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## The Role of Sports in Promoting Social Inclusion and Health in Marginalized Communities



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to explore the role of sports in promoting social inclusion and health within marginalized communities.

**Methods and Materials:** A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from participants. Individuals from various marginalized communities, including ethnic minorities, low-income groups, and those with disabilities, were purposefully sampled. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, with interviews being transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify and categorize recurring themes and patterns in the data.

**Results:** The study identified three main themes: social inclusion, health and well-being, and personal development and growth. Participants reported that sports participation significantly enhanced their social networks, community cohesion, and broke down social barriers, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. Physical health benefits included improved fitness and reduced chronic diseases, while mental health improvements encompassed stress relief, anxiety reduction, and mood enhancement. Sports also facilitated personal development by fostering leadership skills, teamwork, and providing educational and career opportunities.

**Conclusion:** Sports play a crucial role in promoting social inclusion and health within marginalized communities. The findings underscore the multifaceted benefits of sports participation, including enhanced social connections, improved physical and mental health, and personal empowerment. The study suggests that increasing access to inclusive sports programs and addressing barriers to participation can further amplify these benefits.

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## 1. Introduction

Sport has long been recognized as a chief component of physical activity that contributes significantly to both individual health and social well-being (1-5). The benefits of sports participation are well-documented in the literature. Eather et al. (2023) highlight the positive impact of sports on mental health and social outcomes in adults, proposing a conceptual model termed "mental health through sport." This model illustrates how engagement in sports can lead to improved mental health through mechanisms such as increased social interaction, enhanced self-esteem, and stress relief (6). Similarly, Eime et al. (2013) provide a systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of sports for children and adolescents, suggesting that sports participation fosters psychological resilience, social skills, and overall well-being in younger populations (7).

In marginalized communities, where access to healthcare and social resources may be limited, sports can serve as a critical intervention for promoting health and social inclusion. Jeanes (2024) underscores the role of informal sports in public health, particularly in Australia, demonstrating that sports can bridge gaps in formal healthcare services by promoting physical activity and social cohesion at the community level (8). Additionally, Zhu and Zhao (2021) discuss the health system framework for community sports, emphasizing the functional orientation of sports in enhancing community health outcomes (9).

Social inclusion involves creating environments where individuals feel valued, respected, and able to contribute meaningfully to their communities. Sports can serve as a powerful tool for achieving social inclusion by breaking down social barriers and fostering a sense of belonging. Sherry (2010) examines the impact of the Homeless World Cup, illustrating how sports can re-engage marginalized groups, such as the homeless, by providing them with a platform to showcase their skills, build confidence, and connect with others (10).

The role of sports in promoting social inclusion is particularly significant for older adults. Stenner, Buckley, and Mosewich (2020) review the reasons why older adults participate in sports, highlighting benefits such as maintaining physical health, social engagement, and psychological well-being. Similarly, Jenkin et al. (2018) explore the benefits and barriers of sports participation for adults aged 50 and above, noting that sports can enhance

social connections, reduce feelings of isolation, and improve quality of life for older individuals (11).

The health benefits of sports extend beyond physical fitness to include mental and emotional well-being. Hughes et al. (2020) detail the Australian Institute of Sport framework for rebooting sports in a COVID-19 environment, emphasizing the need for safe and structured sports activities to support both physical and mental health during the pandemic. This framework highlights the adaptability of sports programs to meet emerging health challenges and underscores their importance in maintaining community health (12).

Toffoletti and Palmer (2016) discuss new approaches to studying the role of sports among Muslim women, illustrating how sports can challenge cultural norms, promote gender equality, and improve health outcomes. Their work highlights the intersection of sports, culture, and health, and the potential of sports to serve as a catalyst for social change and empowerment (13).

Understanding the mechanisms through which sports promote health and social inclusion requires robust theoretical frameworks. Beacom (2013) offers a critical sociology of sport for development and peace, proposing that sports can be a tool for social change and conflict resolution (14). This perspective aligns with Veken, Lauwerier, and Willems (2020), who present a program theory on how community sport programs can improve health outcomes for vulnerable populations. Their model suggests that community sports programs can enhance social capital, provide psychosocial support, and improve physical health through structured and inclusive activities (15).

The impact of sports on marginalized communities cannot be overstated. Sports provide a unique avenue for addressing various social determinants of health, including social isolation, economic disparities, and limited access to healthcare. By fostering social connections, promoting physical activity, and offering psychosocial support, sports can significantly improve the quality of life for individuals in these communities (16-20). In summary, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of evidence on the role of sports in promoting social inclusion and health, particularly in marginalized communities. By synthesizing insights from various studies and applying a qualitative research methodology, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the benefits of sports participation and the mechanisms through which these

benefits are realized. The findings underscore the importance of continued investment in sports programs as a means of enhancing health and social outcomes for vulnerable populations.

**2. Methods and Materials**

*2.1 Study Design and Participants*

This qualitative research aimed to explore the role of sports in promoting social inclusion and health in marginalized communities. The study utilized semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from participants, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and perspectives. The approach was designed to be flexible and adaptive, ensuring that the data collected were rich and detailed.

The study focused on individuals from various marginalized communities, including but not limited to ethnic minorities, low-income groups, and individuals with disabilities. Participants were recruited through community centers, sports clubs, and local organizations that serve these populations. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences.

*2.2 Data Collection*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to freely express their thoughts while providing some structure to guide the conversation. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences with sports, their perceptions of social inclusion, and the impact of sports on their health. Examples of questions included:

- Can you describe your experience with participating in sports activities?
- How has being involved in sports affected your sense of community and social inclusion?
- In what ways, if any, has participation in sports influenced your health and well-being?

Interviews were conducted in a setting convenient for the participants, such as community centers or their homes, to ensure comfort and openness. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

*2.3 Data Analysis*

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed using NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool. The analysis followed a thematic approach, where recurring themes and patterns were identified across the interviews. The process involved several steps:

**Familiarization:** Researchers thoroughly read through the transcripts to become familiar with the data.

**Coding:** Initial codes were generated from the data, capturing significant features related to the research questions.

**Theme Development:** Codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data.

**Reviewing Themes:** Themes were checked against the data to confirm their validity and coherence.

**Defining and Naming Themes:** Final themes were clearly defined and named, providing a structured framework for reporting the findings.

The principle of theoretical saturation was applied to determine the sample size. Data collection continued until no new themes or insights were emerging from the interviews, indicating that theoretical saturation had been reached. This ensured that the data were sufficiently rich and comprehensive to address the research objectives.

**3. Findings and Results**

While the potential benefits of implicit learning for football performance under pressure are emerging (21), the underlying mechanisms that enable these benefits remain an area of ongoing research. In this context, we explore some of the theorized pathways through which implicit learning might enhance performance in high-pressure situations.

**Table 1.** The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories (Main Themes)	Subcategories (Subthemes)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Social Inclusion	Building Social Networks Enhancing Community Cohesion Breaking Social Barriers Empowerment and Self-esteem Access to Resources	Community engagement, Friendships, Support systems Shared goals, Collective identity, Local pride Cross-cultural interactions, Inclusion of minorities, Reducing stereotypes Confidence building, Sense of belonging, Personal growth Equal opportunities, Accessibility of sports facilities, Financial support
2. Health and Well-being	Physical Health Benefits	Improved fitness, Reduced chronic diseases, Enhanced physical skills

	Mental Health Improvements	Stress relief, Anxiety reduction, Improved mood
	Healthy Lifestyle Promotion	Regular exercise, Nutrition awareness, Substance abuse prevention
	Rehabilitation and Recovery	Injury recovery, Mental health support, Chronic illness management
	Social Support Networks	Peer support, Mentorship, Family involvement
	Psychological Resilience	Coping strategies, Emotional regulation, Stress management
3. Personal Development and Growth	Skill Development	Leadership skills, Teamwork, Strategic thinking
	Educational Opportunities	Scholarships, Academic performance, Learning new sports
	Career Opportunities	Sports careers, Networking, Job skills
	Personal Empowerment	Self-discipline, Goal setting, Overcoming challenges
	Positive Role Models	Mentors, Inspirational figures, Community leaders

### 3.1 Social Inclusion

**Building Social Networks:** Participation in sports was found to significantly enhance social networks within marginalized communities. Participants highlighted the importance of community engagement and the formation of friendships through sports activities. One interviewee mentioned, "I never felt so connected to my neighbors until we started playing football together every weekend." The development of support systems through these networks was also emphasized.

**Enhancing Community Cohesion:** Sports activities fostered a sense of collective identity and local pride, contributing to stronger community cohesion. Shared goals within teams helped bridge individual differences and unify members. A participant noted, "Our community team has brought us closer; we celebrate each other's victories and support each other in losses."

**Breaking Social Barriers:** Sports played a crucial role in breaking down social barriers and promoting cross-cultural interactions. Inclusion of minorities and reducing stereotypes were commonly reported outcomes. One interviewee shared, "Playing sports with people from different backgrounds has made me more open and accepting."

**Empowerment and Self-esteem:** Involvement in sports activities boosted personal growth, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging among participants. Confidence building was a recurring theme, with one participant stating, "Sports have given me the confidence to face challenges in other areas of my life."

**Access to Resources:** Ensuring equal opportunities and access to sports facilities was vital for promoting social inclusion. Participants highlighted the need for financial support to make sports accessible to all. "Without the community fund, I wouldn't be able to afford the equipment needed to participate," said one participant.

### 3.2 Health and Well-being

**Physical Health Benefits:** Engagement in sports significantly improved physical health among participants, with notable improvements in fitness and reduction of chronic diseases. Enhanced physical skills were also reported. One participant remarked, "Regular participation in sports has kept my diabetes in check and improved my overall fitness."

**Mental Health Improvements:** Sports activities provided a substantial boost to mental health, aiding in stress relief and anxiety reduction. Improved mood was a common benefit. An interviewee reflected, "Playing sports is my escape; it helps me clear my mind and reduces my stress levels."

**Healthy Lifestyle Promotion:** Participation in sports encouraged the adoption of healthy lifestyles, including regular exercise and better nutrition awareness. Substance abuse prevention was another positive outcome. "Being part of a sports team has taught me the importance of staying fit and eating healthy," shared a participant.

**Rehabilitation and Recovery:** Sports were instrumental in aiding injury recovery and supporting mental health. Participants noted benefits in managing chronic illnesses through sports. "After my surgery, sports were my lifeline; they helped me regain my strength," said one participant.

**Social Support Networks:** Sports provided robust social support networks, including peer support, mentorship, and family involvement. These networks played a crucial role in participants' overall well-being. "The support from my teammates and coach has been invaluable, both on and off the field," mentioned one interviewee.

**Psychological Resilience:** Participation in sports enhanced psychological resilience, helping participants develop coping strategies, emotional regulation, and stress management skills. One participant stated, "Sports taught me how to handle pressure and bounce back from setbacks."



### 3.3 Personal Development and Growth

**Skill Development:** Sports activities were pivotal in developing essential life skills such as leadership, teamwork, and strategic thinking. Participants frequently cited these skills as beneficial in other areas of their lives. "Leading my team has improved my leadership skills immensely," said one participant.

**Educational Opportunities:** Involvement in sports opened up educational opportunities, including scholarships and improved academic performance. Learning new sports also contributed to participants' educational growth. One participant shared, "Thanks to my sports scholarship, I can now pursue my studies without financial worries."

**Career Opportunities:** Participation in sports created career opportunities, either directly through sports careers or indirectly by developing job skills and networking. "Being active in sports has expanded my professional network and opened up job opportunities," mentioned a participant.

**Personal Empowerment:** Sports empowered individuals by fostering self-discipline, goal setting, and the ability to overcome challenges. Participants reported feeling more in control of their lives. "Setting and achieving goals in sports has translated into setting and achieving goals in my personal life," noted one interviewee.

**Positive Role Models:** The presence of mentors and inspirational figures within sports communities provided positive role models for participants. Community leaders often emerged from these interactions, further strengthening the community. "My coach has been a role model for me, teaching me valuable life lessons," shared one participant.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study highlight the significant role that sports play in promoting social inclusion and health within marginalized communities. Through semi-structured interviews, participants shared their experiences, illustrating how sports participation fostered social networks, enhanced community cohesion, and broke down social barriers. These outcomes align with the conceptual models proposed by Eather et al. (2023) and Eime et al. (2013), which emphasize the psychosocial benefits of sports engagement (6, 7).

**Social Inclusion:** The development of social networks through sports was a prominent theme, with participants reporting increased community engagement and the formation of supportive friendships. These social connections are crucial for marginalized individuals who may otherwise experience isolation. This is consistent with

Sherry's (2010) findings on the Homeless World Cup, where sports re-engaged homeless individuals by fostering a sense of belonging and community (10).

Enhancing community cohesion was another critical outcome. Participants spoke of shared goals and collective identity, which helped unify community members. This echoes Jeanes' (2024) observations on informal sports in Australia, where communal sports activities bridged social gaps and promoted cohesion (8). By breaking down social barriers, sports facilitated cross-cultural interactions and reduced stereotypes, reinforcing findings from Stenner, Buckley, and Mosewich (2020) on the social benefits of sports for older adults (11).

**Health and Well-being:** The physical health benefits of sports participation, such as improved fitness and reduced chronic diseases, were widely reported. Participants noted enhancements in physical skills and overall health, aligning with the Australian Institute of Sport framework discussed by Hughes et al. (2020), which highlighted the importance of structured sports activities in maintaining health during the COVID-19 pandemic (12).

Mental health improvements were also significant, with participants citing stress relief, anxiety reduction, and improved mood as key benefits. This supports the "mental health through sport" model by Eather et al. (2023), which outlines how sports can enhance mental well-being through social interaction and increased self-esteem (6).

**Personal Development:** Sports participation also facilitated personal development and growth, with participants developing leadership skills, teamwork, and strategic thinking. These findings are in line with Jenkin et al. (2018), who noted similar benefits for adults aged 50 and above. The educational and career opportunities provided by sports, as reported by participants, further underscore the role of sports in personal empowerment and development (22). This is supported by Toffoletti and Palmer (2016), who highlighted how sports can challenge cultural norms and promote gender equality, providing avenues for personal and professional growth (13).

The results of this study are consistent with previous research, reinforcing the broad benefits of sports participation across various demographic groups and contexts. For instance, Eime et al. (2013) and Eather et al. (2023) both emphasize the psychological and social benefits of sports for children, adolescents, and adults. These benefits include improved mental health, increased social interaction, and enhanced self-esteem, all of which were echoed by participants in this study (6, 7).

Furthermore, the role of sports in promoting social inclusion, as highlighted by Sherry (2010) and Jeanes (2024), is evident in the experiences of marginalized individuals who reported feeling more connected and engaged within their communities through sports activities (10). The reduction of social barriers and the promotion of cross-cultural interactions observed in this study align with the findings of Stenner, Buckley, and Mosewich (2020), who noted similar outcomes among older adults (11).

In terms of health benefits, the physical and mental health improvements reported by participants corroborate the findings of Hughes et al. (2020) and Zhu and Zhao (2021), who discussed the health system framework for community sports and the role of sports in maintaining health during the pandemic (9, 12). The educational and career opportunities facilitated by sports participation, as highlighted by Toffoletti and Palmer (2016), further underscore the multifaceted benefits of sports for personal development and empowerment (13).

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of sports in promoting social inclusion and health in marginalized communities, it is not without limitations. The qualitative nature of the research, while rich in detail, may limit the generalizability of the findings. The sample size, determined by theoretical saturation, was relatively small and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within different marginalized groups. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from participants introduces the potential for bias, as individuals may have varying perceptions and interpretations of their experiences.

Another limitation is the focus on semi-structured interviews as the sole method of data collection. While this approach allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, it did not provide the opportunity to triangulate data with other methods such as focus groups or observational studies, which could have enriched the findings. Moreover, the study did not extensively explore the potential negative aspects of sports participation, such as the risk of injury or the pressure to perform, which could provide a more balanced view of the impact of sports on marginalized communities.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by employing a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. This could include larger-scale surveys to complement the detailed insights gained from interviews, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of sports on marginalized communities. Additionally, longitudinal

studies that track participants over time could offer valuable insights into the long-term benefits and challenges of sports participation.

Research should also focus on exploring the experiences of different marginalized groups, including those based on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability, to ensure a more inclusive understanding of the role of sports in promoting social inclusion and health. Investigating the specific barriers that prevent certain groups from participating in sports and developing targeted interventions to address these barriers would be particularly beneficial.

Moreover, future studies should consider the potential negative aspects of sports participation, such as the risk of injury, the impact of competitive stress, and the potential for exclusion within sports environments. Understanding these challenges and developing strategies to mitigate them is crucial for maximizing the benefits of sports participation for all individuals.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made to enhance the role of sports in promoting social inclusion and health within marginalized communities. First, increasing access to sports facilities and programs is essential. This includes providing financial support to individuals who may not afford participation costs and ensuring that sports facilities are accessible to people with disabilities.

Community-based sports programs should be designed to be inclusive and welcoming to all individuals, regardless of their background or ability. This can be achieved by promoting diversity within sports teams, providing training for coaches on inclusive practices, and creating safe spaces where individuals feel valued and respected.

Programs should also focus on the broader benefits of sports participation, beyond physical fitness. This includes incorporating mental health support, educational opportunities, and career development into sports programs. For example, offering workshops on stress management, nutrition, and leadership skills can enhance the overall impact of sports participation on individuals' lives.

Collaboration between sports organizations, healthcare providers, and community groups is crucial for creating a supportive network that can address the diverse needs of marginalized individuals. By working together, these organizations can develop comprehensive programs that promote physical and mental health, social inclusion, and personal development through sports.

In conclusion, sports play a vital role in promoting social inclusion and health in marginalized communities. By

addressing the limitations of current research and implementing practical recommendations, we can enhance the positive impact of sports and ensure that its benefits are accessible to all individuals, regardless of their background or circumstances. This study contributes to a growing body of evidence that underscores the importance of sports as a tool for social change and individual well-being, providing a strong foundation for future research and practice.

### Authors' Contributions

V.K. conceptualized the study, designed the research methodology, and supervised the overall project implementation. O.P.-R. conducted the semi-structured interviews, transcribed the recordings, and led the thematic analysis using NVivo software. W.K. assisted with participant recruitment and contributed to data collection and the literature review. A.L. and X.S.N. supported the data analysis and interpretation of findings. D.G., the corresponding author, supervised the data analysis process, provided critical insights, and led the drafting and revising of the manuscript. All authors participated in discussing the findings, critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content, and approved the final version for publication.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethics Considerations

Not applicable.

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