



HARNESSING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH SPORT - EXPLORING THE ROLE OF FOOTBALL IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN SWEDEN

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Abstract:

Integration ought to be a two-way process, requiring adjustments from both migrants and native residents. However, more adaptation is often required of and indeed achieved by the migrants than host communities. Fortunately, participation avenues such as sports offer opportunities for these migrants to interact with and learn from host communities. This study, therefore, explored how African migrants utilize football to create social relations and develop the social capital necessary for their integration in Gothenburg, Sweden. The study employed a qualitative methodology, specifically semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted digitally. Ten adult African migrants living in Gothenburg were interviewed and data was analyzed thematically. The Social capital theory and the Conceptual framework for understanding migrant integration formed the theoretical and analytical framework. Football was revealed as a powerful tool for socio-economic integration, especially since it facilitated migrants' building of reliable social connections in their host communities.

Keywords: African migrants, socio-economic integration, social capital, sports

Introduction

Migration is inevitable in the current realm of globalization and internationalization. Our study focused on international migration, which involves people crossing borders to live and settle in new countries (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2019). We focused on international migrants who are people who have for any reason, temporarily or permanently left their countries of origin (IOM, 2019). Economic differences among countries have widened, transport costs are fairer, communications channels are more

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convenient and migrant networks have expanded (United Nations, 2013). Consequently, international migration flows continue to rise in spite of stricter immigration laws and policies in various countries. By mid-2019, there were 272 international migrants worldwide (Global Migration Data Portal [GMDP], 2019). These significant numbers account for the increased popularity of migration issues in academic and social policy research. Europe attracts 30% of the world's immigrants (GMDP, 2019) and more are especially attracted to Nordic countries because of the generous, social democratic welfare benefits emphasizing universality and egalitarianism (Esping Andersen, 1990). Amidst migration reforms and a reduction in multiculturalist policies and programmes, Sweden remains more welcoming to migrants compared to other Scandinavian countries (Bonoli & Natali, 2012; Brochmann & Hagelund, 2011; Jopkke, 2004). It is still a *“country of opportunities and constraints for migrant integration”* (Riniolo, 2016, p.1). For instance, by mid-2019 Sweden hosted about 2 million international migrants from across the globe who constituted 20% of the country's population (GMDP, 2019). Luckily, migrant integration has received adequate global attention inspired by the *“Leave no one behind, including migrants”* campaign championed by the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (GMDP, 2021, para 1) and remains a priority policy concern within the European Union (European Union [EU], 2011; Makarova & Herzog, 2014). However, some migrants who are not covered by formal interventions rely on informal social capital and support for integration (Ryan et al., 2008). For purposes of this study, socio-economic migrant integration depicts a two-way process whereby migrants and their host communities adapt to each other's sociocultural, economic, and political ways. Both parties ought to respect and promote participation and social inclusion (IOM, 2019).

Sport is increasingly becoming famous in migrant integration due to its ability to promote active participation, inclusion and empowerment of minority groups (Agergaard & Sørensen; 2010; Flensner et al., 2021; Hertting & Karlefors, 2013; Lundkvist et al., 2020). Sports include various physical activities of a recreational or competitive nature often done for individual and/or team benefit (Council of Europe, 2001). Football (also called Soccer in American English), is a physical sport usually involving 11 players, kicking and sometimes holding the ball; aiming at scoring or defending goals (Bundesliga, 2022). Participation in sports of any nature increases access to the means and markers of integration such as labour markets, education, health and other spheres of well-being for migrants and their descendants (Ager & Strang, 2008; Agergaard, 2018). Unfortunately, there exists scanty research on the integration of African migrants in Scandinavian countries yet their background from low-income countries involuntarily accords them a lower socio-economic status and inadequate knowledge about sporting opportunities (Ekholm et al., 2019; Gibbs & Block, 2017). This makes it more difficult for them to integrate into developed countries like Sweden. This research, therefore, explored ways in which African migrants utilize football to build the social capital necessary for their socioeconomic integration. Social capital is understood as relevant, reciprocal and reliable social networks and resources for members of a social group to achieve individual, group and societal goals (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2005; Putman, 2000).

Our study considered football as a team sport because it presents wider arenas for cultivating social networks and harnessing reliable social capital (Agergaard & Sørensen, 2010; Krouwel et al., 2006) necessary for migrant integration.

Study purpose and research questions

This study explored the role of football in the socioeconomic integration of African migrants in Gothenburg, Sweden. It specifically focused on migrants' formation, maintenance and utilization of football-built social capital to integrate socio-economically. The study specifically attempted to answer these research questions; how do African migrants build and maintain social networks through football? And how do these networks influence the migrants' socioeconomic integration into Swedish society?

Literature review

The relevance of sport to migrants' socio-economic integration

Participation in sport has a global potential for promoting migrant integration (Hertting & Karlefors, 2013; Lundkvist et al., 2020) and therefore state bodies are committing significant resources to sports policies and programs (Agergaard & Sørensen, 2010). The European Commission's White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007) acknowledges sport's potential to facilitate migrant integration because it encourages inter-cultural interactions, offers a sense of belonging to migrants and promotes active citizenship through fair play. Sport offers opportunities for social inclusion, participation, belongingness, information sharing and cultural inter-mixing (Flensner et al., 2021; Makarova & Herzog, 2014; Stura, 2019; Xiong et al., 2020). However, Flensner et al. (2021) further argue that sport's role in migrant integration remains unclear and less reliable due to its limited scope in terms of linking migrant participants to broader economic and social structures of society. Spaaij (2012, p.1524) also discourages exaggerating sport's capacity in facilitating social capital development. Nevertheless, sport remains a capable tool for fostering integration since it is a fundamental right that emphasizes non-discriminatory participation (European Commission, 2007; Riksidrottsförbundet [The Swedish Sports Confederation], 2021). Civil society and state agencies in Sweden are striving to promote migrant integration through community sports clubs and programs (Apelmo, 2012; Flensner, et al., 2021). Other European countries such as Norway have also utilized sports in migrant integration with the expansion of social capital as the main objective (Walseth, 2008). Krouwel et al. (2006) also revealed sports reaching the political scene for its potential to bridge the gap between native Dutch and minority populations through intercultural interactions.

Sport offers a major platform for socialization and integration within and across groups (Doidge et al., 2020; Makarova & Herzog, 2014). Precisely, "*sport is one way into society*" (Flensner et al., 2021, p.65 citing Arnoldsson, 2019). Although sometimes characterized by competition (Krouwel et al., 2006), team sports such as football offer conducive and unifying grounds for integration and interaction by breaking diversities

between migrants and native residents who share the goal of winning the match (Agergaard & Sørensen, 2010; Elbe et al., 2018; Rich et al., 2015). Migrants are often a minority, discriminated against and disadvantaged category of the population (O'Reilly, 2017), however, sports can be a means for their integration. Active participation in sports is likely to present positive outcomes such as emancipation, gender equality (Ekholm et al., 2019), high self-efficacy and confidence and appropriate interactional skills (Gibbs and Block, 2017; Lundkvist et al., 2020; Xiong, et al., 2020). Additionally, sport promotes physical fitness, health and psychological well-being (Hertting & Karlefors, 2013; Lundkvist et al., 2020; Malm et al., 2019; Rich et al., 2015). Since experiences of stress, anxiety and loneliness are common among migrants (Menge & Kayonga, 2022), sport enhances positive feelings of joy and happiness, rekindles lost hope and enables social interactions (Hertting & Karlefors, 2013; Stone, 2018; Stura, 2019).

Sport-oriented social networks, social capital and migrant integration

Putnam (2000) contends that participation in voluntary and collective activities, including sports, initiates social interactions resulting in social networks. Sport builds social capital and promotes ideals of collectiveness, social trust, reciprocity and shared interests (Putnam, 2000; Walseth, 2008). Walseth (2008) in her study involving Muslim second-generation immigrant girls in Norway reported that most of her participants agreed to have built broader networks by participating in sports. Putnam (2000) holds that reciprocity as a core prerequisite of social networks can be "*specific*" which relates to "*I'll do this for you if you do this for me*". This reciprocity can also be "*generalized*" which means "*I'll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road*" (p.20-21). Spaaij (2012) also pointed to commitment and obligation as essential for building social connections. In contrast to contentions of participation in sports encouraging teamwork and collectiveness, Krouwel et al. (2006) found that for some Somali migrants in the Netherlands, it offered free arenas for building personal capacities and individual achievements, as opposed to a bridge for social relations.

Forming and maintaining social capital and networks within sports groups might rely on commonalities among teammates regarding language, race, colour, gender, ethnicity, and age or residence status. Walseth (2008) in her study revealed stronger bonds between teammates who shared an immigrant status, although they belonged to diverse ethnicities. In essence, additional similarities with teammates, rather than the game itself, increase chances for building bonding social capital. Similarly, Spaaij (2012) reveals the power of similarity in building bridging social capital in his study where Somali migrants in sports easily built connections with fellow blacks or Muslims because they shared a common identity. In contrast, Stura (2019) revealed differences in religion impeding meaningful "*integration into club life*" for some refugee athletes in Germany (p.136). Physical closeness also facilitates the process of building social relationships within sports groups. Bonds grow stronger when teammates spend more time together either within or outside the sports arena. Walseth (2008) revealed that young women in

Norway felt connected to teammates when they spent more time playing together or travelling to football matches, training and camps. Ekholm (2019) also reported increased bonding and bridging connections between young sports teammates in Sweden because they lived in the same neighbourhood and often met and interacted at the mall.

Social capital harnessed through sports is essential for promoting emotional and psychosocial well-being (Walseth, 2008). Psychosocial well-being is facilitated by belongingness to a sports group (Doidge et al., 2020; Krouwel et al., 2006; Stone, 2018). Belongingness to ethnically homogenous social groups such as sporting associations is vital for migrant integration to be perceived beyond assimilation (Spaaij, 2012). Social relations and interactions with sports coaches and teammates can also facilitate migrants to learn the language and local dialects of host communities (Stura, 2019). Although sport itself is a non-verbal language commonly understood by migrants from different ethnicities, verbal language is a powerful gateway, without which, socialization and inclusion are less existent (Hertting & Karlefors, 2016). Elbe et al. (2018) revealed Eastern European migrants in Greece cultivated limited social interactions due to barriers in language while the Latin American sample drawn from Spain in the same study scored high on interaction and felt well integrated because they spoke Spanish. Moreover, speaking the language of a host community is both a means and an outcome of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Social capital built through sport has the potential for linking migrants to some means of socioeconomic integration. Field (2008 cited in Spaaij, 2012) points to in-group bonds being important for linking members to better opportunities for education and employment. Walseth (2008) also agrees with Putman (2000) that “*weak ties*” (Granovetter, 1973, p.1361) can offer linkages to integration domains of employment, education, housing, health and other opportunities for advancement highlighted by Ager and Strang (2008). Research also evidences how participation in sports by migrants facilitates their adaptation to host communities’ cultural norms, morals, and behaviours as well as positive behaviour and interpersonal skills (Anderson-Butcher & Bates 2021; Ekholm, 2018; Ekholm et al., 2019; Gibbs & Block, 2017; Stura, 2019). Integration indicative of a two-way process (Spaaij, 2012) also requires native citizens to learn about immigrants’ cultures and norms in order for the two groups to build reciprocal and harmonious networks. Agergaard and Sørensen’s study (2010) in Denmark mentioned coaches adapting to Muslim players’ religious practices and giving them breaks and special food during Ramadhan or allowing girls to play with veils.

Theoretical framework

Social Capital Theory

This theory stems from the works of James Coleman (1990), Nan Lin (2005), Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and Robert Putnam (2000) among others. Most proponents of this theory contend that there is some form of membership to a group in which members get entitled to reciprocal support and collective resources essential for their own goal achievement

and that of other members. Generally, social action, social networks, collectivism, social trust, reciprocity, obligation, mutual interest, shared values, solidarity, volunteerism, and proximity are key prerequisites for harnessing social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) distinctively conceptualizes bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital depicts bonds within one's largely-homogeneous social group while bridging social capital highlights connections between and across divergent or heterogeneous social groups. Linking social capital depicts "*weak ties*" (Granovetter, 1973, p.1361) that allow individuals to have access to broader socio-economic systems.

This study, therefore, relied on the Social Capital theory to explore how African migrants as members or fans of football teams harness resourceful social connections and gain linkages to essential domains of socio-economic integration into Swedish society, highlighted by Ager and Strang (2008). Participation in voluntary and collective activities including sports initiates social interactions and relations which encourage the building of social capital that may ease the integration of migrants into host communities (Putnam, 2000). Team sports such as football operationalize essential social capital concepts. Bourdieu (1986) believes that social relationships are maintained by some kind of "*material or symbolic exchanges*" but may also exist in a "*practical state*" or be "*socially-instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name*" (p.21), a football team name for instance. He also brings in the aspect of physical closeness as one of the factors that could influence the maintenance of social connections. Therefore, how often members of football teams meet and how close they are might influence the magnitude and strength of the social capital they are able to harness. Members of a social network (football group) should be obliged to initiate some kind of action in order to build and maintain social capital (Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2005). According to Bourdieu (1986), the amount of social capital a person possesses largely depends on how many social networks they form and maintain. In essence, would the migrants involved in football most likely build stronger social capital if they created numerous social networks within and beyond their teams? How would their football-based social capital be reinforced and strengthened? Would it depend on how much time and energy invested? Or on the interpersonal skills and knowledge to maintain the formed connections?

A framework for understanding integration

This study also relied on the main domains of "*successful integration*" provided by Ager and Strang (2008). Although their work represented the United Kingdom context, it was still reliable for this study's understanding of migrant integration in Sweden through football. Ager and Strang, therefore, highlighted four thematic areas concerning what "*successful integration*" (p.167) generally entails, most of which point to socio-economic integration as the focus of this study. Employment, housing, education and health sectors are conceptualized as markers and means of integration because they facilitate migrants' access to essential services but are also outcomes and indicators of this integration. In relation to the social capital theory, Ager and Strang (2008) recognize the contribution of

social relations in migrant integration at community levels. They summed these as a “*connective tissue*” which bridges citizenship and rights with outcomes from key social and public sectors (p.177). The ability to make social connections signifies an integrated, responsive and harmonious community in which migrants and host-community residents accommodate each other’s differences. Facilitating integration requires eliminating challenges that are likely to impede meaningful participation and “*successful integration*” of migrants in host communities. Ager and Strang (2008) identified two major ways of removing such barriers and facilitating migrants’ participation and social inclusion. These include; “*language and cultural knowledge; and safety and security*” (p.181). This study, therefore, relied on this framework to explore how African migrants harnessed social capital through football, how this social capital linked them to the main domains of socio-economic integration and how football generally loosened the existing barriers to facilitate these migrants’ integration.

Material and methods

Research design and strategy

Consistent with social constructionism and interpretivism research paradigms that guided this study, a qualitative strategy and qualitative data collection methods were adopted to answer research questions. Qualitative methods offer an in-depth understanding of social phenomena and greatly enable consideration of participants’ unique interpretations of the social world (DeCarlo, 2018). This study focused on African migrants’ diverse narratives of their integration through football (Bryman, 2012). A qualitative exploratory and descriptive study were conducted to find out how participation in football facilitates the socio-economic integration of African migrants by enabling them to build social capital. The study was cross-sectional since data was collected about a particular phenomenon at a single point in time (Bryman, 2012) because this was academic research scheduled within a fixed time frame. The research process employed abduction, a *hybrid* theory-research relationship (Bryman, 2012) where participants’ worldviews and opinions influenced the selection of theoretical points of reference and “*arriving at a social scientific account of the social world*” (Bryman, 2012, p.401).

Sampling, study area and population

The study was conducted in Gothenburg city in Sweden where members of the research team were residing and studying at the time. This created opportunities for prior observations of African migrants residing in the city as well as how football activities were arranged.

Non-random sampling, specifically purposive sampling procedures were employed to select ten participants for the study. Participants were selected based on their direct linkages to the research questions (Bryman, 2012), their relevance to the study, their knowledge about the research topic and their willingness to participate. Specific inclusion criteria were that one had to be an adult African migrant (of any category, above

18 years), living in Gothenburg at the time of the study, and presently or recently involved in football (as a player or fan). Deliberate efforts were put into selecting migrants from different African regions and diverse football teams although only those from English-speaking countries were considered. Choosing such a relatively smaller sample was influenced by the limited time and resources available as well as the COVID-19 restrictions in Sweden (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020) which only favored online interviews. The research also intended to highlight the unique narratives and perspectives about integration through football as experienced by the African migrants represented in this study. The aim was therefore not to generalize findings to all migrants but rather to increase the popularity of migrant integration through sports and inspire future related research.

Table 1: Participant characteristics and corresponding football team categorizations

Number	Participant pseudonym	Sex	African country of origin & Region	Years spent in Sweden	Nature of football team/s or group/s
1	Rogers	Male	Cameroon (West/Central)	18	Heterogeneous/ ethnically-mixed (dominated by migrants)
2	Francis	Male	D.R Congo (Eastern)	8	Heterogeneous/ ethnically-mixed
3	David	Male	Uganda (Eastern)	9	A country-specific homogenous migrant team and a semi-homogeneous (dominated by Swedes)
4	Wilson	Male	Ghana (Western)	13	A country-specific homogenous migrant team and a Heterogeneous/ ethnically-mixed
5	Jonathan	Male	Rwanda (Eastern)	3	Heterogeneous/ ethnically-mixed
6	Vosh	Female	Zimbabwe (Southern)		Heterogeneous/ ethnically-mixed
7	Nelson	Male	Tanzania (Eastern)	5	Region-specific homogenous migrant team
8	Viola	Female	Uganda (Eastern)	Over 10 years	Semi-homogenous school team
9	Anthony	Male	Uganda (Eastern)	20	Region-specific homogenous migrant team
10	Constance	Female	Uganda (Eastern)	2 and a half	Football fan

Data collection methods and tools

This study utilized qualitative interviewing, specifically, semi-structured in-depth interviews that enabled researchers to approach the research process in a more flexible manner and ask open-ended questions (Bryman, 2012). All interviews were digitally conducted via ZOOM in compliance with the new COVID-19 restrictions in Sweden,

regarding social distancing (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020). A flexible semi-structured interview guide including a rough list of open-ended questions and topics was used to keep interview discussions on track.

Thematic analysis

A “theoretical” approach to thematic analysis was adopted by approaching transcripts with some specific but unbiased interest towards the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.89). Data was transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were later edited to correct simple grammatical errors while maintaining the original meanings. The transcribed data was then coded by scrutinizing it to identify and categorize recurrent patterns and ideas relevant to the research questions. The codes were later combined to form themes and sub-themes (Bryman, 2012). This coding process was followed by the selection of direct quotations from participants’ narratives that more vividly elaborated and illustrated themes and sub-themes. To ensure anonymity, further edits were made to direct quotations by assigning pseudonyms to people, places and organizations without compromising the data quality.

Ethical considerations

This study was guided by social work ethics (IASSW, 2018; IFSW, 2018) and ethics for conducting social research in Sweden recommended by Vetenskapsrådet [The Swedish Research Council] (2017). Ethical clearance was obtained from the academic supervisor who represented the Swedish University under which the research was conducted. Written and verbal informed consent was also sought from participants. We also ensured the confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of participants and also minimized physical, psychological, legal and socio-emotional harm (Bryman, 2012). In line with social work’s self-determination principle, participants were informed about the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point and to only answer questions they were comfortable with (Bryman, 2012). Also, during zoom interviews, participants had the autonomy to keep their cameras on or off and also consent to be recorded or not.

Study limitations and possible solutions

More men than women were included in this study’s sample, just like more men than women are involved in football and even fewer immigrant women and girls (Makarova & Herzog, 2014; Spaaij, 2012; Stura, 2019). Also, the study considered African migrants in general without paying particular attention to their specific cultures and countries of origin. Nevertheless, this sample was reliable to unveil important insights into how African migrants build social capital that might ease their integration into Sweden.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges to the data collection process by limiting physical contact. Internet-based methods were therefore adopted to fit the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. Although zoom interviews allowed for face-to-face interactions, enabling participants’ non-verbal cues to be noticed, some participants preferred to have their cameras off, had bad lighting, poor internet connectivity and

disruptions from housemates. In spite of these unavoidable flaws, the methodological strategies employed in this study derived sufficient and valuable data with regard to the research questions.

Results and Discussion

Founding, expanding and maintaining football-built social relations and networks

The study realized that most African migrants depended on existing social networks for recommendations and information about football facilities and clubs in Sweden. Similarly, participation in football promoted the formation and maintenance of new and old social networks. Football offered a reliable space for keeping in touch with new and old friends, similar to what Walseth (2008) found out in Norway. Social networks constitute the push and pull factors of migration but also facilitate integration processes through information and resources in host communities (O'reilly, 2017). Similar findings by Spracklen et al. (2015) showed that some migrant youth connected fellow migrants to sporting activities in the UK. Stura (2019) conversely points to some migrants taking personal initiatives to approach sports clubs in Germany which resonates with this study's findings as some African migrants also approached sports clubs themselves.

The process of building new social relations kicked off from the football field as teammates and fans interacted. Building stronger connections took an effortless and *natural* form because the football field offered an open space for initiating friendly conversations as David explained;

"[...] When it is football, everybody is quick to communicate, everybody is quick to socialize. You just pull someone aside and they are willing to talk [...] after the match they immediately come and greet you and they are like "wow, nice game, where are you from?" [...]"

The practical teamwork during football games often resulted in stronger bonds on and off the pitch. Some participants further revealed that having impressive football skills attracted more potential friends and expanded one's social circle as Robert articulated;

"The only thing that made me connect with everybody in the town and school was football. When I started to play in the team, everybody saw that I was good and that is why I think I started to get some kind of fame, quote "fame" [...]. Then other people in that city that played football started to hang with me and when other people saw these people laughing and talking with me, they started to talk with me too."

Although it was easier for most participants to connect with people from similar ethnic and racial backgrounds, football *pushed the wall* for them to meet people who were *different*. The shared goal of playing and winning as a team created a network where diversities were buried and everyone interacted freely. For example, Wilson noted that

“When we get to the field, no matter our nationality, or language, we always find a way to communicate because of our interest in football, we still are able to play and have fun”. Francis added that “[...] at the end of the day we are just like one; football makes you one; you don’t see any difference; it is like one football, one people! [...]”.

Previous research by Walseth (2008) in Norway similarly revealed Muslim girls easily connecting with fellow migrants because they shared something in common. Such social connections within one’s homogenous or similar group constitute bonding social capital. Football pushing the wall of difference enables the formation of bridging social capital which involves connections between and across groups that are different or heterogeneous (Putman, 2000). The courage African migrants developed from interacting with strangers in new football teams equally made it easier for them to interact and form connections with people around the city who did not play football. The spirit of sportsmanship wiped off their shyness, thus increasing their chances for broader networks Francis elaborated:

“If you can play football with strangers, laugh and smile with them then it makes it easier to speak to other strangers. Like the team I play with currently has people from all parts of the world. I see new faces every day but somehow, we are able to make teams and play together. So, it is not difficult for me to meet strangers and easily talk and connect with them.”

This transfer of benefits and behavioural changes from football to out-of-field situations has also been shown in previous research by Ekholm (2018) where young people in Sweden developed self-esteem through facilitative coaching which they transferred and applied in making developmental life decisions. Developing self-confidence may potentially enable migrants to access and utilize essential socio-economic spheres of education, health, housing and employment (Ager & Strang, 2008) since they are confident enough to speak for themselves. Elevated self-esteem might also increase chances for building more social ties (Johnson et al., 2003) as well as bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000).

From this study, the expansion of football-built social networks was described by many participants as *“meeting a friend or family of a teammate”*. Boundaries broke and connections stretched beyond the confines of the football field whenever participants met their teammates’ friends, families, workmates and neighbours. Viola described how football expanded her social network beyond her school confines;

“I made friends from other schools who played football. So, we would just hang out and go swimming in the summer”.

Rogers also mentioned:

"We used to hang out a lot, do different things and meet different people; even end up meeting some of their friends who do totally different stuff from football like musicians".

Making connections beyond one's internal and largely homogenous group constitutes bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) which Spaaij (2012) and Ager and Strang (2012) consider necessary if migrant integration is to mean more than assimilating to the dominant culture. They argue that bonding social capital is however still important since it enables migrants to maintain some valuable aspects of their own culture while trying to adapt to host communities' norms and values.

The study revealed that playing on the same football team did not automatically make and maintain teammates as friends. Extra actions, commitment, regular activities and reliable communication were needed to prove and strengthen these friendships. African migrants mentioned doing out-of-field social activities with teammates to "practice" and maintain their football connections. They invited each other for dinners and celebrated birthdays and Christmas together. Sometimes, coaches and team managers organized team trips and summer camps. These activities strengthened team spirit and enabled teammates to understand each other deeply and discover related hobbies or common business and career ideas. This strengthened their relationships and enabled them to meet teammates' friends and family which broadened their networks. It was such broadened networks that contributed towards these migrants' integration in Sweden. Rogers said:

"[...] we met, we ate together, danced and I met other new people through teammates. I got to know the team more [...]".

Most participants expressed ease in connecting with people with whom they shared something. Having an immigrant background itself was a strong similarity upon which African migrants-initiated relationships within football groups. They found it easier to connect with fellow migrants because as Constance phrased it;

"[...] so when you meet people who are like you, and who have been here for a long time, it also gives you the courage [...]".

Wilson expressed difficulty in connecting with Swedish teammates because he felt they already had their closed group within the team that was almost impossible to "penetrate". He said:

"...before I joined the team, they already had a team, they had things going on in the team and I came in so they already had their network. It has been hard to build relationships with them".

Building strong social relations among football groups, therefore, depended on commonalities of shared nationality, language, race, gender, ethnicity and others. Although football as a unifying factor buried differences amongst teammates, some diversities still stood as barriers to forming stronger networks. Previous research (Elbe et al., 2018 Krouwel, 2006; Spaaij, 2012; Walseth; 2008) revealed similar findings where migrants relate more comfortably with people they share ethnicity, gender, race, religion and other similarities. In terms of social capital categorizations by Putnam (2000), mixed/heterogeneous football teams in terms of age, gender, nationality and ethnicity offered more opportunities for building bridging social capital compared to largely homogenous teams since they offered more diversity.

Maintaining social networks was portrayed as a gradual, continuous and infinite process. The social capital theory emphasizes taking action to prove and strengthen social ties (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990) rather than simply proclaiming being friends or acquaintances. Putnam (2000) emphasizes the investment of time and energy in acquiring companionship (p.20). These practicalities in “*doing football-relationships*” also relate to the idea of “*doing and displaying family things*” where family members ought to actively exercise their “*familism*” through communication, material, emotional or any other support to their relatives (Finch, 2007, p.66). Although this did not directly connect to this study’s major theoretical framework, some participants portrayed their football as a family that fulfilled family-like obligations and expectations.

The contribution of football-harnessed social capital to socio-economic integration

Here we describe ways in which football-built relations and the resultant social capital directly or indirectly facilitated socioeconomic integration in Sweden by enabling the African migrants to dribble past the uneasy beginnings of life in a new city. Most participants portrayed their football groups as an international family and reliable social and psychological support system which filled the gap for their families back in Africa and offered a home away from home. A great sense of belonging was achieved from this football family which Viola portrayed as “*a small but unique and safe community that valued acceptance, security, inclusiveness [...]*”. Wilson further elaborated about this family away from home:

“It’s like not only friends but like family. If I need help, I can call someone and if the person needs help, they can call me. We help each other, we are like family. And a family that leads you to other families as well.”

From the participants' descriptions, this social family was characterized by family-like obligations of offering emotional and material support including babysitting, meeting physiological needs and providing financial support in terms of small loans or advice on financial management. David described his football team meeting his financial needs:

“There was a time I did not have money and the coach called out the whole team and he was like “our brother Davie is having little problems with his family, his mum is sick, he needs some help” and he said let us contribute some money for him. They did a quick fundraiser and raised 3000 Swedish Kroner for me.”

This kind of action (collecting money for David) points to the pooling of resources, an aspect of social capital concerned with reciprocity and collectiveness (Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2005; Putnam, 2000). More specifically David’s team exercised “generalized reciprocity” by “doing something for him without expecting anything specific from him” (Putnam, 2000, pp.20-21). This study portrayed football groups as family, not related by blood or marriage but by the ball. The football family played “familial” roles of giving material, emotional, financial and other support which contrasts with Aboim et al. (2013) whose findings in Portugal showed that much support was given to people by their kin. Study findings portrayed football as a teacher of language that taught African migrants the Swedish language which facilitated their inclusion and integration into football teams and Swedish society at large. Some participants implied that football itself is a language understood by many since players with different backgrounds could still play together and understand each other. Better still, the constant use of Swedish by many coaches and teammates compelled most African migrants to learn the language in order to comprehend instructions and communicate effectively on the pitch or in dressing rooms. Almost all African migrants in the study acknowledged that football offered an easier and friendlier way of learning Swedish. They got an opportunity to learn new words and practice speaking Swedish freely with teammates without being judged for mispronunciations. Jonathan noted:

“[...] I try to speak my Swedish when I’m there to play football. I use it as my best place to practice and learn Swedish because whenever I’m there, people are speaking Swedish [...]”

Learning host communities’ language facilitates integration by enabling migrants to interact with various socio-economic systems of employment, health, education, and housing and also promotes active participation and social inclusion (Ager & Strang, 2008). It facilitates migrants to expand their social networks as part of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) since they can initiate conversations outside their internal bonds or homogenous migrant groups. Stura (2019) also found out that sports clubs facilitated refugees in Germany to learn the main German language and local dialects.

This study revealed social interactions and connections through football as pivotal in African migrants’ job-seeking processes in Sweden. Most participants reported having ever gotten a job opportunity through people they had met from football. Football teams where this study’s participants belonged were often composed of people from different professional backgrounds and areas of specialization. This presented varied opportunities for migrants on the team to easily find employment. Acquiring jobs

through football connections was reciprocal. African migrants themselves received but also offered links to job opportunities for their teammates. For instance, Vosh on the receiving end mentioned:

"I actually got my previous job through someone in football [...] I was looking for work and just stuck with that. So, this teammate was a personal carer [...] the kind of work I was looking for. And when he heard that I was unemployed and searching, he helped me get a job."

On the giving end, other participants reported assisting other teammates to find work by sharing information about job opportunities, directly connecting them to potential employers, giving business ideas, and saving and investment advice. Previous research presents similar findings, for instance, Aboim et al. (2013) in their study in Portugal revealed that non-kin relations are essential in acquiring loans and jobs. Similarly, Xiong et al. (2020) found out that young female migrant workers in China had managed to build a non-kin network on which they relied for information, opportunities for advancement and other *"social resources"* (p.798).

The *"strength of weak ties"* (Granovetter, 1973, p.1361; Putnam, 2000) as linking social capital includes connections for members of a social (football) group to wider socio-economic spheres such as employment which Ager and Strang (2008) conceive as a *"means and marker"* (p.169) to migrant integration. In essence, linkages to the host community's labour market promote but also manifest integration. Putnam (2000) also points to the benefits of social capital spilling over to *"bystanders"* (p.20) or those not directly part of a social connection for example Viola secured a job for her non-football friend at McDonald's through football connections. Also, the giving and receiving of job opportunities reflect reciprocity as an important aspect of social capital in ways that members of social groups are expected to voluntarily fulfil some obligations for themselves and others and share essential resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2005). Additionally, access to the Swedish labour market by migrants corroborates with Putnam (2000)'s contentions that social capital does not only benefit those who possess it or specific members of a social connection but also has a public connotation where benefits spill over to the wider community. In this sense, when African migrants access jobs, they are able to pay taxes and support Sweden's welfare state that emphasizes active labour market policies (Bonoli & Natali, 2012).

Besides giving information about jobs, football connections offered a reliable and easily-accessible source of information for African migrants. They asked their teammates about anything, including immigration policies and procedures, finding apartments, how to use the transport system, finding religious places, African restaurants or food stores and home services among others. For instance, Nelson said:

"[...] once I asked in our East African Football team WhatsApp group and they helped me [...] we wanted someone to paint our house and someone sent me a name [...]"

Some players offered or received assistance in translating migration, police or tax office letters from Swedish to English. Information sharing also extended to the health field where teammates offered health information to each other. Those with a medical background like Nelson advised others on how to manage mild illnesses and where to go for treatment and the necessary procedures. He narrated:

“Because I’m a doctor, they ask me about which kind of medication for the pain and I help them with that. They say I have this kind of problem, and I show them that you can go to this health center where they can help you with something.”

Football also positively improved participants’ physical and psychological health and made them feel less lonely as Francis shared:

“It releases stress, especially if you are new here you can be caught up in a lot of stress, and you feel like you don’t have anywhere to go, you don’t have any help. And I remember all those things could happen but when you come to football training or a match, you forget about your problems, you just leave them behind. So, the field feels like one small room and everyone is just in the same happy mood.”

Some football teams also directly met the health needs of their players. Some African migrants whose civil registration in Sweden was incomplete and could not access free health or subsidized health services from the Swedish government instead got their health care covered by their football teams. David mentioned a “masseuse” (team doctor) meeting his health needs:

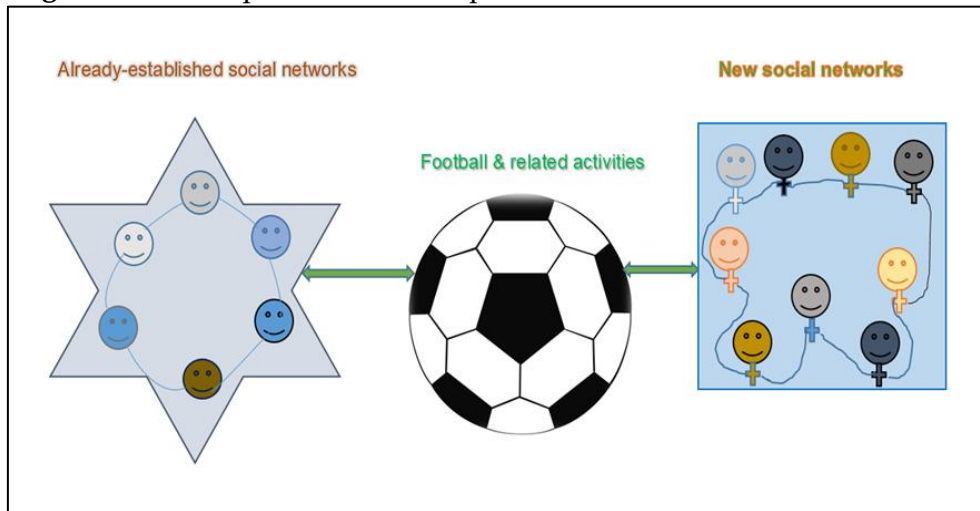
“They have to take care of you medically. I don’t know for others but the clubs I played with used to have a masseuse, even the team in fourth division; someone takes care of your body”.

Generally, Ager and Strang, (2008) consider access to health services and information an indicator of socio-economic integration and a means to achieving meaningful migrant integration and active participation. Anderson-Butcher and Bates (2021) in their paper on sports social work also recognized sport’s ability to promote physical and mental health. Information as a social capital resource (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2005; Putnam, 2000) shared within football groups enabled African migrants to easily access health services in Sweden. These services are often bureaucratic and challenging to access for migrants who lack Swedish language skills, adequate information and legal residence requirements (Biswas et al., 2012).

Summary and conclusions

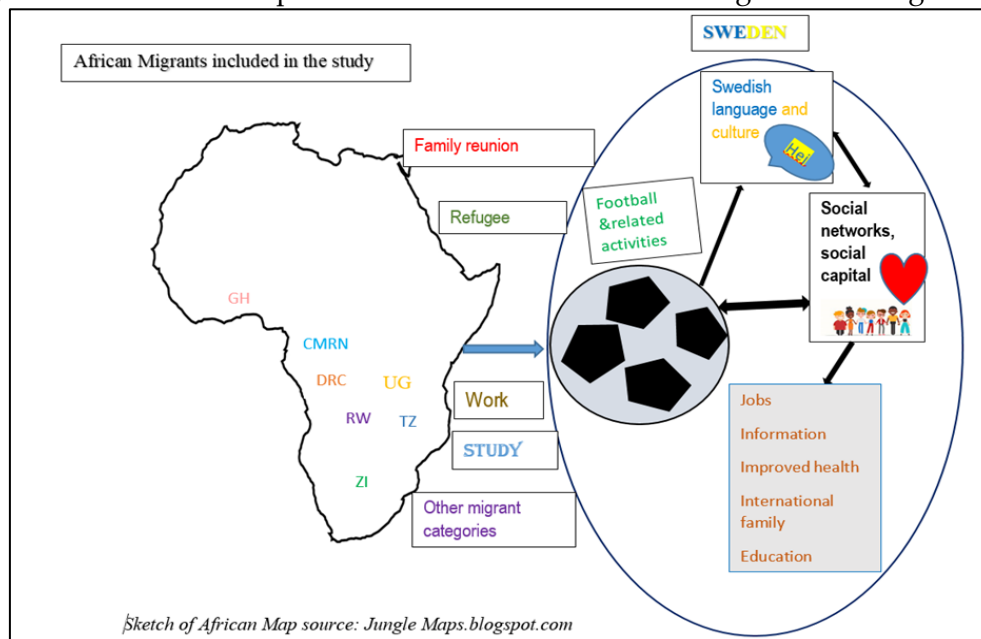
Football and social networks were portrayed as having a reciprocal relationship for the African migrants. This means that the migrants' already-established social networks often connected them to football opportunities around Sweden but at the same time, football enabled formation and maintenance of new social networks and reinforcement of old ones.

Figure 1: The reciprocal relationship between football and Social Networks



Building and maintaining social connections was portrayed as dynamic, flexible and non-procedural. It was a never-ending process characterized by deliberate interactions and actions of “doing football relationships”. Study findings revealed that one’s style of play either attracted or pushed away potential friends within the team and that meeting a friend or family of a teammate potentially expanded one’s social circle. Reciprocity continuously ran through football-built social networks as a way of maintaining and strengthening bonds and bridges. Additionally, members of a football group felt reciprocally obliged to offer something for themselves but also for teammates. In the pictorial summary below, we illustrate how African migrants integrated through football-based social networks that enabled them to access and interact with various socio-economic sectors within Sweden, and learn the Swedish language and culture. The first part of the diagram illustrates different African countries represented in the study sample who moved to Sweden for various reasons. Within the part names “Sweden”, that is where integration takes place; the ball represents football and related activities, which create linkages for migrants to access essential socio-economic domains in Sweden and learn the culture and language.

Figure 2: An illustrative presentation of socio-economic integration through football



The study also realized that African migrants approached integration differently, either as passive recipients or active participants. In other words, whereas some actively took personal initiative to find football teams or schools, health facilities or other services as well as learn Swedish, others were largely passive and dependent on state support or social networks. These styles and approaches to integration were affected by factors ranging from legal residence or citizenship, intended length of stay in Sweden and personality traits. It was also revealed that most African migrants in the study preferred to play in largely homogenous football groups dominated by fellow migrants from the same country, region or any migrants in general as opposed to participation in largely heterogeneous and mixed groups dominated by native Swedes. Most participants mentioned experiencing difficulty in making friends with native Swedes within their football teams due to the differences in culture.

Additionally, although Sweden remained more “open” compared to other European countries, COVID-19 adversely impacted football activities due to social-distancing measures that saw the closure of public events and gatherings (Folkhälsomyndigheten [The Swedish Public Health Agency], 2020). Limitations caused by COVID-19 extended outside the football pitch where some families no longer allowed teammates to visit or have dinners with them, which weakened the social connections they had started building before the pandemic. In essence, COVID-19 as a health hazard limiting integration negatively confirms arguments by Ager and Strang (2008) that healthy migrants actively participate in societal activities including sports, which includes their inclusion and subsequent integration.

Implication for policy and social work practice

Findings from this study encourage the social work profession to incorporate more sports-based models in working with minority groups and communities due to their

empowerment, teamwork and inclusiveness aspects. Sport's potential to improve emotional and psychological well-being also makes it applicable to mental health and therapeutic interventions in social work. For instance, one participant in this study said "[...] sometimes it is like a drug; you play it and you feel good. You can play football and feel good for no reason, so people should always play football [...]". Social workers themselves can engage in sports as a way of rejuvenating their energies after long and stressful days at work. On the whole, we envision the increased popularity of sports within social work education and training accompanied by the development of specific courses and modules about sports social work.

Policy planners and implementers should be enticed by this study's findings that sport is fruitful in migrant integration and therefore inject more resources into sports projects targeting migrants. Integration is portrayed as a two-sided process which also requires host communities to learn and respect some aspects of migrants' culture. Therefore, planners and actors in integration programs should put more effort into host communities' adaptation to minority cultures in order to avoid equating integration to only migrants' assimilation into dominant cultures.

Identified gaps and recommendations for further research

This study did not explore transnational factors and situations in home countries that might impact African migrants' integration into host communities and this could be explored in further research. Our study also considered African migrants in general without taking into account the reasons and specificities behind their movement to and residence in Sweden. Future research could explore how such factors influence how different migrant categories experience the formation of social capital and integration through sport. More research is generally needed about sports within different social work fields of migration, community practice, mental health, drug and substance abuse, and social work with other minority and disadvantaged groups.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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