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Hygge in Iran? The Lived Experience of Physical Activity of Older Adults in the Neighborhood Environment in Tehran

Authors' contribution:

A) conception and design of the study
B) acquisition of data
C) analysis and interpretation of data
D) manuscript preparation
E) obtaining funding

Sahar Khanizadeh[1A–D], Mohammad Ehsani*[1AD], Rasool Norouzi Seyed Hosseini[1A–D], Safar Ghaedrahmati[1AB], Young Jin Yoon[2A]

[1]*Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran*
[2]*Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea*

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***Correspondence:** Mohammad Ehsani, Tarbiat Modares University, Jalal AleAhmad Nasr, Tehran; P.O.Box: 14115–111; Iran email: ehsani@modares.ac.ir

Abstract

Physical activity is considered one of the most important components of daily activities and a healthy lifestyle for the older adult to achieve well-being. The purpose of this study is to explore older adults' views on physical activity in the neighborhood environment. This study is qualitative and interpretive in nature. In this research, thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze and report patterns in the qualitative data, employing Braun and Clarke's six-step inductive approach. Twenty-four active seniors in the Ekhtiarieh neighborhood of Tehran were interviewed in person. The purpose of the interview was to probe into the deep layers of the interviewees' mindset and obtain valid information. The analysis of the data yielded *Hygge* as the global theme, and the three main themes of joyful emotions and behavior (Wellness Hygge), perceived social support (Neighborhood Hygge), and safety and security, as well as eight sub-themes. Although Hygge derives Danish culture and its national identity, The creation of a Hygge subculture in the neighborhood through physical activity can be considered as a collective effort to deal with the contradictions in the society with happiness. The findings of this research have been chosen as inspiring concepts for a better and healthier life, to reproduce simple cultural elements that do not exist in the situation of the local culture, by borrowing from the the culture of Denmark, the happiest country in the world.

Keywords: active aging, joyful emotions and behavior, perceived social support, safety, security

Introduction

The world's population is aging (Alves et al., 2020), and improving the quality of life of older adults is an important global health issue (WHO, 2002). Previous studies have shown that mental well-being is associated with healthy lifestyle behaviors and can have a protective effect on maintaining health and increasing life expectancy (Martín-María et al., 2020). Mental well-being has two distinct components: experience well-being and evaluation well-being. Experience well-being refers to the positive and negative emotions that people experience in their daily lives, while evaluation well-being can be defined as cognitive judgments about life satisfaction or about various specific areas of life, such as one's job, family and partner (Martín-María et al., 2020).

Physical activity is an important component of daily activities and a healthy lifestyle for the older adult to achieve well-being (Carl et al., 2020). Factors that affect one's physical activity vary throughout life, including political, individualistic, social and structural interventions (Ulijaszek, 2018). Furthermore, the role of the physical

or "built" environment in supporting or inhibiting levels of physical activity has attracted attention in the last few decades (Barnett et al., 2017; Cerin et al., 2014; Duncan et al., 2021; Kärmeniemi et al., 2018; King et al., 2019). Ulijaszek (2018) stated that the built environment creates a physical form of human communities as an environment for human activities that can form patterns of physical activity. Places, buildings, and neighborhoods that make up the most visible parts of the built environment create space for the individual body and the social body to engage in behaviors and actions that can affect levels of physical activity. Kim et al. (2020) have attributed the active lifestyle of residents to the social and cultural norms in their neighborhoods. Schutzer and Graves (2004) also considered non-supportive environments as barriers to physical activity. Drawing upon the evaluation well-being of the older adult, happiness and joy should also be mentioned. Happiness is an internal condition; from the moment a person reflects on his or her life experience and evaluates it well. It is based on mental evaluation (Lepp, 2018). A review of past studies shows that happiness and a neighborhood-built environment are highly correlated (Abdullah & Zulkifli, 2018; Elshater, 2016; Shiue, 2012; Somarriba Arechavala et al., 2022). Wenz (1977) considered non-verbal, social, and psychological behaviors and the economic status of neighborhoods as indicators of relative happiness. However, the point is that happiness is mental, and people have different perceptions and ideas of what an ideal neighborhood should possess. For example, some do not like their homes to be close to a playground while others do not find it problematic. Thus, the environmental and social characteristics of a neighborhood can bring positive or negative emotions to its residents.

Generally, previous research relating the characteristics of the built environment to health behaviors falls into the category of "neighborhood effects" studies. Also, the approach used in previous research on active aging and the neighborhood-built environment is often location-based. Our approach in this research is people-based (focused on understanding and adapting the perspectives of people living in the neighborhood, not just physical characteristics). Also, our emphasis in this research is on the well-being of the older adult in the neighborhood with an emphasis on active aging. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore older adults' views on physical activity in the neighborhood environment. To what extent have we been able to take advantage of the potential abilities of the field of culture to grow and promote sports and physical activity in our society?

Field of Study

Different groups of older adults living in the Ekhtiarieh neighborhood of Tehran, an optimal geographical location in District 3 that accommodates the older adult in Tehran, engage in group and individual sports activities at different hours of the day. According to the Walk Score measure (2022), the walkability in this neighborhood has a score of 88, which makes this neighborhood very walkable (This neighborhood has the highest score of walkability from the neighborhoods in Tehran's District 3). Arghavan Park is located in Shahid Kolahdooz St., South Dibaji St., and is in one of the populated centers of District 3 in the Ekhtiarieh neighborhood with suitable access. This park can be considered an important neighborhood place for the physical activity of the older adult.

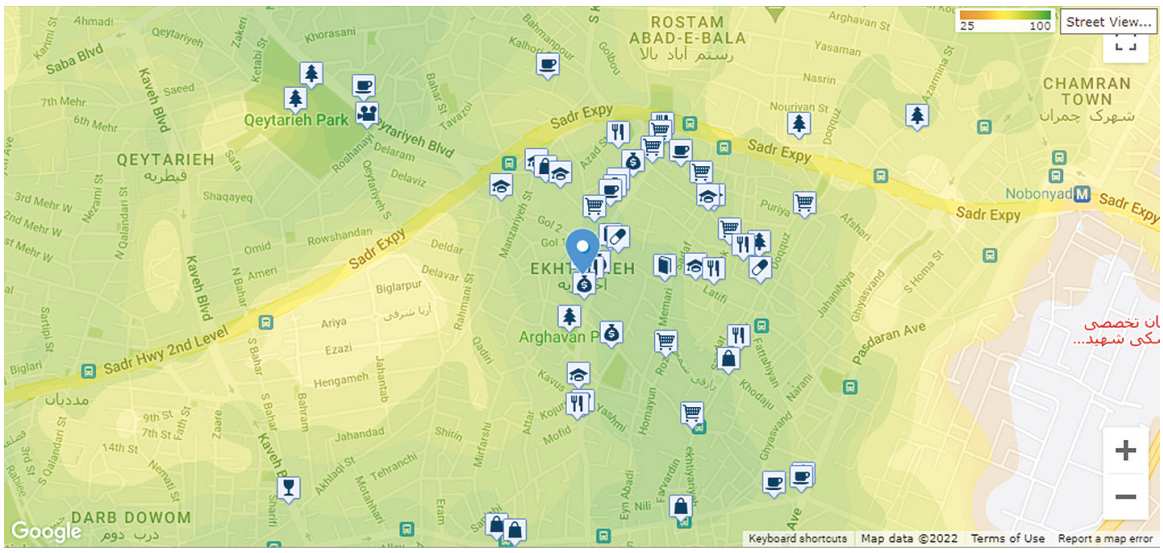


Figure 1. Walkability map of Ekhtiarieh neighborhood based on Walk Score





Figure 2. Field of Study Images

Methodology

Research design

The processes and assumptions underlying the translations of the qualitative data occur iteratively during and after data collection. It is the researcher's responsibility to make known the processes for identifying patterns, constructing descriptions, and developing interpretations to trace the logic of the analysis. Thematic data analysis is a widely used qualitative method where the classification of data into units of analysis is integral. Thematic analysis tries to determine what the data tells us through data coding and analysis and is described by Braun and Clark (2006) as "a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data". It can recognize, analyze and report patterns in the textual data of interviews (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Using thematic analysis, this research has tried to find a suitable model to define active aging in the neighborhood environment in Iran by generating themes inductively from the patterns in the data that are informed by existing knowledge from the literature.

Participants

The population in this study was the older physically active adult in the Ekhtiarieh neighborhood in Tehran. The participants in this study were selected based on purposive sampling (Green & Holloway, 1997), which is a judgment sampling. In other words, the individuals who were selected had the most desirable characteristics for providing the necessary data because they had personally experienced the event (Sekaran, 1992). It is interesting to note that all participants were willing to participate in the study and welcomed the chance to use their experiences as a source of information.

Data collection

The data were collected through in-depth unstructured interviews to allow the participants to freely describe their experiences. According to Van Manen (2016), the interview is the best way to enter the world of human experiences. The interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. The number of participants for the interviews was based on the data saturation rule. It meant to obtain a range of views of the older adult about their lived experience of physical activity in the neighborhood and their interpretation (Nieswiadomy, 1988). Twenty-four active seniors in the Ekhtiarieh neighborhood were interviewed in person. At the beginning of the interview, a few general questions were asked such as: Why do you exercise and remain physically activity? Why do you choose the neighborhood space for your physical activity? What motivates you to do more physical activity in your neighborhood?

As the interview went on, other questions were asked focusing on the objectives of the research. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. During the interviews, the non-verbal messages of the participants were noted and recorded. At the end of each interview, a summary of the interview was presented to the participant to obtain a final confirmation of the perceived content of the interview.

Data analysis

For the analysis of the qualitative data, the theme analysis method was used to identify, analyze and report the patterns (themes in the data). In this method, the data coding process takes place with no attempt to adapt it to a pre-planned coding framework (or theme format). In the inductive method, the thematic analysis is based on the data. In this research, Braun and Clarke's six-step inductive approach was employed (Braun, & Clarke, 2006)

I. The first step is becoming familiar with the data
II. The second step is generating the initial codes from the data
III. The third step is searching for themes
IV. The fourth step is reviewing the themes
V. The fifth step is defining and naming themes
VI. The last step is preparing a report

Trustworthiness

In this study, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used to obtain valid and reliable data. Credibility refers to the extent to which the structure and meaning of the phenomenon are properly represented (Lincoln et al., 1985). To observe the "credibility" of the research, only people with rich experiences in physical activity in the neighborhood were included in the study. The minimum criteria for the interview were having more than one year of residence and experience of physical activity in the neighborhood. Transferability refers to the extent the research findings can be extended to other environments. An attempt was made in the present study to achieve this important goal by fully presenting the findings. Dependability indicates the coherence of internal processes and how a researcher can examine the changing conditions of the phenomenon (Lincoln et al., 1985). To achieve "dependability", two experts reviewed the research process and confirmed the results. "Confirmability" refers to the extent to which a researcher's findings are corroborated by others who review the research or study or its results (Lincoln et al., 1985). Confirmability is achieved through careful review and revision of the data, interpretations, and findings of this study and comparing them with previous studies so that other researchers can understand the experiences, track the data, and achieve similar results.

Findings

The themes obtained from the interviews are the result of trying to explain and interpret the perception and experience of the older adult doing physical activity in the neighborhood. The aim was to gain a deeper and richer insight into this phenomenon. Three main themes and eight sub-themes were extracted from the findings that depict the older adult's perception and experience of physical activity in the neighborhood:

a) Joyful emotions and behavior (Wellness Hygge)

One of the main themes extracted from the data, which was frequently seen in the observations and referred to in the interviews, was "joyful emotions and behavior (Wellness Hygge)". emotions and behavior of the older adult, based on the happiness of the neighborhood-built environment, affects their activity. Below this main theme is *Mudita* as a sub-theme. (Mudita is a term in Pali and Sanskrit meaning to enjoy the happiness and well-being of others). In line with the sub-theme of *Mudita*, Nahid (a pseudonym), a 69-year-old woman said:

"When I come to the neighborhood and see people talking happy and laughing, it makes me happy too."

A joyful environment is another sub-theme below the main theme of "joyful emotions and behavior (Wellness Hygge)". This sub-theme means older adults can create enough small joyful moments in the neighborhood. In this regard, while greeting other neighbors in the neighborhood during the interview, 71-year-old Farzaneh (a pseudonym) said:

"Yesterday, my friends and I decided to go and buy fish after a morning walk in the park. We talked all the way and laughed. We arrived there at 10.05 and we were happy on the way home. The walk on the streets of the neighborhood took about two and a half hours."

Mahboubeh (a pseudonym), a 68-year-old woman, said:

"The doctor has said that I must walk, it is obligatory, but I choose this space for walking because of the green space and the trees especially when the wind blows, the leaves fall, or when it rains. I come here for a walk because I like the environment more."

Sports Philic/Walk Philic is another sub-theme identified under the theme of "joyful emotions & behavior (Wellness Hygge)". Philia (word for love) is an intentional response to promote well-being. In this regard, Koorush (a pseudonym) said:

"I love walking, for example, I walk to Dowlat Street, but I don't take the car, I work in Tajrish, and sometimes I do not even take the car on purpose, I walk from Tajrish to work. I walk for at least one hour a day. Sometimes I run into a friend too, so it takes an hour or two!"

Khashayar (a pseudonym), a 79-year-old man, also said:

"I enjoy walking and exercising. If I don't exercise, I will get really sick."

b) Perceived social support (Neighborhood Hygge)

One of the main themes frequently observed and referred to in interviews was "Perceived social support (Neighborhood Hygge)". Emotional support as a sub-theme is below this main theme. Emotional support in a neighborhood can be beneficial as a protective factor that interacts with risk factors to decrease the likelihood of negative health outcomes among older adults. Social

support has been shown to help alleviate stress. In this regard, 71-year-old Dariush (a pseudonym) said:

"Time goes by even if we don't come here. But if we don't come here, we die of loneliness. I call this guy (pointing to his friend) let's go for a walk."

Afarin (a pseudonym), an 84-year-old woman, said:

"Because here in this neighborhood we met and we grew up. If we go somewhere else, we do not know who to talk with. We have been together in this place for years. I always come here, we see each other, and we pour our hearts out here. I mean we come to talk with our friends, to walk and talk."

Reza (pseudonym), a 67-year-old man, said:

"We come to the park to exercise, to be together. When a person exercises, especially with others, he puts aside his problems and concerns. It does not matter if it is for a short time or a long time."

Hadi (a pseudonym), a 72-year-old man, said:

"It's now many years that we have been coming to our neighborhood park to play sports. This is a neighborhood, and now we are all friends. We greet each other. It looks like an office. Sir, why didn't you come yesterday? Why weren't you here yesterday? Just like an office. Here is a neighborhood environment. Yes! I have a sense of family. We are all friends and it gives me energy. If I go to that corner, I see my friends and we go there and talk, talk, and laugh. This is the best thing! What is life then?"

Another sub-theme under the main theme of "Perceived social support (Neighborhood Hygge)" is information support. Information support is defined as messages that involve knowledge or facts. In this regard, 68-year-old Fataneh said:

"At this age, you may not be the model of the day, but you should know the information of the day. It's the same for me here. We talk about everything."

Homeira (a pseudonym), a 73-year-old woman, also said:

"After the walk, I will sit here and talk to our friends. We talk about our food, about the things we bought. We talk about everything new we have found."

A lively neighborhood is another sub-theme below the main theme of "Perceived social support (Neighborhood Hygge)". A lively neighborhood is a place or situation in the neighborhood that is lively and exciting because many things are happening; a neighborhood where the older adults believe that life is a continuous motion. Narges (a pseudonym), a 79-year-old woman, also said:

"The atmosphere in our neighborhood is really good, Dowlat Street is a marketplace. Everything is around us. For instance, there is only one crossroads from our home to the Qanat crossroads, where you can find everything, old shops, old businesses, and ... I mean, it's so rich in business and everything is there, everything is fine. If you don't find something in a shop, you can go to another shop nearby. Anyway, we feel easy."

65-year-old Fahimeh (a pseudonym) said:

"Sometimes we gather together in the neighborhood park for exercise and walking, but mostly to have tea, or eat cake, or even pottage. It is very good, especially now that it is not possible to party in these corona[-virus] conditions. It is very good that we all see each other. We like to meet each other here."

c) Safety and Security

"Safety and security" was another main theme that was frequently observed and mentioned in interviews. Security in the neighborhood-built environment is under this main theme. In this regard, 68-year-old Nazanin (a pseudonym) said:

"Our neighborhood is safe. If a doper dares to come to the park, I won't get scared since our men, I mean male neighbors, are here."

Ardeshir (a pseudonym), a 65-year-old, also said:

"This is a very good neighborhood. Thanks to God there is nobody to bother. There is a lot of security in the park. These workers (gardeners and guards of the park) are like bodyguards. Some women even exercise at five in the morning when it is still dark, but thanks to God, the security of the neighborhood is very good."

Other seniors also made comments during the interviews. In a multi-person conversation, someone said:

"We have been in this neighborhood for many years. We come and go. We've not seen anything here (neighborhood park) because there are guards here, and the security is very good."

Safety in performing activities as a sub-theme is also included under this theme. In this regard, 68-year-old Nazanin (a pseudonym) said:

"I come from Dolat Street early in the morning and, since it is crowded, I walk here. Then I walk backward in the street facing the park (South Dibaji) to put no pressure on my knees, then I start walking in the park."

Ata (a pseudonym), a 70-year-old man, also said:

"Playing and exercising in the neighborhood is very enjoyable. But if the municipality or the authorities can set up one or two more ping-pong tables, and move this table and bodybuilding equipment, that would be better. I almost hit the window pane of the praying room several times, God have mercy on me. There should be some space where we can move back and forth. If a fence is built around the playground, so that the ball does not go out, there will be a lot more participation!"

Discussion

This study examines the specific dimensions of the neighborhood environment from the perspective of older adults and explains the physical activity status of older adults in the neighborhood. Due to the direct presence of the researcher, it was possible to examine the missing issues and predict the relationships and causes in this field. The results obtained in this study, which has an interdisciplinary perspective of sports management and urban planning, can bring important tips and interpretations for those involved in sports for older adults and urban planners.

According to the results, Hygge is a central theme in this research. Hygge is a word of Norwegian origin but influenced by Danish culture (Howell & Sundberg, 2015). It is more of an empirical atmosphere than an object. Hygge experiences vary from country to country, but what they all have in common are intimacy, togetherness, coziness, and comfort (Wiking, 2016). Hygge in the neighborhood environment in Iran can be considered as an example of the formation of a subculture, considering the role of important and basic values of the society. Obviously, the formation of subcultures has functions, and since Iran is one of the least happy societies, ranked 110 out of 146 countries, which is much lower than the world average (Norouzi Seyed Hosseini et al., 2023), the creation of a Hygge subculture in the neighborhood through physical activity can be considered a collective effort to deal with the contradictions concerning happiness in society.

The findings of this research have been chosen as inspiring concepts for a better and healthier life, to reproduce simple cultural elements that do not exist in the

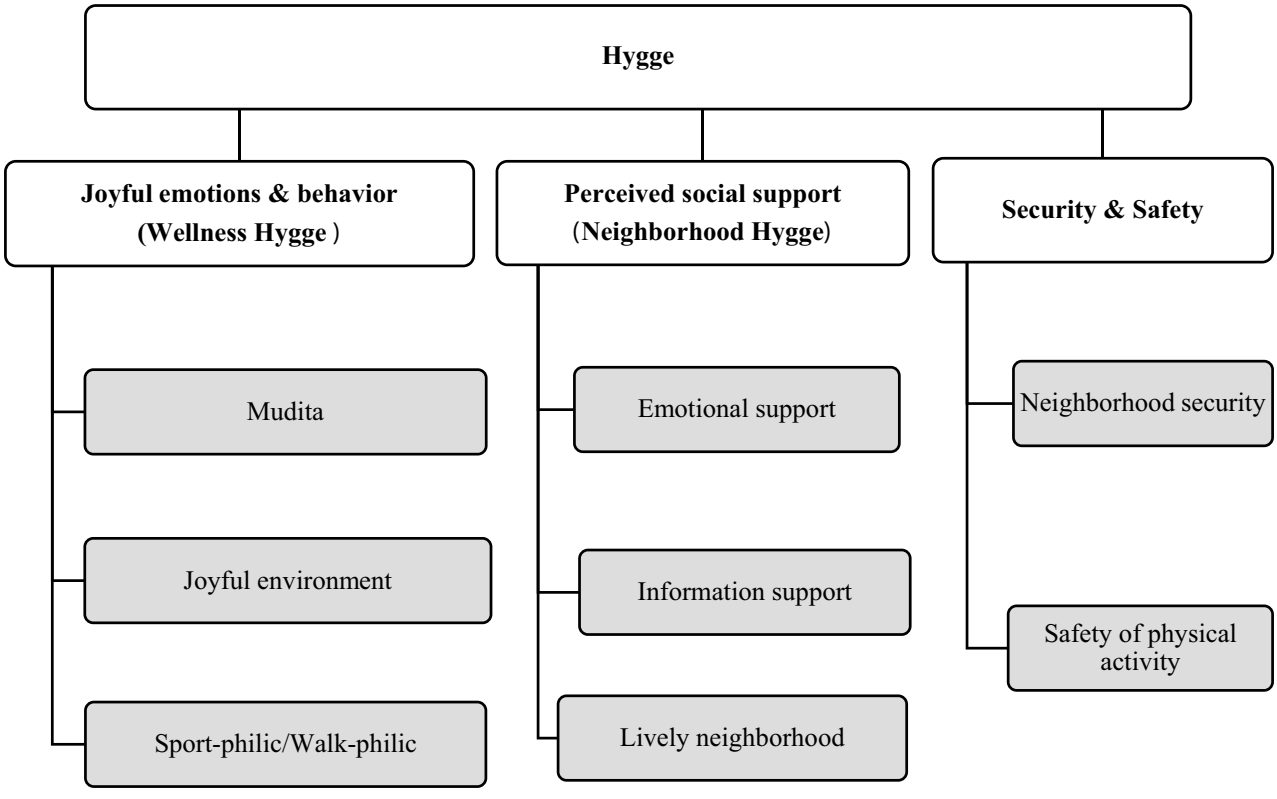


Figure 3. Summary of the research findings

local culture, by borrowing from the culture of Denmark, the happiest country in the world. Denmark, as one of the happiest countries in the world (World Happiness Report, 2023).

Hygge is more of a way of life, a way of making ordinary moments feel special, enjoyable, and meaningful. Wellness Hygge is also about creating a relaxing and emotional environment, about who you choose to surround yourself with and what you spend your time doing (Greife, 2018). Joyful emotions and behavior, one of the main themes below Hygge, reflects beliefs, ideas, and inner feelings about the joy of doing physical activity in the neighborhood-built environment for older adults, a feeling that depends on doing a certain activity and in a certain place. The important thing about joyful emotions is that this feeling of happiness is transient and only happens to older adults in the Ekhtiarieh neighborhood when they experience physical activity in the neighborhood. In this regard, there is strong evidence that having social connections and interactions (another component of hygge – spending time with friends and family) is beneficial for physical and emotional health.

Neighborhood hygge is about hanging out with close friends in the neighborhood. The most important social relationships are close relationships where moments can be experienced and understood with others. A place to share thoughts and feelings. A place where people both support and are supported. Being together is the essence and basis of hygge. This finding is consistent with the results of research by Everard et al. (2000), Van Cauwenberg et al. (2014), and Kang et al. (2018). Perceived social support means joining a trusted network in emergencies or everyday situations (Cobo-Rendón et al., 2020; Taylor, 2011). Perceived social support behind a secure relationship makes one feel valued. This secure relationship can be obtained from three sources: family, friends, and important people (Zimet et al., 1988). Older adults working in the Ekhtiarieh neighborhood play a supportive role in meeting the needs of their neighbors by establishing trusted social networks of friends. Besides being physically active, older adults establish social interactions, which is a motivator for being active in old age.

Safety and security are other key themes under Hygge. This finding is in line with the findings of Ball et al. (2001), Cerin et al. (2013), and Cheval et al. (2019). Security in the neighborhood refers to the rate of urban crimes. While insecurity in the city and neighborhood reduces interactions, security will lead to more citizen participation. Older adults who work in the Ekhtiarieh neighborhood consider the security of the neighborhood as a factor in being more active. Safety in activities is another factor in increasing the participation of older adults in the neighborhood. Safety means following all the principles that prevent unhealthy activities. Concerning the observations and the points mentioned in the interviews, the officials in charge can standardize and better arrange sports equipment, fencing, and separate spaces, floor and pave sidewalks, and increase the number of cycle lanes for physical activity and sports in the neighborhood.

Conclusion

Culture is one of the elements that distinguishes places from each other. The reproduction of simple cultural elements derived from different cultures, which do not exist in the local culture, causes the growth and reproduction of the indigenous culture. The experiences of active older adults in Tehran regarding understanding physical activity in the neighborhood environment are an example of this issue. Joyful emotions and behavior, perceived social support, safety and security in the neighborhood environment will be like a bright and warm candle in the culture of active aging in the neighborhood environment in Iran. Hygge is the Danish recipe for happiness and the new wellness trend from Scandinavia. Therefore, it is suggested that health promotion strategies in Iran take advantage of social activities and design and implement events based on physical activity that create a sense of nostalgia and happiness in older adults.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this research was conducted using a qualitative methodology. Although the study tries to interpret the meaningful behaviors of older adults and the interpretations they provide of themselves and others, the results of qualitative studies cannot be generalized. Despite the efforts of the researchers to consider participants with maximum diversity, one of the limitations of this research was the lack of access to the older adult with more cultural and social diversity in the environment of the neighborhood. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers quantitatively examine the variables identified in this research, such as the relationships between aging, physical activity, and the neighborhood environment, as well as the effects of social pressure on active physical culture at the neighborhood level. It is hoped that this research can add new insight, however small, into the culture of active aging in the neighborhood environments of Iran.

Ethical considerations

This research has ethical approval ID IR.MODARES.REC.1400.174 from the ethics committee of Tarbiat Modares University.

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