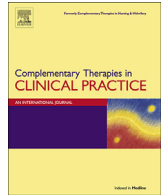




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Participant characteristics of users of holistic movement practices in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of this study was to compare the characteristics of users of holistic movement practices in Australia to people who were physically active but not using holistic movement practices. A second aim was to compare characteristics of users of specific holistic movement practices (yoga/Pilates and t'ai chi/qigong).

Design: We performed a secondary data analysis on pooled data of a nationally-representative physical activity survey conducted yearly 2001–2010 (n = 195,926).

Setting: Australia-wide Exercise, Recreation, and Sport Survey (ERASS).

Main outcome measures: A range of socio-demographic and participation characteristics were documented and compared between users and non-users of holistic movement practices and between yoga/Pilates and t'ai chi/qigong users, employing descriptive statistics, chi square, and multiple logistic regression analyses.

Results: Users of holistic movement practices (n = 6826) were significantly more likely than non-users to be female, older, have fewer children at home, and have higher levels of education, socio-economic background, and physical activity involvement (p < 0.001). Yoga/Pilates (n = 5733) and t'ai chi/qigong (n = 947) users were also found to differ on a number of characteristics, including age, sex, socioeconomic background, and marital status.

Conclusion: As a group, Australian users of holistic movement practices differ on a range of characteristics from those Australians active in other types of physical activities. However, differences between yoga/Pilates and t'ai chi/qigong users suggest these practices attract somewhat different sub-populations. To what extent these differences are due to characteristics inherent to the practices themselves or to differences in delivery-related parameters needs to be examined in future research.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Holistic movement practices (HMPs), like yoga and t'ai chi, are increasingly being investigated for their physical and mental health benefits [1,2]. Many reviews report on the associations of these

practices with a wide range of health outcomes, and there is growing evidence of beneficial effects, for healthy as well as clinical populations [3–8]. With increasing appreciation of these potential health benefits, the question of who participates in HMPs and who does not becomes a relevant one to ask, in particular from the perspective of public health. Historically, however, public health research on determinants and correlates of physical activity has predominantly focused on aerobic moderate-to-vigorous physical activity [9], and more recently sitting [10].

Typically, what makes HMPs holistic and sets them apart from traditional exercise modes is their embedding in integrative philosophies that link the physical practice with holistic well-being.

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The most well-known HMPs are yoga, whose philosophy is often summarized into “eight limbs” [11], and t'ai chi and qigong, which are embedded in concepts from Traditional Chinese Medicine [12]. The practices include multiple inter-related components, variedly emphasizing elements such as musculoskeletal training, breath regulation, concentration, mindfulness, subtle energy, alternative health philosophy, spirituality, ethics, mind-body-spirit coordination, transcendence [11,13–18]. Furthermore, they tend to call for a level of inner involvement and engagement with one self that is not typically part of other exercise contexts [19,20]. Due to these holistic and self-involved characteristics, HMPs may attract people specifically interested in benefits beyond physical fitness – although they may deter others [21–24].

A limited number of nationally representative studies have investigated the characteristics of people participating in certain HMPs and compared them to non-participants. These studies have predominantly been conducted in the United States, and focused on yoga [25–28] and t'ai chi/qigong [28–30]. One study examined characteristics of yoga users in England [31]. Consistent findings across the yoga studies indicate that, compared to non-users, yoga users are more likely to be female, to have reached tertiary levels of education, and to rate their health as good-to-excellent. Other findings are less consistent (e.g., regarding income, age, ethnicity, mental health) or have only been investigated in one or two studies (e.g., BMI, occupational & leisure time physical activity). T'ai chi/qigong users in the United States have consistently been found to be similar to non-users in sex and income level, while differing in age, race, and education [28–30]. Users are more likely to be older, of Asian, African American, or other non-white ethnicity, and educated beyond high school level. A tendency to participate in multiple HMPs has also been noted, with almost half (49.3%) of t'ai chi/qigong users also using yoga [29].

Population-based profiles of user characteristics may serve several purposes. First, they provide information about the population subgroups who currently seem naturally attracted to these practices, and this may inform both referral strategies and marketing practices. Second, they provide information about the population subgroups who currently are *not* participating in these practices, which may give direction to efforts aimed at identifying and overcoming participation barriers. Furthermore, an accumulation of profiles of HMP users from different countries may help refine our understanding of factors that shape participation patterns in these practices.

1.2. Objectives

The aim of this study was to examine the characteristics of Australians participating in HMPs, specifically yoga, t'ai chi, qigong, and Pilates, through a secondary data analysis of a nationally representative survey of Australian adults. Additionally, we aimed to compare people participating in HMPs with people who were physically active but not participating in HMPs in order to capture differences related to choice of physical activity. Furthermore, we aimed to examine similarities and differences between specific holistic movement practices by comparing the characteristics of yoga/Pilates and t'ai chi/qigong users.

2. Method

2.1. Survey and sample

We used data from the Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey (ERASS), a series of Australia-wide independent cross-sectional national surveys, conducted yearly between 2001 and 2010, with a focus on assessing information about the exercise-, recreation-

and sport-related physical activities Australians participate in [32,33]. Various aspects of the ERASS data set have previously been examined [34–38], including its usefulness for public health surveillance [39].

The ERASS involved a random survey stratified by state and territory, with data collected quarterly, using a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) system. Respondents were aged 15 years and over residing in occupied private dwellings. Households were sampled from the Electronic White Pages (2001–2006) or by Random Digit Dialling (2007–2010) [33]. On being contacted by telephone, respondents were informed about the purpose and background of the ERASS, assured of confidentiality and given the opportunity to ask questions. Verbal informed consent was indicated by respondents' willingness to participate in the survey. Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federation University, Australia.

Annual response rates averaged 36.5% between 2001 and 2010, culminating in a total of 195,926 respondents over the 10 years. Averaged across the decade, 49.4% of respondents were male, 37.1% were aged 50 + years, 24.3% were university educated while 29.6% had below high school education, 37.9% were in the two most disadvantaged socioeconomic quintiles [40], and 68.4% were from Metropolitan areas. An overview of sample characteristics is provided in Appendix 1. Details of sample characteristics by year can be found in Bennie et al. [35]. Of the 195,926 people surveyed, 81.3% engaged in some level of leisure-time physical activity in the 12 months prior to the date of interview. Previous analyses showed that overall participation levels in yoga/Pilates and t'ai chi/qigong did not increase linearly across the 2001–2010 decade [37].

2.2. ERASS questionnaire

The ERASS questionnaire focused on participation in leisure-time physical activity, defined as ‘*any physical activity done for exercise, recreation or sport in the past 12 months*’. Physical activities associated with work, household or garden chores were excluded. Those respondents who indicated having participated were asked to list up to 10 types of activity undertaken. Several follow-up questions were asked for each activity, including the frequency of participation during the previous 12 months. Activities were coded according to a predefined list including many sport activities and a range of non-sport leisure-time physical activities. The predefined list assigned one code to yoga and Pilates. T'ai chi and qigong were coded separately. For this study, we used the jointly coded *yoga/Pilates* variable, and combined t'ai chi, qigong, and Chinese exercises into a *t'ai chi/qigong* variable. The questionnaire also assessed the following socio-demographic variables: age, sex, educational level, home postcode, marital status, and number of children below the age of 18 living with the respondent. In 2008, as an indicator of ethnicity, a question was added on language spoken at home. Additionally, in 2009, a question was added about the presence of a physical condition or disability that restricts life in some way. Respondents' postcodes were used to determine regionality and socioeconomic status, using the “Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA)” [41] and the “Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD)” [40], respectively.

2.3. Groups

We defined HMP-users as those respondents who indicated that they had participated at least once in yoga/Pilates and/or t'ai chi/qigong during the last 12 months ($n = 6826$). Non-HMP-users were defined as those respondents who indicated that they had participated in any activity other than yoga/Pilates or t'ai chi/qigong during the last 12 months ($n = 152,468$). Additionally, to examine

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