The global recession is a fact and it has affected many countries worldwide, including the developed countries in North America and Europe. Depending on the dominance of the industries, some local communities are being hit harder than others (e.g., communities dominated by the automotive industry). Family incomes have been greatly affected, creating a high level of uncertainty in many households. Economic hardship creates stress and does affect the behaviour in general, and consumer behaviour in particular (Ang, Leong, & Kotler, 2000; Shama, 1978). Consistent with Keynesian economic principles, people tend to want to spend less and are more apt to save the little they make (Shaw, 1988). Consumers are less wasteful, buy less of everything, delay purchases of durable products, and bargain for lower prices more often than they used to (Cundiff, 1975). In addition, research in Asia showed that consumers spent more time on comparative shopping, bought more through wholesale outlets, and became more do-it-yourself individuals (Shama, 1981). Much of what is going on is uncontrollable for the individual consumer.

One of the elements that people have control over is, however, the care for their own bodies. This is why sport participation and physical activity may play their own roles in these times of economic hardship.

So far, research related to the impact of recession on sport participation and physical activity is not available, with only some primary observations shedding some light on how the recession has affected sport. Some argue that sports and entertainment are the last areas to be hit in a recession and are among the first to bounce back (e.g., Gillet, 2009) under the assumption that sport “counters the feelings of frustration, despair and anger that often accompany economic downturns” (Rutemiller, 2008, p. 6). The Seton Hall Sports Poll, conducted in mid-November 2008, revealed downturns in every area of spending from ticket and merchandise purchases to participation in events requiring a fee and health club memberships (The Economic Downturn, 2008). In the debate about the impact of the recession on sport, spectator sport as a form of entertainment needs to be separated from active participation and physical activity. The focus of this contribution is on sport participation and physical activity. The purpose is to find out to what extent the recession has affected active participation in sport and physical activity in local communities.

Sociological literature explores the place of the human body in contemporary consumer culture (e.g., Maguire, 2008). Findings allow us to believe that, in times of economic down turns, people may want to direct their attention to physical care, including sport and physical fitness, as a way of retaining some measure of individual control. In addition, parents may choose to retain child-centered activities in their budgets (Rutemiller, 2008), or may choose to reduce their expenses by searching for cheaper, more affordable participation alternatives as indicated by Keynes.

Opportunities for sport and physical activity in local communities are many and varied, and are provided by the public sector (e.g., parks and recreation departments of municipalities), the non-profit, voluntary sector (e.g., community sport organizations [CSO’s], school sport programs), and the commercial for profit sector (e.g., privately owned gyms, golf clubs. Ski resorts). Different programs may be affected by the recession to different degrees. Directional propositions are that:

1. The recession positively affects sport participation opportunities at the entry level: lower level sports programs (e.g., house league programs) show an increase in the number of participants; while higher level programs (e.g., AA and AAA) experience declines in membership and revenue, due to their higher costs.

2. The recession positively affects participation in ‘cheaper sports’: ‘cheaper sports’ (e.g., soccer and basketball) see their membership numbers and revenues increase compared to ‘expensive sports’ (e.g., hockey and figure skating) which experience declines in membership and revenues.

3. The recession does not affect extracurricular school sports: programs and sport participation at the high school and university level remain intact.

4. The recession negatively affects participation, memberships and revenues in privately owned sport businesses such golf clubs, gyms, ski resorts.
The current study will explore the impact of the recession on different sport providers in communities as this is an indication as to how sport participation is affected locally. The three types of communities under investigations are: (a) small and medium-sized communities in South Western Ontario, Canada (dominated by the automotive industry and strongly affected by the recession; city type A); (b) small to medium-sized municipalities in Belgium (dominated by the service industry; city type B); and, (c) a ski resort in the French Alpes (dominated by the sport service industry).

Key people from a variety of sport participation providers will be interviewed based on one open ended question: “Has the recession impacted your sport organization?”. If the recession has impacted the organization probes will be used to explore how the recession has affected the organization, and which strategies have been implemented in order to cope with the situation, and to what effect. If the recession did not affect the organization, further questions will explore why they think this might be the case. Interviews will be registered and transcribed. Data will be collected between October 2009 and March 2010. A total of 22 interviews is anticipated: ten in city type A (already completed), ten in city type B, and two in the ski resort. The organizations in city type A include: four privately owned sport businesses (a gym, a health club, a sports facility and a golf course); a parks and recreation department; one junior football league; a high school department and a university sport setting (three key people were interviewed in the latter). NVivo software will assist to help code and analyze the interviews.

The results may reveal opportunities for people to stay involved in sport unlike the economic recession, and assist in remaining physically active and “being part of a whole experience” (O’Reilly & Seguin, 2009, p. 37). The study may also provide a clearer insight whether the cost of sport become an even stronger barrier for participation in time of economic hardship. The cost of sport was already previously identified as one of the barriers in community sport (Donnelly & Kidd, 2003). For sport providers, the research project will offer an in-depth analysis of the hurdles that sport organizations experience during this period of severe economic recession. The results may assist sport organizations in making the necessary adjustments to better position themselves in these turbulent times and to retain players and members in their associations, clubs and facilities and thus sustain sport participation in the local community. From a theoretical perspective this study contributes to the advancements of socio-economic theories as they apply to sport participation. Furthermore, this study will assist in advancing the research stream on the importance of sport participation and development by identifying barriers and hurdles in economic down turns, as well as highlighting strategies for sport organizations to overcome these hurdles.