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Holly Thorpe and Nida Ahmad

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Holly Thorpe

University of Waikato, New Zealand

Nida Ahmad

Georgetown University, USA

Abstract

In this paper we build upon recent scholarship on the globalization of youth culture and sport to examine the growing popularity of action sports in the Middle East. We focus on the development of the urban physical practice of parkour (also known as free running)—the act of running, jumping, leaping through an urban environment as fluidly, efficiently and creatively as possible—among Middle Eastern youth. Drawing upon interviews and media analysis of various print, digital and social media, we reveal how youth (particularly young men) in Gaza developed their own unique parkour group, despite various social, cultural, economic, physical and psychological obstacles. We explain the proactive approaches adopted by these young men to find appropriate training spaces, to develop the skills of local children and youth, and to support their peer groups. In particular, we describe how these young men are creatively engaging social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) to gain inspiration from the transnational parkour community, and also for opening new dialogue and establishing informal cultural exchanges with parkour enthusiasts around the world. We conclude by offering some broader comments for the Sport for Development and Peace Building (SDP) movement, encouraging youth-focused SDP initiatives to move beyond the ‘deficit model’ and toward more collaborative projects that provide space for local voices and acknowledge youth agency.

Keywords

Youth, middle east, gaza, action sports, parkour

Corresponding author:

Holly Thorpe, Department of Sport and Leisure Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand.

Email: hthorpe@waikato.ac.nz

When I was young, I could not imagine that anything would dominate our consciousness more than our isolation or the occupation. All of Gaza was a series of obstacles—closures and checkpoints. Today, all and any obstacles are my point of departure. With free running, I overcome. (Al-Jakhbeer, co-founder of Parkour Gaza, cited in Shahin, 2012: 9)

Many young people in Gaza are angry because they have very few opportunities and are locked in. An art and sports form such as free running gives them an important method to express their desire for freedom and allows them to overcome the barriers that society and politics have imposed on them. It literally sets them free (Gazan psychologist, Eyad Al Sarraj, MD, cited in Shahin, 2012:17).

Global media cultures and patterns of consumption are changing contemporary youth cultural formations. According to youth cultural scholars Nayak and Kehily (2008), everyday cultural flows and mobilities of objects, images and information are ‘transforming young people’s identities in complex ways as they come to interact with and reconfigure processes of globalization’ (p.32). Attempting to understand and explain these changes, researchers are increasingly offering insightful theoretical and discursive analyses of the transnational flows of youth cultural discourses, products and images across and within local, national and virtual spaces (e.g., Barker et al., 2009; Henseler 2012; Horak, 2003; Huq, 2003; Nayak, 2003; Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Pilkington and Johnson, 2003). This paper contributes to this emerging body of literature by examining the transnational flows and networks in contemporary youth-dominated action sports cultures, focusing particularly on the growing popularity of parkour among youth living in the Middle East. In so doing, we illustrate how youth in local contexts are adapting and redefining action sports to ‘suit their particular needs, beliefs and customs’ (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004: 546; Robertson, 1992, 1995; Robertson and White, 2003). More importantly, we reveal how youth in Gaza are using action sport and new social media to call for political change and solidarity for their cause.

The (re)appropriation of the predominantly western phenomenon of action sports by local groups in the eastern world raises interesting questions about the complex and multi-faceted nature of global flows of sport and physical culture in the 21st century. In this paper we build upon recent scholarship on the globalization of youth culture and sport (i.e., Giulianotti, 2004; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004; Henseler, 2012; Thorpe, 2011a; Wheaton, 2004a) to shed light on the development of action sports in the Middle East, and in so doing, we reveal the agency of youth to negotiate space for themselves within complex networks of power in global, local and virtual geographies. We begin by contextualizing the growing popularity of action sports among groups of Middle Eastern youth within the broader social, cultural, political and economic context. In the remainder of the paper we focus on the development of the urban physical practice of parkour (also known as free running)—the act of running, jumping, leaping through an urban environment as fluidly, efficiently and creatively as possible—among youth living in the Middle East. Drawing upon interviews and media analysis of various print, digital and social media, we reveal how youth (particularly young men) in Gaza developed their own unique parkour group, despite various social, cultural, economic, physical and psychological obstacles. We explain the proactive approaches adopted by these young men to find appropriate training spaces, to develop the skills of local children and youth, and

to support their peer groups. In particular, we describe how these young men are creatively engaging social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) to gain inspiration from the transnational parkour community, and also for opening new dialogue and establishing informal cultural exchanges with parkour enthusiasts around the world.

Ultimately, this paper challenges assumptions (particularly by western audiences) that youth in this part of the world are victims, ideologues or fundamentalists (Barber, 2001; Bayat, 2010; Gregory, 2004; McEvoy-Levy, 2001; Spaaij, 2011). Through our analysis of young parkour participants' practices of resilience and resistance, we contribute to resisting the 'orientalist' tendencies among westerners to presume knowledge of youth in Gaza (and the Middle East) in ways that fit with, or confirm, western goals, narratives and ideologies, but often overlook the actual experiences and voices of everyday people. We conclude by offering some broader comments for the Sport for Development and Peace Building (SDP) movement that we hope will be valuable for embassies, governmental agencies, researchers and activists seeking to utilize sport and physical activity to improve the lives of children and youth around the world. Based on our analysis of the grassroots sporting activities of youth in Gaza, we argue that youth-focused SDP initiatives should be wary of the 'deficit model' to understanding poor youth, and instead pursue collaborative projects that provide space for local voices and acknowledge youth agency (Nichols et al., 2011; Spaaij, 2011).

Action sports in a global world: local and virtual engagement

The term 'action sports' broadly refers to a wide range of mostly individualized activities, such as BMX, kite-surfing, skateboarding, surfing and snowboarding, that differed—at least in their early phases of development—from traditional rule-bound, competitive, regulated western 'achievement' sport cultures (Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Kusz, 2007; Wheaton, 2004b, 2010). Various categorizations have been used to describe these activities, including extreme, lifestyle and alternative sports. In this paper, however, we use the term action sports, as it is the preferred term used by committed participants (many of whom resent the label 'extreme sports', which they feel was imposed upon them by transnational corporations and media conglomerates during the mid and late 1990s) (see Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011). Many action sports gained popularity in North America and some parts of Europe during the new leisure trends of the 1960s and 1970s, and increasingly attracted alternative youth who appropriated these activities and infused them with a set of hedonistic and carefree philosophies and subcultural styles (Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011; Wheaton, 2010). While each action sport has its own unique history, identity and development patterns (Wheaton, 2004b), early participants *allegedly* sought risks and thrills, touted anti-establishment and do-it-yourself philosophies, and subscribed to an 'outsider identity relative to the organized sports establishment' (Kusz, 2007: 359).

Developing during a 'historically unique conjuncture' of transnational mass communications and corporate sponsors, and entertainment industries, and amongst a growing affluent and young population, many action sport cultures have 'diffused around the world at a phenomenal rate' (Booth and Thorpe, 2007: 187). Over the past five decades,

action sports have become a highly visible feature of popular culture (Rinehart, 2000; Thorpe, 2011b; Wheaton, 2010). Action sports athletes appear on the covers of *Rolling Stone*, *Sports Illustrated* and *FHM*, and feature in advertisements for corporate sponsors such as Nike, Mountain Dew and American Express. Recent estimates suggest there are more than 22 million Americans currently participating annually in the four most popular action sports—skateboarding, snowboarding, BMX riding and surfing—with many participating on a regular basis and engaging in an array of other action sports (Active Marketing Group, 2007). Reliable international statistics are rare, yet similar trends have been observed in many western, and some eastern (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea), countries (see Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Thorpe, 2008; Wheaton, 2004a, 2004b, 2010). While transnational action sport corporations (e.g., Burton, Quiksilver), events (e.g., the X Games) and media are integral in the globalization of action sports, often ‘favour[ing] the transmission of a set of standardized cultural products using standardized western technologies to [almost] every corner of the globe’, the ‘consequences of this global cultural revolution are neither [sic] uniform nor [sic] easy to predict’ (Hall, 1997: 211).¹ Youth are not passive in the processes of globalization (or Americanization); some resist flows of cultural products from western contexts, while others re-appropriate them for their own purposes. As in most contemporary forms of popular culture, the processes of globalization in action sport cultures are ‘more complex than a simple drive towards a homogenization that reflects only the interests and ideals of an all-conquering Western (or American) culture’ (Osgerby, 2004: 157). Drawing upon the work of globalization scholars such as Arjun Appadurai (1996), Manuel Castells (2000), Roland Robertson (1992, 1995), Manfred Steger (2008), John Urry (2003), and Wilson and Dissanayake (1996), we understand the processes of globalization in contemporary action sports cultures as an ‘aggregation of flows composed of media, technologies, ideologies and ethnicities that move in many different directions’ (Osgerby, 2004: 127). It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the complex and multi-faceted nature of each of the trans-local flows operating within global action sports cultures. Rather, our focus is on the processes of ‘glocalization’, that is how youth in local contexts adapt and redefine the global product of action sports to ‘suit their particular needs, beliefs and customs’ (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004: 546; Robertson, 1992, 1995; Robertson and White, 2003).

Over the past two decades, social media has had a huge impact on contemporary society, and particularly younger generations (Burgess, 2012; Light et al., 2012; Miegel and Olsson, 2012). Recent estimates suggest there were more than three billion internet users in the world in March 2012—45 percent of whom were under the age of 25 years old; Facebook boasted more than 800 million users; Twitter hosted 225 million accounts; and there had been more than one trillion video playbacks on YouTube by this date (Bennett, 2012). Despite ongoing inequalities in access, the internet and new social media have become an integral part of the personal and professional lives of many youth around the globe. According to youth cultural scholar Osgerby (2004), ‘offering instant communication across the world, new media technologies may have accelerated the dissolution of barriers of time and space, redefining notions of the global and local and offering possibilities for the development of new communities based on affinities of interest, politics or any form of cultural identity’ (p.193). The internet and new media and communication

technologies are certainly playing an integral role in the global expansion of action sports, sharing information across borders and facilitating trans-local communication within and across action sport communities. According to *Transworld Business* (2007) magazine, action sport participants spend an average of at least 10 hours per week online. The European snowboarding magazine, *Onboard*, also surveyed its readers (a total monthly audience of over 170,000) to find that 96 percent have access to the internet, 93 percent use the internet to catch up with snowboarding news and snow conditions, and 80 percent buy clothes and snowboard equipment online (OnBoard Media Pack, 2012). As well as passively consuming online videos and event coverage, action sport participants are also actively employing an array of new user-generated social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, to share information and images, organize events, and discuss and debate issues ranging from the quality of the waves at a local beach to the effects of global warming on the snow sport industry. With many (although certainly not all) action sport participants coming from privileged backgrounds, iPhones and other smartphones are also common accessories. Such technologies have allowed participants to communicate with their peers, organizing times to gather for a skate, surf or climbing session, and access relevant information about conditions, products and events while on the move.

While action sport participants have always been keen producers of niche media (see Gilchrist and Wheaton, in press; Wheaton and Beal, 2003; Thorpe, 2011b), new digital technologies (i.e., the GoPro 'Hero' camera), editing programs and networks (i.e., YouTube) have made the recording and dissemination of homemade videos, photos and stories accessible to anyone that can afford the equipment. Recording, editing and publishing one's peers 'in action' is no longer an activity enjoyed solely by the most proficient and/or wealthy action sport participants, but is part of the everyday experiences of many groups of committed action sport enthusiasts. As a result of new highly interactive media and user-generated platforms, the lines between commercial and non-commercial media, and producers and consumers, have become increasingly blurred. Of course, access to computers and mobile communication or recording devices (e.g., cell phones, iPads, GoPro) is not available to all. Recent research, however, reveals that internet and social media consumers are increasingly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and while they might not own iPhones or the latest technologies, less privileged youth are using whatever technologies are available to them for entertainment, communication and access to information (Duggan and Brenner, 2013; Kreutzer, 2009; Rideout, 2011). For example, observing new media trends among children and youth in low-income areas in Cape Town, South Africa, Kreutzer (2009) recognized cheap mobile phones as introducing 'a range of new possibilities for the use and production of media, as well as for personal networking and communication, political activism, and economic development'.

Various critics and theorists have sought to understand 'not only new forms of media delivery, but also new convergences between media technologies and the new ways in which people use, and interact with, media texts' (Osgerby, 2004: 193). The emerging field of cyber-cultural studies is making a valuable contribution to understanding and explaining such complexities. Cyber-cultural studies extends the work of cultural criticism and cultural studies by locating cyber-cultures within the context of global flows of people and finance, recognizing that cyber-cultures are 'both the driving force behind

and the consequence of globalization where information technology enables the swift, constant and unlimited movement of data' (Nayar, 2010: 2). Cyber-cultural studies also recognize that 'all media is crossover media, adapting, borrowing from, or echoing another format' (p.2). As well as recognizing the complexities of contemporary media convergence, there is also an acknowledgement that media products are always a process rather than an object, that is 'a series of actions, negotiations, and interactions in dynamic relations' (p.3). Importantly, such processes cannot be separated from everyday life and our everyday interactions and embodied lived experiences in the material world. Cyber-cultures are 'at various points, and in different ways, attached to and connected with real-life material conditions' which they can replicate, extend, augment and, in some cases, challenge (p.2). Despite some claims of the liberatory aspects of cyber-culture, these spaces are not always democratic. Racial and class inequalities exist in terms of access to and use of digital resources, and, just as with any culture, cyber-cultures are 'prone to power struggles, inequalities, subversion and appropriation' (p.3). Indeed, action sport corporations, athletes and participants certainly regulate and police their own and others media products. In this paper, we draw inspiration from cyber-cultural studies to examine how action sport participants are using social and digital media to 'establish, cultivate and maintain their social relationships' (Osgerby, 2004: 208) within local communities and across the global action sport culture. More specifically, we examine how young male parkour practitioners in the Middle East are utilizing the internet and new technologies to facilitate trans-local interactions with youth around the world for social, educational and political purposes. As this case illustrates, while access to the internet and digital technologies is far from universal, individuals and groups in some of the remotest and least privileged spaces do have access, and in so doing are contributing to shifts in their own and others understandings of space and place.

Grassroots action sports in new contexts: the case of parkour

For many years, action sports were thought to be the exclusive domain of privileged, white, narcissistic western youth. However, due to the rapid expansion of the internet and the global reach of transnational action sport companies, media and events, combined with the increasingly exotic travel patterns of action sport athletes and enthusiasts (see Thorpe, 2011a), children and youth throughout the eastern world are also exposed to action sports. While some reject them as 'crazy American sports', others adopt and re-appropriate these activities in relation to their local physical and social environments. In the Muslim world, for example, surfing is gaining popularity in Iran and Bangladesh; Pakistani youth are taking up skateboarding in growing numbers; and sand boarding is a popular activity among privileged youth (and expats) in Saudi Arabia.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the multiple and varied ways children and youth are engaging in action sports across the Middle East. Here we focus on the practice of parkour that is arguably one of the most accessible action sports. In contrast to skateboarding, surfing or sand boarding, which require (often expensive) equipment (e.g., skate-, surf-, sand-boards) and access to specific types of environments (e.g., smooth concrete, waves, sand dunes), parkour requires little more than a

pair of shoes fit for moving efficiently within the urban environment, and when training in the sand dunes—as is common in many Arab countries—the activity can be performed barefoot. Simply defined, parkour (also known as ‘the art of displacement’ or free running) is the practice of moving fluidly and efficiently across an urban environment, and often involves spectacular maneuvers (inspired by gymnastics, break-dancing, climbing and/or skateboarding) on obstacles found in city spaces. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, free running refers to a slightly different version of the activity that encourages greater individual expression and creative interpretation of the urban environment. Both parkour and free running have roots in military obstacle course training and martial arts; they are non-competitive and encourage a unique philosophy towards the self and bodily movement in space. Parkour participants, or ‘traceurs’, train both their bodies and minds to creatively and safely navigate their way through the urban environment. Well-trained traceurs run, jump, roll and leap over, across and from roof-tops, staircases, raised surfaces and walls, efficiently and with a fluid style. Despite a long tradition, parkour as we know the activity today was developed in France during the 1980s and 1990s by a group of young men, including Raymond Bell, David Belle and Sebastien Foucan. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, parkour rapidly gained popularity among urban youth around the western world, in part due to the highly evocative media coverage of Bell, Belle, Foucan and others, performing spectacular feats in films, advertisements and documentaries.

Scholars in an array of disciplines (e.g., cultural geography, architecture, urban studies, sport sociology) have examined the rapid growth and popularity of parkour in urban metropolises such as London, Toronto and Chicago. In so doing, they have described the unique spatial politics practiced by parkour enthusiasts (Atkinson, 2009), the highly affective experiences of participants (Saville, 2008), and the value of parkour for ‘encouraging youth engagement, physical health and well-being’ (Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011: 109). As well as recognizing traceurs’ intimate engagement with their immediate physical and social environments, some scholars have also examined the ‘dialectical connection’ between parkour practices and the internet (Kidder, 2012: 2). Indeed, the internet and new social media have played an important role in the global dissemination of parkour, and the production of a transnational imaginary in which participants in local contexts feel part of a broader movement. Based on his study of traceurs in Chicago, Kidder (2012) illustrates how ‘globalized ideas and images available through the internet and other media can be put into practice within specific locals’ (p.1). Describing practitioners of parkour as simultaneously ‘engag[ing] their immediate, physical world’ and ‘draw[ing] upon an imagination enabled by their on-screen lives’ (p.2), he argues that urban researchers need to ‘consider the ways that virtual worlds can change and enhance how individuals understand and utilize the material spaces of the city’ (p.1). Similarly, Gilchrist and Wheaton (in press) draw upon original research into the emergence and institutionalization of parkour in the UK to analyze the ‘impact of networked communications in parkour’. They describe digital media as ‘an important means of communication, connecting participants trans-locally, and for some transnationally’, allowing participants to learn about the activity and its culture, ‘as a creative form of performance and self-expression, and a route to possible entrepreneurial activity’ (Gilchrist and Wheaton, in press). In this

paper we build upon the work of Kidder (2012) and Gilchrist and Wheaton (in press) to examine the use of electronic media by youth in Middle East countries for sporting inspiration and connecting with fellow enthusiasts around the world. As we illustrate via the case of parkour in Gaza, practicing this urban sport in the local community and communicating with other enthusiasts via the transnational parkour network offers both physical and virtual (temporary) forms of escapism, political activism and inspiration for alternative ways of living.

In the remainder of this paper we explore the grassroots development of parkour in the Middle East at a unique historical conjuncture in which youth have (to varying degrees) gained greater access to global information and opportunities to virtually communicate beyond their local environments, yet continue to live with the everyday realities (or threats) of war, poverty and political upheaval. To understand the development of parkour in the Middle East, we conducted interviews with key members of parkour groups in Kuwait, Egypt and Gaza. Due to our physical distance, we offered to conduct interviews via phone, email, Skype or any other electronic medium that suited the participants. Many participants preferred to use the private message board in Facebook to answer questions.² Not only is Facebook a familiar space for these young men (many of whom use it on a daily basis to organize training sessions and communicate with fellow parkour practitioners in their local community and abroad), but it is also perceived to be a 'safer' space than personal email accounts that may be at risk of state surveillance. These digital communications were held asynchronously, allowing for time differences, busy lives, and in the case of the participants, unstable internet connections.

After explaining the details of the project and establishing the preferred mode of communication, the first author then posed a series of questions and encouraged the participants to add to or extend these questions at their leisure.³ While most participants willingly accepted our invitations to share their thoughts and reflections, language difficulties lead to some misinterpretations of questions and answers. It quickly became apparent that participants were using Google Translator to convert the interview questions into Arabic, and then typing their responses in Arabic before translating back into English. Due to such translation difficulties, further clarification was often sought with follow-up questions. It is also important to note that while many of the quotes from interviews included in this paper have been edited for clarity by the authors, we try not to lose the essence of the participants' voices. To facilitate our interpretations, we adopted the method of triangulation; we engaged our electronic interviews in dialogue with media analysis of various print (e.g., magazine articles), digital (e.g., YouTube clips, parkour websites) and social media (e.g., Twitter postings by group leaders, Facebook) to identify themes across the data. In so doing, we reveal how youth are engaging social media for inspiration, and also for sharing their experiences with parkour enthusiasts around the world. Despite many similarities in the development of parkour across Middle Eastern countries, there are also unique differences based on the particular socio-cultural and political contexts. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer in-depth insights into parkour in the various contexts; thus in the final part of this paper we focus on parkour in the Gaza Strip.

Youth, parkour and political agency in the Middle East

The Middle East has been a site of much discussion and debate over the past three decades. Despite massive oil reserves, Arab countries are faced with 'declining productivity... decreasing school enrolment, and high illiteracy, and with health conditions lagging behind comparable nations' such that they seem 'richer than they are developed' (Bayat, 2010: 1). The delays in social development in the region cannot be separated from poor political governance. Providing a valuable overview of recent events in the region, Bayat (2010) describes 'authoritarian regimes ranging from Iran, Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco to the sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf, and chiefly Saudi Arabia (incidentally, most with close ties to the West)' continuing to 'frustrate demands for democracy and the rule of law, prompting (religious) opposition movements that espouse equally undemocratic, exclusive, and often violent measures' (p.1).

Following long histories of war, conflict and political unrest, the Arab Springs uprising in 2010 has seen radical political and social changes in the Middle East (i.e., Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Bahrain), which have seriously impacted their internal, regional and international relations. The Arab Springs started in Tunisia with its citizens protesting against the oppression of their government; it was a call for more civil rights. Assisted with the use of new media and communication technologies, the act of protesting spread across the region and affected many countries in its path. The use of cell phones and social media such as email, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were vital vehicles in both 'sustaining reform movement within countries and spreading the wave of demonstrations across the region' (Mohammad, 2011: 159). In many cases, civil protests in these countries led to the dissolution of governments. Consequently, organizations of democratic elections have been held in addition to inaugural drafting of constitutions as well as a general shift of power. With the Middle East purportedly 'falling into disarray', it is not surprising that the western world has become highly concerned about the 'international destabilizing ramifications of this seeming social and political stagnation' (Bayat, 2010: 1).

In the last three decades, there have been major societal changes in many of the Arab states, in which sporting values, policies and politics have transformed within the Arab world. According to Amara (2012), many of those in power understood well the 'multiple uses of sport as an element of political, social and cultural recognition' and thus the 'western dominant model of sport' was 'accepted by the newly independent countries with little criticism or adaptation to local particularism' (p.7). Many Middle Eastern countries are increasingly embracing the 'strategy of development through sport in the bidding for, and staging [of], mega-sport events' as a 'scheme for urban regeneration, for strengthening internal and external political legitimacy and for integrating the commercial values of sport' (Amara, 2012: 14). Through relationships with FIFA and the IOC, sport in the Arab world 'came to be regarded in general as an effective arena for future international treaties and conventions between North and South, East and West' (p.7). However, as Amara (2012) is careful to point out, 'the adoption of democratic or popular practices' in the Arabic world 'are always fragmentary and deceiving' (p.17). Indeed, despite recognition among the Arabic elite of the potential of sport, some cultural and religious differences between the West and the Arab world continue to pose

difficulties, particularly regarding women's participation in sport, and youths' participation in unorganized, non-competitive sports that celebrate fun, creativity and self-expression.

Parkour in the Middle East: reclaiming youthfulness and the everyday politics of fun

Many countries in the Middle East face their largest youth cohort in modern history. Young men and women in these countries are, according to Chaaban (2008), encountering 'increased social exclusion and marginalization... rising unemployment rates, higher exposure to health issues, and a precarious education system' (p.6). Many social commentators and researchers have identified the large number of unemployed youth in Arab nations as a major cause of recent political unrest. According to Mohammad (2011), unemployed youths' political frustrations were 'aggravated by their inability to express themselves in tightly controlled police state', combined with 'political corruption and the incapability of the state to deal with social and economic problems' (p.159). At the same time, youth were also gaining access to new media, which not only exposed them to other ways of knowing the world, but also facilitated greater communication and organization across groups. According to Amara (2012), the new type of politics practiced by this younger generation was 'the product of "societies of knowledge" (societes du savoir), new technology, globalization, open media and web-based social networks, against the interventionist and coercive model of politics of state (be it a party or a monarchy)' (p.19; also see Levine, 2012).

In his book, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Bayat (2010) describes a 'deep distrust' of the state developing among Muslim youth such that the young increasingly 'took solace in non-state spaces that infringed only marginally on political and moral authorities. They resorted to the cultural politics of everyday life, where they could reassert their youthful claims' (p.131). Here 'youthful claims' refers to Muslim youths' collective efforts to defend and extend the conditions that allow them to embrace expressions of fun and play in everyday life, and 'free them from anxiety over the prospect of the future' (Bayat, 2010: 18). Although rarely acknowledged in discussions and debates about youth movements, or the political mobilization of youth in the Middle East, such 'claims of youthfulness' are, according to Bayat (2010), at the core of ongoing youth discontent in the Muslim Middle East (p.18).

For Bayat (2010), puritan Islamists' apprehension, even hostility, toward the expression of fun and joy is part of the problem. During the 1980s and 1990s, conservative Islamists 'battled against those who desired to demonstrate public joy. Fun, playfulness, lightness, and laughter were seen as instance of immorality, laxity, and waste' (Bayat, 2010: 140). However, 'young mullahs also need to have fun' (Bayat, 2010: 137), and as youth were increasingly exposed to global media they became more and more 'informed by western technologies of fun' (e.g., music, fashion, sport, dancing, drinking, dating). Such 'spontaneous, erotically charged, and commodified pleasures' were framed in terms of 'western cultural import' (pp.138–139), and deemed 'alien to Islamic culture' (p.139). The morality of youth became a matter of serious concern among many Islamists, the conservative media, and what Bayat (2010) refers to as 'anti-fun adversaries', such

that bans and strict codes of conduct were imposed upon youth in many Islamic states. Of course, the intensity of youthful challenges to such authoritarian restrictions 'depends on the capacity of the adversaries, the moral and political authorities, to accommodate and contain youthful claims' (p.116), as well as the numbers and networks of disaffected youth.

For many frustrated, angry and 'fun'-deprived youth, the streets served as the 'key theatre of contentions' (p.11) and the 'ultimate arena to communicate discontent' (p.12). According to Bayat (2010), the active use of the urban environment for purposes other than those dictated by the state (e.g., walking, driving, watching) has become a form of 'street politics' that 'infuriate officials who see themselves as the sole authority to establish and control public order' (p.12). In this paper we identify parkour as a form of 'everyday politics' being expressed by Arab youth in their attempts to 'reclaim youthfulness' through physical play, self-expression and public performance, amidst ongoing authoritarian rule. Parkour is a subtly anti-authoritarian gesture in that youth seek to negotiate physical and symbolic space in local and global (virtual) communities as the Middle East continues the messy process of integration into the global economic system.

Drawing upon research with parkour participants from the USA, the UK and Australia, Bavinton (2007) explains that the 'spontaneous fun and creativity characteristic of parkour' is closely associated with the 'reinterpretation and utilisation of constraints'; participants are empowered by their ability 'to wrest (admittedly partial and momentary) control of the power relations embedded within public urban spaces' (p.391). As we illustrate in this paper, however, the creative uses of the urban environment by parkour practitioners in Middle Eastern countries—where the streets have been key sites of social unrest (and thus remain under close surveillance)—carry different meanings for participants. Parkour is not only a symbolic form of 'street politics', but it is also an alternative to the top-down, state-defined forms of sport that are emerging in the Middle East (Amara, 2012).

Parkour had been popular among western youth for almost a decade before it reached the Middle East in the new millennium. In contrast to the historical movement of sports across countries—in which colonizers often imposed their sports on the local peoples who adopted, appropriated or rejected the activities—young men in the Middle East were first exposed to the activity via cable television and the internet in the early 2000s. According to photojournalist David Denger, parkour 'migrated to Egypt without direct contact but through iconic movies such as *District 13* and homemade YouTube videos' (personal communication, January 2013). Inspired by the athleticism and novelty of parkour, some young Middle Eastern men quickly adopted active roles in learning the sport, finding and creating their own spaces for participation, training others and establishing their own media (e.g., videos, websites, newsletters).

Youth in the Middle East are some of the world's most active users of the internet and new social media. Youth make up around 70 percent of the 45 million Facebook users in the Arab world, and Arabic is the fastest growing language in Twitter history (Facebook in the Arab region, 2012; More than, 2012; Richards, 2012). It is perhaps not surprising then that the internet and social media have been integral to the development of parkour in Middle Eastern countries. For example, in 2003, a small group of young Egyptian men became inspired after watching parkour online. Nasser Al-Refaei—a physical education

graduate—was among the first to start practicing parkour in Egypt. In his own words, he had ‘always been in love with extreme sports’, and was quickly impressed by the maneuvers he saw on YouTube: ‘I started to analyse the moves based on my background studies and then applied that to myself. Then I shot a small clip of my trainings and posted it on YouTube’ (cited in *Against Gravity*, 2012). Al-Refaei then went on to become the primary trainer for Parkour Egypt, the first official parkour group in the Middle East. Since its establishment in 2005, Parkour Egypt has grown to include more than 200 members. Virtual media continue to play an integral role in the daily organization, and local and international communications, of the group. As Mahmoud explained, ‘the social networking websites are helping us to spread the art and keep all our fans and students updated with anything we do. Internet has an essential role making the parkour spreading in Egypt, and for communication with many groups from different Arabic states’ (personal communication). Shortly after the development of parkour in Egypt, the activity also drew the attention of young men in Kuwait who went on to found PK Jaguars in 2006. The primary goal of this group is to ‘spread Parkour’s way of life to Middle East any way possible and make the youth and community realize how important Parkour and movement is to our daily lives’ (PK Jaguars Facebook page). As with Parkour Egypt, the PK Jaguars are very active in their use of online media.

Many of the early participants tended to be young men in their late teens and early 20s, and often university graduates unable to find full-time employment. As coaching sessions have been made available, however, the groups are becoming more diverse with younger boys increasingly taking up the activity. Of course, these groups are not free from hierarchical and patriarchal practices that continue to proliferate in many Arab countries. According to one young Kuwaiti interviewee, ‘a lot of women want to join, but our religion doesn’t allow it. In Islamic [tradition], man can’t touch the woman, so captains can’t catch them during training’ (personal communication). Similarly, a coach at Parkour Egypt explained:

We don’t train girls due to religious and traditional reasons. In Islam it is not allowed to touch women at certain sensitive body parts, as parkour training requires the trainer to hold and catch the student in specific positions, this makes training impossible. Also...for a girl it will be dangerous and more risky than a boy to have an injury. In Egypt people criticize boys who do parkour and always mock them in streets, imagine a girl doing parkour in the streets, she would get negative feedback. (Mahmoud, personal communication)

While women are not allowed to participate with most parkour groups in the Middle East, differences in the gender regimes across and within countries are such that a few women are practicing parkour with groups in Egypt (Egyflow) and Iran (Hitall). Yet, for girls and women in some Muslim countries, the street can be a dangerous space if one’s behavior is not deemed to be culturally and socially appropriate.⁴

Today, groups of (mostly young male) traceurs and free runners can be found in Bahrain, Doha, Egypt, Israel, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and UAE. Almost all have Facebook pages with the number of followers ranging from 300 (Parkour Libya Free) to 42,000 (Parkour Egypt). These pages feature short edited videos with group members performing parkour or free running in various environments, news of upcoming training sessions and performances, or reviews of events, mostly

written in Arabic. Some parkour groups are relatively small, informal groups of young men who train together, whereas others have grown into highly organized, hierarchical and commercial organizations with hired training facilities and coaches. Key members of some groups are travelling internationally to compete and perform, and make regular appearances in movies and commercials (e.g., Chevrolet, Vodafone, Pepsi). For example, members of the PK Kuwait and Bahrain Parkour teams performed together on the beach at the Qatar National Day celebration in December 2011. Both Parkour Egypt and PK Jaguars have featured in the Arab's Got Talent television program, and in 2011 Kuwait hosted the Red Bull Art of Motion international competition, including some of the top free runners and parkour athletes from Kuwait and around the world. In contrast, the development of parkour in Gaza has been considerably more difficult.

PK Gaza: overcoming obstacles

The Gaza Strip is a territory on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea that borders Egypt on the southwest and Israel on the east and north. With approximately 1.7 million residents and refugees occupying an area of 365 square kilometers (40 kilometers long and 10 kilometers wide), the Gaza Strip is among the most densely populated regions in the world. Originally administered by Egypt (which retains control of Gaza's southern border), the area was captured by the Israelis in 1967 during the Six Day War (Oren, 2002). Israeli settlements in the region were a constant source of tension, such that in 2005 Israel withdrew its troops and settlers. Research shows that youth held significant roles in the Intifada (Arabic for uprising or shaking off): 80 percent of male children and 50 percent of female children, and 85 percent of male adolescents and 65 percent of female adolescents were involved in demonstrations against the occupation (Barber, 2001). Interviews with Palestinian youth revealed that their involvement was 'driven by informed and advanced levels of awareness and commitment to the broader social goal of relief from the occupation' (Barber, 2001: 259). In an excellent historical and geographical analysis of the Palestine-Israel conflict, Gregory (2004) identifies the heightened militarization of the al-Aqsa Intifada as the 'product of a profound, desperate anger born out of the sustained and asymmetric violence of Israel's continuing military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank' (p.105). He describes the Palestinian 'youth culture from which many suicide bombers have emerged' as 'both communal and competitive' (p.105), and draws upon the work of Hage (2003) to suggest 'a sort of jockeying for symbolic capital among those for whom most other opportunities for recognition and worth have been systematically withdrawn' (p.105).

A year after the Israeli withdrawal, the Islamist militant group Hamas won elections in Gaza. In June 2007, Hamas took complete control of the strip, ousting the more moderate rival Fatah, a faction of Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas who continues to run parts of the West Bank. The Israelis responded by tightening a blockade on Gaza, seriously limiting the transit of goods and people into and out of the territory. Such blockades restrict opportunities for trade, such that Gaza is largely dependent on external aid and the 'shadow tunnel economy' that is said to include hundreds of tunnels built under the border with Egypt, thus enabling the movement of goods, including weapons. The words of Palestinian author and poet Mahmoud Darwish provide insight into the

difficulties and atrocities of living in Israeli occupied territories: 'the occupation does not content itself with depriving us of the primary conditions of freedom, but goes on to deprive us of the bare essentials of a *dignified human life*, by declaring constant war on our bodies, and our dreams, on the people and the homes and the trees, and by committing crimes of war...' (cited in Gregory, 2004: 133). This is, according to Gregory (2004), a 'world wrenched upside down' (p.129) where Israel continues to 'extend its illegal settlement of the occupied territories and asserts its monopoly of violence', and 'criminalizes any act of Palestinian resistances to its illegal operations and its state terrorism' (p.129), all with the intent to 'paralyse Palestinian agency' (Gregory, 2004: 26; Giacaman et. al., 2007).

As a result of years of conflict and ongoing blockages, almost 80 percent of the Gazan population is dependent on international assistance (United Nations, 2013). Gaza suffers from high unemployment (approximately 40 percent), with a particularly high rate (58 percent) among those aged 20–24 years (Life in the Gaza Strip, 2012). With over 50 percent of the population under the age of 15 years, the 'youth bulge' is the most severe of all the Middle Eastern countries. The infrastructure in Gaza is also very poor compared to the other Palestinian territories. It is thought that a lack of funding for infrastructure or investment is a strategic move by the Israeli government to limit basic human needs, in order to regain power over the region. In 2012, there were several rockets and airstrikes that were exchanged in retaliation of both Israeli and Palestinian being killed. While many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments and peace activists have been involved (for decades) in trying to resolve the conflict, the violence continues, with no real peace strategy in sight. Various SDP organizations, such as Right to Play, Peace Players International, and Kicking the Ball and Taking Care, are also actively working in the region in efforts to enhance the health, well-being and resilience of Palestine residents living in refugee camps and conflict zones, and to facilitate cultural exchanges between groups of different religious and cultural backgrounds (Bellotti, 2012; Sugden, 2006, 2008). Several local football teams also participate in the Gaza Strip League. In the context of such hardship, however, organized sport seems to offer little more than a short-term escape from the harsh realities of life in Gaza.

Parkour reached Gaza in 2005, when recent university graduate Abdullah Anshasi watched the documentary *Jump London* on the Al-Jazeera documentary channel. He promptly followed this up by searching the internet for video clips of parkour, before recruiting Mohammed Aljkhbayr to join him in learning the new sport. Mohammed recalls the day fondly:

Abdullah, my best friend, told me he had just seen a video clip online about 'free-running' which is about overcoming obstacles. It just sounded like a sport that I would love to practice. We started to practice every day, and our liking of this sport increased. We kept looking at the video clips online, whenever the electricity worked. We toned our bodies and practiced jumps, rolls and runs daily. (Cited in Shahin, 2012, paras. 6–7)

As with parkour practitioners in Kuwait and Egypt, the internet and online videos were their initial inspiration for practicing the sport, and integral to their skill development over the following years. Abdullah and Mohammed 'never had any formal training' and took it upon themselves to 'learn from the videos we saw on the net' (Enshasi, cited

in Shahin, 2012). Continuing to develop their skills, they soon found parkour to be so much more than a sport, 'it is a life philosophy' that encourages each individual to 'overcome barriers in their own way' (cited in Shahin, 2012). In a world surrounded by obstacles and blockades, the symbolism is not lost on these young men:

I dream of travelling abroad to compete in international competitions, but we can't leave this place. We're caged in on all sides. ... When I had nothing to do I would go to the border with Abdallah. We'd sit at the Rafah border which is our border with Egypt. We would ask ourselves, what is beyond this border and how do people live on the other side? We would dream that one day our sport will help us get past this obstacle... crossing this border is a big dream. (Cited in 'Free Running Gaza')

Such goals inspired the young men to continue in their physically demanding training despite physical and social risks.

Re-appropriating dangerous spaces

The young men experienced resistance from their parents and many in the local community who did not understand their quest for physical expression, creativity and pleasure in the urban environment surrounding the Khan Younes refugee camps: 'We practice every day in isolated areas. When I come home there are always questions: where have you been? What are you doing? We face a lot of resistance from family, neighbours, and the police' (cited in Shahin, 2012). The parents of another parkour recruit, Abu Sulton, also 'forbade it': 'they tried to stop me, especially after I was injured, but they couldn't. It's in my blood' (cited in Hussein, 2012). As Abdullah and Mohammad recruited other young men to join their training sessions, groups of children and youths often gathered in the streets to watch with fascination. Yet many older local residents were unsure what to make of these young men running up walls, jumping off roofs and performing spectacular flips and rolls in the streets. 'At first people didn't accept us. People would say, "you jump like monkeys and you climb buildings like thieves. What are you doing?"' explained Abdullah (personal communication). Similarly, another PK Gaza recruit, Jakhibir, recalled: 'people would complain and the police would come. It became a game, we'd practice until they arrived and then run away' (cited in Hussein, 2012).

To avoid conflicts with family members, local residents and police, members of PK Gaza (the name chosen by the group) sought out unpopulated spaces where they could train without interruption. Popular training areas included cemeteries, the ruined houses from the Dhraha occupation, UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) schools, and on the sandy hills in Nusseirat, formerly an Israeli settlement now deserted in the center of Gaza City. The latter is particularly meaningful for the youth, who proclaim that by practicing parkour in the space, 'we demonstrate that this land is our right and we do what we like in a place that we want, even if you have to kill us or bomb us... we will continue to practice our sport in any place and at any time' (Mohammed, personal communication). Despite ongoing resistance from family members, and local authorities, Mohammed is a strong advocate for the potential of parkour for raising awareness about the conditions of those living in Gaza: 'I want people to change their ideas about sports, all sports. They need to understand that sport is something very

important. Athletes can raise Palestine's name throughout the world' (cited in Hussein, 2012). Indeed, Mohammed, Abdullah and other members of PK Gaza are very proactive at using the internet to share their unique skills and experiences with the transnational parkour community, and in so doing, are advancing an informal form of cultural diplomacy.

YouTube, Twitter and Facebook: tapping into the transnational parkour network

Despite such poverty, Gazan residents have remarkably high levels of access to internet and telecommunications. In 2011, 95 percent of households in Palestinian territories owned a mobile phone, compared with 72.8 percent in 2004, and 93.9 percent of households had satellite dishes (More than, 2012). Over the same period, the number of households connected to the internet more than tripled from 9.2 percent to 30.4 percent (More than, 2012). The increasing youth engagement with the internet is the most noteworthy, with the number of young Palestinians with access to the internet and with email accounts growing five-fold (46.5 percent) between 2004 and 2011 (More than, 2012). Their usage of the internet, however, is intermittent with regular electricity outages and blackouts, and threats of internet surveillance, censorship and control of information. But with support from international groups such as Telecomix, an organization that believes in freedom of information, Gazan residents are finding alternative means to maintain their broadband services (McGuire, 2012).⁵

As part of the younger generation of technologically savvy Gazan residents, the founders of PK Gaza are explicitly aware of the potential of the internet for their parkour practices, and also for broader political purposes: 'YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are very important for us because we use it to show our skills and deliver a message to the world that Palestine exists and stems of life and love and peace' (Mohammad, personal communication) (see Figure 1). 'We started filming ourselves with mobile phones and putting the videos on YouTube', explains Mohammed, and they have continued to develop more advanced filming techniques using borrowed cameras and editing the footage on a cheap computer. The PK Gaza and they Freerunning Facebook page has almost 4000 followers from around the world, and provides space for PK Gaza members to chat (mostly in Arabic) with parkour enthusiasts across the Middle East, and around the world (Farrell, 2011). The group also posts regular YouTube videos that can receive upwards of tens of thousands of views. Both Facebook and YouTube are key spaces for interaction and dialogue with youth beyond the confines of the Gaza strip. In so doing:

'...[we] contribute very significantly to raising international awareness of what is happening in Gaza. We offer video clips, photographs and writings related to the situation in which we live in the Gaza strip and deliver the message to all the people's that's watching online that there are oppressed people... we were able to take advantage of parkour... to deliver the right message of what is happening in the Gaza strip... we won the world's sympathy with our cause. (Mohammed, personal communication)

A particularly evocative video reveals the everyday risks facing the PK Gaza participants. Training in the sand dunes on the outskirts of the Khan Younis refugee camp on the first day of the Israeli assault on the Gaza strip on November 14, 2012, ‘the occupation forces bombed a site very close to the place of our training with a group of children, some of whom panicked because they fear the Israeli army. We documented the event on camera, so we can not forget’ (personal communication). Indeed, the short video of the bombing that interrupted the training mentioned above, titled ‘Despite the pain there is hope’, was re-posted, linked and ‘liked’ on news sites around the world. The original YouTube video has been viewed more than 150,000 times. As Mohammed explained: ‘We did this video to convey [the] message to the world that we, despite all what is happening in the Gaza Strip—killing and bombing and destruction of facilities—there is hope in life’ (cited in Gaza Parkour, 2012, para. 2).⁶

Interestingly, these virtual spaces also enable dialogue that may contribute to building respect between participants of varying socio-cultural, religious and/or national backgrounds based on parkour participation. For example, YouTube videos created by the PK Gaza group receive support in Arabic and English from fellow parkour enthusiasts around the world, including the following comment from an Israeli parkour practitioner: ‘Amazing guys! You got so much better than last year. I hope there will be peace between us one day’: the message was signed ‘Peace from Israel!’ In some cases, it seems the virtual communications between parkour participants from different countries may also facilitate cultural understanding that has the potential to contribute to future peace building.

As well as posting their own media on universal providers such as YouTube, the founders of PK Gaza have also reached out to the international parkour community by contributing to existing online platforms. Abdullah recalls his initial efforts to negotiate legitimate space within the transnational parkour community:

When I tried to register [PK Gaza] on the [international parkour] website, I looked for the Palestinian flag in the country section. I wrote them several letters... for a month I kept writing. In the end they wrote back... I was so happy when I saw it. Before this they only had the Israeli flag. We wanted the world to know we were here—we were free runners. It took a while, but eventually they reached out to us. (Personal communication)

Indeed, after successfully registering on an international parkour online network, their video ‘Free running Gaza’ was posted on the website and thus shared with parkour participants around the world. With such global exposure, the PK Gaza group began to receive offers of support from individuals and groups around the world. For example, an Australian viewer offered to design their logo that now features on the team websites and team T-shirts. They also received invitations from around the world to compete in international events and competitions. Due to the blockages, they were regrettably unable to accept such invitations. In February 2012, with sponsorship from the Unione Italiana Sport Per Tutti (‘Sport for All’), however, Mohammed, Abdullah and Jihad were able to travel outside of Gaza for the first time to attend the Italian Free Running and Parkour Federation’s annual event in Milan. On this trip, they also performed in Rome, Bologna and Palermo, and met free runners from across the world, including practitioners from Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco: ‘those were the most memorable 17 days of our lives. ...



Figure 1. Screen shot of the Gaza Parkour and Free Running Facebook page that plays such an integral role in organizing the local group's training sessions and communicating with parkour enthusiasts around the world.

The other free runners were kind and helpful, and they wanted to hear what we had to say about Gaza,' recalled Mohammed (cited in Shahin, 2012). Continuing to wax lyrical about the generosity of their Italian hosts, he proclaimed: 'they were able to make our biggest dream come true... [overcoming] the biggest obstacle of all—the Israeli check-point—and travel abroad' (Mohammed, cited in Hussein, 2012). The young men used this trip as an opportunity for cultural diplomacy and raising awareness of the plight of those living in Gaza: 'we talked to people about our lives in Gaza, that we're living under siege, and in a continually tense situation. We face financial, social and political obstacles' (cited in Hussein, 2012). As Figures 2 and 3 illustrate, the young men received much support from various parkour groups and sports teams whom they met during their Italian trip.⁷

Parkour for resilience and coping

As well as raising awareness of the conditions in Gaza and offering a temporary escape from the harsh realities of everyday life, the PK Gaza team also advocates the socio-psychological benefits of their everyday parkour experiences. They proclaim the value of parkour for their resilience and coping with the frustrations, fears, anxieties and pains of living in the Khan Younes refugee camp. As Anshasi explains, 'I have witnessed war, invasion and killing. When I was a kid and I saw these things, blood and injuries, I didn't know what it all meant... this game [parkour] makes me forget all these things' (cited in Sorcher, 2010). With a background in kickboxing, Jihad joined the PK Gaza team after seeing a clip of Mohammed on YouTube, and he enjoys the physicality and psychology of the activity: 'It uses physical strength more than any other sport... parkour teaches us to overcome obstacles. It makes me feel free, it makes my body feel strong, that I can



Figure 2. A group of Italian parkour practitioners (Parkour Wave) makes a public statement following their interactions with the PK Gaza team in November 2012. (Image used with permission of photographer, Luca Colombo, and UISP Milano, Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti.)



Figure 3. The Stella Rosa rugby team in Milan offers their support of Gaza after meeting the PK Gaza team. (Image used with permission of photographer, Luca Colombo, and UISP Milano, Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti.)

overcome anything' (cited in Hussein, 2012). Similarly, Mohammad describes a dire situation, 'the sanctions have created enormous obstacles. It's been five years and things

keep getting worse. We have wars regularly and the sanctions make our lives miserable,' but continues, 'this sport has given me the ability to overcome many obstacles. It's made me steadfast and has given me the strength to face the pressures of the occupation' (cited in 'Free Running Gaza'). Although Mohammed has become well-practiced in answering questions from journalists about the social-psychological benefits of parkour, he remains adamant that parkour helps him untangle the 'anger and depression' that comes with living in the narrow, politically and militarily confined Gaza strip (cited in 'Free Running Gaza'). Continuing, he explains, 'There is always a problem here of one sort or another. If it's not the war or the sanctions, then it's an internal issue. It's depressing but we try to practise self-help. We try to be our own doctors' (cited in 'Free Running Gaza'). As the quote at the head of this paper from Gazan psychologist, Eyad Al Sarraj (MD) suggests, some medical and health professionals also acknowledge the value of activities such as parkour for young men trapped in such a stressful environment. Such observations are supported by a plethora of research that has illustrated the value of physical play and games for resilience in contexts of high risk and/or ongoing physical and psychological stress (e.g., refugee camps), and the restorative value for children and youth who have experienced traumatic events (e.g., natural disaster, war, forced migration) (Berinstein and Magalhaes, 2009; Evers, 2010; Kunz, 2009; Rung et al., 2011).

Looking forward: mentoring the next generation

The pioneers of parkour in Gaza, Mohammed and Abdullah, are now working with a group of peers to support the next generation of parkour enthusiasts. According to Mohammed, 'Palestinian society requires us to... dedicate our lives to work and found a family'. Thus, recognizing that he will soon be 'forced to leave the sport' that he has dedicated almost a decade of his young life toward developing, he is now investing his energies into 'training larger groups' and expanding to various provinces in the Gaza Strip. They do so with the hope of the 'formation of a large academy to train new generations... and disseminate among young men and women all over Palestine' (interview). According to Enshasi, one of the trainers for a group of 8–16-year-old male parkour enthusiasts, explains:

My main focus as I grow older is to make sure that PK Gaza continues as an art and sports form in Gaza. I do not want it to die with us. I want it to continue and grow. This is why now I feel our main focus should be on training the next generation. They are young minds and bodies who want to be set free. (Enshasi, cited in Shahin, 2012)

The regular training sessions and informal peer mentoring provided by the PK Gaza leaders offer boys and young men growing up in Gaza valuable social networks beyond the family, and support structures that facilitate coping and resilience through everyday physical pleasures. Perhaps most importantly, the social and physical experiences offered through parkour offer youth a sense of hope for a future with surmountable obstacles.

Concluding thoughts: lessons for the SDP movement

In this paper we examine how youth living in the Middle East are actively reconfiguring global (or rather, western) action sport commodities, images and texts, and creatively re-embedding them within local contexts and cultures to suit their particular needs, beliefs and customs. In so doing, we gain fresh insights in the processes of 'glocalization' operating within and across contemporary action sports cultures. More specifically, we provide insight into the meanings and practices of sport in Gaza, and particularly how youth in Gaza are using parkour to enhance the quality of their everyday lives, and also to make people aware of their living conditions. A place of conflict and poverty, many Gazan children and youth face 'apathy, low self-esteem and a sense of powerlessness' (McEvoy-Levy, 2001: 24). Yet, as this paper illustrates, we should not overlook their agency, nor should we assume them to be victims, ideologues or fundamentalists. Some youth are demonstrating remarkable agency in creating sporting opportunities that cater to their own and other local children and youths' physical, social and psychological needs. Acknowledging the agency and privileging the voices of youth involved in grassroots sporting groups seems particularly important in regions such as the Middle East, where the huge and growing population of young people has the potential to 'shake present regimes from within more devastatingly than even the forces of international politics' (Fuller, 2004: 4). We conclude this paper by considering the relevance of some of the insights from the case of parkour in Gaza for the SDP movement.

The SDP movement has proliferated in the current neoliberal context with groups and organizations using sport and physical activity to help improve the health and well-being of individuals and communities around the world (Beutler, 2008; Black, 2010; Darnell, 2012; Donnelly et al., 2011; Giulianotti, 2011; Houlihan and White, 2002; Kidd, 2008, 2011; Levermore, 2008; Levermore and Beacom, 2009; Thorpe and Rinehart, 2012). Of the 700 organizations working under the SDP umbrella, the lion's share utilizes traditional sports such as football, basketball, volleyball and hockey. Organizations such as Football for Peace, Right to Play, Hoops 4 Hope and Peace Players International have been acclaimed as making valuable contributions to the quality of many individuals lives, but as the case of parkour in Gaza suggests, we should not assume local children and youth want (or need) soccer or basketball programs. Before delivering sport programs in foreign countries, we suggest that SDP researchers and practitioners should first examine the grassroots sporting participation of youths in local communities.

We concur with Nichols et al. (2011), who recently argued that 'local knowledges should be recognized as valid knowledges that have a role to play in furthering the understanding of the concept of sport as a tool for development' (p.261). Thus, we encourage those working within the SDP movement to *look more closely* at the grassroots activities of youth. Yet, we also acknowledge the relative 'invisibility' of some of these activities. Due to restrictions and regulations on the use of space in zones of conflict and authoritarian rule, some youthful sporting activities are being practiced on the margins or in the shadows of local communities (e.g., at night, on the outskirts of the city, in cemeteries or in deserted buildings). Thus, adults and/or authority figures may not see these sports even when they go looking for them. Many action sports may be practiced and performed out of sight in local (often high-risk) spaces, but they tend to

have a highly visible virtual presence. As illustrated via the case of the PK Gaza group, we should not underestimate the technological and organizational capacities of contemporary youth; even those in poverty-stricken and war-torn communities are utilizing new technologies to globally publicize their efforts and to communicate across borders via western-based (although truly transnational) action sport networks (e.g., www.parkourgenerations.com) and social media. Arguably, SDP researchers and professionals working in a particular region would do well to devise new strategies that use the internet and social media to locate, connect and open a dialogue with grassroots youth sporting groups.

Despite the relative invisibility of grassroots action sports groups, they 'exist organically and need to be supported and fostered rather than created anew' (McEvoy-Levy, 2001: 24). Indeed, we believe that respectful collaborations with young, grassroots sporting participants have the potential to make a valuable contribution to the sustainability and success of future youth-focused SDP projects. Working with local groups of youth will, however, require critical reflection upon some of the assumptions underpinning much SDP work. Firstly, we must move away from the 'deficit mode' (Spaaij, 2011) that assumes poor youth in developing or war-torn contexts are victims needing 'our' versions of sport for their empowerment. As illustrated in this paper, some youth are practicing and developing sports on their own terms. Secondly, we encourage a move away from top-down models of SDP programs in which sports are delivered to those 'in need' with little consultation with potential participants, and toward a greater recognition of the grassroots sports already being practiced and developed by children and youth in local contexts. Put simply, we advocate greater consideration for youth agency, and more space for their voices in SDP program development and implementation (Evers, 2010; McEvoy-Levy, 2001; Nicholls, 2009; Nichols et al., 2011). In sum, we hope the case study offered in this paper encourages those working in the SDP industry to rethink the tendency to design and deliver sports programs that they assume are the most accessible and preferred choice of local youth (e.g., soccer), and to give greater consideration to the grassroots sports already being practiced by youth. Recognizing the agency, creativity and needs of local youths, the SDP community might then work *with* key members of these action sport groups to help them achieve their self-defined goals.

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Notes

1. For example, the development of action sports in China is certainly not a one-way process of 'cultural imperialism'. Despite extensive efforts by US-based action sports corporations and media to promote these activities among the ever-growing Chinese youth market, cultural differences (e.g., approaches to risk-taking, prioritization of education over leisure time) are causing many difficulties for mostly US-based action sports corporations who struggle to understand why their typically successful marketing campaigns that emphasize the 'extreme' nature of these sports are not working with Chinese youth (see Thorpe, 2008, 2012).
2. It was not in our original research design to use Facebook for communication with participants. However, as this was their preferred mode of dialogue, we adopted a flexible approach that took into consideration some of the unique ethical issues that arise when using social media for research purposes. One of the initial concerns was the privacy of the researcher and the participant. Holding a private dialogue via Facebook required that the participant accept the researcher's 'Friend' request, and upon doing so, both had access to one another's private information (e.g., photos, updates). This was not a problem in this case, however, as both the participants and the researcher use Facebook as a professional space, and thus are cautious of providing personal information on their sites. In fact, access to the participants' regular postings about their latest parkour practice sessions and performances, videos and news releases, proved insightful for the overall project. It is likely that access to the researcher's postings about research and sporting activities also contributed to building participant's trust and rapport with the researcher.
3. Examples of interview questions included the following. (1) Could you please start by telling me when and how you first saw parkour? What were your initial thoughts and feelings towards the sport/art of parkour? (2) In the very early days of your participation, what did you like about parkour? How did parkour compare to other sports you might have played at school or in your community? (3) How did your family and people in your community initially react to you doing parkour? (4) Is Gaza a good place for doing parkour? What would make Gaza a better place for doing parkour? (5) How important are YouTube, Twitter and Facebook for PK Gaza? Why is the internet important for PK Gaza?
4. It is important to note, however, that while girls and young women do participate in parkour in western cities, the activity remains dominated by young men who perform for their peers and thrive on attention obtained through spontaneous public performances in urban spaces.
5. Palestinian hackers are responding by forcing temporary shutdowns and defacements of hundreds of Israeli websites, such that some describe the 'cyber war' as the 'second front' in 21st century Israeli–Palestinian conflicts (McGuire, 2012). As military conflict develops in the Gaza Strip, the complex efforts by hackers and the governments to control the flow of information are only expected to increase (McGuire, 2012; Aouragh, 2008).
6. The video recording of the PK Gaza training day that was disrupted by Israeli bombing nearby can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qE2eWIHEPwI>.
7. The following YouTube video further illustrates the experiences of PK Gaza in Italy in November 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y77uuTcpe00>.

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