

## **Indicators for Life-Designing as a form of youth identity formation**

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### **Abstract**

The formation of youth identities in Austria – as a prime example of Western late modern societies – is in an ongoing process of rapid and fundamental change: from static and traditional patterns towards multi-optional Life-Designing. The aim of this paper is to identify the main indicators for new identity concepts of this sort. These indicators can be classified within categories of consumerism, individualisation, flexibilization and the impact of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies). We suggest that these indicators prepare a way for the better understanding of the experiential reality in a globalising society, which enables to create and to design a sustainable social system. Thus, optimized social well-being can be realized.

**Keywords:** youth identities, late modern societies, Life-Designing, indicators, social well-being

## Introduction

*“La jeunesse était le temps du bonheur, sa saison unique; menant une vie oisive et dénuée de soucis, partiellement occupée par des études peu absorbantes, les jeunes pouvaient se consacrer sans limites à la libre exultation de leurs corps. Ils pouvaient jouer, danser, aimer, multiplier les plaisirs. [...] Ils étaient le sel de la terre, et tout leur était donné, tout leur était permis, tout leur était possible.” (MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ; La possibilité d'une île)*

*“Nach meinem Verständnis hat die ältere Generation den Generationenvertrag erfüllt. Sie hat für ihre Eltern gesorgt, und sie hat Kinder bekommen. Kinder sind die beste Zukunftssicherung, darüber muss man reden. Was macht das Leben lebenswert? Etwa wenn man von Party zu Party rauscht, ist es das Single-Leben?” (ELISABETH GEHRER Austrian Minister for Education; DIE PRESSE 23.08.2003)*

In this paper we argue that in Austria Life-Designing as a new form of identity formation is gaining ground. This phenomenon is not confined to Austria, but can be observed in late modern societies in general. For Britain it has been stated that “young people increasingly perceive themselves as living in a society characterized by risk and insecurity which they expect to have to negotiate on an individual level.” (FURLONG/CARTMEL, 1997: 10) On the one hand Life-Designing enables young people to design their lives by themselves, on the other hand it is not yet institutionally acknowledged and political, economical and cultural constraints limit room for individual development. Furthermore we contend that different indicators, which can be clustered into four overall categories, condition this area of conflict. The indicators individualization, flexibilization, consumerism and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) strongly influence each other and overlap in various ways. Every attempt to build a sustainable and just social system has to take these indicators of youth identity formation into account.

## **Indicators for youth identity formation**

Among definitions of youth physiological and psychological approaches still seem to dominate the public discourse. These approaches are well grounded in empirical studies and – from legislation to pedagogics – occupy various social fields. Yet, youth has been increasingly perceived as a social category as well, which is culturally constructed and determined. The way youth identities are constituted consequently gets detached from fixed psychological and physiological models, since exact definitions of youth fall prey to changes within the realm of cultural meanings and dynamics within the social sphere. This means, in our opinion, that concepts of youth can no longer be reduced to any kind of natural process alone. Instead, we have to think of youth as a cultural assignment of social locations, which are related to institutions and life-styles. (See FORNÄS, 1995)

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century constituents of youth identity changed constantly. Around 1900 all over Europe movements establishing youth as a social category were mainly carried out by students and pupils; parallel existing working class movements were lower in numbers. In the middle of the century youth became a mass phenomena triggered by new forms of mass-media, which communicated youth-specific values and lifestyles. A generation polarity between youth and adults was generated. (See MITTERAUER, 1986) Currently this polarity is in dissolution, because within contexts of life-long learning there is no longer any finished state of personal development and parents no longer act as generation opposites. On the contrary, youth is considered the epitome of a desirable way of life associated with characteristics such as independence, health and beauty, carelessness and successfulness.

Youth identity formation these days has to be considered within the broader context of Austrian society, in which more and more people – in accordance with Anthony Giddens' most accurate formulation – "have no choice but to choose how to be and how to act." (GIDDENS, 1994: 75) Within a certain bandwidth, identities in post-traditional contexts are no longer given entities, into which human beings are born, but get transformed into tasks. Human beings are charged respectively entrusted with the responsibility of self-determination. Whereas older generations still tend to cling to traditional forms of identity

formation, young people's identity is constituted according to indicators, which signal current social change.

In Austria traditional indicators of youth identity formation are still valid, but get more and more replaced by various others, among which we consider individualization, consumerism, flexibilization and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as the most suitable overall categories. We argue that these indicators allow conceptualizing Life-Designing as a new form of youth identity formation, which is gaining ground among younger generations, who – as an analysis of the above mentioned indicators will show – have become the central agents of social change in our times. As these indicators are driving forces within Austrian society only the acknowledgement of their impact on youth identities can lead to the creation of a sustainable social system concerning economical, political and cultural welfare.

## **Individualization**

Individualization is one indicator for Life-Designing as a new form of youth identity formation. It has turned out as a historical condition challenging traditional modes and categories of social life and understanding. The late modern constellation propagating do-it-yourself-biographies opened up new possibilities and risks at the same time. The social order based on nation-states, regions, classes, religions and families is eroding and social securities get lost. Moreover, in many contemporary risk-societies neoliberal ideologies undermine individuals' institutional dependency on the welfare-state and raise the question, how individualization can be linked to democratization processes. (See BECK, 2002)

Austrian schools, for example, face an ambivalent situation: on the one hand curricula are drafted according to corporate interests on the political level prolonging the functioning of schools as institutions, which reproduce established social power relations and suppress self-esteem and individual freedom; on the other hand teacher training programs stress the importance of self-reliant and open learning processes enabling creative and participative modes of instruction. In our opinion, only the latter approach enables young people to tackle the complexity of a changing society, in which flexibility and self-reliance are

preconditions for survival respectively success. Within this ambivalent situation individualization is not yet fully acknowledged as an indicator of youth identity formation. (See TIMMERMANN, 1995)

While traditional forms of collectivity (nation, class, family, religion) loose influence, new forms of collectivity, which often can be characterized as free-floating communities, emerge. Communities – reinvented – are deprived of their oppressive character and ideologically occupied meaning. Concerning the family, the numbers of divorces and so-called patch-work families are steadily rising and relationships are increasingly formed according to individuals' own interests and wishes. The traditional family as a constitutive mode of social existence has vanished and new forms of living together, for example single households, emerge. Some sociologists even speak of a single society. (See HRADIL, 1995)

These processes are closely related to new forms of intimacy and sexuality resulting from changing attitudes towards sexual conduct (including contraception and abortion) and the liberation of sexual activity from ideological constraints, especially from the religious negation or even demonization of the human body. Nowadays homosexual relationships are gradually more tolerated and partnerships no longer envisage human re-production, but sexuality as an end in itself.

**Fig. 1: Birth rates and family forms:** Family as a social category has changed fundamentally over the last few decades. Statistical data demonstrate a shift towards the individual within family organisation, which is indicated by declining birth-rates and the rising number of divorces.

Year	Number of Birth	Marriages	Divorces
1960	125.945	58.508	-
1970	112.301	52.773	-
1980	90.782	46.435	13.327
1990	90.454	45.212	16.282
2000	78.268	39.228	19.552
2004	78.968	38.528	19.590

Source: Austrian Institute for Family Studies. Familien in Zahlen, 2005

Individualization turns out as a historical condition affecting the whole society in various forms. If social life shall not succumb to neoliberal market-theories and precarious freedoms shall not become our destiny, society has to be reinvented and ideological patterns have to be abolished.

## **Consumerism**

Consumerism is the second indicator for Life-Designing, which we want to elaborate. It shapes needs and desires of individuals according to corporate interests and acts as stabilizer of social power relations within capitalist societies respectively of capitalism as such. (See BAUDRILLARD, 1998; BOURDIEU, 2000) The main carrier of consumerism in contemporary societies is a huge advertising machinery controlling trends and fashions to a large extent. Present consumption can be hardly designed by consumers themselves. Consumerism, furthermore, is an elaborated system that substitutes happiness with the quest for happiness; the pressure to be up-to-date and to constantly catch up with the accelerated change of styles and fashions and technological developments as well keeps the system running.

Young people and children are main targets of advertising techniques and many of them stumble into financial problems, since consumption pressure leads to an overestimation of their own financial capacities. As a consequence movements arise to protect young consumers from consumption itself. For Germany it has been stated that 20% of young people (at the age between 15 and 25) display demonstrative consumption aiming at the improvement of their social status, 14% compensatory consumption and 6% shopping addiction. (See LANGE, 2004) Consequently a critical pedagogical approach to consumption has to be strongly recommended.

Consumerism inscribes itself into social life as a whole and prescribes what is beautiful, healthy, desirable and so on. The care for one's body, for example, is aligned along consumerist imperatives. From food supplements to beauty cosmetics our society is swamped by a whole range of products, whose quality and effect don't always pass scientific testing. Yet, consumerism in post-industrial societies necessitates selective consumption and choice, dependent on individuals' economical means, and to be aware of these choices means to be

aware of the (of course still limited) individual capacities to design the world of consumption by oneself.

With the historical rise of consumerism an aestheticization of everyday life took place, which is central for youth identity formation these days. "The consumer society must not be regarded as only releasing a dominant materialism for it also confronts people with dream-images which speak to desires, and aestheticize and derealize reality." (FEATHERSTONE, 1991: 68) Especially among young people the adoption of life-styles and fashions can be related to artists, who work on their own life and body and experiment constantly with new ways and possibilities of expressing oneself. Although individual choice and differences have been realized by this development, it can be doubted how autonomous these choices actually are.

## **Flexibilization**

Flexibilization as an indicator is deriving from sociological and economical studies concerning the labour market. In post-industrial societies employees are forced to change working behaviours in accordance with labour conditions, which are shaped by corporate interests. Regional (or even global) mobility, flexible working hours and temporary employment are increasingly demanded skills, which often result in social and psychic stress, because neoliberal thinking determines the workflow, reduces jobholders to human capital and is not yet socially acceptable. Moreover new technologies and the permanent modification of working processes require life-long learning and personal adaption to changing working environments. However, flexibility turns out to be a *condition sine qua non* of the future labour market. (See SENNETT, 1998)

**Fig. II: Changes within the Austrian education system:** Considering its historical development contemporary Austrian society can be regarded as knowledge-based and strongly dependent on higher education. Due to the rapid (and sometimes abundant) growth of information life-long learning, that presupposes flexibility, is increasingly demanded and gaining institutional ground.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Attendants of high schools providing general education</b>	<b>Attendants of high schools providing vocational education</b>	<b>Apprentices</b>
1960/61	83.426	20.973	-
1970/71	141.260	30.762	137.445
1980/81	181.561	76.189	194.089
1990/91	158.359	99.191	145.516
2000/01	184.713	123.676	126.600
2005	197.418	132.060	119.071

Source: Statistik Austria. Statistisches Jahrbuch, 2006

Within our categorization of indicators flexibilization turns out to be a phenomenon that is not reducible to economical structures, but has to be seen in a broader context of social change. *Lebenswelten* of young people in Austria today necessitate flexibility concerning different fields: "Our life-work is split into many little tasks, each performed in a different place, among different people, at different times. Our presence in each of those settings is as fragmentary as the tasks themselves." (BAUMANN, 1994: 19) Interpersonal relationships are characterized by decentralization and are perceived to be limited to life periods. Traditional family patterns are in decline and due to divorces many young people imbibe the temporality of human partnerships. As already mentioned, the dissolution of traditional communities requires self-dependent decision-making. Many metaphors have been coined to comprehend the new *Lebenswelten* of late modern societies and especially young people can be seen appositely as nomads, vagabonds or tourists. (See BAUMANN, 1994) In a time, when neither jobs nor personal relationships are guarantees for the future, ideologically fixed patterns are slowly vanishing and values become a matter of choice, many young people don't know, where they will go, what they will work and when their lives will



change. As a result they have to be flexible in order to be able to cope with whatever future they have to face.

Yet, forms of reintegration give rise to new types of socialization, which can be characterized as free floating communities, whose boundaries and rules are not ideologically fixed, but have to be co-operatively negotiated. This becomes obvious especially in the field of ICTs and within the interconnectedness of cultures through migration and global networking. Self-reflexive and flexible reactions facing changing and newly emerging environments or personal developments, thus, have to be integrated into individual identity formation by many young people in Austria.

### **Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)**

The impact of the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has changed our society over the last fifteen years fundamentally and can be seen therefore as indicator in itself. The generation of cyberspace, which is characterized by an almost unmanageable accumulation of information, is central to this change. Although as much information as never before is accessible to as many people as never before, this data overflow cannot be regarded as an end in itself, but requires mechanisms of control and selection. (See HARTMANN, 1996) Growing up in contemporary Western societies means to learn to navigate within and utilize cyberspace at an early age. From childhood onwards one gets to know the plurality of information, the necessity of choice and the functioning of self-organizing informational communities such as wikipedia. Still, it is necessary to a path a way towards a critical information society, for example through related pedagogical approaches, in order to support self-reliant handling of the cyberspace.

The role of ICTs is discussed controversially – on the one hand cultural critics argue that ICTs transform identities into virtual identities or even lead to a replacement of reality by hyper-reality, on the other hand we want to stress, that ICTs can build the basis for forms of new online-collectivization. Following a cultural critic approach phenomena like otakuism, which first emerged in Japan already in the pre-telematic area and in the present information age slowly spreads out over Austria and other European countries as well, can be seen as an

example for Baudrillard's hyper-reality thesis. (See BAUDRILLARD, 1984) Traditionally an otaku can be understood as a "manic collector of instance records, magazines and games" (UENO, 2001). In the information society an otaku identifies him- or herself hundred per cent with a media product like a figure he or she plays in an online-manga.

We would like to point out the positive potential of ICTs, which, in our opinion, manifests in new forms of online-collectivization processes like blogs, collaborative wikis, public online discussion boards, mailing-lists, online-petitions, digital storytelling and the emergence of new social virtual communities (e.g. myspace.com). Such tools have the potential to open up the space for young people to participate in societal developments.

Very popular phenomena in European countries at the moment are weblogs, usually shortened to blogs. The topics dealt with in such online diaries, are variable and highly heterogeneous – from cooking recipes to quantum theory. In our context the question of a possibility of political participation through blogs and other forms of digital democracy arises. In Austria forms of representative, top-down politics are dominant, which means that political parties present their programs in a one-dimensional way, without any forms of interaction with the citizens. An analysis of the websites of important political actors in Austria carried out by Christian Fuchs shows that political institutions and parties mainly practice forms of representative digital democracy, whereas civil society groups seem to be more inclined towards interaction.

**Fig. III: Tools of digital democracy employed by different political actors in Austria:** Most Austrian parties and governing institutions (government, parliament, president) provide e-mail and newsletters as means of interaction and therefore practice representative digital democracy. Exceptions are the Austrian Green Party (traditionally the Green Party has a strong emphasis on participatory decision-making), which provides a web-based discussion board and civil society organization such as Attac Austria and Greenpeace Austria, which offer tools for political many-to-many communication.

<b>Website</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>	<b>Guest Book</b>	<b>Newsletter</b>	<b>Online Survey</b>	<b>Mailing List</b>	<b>Discussion Board</b>	<b>Chat</b>	<b>Wiki</b>	<b>Blog</b>	<b>Online Petition</b>
<b>Parties</b>										
Österreichische Volkspartei ( <a href="http://www.oevp.at">http://www.oevp.at</a> )	X		X							
Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs ( <a href="http://www.spoe.at">http://www.spoe.at</a> )	X									
Die Grünen ( <a href="http://www.gruene.at">http://www.gruene.at</a> )	X		X			X				
Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs ( <a href="http://www.fpoe.at">http://www.fpoe.at</a> )	X		X							
Bündnis Zukunft Österreich ( <a href="http://www.bzoe.at">http://www.bzoe.at</a> )	X		X							
Kommunistische Partei Österreichs ( <a href="http://www.kpoe.at">http://www.kpoe.at</a> )	X									
<b>Government</b>										
Bundeskanzleramt Österreich (Chancellor, <a href="http://www.austria.gv.at/">http://www.austria.gv.at/</a> )	X									
Europa hört zu ( <a href="http://www.zukunfteuropa.at">http://www.zukunfteuropa.at</a> )	X			X						
Österreich 2006 Präsidentschaft des Europäischen Rates (Austrian Presidency of the European Council, <a href="http://www.eu2006.at">http://www.eu2006.at</a> )	X		X							
Österreichisches Parlament (Parliament, <a href="http://www.parlinkom.gv.at">http://www.parlinkom.gv.at</a> )	X		X							
Österreichischer Bundespräsident (President, <a href="http://www.hofburg.at">http://www.hofburg.at</a> )	X		X							
<b>Civil Society</b>										
Attac Österreich ( <a href="http://www.attac.at">http://www.attac.at</a> )	X		X		X	X		X		
Greenpeace Österreich ( <a href="http://www.greenpeace.at">http://www.greenpeace.at</a> )	X		X						X	X

Source: Fuchs, ICT&S Center, Research Paper No. 1 , 2006

ICTs provide the means for participative designing of the whole social system, which are not yet fully realized on the political level. It is one of the great

challenges of our times and a considerable chance to integrate young people into decision-finding processes this way.

## **Life Designing**

The indicators just outlined condition Life-Designing as a new form of youth identity formation. In accordance with these indicators young people in Austria and other late modern societies begin to take their life into their own hands and values and life-perspectives are no longer fixed, but allow coping with ambivalences or even contradictions. (See GROSSEGGER, 2004) In a multi-optional society patch-work identities seem to become regularity as individual choices and Life-Designing determine, who a person is. Yet, a social system, which is increasingly based on such forms of identity formation, can only be sustained and facilitate social well-being by acknowledging self-reliance, participation and cooperation as guiding principles, which are demanded by young people again and again. The indicators individualization, consumerism, flexibilization and ICTs open up – as already mentioned – possibilities and risks at the same time. We argue that the implementation of the just mentioned principles is a step towards maximizing possibilities and minimizing risks.

Since the enlightenment period self-reliance has been considered as a guiding principle to be strived for by society, most prominently demanded by Immanuel Kant. Nowadays self-reliance is often reduced to the economic field and is suspected to be insultingly complicit with neoliberal market-theories, which aim at maximizing corporate profit. Yet, we understand this principle in a broader and more fundamental sense, as it affects almost all aspects of life. Especially young people, whose identity formation is shaped by the indicators described, are facing the need to act self-reliantly. At the moment self-reliance is located within the context of economic competition and can even be regarded as a means of exploitation. Therefore a completion with co-operation is absolutely necessary, in order to achieve equal opportunities, just social relationships and the reduction of personal risks.

Co-operation is a type of social relationship realizing social integration that is different from competition. Co-operation is a specific type of communication where actors achieve a shared understanding of social phenomena and make

concerted use of resources so that new systemic qualities emerge. Competition means that certain individuals and groups benefit at the expense of others, i.e. there is an unequal access to structures of social systems. This is the dominant organizational structure of modern society, modern society hence is an excluding society. Our discussion of indicators illustrates that at the moment we are still facing many excluding structures, e.g. in the economic field where young people are confronted with pressure to perform although new approaches towards easing the tension of the labour market, such as basic income and the advancement of civil engagement, are already existing.

In general co-operation includes people in social systems, it lets them participate in decisions and establishes a more just distribution of and access to resources. Hence co-operation is a way of achieving and realizing basic human needs, competition is a way of achieving and realizing basic human needs only for certain groups and excluding others. (See BICHLER/FUCHS/RAFFL, 2006)

The principles of self-reliance and co-operation form the basis for participation, which we consider to be the most important principle for a sustainable social system. Especially for youth modes of participation should be realized in order to make use of young people's creativity and their experiences with a changing globalized *Lebenswelt*. Contrary to the proposed forms of social organisation, the current general conditions offer very limited possibilities for young people to participate in political decision making and social system designing. This lack of democracy leads to resignation and apathy, which can only be countered by re-considering political thinking and practice: "The multiplication of political spaces and the preventing of the concentration of power in one point are [...] preconditions of every truly democratic transformation of society." (LACLAU/MOUFFE, 2001: 178) Participation therefore offers the opportunity for young people to co-design consumption, co-ordinate individualization processes, handle new technological developments co-operatively and profit from flexibilization.

## **Conclusion**

The indicators discussed in this paper caused a fundamental shift within late modern society towards Life-Designing as a new form of youth identity formation

and demonstrate possibilities, risks and constraints young people are offered respectively confronted with today. To tackle this complex development self-reliance, co-operation and participation have to be implemented as guiding principles of society. Deriving from our conceptualization concrete recommendations, which assist Life-Designing, can be exemplarily formulated. Concerning political decision-making interactive participation (e.g. eVoting, online-discussions and ePetitions) has to be encouraged and should be substituted for representation politics. To reduce economical tension for young people new labour market approaches based on basic income have to be taken into consideration and work should be designed in a participative way involving all stakeholders. The educational system has to integrate open and self-reliant learning processes and has to be liberated from ideological patterns fostering competition and exclusion. To achieve sustainable social well-being for all Life-Designing has to be acknowledged and made possible by political decision makers and further research has to continuously elaborate conditions and frameworks of Life-Designing more detailed.

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