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Promoting Social Inclusion Through Sport: A Case Study of Uyghur Youth in China

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Abstract

This study examines the role of sports as a means of promoting social inclusion among Uyghur youth in China, drawing upon social inclusion theory. Utilizing a qualitative case study methodology, we explored the perspectives of Uyghur youth athletes to gain insight into the challenges they face in achieving social inclusion without feeling "othered" or excluded. Data analysis followed an inductive grounded theory approach, identifying first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions. Our findings reveal that social inclusion of Uyghur youth through sports participation is influenced by multiple factors, including language barriers, stereotypes, cultural differences, high expectations, and government policies. Despite these challenges, engaging in sports has enabled Uyghur youth to foster friendships, build confidence, and adapt more effectively to new environments, highlighting the potential of sports as a powerful tool for promoting social inclusion among marginalized groups.

Keywords

China; minorities; social inclusion; sport; Uyghur

1. Introduction

Social inclusion is a complex and context-dependent concept that is frequently used interchangeably with social integration (Kelly, 2011; Rodriguez & Garro-Gil, 2015). This concept is critical in understanding the dynamics of social cohesion and integration within diverse societies. Drawing from social inclusion theory,

this study aims to explore the multifaceted nature of inclusion, particularly in the context of sports participation among ethnic minority groups.

Sports is often viewed as a "universal language," and it can also be a vehicle for individuals to gain a sense of belonging (Kelly, 2011). In the realm of sports, research has consistently shown a positive correlation between sports participation and social inclusion (Bailey, 2005; Suzuki, 2017). Sports can serve as a powerful tool for social inclusion, particularly at the micro-level of society, by fostering a sense of community and promoting shared values and experiences (Marivoet, 2014). However, the complex interplay between personal identity, athletic pursuits, and societal pressures can pose significant challenges to the social inclusion of ethnic minority athletes.

In China, the Han ethnic group forms the majority of the population, accounting for approximately 92% of the total, while ethnic minorities like the Uyghurs contribute to the country's rich diversity. In general, the Han ethnic group, notably, does not adhere to a particular religion. The Uyghur population, exceeding 10 million and constituting China's fifth-largest ethnic minority, predominantly resides in Xinjiang, a border region located in the northwestern part of China. In Xinjiang, the majority of Uyghurs are Muslims who predominantly practice Islam, and they have a rich cultural heritage and a long history in the Xinjiang region, with their roots tracing back centuries. Over time, the Uyghurs have developed a unique blend of traditions, languages, and customs that set them apart while also contributing to the diverse tapestry of Chinese culture. However, like many ethnic minorities, the Uyghur population has faced various social, economic, and political challenges that have impacted their integration into broader Chinese society. Due to historical and geopolitical problems, this region has witnessed inter-ethnic relations being further complicated by separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism. As a result, interactions between the Han and Uyghur communities have faced difficulties (Huang et al., 2020). Therefore, the relationship between Uyghur and Han in China has received much attention. Addressing the challenges faced by Uyghur youth in achieving social inclusion through sports participation is thus essential for promoting a more harmonious and cohesive society in China.

Many studies have focused on the social identity of Uyghur youths in non-Xinjiang places in China. For instance, Feng (2018) found that the social identity of Uyghur youths living in Guangzhou included hometown and Guangzhou identities, and there was a preference for their own cultural environment. Bilingual proficiency impacted their social identification, with slower Chinese processing indicating less familiarity, which affected their Guangzhou social recognition. In addition, X. Zhang et al. (2017) found that Uyghur's national identity faces challenges from international Islamic fundamentalism and religious-nationalistic separatism instigated by Central Asian extremists, and adhering to Sinicization and localization, and actively adapting to society is the future of Islam in Xinjiang, China. Moreover, Su (2018) found that Muslim female immigrants' social adjustment to Chinese metropolitan areas is heavily influenced by ethnic and regional factors, as well as Xinjiang's social changes, with many facing barriers to independent urban living and opting for traditional roles due to employment discrimination, ethnic prejudice, and gender inequality.

Drawing from social inclusion theory, this study aims to understand the various factors that influence the social inclusion of Uyghur youth in China. It explores the challenges they encounter in the process of achieving social inclusion and the strategies and actions they employ to navigate and complete this process.

By doing so, this study contributes to the broader literature on social inclusion and ethnic minority sports participation, providing valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to promote more inclusive societies.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Inclusion Theory

Social inclusion theory suggests a multidimensional framework for inclusivity that encompasses individuals who are deemed "different" within society. This theoretical framework serves as the foundation of the present study, which explores the varying degrees of inclusion (Gidley et al., 2010). The concept of social inclusion, also known as social exclusion, when considered from its opposite perspective, encompasses four distinct dimensions: spatial, relational, functional, and power (Bailey, 2005; Donnelly, 1996). These dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the various factors that contribute to an individual's sense of belonging and acceptance within society.

The spatial dimension addresses the physical proximity and the bridging of social and economic disparities. The relational dimension, on the other hand, defines social inclusion as "a sense of belonging and acceptance" within a given community (Bailey, 2005). The functional dimension emphasizes the enhancement of knowledge, skills, and understanding, while the power dimension refers to a transformation in the locus of control (Bailey, 2005). Furthermore, Gidley et al. (2010) have identified three distinct levels of social inclusion: access, participation, and empowerment. Access refers to the financial means to engage in activities such as sports, participation denotes the ability to actively take part in such activities, and empowerment signifies the maximization of potential for each individual involved (Gidley et al., 2010).

Numerous researchers have sought to identify the indicators that promote social inclusion. Oxoby (2009) highlighted identity and attitude as two broad concepts intricately linked to social inclusion and concluded that fostering a common identity among citizens could facilitate social inclusion, with a particular focus on individuals' cognitive processes. Atkinson (2002) outlined a set of common indicators adopted by the European Union for social inclusion, encompassing health, income, education, and employment. Additionally, researchers have also examined the impact of housing forms (e.g., renting or owning), labor market conditions, and social networks on the inclusion and exclusion experienced by minorities, individuals with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups (McGregor, 2000; Till, 2005). Furthermore, Ginsburgh and Weber (2005) emphasized the importance of maintaining linguistic diversity in mitigating social exclusion among European citizens.

In summary, social inclusion theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the varying degrees of inclusiveness within society. By examining the spatial, relational, functional, and power dimensions, as well as the indicators that promote social inclusion, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to social inclusion and exclusion. This theoretical foundation offers valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to promote more inclusive societies.

2.2. Application of Social Inclusion Theory in the Sports Domain

Extensive research has been conducted on the relationship between sports participation and social inclusion, with most studies indicating a positive correlation (Bailey, 2005; Suzuki, 2017). Some scholars have delved into the essence of "social inclusion through sport." Sherry (2010) and Haudenhuyse et al. (2013) defined this concept as the development of personal, social, motor, or other skills, emphasizing good practices that promote formative sport. These practices prioritize ethical principles and sport-related values in children and young people, particularly those at risk of discrimination.

Furthermore, research has shown that sports can serve as a powerful tool for social inclusion, particularly at the micro level of society (Marivoet, 2014). However, Suzuki (2017) argued that micro-, meso-, and macro-level social processes all contribute to improving an individual's capability for social inclusion, with meso-level processes primarily determining the extent of the impact. Additionally, Morgan et al. (2019) found that sports participation can enhance the psychological capital of young people from disadvantaged groups. Eitle and Eitle (2002) also noted that athletic team participation can help build Black youths' cultural capital, thereby reducing feelings of exclusion in other life areas, such as poor academic performance. However, despite these positive findings, there is still a lack of clear evidence to support the notion that sports and physical education (PE) can contribute to social inclusion (Dagkas, 2018).

2.3. Social Capital and Social Inclusion in Sport

The concept of social capital is often used in research on social inclusion. Putnam et al. (1993) outlined that social capital encompasses trust, mutual assistance, cooperative norms, civic participation, and social networks. In their study, social capital possesses both individual and collective dimensions. On the one hand, it refers to the resources, such as networks, trust, and shared values, that individuals can draw upon to achieve their goals (Bourdieu, 2011). On the other hand, it also refers to the shared resources and social cohesion that exist within communities or groups (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

Previous studies have emphasized the significance of developing social capital and networks for communities and democratic systems (Putnam, 2000; Putnam et al., 1993, 2004), as well as for an individual's feeling of belonging within a community (Morrow, 2004). In addition, Putnam (2000) also categorized social capital into two forms: bridging and bonding. Bridging involves getting to know people from different backgrounds, like those of another ethnic group. Bonding refers to maintaining relationships with similar individuals.

Multiple studies have explored the interplay between sport and social capital enhancement. For instance, Walseth (2008) revealed that young women with immigrant backgrounds can leverage sport clubs to build both bridging and bonding social capital, albeit certain barriers exist. Similarly, other researchers also found that participating and volunteering in sport clubs interacts with various social normative structures—shared values, beliefs, expectations, and behavioral patterns that guide and constrain individual behavior within the social context of the club. These interactions foster social capital at both individual and community levels (Peachey et al., 2013; Walseth, 2008).

In professional sport, Rosso and McGrath (2012) found that a player's personal social capital can both help and hinder their initial success in joining a professional football club. Social capital provides access to resources

like emotional support, cultural norms, mentorship, skill development opportunities, and logistical/financial assistance, which in turn affect their self-confidence, motivation, sense of belonging, and skills, and also offer necessary transportation and funds. On the other hand, if a player's personal network includes peers or family members who are critical of their football abilities or discourage them from pursuing a professional career, this negative social capital can undermine their self-belief and determination, thereby impeding their initial success in securing a place in a professional club.

2.4. Uyghur Sports in China

Since the late 2010s, numerous professional basketball and football clubs in China have begun to include Uyghur players in their rosters, with these players often exhibiting a dominant performance during gameplay. Furthermore, a significant number of Uyghur athletes have been selected for the national basketball and football teams of China, where they have made impressive performances. Additionally, many Uyghur athletes have been chosen to represent China in the 2020 and 2024 Olympic Games.

Previous studies found that the Uyghur people possess a character of daring to take risks, being fearless of hardships, perseverance, and never giving up, which are the fundamental personality traits required of athletes in all competitive sports, since they lead to better performance (K. Zhang et al., 2004). However, research also found that when comparing youth Uyghur athletes with the youth Han athletes, it is evident that the former do not exhibit superiority in the majority of measures related to physical fitness, bodily morphology, and functional attributes (Li, 2018).

Using social inclusion theory (Gidley et al., 2010), one focus of this study was to understand the power that participating in sports may have on teen Uyghur in China as they strive to belong within their new community without feeling as though they are being "othered," or excluded. Therefore, our research questions are:

- What are the challenges encountered by Uyghur youths in the process of achieving social inclusion?
- And how did participation in sports facilitate Uyghur youth individuals' navigation and successful completion of the social inclusion process in China?

3. Methodology

A qualitative case study was applied, and multiple data collection strategies were employed. The primary data were gathered from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 Uyghur youth athletes ranging in age from 17 to 21 ($M = 18.85$ years, $SD = 1.3$), residing both in their home city in the Xinjiang province and in other cities across China. The sample comprised five participants residing in Xinjiang ($M = 17.8$ years, $SD = 0.75$) and eight residing in other cities such as Beijing, Harbin, Lanzhou, and Zhengzhou ($M = 19.46$ years, $SD = 1.2$). This geographical diversity allowed for a nuanced exploration of how different environments and experiences might influence the perspectives and behaviors of Uyghur youth athletes. It is acknowledged that interviewees living outside Xinjiang may have been influenced by their new social and cultural contexts, potentially shaping their responses and opinions (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). For instance, they might have adopted values, beliefs, or behaviors that diverge from those prevalent in Xinjiang.

The interview questions were aimed at exploring the experiences and perspectives of Uyghur youth athletes, and cover a wide range of topics, including personal backgrounds (e.g., Can you describe your age, ethnical background, and your family? How did these factors impact your decision to be a youth athlete?), sports participation (e.g., As a Uyghur athlete, what do you think your advantages are in sports? Have you encountered any challenges?), inter-ethnic relationships within sports teams (e.g., Could you talk about your current teammates? What ethnic groups do they come from? Do you have any barriers when playing with them?), and the influence of sports on identity and social inclusion (e.g., When you compete on behalf of your school, region, or country, do you realize that your ethnic identity can have some influence on the entire team?). These questions are designed to elicit in-depth responses that will provide insights into how sports contribute to the social integration of Uyghur youth athletes within Chinese society, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face in this context.

Interviews were conducted over the phone in Chinese during 2024, and they lasted from 29 to 63 min with an average length of 38 min. These interviews were audio-recorded, subsequently transcribed, and then translated by a certified translator. To ensure accuracy, a native speaker reviewed the translations, and any discrepancies in interpretation were discussed and resolved. Secondary data were collected via numerous archived documents. We focused on the role sports and the sporting environment play in the inclusion of these ethnic minority youths into their new society. Data analysis followed the inductive grounded theory approach, wherein we identified first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2012). Data triangulation was employed by integrating data from diverse sources, peer debriefing, and member checking. First, data from multiple sources including interviews with participants from different places, documentaries, and websites were collected to further enhance the credibility of data analysis. In addition, peer debriefing with other sport researchers was conducted to ensure the validity of the emerging results. Moreover, the participants were presented with the data analyses, along with the primary interpretations and conclusions, which they believed to be accurate and credible.

4. Findings

Our findings reveal that upon moving to other places, Uyghur youths saw their play activities become "sportified," meaning that their leisure activities now have become areas of competition, rules, and nationalism. Similarly, the teenagers also stated the PE teachers, while focused on ensuring they have fun, also concentrated on developing the skill set of athletes, allowing them to participate more frequently in sporting activities.

4.1. Challenges for Ethnic Integration

4.1.1. Language Barriers

Language barriers have been identified as a prevalent obstacle to social inclusion (Ginsburgh & Weber, 2005). A substantial portion of the participants reported encountering integration challenges upon relocating to their current urban residences. As Micheal, a football player, shared, "Despite initiating Mandarin language learning at a young age, my proficiency does not match that of the Han population, occasionally leading to communication difficulties with those around me, which has posed certain challenges."

Echoing this sentiment, Henry, another football player, emphasized the language barrier as a hindrance to the social inclusion of Uyghurs, stating, "While reading is manageable, some of my Uyghur peers struggle with speaking Mandarin proficiently, complicating their adjustment to life here."

These cases illustrate that language barriers can pose significant challenges to the social inclusion of Uyghur youth in China. Furthermore, Uyghur youth may harbor fears of ridicule or judgment due to their linguistic differences, as exemplified by one participant who said, "Our Mandarin carries an accent, and it's a distinct language....I fear being judged, even though I haven't personally experienced such incidents....Our fluency is limited, so sometimes others don't fully understand us, necessitating repetition" (Sophia, a snowboarding player).

Conversely, several participants highlighted the benefits of speaking a common language for their social inclusion. Robert, a football player, shared, "My proficiency in Mandarin, which surpasses most of my peers, I believe, has facilitated my engagement with individuals from other ethnic groups." Another football player, Jack, stated, "I make a concerted effort to speak Mandarin in public to ensure others, especially the Han population, can understand me. Playing football accelerated my Mandarin learning, as communication with teammates, coaches, and occasionally opponents was essential."

Overall, these findings underscore the crucial role of language proficiency in facilitating social inclusion among Uyghur youth in China and highlight the potential consequences of linguistic barriers.

4.1.2. Stereotypes

Stereotypes surrounding the Uyghur people in China have been documented. Often, individuals lack understanding of the daily lives of Uyghur people in Xinjiang, leading to perceptions that they lead vastly different existences. In this study, participants shared their personal encounters with these stereotypes and misconceptions, particularly those related to their hometown in Xinjiang. As Eric, a basketball player, remarked, "There is a misconception that we are easily irritable, which is inaccurate. In my hometown, people are generally polite, and it is only those with limited education who may become easily tempered."

Furthermore, stereotypes persist that associate Uyghur people with underdeveloped regions. Some participants discussed this issue, with John, a football player, stating the following:

> A few of my classmates assumed I came from a poor family because I am from Xinjiang, which is not true....In fact, my family's status is probably better than most of my classmates', and I am currently able to work part-time to earn money.

Regarding living conditions, some individuals even hold the mistaken belief that Uyghur youth reside in rural areas: "I recall my teammates asking if I rode horses to school....I found it quite absurd" (Jessica, a skier).

These data highlight the prevalence of stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding the Uyghur people in China, particularly in relation to their hometown of Xinjiang, and underscore the need for greater understanding and awareness to dispel such misconceptions.

4.1.3. Cultural Differences

In China, a significant portion of the population does not adhere to any religion, whereas religion holds substantial importance in the lives of the Uyghur community. Consequently, cultural disparities, encompassing facets such as lifestyle, religious beliefs, and dietary preferences, represent a crucial factor influencing the social integration of Uyghur youth. This was exemplified in the following two quotes:

> Occasionally, after our training sessions, we tend to select our own dining spots because some of their food choices do not align with our tastes, and, due to our religious convictions, we don't eat pork at all. This occasionally leads to challenges for us. (Jack)

> We uphold our unique traditions, which differ significantly from the customs of the Han people, yet this is acceptable....As the majority of us are Muslim, it is imperative that we maintain our traditions. Sometimes, individuals here perceive our practices as unusual. (William, a basketball player)

Moreover, another participant reflected on their cultural adaptation experience: "When I was in Xinjiang, I felt fully immersed in our own culture. However, upon arriving in Beijing and gaining exposure to the cultures of other ethnicities, I came to realize the existence of numerous diverse cultures" (Micheal).

Notably, these cultural differences can be mitigated through participating in sports, as shown in the following quote:

> When we first arrived, it was not always easy for us to integrate. We spoke different languages and did not have meals together....Even during training and games, they perceived us as reluctant to pass the ball. However, after some time, these issues dissipated as we became more familiar with each other, and they recognized our playing abilities. (Jack)

These testimonies highlight the impact of cultural differences, particularly religious and dietary practices, on the social integration of Uyghur youth. They also underscore the potential of shared experiences, such as sports, to facilitate cultural understanding and promote harmonious coexistence among diverse ethnic groups.

4.1.4. Higher Expectations

Many participants reported that high expectations were placed on their sports performance, with nearly all interviewees indicating that they were anticipated to become professional athletes. This phenomenon underscores the intense pressure and high-stakes environment in which these athletes find themselves, as illustrated here:

> I could say that those professional clubs and the local sport bureau paid more attention to us when we were training. The Han students may receive training just for fun, but when compared to them, I [as a Uyghur student] feel that there's a higher expectation that we should become professional athletes. Nowadays we see more coaches and clubs start to recruit youth players back to Xinjiang. (Henry, a football player)

> When I am training, I just feel that I am an athlete, I don't always think about my ethnicity, so no matter who we are, we are just a member of the team, and I just want to be a sportsman. It seems that people around us would also like to perceive us as professional athletes. (Frank, a football player)

These interviews illustrate how athletes strive to transcend ethnic boundaries within the competitive sphere, focusing on their shared identity as athletes rather than their ethnic backgrounds. However, the pressure to perform at a high level remains a constant presence in their lives.

Moreover, the dynamics within teams were also examined, with John commenting on the differing playing styles between Uyghur and Han athletes:

> Regarding interactions with teammates, I perceive that they tend to favor passing the ball, whereas we have a greater preference for dribbling. I believe that we are innately inclined towards competition, and this instills a sense of satisfaction within me. Occasionally, miscommunications arise, yet as long as I contribute to the team's goal-scoring efforts, I am not held accountable, so sometimes I am stressed but it's okay.

4.1.5. Exclusion

The integration and acceptance of athletes from diverse ethnic backgrounds is a critical issue that has garnered significant attention. Henry offered a nuanced perspective on the acceptance of Uyghur athletes within Chinese sports: "I do not believe that Uyghur players are fully accepted, as I feel there are numerous exceptional athletes, yet they are not recruited adequately for the national teams." This statement underscores the perceived lack of adequate representation and opportunities for Uyghur athletes at the national level.

4.2. Athletic Performance and Career Prospects

4.2.1. Sport Activities

Sports participation has the potential to augment the social capital of Uyghur youth by fostering self-confidence. Numerous participants have articulated that engaging in sports activities facilitated their integration with new acquaintances in unfamiliar locales. The following statements of two football players are examples:

> I perceive that we possess greater vitality than our Han counterparts, which is why we are frequently assigned more physical and athletic endeavors. Boys engage in sports, whereas girls participate in artistic pursuits such as dance competitions. Although there are a few girls who play football, their numbers are not substantial. (Monica, a football player)

> Even in my hometown, there has been a surge in formal matches compared to the past. Presently, there are numerous amateur tournaments that evoke tremendous excitement. My brother represented our village in my hometown, and he expressed his aspiration to become a professional athlete and play for clubs in Beijing or other cities. (William)

In certain regions, sport activities serve as a catalyst for breaking the ice when individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds converge for the first time, particularly at the commencement of school semesters. Jack gave an example of this situation:

> I recall that during my youth, whenever there was an event such as the opening ceremony of our school, we would engage in inter-school football matches. Typically, the teammates comprised a mix of ethnicities, and we would play together. During training and gameplay, we would communicate in Mandarin to ensure mutual understanding.

Even in Xinjiang, some educational institutions organize sports activities to facilitate interactions among students from Uyghur and other ethnic groups. As Steven, a basketball player, mentioned, "When I was in Xinjiang, we participated in sports activities alongside other ethnicities, so there was already a sense of integration. I did not perceive any significant issues."

Another participant echoed this sentiment by stating, "Reflecting on my time in Xinjiang, I believe that most of the sports games and activities organized by the schools were aimed at promoting social inclusion and ethnic unity. We had become accustomed to this theme" (Jessica).

Participants' narratives highlight the role of sports in promoting their integration, particularly in diverse ethnic settings. In various regions, including Xinjiang, sports activities are organized to encourage interactions among students from different ethnic groups, fostering a sense of integration and unity.

4.2.2. Educational and Career Development

Another significant theme emerging from the study is the impact of sports participation on the Uyghurs' educational development and subsequent career development. Most participants reported that engaging in sports and pursuing amateur or professional athletic careers had positively influenced their further education as well as career development, and most of the participants expressed a desire to choose a career that related to sport in the future. For instance, Smith, a basketball player, highlighted the existence of policies aimed at supporting minority groups, stating, "There are policies in place that afford us [minority groups] certain advantages, such as additional points on the College Entrance Exams. Consequently, as student-athletes, our path to higher education becomes less challenging."

Another participant shared her personal experience, stating the following:

> I began receiving athletic training at a very young age, which has proven immensely beneficial. My involvement in sports facilitated my admission to a reputable middle school, and my prowess in skiing secured my place in university. Presently, I am able to pursue a dual career as both an athlete and a coach. (Jessica)

Moreover, the study revealed a notable trend of Uyghur individuals occupying coaching and PE teacher positions, both in Xinjiang and elsewhere. This observation suggests that sports can serve as a viable avenue for securing stable employment opportunities, as Robert illustrated: "Regardless of whether I am in Xinjiang or elsewhere, I have noticed an increased presence of Uyghur coaches and PE teachers. This indicates that sports can indeed assist us in finding respectable jobs."

Financial benefits were also highlighted as a significant advantage of sports participation, as reflected in this quote:

> Playing football has augmented my income. Currently, I work as a part-time coach, and the remuneration is quite satisfactory. Additionally, I occasionally play for a local club, which provides me with additional earnings after matches. Thus, not only do I possess the necessary skills, but I also enjoy a steady income, which is quite advantageous. (Micheal)

These testimonies highlight the positive impact of sports participation on Uyghur youth's educational and career development, with many participants pursuing sports-related careers. The trend of Uyghur individuals securing coaching and PE teacher positions underscores sports as a viable pathway to stable employment. Lastly, the financial benefits derived from sports participation were emphasized as a significant advantage.

4.3. Social Support and Social Capital

4.3.1. Coaches and PE Teachers

In the context of exploring social support among Uyghur youth athletes, several participants reported receiving multifaceted assistance in initiating their involvement in sports. Sophia notably expressed, "My coach serves as a beacon of reliability...his presence, whether during training, competitions, or personal moments, instills a profound sense of security in me." This sentiment underscores the role that coaches play in providing emotional and practical support for the Uyghur youth athletes.

Another topic common to most participants was the experience of receiving social support in both their hometown and subsequent cities. Usually, during their formative years in their hometown, coaches tended to prioritize the athletes' overall well-being over skill development. Conversely, upon relocating to new environments, advanced coaches placed greater emphasis on performance. Steven commented, "In my junior team, the coach's focus was more on our lives than our athletic performance." Similarly, Eric recalled his hometown coach, stating, "At a young age, our coach was very strict and instructed us not only in sport skills but also in character development and ethical conduct. I felt it was very useful."

For athletes who lacked a dedicated coach during childhood, PE teachers emerged as significant sources of support. As Micheal noticed, "My elementary school PE teacher introduced me to football and emphasized its potential to transform my social standing and facilitate dream pursuit. Indeed, I believe it has, as evidenced by my current residence in Beijing."

Participants discussed the varying experiences of social support received in their hometowns and subsequent cities, with coaches playing a pivotal role in providing emotional and practical support. For athletes lacking a dedicated coach, PE teachers emerged as significant sources of support, introducing them to sports and emphasizing their potential to transform social standing and facilitate dream pursuit.

4.3.2. Family Support

Family support was also recognized as a crucial factor influencing the athletic journey of Uyghur youth. Some participants highlighted positive family dynamics, with Jack stating, "My parents are incredibly supportive; they never interfere when I'm playing football." However, not all athletes enjoyed unwavering familial backing. Frank disclosed a divide within his family, noting, "While my father supports me, my mother is concerned that excessive training might hinder my academic performance."

Furthermore, several participants described initial resistance from their parents towards their athletic pursuits, as articulated by Eric:

> My parents didn't support my sport training initially….They believed that only academically challenged students became athletes. Consequently, I didn't receive much encouragement during my early years….Nevertheless, I persisted, and when they witnessed my admission to university, their perspective shifted, and they accepted my choice.

These narratives highlight the complex interplay of support systems and their evolving nature throughout the athletes' careers.

4.3.3. Physical Advantages

The personalities of Uyghur youth athletes are of utmost importance in enabling them to achieve a sense of pride and facilitating their social inclusion in unfamiliar settings. This study highlights how these factors contribute to their overall athletic experience and societal integration. As Jack shared, "I feel that I can exert a significant influence on my teammates, possibly due to my Uyghur identity and my personality, which I believe is one of my best assets."

Furthermore, another participant expressed that he needed to adopt some strategies to make people understand the Uyghur culture:

> I am proud to be a Uyghur, and I am aware that many people have limited knowledge about our culture. Therefore, I strive to introduce Xinjiang to those around me, helping them gain a better understanding of us. At times, I share our traditional snacks with my teammates or opponents during matches. Nowadays, whenever I participate in tournaments, I make sure to bring some of these snacks with me. After receiving my snacks, people tend to accept me more quickly. (Micheal)

This was echoed by Robert: "When I was younger, many people commented on my strength and resilience, although I don't feel much different from the Han people."

A participant also stated the following:

> Of course, as children, our [Uyghurs'] physical fitness was exceptional. I'm not sure why, but it could be due to our unique dietary habits. We are more tenacious, and even in recreational sports matches, we give it our all…we simply cannot bear the feeling of losing. (Henry)

Participants' narratives illustrated the strategies employed to promote cultural understanding and acceptance, such as sharing traditional snacks and emphasizing unique strengths and resilience associated with their Uyghur identity. Additionally, participants' reflections on their physical fitness and tenacity highlight potential cultural factors influencing their athletic performance and mindset.

4.3.4. Social Capital

Almost all participants reported that engaging in and being excellent at sporting activities augmented their social capital, facilitating smoother and more rapid integration with others. As Micheal said:

> Due to my proficiency in sports, I have been selected as a member of the university's frisbee team. We recently won the championship in the city's tournament, and one of our teammates has been recruited by the national team, and we are proud of it!

Furthermore, two football players emphasized that athletic prowess presented an opportunity to reveal their personality and reshape the perceptions of those around them regarding Uyghurs. They elaborated:

> I take pride in being a Uyghur, despite the lack of knowledge about our culture among many people here. Maybe some Uyghurs have done bad things before, leading to stigmatization….Nevertheless, when I engage in football with others, I socialize with them in a friendly way, enabling them to recognize our inherent amiability. (Jack)

> During my formative years, I experienced feelings of inadequacy due to my academic struggles. However, engaging in football has bolstered my confidence and led me to believe that I am on the correct path, even if a professional athletic career may not be attainable. (Frank)

Therefore, engaging in and excelling at sports enhances Uyghur youth athletes' social capital, facilitates integration, reshapes perceptions of Uyghurs, and bolsters confidence, as illustrated by participants' experiences.

4.3.5. Social Acceptance

The inclusion of Uyghur players in a team significantly enhances its overall strength, as evidenced by the observation that some amateur teams consist entirely of Uyghur starting players, leading to a higher success rate:

> Indeed, the team's prowess is augmented when I participate, and I have observed that there exist amateur teams that field exclusively Uyghur starting players, leading to a greater number of victories. (Eric)

Likewise, Smith stated, "During organized matches, provided that we have Uyghur players on our roster, they are prioritized for play due to their enhanced strength."

Moreover, numerous participants emphasized their positive integration experiences through engaging in sports activities within their new communities. For instance:

Within the realm of sports, I perceive a heightened sense of acceptance as a Uyghur individual, accompanied by a prevailing sentiment of respect. For instance, during meals with my teammates, they inquire about my dietary preferences to ensure our communal dining experiences are inclusive. (Jessica)

Another participant also noted that engaging in sports led to receiving respect from individuals in their new locality: While pork consumption is common among Han individuals, my friends respect my cultural traditions and refrain from consuming it during our communal dining experiences" (William).

4.3.6. Cultural Identification

The issue of ethnic identity and inclusivity in sports is complex, particularly in a diverse country like China. In this context, the perceptions and aspirations of athletes from different ethnic backgrounds play a crucial role in shaping the sports landscape. Eric expressed a sense of unity and admiration for Uyghur athletes, stating the following:

Of course, we feel that we are Chinese, and sometimes we see those Uyghur athletes playing football games on the national team, and we see them as our heroes. I know there are quite a few Uyghur players in the national basketball and football teams. I hope one day I can be like them.

This statement highlights the potential for positive perceptions and aspirations among Chinese individuals towards Uyghur athletes, recognizing their contributions and successes.

Another participant, Frank, expressed his own athletic aspirations, stating, "I played for the provincial team, and I would like to become a member of the national team if I am good enough. And I am looking forward to it!" This reflects the shared goal of athletes to excel and contribute to their nation's sports achievements, regardless of their ethnic background.

However, the focus on athletic ability and performance, rather than ethnicity, is a crucial aspect of promoting a shared identity in sports. William emphasized this point:

I don't care about the ethnicities when I am playing basketball, and I just want to be better and be recognized by people around us. For those basketball stars, as long as they are good, they are my role models. So that's why I like Yi Jianlian and Yao Ming a lot. If they can become good in such a system, so can I.

This underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing athletes based on their skills and accomplishments, rather than their ethnic background, in order to foster a shared identity.

Despite the potential for inclusivity and unity in sports, the issue of ethnic identity and cultural pride remains a complex and personal one. In this context, Sophia expressed her pride in her Uyghur identity and culture, stating the following:

I will always see myself as a Uyghur and it will never change, and although I don't plan to go back to Xinjiang, I am proud of my culture. Maybe in the future, my next generation will change, I don't know.

This statement highlights the importance of respecting and acknowledging the diverse cultural identities of athletes, while also recognizing the potential for change and evolution over time.

4.4. Government Policies and Initiatives

In recent years, the Chinese central and local governments have implemented numerous policies aimed at fostering sports development in Xinjiang, particularly among Uyghur youth. These initiatives have significantly contributed to the engagement of children and adolescents in popular sports activities, including football, basketball, and winter sports. As an illustrative example, the General Administration of Sport of China unveiled the Three-Year Action Plan for Sports Aid to Xinjiang (2024–2026) to ensure the successful execution of various sport-related programs, encompassing sport-for-all initiatives, the construction of sports facilities, and the identification of athletic talents. These programs and policies in Xinjiang not only promote sports development, particularly among Uyghur youth, and ensure equal access to sports resources and opportunities for all ethnic groups, but also foster civic engagement and harmony through organized sports events and inter-ethnic exchanges. By integrating different kinds of sports into school curricula and community events, they celebrate cultural diversity and adopt a holistic approach that goes beyond physical fitness. Ultimately, these initiatives aim to build a more inclusive, cohesive, and harmonious society, using sports as a bridge to connect individuals and communities, transcend differences, and foster a shared sense of purpose and belonging.

The implementation of these policies has not only enhanced sports participation but also provided tangible benefits to Uyghur students. As Jessica said, "Indeed, we possess certain advantages over others. Due to these policies, I was able to gain admission to reputable universities with a lower score on the National College Entrance Examination." This statement underscores the positive impact of such policies on educational opportunities for Uyghur youth.

The support from local governments has played a crucial role in facilitating the transition of Uyghur students to higher education. As shared by Robert:

> When I was admitted to my current university, the local government in my hometown organized a prize-award ceremony and granted me a scholarship to support my life here. This made me feel deeply connected to my hometown and aided my adjustment to university life.

This anecdote highlights the emotional and financial support provided by local authorities, which contributes to a sense of belonging to their new town and academic success among Uyghur students.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the social inclusion of Uyghur youth through sports participation in China. By examining the various factors influencing their integration, we can better understand the complex interplay between personal identity, athletic pursuits, and societal pressures.

Firstly, the "sportification" of play activities upon moving to other places highlights the shift from leisure to competition, rules, and nationalism, mostly because of those Uyghur youths' transformation into athletes.

In this study, many of the participants started their collegiate athlete career or professional athlete career when they moved to the new location. This transformation not only reflects the increasing professionalism of sports but also underscores the potential for sports to serve as a bridge for cultural exchange and understanding. The emphasis on skill development by PE teachers further indicates the dual role of sports in fostering both athletic prowess and social integration.

Language barriers, however, pose significant challenges to the social inclusion of Uyghur youth. The cases presented illustrate the difficulties faced by Uyghur youth in communicating with their Han counterparts, leading to feelings of isolation and fear of judgment. Conversely, proficiency in Mandarin is seen as a facilitator of social inclusion, highlighting the importance of language education in promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding the Uyghur people in China also hinder their social integration. Participants' personal encounters with these stereotypes reveal the need for greater awareness and understanding to dispel such misconceptions. Sports, in this context, can serve as a platform for breaking down stereotypes and fostering mutual respect and understanding.

Cultural differences, particularly religious and dietary practices, further complicate the social integration of Uyghur youth. However, the study also highlights the potential of shared experiences, such as sports, to facilitate cultural understanding and promote harmonious coexistence among diverse ethnic groups. By participating in sports together, Uyghur and Han youth can transcend cultural boundaries and build friendships based on shared interests and goals.

The high expectations placed on Uyghur athletes to become professionals reflect the intense pressure and high-stakes environment in which they find themselves. While this pressure can be a source of motivation, it can also lead to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion if not met. The perceived lack of adequate representation and opportunities for Uyghur athletes at the national level further underscores the need for more inclusive and equitable policies in sports.

Sports participation has the potential to augment the social capital of Uyghur youth by fostering self-confidence and facilitating integration with new acquaintances. Social capital, as defined by Putnam et al. (1993), encompasses trust, mutual assistance, cooperative norms, civic participation, and social networks. On the individual level, engaging in sports fosters self-confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging among Uyghur youth athletes. As participants expressed, they develop a strong network of support from coaches, peers, and even opponents, which enhances their individual social capital. On the collective level, sports participation promotes the development of bridging and bonding social capital among Uyghur youth. Bridging social capital involves connections with individuals from different social backgrounds, such as Han athletes, coaches, and community members. These connections broaden the social network of Uyghur youth and expose them to diverse perspectives and experiences. This, in turn, fosters mutual understanding and respect, reducing inter-ethnic tensions and promoting social cohesion. Sports participation provides a platform for Uyghur youth to come together, celebrate their cultural heritage, and reinforce their sense of community. These shared experiences help build trust and cooperation within the Uyghur community, fostering a sense of collective identity and belonging.

Furthermore, sports participation positively influences the educational and career development of Uyghur youth. Policies aimed at supporting minority groups, such as additional points on the College Entrance Exams, facilitate their path to higher education. The trend of Uyghur individuals occupying coaching and PE teacher positions, both in Xinjiang and elsewhere, suggests that sports can serve as a viable avenue for securing stable employment opportunities. These achievements not only reflect the personal growth and development of Uyghur youth but also contribute to their social capital by enhancing their social status and networks.

Social support, particularly from coaches, PE teachers, and families, plays a crucial role in the athletic journey of Uyghur youth. The evolving nature of support systems throughout their careers highlights the need for continuous and multifaceted assistance to ensure their success and well-being. This support system, which includes emotional, practical, and informational resources, constitutes another form of social capital for Uyghur youth.

The physical advantages of Uyghur youth athletes, such as strength and resilience, contribute to their overall athletic experience and societal integration. By excelling in sports, they can reveal their personality and reshape the perceptions of those around them regarding Uyghurs. Additionally, their social capital was enhanced by the improvement of their social reputation and status.

Lastly, the inclusion of Uyghur players enhances the team's overall performance and leads to a higher success rate. The positive integration experiences of participants through engaging in sports activities within their new communities underscore the potential of sports to promote social acceptance and respect. These experiences not only contribute to the personal growth and development of Uyghur youth but also enhance their social capital by fostering trust and mutual respect within the community.

5.1. Limitations

This study provided insights into understanding the challenges that the Uyghur youth athletes faced when they moved to new places, and it also helped understand how the Uyghur youth athletes navigated the situation to achieve social inclusion. However, there are also some limitations to this study. First, the sample size is relatively small. Despite attempts to expand the participant pool, unforeseen circumstances precluded the inclusion of a larger number of Uyghur youth athletes. Consequently, future research should delve deeper into the social inclusion of Uyghur youth athletes in China, employing a more extensive sample size to enhance the robustness of the findings.

Secondly, the study's scope is potentially constrained by its exclusive focus on Uyghur participants within China, which may introduce bias. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding, future research would benefit from exploring the perspectives of other ethnic minorities residing in China.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that only three participants in this study were female athletes. Given the gender-specific nature of sport participation and its impact on social inclusion, future research should investigate how sport engagement facilitates social inclusion among different genders within minority groups. Such an investigation would significantly contribute to advancing the current knowledge in this field.

6. Conclusions

The social inclusion of Uyghur youth through sports participation in China is influenced by various factors, including language barriers, stereotypes, cultural differences, high expectations, and government policies. The process of "sportification" experienced by Uyghur youth upon relocating to new environments highlights the transformation of leisure activities into competitive, rule-bound, and nationalistic endeavors. Despite these challenges, the Uyghur youth have devised strategies to successfully integrate into their new communities. Sports participation has proven to be instrumental in the educational and career development of Uyghur youth, providing them with opportunities to showcase their talents and reshape societal perceptions of their culture. It has also served as a medium for receiving social acceptance and enhancing their social capital. By engaging in sports, Uyghur youth have been able to foster friendships, build confidence, and adapt to new environments more effectively. To foster a more inclusive and equitable society for all, it is imperative to address the challenges faced by Uyghur youth and leverage the potential of sports to bridge cultural divides and promote mutual understanding. This includes improving language education to overcome communication barriers, dispelling stereotypes through awareness campaigns, and implementing inclusive policies that ensure equitable opportunities for Uyghur athletes at the national level. By doing so, we can harness the power of sports to contribute to the harmonious coexistence of diverse ethnic groups in China.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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