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Beyond the podium: Exploring the leisure reference of a special Olympic athlete with Down Syndrome

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Abstract

Leisure activities play a crucial role in the lives of individuals with disabilities, offering opportunities for social interaction, skill development, and self-expression. This study aims to explore the leisure reference of a Special Olympics athlete with Down Syndrome, filling a gap in research specific to this population. The study seeks to identify the leisure activities of the athlete, examine their impact on well-being, introduce new leisure activities, and understand the athlete's experiences in the new activity. Previous research has shown the benefits of sports and physical activity for individuals with Down Syndrome, enhancing physical fitness, coordination, and motor skills. However, limited research exists on leisure patterns beyond training and competitions in these athletes. Understanding their leisure experiences can inform the development of programs and policies to support their participation in sports. Three themes were formulated and finalized by the researchers to describe the current leisure activities and introduced leisure activity of the subject: (a) *Ignite the fire within!*; (b) *Breaking free: Overcoming obstacles, embracing leisure*; and (c) *Elevate your life: Unleash the power of leisure!*. The findings of this study will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of leisure among individuals with Down Syndrome, provide insights into their unique experiences and needs, and guide the development of inclusive programs and interventions.

Keywords: Leisure reference, Down Syndrome, special Olympic, athlete

Introduction

In a world where limitations are often imposed, the significance of leisure for individuals with disabilities plays a crucial role. Leisure is defined as a self-determined activity experience that falls into one's economically free-time roles (Blackshaw, 2010) ^[30]. Based on several studies, leisure provides opportunities for social interaction, skill development, and self-expression, thus, it has been found to be associated with a greater quality of life, and greater psychological well-being in adults with Down Syndrome (Mihaila et. al, 2017) ^[12]. Down Syndrome (DS) is the most common genetically mediated intellectual disability (Haseeb, 2022) ^[11], which results from the presence of extra Chromosome 21 (Mégarbané et al., 2009) ^[18].

A significant transformation in the field of sports has taken place in recent years, with an emphasis on diversity and inclusivity. The participation of athletes with disabilities is one of the areas where progress has been made—notable successes. These athletes have defied stereotypes that show what individuals with disabilities can do. They have become role models for those individuals facing similar problems. For athletes with Down Syndrome, sports and physical activity have been identified as being extremely beneficial as they enhance physical fitness, coordination, and motor skills (Alesi & Pepi, 2017) ^[2].

Furthermore, leisure activities beyond sports, such as creative pursuits like art, music, and dance, allow for self-expression, creativity, and emotional development, which offer numerous benefits for athletes with Down Syndrome. Despite these accomplishments, little is known about the leisure patterns beyond the training and competitions of these athletes. Understanding the leisure reference of Special Olympics athletes with Down Syndrome can provide insights into their unique experiences and needs, as well as inform the development of programs and policies that support their participation in sports.

Although enough studies have been published regarding the effect of leisure on people with intellectual disabilities, no research has focused on leisure specific to people with Down Syndrome at a competitive level, particularly in the context of an Olympic-level competition.

Research Aim

The study aims to provide an in-depth description in the leisure reference of a Special Olympics athlete with Down Syndrome. The researchers seek to fill a gap in existing research about the leisure activities of a person with Down Syndrome. Specifically, the researchers intend to:

1. Identify the leisure activities of an Olympic athlete with Down Syndrome.
2. Determine the impact of these leisure activities on the subject's well-being
3. Introduce new leisure activities to the subject.
4. Discover the experiences of the subject in the new leisure activity.

Definition of Terms

Leisure: Leisure is a period of time referred to as discretionary time. It is that period of time when an individual feels no sense of obligation or physiological necessity (Voss, 1967).

Special Olympics: Special Olympics is the world's largest sports organization for children and adults with intellectual disabilities that provides year-round training and activities.

Down Syndrome: Down Syndrome (DS) is the most common genomic disorder of intellectual disability and is caused by trisomy 21 for human chromosome 21 (Antonarakis, 2020) [3].

Rhythmic Gymnastics: Olympic rhythmic gymnastics is a female-only event that uses apparatus to showcase skill, flexibility, and musicality (International Olympic Committee).

Literature Review

This presents the relevant literature and studies that the researchers considered in filling out the gap in research about leisure specific to people with Down Syndrome at a competitive level. It also presents the synthesis of the art to fully understand the research for better comprehension of the study. Lastly, this literature review is to sufficiently position the study with the possibility of introducing a Special Olympics athlete with Down Syndrome to a new leisure activity such as rhythmic gymnastics.

Athlete with Down Syndrome

Down Syndrome affects a person's physical and intellectual development, but it does not define their abilities or limit their potential in the world of sports. Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the sports participation of athletes with Down Syndrome. One example was the published article by Ferrario and colleagues (2022) [9], which is about the analysis of energy parameters of patients with Down Syndrome (DS). With a chromosomal malformation known as Trisomy 21, individuals with Down Syndrome have differences in the size of specific areas of their brains which leads to problems of motor control and proprioceptive as well as a non-motor involvement. The study has concluded that with the help of sport participation, Down Syndrome patients

can improve their cardio-circulatory system and increase their musculature, which is fundamental for subjects who are overweight. Although children with Down Syndrome have a range of suitable and improper social behaviors, Myburg and colleagues (2022) [19] mentioned that they generally have more appropriate or positive social behaviors.

On the other hand, Rintala and colleagues (2016) have noted that Special Olympics athletes perform better than inactive individuals with intellectual disabilities, but the level of physical fitness of Special Olympics athletes is still low and alarming, thus warranting more research.

When it comes to facilitation in the the involve physical Physical activity, Alesi and Pepi (2017) [2] noted that the support derived from family, the availability of Adapted Physical Activity instructors and the challenging nature of sport activities play a crucial role in positive factors that increase the likelihood of participation of individuals with Down Syndrome. This was also noted in one of the journals of Barbu and colleagues (2021) [6], stating that out of a wide range of activities that can support the effective inclusion of people with disabilities in society, physical education and sports occupy a privileged place as it brings self-confidence, a sense of identity and belonging, physical and mental wellbeing.

Given a good and proper intervention, exposure to activities and sports at an early age, and consistency in guidance and training, an individual with Down Syndrome can and has proven to be capable of going beyond their physical and health means and be an athlete just like everyone else. Although sports does not seem to be able to modify the motor control of athletes with Down Syndrome, with all the studies done researchers can conclude that it is still fundamental. In fact, sport can improve the cardio-circulatory system as well as increase the musculature, which is fundamental for these individuals with Down Syndrome who are characterized by overweight, ligamentous laxity and a high risk of cardio-circulatory diseases as it is physically shown to our participant.

Leisure activities of individual with Down Syndrome

The emphasis of study among children with Down Syndrome has evolved from survival to broader factors affecting quality of life, such as friendships and leisure activity. One example of this was the study conducted by Oates and colleagues (2011) [21], which examined how Down Syndrome in school-aged children's engagement in friendships and leisure activities was influenced by disability, person, and environmental variables. It was concluded that leisure participation is affected by complex factors both internal and external to the child with Down Syndrome. Children with Down Syndrome's involvement in leisure activities was limited, generally resulting in lower performance than the performance of typically developing children of the same age. Thus, suggesting more research on how leisure activities might be modified to account for handicaps, person, and environmental characteristics.

On the other hand, the study of Mihaila and colleagues (2017) [12] focuses on different age group but shows similar results. It was revealed that middle-aged and older adults with Down Syndrome frequently participated in social and passive leisure activities, with low participation in physical and mentally stimulating leisure activities. This information can be used to help direct support services in efforts to increase underutilized domains of active leisure activity.

A much recent study from the same researchers also indicated the same results, concluding that the majority of adults with Down Syndrome did not meet established physical leisure activity intensity recommendations. Adults with Down Syndrome self-initiated and self-engaged in the majority of their leisure activity.

Family members and paid staff allocated resources towards initiating and engaging as social partners in social and physical leisure, respectively. Therefore, interventions and support services should partner with family members and paid staff to foster participation in adaptive leisure activity, perhaps through the establishment of leisure activity as part of daily routines (Mihaila *et al.*, 2020) [31].

Furthermore, the current study of Lifshit and colleagues (2021) [17] examined the intelligence trajectories of adolescents and adults with Down Syndrome. The study indicated that participation in highly cognitively stimulating leisure activities like playing checkers, using digital devices or academic courses contributed positively and significantly, mitigating the negative influences of chronological age and declining health status.

As leisure is considered essential in enhancing quality of life (Atara, 2017) [4], studying the leisure participation of individuals with disabilities such as Down Syndrome is equally important in studying the leisure participation of everyone else. This will serve as a bridge in building inclusivity with the community with diverse individuals.

Rhythmic gymnastics as leisure activity for person with Down Syndrome

During data gathering, the subject has mentioned that one of the leisure activities that she wanted to explore was Rhythmic Gymnastics. Additionally, studies have found a good connection between music and dance movement, therefore introducing rhythmic gymnastics can offer a good continuity as a performing activity of an individual with Down Syndrome.

Akyol and Pektas (2018) [1] evaluated the effects of gymnastics training combined with music on balance, loco-motor level and coordination in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Down Syndrome (DS). Gymnastics training is administered rhythmically and remarkably in children with ASD and DS. Results show that gymnastics training combined with music were found to be effective in improving balance score, loco-motor level, coordination, and flexibility in children with Down Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorder. The results of this study can be considered to provide important contributions to the understanding and treatment of children with autism and Down Syndrome.

Another important note from the study of Popescu and colleagues (2013) [24] noted that individuals with Down Syndrome, integrated in a scientific training program and motivated by the competition of the "Special Olympics" can acquire gymnastic skills, abilities and habits which rival normality. Thus, through systematic training, guided by professionals, they can gain admirable technical performances in motor control, coordination, balance, motor memory and orientation. The same results were found in the experimental research of Fotiadou and colleagues (2009), where it concluded that adults with intellectual disability can improve balance ability with the application of a well-designed rhythmic gymnastics program.

For individuals with Down Syndrome, The use of proper

musical accompaniment is said to have a positive effect on the motivation of children to motor material, its memorization, correction of impaired motor skills, and normalization of emotional state. One article has emphasized that rhythmic gymnastics is most suitable for musculoskeletal devices for children with Down Syndrome. Rhythmic gymnastics' leading characteristic is based on coordination exercises and combination with musical accompaniment that allows the individual to deepen the effect of corrective and developing effects (Yuryevna & Sergeevna, 2020) [29].

The studies presented demonstrated enough evidence that gymnastics activities combined with music effectively improved systematic-dynamic balance, loco-motor level and coordination parameters. The researchers observed that gymnastic movements made with music in Down Syndrome individuals were effective on static and dynamic balance, coordination and flexibility values. Adding music has had such a tremendous impact on the movement and made those individuals with Down Syndrome move their body in such a flowing rhythm.

Methodology

The study utilized a descriptive qualitative research method to give an in-depth description of the leisure experience of the subject. A qualitative research method is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions (Pathak, 2013) [22]. It generates non-numerical data and is primarily concerned with understanding human beings' experiences through a humanistic and interpretive approach (Jackson, 2007) [13]. Qualitative description enables a "straight descriptive summary of the informational contents of data organized in a way that best fits the data (Sandelowski, p. 338-339, 2000) [27]. It allows the researchers to describe leisure references of the subject and discover diverse viewpoints, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of leisure. Furthermore, this method is also the key in exploring the leisure activities, purpose and experience of the subject when introduced to a new activity, specifically rhythmic gymnastics.

Participants of the study

The participant in the study focused on an individual who has an intellectual disability. The researchers wanted to explore a 27-year-old female athlete with Down Syndrome. The subject was born without any major medical conditions and is an athlete leader and a dance coach in the Special Olympics Pilipinas. Additionally, the subject plays bocce, qualified for the National Games, and will represent the Philippines in the upcoming World Games 2023 Special Olympics in Berlin, Germany.

Research Instrument

The researchers of this study utilized two sets of semi-structured interviews to let the subject elaborate on her leisure activities and experience. The semi-structured interview consists of a sequence of adapted questions that provide options to the subject to help formulate her thoughts. The interviews were recorded with consent from the participant and her guardian. The first set of interview questions focuses on identifying the leisure activities, reasons for participation and the impact of the activities on the subject's well-being. The second set of questions aims to discover the subject's experience with the new leisure activity introduced by the researchers.

Data Gathering

The data-gathering procedure started with an invitation letter that was sent to the participant. Upon accepting the invitation, a consent form was delivered to the subject, to the subject's parents and to the program director of Special Olympics Pilipinas. Upon confirming, a face-to-face interview was scheduled based on the availability and convenience of the subject. An orientation about the study's nature, objectives, and purpose was conducted before the interview proper. The interview was conducted on April 30, 2022 Decathlon, Tiendesitas. The rules and procedures by Braun and Clarke (2006) [32] were the basis for the data analysis. The recorded interviews of the participants were transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were analyzed using thematic analysis in order to identify patterns and meanings encapsulating the qualitative data.

The first was familiarizing the data. In this step, it was critical to read and re-read, become fully immersed in, and be acquainted with the data. The second was data coding, where sections of the text were highlighted, usually phrases or sentences, and shorthand labels or codes were created to describe the data. The third was looking for patterns or themes in the codes. The patterns or themes in the codes were searched across different interviews. Data were investigated, identified and researchers started coming up with ideas by using several codes to form initial themes. Fourth phase was

reviewing the themes. Researchers go through a deeper review of the initial themes, deciding whether it needed to combine, separate, refine or discard the themes formulated. The fifth was defining and naming final themes. The themes were defined and named to clarify each concept and figure out how it helped in understanding the data. The sixth is to produce the report. The researcher wrote the data analysis with excerpts from the transcripts.

Intervention

From the list of activities that the participant wanted to try, the researchers chose Rhythmic Gymnastics as the activity to be introduced. Rhythmic Gymnastics involves combination of coordination exercises with musical accompaniment that allows the individual to deepen the effect of corrective and developing effects (Yuryevna & Sergeevna, 2020) [29]. The routine was composed of basic elements of Rhythmic Gymnastics with a combination of music, dance and apparatus manipulation, which is ribbon. Teaching adaptation strategy used by the researchers was based on the book written by Naude, 2008 [20]. Teaching strategies involves presenting instructions in short blocks to avoid input overload, simplifying movements, modifying the size of the ribbon apparatus, giving autonomy in choosing music and adding short breaks in between the session.

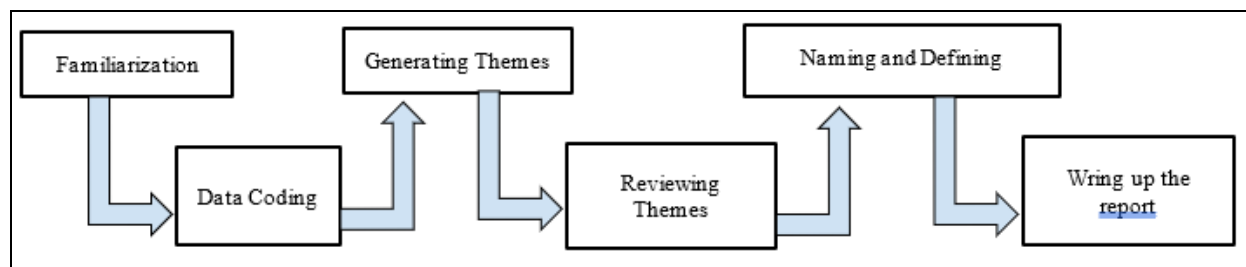


Fig 1: Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006) [32] process flow

Results and Discussion

This part explains the leisure activities and references of a Special Olympic Athlete with Down Syndrome. Three themes were formulated and finalized by the researchers to describe the current leisure activities and introduced leisure activity of the subject: (a) *Ignite the fire within!*; (b) *Breaking free: Overcoming obstacles, embracing leisure*; and (c) *Elevate your life: Unleash the power of leisure!*.

Leisure Activities

The subject shared in the interview that she has free time every day and usually inside the house when doing her free time activities. In no particular order, the subject stated (6) six activities, which are: (1) *dancing*; (2) *watching movies*; (3) *chatting with friends*; (4) *sleeping*; (5) *art and crafts*; and (6) *exercising*. Based on the leisure domains established by Mihaila and colleagues (2020) [31], activities such as dancing and exercising can be identified as "physical leisure," which involves activities with physical energy expenditure. Meanwhile, watching movies and sleeping can be identified as "passive leisure" which involves little cognitive engagement and are associated with poorer psychological well-being in studies on the general population (e.g., Kikuchi *et al.*, 2014; Trainor *et al.*, 2010) [16, 28]. On the other hand, chatting with friends is her only activity that can be identified as "social leisure" and this involves interaction with others. Lastly, arts and crafts is her only activity that can be identified

as Cognitive Stimulating Leisure as this activity requires cognitive engagement such as directing and sustaining attention. The subject was also asked to estimate how much time she engaged in these leisure activities. Accordingly, she spends (4-6) four to six hours per week in physical leisure activities, which therefore concluded that the subject was able to meet intensity recommendations for physical leisure.

Theme 1: Ignite the fire within!

As leisure is a period of time referred to as discretionary time, the participant was able to decide which activities she wanted to participate in. With this, during the interview, the subject elaborated the purpose/reasons for participation in her current free time activities, formulating 4 sub-themes.

The participant shared that one of the reasons why she engages in the said free time activities was because it is related to her passion/interest and has desires of becoming famous one day. This conclusion was supported by the subject stating: "*The reasons...Uhhh, earlier dancing is my passion...and want to be famous.*" This sub-theme was coded as "desires".

Other reasons stated in the interview were associated with perceiving positive perception. The subject mentioned that the activities made her feel positive emotions such as happiness and feeling good.

This conclusion was supported by the subject stating: "*It because makes me happy...I feel good*"

The subject explains that she also likes talking and communicating with her peers and is willing to expand connections, thus she engages in those free time activities. This conclusion was supported with the following statements: *"I like chatting with friends because I'll be in touch with other people...Yeah. I meet new people. It feels...makes me feel happy to see new people."* This sub-theme was coded as "social connection".

Lastly, the researchers concluded another reason for participation, participant wanted to enhance creativity which eventually led to skill development. The last sub-theme is named as "skill development" as the subject stated the reasons for participation in arts and crafts: *"...because like to be creative."*

On the other hand, when the subject was asked what new leisure activity she wanted to try, she answered the researchers, Rhythmic Gymnastics. The participant elaborated her reasons and purpose for choosing that specific activity, formulating 3 sub-themes.

For the first sub-theme which is "desire", the subject stated: *"because I want perform in front of people."* This shows that she has confidence and interest to showcase her talent in the future.

For the second sub-theme which is "positive perception", the subject stated the following: *"The Gymnastics is like art, or something like that... It's like a... it's like dancing, expressing and a lot more."*

The researchers interpret her statement by apprehending that the subject likes performing arts and considers Rhythmic Gymnastics as a form of art.

Lastly, for the third sub-theme which was named "skill development" the subject stated the following: *"Favorite part is the music and the ribbon apparatus"*. The combination of music, dance and apparatus manipulation gets the interest of the subject. *"Like Rhythmic Gymnastics because want to explore more"* The subject is willing to experience new activities to develop skills. *"Like to try Rhythmic Gymnastics in free time"* - The subject wanted to try/add Rhythmic Gymnastics in her leisure activities.

Theme 2: Breaking free: Overcoming obstacles, embracing leisure

The second theme for the current leisure activity is (b) *breaking free: Overcoming obstacles, embracing leisure* is broken down into two sub-themes: Doubts and Responsibilities. The participants mentioned that she believes that her skills are not enough for her to do more and new activities. She also mentioned that doing her chores at home is considered a feel-good responsibility as she is doing this for her taking part in her family. As the researchers introduced a new activity which is the Rhythmic Gymnastics that's new to her, the participant did not hesitate to do but during the interview answered that she is lacking skills as this is her first time knowing about this activity and doing a new activity will be something that a lot of learning should be done on her part. All of us can feel de-skilled when trying a new activity, as a first timer our participant felt the same way when we introduced a new leisure activity and added this to her routine. But her determination of performing in front of people made her overcome this challenge as she really loves to have a good audience appreciating the things that she does. When we taught her this activity she deliberately followed and she fell in love the first time that she did this with us. She had a strong foundation of dancing so moving forward to Rhythmic Gymnastics with the same concept of choreography,

movement with music, and following instructional steps made her feel at ease as familiarization kicked in concept-learning based on her current activity and her love of dancing.

Making her do more did not change her usual and current schedule of routines, she can still rest after finishing her chores. Relaxation is a good indicator that our participant still takes her time to make her body recharge according to what is needed and recuperate so she can do more.

Theme 3: Elevate your life: Unleash the power of leisure!

The results of the interview highlight the positive impact of participating in leisure activities on participant's well-being and personal development. Engaging in a variety of activities, such as dancing, exercising, and chatting with friends, brings her happiness and excitement. These activities provide her with opportunities for self-expression, social interaction, and relaxation.

She receives support from her family, which plays a crucial role in fostering her interest and motivation. Their encouragement and motivational advice contribute to her overall positive experiences. However, she also faces challenges, particularly in terms of limited skills and support. Addressing these challenges may enhance her ability to fully engage in her desired activities.

The interview reveals her desire to explore new activities, such as arts, which demonstrates her openness to learning and personal growth. This desire for exploration aligns with her engagement in rhythmic gymnastics, where she experiences a range of positive emotions, including happiness, relaxation, luck, energy, and a sense of freedom. Rhythmic gymnastics provides her with an avenue to express her creativity, improve her physical health, and achieve her goal of performing in front of others.

Furthermore, her positive experiences and confidence boost from participating in rhythmic gymnastics indicate the potential benefits of leisure activities in building self-esteem and personal fulfillment. It is evident that engaging in leisure activities contributes to her overall well-being, allowing her to experience positive emotions, explore her interests, and develop new skills.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended to consider the following actions.

Promote the importance of leisure for individuals with Down Syndrome

The study highlights the significance of leisure activities for individuals with Down Syndrome in enhancing their quality of life and psychological well-being. It is important to raise awareness about the benefits of leisure and promote its inclusion in the lives of individuals with Down Syndrome.

Support the participation of athletes with Down Syndrome in sports and physical activities

Sports and physical activities have been found to have numerous benefits for athletes with Down Syndrome, including improved physical fitness, coordination, and motor skills. It is crucial to provide support and resources to encourage their participation in sports and physical activities, both within and outside of the Special Olympics context.

Explore diverse leisure activities beyond sports

While sports have shown to be beneficial, it is important to recognize that individuals with Down Syndrome may have

varied interests and preferences for leisure activities. The study suggests introducing new leisure activities, such as rhythmic gymnastics, which can offer opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and emotional development. It is recommended to explore a range of leisure activities to cater to individual preferences and provide a holistic leisure experience.

Collaborate with families and support staff

The study emphasizes the role of family members and support staff in facilitating the participation of individuals with Down Syndrome in leisure activities. It is essential to involve and collaborate with families and support staff to provide the necessary resources, guidance, and encouragement for individuals with Down Syndrome to engage in leisure activities. This collaboration can contribute to the development of inclusive leisure programs and enhance the overall well-being of individuals with Down Syndrome.

Develop tailored programs and policies

The study highlights the need for tailored programs and policies that support the participation of individuals with Down Syndrome in leisure activities. It is recommended to develop programs that consider the specific needs and interests of individuals with Down Syndrome, providing them with opportunities to engage in meaningful and enjoyable leisure experiences. These programs should also address any barriers or challenges that individuals with Down Syndrome may face in accessing leisure activities.

Promote inclusivity and community engagement

Leisure activities can serve as a bridge for building inclusivity and promoting community engagement for individuals with Down Syndrome. It is important to create inclusive environments that welcome and embrace individuals with disabilities, including Down Syndrome, in leisure activities. This can be achieved through awareness campaigns, education, and community initiatives that promote understanding, acceptance, and active participation of individuals with Down Syndrome in leisure activities.

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