

Review

# Changes in Sports Participation Trends: A Comparative Theoretical Analysis of the Case of the Municipality of Zaragoza

Celia Marcen <sup>1,\*</sup>, Irela Arbones-Arque <sup>2</sup> and Dominic Malcolm <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology and Sociology, Universidad de Zaragoza, 50009 Zaragoza, Spain

<sup>2</sup> Institut Nacional d'Educació Física de Catalunya, Universidad de Lleida, 25192 Lleida, Spain

<sup>3</sup> School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK

\* Correspondence: c.marcen@unizar.es

## Abstract

This paper seeks to test the explanatory potential of different sociological perspectives in relation to the development of new sport models that reflect the growth of leisure sport participation in urban outdoor places and the decline in traditional practices in associations and clubs. In this regard, this study employs an analytical framework to examine global trends, with a particular focus on the specific context of the municipality of Zaragoza (Spain). With a multi-method approach, a 10-year-period dataset (2009–2019) incorporating sport participation surveys, observational data, and a focus group study is analysed. Three theories are tested: Maffesoli's neo-tribes; neo-Bourdieuian ideas about urban subcultures; and Elias's theory of civilizing processes. The results show a congruence between the three theories regarding identity negotiation, commodification, and community sense. However, disparities were found between the three theories, with one or more of them exhibiting an absence of class consciousness that supports subcultural interpretation and distinct notions of change versus continuity of the analyzed phenomena. This paper concludes that recent sports participation trends are best explained with reference to the quest of excitement and using healthism as a dominant ideology or social imperative.

**Keywords:** arousal; civilizing processes; health; leisure; neo-tribes; quest for excitement; subcultures; Spain



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## 1. Introduction

The relevance that physical activity and sport have acquired in developed societies has meant that the motives for sport participation, as well as barriers to sport participation, have been prolifically studied worldwide. The desire, on the one hand, is to know the reasons that lead a person to participate or not participate in these types of activities and, on the other, to facilitate the implementation of more effective public policies (Lera-López and Marco 2018; Molanorouzi et al. 2015). It has been found that the preferred setting for physical activity and sport has, in many world regions, moved from private (gym, sport center, or home) to public places like streets, parks, or nearby natural surroundings. In the United States of America, outdoor sporting activities are the second most popular form of physical exercise, with 49% of the population participating in them in some capacity (Physical Activity Council 2018). A similar trend is evident in Europe, where data indicate that parks and other outdoor locations are the most prevalent settings for exercise (European Commission 2018). Lifestyle sports (as individual, flexible, non-competitive,

and fitness-oriented) and outdoor sports are expanding across Europe (Collins and Brymer 2023; Scheerder et al. 2005).

Spain typifies these trends, and the Eurobarometer (European Commission 2018) shows that 53% of Spanish people exercise outdoors and that 77% do not participate in any sport club or association (against a European average of 69%). Even taking into account that surveys conducted in 2020 have likely been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, an exacerbated desire to recover physical activity in the open air once restrictions were reduced is evident (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte 2021). Sports participation has increased by 6 percentage points compared to a previous survey (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte 2015), increasing, in turn, the proportion of those who practice physical activity outdoors. While outdoor spaces are preferred by the general population (47.1%), there are differences in preferences for outdoor spaces when considering age, sex, educational level, or socioeconomic status. Preference ‘for the practice of individual sport has increased to 66.1% of the population analyzed, compared to 11.6% who leaned towards sports collectives or the 22.3% who do not show any preference’ (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte 2021, p. 27).

These changes have been called ‘new models’ of sport participation (Arbones-Arque 2018; García Ferrando 2006; Zuev and Popova 2018). Drawing on contemporary sociological theories, these developments could be interpreted in different ways. A review of the literature on changes in sports participation was conducted, and three sociological theoretical frameworks that address the issue were identified: (a) postmodern neo-tribes (Dawes 2016; Maffesoli 2016); (b) urban subcultures (Bourdieu 2016; Dinges 2011; Harvey 1987); and (c) an evolution of Western civilizing processes (Dunning 2005, 2010; Elias and Dunning 1986). Unlike other studies, where the main objective has been to interpret the data from one particular theoretical perspective, this article is the first to compare sociological perspectives in order to discuss their potential to explain not only specific sport modalities or behaviors, but to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the aforementioned phenomenon. It also addresses a frequent shortcoming of sociological research, namely being primarily theoretical or primarily applied. To this end, this analysis can inform future studies in this field. In order to demonstrate an understanding of the changes and trends that occur in sports participation, it is necessary to employ a combination of theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that these perspectives are connected to one another in a manner that avoids reductionism. In this sense, applied to the case of a municipality in northern Spain, this study deals with global processes that can be generalized, to a certain extent, to many other regions.

## 2. Review of Theories

### 2.1. Postmodernism, Sport and Neo-Tribalism

Postmodern theories posit that we are currently experiencing a new era, characterised by the erosion of traditional ideologies and the emergence of more fragmented and diverse personal identities (Lyotard 1984). In this context, values have undergone a shift: instead of progress and stability, we observe uncertainty, rapid change, and an increasing emphasis on individual consumption and self-expression (Bauman 2010; Inglehart 2000). It is evident that personal lifestyle choices, including sporting activities, play a significant role in the construction of identity, particularly among young, educated individuals.

Lifestyle sports, including running, skateboarding, and surfing, are frequently regarded as more expressive and less competitive in nature than traditional sports. However, authors such as Poulson (2016) have employed Foucault’s theories on discipline to argue that such practices are increasingly influenced by market forces and standardization, which have transformed what appears to be ‘alternative’ into a form that closely resembles mainstream sport. A significant proportion of participants, particularly those from the middle

class, engage in these activities as a means of evading work-related pressures and as a means of experiencing a sense of authenticity. Nevertheless, authenticity has evolved into a commercial entity, employed as a means of marketing products and lifestyles to consumers who aspire to distinguish themselves or embody a sense of uniqueness.

These changes are related to a broader cultural shift from social class-based subcultures to what some scholars have termed 'post-subcultures' or 'neotribes,' that is to say, fluid social groups formed around shared tastes and consumption practices (Muggleton 2000; Robards and Bennet 2011). In contemporary postmodern societies characterized by an abundance of media, sport has emerged as a pivotal mechanism for the construction of both personal image and collective identity (Koski 2008). These neo-tribes are defined as communities of people who establish connections through the medium of common rituals, dress styles, and shared experiences (Dawes 2016; Maffesoli 1996).

In contrast to conventional communities, these tribal entities exhibit a distinctive characteristic of openness and flexibility, allowing individuals to affiliate with multiple groups. The prevailing ethos of sporting activities in this locale is not predicated on the principles of competition or performance, but rather on the concepts of belonging and emotional resonance and the establishment of shared meanings. The transition of private activities, such as personal habits and identity construction, into a public sphere has been a subject of considerable interest. This shift has been influenced by social media and consumer culture, which have played a significant role in shaping these practices. The construction of identities in full view of others, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as 'personal branding', serves to blur the boundaries between the self and the market.

In this sense, contemporary leisure practices, encompassing informal sporting activities, transcend the realm of individual pursuits, serving as conduits for the establishment of emotional connections and the sharing of collective experiences. This challenges the prevailing view that the rise of these sports is solely attributable to individualism (Burmann et al. 2019; Schwartz 1994). Instead, these practices represent a new form of shared culture, in which identity is created through rituals, language, dress, and values that bring people together.

## 2.2. Late Modernity and Urban Sports' Subcultures

In recent decades, certain critics of postmodernism have drawn attention to the fact that an excessive focus on subjectivity and discourse can result in a neglect of objective facts, ethical responsibility, and political action (Edwards and Jones 2009; Sokal and Bricmont 1999). From a sociological perspective, traditional factors such as age, gender, and social class remain essential to understanding who participates in sport and how (Scheerder et al. 2005). The factors under discussion have been shown to determine both the level of participation and the types of sports chosen by people, with the social environment having a significant impact on these decisions.

In accordance with the theoretical framework proposed by Bourdieu (2016), the social class to which an individual belongs exerts a significant influence on their individual tastes and preferences, which, in turn, function as a form of communication. For instance, even within societies that boast extensive access to consumption, individuals persist in utilising cultural expressions such as sport to articulate their social standing (Mehus 2005). Critical theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) have argued that mass culture, including sport, has the capacity to inhibit critical thinking and reinforce existing power structures.

It is important to note that sporting choices are not neutral; rather, they reflect broader power dynamics, including access to economic, cultural, and social resources. In this context, urban sports subcultures—such as running, skateboarding, or cycling—can be understood as spaces where alternative identities are constructed and, at times, act as

forms of resistance to dominant norms (Brake 1985; Cohen 1965). These subcultures characteristically emerge from working-class environments and are expressed through distinctive styles, including clothing and language, as well as behaviour.

However, it should be noted that these alternative sports do not constitute an alternative to the prevailing economic system. Conversely, a significant proportion of these species have been commercialised. As Dinces (2011) observes, contemporary sports such as skateboarding and surfing are now marketed through a narrative of ‘authenticity’ that balances elements of rebelliousness and marketability. It is evident that entrepreneurs operating within these niche markets frequently present themselves as ‘authentic’ in order to appeal to a broader audience, extending beyond the confines of the athletic community to encompass consumers who espouse a certain way of life. This demonstrates the capacity of countercultural sports to become integrated within new market sectors that are shaped by capitalist economic frameworks (Harvey 1987).

### 2.3. Civilizing Processes and the Quest for Excitement

It has been posited by certain sociologists that postmodern theories have a tendency to exaggerate change and fragmentation, whilst simultaneously ignoring the ways in which societies also demonstrate continuity. In the context of Norbert Elias’ theory of civilising processes, sport assumes a significant role in facilitating individuals’ ability to cope with the demands of highly structured and controlled daily lives (Elias and Dunning 1986). In contemporary societies, where a plethora of rules and norms regulate behaviour, sport and leisure offer a space for the ‘controlled release’ of emotions in a socially acceptable manner, as Elias theorised.

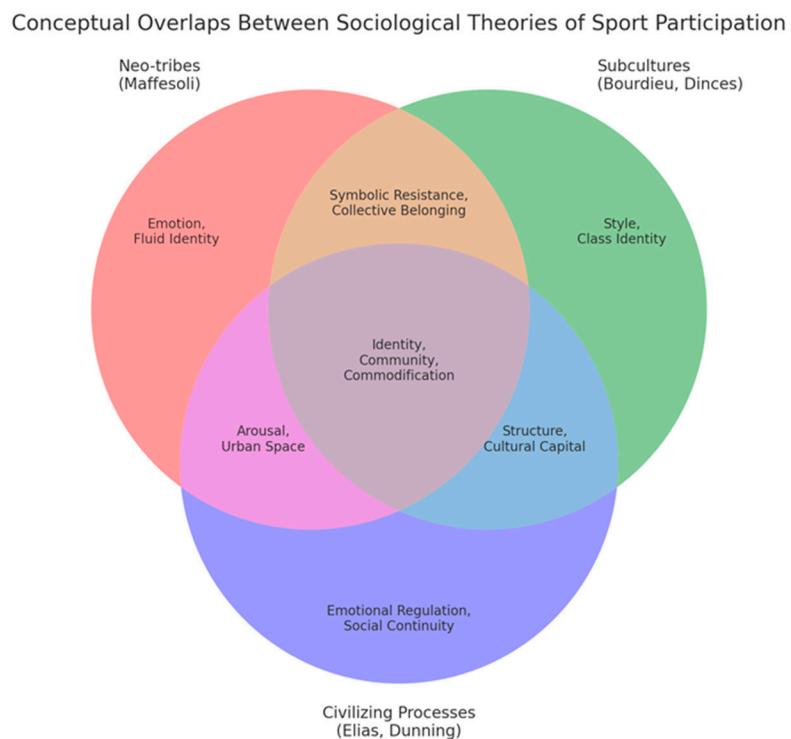
From this standpoint, sporting activities aid individuals in extricating themselves from habitual practices (a process termed ‘deroutinisation’) and experiencing sensations of excitement, movement, and emotional expression. According to Dunning (1996, 2010), this emotional dimension is of fundamental importance, as sport represents more than mere exercise or health: it encompasses feelings, belonging, and expression. The following three components of leisure activities have been identified:

- The term ‘sociability’ is defined as the enjoyment of engaging in activities with other individuals, even in situations that involve a certain degree of risk;
- Mobility is defined as the pleasure derived from physical movement. This concept is frequently characterised as the state of ‘flow’, whereby an individual experiences a sense of complete engagement and enjoyment in the activity being performed (Csikszentmihalyi and Mihaly 1990);
- Mimesis can be defined as the symbolic and emotional commitment that distinguishes sport from everyday life, but always within controlled limits.

These elements enable individuals to experience a sense of emotional vitality without compromising social conventions. For instance, the experience of triumph achieved in sporting competitions has been shown to induce a potent, even euphoric condition that Elias and Dunning term ‘emotional catharsis’.

However, in contemporary competitive and neoliberal societies, individuals frequently find themselves compelled to transgress these boundaries in order to distinguish themselves or achieve a distinct social standing. This creates tension: on the one hand, sport offers emotional relief and a sense of identity; on the other, it can become another space where social pressures and inequalities are manifested. The ability to strike a balance between emotional stimulation and social control is pivotal to comprehending the contemporary practice of sport.

Figure 1 elucidates the manner in which the various theories coalesce.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual overlaps between sociological theories of sport participation.

### 3. Research Methods

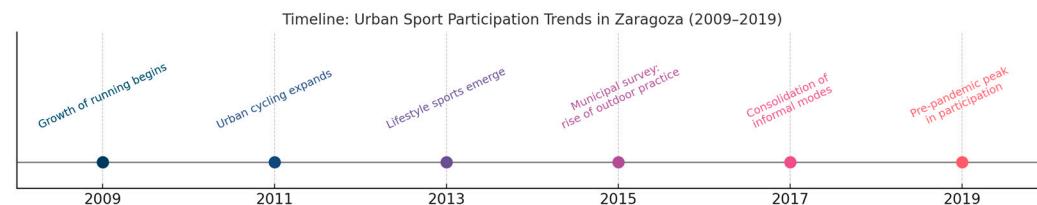
This study adopts a multi-method longitudinal research design (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) to examine the evolution and characteristics of sport participation and physical activity in urban spaces in Zaragoza, a medium-sized city in northeast Spain. Data were collected over a 10-year period (2009–2019) through three complementary methods, each of which addresses different dimensions of the phenomenon under study. The previous studies on which this work is based were carried out by the authors and have been approved by the Ethics Committee for Research of the Government of Aragon.

- (a) Quantitative survey data: Nationally published sport participation surveys were combined with two local, city-based surveys conducted in 2009 and 2015. These surveys aimed to assess general interest in sport, participation habits, use of facilities, perceptions of civic sport policies, and overall satisfaction (Zaragoza Deporte Municipal 2016). The local surveys used a stratified sampling design (by district, sex, and age) with a sample of 1200 residents aged  $\geq 14$  years. The sampling error was  $\pm 2.86\%$  ( $p = q = 50\%$ , 95.5% confidence level);
- (b) Systematic observational study: Physical activity in urban green areas was analysed using the URBANS-OS (Urban Sports Observational System), a validated instrument (Arbones-Arque et al. 2018). Observations were conducted in the city's largest green park (Parque del Agua) during two seasonal periods (spring and autumn), across four times of day (morning, noon, afternoon, evening). Observers, previously trained for inter-rater reliability, recorded variables such as age group, gender, type of physical activity (individual/group, led/independent), and intensity. A total of 1715 park users were observed during 32 observation sessions;
- (c) Qualitative focus groups: To gain a deeper understanding of the emerging patterns from the quantitative and observational phases, three focus groups were organised, comprising participants from different sports: runners, cyclists, and those who practise minority sports. The discussions covered topics such as the increased use of green spaces for sports, the evolution and institutionalisation of these activities, perceptions

of quality of life, and future trends. These topics were chosen based on previous findings and the literature (Arbones-Arque 2018).

This triangulated approach enables a comprehensive, contextualised analysis that combines large-scale patterns with in-depth knowledge. Combining methods supports data validation, enriches interpretation, and improves the robustness of the results.

The timeline of these trends is displayed in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Timeline of urban sport participation trends in Zaragoza (2009–2019).

This research fulfils the five characteristics of mixed methods, namely (a) triangulation of the results; (b) complementarity; (c) discovery of contradictions; (d) sequential development of instruments; and (e) evolution of the project as it develops. This approach is carried out through applying three methods: surveys, direct observation, and a focus group (Castañer et al. 2013), which consequently improves the validity and reliability of the results (Guba and Lincoln 1989).

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools for the purposes of minor language review (DeepL GmbH, DeepL Pro Starter, DeepL SE, Cologne, Germany) and graph elaboration (OpenAI, ChatGPT-4, San Francisco, CA, USA).

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. General Patterns of Sport Participation in Zaragoza City

The survey on local sports participation in Zaragoza demonstrates that 70% of citizens express interest in sports in general, with 60.6% regularly participating in sports (Marcen and Malcolm 2020). The correlation between sporting activities and improved health is a persistent phenomenon, as evidenced by the preponderance of responses that designate sport as a 'source of health' (98.4%) and health as the predominant motivation for engagement (45.7%). Interaction with other people is another valued aspect (94%), but 73.4% of people practise 'on their own', i.e., outside clubs, associations, or federations. In such contexts, the most popular sports are running, cycling, and swimming. A survey has revealed that public places represent the most popular locations for exercise in urban areas (38.2%), surpassing public facilities and private gyms in terms of popularity.

The observational study lends further support to these data, demonstrating that 89.2% of park users engaged in some form of physical activity during the observation periods (Arbones-Arque 2018). The most prevalent activities were walking (40.9%), running (14%), playing in the playground (13.3%), cycling (8.6%), and exercising (6.6%). However, in accordance with the findings of other surveys, only 40% of park users were female (Arbones-Arque et al. 2018). The updated data support the central thesis that contemporary patterns of sports participation are undergoing a profound transformation, especially in urban outdoor environments. The considerable rise in sports participation in Spain, as evidenced by the 2022 national survey (Consejo Superior de Deportes 2022), aligns with broader European trends (European Commission 2022). This shift is indicative of a transition from conventional club participation to more flexible, self-managed, and socially expressive forms of sport.

In the six-year period between surveys (2009–2015), the sports that experienced the greatest surge in popularity were running, cycling, and minority sports that involve a cer-

tain degree of controlled risk ([Zaragoza Deporte Municipal 2016](#)). Consequently, Zaragoza is a city where the general trends in the development of new sports models are more pronounced than the national and European average. Furthermore, Zaragoza is regarded as a model city from a marketing perspective and as the Spanish Ohio in terms of electoral processes, which establishes the city as an ideal laboratory for this study ([El País 2019](#)).

The present article has focused on the general participation of the population. As a result, it has not been possible to deal in greater depth with aspects such as gender, origin, social class, and other structural factors that clearly affect sports participation and intervene in it. Despite this, there are several examples where they are key elements for understanding social dynamics.

#### *4.2. Micro, Meso and Macro Explanations*

The increase in sport practice in the urban outdoors was explained by focus group participants in terms of micro, meso, and macro factors.

##### **4.2.1. Micro Level: Individual Motivations and Social Meaning**

At the micro-individual level, participants attributed the phenomenon to people's beliefs about health and the benefits of physical activity, the establishment of social relationships or connections, comparison with others ('if they can do it, so can I'), and following social trends or fads ('I don't know if it's really a fad or contagious').

The results of this study highlight three key dynamics: (1) a strong alignment between sport-related and health-related motivations, (2) the symbolic and social importance of informal participation, and (3) the growing commercialisation and commodification of lifestyle sports. These changes indicate a convergence between theoretical perspectives. For instance, the sense of community and shared symbolic practices evident among runners and cyclists align with Maffesoli's concept of neo-tribes ([Maffesoli 2016](#)). Furthermore, the negotiation of public space and the emergence of grassroots initiatives are indicative of aspects of subcultural resistance and identity construction, albeit without clear class boundaries, which weakens the explanatory power of traditional subculture theory.

##### **4.2.2. Meso Level: Cultural and Social Structures**

At the meso level, participants identified the flexible range of activities on offer (in terms of time, space, and company), the increase in free time compared to the past, cultural change and sports culture (especially for women: 'after work... we've swapped the bar culture for the running culture'), the democratisation of sport, and the normalisation of urban sports. This signifies a substantial shift in the prevailing attitudes of citizens with regard to such activities. However, it should be noted that this transformation has not yet been fully realised, as evidenced by the following statement: 'Not long ago, if you weren't a professional...'.

##### **4.2.3. Macro Level: Political, Economic, and Urban Contexts**

At the macro level, focus group participants identified the implementation of public policies for safety ('the creation of these spaces has allowed more people to go out and engage in physical activity'), development and promotion ('there is political interest in promoting bicycle use'), city expansion and the demands of a growing population, the effects of the economic crisis ('And now that we don't have any money...'), and political expression and protest (see the discussion on the Savage Cranks below).

#### *4.3. Identity, Authenticity and Sport Typologies*

The Eliasian concept of a 'controlled chaos' of emotions remains particularly apt to describe the motivations of these new participants, who seek excitement, risk, and

emotional reward within socially accepted limits (Elias and Dunning 1986). The motivation to challenge oneself, to be part of communities with a relaxed structure, and to maintain a personal but public identity through sport indicates that new sporting practices are simultaneously individualising and collectivising.

From a postmodern perspective, these trends are indicative of a shift towards new values, such as the desire for autonomy and freedom in liquid societies, where flexible commitments that do not generate solid or long-term commitments are preferred, and the establishment of informal groups in which the individual can integrate or disengage from what Bauman (2010) describes as simple and painless forms. These training groups, or 'encounters', satisfy the desire for social relationships, which motivates many people to engage in these modalities that do not require long-term obligations or commitments. Furthermore, the relatively rapid improvement that can be achieved without much sacrifice (instant gratification) has been found to be a significant stimulant. This endeavour is imbued with a profound symbolic dimension, as articulated by Sato et al. (2014), who describe it as 'the epic'. This term refers to an endeavour of exceptional length and an arduous nature, one that necessitates considerable effort and personal sacrifice. It thus finds resonance with the heroes depicted in the ancient Greek epics, where such endeavours were a norm and their consequence was often the loss of life. The viral spread of such content, which chronicles novel challenges surmounted, remarkable achievements accomplished, and the potency of physical presentation (termed 'pose'), is met with immediate approval on social media platforms through the act of 'liking'. This phenomenon functions as a personal branding strategy, enabling the individual to distinguish themselves within their respective fields (Kumar and Makarova 2008).

#### 4.4. Participation, Institutions and Social Critique

The rise of solo sports can be compared, in terms of social processes, to the growing disengagement of the general population (and young people in particular) from institutions, and to the weakening of social consciousness through 'mass culture' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972). A significant proportion of the participants, specifically 98%, engaged in sporting activities at the water park autonomously, that is to say, without the supervision of an instructor. This observation pertains to both individual and group activities. This assertion is corroborated by survey data, which indicate that a mere 21 percent of participants possess a federation licence, while a significant proportion of 33.6 percent have never been affiliated with a sports club or association.

For the participants, a discernible and insurmountable chasm exists between federations and athletes. Focus group participants accused federations of elitism and of failing to connect with the needs of a new generation of athletes. This generation is very different from traditional federation members, and they seek the support of federations for their participation. Affiliated athletes regard popular athletes as 'domingueros', a term that is considered derogatory and which translates literally as 'Sunday athletes' (the term refers to occasional participants who tend to engage in sport on Sundays, without much commitment—similar in terms of time to 'weekend warriors', but with less intensity). The dynamic relationship between these two factors has been further exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic of the novel strain of coronavirus. The increasing popularity of outdoor spaces, heightened awareness of health issues, and evolving work-life routines have collectively led to a democratisation of urban physical activity. This lends further support to the notion that recreational sport has evolved into a public health strategy and a form of symbolic capital that is accessible to a diverse range of social groups.

#### 4.5. The Urban and the Tribal: Gender, Space, and Belonging

The concept of 'neotribes' has been described as communities with shared tastes (Dawes 2016; Maffesoli 2016), with porous boundaries linked to uncertainty (Kumar and Makarova 2008). This concept is one that fits quite well with the groups that participate in running and cycling, as well as with some of the urban sports that are analysed herein. For instance, a participant in the cycling group remarked: 'Individuals partake in sightseeing activities within the locale, appreciating the surrounding environment, engaging in sporting pursuits, and dining out. There is also a propensity to undertake these activities as a family or in groups, as opposed to individually.' In a similar vein, a participant in a discussion group focused on running alluded to 'groups that share similar lifestyles, for instance, the group of parents at school... groups of friends...'.

As was noted in the review of theories, territory is another relevant aspect for a tribe. In this sense, neo-tribes and urban subcultures can be said to have a point of convergence. The city, as both a physical and symbolic space, provides a framework for the reproduction of hegemonic values, but also a possibility for the production of new social discourses (MacKay and Dallaire 2013; Weiß 2021). This is evidenced in many urban sports (e.g., skateboarding or parkour) that are based on the display and reaffirmation of masculinity (Kidder 2013). In all three discussion groups, the city is shown to be a structural resource for maintaining and constructing gender identities through the renegotiation of gender in spaces (Carr 2017). The research identified this construction of gender and space in 'The Savage Crancks' (a women's cycling association), for which the bicycle is regarded as a further instrument of women's empowerment. Among the runners of the 10K Challenge (a running club for women who start from scratch to prepare for a 10 km race in 3 months), the process of training involves a renegotiation (not always free of conflict and contradictions) of public-private space at the family level.

Finally, the notion of identity or sense of belonging (Madgin et al. 2016), which implies the existence of emotional ties between people and their environment, is reflected in the approach to minority sports. In this context, space and the city become an extension of the athlete and a means through which to express themselves and experiment with their bodies ('It's not just that the bike is an extension of your body...'; 'you are one with the route... and with the group'; 'being part of the river, in a family activity, with friends...').

#### 4.6. Markets, Authenticity, and the Future of Urban Sports

A recurrent theme in the research data was the manner in which the prevailing economic circumstances, colloquially designated as 'austerity', contributed to the perpetuation of the studied phenomenon in multiple ways. The economic crisis has motivated many people who previously spent money on physical activity (e.g., gym membership fees) to take up a practice that, in principle, requires minimal investment, such as buying inexpensive trainers or non-specialised sportswear. The advent of these practices has had a stimulatory effect on the sector, not only with regard to an increase in demand for sports products, but also with regard to the emergence of personal trainers, training groups for the improvement of fitness or the preparation for specific events, and a market for organised sports events and services. As previously mentioned, the high level of demand in this area has resulted in the establishment of a variety of commercial enterprises. However, given the absence of regulatory oversight, a significant proportion of participants have noted the absence of a professional standard in the delivery of these services, and, in numerous instances, the inadequate training received by those tasked with the planning and execution of these activities. In certain instances, the opportunism of these self-proclaimed 'entrepreneurs' is subject to direct condemnation, as they are regarded as individuals who seek to capitalise on prevailing trends with the primary objective of generating profit through economies

of scale and mass appeal. This underscores the ongoing debate surrounding the concept of 'authenticity' in entrepreneurship. While authentic entrepreneurs are able to sustain themselves, their livelihoods are precarious, as they must maintain a delicate balance to preserve the values that confer their legitimacy. The debate among the participants is characterised by a dichotomy between opportunity and opportunism, which are viewed through the lens of personal and professional ethics.

In the discussion group with participants in minority sports, there was intense debate on several occasions that reflected the irreconcilable notions that (a) these sports need structures and professionalisation in order to be visible (Le Breton 2002) and (b) that this is perceived as a process of domestication through which the original essence of these activities is lost and the underlying values are corrupted (some prefer a 'pure state', even if this means low levels of participation).

The relationships between the different elements of urban sports participation are shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Infographic: cycle of urban sport participation.

The majority of respondents advocate for increased regulation in the future, both at the legal and management levels, as well as a reduction in the number of groups (due to the disappearance of some or the merger of several). The emergence of large commercial brands is also anticipated, in which companies see the possibility of a profitable market resulting from the commodification of sporting lifestyles (Dinces 2011; Mehus 2005; Robards and Bennet 2011).

This aspect is therefore positioned at a crossroads between the theories that are analysed herein, being indicative of neotribal identity consumption, a subcultural lifestyle, and the result of civilisation processes. Participants in the focus groups on lifestyle and cycling recognise an increase in internal regulation, based on the culture of the new generation, which is more aware of the benefits of sustainable mobility and mutual respect.

Furthermore, they predict an evolution towards longer and more arduous sporting activities and events to prove to themselves, the community, and social media that they are

capable of self-control at levels never before achieved (Elias 2000; Maguire 1993). However, they also express a desire to maintain the thrill and optimal excitement that is necessary to motivate participants (Dunning 1996; Elias and Dunning 1986). When confronted with a challenge, such as the completion of an event or the establishment of a new personal best, they seek to surpass these achievements. This pursuit of excellence leads to the aspiration of increasing the distance covered, the complexity of the challenge, or the level of difficulty.

Participants considered this period to be, at least in part, a fad or a protracted yet impermanent social trend. Consequently, this form of sporting activity can be considered as having its origins in the need and/or desire of individuals to participate in leisure activities that provide them with social differentiation (Bourdieu 2016). However, it also suggests a certain social control through the demonstration that one is capable of training and participating in this type of challenge, and of persisting in the activity until achieving goals that demonstrate the individual's self-control and compliance with social norms regarding self-care. In other words, healthism as a dominant ideology is posited (Lupton 1995; Malcolm 2016; Shipway and Holloway 2016). In summary, it can be posited that this phenomenon can be considered a cult of youth, in which health and sport are held in high esteem and the athletic image is held in high social regard (Maffesoli 2016).

## 5. Conclusions

Although we can find various aspects of urban subcultures in the sports that were analysed in Zaragoza (sport identity, engagement, uniformity and autonomy, and a lifestyle), the truth is that the term defines a certain identification of social class or class culture, and this precondition is not observed in either the survey data, observations, or group interviews. In general terms, the city's sport follows the stratification patterns that one would expect, with young, educated, and working men of middle and upper-middle class status participating in sports to the greatest extent. However, in the sports that concern us, the reality is that the athletes come from very different social strata. It is therefore difficult to explain the phenomenon in terms of subculture. The participants do not seem either to have a countercultural or resistance character (except perhaps if we look at female participation). The use of public space can be seen as a form of appropriation, but also as an attempt on the part of the institutions to permit regulated use, even if this encourages certain conflicts, as seen in the case of bike lanes, of the newly open facilities, and the use of downtown streets for races.

Regarding the postmodern consideration of these sports as neo-tribes, the findings confirm the idea that we are seeing the emergence of communities of shared meanings and tastes. This leads to the vision of these sports as lifestyle sports, albeit with consequent commodification, as well as an area where taste is generating an element of differentiation (providing further links to the three studied theories). Community feeling has been proved in various narrations of the different focus groups, and a lifestyle associated with health and sport has also been shown. Individuals observing the differences that come from commodification may be more or less conscious of the standardization of alternative sports (Poulson 2016), the emergence of new markets through 'flexible accumulation' (Dinces 2011), or commodified bodies (Maguire 1993). The updated evidence reaffirms the need to approach contemporary sport participation as a hybrid phenomenon that draws from multiple theoretical frameworks. While urban subcultures help explain the symbolic resistance and alternative values found in lifestyle sports, the lack of clear class-based cohesion challenges their centrality. Instead, the postmodern concept of neo-tribes and the process-sociological approach of Elias and Dunning offer stronger interpretive lenses.

Concepts of identity and authenticity are also common to the three analysed theories. Identity is managed with two parameters: prioritizing or not the competition (ath-

lete/other identities) and ‘doing it’; and authenticity—publicly and repeatedly showing the behaviours that are supposed to be associated with that sporting identity (rituals, practices, consumption) to achieve the individual and collective effervescence needed to maintain optimal levels of arousal (Dunning 2005, 2010). But competitiveness is not always socially valued, so many of these ‘performance popular athletes’ identify pride and effort as reasons to participate in competitions regulated by social agencies (Shipway and Holloway 2016). The ‘winning experiences’ has evolved towards the ‘finisher experience’, in a democratic way, extending the champion’s mentality to sports participants more generally, and breaking out from traditional institutions but remaining eager for competition.

According to postmodern postulates, these identities would be fluid or changing, yet the results presented here show that a person is considered an athlete if they can demonstrate a certain skill. Liquidity is only manifest in the ease by which people can change sports, something that Elias and Dunning would mainly attribute to the loss of arousal rather than fluidity or fashion. Neo-tribes, as temporary, porous, and emotionally driven collectives, fit well with current urban sport communities that gather through shared tastes, social media, and public visibility. At the same time, the civilizing process perspective underscores the continuity of emotional regulation, health imperatives, and the structured unpredictability that sport provides.

However, if it could be considered that a member of the tribe shares feelings, emotions, and passions—which also fits perfectly with Elias’ theory of leisure—we see similarities across the three types of sport analysed herein, rather than an alignment of each of the individual sports with just one of the theoretical approaches (as the prior literature has established). The demonstration that the trends outlined by the postmodern or postmaterialist perspectives could (already) be explained using Elias’ approach suggests that such theoretical innovations in our approach to leisure, emotions, and sport participation are not required, and may even hinder us in our analyses of certain other important social processes.

A radically different aspect between both theories is the consideration of Maffesoli, and a return to the wild through this type of social dynamics. However, for Elias, such developments could be interpreted as one more step in the processes of external control (imperative of health) and self-regulation (a controlled de-controlling of emotional constraints) that happen, not without tensions, in parallel in various fields of social life. Within the framework of the imperative of health, one could locate the Maffesolian concept of ‘culture of youth’, since we are urged to be (or at least look) ‘forever young’ (Featherstone et al. 1991). Lifestyle sports are a package tailored to achieve this. The new sports, therefore, seem to come from old processes of democratization, differentiation, and individualization, each with their own tensions and cracks. Like men, sport can die only once, and at the moment, it seems to be very alive and in continuous evolution, as part of an ongoing quest for excitement. Future studies should examine how these patterns evolve in the face of increasing commercialization, digital mediation, and environmental challenges. The potential tension between authenticity and commodification, individuality and community, remains central to understanding the trajectory of contemporary sport models. Ultimately, the renewed emphasis on public spaces, inclusive participation, and personalized identity-making suggests that sport is more alive than ever, not as a monolithic institution, but as a multifaceted, evolving cultural practice.

From an academic standpoint, this work contributes to the overcoming of reductionism by applying a range of theoretical frameworks and perspectives. This work seeks to identify points of connection between these frameworks and perspectives rather than contrasting them, which may provide an interesting approach for other academics and researchers. This combination of perspectives does not seek to validate one perspective over another.

Instead, it is indicative of the fact that, for some of the institutional changes that have been observed, one perspective provides a superior explanation of the evolution and trends, while, for others, other perspectives provide a more adequate description of these events.

From an applied perspective, this work has provided a comprehensive overview of the processes involved in changes in sports participation at the municipal level, thereby enabling more effective planning by decision-makers and a wider comprehension of the studied phenomena.

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