

## **Abstract**

This article addresses factors that influence VSC members' loyalty to voluntary engagement. The question asked is an issue of VSC volunteers' commitment whether they decide to quit or continue their engagement. A multilevel approach was used that regard both individual characteristics of volunteers and corresponding contextual features of VSCs to analyse members' voluntary commitment. Different multilevel models were estimated in a sample of 477 volunteers in 26 Swiss and German VSCs. Results indicated that members' stable voluntary activity is not just an outcome of individual characteristics such as having children belonging to the club, strong identification with their club, positively perceived (collective) solidarity and job satisfaction.

## **Keywords:**

Voluntary sport clubs, social action, voluntary commitment, contextual features, multilevel analysis

## **Introduction:**

Nonetheless, it should be considered that the purported decline in the willingness to volunteer has long been the subject of a controversial debate on the 'crisis of volunteering' in VSCs. Research also indicates that this purported crisis has not led to any reduction in the sport services offered by VSCs in the past (Anthes, 2009; Pitsch and Emrich, 1997, 1999). In particular, Pitsch (1999) has used the example of voluntary engagement in VSCs to discuss the problem of ideological influences on empirical research, and emphasizes deficits in the validity of measurements of shortages or crises in voluntary engagement. Nevertheless, sport club research does provide an ambivalent picture of voluntary engagement: Because voluntary commitment usually occurs within a specific organizational context, the unique

characteristics of the organization itself should also be considered (Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013). Nonetheless, it can be assumed that the risk of terminating volunteering among club members is not just an individual problem. Different contextual aspects such as organizational conditions in VSCs may lead to differences in collectively shared action orientations, and this may be accompanied by individual differences in motivational characteristics or perceptions of volunteering that influence voluntary behavior in terms of stability of engagement or time donated to volunteering. Thus, focusing on the organizational settings affecting volunteers sheds light on the ‘meso-level’ between the above-sketched micro-level of motives, sociodemographic characteristics and personal dispositions and the macro-level of societal values, government policies and social capital affecting volunteering (e.g. Haski-Leventhal et al., 2009; Hustinx and Meijs, 2011).

## **Literature Review**

A review of the literature reveals numerous studies that have analyzed the personal characteristics of VSC volunteers such as their motives, personal dispositions and socio-economic characteristics (see Wicker and Hallmann, 2013, for a summary).

Going beyond socio-economic variables such as age, income or education level, several studies have performed theoretical and/or empirical analyses of the motives associated with voluntary engagement from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of different sport contexts (e.g. Braun, 2003; Emrich et al. 2014; Farrell et al., 1998; Flatau et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2013; Strigas and Jackson, 2003). These motives reflect the values and goals individuals attribute to themselves and associate with voluntary activity. In general, results from different studies on volunteer motivation indicate that motives are located on a continuum between an altruistic/selflessness orientation (‘wanting to help others’) and an egoistic orientation (‘pursuing one’s own interests’) (Braun, 2003). The majority of studies

support the notion that volunteering motivations are multifaceted; that is, they occur in combination with each other rather than in isolation (Rehberg, 2005). Because volunteers do differ in terms of their motivation for volunteering, one can find heterogeneous motivation-based profiles of voluntary engagement (Braun, 2003; Dolnicar and Randle, 2007). These diverging bundles of motives also help to explain why members engage in completely different activities and task domains (Clary and Snyder, 1999). Furthermore, volunteers' motives have been linked not only to demographics such as gender (Skirstad and Hanstad, 2013) or age (Hardin et al., 2007; Okun and Schultz, 2003) but also to the frequency of past volunteering in order to analyze the evolution of motivation over a volunteering career and the life cycle (Emrich and Pierdzioch, 2014; Haski-Leventhal and Bargal, 2008).

Although motives are a powerful factor when it comes to explaining why individuals engage voluntarily in VSCs, the issue of voluntary commitment is also linked closely to other aspects. Current studies analyze how other factors such as volunteers satisfaction or identification with the club relate to the intention to quit voluntary engagement in VSCs (Schlesinger et al., 2013), time commitment (Burgham and Downward, 2005; Hallmann, 2015) and long-term volunteering at sporting events (Kristiansen et al., 2015).

Whereas there is an extensive body of studies on individual-level determinants, there has been only limited research on how contextual aspects such as organizational conditions and structures influence volunteering. A systematic literature review by Studer and von Schnurbein (2013) emphasizes the relevance of the organizational context. It argues that the practices and instruments of volunteer management, and, even more strongly, the organizational attitudes towards volunteers as well as an organization's embedded values co-determined by social processes (integration and production of meaning) are crucial factors affecting volunteers. The review also addresses structural features such as volunteer management capacity that limit the action space of volunteers and volunteer coordination.

Concerning VSCs – as a specific sector of voluntary engagement – only a limited number of studies have focused on the organizational aspects associated with volunteering. First, comparisons in different voluntary settings (German Red Cross vs. German soccer clubs) reveal differences in voluntary motivation. Membership of the German Red Cross can be viewed as an ‘altruistic’ resource pooling in which members produce public goods mainly for non-members. Therefore, private consumption motives do not play a major role for voluntary supply (Emrich and Pierdzioch, 2015). However, in VSCs as interest organizations whose members produce goods for members, strong evidence is found for the private good consumption model (Hämmerle et al., 2014). Therefore, the taxonomy of altruistic versus egoistic resource pooling should deliver a more detailed understanding of motivational aspects in volunteering.

Further analyses are based mostly on data from comparative structural analyses in VSCs and reveal inconsistent findings. They show some effects of club size: VSCs with fewer members and a high share of members participating in social events have less difficulty in recruiting and retaining volunteers (Breuer and Wicker, 2010; Nagel, 2006; Scheerder and Vos, 2010). Furthermore, VSCs with high annual per capita revenues and no own facilities experience smaller problems in recruiting and retaining volunteers (Wicker and Breuer, 2013). Regarding organizational objectives, it becomes clear that VSCs that can be characterized more as solidarity-oriented communities that set value on conviviality reveal a stronger willingness for members to volunteer (Wicker and Breuer, 2013). Vice versa, the level of volunteering in more service-oriented clubs providing a wide range of courses (also for non-members) is lower (Nagel et al., 2004). However, findings on Norwegian VSCs reveal that the level of commercialization was already significant among clubs, and that increasing commercial resources did not necessarily hinder or crowd out voluntary work (Enjolras, 2002). Regarding the influence of volunteer management practices, particularly

Cuskelly et al. (2006) have investigated the efficacy of management practices in retaining volunteers in rugby clubs. Their results reveal that planning, training and support are associated with fewer problems in retaining volunteers. Alongside the positive effects of some volunteer management practices, however, VSCs that are guided by the idea of a service delivery organization and thus restrain individual choice for action through having more formalized work processes are less attractive for voluntary engagement (Hoeber, 2010; Nichols and James, 2008).

Despite the number of available studies, the state of research on voluntary commitment in VSCs is unsatisfactory in several respects. First, only a few studies relate the characteristics of volunteers to their club membership. Existing panel data or voluntary surveys seem to be rather unsuitable for analyzing such relations, because they are generally too aggregated. There is a far stronger need to gather data focusing on a club as a specific social context in order to obtain the most detailed information possible on different aspects of the relation between members and their club. Second, the available studies try to explain volunteering in VSCs separately on either the individual or the contextual level. There is a lack of analyses that consistently link together individual data from volunteers with the corresponding contextual conditions in their VSC as has been performed in other voluntary sectors (Bühlmann and Freitag 2007; Rotolo and Wilson, 2012). Although there have been calls for linkages between individual and corresponding contextual data within sport organization research for some time (Nagel, 2007; Wicker and Hallmann, 2013), from an empirical perspective (of willingness to volunteer: Schlesinger and Nagel, 2013; member commitment: Schlesinger and Nagel, 2015). However, we still know little about the influences of factors from different levels on voluntary commitment in VSCs, or about their interplay. As a result, studies fail to meaningfully explain why and how different factors exert an influence.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Individual level*

In this context, volunteers may well differ in the extent of their collective solidarity and identity with their club in line with club-specific socialization and integration processes – the social process through which individuals gradually acquire club-specific norms and a growing sense of belonging to a VSC (Flatau, 2009; Haski-Leventhal and Cnaan, 2009).

### *Contextual level*

However, the notion of context should not be understood as descriptive but as analytical, in the sense that the package of features characterizing a context depends on which research question is being addressed (Boudon, 2014).

VSCs can be characterized in terms of their specific social structure as interest communities with an organizational logic based on self-organization and (egoistic) resource pooling (cf. Coleman, 1974). The basic idea of VSCs is to produce certain club goods such as sports and social services with the help of volunteer services, and to provide these goods exclusively for the utility and interests of their members. This results in a specific kind of motivation of club members to invest time voluntarily that simultaneously validates the private good consumption model of VSC volunteers (Emrich et al., 2012; Hämmerle et al., 2015).

The status of voluntary engagement within a club manifests clearly in measures to promote volunteering in the club along with the established practices of giving symbolic or material rewards (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Haski-Leventhal and Cnaan, 2009). Though it is generally held that low levels of bureaucracy and formalisation contribute to the satisfaction of volunteers, Musick and Wilson (2008) have argued that very low levels could alienate them.

On the one hand, this may raise the value of the social appreciation of voluntary engagement for members. On the other hand, the lower anonymity and the accompanying possibilities of sanctioning non-commitment (free-riding becomes more costly) lead to the expectation of higher voluntary commitment (Bühlmann and Freitag, 2007).

## **Method**

### *Data collection*

Club-specific data was obtained with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire by club managers (presidents, technical directors).

### *Measures*

(‘How often in the past few months have you felt like quitting your voluntary engagement for your sport club?’) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*often*) to 5 (*never*). A total of 48.0% reported never; 18.4%, yes, but only occasionally; 17.8%, sometimes; and 15.8%, frequently and often combined. Hence, approximately two-thirds of volunteers could be characterized as stable and about one-third as unstable. Although the majority of those thinking about terminating their volunteering may well not actually do so, the risk of no longer volunteering was probably higher among those who had already entered into such a decision-making process.

The independent variables on the individual level were operationalized as follows: in a first step, individual preferences for (the utility of) volunteering are associated with satisfaction of one’s volunteering expectations. Volunteer job satisfaction is achieved when the expectations regarding working conditions are met (Chelladurai, 2006; Doherty, 2005). Therefore, a z-standardized index of volunteers’ job satisfaction was considered that covered

five dimensions of work conditions in VSCs (task design, leadership, material incentives, recognition and support) identified in a prior study (Schlesinger et al., 2013).

Here we differentiated between situational variables (e.g. number of members, number of divisions), variables regarding supporting volunteering (e.g. strategic planning, incentive structure), and variables representing the strategic orientation of a club.

Table 1 gives an overview of the operationalization and descriptive statistics of all variables on both individual and organizational level.

### *Data analysis*

Insert Table 1 here

## **Results**

If no variance in the dependent variable could be determined on the club level, contextual features of the clubs indicate no further variance and thus, multilevel analysis is not required (Hox, 2002). The size of the ICC was applied as a criterion to determine whether multilevel analysis was an adequate modelling strategy. The estimated random intercept-only model indicate that the variance of the individual-level residuals ( $\text{Var } r_{ij}$ ) was 1.467 (see Table 2). The variance of the context-level residuals ( $\text{Var } u_{0j}$ ) was 0.139. The table displays the variance components for both levels followed by the intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC). The calculated ICC was 0.087. This indicates that 8.7% of the variance could be traced back to contextual differences between the clubs.

The random-intercept model documents the estimation of all theoretically developed variables at the individual level (see Table 2). Within this model, the intercepts vary and the scores on the dependent variable for each individual observation are predicted by the intercept that varies across groups. Results showed a significant influence of five variables at the



individual level. A strong identification with the club, a positively perceived collective solidarity, satisfaction with the clubs working conditions and children belonging to the club had a positive influence on voluntary commitment. Whereas, the length of volunteering had a negative effect. Other individual factors such as gender, age, duration of membership or competition experiences had no significant influence on voluntary commitment.

power (Table 2). Results indicated three significant factors that explain club-related differences in voluntary commitment. More rural clubs, clubs in which supporting competitive sports is important and clubs that place value on conviviality revealed more stable voluntary commitment independently from individual characteristics. From a modelling perspective, it is advisable to remove the non-significant independent variables in subsequent stages to improve the quality of the model (Hox, 2002).

Furthermore, comparison with the deviance values ( $-2 \log$  likelihood) indicated that the consideration of contextual data improved the model valuation, meaning that the model was adapted to the empirical data to a higher degree.

Insert Table 2 here

## **Discussion**

Results show that individual expectations regarding the club's working conditions and whether these expectations are met were important. More satisfied volunteers exhibited a lower risk of terminating their volunteering. Moreover, having children who belong to the club also had a positive influence on voluntary commitment. This underlines the plausibility of the finding that having children currently belonging to the VSC had a positive effect on volunteer activities and therefore promoted the likelihood of stable volunteering (Burgham and Downward, 2005).

Clubs with in rural areas have more stable voluntary engagement regardless of the individual characteristics of their members. These increase the value of the social appreciation of voluntary engagement in the club and make free-riding more costly. This suggests that previous measures and strategies have either been less effective, or that a high level of formalization in VSCs might be less attractive for volunteers – as pointed out in previous studies (Hoeber, 2010; Stirling et al., 2011).

Future studies should include former volunteers of VSCs such as dropouts during the previous months, and also distinguish between different types of volunteering. Therefore, further studies should recruit larger samples, particularly at the context level. Additionally, more cases at the context level permit further analysis options such as random-slope models or cross-level interactions that would deliver a deeper understanding of individual behavior within contextual conditions. Researchers have assessed the necessary sample size at the context level and concluded that at least 30 cases are necessary to have correct standard estimates at the context level (Maas and Hox, 2004). Nonetheless, future research should specify the contextual conditions of VSCs such as material and immaterial incentives or opportunities for voluntary engagement more precisely. Finally, among the contextual conditions, the specific understanding and valuation of volunteering in VSCs varies across different sports systems and this could have different effects on the decision to engage in volunteering. Further research in various countries is needed in order gain more broadly generalizable findings.

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Table 1: Variables for analyzing voluntary commitment, their operationalization and descriptive statistics

Variable	Operationalization	Descriptive statistics
<b>Dependent variable</b> Voluntary commitment (Intention to quit voluntary activity)	'How often have you felt like quitting your voluntary engagement for your sport club in the past few months?' 1 ( <i>often</i> ) to 5 ( <i>never</i> )	M = 3.7 (SD = 1.6); Yes, frequently = 9.4%; Yes, often = 6.4; Yes, sometimes = 17.8%; Yes, but only occasionally = 18.4%; never = 47.6%
<b>Independent variables</b>		
<b>Individual level</b>		
Gender	Dummy; 1 = male	Male = 70.1%; Female = 29.9%
Age	Number of years of life (> 16 years)	M = 40.6 (SD = 14.5)
Children belonging to club	Dummy; 1 = yes ( $\leq$ 16 years)	Yes = 17.2%; No = 82.8%
Competition experiences	Dummy; 1 = yes	Yes = 83.6%; No = 16.4%
Duration of club membership	Number of membership years	M = 19.3 (SD = 11.6)
Length of volunteering in the club	Number of years in voluntary work	M = 11.7 (SD = 9.5)
Average time volunteered in the club	Number of hours per month for volunteering	M = 16.6 (SD = 12.0)
Payments (up to 2000 CHF p.a.)	Dummy; 1 = yes	Yes = 33.7%; No = 66.3%
Volunteer job satisfaction	Index from 5 dimensions (z-standardized)	M = 3.90 (SD = 0.9)
Identification with the club	Index from 5 Items (z-standardized; Cronbach's $\alpha$ = 0.83)	M = 4.23 (SD = 0.7)
Perceived (collective) solidarity	Index from 4 Items (z-standardized; Cronbach's $\alpha$ = 0.85)	M = 4.01 (SD = 0.7)
<b>Club level</b>		
<i>Situational features</i>		
Members	Number of club members	M = 1,409.6 (SD = 2,152.6)
Members <sup>2</sup>	Squared number of club members (members * members)	M = 6,612,941.4
Divisions	Number of divisions with different sports	M = 9.0 (SD = 11.8)
Community size, where the VSC is local embedded	1 = rural; 2 = agglomeration; 3 = urban; 4 = city	Rural = 10.3%; agglomeration = 29.1%; urban = 24.1%; city = 36.5%
<i>Volunteer-related features of the VSC</i>		
Problems with 'volunteering'	1 = no problems to 3 = big problems	No problems = 27.9%; medium problems = 34.3%; big problems = 37.7%
Measures to promote volunteering <sup>a</sup>	Index of selected items (categorized: 1 = no further measures to 3 = specific measures)	No further measures = 16.1%; scattered measures = 51.4%; specific measures = 32.5%
Strategic planning of volunteering <sup>b</sup>	Index of selected items (categorized: 1 = no specific coordination to 3 = coordinated)	No specific coordination = 19.3%; rather coordinated = 59.3%; coordinated = 21.3%
Immaterial/symbolic rewards	1 = no; 3 = strong	No = 31.1%; partially = 39.1%; strong = 29.8%
Material incentives	1 = no; 3 = strong	No = 50.6%; partially = 33.8%; strong = 15.6%

Paid staff within the club	Dummy; 1 = yes, paid staff	Yes = 59.9%; No = 40.1%
<i>Strategic orientation of the club</i>		
Supporting competitive sports	1 = not important to 5 = important	Not important = 5.3%; neither/nor = 11.1%; rather important = 62.8%; important = 20.8%
Supporting grassroots sports	1 = not important to 5 = important	Neither/nor = 13.7% rather important = 29.4%; important = 56.9%
Maintaining tradition	1 = not important to 5 = important	Not important = 3.2%; less important = 2.4%; neither/nor = 31.0%; rather important = 46.0%; important = 17.4%
Set value on conviviality	1 = not important to 5 = important	Less important = 7.1%; neither/nor = 27.7%; rather important = 27.9%; important = 37.3%
Supporting external cooperation	1 = not important to 5 = important	Less important = 14.1; neither/nor = 23.1%; rather important = 49.6%; important = 13.2%

## Notes

<sup>a</sup> *Measures to promote voluntary engagement* of club members include clearly defined volunteering responsibilities, specific publicity campaigns to recruit volunteers and keeping membership records. These were assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*completely true*).

<sup>b</sup> Items include *strategic planning of volunteering* such as job descriptions, volunteer coordinator, knowledge about skills, expectations of volunteers and volunteering as topic in mission statement. These were assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*completely true*).

Table 2: Individual and contextual determinants of voluntary commitment in VSCs (random intercept, non-standardized coefficients)

	Random intercept only	Random intercept (individual)	Random intercept (individual+contextual)	Random intercept (individual+contextual)	Random intercept (individual+contextual)	Random intercept (full) model
<b>Fixed part</b>						
Intercept	3.935***	4.073***	4.224***	4.297***	4.083***	4.251***
Gender (1 = male)		.010	.014	.016	.015	.014
Age		-.001	-.001	-.001	-.001	-.001
Children belonging to club (1 = yes)		.346**	.331**	.334**	.326**	.323**
Competition experiences (1 = yes)		.109	.112	.108	.112	.111
Volunteer job satisfaction		.258***	.240***	.247***	.244***	.240***
Duration of club membership		-.004	-.004	-.004	-.004	-.004
Length of volunteering in the club		-.030***	-.031***	-.030***	-.031***	-.030***
Average time volunteered in the club		.003	.002	.003	.003	.002
Identification with the club		.362***	.359***	.351***	.357***	.351***
Perceived (collective) solidarity		.337***	.338***	.340***	.330***	.338***
Payments (1 = yes)		-.063	-.056	-.058	-.052	-.060
Members		--	-.001	--	--	--
Members <sup>2</sup>		--	.000	--	--	--
Divisions		--	.004	--	--	--
Community size		--	-.127*	--	--	-.112*
Supporting competitive sports		--	--	.106*	--	.087
Supporting grassroots sports		--	--	.020	--	--
Maintaining tradition		--	--	-.031	--	--
Set value on conviviality		--	--	.132*	--	.118*
Supporting external cooperation		--	--	-.073	--	--
Paid staff within the club (1 = yes)		--	--	--	-.007	--
Measures to promote volunteering		--	--	--	.080	--
Strategic planning of volunteerism		--	--	--	.053	--
Immaterial/symbolic rewards		--	--	--	.069	--
Material incentives		--	--	--	.049	--
<b>Random part</b>						
Variance individual level (Var $r_{ij}$ )	1.467	1.054	1.011	.984	.996	.981
Variance contextual level (Var $u_{0j}$ )	.139	.103	.091	.083	.097	.079
Intraclass correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ )	.087	.089	.083	.078	.088	.075
Deviance (-2 log likelihood)	1563.6	1358.5	1335.4	1336.9	1349.4	1326.2

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$