

SPORT PARTICIPATION AND AGEING

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Aim of abstract/paper - research question

How does sport participation (participation yes/no and frequency; type of sport; organisational form; motivation) of the German population change with increasing age?

Theoretical background or literature review*

In an ageing society, the effects of age on the demand for sport are of particular interest for policy makers, private companies and sport organizers (clubs, private sport organizers). Some effects of increasing age on sport participation have been analysed by Breuer, 2004; Woll, 2006; Pahmeier, 2008; Klein, 2009. Further, Breuer, Wicker, Hallmann & Feiler (2010) have conducted a meta-analysis of existing studies on the effects of ageing on sport participation, with most cross sectional studies showing a decrease in participation with increasing age, while longitudinal studies have indicated that participation does not necessarily decline with age. Rather, the types of sport practiced change and the intensity of participation generally declines. These findings go in line with the theoretical background explaining the complexity of investigating this relation (Breuer et al., 2010, 62), showing that the effects of ageing have to be divided into a *physical factor* (decline of physical capabilities), a *mental factor* (changes in attitudes/motivations), a *social factor* (age norms/perceptions in society) and an *economic factor* (changes in monetary and time resources). Accordingly, providing recent and reliable information on the effects of these four factors of ageing on sport participation are of high relevance for all stakeholders involved (like policy makers, private companies on the supply side and sports clubs) and is therefore the aim of this paper.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

For this project, a sample of n=7,031 persons, being representative for the German population regarding age, gender and place of residence, was interviewed using CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews) based on the Rösch telephone sample in late 2009. The interviews provided representative data on sport participation in Germany, including the types of sport practiced, frequency, organisational forms and motives behind the participation.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

The results show that overall 55.5% of the German population participated at least once in a while in sport in 2009. 34.3% participated on a weekly basis. The peak of the level of participation is in youth and child age with 56.3% participating weekly. The levels decrease until the age of around 35, with only 26% participating at least once a week. From that point on, the overall rate of participation stagnates and finally declines, whereas the rate of weekly participation rises slightly until levels of around 35% are reached at age 65. As far as gender is concerned, more men are active at younger age, while more women than men are active with increasing age.

The preferred organizational form of the sport activities in Germany is self-organized with 67% of all participation taking place in this form. Sports clubs are host to 22% and other forms make up for the remaining 11%. In childhood and youth, the majority of sport takes place in sport clubs (57%). Only 18% of the age group 16-25 is active in sport clubs and 12% of the age groups from 26 until 55. The levels go back up slightly to 19% in the age groups from 56 and upward.

The dominant reasons/motivations to participate are "fun" and "health/fitness", followed by "being in nature" and "recreation". The motivations "health/fitness", "being in nature" and "recreation" are becoming more relevant with increasing age while "fun", "body shaping", "performance" and "lifestyle" are losing some of their importance.

The most popular types of sport overall are bike riding (34.4% of the population), swimming (30.7%), hiking (26.5%) and running (25.1%). The most popular team sport is football at rank 9 with 11.3% of the population participating. With increasing age, the preferred types of sport change. As football is the number one sport for youths and number 2 for the 16-25 year-olds, it loses its relevance for older age groups. Bike riding, swimming and running are popular through all age groups. Hiking, gymnastics and health-oriented sports in general are among the most popular types of sport for the older age groups. These results show that with increasing age, the preference for certain types of sport changes, but the overall participation rate, especially for weekly participation, does not decline. This may be caused by the decline of general performance capabilities (physical factor) and changes in the age norms in nowadays societies, where active seniors are more and more common and appreciated (social factor). As mentioned above, the relevance of the motive "health/fitness" increases with age (mental factor). Further, the increased availability of time (economic factor) may also be a reason for the slight increase of participation rates from the age of 55 on.

The target group of active middle-aged and senior citizens is growing. Politics and business should act accordingly. Policy makers should aim at providing the infrastructure for the active elderly, like bicycle paths, hiking trails and support the supply of health-oriented sport classes in order to meet the sport demand of these older age groups. This would also help decreasing the growing costs of the health system. Private companies can learn from these results and specifically target these age groups in their communication activities and offered supply.

References

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