims – in postmodern Western societies are replaced with new ones oriented on

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\(^1\) I define soap operas as serial dramas on television or radio characterized by open-ended narratives and multiple storylines focused on emotion and affairs of the heart (cf. Anger 1999).

providing pleasant sensations or on bodily beauty. Using Zbigniew Krawczyk’s categories, we have to do with replacing the ascetic and the efficiency-oriented pattern of somatic culture by the hedonistic and the aesthetic one (Krawczyk 1995). Rymarczyk points also out to contemporary commodification of sport for all, which causes that individuals more and more often perceive their participation as consumption of fashionable commodities (sports equipment, sportswear, holidays in fashionable destinations), which is to provide them with a socially attractive identity (op. cit.).

Thus, our analysis of soap operas should include the following questions: are the discussed processes reflected in their content? And – if yes – what kind of reflection is it? Do mass media messages belonging to the discussed category support those processes, or do they oppose them?

The author wanted first of all to answer two detailed questions:
1. Do the researched serials encourage their viewers for overcoming cultural stereotypes which constitute barriers to participation in physical culture, or do they act in the opposite way maintaining those stereotypes?
2. Do the researched serials confirm the thesis that late modern societies experience a transformation of the axiological context of physical activity consisting in a shift from the efficiency-oriented and the ascetic pattern of somatic culture to the hedonistic and the aesthetic one?

Short review of literature on the subject

Cultural transformations faced by Western societies in the second half of the 20th century made many sociologist and social philosophers formulate the thesis on subversive character of mass culture. Numerous authors proclaimed that commercial mass culture is a force which, in order to promote consumption, encourages its recipients for unrestrained fulfilment of hedonistic needs, what undermines traditional moral norms. That way sensual pleasures – which in the light of older cultural narrations were regarded as “low”, sinful or animal-like – according to the new mass culture narration are regarded as the proper aim of life.

Such views on mass culture were proclaimed both by its conservative critics – such as Daniel Bell ((1976) 1996) or Christopher Lasch ((1979) 1991) – as well as by its postmodern adherents, such as Lyotard ((1974) 1993).

What is worth noting is the fact that the discussed authors not only describe mass culture as a vehicle of cultural change, but they also maintained that it changes somatic culture by making it more and more hedonistic – what means that they perceive it as an executor of the transformation of social attitudes towards the body which was described in the aforementioned texts of Bau- man and Rymarczyk.

On the other hand, there are authors who put into question the opinion about subversive potential of mass culture. Among them there are numerous feminist writers who proclaim that mass culture in contemporary Western society is a factor maintaining traditional patriarchal gender relations (Wolf 1992, Faludi 1991). Another analyst Stewart Hall (2002) points out to racist stereotypes reproduced by authors of mass media messages – even if unintentionally.

Soap operas, as a popular category of radio and TV programmes, were the subject of separate analyses. A British researcher Dorothy Hobson emphasizes their educational role. As she writes: “Soap operas producers are constantly approached by organizations of all kinds who ask them to include their own particular concerns or campaigns as parts of the storylines” (Hobson 2003, p. 141). Thus she maintains that soaps can be a force undermining social stereotypes, but they do that, according to her opinion, on a different basis than that which is pointed out by the authors who emphasise hedonistic aspects of mass culture.

However, the situation described by Hobson seems specific for the British TV market which was dominated by public broadcasting for a long time. On the other hand, Dorothy Anger, referring to realities of the American market – dominated by privately owned and commercial mass media – describes soap operas as reluctant to undertake a role of a social educator who deals with controversial issues and undermines established patterns of behaviour. It comes from the fact that their producers are afraid of offending or disinclining viewers. However, even Anger, while talking about screenwriters of soap operas, admits that, “in order to tell effective stories, stories that will catch their audience’s interest, they must deal with matters that are part of that audience’s realities” (Anger 1999, p. 107).

Ang and Stratton (1995) also point out to conservative character of social patterns promoted by soap operas. They describe soaps as involved in maintaining the cornerstone of the existing moral order constituted by the nuclear family⁵.

Material and methods

The analysed material was constituted by the season 2014/2015 episodes of three soap operas:
- „M jak miłośc” – episodes 1073-1151;
- „Na dobre i na złe” – episodes 564-603;
- „Barwy szczęścia” – episodes 1150-1307.

The choice of the material resulted from the fact that in the previous year (that is, 2013) the researched seri-
als – according to a study by the National Council of Radiophony and Television – were, the most popular soap operas aired by Polish TV stations (Rynek telewizyjny – analizy problemowe 2014). All of them were aired on a public TV station TVP 2.

The study is based on quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The latter takes on a form of narrative analysis – that is, interpretation of texts consisting in treating them as stories with some kind of plot whose structure and qualities a researcher tries to characterize (Alaasutari 1995, pp. 71-73). As Anne-Laure Ryan remarks, speaking about a plot or a narration is legitimate when a given text creates a world filled with persons and objects of definite qualities and undergoing changes which are interpretable in terms of aims, motives and cause and effect relationships (Ryan 2004). In the case of the presented analysis the author was interested in aims and motives connected with participation in physical recreation.

Results of the study

Quantitative content analysis proves that cases of recreational physical activity of characters in the studied serials – such they are directly involved in and such which are mentioned by them as a subject of their plans or memories – appear in the analysed sample the following number of times:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial</th>
<th>Women/girls</th>
<th>Men/boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>„M jak miłość“</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>„Na dobre i na złe“</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>„Barwy szczęścia“</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>„Total“</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

„M jak miłość” – 53 cases for 3547 minutes – once for 66.92 minutes.
„Na dobre i na złe” – 18 cases for 1913 minutes – once for 106.28 minutes.
„Barwy szczęścia” – 67 cases 3950 for minutes – once for 58.96 minutes.

A total of 138 cases of recreational movement activity can be found in the analysed soaps. Its forms which are the most often met are various forms of physical play (28 cases), jogging (13 cases), cycling (11 cases) and fitness exercises in a gym (7 cases).

Thus, sport for all is a relatively rare subject of plots of the researched programmes. Such a picture of their characters’ leisure is probably to a considerable degree a consequence of storyline requirements, since the *spiritus movens* of plot development in soap operas are dialogues, which are easy to conduct while drinking coffee or walking, but which would be difficult if soap opera characters undertook any more intense physical activity.

Situations of recreational physical activity relatively the most seldom appear in „Na dobre i na złe”. It can result from the fact that the discussed soap opera is a medical serial whose plot takes place mainly in the area of a hospital, and hence there is little space for any form of leisure activity there.

As we can see in the above table, males in the analysed serials are shown in situations connected with recreational physical activity more often than females. In fact – according to some polls – the difference between the levels of males’ and females’ physical activity in the analysed serials is higher than the difference between the levels of those activity in real life (Aktywność fizyczna Polaków 2013). It proves that the analysed messages have a clearly conservative attitude towards the discussed issues.

A conservative attitude towards gender patterns is also visible when we consider what particular forms of recreational physical activity characters appearing in the studied serials are involved in, since persons who are involved in such types of activity which are stereotypically recognized as “masculine” – that is, which are connected with violence (like boxing) or muscular development (bodybuilding exercises) – are almost always men. Admittedly in one of episodes of „M jak miłość” (1142) we see a young woman trying to do push-ups, but her attempts are clumsy and a man watching them says that her push-ups are “girlie”.

Reproduction of conservative stereotypes concerning physical activity takes also place regarding the age of persons involved in it. What is the most visible when we look at the table above is the fact that the analysed material includes only four situations when the discussed kind of activity is participated by persons after their middle age (what means for that their number is over 13 times smaller than the number of cases of young adults’ physical activity and over 7 times smaller than the number of situations of middle aged persons’ activity).

The sum of cases of males’ and females’ acts of physical activity indicated in the table is higher than the aforementioned total number of cases of recreational physical activity because in some scenes we have to do with simultaneous presentation of males’ and females’ activity.

Reproduction of conservative stereotypes concerning physical activity takes also place regarding the age of persons involved in it. What is the most visible when we look at the table above is the fact that the analysed material includes only four situations when the discussed kind of activity is participated by persons after their middle age (what means for that their number is over 13 times smaller than the number of cases of young adults’ physical activity and over 7 times smaller than the number of situations of middle aged persons’ activity).

4 The term “conservative” in the presented text is used in its popular meaning – as synonymous with “reluctant to social/cultural change”. It does not include all elements of conservative ideology as it is described by political sciences.
All those cases appear in “Barwy szczęścia”. We can watch there an elderly couple practising tai chi, another couple playing ball with a granddaughter, an old woman with Nordic walking poles and a white-haired man playing tennis. But in one of “Barwy szczęścia” episodes we can find also a scene reflecting popular fears referring to elderly people’s physical activity. A husband proposes her not so young wife to go to a gym. “Do you want me to break my bones” – she answers enraged.

The analysed serials maintain also discriminating stereotypes referring to physical activity of the disabled. On the one hand, they deserve praise for raising that subject at all. On the other, in the studied soaps there are only five cases of such activity – four of them in “Na dobre i na złe”, what is indubitably connected with the subject of that serial. It means that disabled persons appear in about 3.6% of the scenes presenting recreational physical activity. Taking into account the fact that they constitute over 12% of the Polish population (Biuro Pelnomocnika Rządu ds. Osób Niepełnosprawnych Dane demograficzne, 2016), we have to do with their clear underrepresentation.

Another question which the study tries to solve is whether the studied serials reflect transformations regarding the axiological background of somatic culture reportedly taking place in contemporary Western societies. In order to achieve that aim the content of the analysed sample has been analysed regarding utterances which are justifications of undertaken or prescribed recreational physical activity. There have been found 27 of them.

The most numerous category (12 cases) was constituted by utterances referring to justifications which can be placed at the threshold of hedonistic and health-oriented values. It refers to statements which justified physical activity by pointing out to wellbeing and relaxation it is going to provide. “Running somehow makes me calm” – says a young woman jogging in a forest (“M jak miłość” – episode 1084). “Nothing purifies the mind better than physical effort” – says another woman while practising Nordic walking (“Barwy szczęścia” – episode 1215). Exercises in a gym are described as “Probably the best way of getting rid of toxins from your head and from your body” (“Barwy szczęścia” – episode 1269). “Endorphins” play a role of some kind of a keyword in that context. “I am increasing production of endorphins” – says a young doctor jogging in a park (“Na dobre i na złe” – episode 586).

The category of utterances which was the second regarding its numerical amount (4 cases) are justifications which can be called social ones. They consist in presenting participation in sport for all as a means of achieving social popularity, arising other persons’ jealousy, avoiding social stigmatization or realizing a need for being with others. In 3 of 4 cases of referring to such a justification the key role is played by social prestige which is supposed to be achieved through sports participation. In one of episodes of “Barwy szczęścia” (1154) son asks his father for money for participation in school tennis tournament – he admits that he does not like tennis but he says “I don’t want to be worse than others again”.

There are 3 cases of justifications of aesthetic character in the analysed sample. Recreational physical activity is treated there as a means of attaining a slim bodily form in the case of women or a muscular form in the case of a man who explains going to a gym in the following way: “Summer is coming. You need to work out a bit” (“Barwy szczęścia” – episode 1232).

In the researched sample we find 2 cases of referring to purely health-oriented values (what means that the idea of health is not connected there with a hedonistic element of wellbeing, but it is rather associated with faultless functioning of the organism. “We all do it for health” – says a young woman running marathons (“Na dobre i na złe” – episode 583).

In 2 other cases we have to do with justifications referring to purely hedonistic values. In one case it is a possibility of getting in contact with nature, in the other it is pleasure connected with adventure – in one of episodes of “M jak miłość” (1092) a young man encourages his girlfriend for rock climbing and says: “Kasia – you only live once. When are we going to do it? When we are married and with children?”

There are 2 cases of justifications referring to the efficiency-oriented pattern of somatic culture, which – as it has been mentioned above – consists in treating the body as a means of working or fighting. In “M jak miłość” (episode 1142) a policeman says that he should start going to a gym because he is going to have tests in his workplace. In some earlier episode (1107) a baby sitter says to the aforementioned policeman’s son: “I will show you what you can do when somebody attacks you”. What happens next has more to do with play than with real training, but practical, efficiency-oriented character of the quoted justification is indubitable.

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**Table 2. Number of cases of recreational physical activity according to age category**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Teenagers</th>
<th>Young adults</th>
<th>Middle-aged</th>
<th>Elderly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>„M jak miłość“</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>„Na dobre i na złe“</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>„Barwy szczęścia“</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>„Total“</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Note: The sum of cases of physical activity of persons belonging to particular age categories indicated in the table is higher than the aforementioned total number of cases of recreational physical activity because in some scenes we have to do with simultaneous presentation of physical activity of people of different age.
There is one case of justification referring to the agonistic pattern of somatic culture (connected with sport competition) – a boy wants to improve his fitness because his football coach has removed him from the first team squad (“Barwy szczęścia” – episode 1189). We find also one justification which cannot be unambiguously classified and which refers to purely health-oriented or to mixed health-oriented/hedonistic values – a woman refuses an offer for a lift and says that she prefers to come back home by bike. She says: “it will probably serve me well if I pedal a bit” (“Na dobre i na złe” – episode 589).

**Conclusions and discussion**

The conducted study proves that the analysed serials manifest a conservative attitude regarding the issue of participation of various social groups and categories in physical culture. In spite of the fact that we have to do with serials aired by a public TV station TVP2, they fit much more characteristics presented by Anger than that expounded by Hobson. Such a result confirms an opinion proclaimed by a media sociologist Beata Łaciak (2013), who came to a conclusion that contemporary Polish soap operas promote conservative attitudes regardless from the fact whether they are broadcasted by public or private TV.

One of interpretations of that phenomenon is connected with the fact that when the study was conducted the Polish public TV in practical terms was more oriented on commercial aims than on realization of any social mission, so it is no surprise that it was reluctant for re-pulsing potential clients by undermining cultural stereotypes. We should, however, remember that participation in physical culture does not belong to the category of “hot” issues – such as abortion, homosexuality or immigration - which are the subject of public debates and, because of that, the way of presenting them is indubitably thought over and discussed by screenwriters and producers of soaps. Hence, in the case of patterns of participation in physical recreation which are presented by the analysed soaps we have rather to do with unintentional reproduction of stereotypical assumptions than with their intentional maintenance. Nevertheless, such a reproduction – even if unthinking – can contribute to slowing down the process of achieving more similar levels of particular social categories’ sports participation.

Conservatism of the studied TV dramas is not, however, unambiguous. Taking into account the second research question – concerning the axiological context of justifications of recreational physical activity which appear in the analysed material – the conducted analysis confirms a supposition that the dominant role among them is played by those which refer to hedonistic and aesthetic values connected with the body, hence values of those kinds are referred to in almost two third (17 from 27) of justifications which appear there. Thus, the content of the analysed soaps reflects the aforementioned postmodern shift in sport for all consisting in re-placing the ascetic and the efficiency-oriented pattern of somatic culture by the hedonistic and the aesthetic one.

That discrepancy in the analysed material probably results from the fact that hedonistic lifestyles constitute the central element of the ideology promoted by contemporary commercial mass culture and, hence, they are an inseparable component of its messages.

**References**


Bauman Z. [1995], Ciało i przemoc w obliczu ponowoczesności, Toruń: UMK.


