Why CrossFit?: Participants' Basic Psychological Needs and Motives

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Physical inactivity is a prominent concern for people of all ages across North America. In 2011, just 20.6% of American adults over the age of 18 met the Physical Activity Guidelines for both aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2011). Of those participants who do attempt physical activity routines, there is often a lack of persistence (Dishman & Sallis, 1994; Wankel, 1985). Part of the role that fitness managers and sport researchers have in serving society is to explore the reasons which motivate or detract from participation in physical activity.

CrossFit can be described as a relatively new physical training method that is based on a variety of high-intensity weight training, gymnastics, body weight movements, and cardiovascular exercise (Glassman, 2011). CrossFit sessions, known as WOD's (workout-of-the-day) encompass all types of physical fitness: endurance, stamina, strength, speed, flexibility, power, coordination, agility, and balance (Sibley, 2012). CrossFit sessions take place in gyms known as “boxes” since the locations are typically old warehouses converted to useable gym space. Athletes, former athletes, sedentary and ordinary gym-goers participate in CrossFit, as the workouts can be tailored to individual fitness levels. CrossFit affiliates have grown from seven to 3500 between 2005 and 2012, and operate in 61 different countries with nearly 50 new affiliates added each week.

Two studies have examined the effects of CrossFit training on physical fitness (Pain, Uptgraft, & Wylie, 2010) while another study examined the application of CrossFit as a lesson plan for high school physical education (Jeffrey, 2012). To date, however, no study has examined the relationship between basic psychological need satisfaction as it relates to adult CrossFit participation. Given the lack of empirical research on the psychological impact of the unique CrossFit environment, the purpose of this study was to qualitatively analyze CrossFit participants’ reasons for pursuing the activity in relation to their basic needs satisfaction.

Under self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985), researchers have found that when the three basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) are satisfied, a person will be more internally motivated to pursue an endeavor (Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Girgolas, 2007; Patrick & Canevello, 2010). Research has also found that those who are more intrinsically motivated are more likely to persist at an activity. The theory also suggests that because these are basic needs, people will be intrinsically motivated to find situations and activities which satisfy these needs. Competence refers to how effective one feels in their environment, while autonomy refers to the choice surrounding the behavior as being derived by the self, and relatedness refers to a sense of belongingness with significant others (Deci & Ryan, 2006; Harter, 1981; Kipp & Amorose, 2008). Researchers can, therefore, pinpoint conditions and undertakings which are more likely to facilitate intrinsic motivation via basic need satisfaction (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). Getting qualitative feedback from participants can also help box owners to further emphasize the praised elements in order to further recruit and retain self-determined participants.

Current CrossFit participants (N = 146) in the United States were asked to provide the personal reason(s) for which they participate in CrossFit. Most participants reported attending three sessions (46.9%, n = 69) and five sessions (38.1%, n = 56) per week during the previous month, while exerting a perceived rate of exertion (RPE) of 15-17 (57.7%, n = 82) on a 20 point scale, where 20 is the highest rate of exertion. Open-ended survey responses were coded by two researchers using a thematic, theoretically-driven deductive analysis (Creswell, 2009). Following the methodology provided by Farrell, Crocker, McDonough, and Sedgwick (2004), the researchers divided participants’ answers into “meaning units” (i.e., single words, sentences, or paragraphs) based on the theme they were deemed to belong with and then sorted appropriately into one of three themes.

Relatedness was the predominant theme which emerged from these participants. The theme had 49 meaning units attached, and included statements like “the workouts are tough, but the sense of community and friendships I’ve
built have kept me coming back for me” or “I love the camaraderie that comes from CrossFit.” The Competence theme had 39 meaning units emerge which referred to things like being challenged, hitting “new records,” and “proving to myself that I can do these exercises.” These accounts align with Deci’s (1975) definition that competence is the perception that our behavior and interaction with our environment is effective. While autonomy did not emerge from the data, the final theme Well-Being was reflected with 24 meaning units and was expressed with statements referring to overall health, fitness, shape and well-being. One participant said for example, “my personal reason for CrossFit participation is to have the best health I can have. I want to live pass 100 and live well the whole time.”

Given the relationship between basic need satisfaction and motivational outcomes, most notably persistence, findings from this study offer box owners and researchers plenty of specific elements which are satisfying the basic needs of CrossFit participants. The emphasis on community and relationships between members and coaches should continue to be a priority for box owners. Additionally, members appreciate the opportunity to push themselves and achieve results which help them to display competence which in turn relates with the final well-being theme. Given the sustained participation from this sample, at relatively high energy expenditures, box owners and other sport and exercise managers should take note of the qualities expressed through this study to promote and sustain adult participation in a viable physical activity routine, and ultimately help reduce physical inactivity.