LEISURE TIME EXPERIENCES IN STRUCTURED EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES PREDICT ADOLESCENT SELF-CONCEPT

by

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how adolescents’ involvement in different leisure time activities is associated with their self-concept. Adolescence is a period of development marked by its focus on identity exploration and refinement. Discretionary time activities are considered optimal contexts for learning about oneself, as they are chosen by youth to fit their interests and goals. This thesis utilised a number of approaches to the measurement of leisure time to understand how different aspects of activity involvement are associated with adolescent self-concept. Data were collected from a large representative sample of Western Australian adolescents in conjunction with the Youth Activity Participation Study of Western Australia (YAPS-WA). Study 1 and Study 4 in this thesis utilise Wave 1 data from the YAPS-WA project (see Appendix A for a copy of the entire Wave 1 survey). Study 2 and Study 3 draw on data from Wave 2 (see Appendix B for a copy of the entire Wave 2 survey). Study 5 is longitudinal and uses all 5 high school waves of data from the initial Year 8 cohort.

Study 1 investigated the relationship between adolescents’ participation in structured leisure activities and their self-concepts. In general, participation in any type of structured activity was associated with a higher social and academic self-concept, and general self-worth, compared to no participation. Study 1 also found that adolescents who participated in
both sports and non-sports reported a more positive social self-concept and general self-worth, compared to those who only participated in one of the activity types.

Study 2 focused on the link between involvement in unstructured leisure and self. As there is immense diversity in unstructured leisure activities, with some activities less likely to be associated with self (e.g., watching television), this thesis focused on a popular activity with potential to influence self-development: social networking. Frequency of social networking site use was linked to higher social self-concept, while investment in social networking sites was associated with lower self-esteem and higher depressed mood. Gender differences were also explored in Study 2.

Study 3 examined the degree to which different leisure activities provide youth with opportunities to explore and refine their identities and experience positive peer interactions. Traditional structured leisure activities (e.g., sport, art) provided adolescents with more experiences of identity exploration and reflection and positive peer interactions than did social networking site use. Further analysis compared differences in social networking site use and found that both the frequency with which adolescents visited their social networking sites, and the degree of investment they had in their social networking sites, predicted more experiences of identity exploration and reflection and positive peer interactions.

Study 4 investigated whether positive developmental experiences in structured leisure activities predicted more positive self-concept, and whether this link was stronger for youth from disadvantaged schools. The positive developmental experiences that occurred during structured leisure activities predicted higher general self-worth and social and academic self-concept, and this link was stronger for youth from low SES schools.

The fifth and final study investigated the longitudinal impact of adolescent involvement in structured leisure activities on self-concept. Study 5 used latent growth curve models to examine whether breadth of structured activity participation during early
adolescence predicted changes in self-concept across the high school years. Greater breadth of structured activity participation during early adolescence, controlling for intensity of participation, predicted less decline in general self-worth and academic self-concept.

In summary, all five studies provided support for the proposition that leisure time activities are important to adolescent self-concept. The findings indicate that involvement in a diversity of structured leisure activities is a developmentally positive use of discretionary time in adolescence, particularly for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, results suggest that adolescents’ frequent use of social networking sites is not a cause for concern, although the degree to which an adolescent is invested in his or her social networking site does appear to be linked to poorer outcomes. The findings of this thesis have relevance to both policy and practice.
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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis comprises the following publications:


The following empirical study has been submitted to a peer reviewed journal and is currently being reviewed and considered for publication.

5. Blomfield Neira, C. J., Barber, B. L., & Modecki, K. Breadth of Participation in Extracurricular Activities During Early Adolescence Predicts Self-Concept Trajectories Across the High School Years. *Child Development*.
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