

Examining Urban Youth Engagement in Sport

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Statistics in most developed countries, including Canada, point to an alarming rise in obesity levels and significant declines in sport participation rates. Despite an increase in "collaboration" between governments, non-profits, and business to enhance sport participation, governments are faced with a challenging paradox. While health and fitness dominate our agenda, the population as a whole is becoming less healthy, less fit and less active. Sport, in the broadest sense, provides benefits that are economic, health promoting, and cultural (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2002). Canadian households spent an estimated \$15.8 Billion on sport in 2004, representing 1.2% of GDP (Bloom, Grant and Watt, 2005). The health and social benefits associated with regular participation in sports and physical activities are also well recognized (Conference Board, 2005). Nevertheless, 64% of Canadians are not sufficiently active to achieve personal health benefits (National, 2002). Furthermore, activity studies (e.g., the Health Behaviour of School Aged Children, the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth) consistently find that young people increasingly select sedentary leisure-time activities such as television viewing, videogames and personal computing (McElroy, 2002).

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and Sport Canada have partnered to support major research efforts in and around sport participation in Canada. As one of the studies selected by SSHRC and Sport Canada to start in January 2007, the present research involves an ambitious agenda to explore urban youth's engagement in sport in Canada. As mentioned above, past research has determined that urban youth are most susceptible to the influences that limit participation in healthy activities and, in turn, may lead to health challenges. Given this, our research focuses in on the urban youth - defined as anyone living in a Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) or city of 100,000 or more people in Canada.

This research program uses 'engagement' as our unit of analysis, where engagement is viewed as the extent that attitudes and subjective norms can provide a foundational explanation of sport involvement. Understanding progression through deeper levels of engagement needs further exploration (see Green, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Slack, 1997; Crone, 1999, Fournier, 1998; McCracken, 1986). We propose that urban youth may 'engage' the sport sector through a variety of 'content' behaviors and that they may 'engage' in the behavior either weakly or strongly. Strong engagement may be manifested in many ways, including the integration and infusion of sport into one's frame of reference, into the things that form the focus of attention; into the things or items perceived as important; into the topics studied or learned; into the beliefs, knowledge or cognitions held; into aspirations and expectations for the self and others; into the basis of social life; into stated or implicit goals in life; into daily rituals, actions and behaviors; and into measures of success. While not everyone engages in sport at such a deep level, there is every indication that some people do, across a variety of content domains.

In order to examine in detail the construct of urban youth sport engagement, we are initiating a 4-project research agenda that will respond to the needs of the Canadian Sport Policy and seek to understand how sport engagement can link to sport participation. These projects will respond to the following research questions: 1. In what ways and how deeply are young urban Canadians engaged in sport? 2. What is the nature of the engagement process? 3. What capacity exists in urban Canada to facilitate, support and enhance urban youth engagement with pool and rink sports? 4. What roles, responsibilities and benefits accrue to business, government and non-profit organizations involved in the sport sector? Given the vast size and scope of sport in Canada, we propose to investigate attitudes, behavior, processes and capacity among youth in Toronto and Montreal in two major sporting venues: pool (swimming, diving, water-polo synchronized swimming) and rink (speed skating, figure skating, ice hockey).

This presentation will focus on an overview of the innovative combination of methods undertaken to answer the first research question relating to how urban youth are engaged in sport. Specifically, secondary data will be examined using a variety of reports on sport participation while ethnography and netnography will be used as a primary form of data collection. More precisely, the secondary data allows for the determination of the "state of participation" in sport by urban youth. To date, the studies reviewed include Statistics Canada's 2004 National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations, The Conference

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Board of Canada's 2005 report on the Socio-economic Benefits of Sport Participation in Canada, Paddy Bowen's 2004 work on Investing in Canada: Fostering an Agenda for Citizen and Community Participation, the Strategic Counsel's 2005 survey of Canadians on True Sport Values, Final Report, prepared for the True Sport Foundation. Provisional findings indicate that active participation is on the decline and that the nature of how youth spend their time is varied and rapidly changing.

In an attempt to better link the first research question with the other three research questions, a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach using ethnographic and netnographic methods will be conducted so that a conceptual framework of youth engagement in sport may be developed and examined in greater depth in the subsequent projects. Ethnographic strategies are found when "the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time by collecting, primarily, observational data" (Creswell, 2003, p. 14). Ethnographic methods will consist largely of participant-observation in order to go beyond the mere statistical description of youth engagement and into behavioral and process descriptions of how youth engagement is translated in pools and rinks (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Creswell, 2003, Sands, 2002, Schwartzman, 1993). Netnography, an adapted online version of ethnography, is a contemporary qualitative research methodology that has been established in the business literature as an appropriate method to assess and understand online cultures (Kozinets, 2002, 1999, 1998, 1997). It is proposed here as an efficient, informative and enlightening way by which to understand urban youth behaviour in the online environment; where they are used to being. The ethnography observations will take place over one-week periods in one pool and one rink per city (i.e. four weeks total); while the netnography will be an ongoing observation of selected websites. Using both ethnography and netnography will allow us to capture processes and activities of all levels of engagement, including actively engaged (e.g., hockey players), passively engaged (e.g., video-game players), and non-engaged (e.g., "anti-sport" individuals). Such an approach will provide the sport management literature with a greater and more in-depth understanding of how urban youth are engaged, thereby providing greater knowledge for policy makers in getting urban youth actively engaged in sport and physical activity in order to better their overall health.