Historically, bowling lanes have been inexpensive and accessible fixtures in many American communities. Spanning the generations, virtually every American has bowled sometime in their life. The bowling alley has been a fun place for children’s parties, a safe environment for teenagers to hang-out, and a home for adult competitive leagues. Seldom has bowling been examined in terms of its social significance as a contributing factor in community cohesion.

Traditional bowling leagues and facilities have been on a steady decline since the 1950s (Putnam, 2000). In recent history, sport marketers have attempted to dress up bowling in an attempt to recreate the popularity the sport once celebrated. Resembling night clubs or sports bars, modern bowling facilities often employ DJ’s and show popular sporting events on big screen televisions. A contrasting environment exists in traditional bowling lanes, which are still in existence, but do not have the popularity they once enjoyed in earlier periods. A few questions that emerge from this transformation are: how do individuals who bowl in these two distinctly different social worlds perceive their bowling experience and has bowling reflected the societal trend away from community gatherings to exclusive activities?

The purpose of this study is to examine the role bowling plays in the process of civic engagement and community cohesion in two distinctly different socio-economic neighborhoods. This study addresses the following research questions: a) How do those who engage in bowling in a traditional bowling facility and a modern facility perceive their experiences? b) What social function does bowling serve to those who participate in a traditional bowling facility and modern facility? c) What roles do traditional and modern bowling facilities play in the communities in which they reside?

Bowling in small groups or with family and friends, has replaced the popularity of league bowling as a recreational pastime. This has mirrored the decreased popularity of similar recreational community centers across the nation (Putnam, 2000). The social construct of the community has taken a beating since the early 1980’s, when British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher pronounced that there are no communities only individuals. Following in Thatcher’s footsteps, President Ronald Reagan rewarded the notion of rugged individualism and devalued publicly funded institutions and places to gather outside the home (Coakley, 2009a). Communities are built around such gathering places as recreation centers and bowling alleys. Privatization has replaced public financing as a source of funding for many recreational pursuits. Gated-communities have come to represent the new norm in which people who have the financial means create exclusive settings in which to live and gather, a style of housing that has literally and figuratively constructed barriers to the greater world around them. (Coakley, 2009b).

According to Anderson et al (2006) civic engagement has been on the decline since 1960 in part because of the rise in popularity of television and video games that has provided more social engagement opportunities inside the home. Putnam (2000) argues that the community building, social engagement potential of sport, known as social capital has eroded and is reflected in the decreased participation numbers in a wide range of civic oriented activities. He argues that democracy is built on institutions that foster civic engagement and high levels of social capital and their decline reflects a threat to democracy. Dyreson (2001) counters this argument by asserting that recent incarnations of bowling – with all its modern glitz – reflects more the commercialism and consumerism in the sport than it’s supposed civic engagement potential. As he states: “bowling….seems designed for producing communities of consumers rather than democrats in funny shoes” (Dyreson, 2001, p. 27). He further asserts that recreational activity does not inherently have the qualities that can unite a society. Societal unification via sport happens when the people involved construct an environment for which it is favorable.

Qualitative methodology (Berg, 2004) will be used to address the research questions. Three forms of data will be collected: a) interviews conducted with participants and facility managers, b) systematic observation, and c) unobtrusive analysis of primary sources. Trustworthiness and strength of data will be enhanced through triangulation. The data will be coded and organized around emergent themes that address the research questions. The primary source of data will be semi-structured interviews, that will be digitally recorded, and surveys conducted with participants recruited at the bowling alleys. Upon completion of each interview, the researcher will transcribe the entirety of the interview and e-mail it to the participant for review and member checking. The second type of data collection is systematic observation. Field notes will be taken that will describe both the physical setting and social interaction patterns. Finally, unobtrusive analysis of primary sources will be reviewed and analyzed to help complete the triangulation process.
The results will indicate whether or not a real difference exists between the meaning bowling has in the lives of those who bowl in a traditional setting and those who bowl in a more modern one. This study will add to the growing body of literature examining the role sport and physical activity plays in the development of community building social capital as well as the growing trend away from public and low cost recreational opportunities. Those seeking to market and promote the sport of bowling as a recreational activity can gain insight from the results to potentially create a hybrid experience that will have broader consumer appeal.