

## LIFESTYLE HABITS IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: STUDENTS' POINT OF VIEW

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### Abstract

Despite the many physical and psychological health benefits associated with healthy lifestyle habits, some 50% of Canadians fail to adopt an active lifestyle and healthy eating habits (Statistics Canada, 2014). University students are no exception to this tendency, even though the literature acknowledges the benefits of healthy lifestyles for their academic success (Trockel et al., 2000). This research proposes to survey university students in order to learn their needs and interests towards interventions aimed at improving and/or maintaining their healthy lifestyles, with particular emphasis on regular physical activity and a healthy diet. The qualitative research includes three focus groups within the three study cycles (N=22 students, ~7/group). The interview grid was developed around the variables of the ecological *Conceptual Framework* of the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services (QMHSS, 2012). Data were analyzed using NVivo software. Preliminary findings suggest that students are strongly interested in the development of a tailored intervention to promote physical activity and good nutrition throughout the academic year. They highlight the relevance of a balance between offline (e.g., workshops) and online interventions (e.g., computer tailoring). The relevance of online functionalities, however, would be a determining factor in their willingness to download and use the application. The *Conceptual Framework* of the QMHSS serves as a theoretical support for enriching the discussion. The present research falls within the context of health initiatives in the Quebec education network, and the emerging interventions may be exported to other post-secondary institutions concerned with the health and academic success of their students.

**Keywords:** *Lifestyle habits, healthy, students, university, initiatives.*

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### 1. Introduction and context

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes the current situation of obesity and overweight as epidemic (WHO, 2003). Although obesity is a multifactorial health problem, the literature firmly establishes that those most affected by the problem overeat and lead a sedentary lifestyle (WHO, 2014). Despite the many physical and psychological health benefits associated with healthy lifestyle habits, some 50% of Canadians fail to adopt an active lifestyle and healthy eating habits (Statistics Canada, 2014). In addition, the transition to university is recognized as a risk period for young adults regarding body weight management, as a US (Levitsky et al., 2004) and a Canadian study (Pérusse-Lachance et al., 2010) demonstrate. The literature also acknowledges the benefits of healthy lifestyles for academic success (Trockel et al., 2000). What's more, many experts believe that environments influence the increase in obesity more than biological factors (Hill et al., 2003), with some going so far as to describe this as an "obesogenic" environments (Swinburn et al., 1999).

Such was the context for a study conducted in 2016 at a Canadian university, which found that 55% and 81% of students did not meet the guidelines for physical activity and fruit and vegetable consumption, respectively (Busque et al., 2017). These disturbing results motivated a second phase of research at the same university that focused on better understanding students' needs and interests in terms of healthy lifestyles, in this instance, regular physical activity and a healthy diet.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Environment influences health behaviours. The *Conceptual Framework* of the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services (QMSS, 2012) includes four environments, from the most proximal to the distal, which influence individual health behaviours: (1) individual characteristics, (2) living milieu, (3) systems and (4) global context. The Quebec government's *Framework* served as a theoretical and methodological guide for this study. Although there are several frameworks relevant to our subject (e.g., Cohen et al., 2000), the present *Conceptual Framework* (QMSS, 2012) proved to be the best guide for examining the interaction of healthy lifestyles with multiple environments in Quebec specific context.

## 3. Objective

The objective of the present study was to survey university students in order to learn their needs and interests towards interventions aimed at improving and/or maintaining healthy lifestyles, with particular emphasis on regular physical activity and a healthy diet.

## 4. Method

Our qualitative study used a descriptive and interpretative approach to achieve our research objective (Poupart, 2011). Participants included 22 students who were divided into three study cycles and took part in the focus groups as follows: Group 1, n=6 (F=5; M=1), Group 2, n=8 (F=7; M=1), and Group 3, n=8 (F=5; M=3). Participants in the study closely respect the ratio of women vs men in our student community. The focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes each and were guided by 14 questions divided into four major themes/environments echoing the *Conceptual Framework* (QMSS, 2012). The analysis strategy is inspired by Boutin (2007). The content was audiorecorded, transcribed and analyzed using NVivo 11 software, which facilitated the delineation, coding and grouping of units of meaning, the emergence of sub-categories, and the analysis of the similarities and differences noted in the comments of the various participants.

## 5. Findings

Findings are presented in keeping with the objective of the study and fall into four main categories. First, results concerning individual characteristics show that most students are interested in practicing physical activity but lack the time and motivation owing to a heavy workload. The same holds true for healthy eating, as students say their workload does not allow them to organize meals in advance.

Second, in terms of living milieu, students find that, on the whole, the cost of physical activity facilities is slightly higher on campus than off. Furthermore, they describe the quality of the food on campus as very poor, expensive and generally unhealthy, especially when compared with food in the neighbouring environment.

Third, when it comes to systems, students highlight the importance of improving the structure of the built environments on campus to facilitate the adoption of active transport to university.

Fourth, findings suggest that students welcome the idea of workshops on health promotion activities to increase their awareness and knowledge of healthy lifestyle habits. They also demonstrate a strong interest in the development of an application tailored to their needs in terms of physical activity and nutrition.

## 6. Discussion

Findings show that time constraints of a heavy workload, high costs and lack of motivation are the main reasons for students' failure to participate in physical activity and/or adopt healthy eating behaviours. These findings are consistent with those of Azru and colleagues (2006). Students' living milieu must be considered and developed with their needs in mind (QMSS, 2012) if they are to acquire or maintain a healthy lifestyle. Two ways to achieve this objective are through computer-tailored interventions and active workshops. The innovative intervention could be based on the computer personalization technology, which makes an online an individualized program according to the user's desired lifestyle (Boudreau et al., 2016). In addition, the environments in which the community evolves will be considered, which represents a bold and distinctive element in research on tailor-made and individualized interventions.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has the potential to guide the university in developing a program to promote overall health and healthy lifestyles, thereby ensuring the permanence of a healthy and active lifestyle for students in the years following their transition to university. We believe that, when used as an educational strategy, our survey can serve as a model for other post-secondary institutions (or in other professional fields, even) insofar as it offers a better understanding of the mechanisms for adopting a healthy lifestyle. Environments should also be taken into account and studied to determine the type of interventions most likely to affect people's health behaviours.

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