

Growing -up with sport in an individualized society: The adolescent 'sport-hopper' as a modern social role model?

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On trend scouts and sport-hoppers

Even in the world of sports trend scouts are reporting the continuous change of activities consisting of scene-typical variations with even shorter expiry dates. There seems to be a mega-trend within trends: the unwavering involvement in a particular type of sport, with consistent and long-term training, is replaced by short-term and wide open experiments in the enriched sports programs. The rather 'old-fashioned' sport clubs are 'out', whereas alternative sports such as, secluded mountain-biking, a 'streetball' meeting in the neighbourhood and a 'blade-night' gathering in the city – are 'in'. The traditional sports enthusiasts who concentrated on competition in a particular sport within a sport club, have developed into freely moving sport-hoppers who roam the colourful sports scene, and, depending on their mood, look into this sport or try another activity, always on the look-out for the ultimate kick: 'Fit for fun!'

If one believes the 'leisure gurus' and their visionary view of sports, then the current scenario leaves no doubt as to the future: the sport-hopper will become the new social role model. However, the question concerning the realistic content of these visions remains, and it is this question which will be addressed as follows.

First of all, two methodological comments need to be made: (1) the discussions, for the most part, will concentrate on the sport activities of young people – i.e. children and adolescents. (2) for obvious reasons, the sport involvement of young people in Germany will be analyzed, which raises the question whether the findings can be generalized for other countries. The conclusion will reflect these thoughts.

With these reservations in mind, the following four steps will be used to not only *describe* the changes in young people's sport participation, but also to *explain* these changes in the theoretical context of social analysis. (1) an outline of the argumentation figures of the so-called individualization-theory and (2) discussion of their consequences for the analysis of sport. For it is only in *this* theoretical context that the 'sport-hopper' could be so successfully hailed as a modern – or more precisely: as a post-modern – social role model. With this individualization-theory background several assumptions about changed forms of involvement in sports can be examined in more detail. That means, (3) these assumptions need to be substantiated first in connection with the individualization-theory, and then (4) the empirical basis needs to be discussed in regard to these assumptions/speculations/theses.

1 The individualization-theory and its consequences for the youth culture

In the early 1980s a theoretical infrastructure under the label of the so-called 'individualization-thesis' was created by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1986, 1997; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1994, 2002). This theory proved to be far-reaching as well as profoundly

significant for social developments of the 'modern', or rather of the 'post-modern' age. This particular individualization-theory can be interpreted as a socio-analytical concept, which has been extensively discussed, not only in Germany but also world-wide.

If one follows this individualization-theory, it becomes apparent that in post-modern societies the young generations get caught up in a whirlwind of social de-standardization. What are some of the reasons for this development?

(1) One can recognize a de-structuring of social allocations. Class and social milieus are losing their social significance in favour of plural and less distinct social clusters. In short, positions in post-modern societies become blurred, and a clear allocation of advantageous or disadvantageous life chances can no longer be associated with them.

(2) One can also observe a de-chronology of the 'normal' life course. Once defined and 'socially marked' periods of life (such as childhood or adolescence) have become complex, age-specific norms lose their binding force, and social rites of passage (if they still exist) have gained in variability. In general, the social regulated timing of life events has lost its once dominating power.

(3) As a consequence, already young people are required to plan, create and also 'get through' their lives to a large extent on their own. "If someone has to develop and write his/her own script of life, then that person faces increased pressure to produce a biography and, in addition, the demands of active self-creation" (Schwier, 2003, p. 5). The consequence is ambivalent: On one hand, young people are free to make their own decisions; on the other hand, they have to be responsible for these decisions. This responsibility weighs heavily on their shoulders on their path through life, and it is not unusual to see quite a few adolescents being overwhelmed by this task.

2 The individualization of sport involvement

Sport-related youth research has endorsed this individualization-theory without any reservation. There are four main aspects which are linked together in the discussion on children's and adolescents' participation in sports.

(1) First, some researchers regard the pluralization of sport as a social field. They argue that the 'models' and interpretations of sport have developed into a rich variety 'beyond' the traditional competitive sport – for example, the health and fitness oriented sport, or the sport which focuses on body-styling or adventure and recreational sports. As a consequence, these athletic behavior patterns have branched off into a multitude of various sport practices and these different activities can be played in different forms of interaction and in different social contexts. This differentiation has created a wide range of sporting options, which, until recently, had been unknown.

(2) Second, it is assumed that this whole range of pluralized sport is equally accessible to all groups within society.² It seems that particularly sport as a self-chosen leisure activity is the area, where traditional social lines of distinction have melted away and therefore have lost their power of differentiation regarding sport participation.

(3) Third, since individualization processes are also gaining significance in the social field of sport, sport activities can be developed according to completely individual preferences within the wide range of sports. It is within the field of sport that the post-modern *homo optionis*

seems to have found his playing ground, and “sport-hopping” counts as the new norm of sport involvement that is permanently open to change (c.f. Nagel, 2003). The ‘patchwork sports player’ is hailed as the new ‘prototype’ (Schwier, 2003), and “sport-hopping” is accepted as the new norm of sport involvement that is permanently open to change.

(4) Fourth, the assumption exists that the individualization of lives on the one hand and the individualization of sport activities on the other run together in a double individualization and reproduce each other in turn. The individualized lives form the biographical background into which young people integrate their sport activities.

3 Sport-related hypotheses in the context of the individualization-theory

Against the backdrop of this debate about individualization and the consequences for the young people’s sport involvement, several further assumptions can be put into more concrete terms so that their empirical stability can be tested.

The following five hypotheses will be substantiated in individualization-theory terms and then examined under the scrutiny of empirical data:

- sportisation of life-styles;
- de-institutionalization;
- erosion of membership ties and commitments;
- flexibility and ‘multiplication’ of sport participation ;
- and finally, social de-structuring.

Sportisation of life-styles

With the increasing variability of sport culture, the chances have multiplied for young people to find forms of sport which they can coordinate with other affairs in quite individual combinations and thus incorporate them in their lives. Since everyone can choose their own sports nowadays, sport involvement is increasing. In short: For today’s young generations playing sport has become a regular part of their daily life, and for that reason, one can talk of a sportisation of young people’s lives.

De-institutionalization

In the course of individualization in post-modern societies, institutions and organisations seem to be losing acceptance by young generations. Therefore, it can be suggested that young people are turning away from the organized sport, and instead, look to participate in sport in a more informal, non-committal way.

- For that reason, they are distancing themselves from the sport activities in sport clubs which require too many commitments and duties.
- On the other hand, the diverse alternatives are gaining in popularity, since they demand much less obligation.

- Above all, informal sport offers itself as a more ‘individualistic sport’, because young people can arrange their informal sport activities themselves and integrate them into their lives, thus giving them more flexibility.

Erosion of membership ties and commitments

De-institutionalization cannot only occur as a decline in the organised sport, but it can also be seen in the fact that membership ties are becoming weaker (if memberships are still entered into at all). If young people do still join sport clubs, they reject commitments and membership duties. Therefore, strongly defined and longer-term membership ties and commitments are being replaced by open-ended and mostly short-term memberships – which would only be maintained, as long as the club-organized sport activities can be fitted ‘trouble-free’ into the individual’s life.

Flexibility and ‘multiplication’ of sport activities

With the expanding sporting options, the concentration on a single sport – in which young people usually train on a consistent basis – is given up in favor of a short-term exploration of various and varied sports, which are tried out simultaneously or in succession. In the perspective of the individualization-theory, it can therefore be assumed that:

- sport careers are becoming more flexible, because young people more often change their sports,
- and / or a ‘multiplication’ of sport activities is occurring, whereby young people are taking part in several sports at the same time.

Socio-structural de-structuring

The disintegration of socio-structural and socio-cultural differentiations may be considered typical in individualized societies. Consequently, in the social field of sport, clearly defined social differentiations and differences tend to disappear: Both, horizontal socio-structural criteria, such as age and gender, and vertical indicators, such as education and social background lose their power of differentiation in the young people’s sport involvement. Thus, access to sport would become a more equal opportunity. Differences would result mainly from individual preferences, which would be no longer linked to socio-structural indicators.

At this point, a brief explanation is needed: there is no doubt that these individualization-theory arguments for a change in sport culture are plausible and convincing. Nevertheless, these arguments have been awarded the status of assumptions, but not that of empirically proven observations and hypotheses. Therefore, these assumptions will be subjected to empirical data. The data were collected from representative youth sport surveys from Germany and based on these and whenever possible, time-series data were established. These types of time-series data are appropriate to analyze changes in sport, even though they may pose some minor methodological problems.³

4 Empirical findings

4.1 Sportisation of life-styles

Today's young generations find a vastly differentiated sport culture in which they can put together their very own personal sports programs. Since so many great choices exist, the number of people who take part in sport is growing. For that reason, time-series data should show a significant increase in the number of young people doing sport in their leisure time (Table 1; Baur & Burrmann, 2003; Sporthopper, 2004). And there is no doubt: the results from the German surveys support the thesis of sportisation of life-styles and careers.

- A considerably larger percentage of today's younger generations take part in sport than did young generations of 15 or even 45 years ago.
- Noteworthy is the jump in the sport participation of girls – from 35% during the 1950s to 76% by the end of the 1990s.
- The comparatively high participation rates of today's young generations do not just result from a high number of people doing sport occasionally. On the contrary, the large majority – almost 66% of the girls and 80% of the boys – turned out to be regular sports players, who pursue their sports several times a week or even every day.⁵ (Recent findings from an in-house conducted study).

Therefore, these results indicate that the pluralization of sport culture which also resulted in the individualization of sport activities has been responsible for the expansion of sport in childhood and during adolescence – unknown to previous young generations.

Table 1: Sport involvement of young people in leisure time. Percentages. Representative youth surveys for Germany

Survey year	Survey	N	Age	Total	Gender	
					Male	Female
1954	Emnid (1955) ^a	1 493	15-24	47	60	35
1984	Shell (1985)	1 472	15-24	72	75	69
1999	Shell (2000)	4 546	15-24	81	85	76

4.2 De-institutionalization

Following the de-institutionalization hypothesis, the described sport expansion would have to take place at the expense of organized sports and its membership commitments and in favour of a variety of informal sport activities. Based on time-series data, one should come to two conclusions: a) a verifiable downward trend in sports club memberships, due to sport clubs losing their attraction for young people, and b) an increased involvement in alternative forms of sport.

Are sport clubs losing their attraction for young people?

A time-series comparison of sport club memberships shows a rather interesting trend (table 2): until the 1970s a significant rise in the level of participation of young people in sport clubs can be noted. The numbers doubled from 17% to 35% over a period of about 20 years.

Obviously, the levels of participation stayed the same since the 1970s, but there is no evidence for a decline.⁶ Therefore, until the end of the 20th century, club-organized sports do not seem to lose any attraction. It is also difficult to recognize any clear trend which would allow to extrapolate for the future that successive young generations would migrate ‘en masse’ from club-organized sport, as some researchers have predicted hastily.

Table 2: Participation of young people in sport clubs. Percentages. Representative youth surveys for Germany

Survey year	Survey	N	Age	Total	Male	Female
1954	Emnid (1955) ⁷	1 493	15-24	17	26	9
1964	Emnid (1966)	2 380	15-24	27	39	14
1975	Emnid (1975)	845	15-24	35	44	26
1981	Shell (1981)	1 077	15-24	34	39	28
1984	Shell (1985)	1 472	15-24	34	38	30
1991	Shell (1992)	3 142	13-29	35	40	30
1999	Shell (2000)	3 734	15-24	37		

An additional remark from the gender-perspective: the rates for girls’ participation are clearly lower than those of the boys’; but it is also apparent that the girls’ rates increased significantly from the 1950s until today – from about 10% to 30%, which reflects a gain of 200%.

Are ‘alternative’ sports contexts gaining in significance?

At this time, no empirical indications for a broader movement away from sport clubs can be found. Nevertheless, it could be that young people are increasingly participating in non-club-organized, i.e. in informal or commercial sports – an assumption, for which at least some empirical evidence exists.

- The rising number of young people who are active in sports cannot be attributed to an increased involvement in club-organized sport alone, especially during the 1980s and 1990s. The figures for those involved in sports have generally risen, even more than those for club-organized sports, resulting in noticeable differences (table 3).
- The number of young people involved in informal sports has gone up by over 65% within less than 10 years (1988-1995) (table 4).
- In addition, the figures for those participating in sports at commercial establishments have increased at the same time.

Table 3: Sport involvement of young people in leisure time (indicator: at least once per week). Percentages. Representative youth surveys for Germany

Survey year	Survey	N	Age	Total	Club-organised	Δ	Male	Female
1954	Emnid (1955)	1 493	15-24	47	<i>17</i>	<i>30</i>	60	35
1984	Shell (1985)	1 472	15-24	72	<i>34</i>	<i>38</i>	75	69
1999	Shell (2000)	4 546	15-24	81	<i>35</i>	<i>46</i>	85	76

Note: Values in italics for comparison. Club-organized sports: proportion of young people who play sport in a club; Δ: difference between playing sport in general and playing club-organized sport.

Table 4: Regular participation of young people in different sport contexts (indicators: playing sport ‘at least once per week’ or ‘frequently’). Percentages. Representative youth sport surveys for Germany

Survey year	Survey	N	Age	Commercial	
				Informal	Peer-groups
1987/88	Brettschneider & Bräutigam (1990)	4 200	13-21	12	24
1992	Kurz et al. (1996)	2 425	13-19	18	28
1995	Kurz & Tietjens (2000)	1 656	13-19	21	40

In summary, it seems that for many young people who engage in sports activities, the institutionally guaranteed consistency, and perhaps the methodical and systematic learning and training in sports are still as important as ever. But, at the same time, playing sport in an informal, self-regulated and self-arranged way is also gaining greater significance (Baur & Burmann, 2003a, 2003b).

4.3 Erosion of membership ties and commitments

If institutions and organisations lose acceptance in the course of the above mentioned de-institutionalization, it could lead to a situation where traditional sport clubs may be still popular, but that the membership ties become weaker. This assumption was tested with reference to three indicators, duration of membership, commitment to the sport club, and voluntary work. Surprisingly, the results were completely opposite to expectations!

(1) The data on the duration of membership hardly provide any grounds for the assumption that young people become only members on a short-term and so-called ‘trial’ basis. The mean duration is between 6 and 8 years (table 5, only differing with Brettschneider & Kleine, 2002). If this information is converted into age-related data, it shows, that on average young people who are members of a sport club belong to their clubs for more than 40% (!) of their life span.

Table 5: Mean duration of membership of young people in sport clubs. Representative youth sport surveys for Germany.

Survey year	Survey	Age	N	Membership in years
1978	Sack (1980)	12-18	1 719	6.2
1992	Kurz et al. (1996)	13-19	929	8.2
1995	Tietjens (2001)	13-19	798	8.2
1998	Brettschneider & Kleine (2002)	12-16	607	5.0 (female) / 5.2 (male)
2001	Baur & Braun (2003)	15-19	122	7.4

(2) The duration of membership already proves that young people do not join sport clubs temporarily. But the quality of membership could have changed to the extent that today’s young generations have departed from the ‘old ideals of commitment and loyalty’. However, the members’ commitment to their sport clubs is well-established (table 6). Quite remarkable is the strong commitment of the young members (almost 80% of the 15-19 old age group), and furthermore, boys show a higher commitment than girls.

Table 6: Membership commitment to sport clubs. Percentages. Survey of members (Germany 2001; Baur & Burrmann, 2003)

	Weak	Average	Strong	χ^2 -test
15-19 years ($N = 224$)	5	16	79	$p < .05$
30-49 years ($N = 696$)	10	24	66	
15 to 19 year-olds				
Boys	2	20	78	$p < .05$
Girls	11	6	83	

(3) Following the individualization-theory assumptions, it should be almost impossible to win adolescents over to do voluntary work. Young people would only involve themselves as ‘free-riders’ in voluntary associations, taking advantage of the club’s services but not contributing anything to these services. However, as before, the empirical data do not confirm these assumptions (table 7). If voluntary work represents, in principle, a limited resource and is not automatically forthcoming from all members, then the finding that almost half of young club-members are active in the running of a club can be interpreted as really ‘optimistic’: Young people are willing to do voluntary work.⁸

Table 7: Membership commitment to sport clubs. Percentages. Survey of members (Germany 2001; Baur & Burrmann, 2003)

	formal work (in a voluntary position)	Informal (without position)	Work neither	χ^2 -test
15-19 years ($N = 224$)	15	30	55	$p < .05$
30-49 years ($N = 696$)	28	28	44	
15 to 19 year-olds				
Boys	16	32	52	$p > .05$
Girls	16	25	59	

Notice: formal work in a voluntary position like trainer, referee, cashier etc.

4.4 Flexibility and ‘multiplication’ of sport activities

Those who want to keep up with ‘trends’ can no longer concentrate on one sport for an extended period of time. Variability is much more in demand. Some evidence does indeed speak for dissolution of more ‘concentrated’ activities in favour of more varied and ‘spread out’ ones (table 8):

- Today’s young people clearly change sport clubs more often than previous young generations.
- The proportion of multiple members, who belong to several sport clubs simultaneously, seems to have increased, too.
- In general, not only multiple memberships, but also multiple sport activities seem to have gone up. The data from a current youth sport survey, conducted by our own department, showed that in 2002 a 60 %-majority of young people who are active in sports, play sport in several social contexts at the same time.

Table 8: ‘Fluctuations’ during sport careers. Percentages. Representative youth sport surveys for Germany

Survey year	Survey	N	Multiple memberships	Change of sport clubs
1967/68	Artus (1974)	590	17	
1978	Sack (1980)	1 719	22	46
1987/88	Brettschneider & Bräutigam (1990)	1 856	67	
1992	Kurz et al. (1996)	959	35	67
1995	Tietjens (2001)	798	59(female)	56 (male)

All in all, sportisation includes more flexibility and multiplication of sports activities. That means young people get into different sports in more or less ‘rapid’ succession or simultaneously.

4.5 Socio-structural de-structuring

With the pluralization of sport culture and the resulting options, opportunities for access to sport have opened up for everyone; this implies that social differences in sport involvement must have levelled out. As a result, sport involvement is first and foremost defined by individual preferences, which are, however, separated from socio-structural indicators.

Again, contrary to these assumptions, one cannot recognize in sports, that socio-structural differentiation criteria have become irrelevant (table 9). The pluralization of sport culture does not automatically imply levelling out tendencies in sport involvement and in preferred sport activities.

Table 9: Sport involvement of young people. Percentages. Youth (sport) surveys for Germany.

Survey	N	Age	Total	Gender		Education year		
				Male	Female	Sec. school	Gram. school	
<i>General sport involvement</i>								
1954	Emnid (1955)	1 493	15-24	47	60	35		
1984	Shell (1985)	1 472	15-24	72	75	69	67	80
1999	Shell (2000)	4 546	15-24	81	85	76		
<i>Club-organised sport involvement: membership in sport clubs</i>								
1978	Sack (1980)	3 600	12-18	48	57	38	39	58
1987/88	Brettschneider & Bräutigam (1990)	4 079	13-21	46	54	38	38	62
1995	Tietjens (2001)	3 426	13-19	48	55	41	34	70
1998	Brettschneider & Kleine (2002)	1 565	12-16	52	60	45	38	63

For example, more elementary school than secondary school students, and more boys than girls are involved in sport; and the same is particularly true for sports in sport clubs.

To sum it up, despite the pluralization of sport culture, the social differences in sport involvement still exist, and pluralization has not led to the expected equal opportunities.¹⁰

5 Some Concluding remarks

5.1 *A short résumé*

Two results are particularly striking:

(1) Today (at least in Germany and perhaps also in other post-modern societies) a sportisation of youth culture can be observed to a degree that was hardly predictable in the mid 1950s. For today's young generations, playing sports has become an integral part of their lives. This sportisation takes place in two dimensions: a) on the level of objective infrastructures, and b) on the level of subjective sport interests. On one hand, sport infrastructures have been widely differentiated, so that the objective chances of becoming involved in sport have considerably increased compared to previous years: the number of sport clubs and commercial sport establishments is still growing and they are continually expanding their sports programs. The facilities that provide these informal sports can be found at almost every street corner, thus inviting people to come. On the other hand, these programs have provided more and more opportunities for young people, who have used it to their advantage, as it is reflected in the growing numbers. It is this interaction between the differentiating sport infrastructures and the increasing interests in sports that nourishes the sportisation of today's youth culture.¹¹

(2) In this sportisation two developments are running together: It seems that on one hand, (club)-organized sports are obviously still attractive for young people. On the other hand, the playing of informal sports and the advertisement of commercial sport offers have expanded. This is the trend which was described as the 'multiplication' of sport activities: an increasing number of young people seem to pursue their sport activities in sport clubs, in informal settings, and perhaps even in commercial sport establishments. This 'multiplication' of sports activities might explain the fact that today's young people might be perceived as doing some form of 'sport hopping'.

5.2 *Questions to socialization theory*

If the observations of these trends towards a sportisation of youth culture are correct, then new questions concerning the socialization theory need to be asked. Three questions will be addressed:

(1) If sport participation is playing a more and more important role in everyday lives of young people, then questions about a sport-related socialization generally gain in significance – and as a consequence, these questions become relevant for general socialization theory and research. To be more informative in the future, general socialization research should intensively study the issue of physical, motor- and sport-related socialization as a factor of development. This development should also include the development of the physically-based identity, which is a fundamental factor of general human development.

(2) The continuing sportisation of youth culture raises another question, which has not yet been adequately researched. For example, completely contradictory matters are being discussed (at least in Germany), without giving these contradictions a central theme. On one hand, it can be concluded without great exaggeration that no youth generation has ever played so much sport as today's young people (at least those who are growing up in post-modern societies). The typical 'couch potatoes' are nowhere to be found! On the other hand, there is the ongoing discussion of lack of exercise and the serious deficits in the physical, motor, and health development of young people, resulting in obesity, bad posture, cardiovascular, and psychosomatic diseases. Highly active young people being considered physically unfit? This question, without a doubt, demands a lot of theoretical and empirical research.

(3) At this point, a connection to another insufficiently researched question can be established: the question of the 'socialization benefits' of the various sport contexts. The trend towards the 'multiplication' of sport activities should lead to careful analyses of which socialization processes are occurring in what sport contexts and which socialization effects can be realistically expected. For example, hardly anything about the socialization in self-arranged and self-regulated informal sports is known – though these informal sport activities attract more and more young people. Another example is that club-organized sports are often overburdened with socialization expectations which, quite often, may lead to disillusionment and disappointment because, very often, the fact is overlooked that sport clubs are primarily leisure organisations and not educational establishments.

What is needed, are very subtle descriptions of the various contexts, in order to assess possible effects of socialization in these different contexts.

5.3 Two closing comments on analytical concepts

(1) In Germany 'sporthopping' has become a term which is mainly characterized by its lack of clarity and therefore, can be used freely and arbitrarily. It reveals an old methodological problem which is in need of more exactly defined and operationalized concepts. If one refers to the individualization-theory, and if one is interested in individualization processes in the field of sport, then more operational hypotheses must be justified, and subsequently, be proven empirically, in order to go 'beyond' pure speculation. It is advisable to distinguish between different aspects of individualization. Based on this differentiation, various degrees of individualization in the social field of sport can be observed– which has been proven by the presented empirical data.

(2) At this point, the intriguing question rises, how far can one refer to the social area of sport in order to follow social processes of individualization in societies in general. Assuming, that individualization is a significant indicator of general social modernization, and further, that individualization processes also emerge in the social field of sport, then sport-related individualization processes could be taken as appropriate indicators for the degree of modernization of societies between traditionalism and post-modernism. With this

in mind, it would be possible to apply the results of the analysis, (the case study in Germany), for intercultural comparisons of sport cultures and societies.

The extensive and laudable work by De Knop, Engström, Skirstad and Weiss (1996) about 'Worldwide trends in youth sport' proves the far reaching concurrences in the developments of sport cultures in those countries which can be classified as post-modern societies – for example, countries in western Europe or North America. For that reason, it would be very intriguing to compare these countries and their sports systematically with the 'sport cultures' in 'traditional' countries – such as countries in South America, Indonesia or Africa. These particular studies would not only describe sport-related participation rates comparatively, but they would be able to explain sport participation in the context of different sport cultures and different degrees of individualization and modernization of societies.

“Any analysis of sport is related to an analysis of society as a whole”. It was a long time ago, when I heard this statement by José Maria Cagigal, whom I met at the Olympic Academy in 1967. This statement has aged since then, but it is still relevant, and therefore it is very important to try to 'translate' this statement into intelligent and complex research designs.

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