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The role of sports in promoting the integration of immigrant men into Finnish society

ABSTRACT

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This study explores the role of sports in helping immigrant men integrate into Finnish society. The project was in collaboration with Liikkukaa- Sports for All. It focused on two key aims: first, to explore how immigrant men view the impact of sports on their integration journey in Finland; and second, to identify the obstacles they encounter when taking part in sports activities. Sports are recognized as a form of social capital within immigrant communities and have attracted increasing attention in socio-political discussions surrounding integration efforts across Europe (Smith et al., 2019).

The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach. Six participants, either organizers or participants in sports programs involving immigrants, took part in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. These interviews were guided by a flexible question framework. The qualitative data collected was analyzed using an inductive content analysis method (Kyngäs, 2020). Researchers coded the interview transcripts and organized them into categories and subcategories aligned with the study's questions.

The participants shared diverse insights on the role of sports in integration. Two main themes emerged: (1) sports foster social connections with the broader Finnish community, and (2) they provide access to essential information and services. The study also revealed two main challenges immigrant men face in sports participation: (1) difficulties in balancing work and personal life, and (2) language and communication issues.

In conclusion, the research highlights sports as a valuable resource for promoting the integration of immigrant men in Finland. By outlining both the advantages and the barriers associated with sports engagement, the findings offer useful guidance for policymakers and organizations working to strengthen integration initiatives. The study also emphasizes the broader benefits of sports in enhancing wellbeing and encouraging positive social interaction.

Keywords: Immigrants, Immigrant integration, Inclusion, Sports, and Migrants

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1 INTRODUCTION

As of May 24, 2024, data from Statistics Finland shows that there are 73,236 immigrants living in Finland, comprising 36,824 men and 36,412 women (Statistics Finland, 2024). Although the gender distribution is nearly equal, this study specifically centers on immigrant men, who represent a slightly larger share of the population. The emphasis on men stems from the understanding that they often encounter distinct challenges in the integration process, particularly regarding employment, social connections, and identity development (Busk & Jauhiainen, 2022). These men navigate a multifaceted journey as they adjust to life in a new country. Gaining insight into the factors that support their integration is essential, and one key avenue is participation in sports. The Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) defines integration as acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to engage actively in society and the workforce in the host country (The Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), 2024).

Engaging in sports has proven to be an effective means of supporting immigrant integration (D'Angelo, 2019). It not only facilitates social interaction but also promotes cross-cultural understanding, regardless of one's migration background (Smith et al., 2019). This study seeks to highlight the role of sports in aiding the integration of immigrant men into Finnish society. Given Finland's strong sports culture, which includes activities like football, ice hockey, and others, the country provides an ideal setting for fostering integration through shared recreational experiences. Sports are increasingly recognized as a valuable resource in integration efforts (D'Angelo, 2019).

The research was carried out in collaboration with Liikkukaa – Sports for All, an organization that played a key role as a work-life partner during this project. Liikkukaa – Sports for All uses sports and leisure activities as tools to enhance social inclusion, equality, and both mental and physical well-being within multicultural communities. The organization actively hosts sporting and cultural events and takes part in various workshops and seminars aligned with its mission.

The study's theoretical foundation is rooted in social capital theory, which explores how participation in sports can support immigrant men's integration into Finnish society. This theory highlights the value of social networks and relationships formed through sports, which help individuals access vital resources and opportunities. These connections are instrumental in promoting successful integration into their new environment.

This thesis utilized tools such as ChatGPT to enhance readability, improving clarity, removing redundancy, while Grammarly refined the vocabulary and reduced repetition.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Social Capital theory

This study is grounded in Social Capital Theory (SCT), which serves as its primary theoretical framework. At its core, SCT posits that the social networks individuals engage in, along with the resources accessed through these connections, play a vital role in enhancing their well-being and opportunities (Berraies et al., 2020). Within the context of this research, sports act as a key medium for developing social capital among immigrants, thereby facilitating their integration into the host society. Like social capital, quality of life is a complex construct encompassing a range of positive and negative social, environmental, physical, and psychological dimensions (WHO, 1982). These dimensions are defined by individuals' perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live, and with their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns. Quality of life as an essential measure of health not only reflects the absence of disease but also encompasses physical, mental, and social well-being. The subjectivity of this life measure makes it a rather exciting subject considering how it affects individuals who find themselves in environments not native to them.

Through participation in sports activities and events, individuals can build and nurture relationships that contribute to important dimensions of social capital, such as social cohesion and mutual trust. These elements often emerge from shared experiences and regular interaction, playing sports a powerful setting for promoting social integration (Berraies et al., 2020). For various reasons, ranging from family reunification and educational advancement to sociopolitical or economic motivations, people continue to migrate at an unprecedented rate. This raises new concerns regarding their adaptation and integration and, more importantly, intensifies the discussion around the quality of life of migrants in their host countries (IOM, 2013).

A specific focus is also placed on the cognitive dimension of social capital, which "is concerned with that which strengthens interaction within the network" (Thomas & Gupta, 2021). This dimension emphasizes the emotional and meaningful components of interpersonal relationships within society. In this regard, sports represent a collaborative effort that not only fosters trust but also supports the pursuit of common goals.

The diagram below illustrates the theoretical framework applied in this study, showing how Social Capital Theory connects with various aspects of sports and their role in the integration of immigrant men.

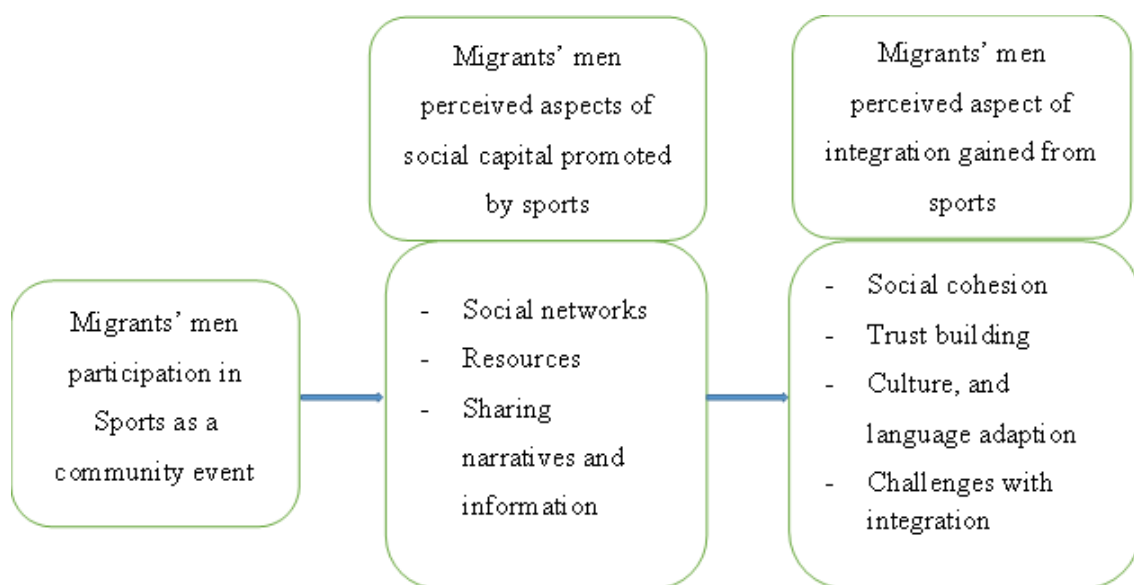


Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the study

2.2 Integration and immigration concepts

This proposal revolves around several core concepts: immigrants, immigrant integration, inclusion, sports, and migrants. These terms are foundational to the

literature review and are defined in this section to ensure conceptual clarity throughout the analysis.

An immigrant is defined as an individual who relocates to a country other than their habitual residence for a minimum of 12 months, such that the destination becomes their new place of usual residence (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2024). However, definitions of "immigrant" can differ across national contexts. In the Finnish setting, "persons who have moved to Finland and who intend to reside in Finland for more than twelve months or have resided in Finland over three months without interruption" are classified as immigrants (Statistics Finland, 2024).

Immigrant integration is described by the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) as a reciprocal process supported by official efforts to enhance well-being, health, education, and employment, with the overarching goal that the immigrant becomes "a full member of society" (The Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), 2024). This concept is multidimensional. "Integration can be understood through three primary dimensions: access and outcomes in sectors such as employment, housing, education, and healthcare; civic participation and recognition of rights; and social connections, including community engagement and overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers (Ager & Strang, 2008)."

International Organization for Migration (IOM), (2024) also views integration as a "two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and societies in which they live," involving incorporation into the economic, social, cultural, and political life of the host community. This definition encompasses broader strategies such as social inclusion and social cohesion.

Inclusion, in this context, is understood as the universal right of individuals to access health services, education, employment, housing, social networks, and to engage meaningfully in personal and societal development (The Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), 2024).

Sports are highlighted as a practical tool for supporting immigrant integration. Defined as either competitive or non-competitive physical activities, sports aim to improve

physical capabilities, enhance enjoyment, and offer entertainment. In the context of integration, sports can foster community ties, promote well-being, and serve as a platform for intercultural interaction (Flensner et al., 2021).

Migrant serves as a broader classification. It refers to any person who moves away from their habitual residence, either within national borders or internationally for temporary or permanent reasons. This category includes migrant workers, students, and individuals who are smuggled across borders (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2024).

2.3 Review of Literature

This section reviews the existing body of literature concerning the integration of immigrants into host societies, with a particular focus on the role of sports. It draws upon studies at the international, regional, and Finnish levels, providing a comprehensive overview of how sports have been employed as a strategy to foster social inclusion and integration among immigrant populations.

A significant number of scholarly works have explored how sports contribute to the integration of individuals with migrant backgrounds. Research has commonly emphasized sports as a catalyst for social interaction (Buser et al., 2022; Chatzopoulos, 2022), a mechanism for social inclusion (Pires De Freitas, 2021), and a domain for understanding migrants' lived experiences related to integration (Flensner et al., 2021). Some investigations have also considered the perspectives of those organizing these sports programs, particularly within sports clubs (Hertting & Karlefors, 2021).

A notable trend in this field of study is the focus on immigrant women, often within gender-specific programs such as women-only swimming sessions (Chatzopoulos, 2022) or multicultural sports initiatives tailored for female participants (Lee et al., 2021). Forced migrants (Middleton et al., 2020) and youth from migrant backgrounds (Hertting & Karlefors, 2021; Flensner et al., 2021; Lundkvist et al., 2020) have also been central to several investigations. For instance, Flensner et al. (2021) not only

examined youth experiences but also explored how leaders of nonprofit sports organizations shape cultural norms and language dynamics through sports activities.

Through these studies, sports are presented as a dynamic platform that promotes both integration and social inclusion through a range of outcomes. According to Olmesdahl et al. (2024), participation in sports helps migrants acquire essential life skills such as teamwork and communication. Similarly, Buser et al. (2022) reported that migrant involvement in Swiss sports clubs led to “significantly higher levels of social integration” compared to non-participants. This effect is particularly evident among male migrants, who often encounter more obstacles in forming social connections. In the Finnish context, Busk and Jauhiainen (2022) observed that immigrant men who engaged in sports were better positioned to establish social ties, navigate cultural norms, and overcome isolation. The authors noted that men's preference for team-based sports further enhanced their sense of community and belonging. Sports, whether competitive or recreational, are governed by standardized rules often set by national or international bodies. They typically involve physical activity, skill development, and cognitive engagement. In Denmark, Chatzopoulos (2022) found that government sports policies played a vital role in integrating migrant women, reinforcing the idea that sports are instrumental in promoting communal life and societal assimilation. Consequently, municipal authorities often support these efforts by collaborating with local clubs to host inclusive sports events. However, research has also pointed out potential downsides. For instance, Buser et al. (2022) and Nagel et al. (2020) cautioned that some sports clubs might accidentally reinforce “social closure,” creating environments where hidden ethnic or ideological boundaries persist.

Sports can take many forms, from mainstream team games like football and basketball to individual pursuits such as running and swimming. In South Korea, multicultural support centers implemented sports programs for migrant women, resulting in higher levels of integration and emotional well-being compared to other types of support services (Lee et al., 2021). Similarly, in Brazil, the Refugee and Immigrant Tournament organized by refugees themselves served as a platform to foster solidarity and resist discrimination (Pires De Freitas, 2021). These programs not only promote health and recreation but also support personal growth and cross-cultural understanding (Maguire & Falcous, 2020). In Sweden, Hertting and Karlefors (2021) found that sports

contributed to integration by enhancing personal development and bridging cultural divides.

At its core, sports involve people coming together to engage in shared physical activities. Its universality across languages, religions, and cultures makes it a powerful tool for inclusion (Kittelmann et al., 2021). It helps reduce the barriers faced by immigrants through the communal aspect of sports clubs.

Inclusion, broadly defined, refers to the intentional and ongoing effort to ensure that all individuals feel respected, supported, and valued in society. Inclusive environments are those that embrace diversity and promote equality and belonging. Sports, by their very nature, can help break down social and cultural boundaries, thereby fostering integration and inclusion (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

Nevertheless, while literature largely supports the role of sports in facilitating integration, some studies offer a more critical perspective. For example, Middleton et al. (2020) and Lundkvist et al. (2020) found little to no evidence of a significant difference in integration outcomes between youth who participated in sports and those who did not, based on data from Sweden. This highlights the complexity of integration processes and suggests that sports alone may not be a universally effective solution.

The existing literatures further helps to understand how sports bring cultures together in Finland.

Integration can be understood as the capacity to participate fully in all spheres of society, economic, cultural, social, political, and political, without having to relinquish one's cultural identity (Valtonen, 2004). Sports, being inherently collective in nature, offer a unique space where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds come together, thereby promoting both social and cultural well-being. Through encouraging dialogue and interaction, sporting activities serve as a bridge between cultures, helping to diminish prejudice, stereotypes, ignorance, intolerance, and discrimination (UNESCO, 2024; ECCAR, 2021).

Participation in sports also enables the creation of valuable social networks that can support immigrants in navigating their new environment (Olmesdahl et al., 2024). These connections may inform them about employment opportunities, healthcare services, and other essential social support systems. Given the psychological strain often associated with adapting to life in a new country, such group activities, especially among immigrant men can significantly reduce stress and help alleviate symptoms of depression.

Engaging in sports offers a constructive outlet for managing emotional tension and psychological pressure. It contributes to improved mental health by enhancing sleep quality, reducing anxiety levels, and strengthening the connection between the mind and body. Additionally, sports help develop physical coordination and motor skills (World Health Organization, 2018).

In Finland, sports have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to foster unity and inclusion. A notable example is the TAT International Cup organized by HELSINKI NMKY, which brings together teams from approximately 20 different countries along with a diverse group of spectators. This event promotes intercultural understanding and community-building, using football as a shared language across cultures. Another prominent organization is the Helsinki YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), established in 1889. It offers a variety of recreational and cultural activities for individuals of all ages, including clubs, physical exercise, music, scouting, and adventure programs. The organization also hosts various events, courses, and camps, with all profits reinvested into youth-focused initiatives.

3 PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to create awareness on the influence that sports wield on immigrant's integration into Finnish groups, with greater attention to Liikkukaa_Sports for All, being the context for the study.

The aim of this study was to examine the role of sports in integrating immigrant men into Finnish society. It aims to investigate how sports help people form social relationships, gain access to resources, and overcome integration barriers. With growing migration, examining the role of sports in promoting integration is important because sport is part of most individuals' activities. Thus, given the increasing diversity in Finnish society, it is important to explore the role of sports in promoting integration.

Two research questions were used to fulfil the aim of this study:

- (i) How do immigrant men perceive the role of sports in building social networks and facilitating their social integration in Finland?*
- (ii) What challenges do immigrant men face in accessing sports as a means of developing social capital and participating in community life in Finland?*

4 RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT AND PARTNERS

This section outlines the collaborative organization that partnered with the researchers and supported the study by providing relevant data. The contributions and related activities of the partner organization are detailed below.

The researchers worked in partnership with Liikkukaa, Sports for All, an organization founded in 2001 that served as the work-life collaborator in this study. Liikkukaa, Sports for All leverages sports and recreational activities as tools to promote social cohesion, improve mental and physical well-being, and foster equality across culturally diverse populations (Liikkukaa, 2024). The organization actively hosts sports and cultural events and engages in seminars and workshops. Within the Finnish context, Liikkukaa plays a significant role in supporting the integration of immigrants through its well-structured sporting initiatives (Liikkukaa, 2024). Its extensive work in promoting social integration through sport is particularly noteworthy.

Through its network of member organizations, Liikkukaa offers a wide array of activities tailored for families newly settled in Finland. These member organizations include both circus groups and traditional sports clubs (Liikkukaa, 2024). Services are provided across multiple regions in Finland, with member groups located in cities such as Espoo, Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Mikkeli, Oulu, Seinäjoki, Tampere, and Vantaa. Many of these member organizations are migrant-led sports initiatives focused on delivering socially inclusive sports programs aimed at supporting individuals in vulnerable or disadvantaged situations, including those in crisis (Liikkukaa, 2024).

5 METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methods and materials utilized in conducting the study, including the research design, data collection strategies, and the approach to data analysis.

The research employed a qualitative methodology, which, as Kyngäs (2020) explains, is particularly suitable for gaining in-depth insight into complex social issues. Qualitative research goes beyond gathering non-numerical data; it focuses on interpreting meanings, understanding context, and capturing participants' lived realities (Lim, 2024). In this study, the qualitative approach enabled a richer exploration of immigrant men's experiences related to migration and participation in sports, shedding light on their challenges and paths to integration.

The study specifically utilized inductive content analysis, a widely recognized method in qualitative inquiry, especially for exploratory studies (Kyngäs, 2020). Rather than relying on predefined categories, this method allows patterns, categories, and themes to emerge organically from the data. This grounded approach ensured that the findings authentically reflected the participants' perspectives, making it possible to uncover the subtle interconnections between identity, social belonging, and involvement in sports among male immigrants living in Helsinki.

5.1 Data collection procedure

This project primarily centers on conducting interviews with individuals associated with the Liikkukaa organization. Participants were invited through a combination of word-of-mouth outreach and email communications sent to those who met the study's eligibility criteria. These invitations included supporting documentation, which provided details about the researchers, the project objectives, and ethical considerations.

To gather data, the Semi-Structured Interview (SSI) technique utilized, an established qualitative research method. SSI was selected for its ability to facilitate in-depth

discussions across various thematic areas while allowing flexibility in how topics are explored (Kakilla, 2021).

To guide the interviews and ensure consistency, a structured interview guide was created. This guide comprises seven questions focused on the role of sports in the integration process of male immigrants and can be found in Appendix I. Interviews were scheduled to take place virtually via Microsoft Teams and F2F, with the interview guide serving as a tool to elicit insights into how sports contribute to the social integration of immigrant men in Finnish society. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent.

Collected data included basic demographic details such as age, educational background, and level of involvement in sports. This involvement was further categorized by type of sport, length of participation, and the role played whether as an athlete, coach, or event organizer. Additionally, questions addressed the broader impact of sports on the integration of immigrant men into Finnish life (refer to Appendix I – Interview Guide). A total of six interviews were conducted between September and October 2024.

5.2 Data analysis

The analysis of the study's findings draws from the responses of individuals who were either involved in organizing sports events or actively participated in sporting activities that engage immigrant men. The data collected through semi-structured interviews were examined using qualitative content analysis, applying the three-phase model proposed by Elo and Kyngäs (2008): preparation, organization, and reporting.

Content analysis was selected for its effectiveness in uncovering underlying meanings within qualitative data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), especially in areas that have been widely explored in existing literature, such as the role of sports in immigrant integration. Given the study's focus on examining this issue within the Finnish context, content analysis proved to be an appropriate method for interpreting and extracting insights from the interview transcripts (Lindgren et al., 2020).

During the preparation stage, interview recordings were transcribed using the built-in transcription feature in Microsoft Teams, which streamlined the process of converting spoken dialogue into written text. These transcripts were then reviewed to identify meaning units directly related to the study's key objectives: to understand immigrant men's perceptions of sports as a tool for integration and to identify the barriers they encounter when participating in sports in Finland.

Following Kyngäs (2020) framework, the analysis began with the identification of codes that reflected the study's purpose. These codes were then sorted into subcategories and further consolidated into overarching categories. This process led to the development of two primary categories, each comprising four subcategories, capturing participants' views on how sports influence the integration of immigrant men. Additionally, two more categories, also with four subcategories, emerged from the data, shedding light on the challenges participants faced in engaging with sports. This structured content analysis enabled the researchers to offer a detailed and coherent interpretation of the findings, consistent with the methodological recommendations of Lindgren et al. (2020)

Table 1. The table below shows few of the data categorization of inductive content analysis

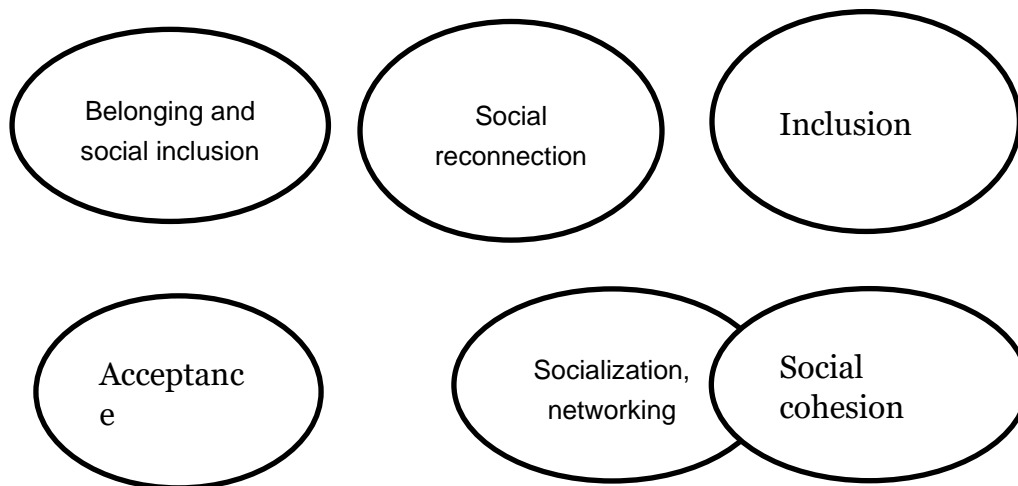
Participant	Category	Sub-categories	Examples of meaning units
HS20	Sense of belonging and inclusion	Inclusion, belonging	"I have the opportunity to connect with people who have lived in Finland longer than I have and are more experienced in finding the services I need while living here."
SC10	Social reconnection	Reunion, socializing, interaction,	"Immigrants have had the opportunity to participate in sports events through our summer

	and cohesion	and brotherhood	tournaments organised under the canopy of veteran Finland and TAD Finland, wherein we interact and socialise with our fellow brothers that we haven't seen for a while due to our tight schedules".
HS12	Belonging and social inclusion	Inclusion, acceptance and belonging	"Moments of teamwork, support from Finnish teammates, or recognition for good performance during sports events can make immigrants feel included and accepted. These experiences reinforce a sense of belonging and being part of the larger Finnish community".

6 RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the study. These are presented according to the aim and the research questions.

Themes that were inducted from the interview linking to social capital theory;



6.1 Perspectives of immigrant men on the role of sports in their integration

From the research question, “what is the perception of immigrant men on the role of sports in their integration into Finland”, following content analysis led to two categories: (i) a way to build connections in the Finnish society and (ii) a way to get information and access to services. Under each category, there were two subcategories as shown in the table below.

Sports to build connections in the Finnish society

This category closely corresponds with social capital theory as outlined by Berraies et al. (2020), who highlight the importance of social connections and networks in

generating value for individuals and communities. The subcategories (i) interaction within both immigrant and native Finnish communities, and (ii) opportunities for socializing, cultural expression, and enjoyment capturing essential aspects of social capital, particularly the concepts of bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is reflected in the relationships formed within the immigrant community, which promote mutual support and solidarity. Meanwhile, bridging social capital is evident in the interactions with native Finns, offering access to broader social networks and new opportunities. According to participants, sports events provided an ideal environment for meaningful exchanges and dialogue, echoing Berraies et al. (2020) argument that shared activities and mutual trust are fundamental to building social capital. Therefore, participation in sports not only strengthens ties within immigrant groups but also facilitates connections across different communities, highlighting the pivotal role of social capital in the integration process.

Respondent SC10 mentioned for examples:

“Immigrants have had the opportunity to participate in sports events through our summer tournaments organised under the canopy of veteran Finland and TAD Finland, wherein we interact and socialise with our fellow brothers that we haven’t seen for a while due to our tight schedules”.

Which implies based on the inductive interpretation that interactions with native Finns promote a sense of integration into broader Finnish society and participation in sports nurtures a collective identity and aligns immigrants with societal institutions.

Respondents held various opinions that reflected sports as a platform for socialising, displaying one's own culture, and a source of enjoyment. For example, RY6 respondent reported that: *“during our sporting events we usually have a cultural jamboree where we get to display our culture and our guests have greatly enjoyed the slot”.*

Which affirms that immigrants celebrate their identity, strengthening ties within their own cultural group.

A way to get information and access to services

The respondents also held various perspectives that led to this category. There were two related subcategories: (i) knowing where to get the services and getting

information on services; and (ii) access to services, a sense of belonging in the community, getting to know the Finnish culture and enhancing language skills.

Respondent HS20 described sports as something that helped them to get information on services and where such services can be found. Such as one respondent who noted that:

“I get to meet with others who have lived here longer than myself and have a lot of experience in aspects of knowing where to get the services I need while living here in Finland”

Which interprets that access to useful, experience based knowledge supports upward mobility and better integration into systems.

In addition, respondents shared that, through participation in sports, they felt a sense of belonging in the community and getting to know the Finnish culture while enhancing language skills. This was reflected from various meaning units extracted from the respondent HS12 interviews such as one respondent who noted that:

“Moments of teamwork, support from Finnish teammates, or recognition for good performance during sports events can make immigrants feel included and accepted. These experiences reinforce a sense of belonging and being part of the larger Finnish community”.

Although not related to sport events, it is quite interesting that some respondents noted that they felt a sense of community spirit – *“expand their social networks beyond their own community”* etc., when they participated in sports. For instance, one responded in the following way:

“Through the inter community tournaments that are organized we have the possibility to meet with other nationals and Fins as well thus fostering the community spirit”.

Table 2. Categories and subcategories describing perspectives on the role of sports on immigrant men integration

Categories	Subcategories
Perspectives on the role of sports in integration	
A way to build connections in the Finnish society	Interaction within the immigrant and the native Finnish community
	Socialization, display of own culture, and a source of enjoyment
A way to get information and access to services	Knowing where to get the services and getting information on services
	Access to services, a sense of belonging in the community and getting to know the Finnish culture and enhance language skills

6.2 Perceived challenges in engaging in sports activities

The respondents had different perceived challenges to engage in sports activities. This led to two categories: (i) work-life balance and (ii) communication barrier. With respect to category one, this was derived from two subcategories: (i) tight working schedule and (ii) low participation rates.

Some respondents perceived that due to busy working schedules, there was very little time left for engaging in sports activities. Specifically, a respondent expressed that: *“Due to our tight schedules, it is difficult for us to really meet alongside our spouses and kids, so it is difficult to have everyone on board at the same”*

Lastly, low skills in the Finnish language also hindered their participation in sports activities. This constituted the commonest barriers reported by most respondents. For example, JH19 respondent noted that because of language limitation, it becomes challenging to access sports facilities:

“Challenges include language barriers, unfamiliarity with certain sports, and sometimes limited access to sports facilities or information about how to get involved. In some cases, social isolation, or the feeling of not being fully accepted can be obstacles”

Table 3. Coding of perceived challenges in engaging in sports activities

Categories	Subcategories	Examples of meaning units
Work-life balance	Tight working schedule	“The greatest challenge we face is that due to our tight schedules it is difficult for us to really meet alongside our spouses and kids so it is difficult to have everyone on board at the same time.”
	Low participation rates	“There is a need for more sensitization so that more people can see the need to join the train as it is an important part to relieving mental stress and reinforcing social integration.”
Communication barriers	Lack of language skills and cultural differences	“Well, the primary challenge we as immigrants are facing is all in the direction of communication. It's quite hard to learn the Finnish language at a fast speed thus communication barriers hinders some of us from even growing a career in integration. Common challenges for immigrant men include language barriers, cultural differences, and limited access to sports opportunities.”

7 ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

7.1 Ethical considerations

Appropriate permissions were secured from the organization where the study participants were recruited. Since the project involved human subjects, it adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK), 2019). Prior to participation, all individuals were provided with detailed information about the study to ensure they fully understood its purpose and scope.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the study commenced. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences (Neurolaunch, 2024). All relevant information regarding the study, privacy policies, and voluntary participation was shared before data collection began.

Collected data was securely stored on a password-protected computer belonging to one of the researchers to prevent unauthorized access by anyone outside the research team. The data was used exclusively for academic purposes, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the processes of data collection, entry, and storage.

Oversight of the research was carried out at the institutional level by the University. Data access was restricted to members of the research team, and no data was published or shared externally.

The project complied with applicable data protection regulations, including the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). No personally identifiable information was collected during the study, and participants' anonymity was strictly maintained.

8 LIMITATION AND RELIABILITY

8.1 Limitations

As emphasized by Price and Murnan (2004), recognizing and clearly communicating a study's limitations is vital to ensuring both transparency and the credibility of its findings. While this research has provided meaningful insights into how sports contribute to the social integration of immigrant communities, it is essential to consider its limitations when evaluating the reliability and scope of the results.

One of the main limitations is the relatively small number of interview participants. Although this allowed for a more in-depth and nuanced exploration of individual experiences, it inevitably narrowed the dataset and may affect the generalizability of the findings to wider populations or different social contexts. Nevertheless, as noted by Cohen et al. (2007), qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, aiming to reveal complex insights and patterns. The choice to concentrate on a smaller, focused sample aligns with this principle, offering a richer perspective on the dynamic relationship between sports, integration, and community participation.

Additionally, the use of a qualitative approach specifically semi-structured interviews and content analysis enhanced the study's interpretive depth. These methods facilitated the identification of recurring themes and systematic categorization of data, helping to present the findings in a coherent and meaningful way. The iterative coding process, applied consistently across the dataset, contributed to the study's internal reliability by minimizing subjective interpretation.

That said, the study's findings may still reflect the specific cultural and social context in which the research took place. Factors unique to the participating communities could have influenced the results, and therefore, any attempt to apply these findings to other contexts should be approached with caution.

8.2 Reliability of the study

The reliability of the study was further reinforced by the ethical and methodological integrity maintained throughout the research process. The study strictly followed the ethical principles set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK), 2019), with particular attention to informed consent, participant confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity. Working closely with immigrant communities required heightened ethical consideration, which not only ensured respectful and responsible data collection but also enhanced the authenticity and trustworthiness of the participants' responses.

Moreover, the research team's direct engagement through face-to-face interviews contributed to effective communication and advocacy, thereby improving the richness and quality of the data gathered. Collaboration with a range of stakeholders including community organizations and academic peers added further credibility to the study by incorporating varied viewpoints and encouraging a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the role of sports in integration.

9 DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATION, CONCLUSION AND, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVEMENT

9.1 Discussion

Flexible and adaptive strategies play a key role in fostering resilience and integration skills among immigrants. This study set out to examine individual perspectives on how sports contribute to the integration of immigrant men into Finnish society. The findings revealed two core themes related to sports' role in supporting integration.

Actively engaging in sports was found to significantly aid in building social networks, improving access to services and information, and promoting cultural learning, including language acquisition. These outcomes have important implications. Firstly, regular involvement in sports may serve as a long-term adaptive strategy for immigrant men navigating the integration process. Secondly, policymakers and integration initiatives might benefit from encouraging sports participation as a means of enhancing the effectiveness of integration programs.

Sports have long been used to address a range of social issues, with particular attention given to their function in facilitating the integration of immigrants. According to social capital theory, skills and experiences brought into social settings; such as sports, can help individuals build networks and foster social bridges, particularly among immigrant communities (Berraies et al., 2020). In this context, immigrants often utilize their sporting abilities to forge new social ties and establish a sense of belonging. Sports environments provide a space for interpersonal connection and resilience-building, offering a meaningful avenue for social inclusion (Thomas & Gupta, 2021; Ager & Strang, 2008).

However, the study also revealed complexities in this relationship. While participants generally viewed sports as a positive space for socialization and connection, existing literature suggests a more nuanced reality. Despite supportive policies, some immigrants remain hesitant to engage in specific types of sports, particularly those perceived as aggressive or culturally disconnected. This highlights that sports, while beneficial, do not always guarantee successful integration outcomes.

This research also highlighted that sports serve as an informal avenue for learning about Finnish culture and enhancing language skills. Nonetheless, language barriers emerged as a major challenge to participation. This aligns with previous findings suggesting that while sports can support cultural adaptation, initial engagement may be low due to language-related challenges (Pires De Freitas, 2021). On the other hand, some researchers argue that participation in sports does not necessarily correlate with improved integration outcomes, with some participants experiencing similar trajectories to those not involved in sports (Hertting & Karlefors, 2021). These differing viewpoints emphasize the complex nature of using sports as a tool for integration.

Furthermore, immigrant men often encounter practical barriers to participating in sports, such as demanding work schedules and limited language proficiency. These findings are consistent with broader national data, which show that structural and linguistic barriers can limit immigrant involvement in various social activities (Statistics Finland, 2024; The Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), 2024). Addressing language challenges is thus critical to enabling more inclusive participation in sports and improving the overall integration experience for immigrant communities in Finland (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2024; Chatzopoulos, 2022; (Buser et al., 2022).

9.2 Recommendation

The findings emphasize the importance of language skills, both for participating in sports and as a benefit gained through engaging in sports events. Based on this, the study suggests enhancing the focus on Finnish language development in sports activities. This could be implemented through language learning modules integrated into sports programs or by providing Finnish language support during sports events.

Moreover, the challenges of balancing work and life must be taken into account. It is recommended that sports events be organized with flexible scheduling, such as evening and weekend options, to accommodate individuals with busy routines. The importance of involving immigrants in sports activities should also be highlighted in events designed to promote their integration.

For future research, this study used a short-term qualitative approach, and there is a need for longitudinal studies with extended follow-up periods. These studies should explore the long-term relationship between sports participation and integration outcomes, considering factors such as education and socio-economic background. This would offer deeper insight into the interconnected role of sports in the integration process, alongside other influential factors.

9.3 Conclusion

Through semi-structured interviews with six participants who have recently organized or taken part in sports events involving migrant men, the study highlighted how sports facilitate integration pathways for immigrant men into Finnish society. While the respondents offered diverse viewpoints, key insights were gathered, particularly that sports serve as a means for building connections, creating networks, and providing important information about accessing services in Finnish society. The research indicates that sports contribute to integration by encouraging interactions that enhance migrants' Finnish language skills and promote learning about Finnish culture.

As noted by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), social relationships are crucial for fostering inclusion and integration (The Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (The Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), 2024). This study reinforces the idea that sports offer both an activity and a platform for migrant men to integrate into Finnish society. Furthermore, because integration is a mutual process requiring adaptation from both immigrants and the local population, sports create a space for these interactions. Therefore, it can be concluded that sports play an essential role in the integration of migrant men into Finnish society.

The study's findings support the case for sports policies in Finland as a means of promoting social integration for immigrants. National and local policymakers could use these insights to collaborate with sports clubs and organizations, such as Liikkukaa (the study's work-life partner), to maintain and expand sports programs that involve

immigrants. The use of sports as an integration tool has been successfully explored in other countries, such as Copenhagen, Denmark (Chatzopoulos, 2022) and Sweden (Lundkvist et al., 2020).

In conclusion, while proactive participation in sports can be hindered by language barriers, sports also serve as a valuable tool for improving Finnish language skills. This emphasizes the need for structured opportunities where native or proficient Finnish speakers can engage in mutual learning through cross-cultural sports activities, helping immigrant participants improve their language skills.

9.4 Professional competencies and development

The use of qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and content analysis, greatly enhanced data collection, interpretation, and categorization abilities. Additionally, coding and identifying key themes improved the ability to present research findings in a clear and coherent way. These skills are essential for evidence-based policymaking and social work interventions, ensuring that research results effectively guide practice and decision-making.

Conducting face-to-face interviews with key informants also contributed to strengthening communication and advocacy skills. Interacting with participants improved active listening and effective questioning abilities. Moreover, synthesizing research findings into a structured analysis improved academic writing and advocacy skills, enabling researchers to clearly communicate the importance of sports in social integration to policymakers, organizations, and immigrant communities.

As emphasized by the (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK), 2019), cultural sensitivity and ethical awareness were important competencies developed during this process. The study involved working closely with immigrant communities, which required cultural sensitivity alongside adherence to ethical research standards, such as informed consent and confidentiality. This experience reinforced our ability to engage ethically and respectfully with diverse groups, an essential skill for professionals in the social services field.

Additionally, the research fostered a stronger sense of teamwork and collaboration. Working with research participants, organizations, and colleagues throughout the study improved our ability to function effectively in a multidisciplinary environment, providing deeper insights into different stakeholders' views on sports and integration. This experience underscored the importance of collaboration in social work and policymaking.

In summary, Ashi Ayounjuh Francis research contributed to my professional growth by enhancing my skills in social issue analysis, ethical research practices, and effective communication of findings. It also provided me with valuable knowledge about social service professionals working in migration and community development. These competencies that I learnt will be vital for contributing to policies and programs aimed at fostering immigrant inclusion and improving overall well-being.

Morris Ivan Kiwanuka, engaging in this work deepened my understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding migration and integration, highlighting the practical implications for social service delivery. My professional competence development emphasized the importance of culturally responsive approaches, ethical sensitivity, and the ability to translate research into meaningful action. Beyond personal growth, the experience positioned me to make informed contributions to community-based initiatives and policy efforts aimed at fostering inclusive, resilient societies.

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APPENDIX 1: Interview guide questions

Study Title: The role of sports in promoting the integration of immigrant men into Finnish society

Researcher: (Your Full Name)

Age: (Participants Age)

Date: (Insert Date)

Interview Mode: (Team Meeting / Online)

Duration: Approximately 1hour

Section 1: Background Information

1. Can you briefly tell me about yourself, your country of origin, how long you've been living in Finland, and what types of sports you participate in?
2. How did you first get involved in sports activities here in Finland?

Section 2: Core Interview Questions

1. Have immigrants got the possibility to make friends or social connections through participation in sports events? If so, how have these relationships developed during sports events?
2. How has participation in sports influenced the ability of immigrant men to communicate during and after sports events? And has this communication enhanced their ability to communicate in Finnish or about societal issues?
3. How has participating in sports helped immigrant men to establish connections with persons outside their immediate immigrant community?
4. Describe how your participation in sports helped you to gain information about the Finnish society and societal services?
5. Describe how you have had the opportunities during sports events to share your own cultural background with others and learn about the Finnish culture through sports?
6. Can you describe moments, or experiences where participating in sports has enabled you to feel part of the Finnish society and included or accepted in the community?
7. What are the perceived challenges immigrant men encounter in engaging in sports activities in Finland.

APENDIX 2. Consent form

STUDY TITLE: THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN PROMOTING THE INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANT MEN INTO FINNISH SOCIETY: PERSPECTIVES OF IMMIGRANT MEN IN FINLAND SOCIETY

We invite you to participate in our study on the role of sports in facilitating integration and social inclusion of immigrant men in Finland. The study is entirely for academic purposes to fulfil the requirements for award of a degree, your information may however contribute to improvement of integration strategies for migrants in Finland.

I _____ have been given information about the study and have understood the purpose of the study and accept to voluntarily participate in the study.

Date _____

Signature/Initials _____