Music, Sport and Physical Activity: Intersecting to Yield Positive Impact

Adam Cohen, Texas Tech University
Khalid Ballouli, University of South Carolina

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Although sport can serve as a valuable mechanism for social change, this does not imply sport can single-handedly solve large-scale problems (Coalter, 2010); rather, it should be utilized with passionate and talented leadership, efficient and innovative program design, and ancillary cultural enrichment and educational activities to achieve optimal results (Chalip, 2006; Garcia, 2001; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Sugden, 2008).

The current study was motivated by recent and interesting developments in the youth sport and recreation industry. In an effort to appeal to specific demographic groups that have ceased to participate in sport and fitness activities due to burnout, dropout, or lack of interest in general (Gould, 1987; Smith, Gustafsson, & Hassmen, 2010), several innovative sport-for-development (SFD) models and organizations have emerged. One such model in recent years has involved the incorporation of music within a sport setting to draw further interest. Specifically, SFD programs are utilizing the sociocultural and psychophysical aspects of music in sport settings as a means to create more memorable experiences and longer lasting commitments among participants. Thus, this study will highlight an intervention program using sport and music jointly as a catalyst for change, Hip Hop Loves (HHL), a non-profit organization in New York City, that offers at-risk inner-city youth increased cultural enrichment and self-enhancement opportunities through vibrant forms of expression (Hip Hop Loves, 2015).

As part of a collaborative effort with HHL, the primary purpose of the current study was to monitor and evaluate the unique intersection of sport and music in effort to address calls for research on SFD programming that extends beyond the sole use of sport as an agent to influence change (Chalip, 2006; Coalter, 2007; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Schenkorf & Sugden, 2011). As such, we sought to answer the following research questions: to what extent does the intersection of sport and music inspire urban youth to participate in physical activity and education classes, and how does this intersection enhance the positive impact of the youth’s experience with the program?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Despite the plethora of recent field studies and conceptual articles within the modern field of SFD, there have been numerous calls for further impact assessment and increased empirical evidence (Coalter, 2007; Schenkorf & Sugden, 2011). In efforts to fill this fissure in the literature, scholars have been working towards a sport-for-development theory (SFDT), designed as a way for scholars to observe and understand the structures, processes, and components of SFD interventions that help address various social issues and challenges faced by sport organizations (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Welty Peachey, Lyras, Borland, & Cohen, 2013). According to Lyras and Welty Peachey (2011), the development of SFDT in the sport literature is the outcome of a process whereby “theories from other disciplines are utilized to build the practical and research implications of the five [SFDT] components to describe and explain the conditions under which sport researchers and practitioners can more effectively design and assess sport for social change initiatives” (p. 313). The five components include: (a) impacts assessment, (b) organizational, (c) sport and physical activity, (d) educational, and (e) cultural enrichment. Collectively, these components comprise the unique aspects of the organization, the environment in which sport participation takes place, and the quality of the experience for participants (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011).

In the current study, a sport intervention program endeavors to incorporate hip-hop culture in unique ways that enhance the physical activity of program participants. Research on the sociocultural and psychophysical effects of music depict a history of utilizing music as a means to trigger or regulate emotions, alter moods, reduce inhibitions, inspire rhythmic movement, and alleviate psychological disorders associated with physical activities (Karageorghis & Priest, 2012; North & Hargreaves, 2008). While researchers have established that demographic variables play a key role in response to music in sport and exercise (Mackay & Mensa, 2004), it is unclear whether music has varying effects on different race and socioeconomic groups to whom it is a defining cultural and social characteristic (see
Patton, 2009). This research provides an opportunity to uncover how at-risk urban youth respond and interact with hip-hop in sport and exercise.

Method

This research was a collaborative effort with HHL to conduct an impact assessment and monitor and evaluate the initiative based on the perspective of key stakeholders and participants. The protocol for interviews derived from literature on SFDT (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011) and social psychology of music (North & Hargreaves, 2008). Research took place on site in New York City, where the first and second authors spent three days to observing the HCZ facility and informally meeting HHL participants, staff, and board members to learn more about the mission and vision. Individual interviews were conducted in person in an attempt to build a strong rapport and comfortable relationship between the researchers and study participants. Interviews included staff, volunteers, workshop leaders, and participants (N=22). Researchers aimed to speak with individuals who had diverse roles with the HHL organization including leadership, administration, fitness workshop instructors, and general volunteers, all of who were involved in activities ranging from nutrition to kickboxing.

Current findings from the aforementioned literature guided the analysis of transcriptions and provided a priori thematic categories by which the data were initially coded. Considering additional themes were anticipated to emerge from the data through a more inductive process (Thomas, 2006), open coding was also utilized to analyze transcripts line-by-line (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

Data analysis illustrated three key findings. The most prominent theme involved the impact of intersecting music and sport on participants’ motives to engage in physical activity and fulfillment with the subsequent outcomes. In addition, our results show how cultural enrichment among participants was enhanced through the strategic use of hip-hop culture in sport programming. Each of these themes highlighted the sport and physical activity, educational, and cultural enrichment aspects of SFDT (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). Finally, our third key finding pertains to the unique appeal of HHL programming to key stakeholders and the ensuing impact their involvement with HHL had on both students and themselves as youth leaders within the community which highlighted the organizational component of SFDT (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011).

Our findings align with the work of Lyras and Welty Peachey (2011, p. 324) who suggest that SFD programs “should design their structure and programming around five theoretical building blocks—the impacts assessment, organizational, sport/physical activity, educational, and cultural enrichment components.” To this end, we recognize that the design and mission of the HHL initiative was crucial toward motivating urban youth within the Harlem community to participate in physical activity programming which, in turn, led towards positive outcomes.

This study signifies a valuable contribution to advancing theory in SFD literature along with serving as one of the first efforts to recognize the impact of music and sport within a social change setting. In addition, it functions as a valuable step toward providing new evidence of the positive outcomes innovative and well-designed SFD programs might achieve. From a practical standpoint, our findings highlight the value of joint programming using music and sport to serve at-risk populations. Taking into account the targeted population, as well the cultural and historical disparities of the community in need, practitioners should consider blending multiple enrichment opportunities under one program design.