

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Providing the Framework of Social Inclusion in Community Sport: A Meta-Synthesis****Farzad Ghafouri** 

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT**Introduction**

Social inclusion has become a cornerstone of contemporary community sport policy, positioning it as a critical lever for national policymakers and sports organizations. This prominence arises from the belief that community sport is an effective and affordable vehicle for achieving broader social objectives, particularly the integration and empowerment of marginalized groups like vulnerable youth. Community sport, characterized by its flexible, adaptable, and people-centered nature, aims to lower participation barriers. It is often viewed as a means to address social, political, and cultural inequalities, going beyond mere "fair play."

Despite its potential, many groups still face discrimination and social exclusion in sports—a process defined as long-term deprivation leading to separation from mainstream sporting activities. The antidote to this exclusion is the active promotion of social inclusion. Representing "social membership," social inclusion is an action that emphasizes acceptance and participation in society, serving to improve quality of life and reduce isolation. It is an ideal pursued by governments to prevent the marginalization of specific social groups, grounded in values of equity and social justice. Marivoet (2014) defines social inclusion in community sport as the "existence of real equal opportunities in access to sport" for all.

However, a clear gap exists in the literature. While studies have highlighted the role of sport in social empowerment and identified factors influencing exclusion, a comprehensive framework conceptualizing social inclusion in community sport has been lacking. Existing models often prioritize talent identification over social objectives or overlook the social role of sport altogether. Therefore, this research sought to synthesize existing knowledge to answer the question: "What is the framework of social inclusion in community sport?"

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative meta-synthesis approach, which fundamentally differs from quantitative meta-analyses that focus on statistically aggregating numerical data. Rather than seeking statistical aggregation, meta-synthesis serves as an integrative interpretive method designed to analyze and synthesize findings across a collection of qualitative studies addressing a specific research topic. The core objective of this methodology is to generate a novel and holistic understanding that transcends the individual contributions of the primary studies, thereby often culminating in the development of new conceptual models that offer a more comprehensive perspective than any single study could provide.

To ensure a systematic and rigorous research process, the study meticulously followed the seven-step model established by Sandelowski and Barroso (2007). The research journey commenced with the crucial stage of formulating the precise research questions, which were: "What are the concepts and categories of social inclusion in community sport?" and "What is its framework?". This was followed by a comprehensive systematic

literature review, involving extensive searches across major international databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, as well as relevant Iranian scientific databases, using a targeted set of keywords including "social inclusion," "community sport," and "social exclusion in sports."

The initial search yielded 377 potentially relevant sources. From this pool, a refined selection process was undertaken, applying strict criteria pertaining to relevance, accessibility, content depth, and methodological quality, which ultimately resulted in 35 articles being chosen for in-depth analysis. The subsequent phase involved a thorough extraction of information, where the selected studies underwent detailed content analysis to identify and extract themes and concepts related to social inclusion, which were then recorded as primary codes. The analytical process then advanced to synthesizing these findings, whereby the extracted codes were systematically grouped into coherent and similar concepts, forming the foundational building blocks from which the main categories of the framework were derived.

Throughout this process, quality control was paramount. Rigor was maintained through comprehensive documentation of all procedures, the application of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool for evaluating the qualitative studies, and the establishment of content validity (CVR) through consultation with a panel of expert judges. The final step involved the coherent presentation of the synthesized findings, culminating in the articulation of the proposed framework for social inclusion in community sport.

Findings

The meta-synthesis yielded a comprehensive framework for understanding social inclusion in community sport, conceptualized as a progressive two-stage process that moves from basic access to transformative empowerment. The foundational first stage, termed Spatial Inclusion, serves as the crucial gateway to participation, functioning as a non-negotiable prerequisite without which deeper forms of inclusion remain unattainable. This initial stage focuses on overcoming fundamental barriers by systematically diminishing social, cultural, and economic distances through the creation of accessible pathways. It manifests through three interconnected forms of proximity: Socio-Cultural Proximity, achieved through diversity-based policies, culturally sensitive facilitation, and the active elimination of stereotypes and linguistic barriers that often alienate marginalized groups; Physical Environment, encompassing not only accessible facilities but also safe and enjoyable training conditions, qualified coaching methodologies, and essential logistical support systems such as childcare services that enable participation; and Economic Proximity, facilitated through strategic reduction of costs, thoughtful consideration of family economic status, and the promotion of economic justice principles within program design. This spatial dimension represents more than mere physical access—it constitutes the essential ecosystem that either enables or constrains initial engagement, creating the foundational conditions upon which all subsequent inclusion processes depend.

Upon establishing this crucial foundational access, the inclusion process advances to a more complex second stage comprising three deeply interconnected dimensions that collectively enable full social integration. Functional Inclusion initiates this deeper engagement by focusing on personal development through the systematic enhancement of knowledge, skills, and competencies. This dimension manifests through three distinct yet related pathways: building Human Capital through the development of transferable social skills, leadership capabilities, and strategic networking abilities; developing Sports Capital through the acquisition of technical sporting skills, physical literacy, and health-related knowledge; and fostering a robust sense of Self-Worth evidenced by enhanced self-esteem, strengthened self-efficacy, and increased life satisfaction. Operating simultaneously and synergistically, Relational Inclusion addresses the essential emotional and affiliative aspects of inclusion by cultivating a profound sense of social acceptance and belonging. This dimension evolves through multiple layers: establishing a fundamental sense of Safety and Well-being that encompasses physical security, psychological safety, and equal opportunity access; nurturing positive Social Relations characterized by deepening trust, reciprocal support mechanisms, and genuine community belonging; and affirming a positive Social Identity through consistent social validation, moral support networks, and recognition within the community.

The most transformative dimension, Power Inclusion, represents the culmination of the inclusion process through its fundamental redistribution of control and authority within

the sporting context. This dimension achieves genuine empowerment through three strategic pathways: developing personal Agency by granting participants the capacity to influence activities, exercise independent action, and effectively resist discrimination; promoting Active Citizenship through meaningful involvement in decision-making processes and fostering civic responsibility that enhances community cohesion; and strategically expanding Social Networks to create bridging capital that connects the sports environment with wider community resources, establishing vertical connections across different social strata. Together, these three dimensions—functional, relational, and power—form an integrated progression that represents a journey from initial access through capability development and relational bonding to ultimate empowerment, creating a comprehensive pathway from marginalization to meaningful integration within community sport.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research makes significant theoretical and practical contributions by proposing a comprehensive framework that conceptualizes social inclusion in community sport as a transformative, two-stage process. The framework's theoretical advancement lies in its synthesis of previously fragmented research into an integrated model that transcends singular focus on specific marginalized groups, instead illuminating the fundamental processes underlying inclusion itself. By systematically organizing these processes into spatial, functional, relational, and power dimensions, the framework establishes a sophisticated conceptual architecture that enables researchers to conduct more nuanced comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts and political environments. Furthermore, it generates testable hypotheses regarding the sequential relationships between different inclusion dimensions and their cumulative impact on achieving sustainable social integration, thereby opening new avenues for empirical investigation and theoretical development in the field of sport sociology and social policy.

The framework's practical utility manifests through its capacity to inform more sophisticated and effective intervention strategies. It provides practitioners with a comprehensive diagnostic instrument that moves beyond conventional approaches focused predominantly on physical accessibility or financial barriers. The model guides sports organizations through a multidimensional assessment process, ensuring that programming addresses not only initial entry barriers but also the complex developmental, relational, and empowerment requisites essential for meaningful inclusion. This sophisticated understanding facilitates the design of integrated interventions that progressively advance from basic spatial access through skill development and community bonding toward authentic power sharing and co-decision making. Such an approach cultivates genuine social and cultural diversity that transcends token representation, creating environments where historically marginalized groups can truly thrive as equal participants.

Moreover, by conceptualizing community sport as a microcosm for broader societal transformation, the framework represents a substantial advancement toward realizing comprehensive social justice objectives. The intricate processes of dismantling exclusionary structures and constructing inclusive communities within sports settings provide transferable insights for addressing parallel challenges throughout society. This suggests that the principles of progressive inclusion—moving systematically from basic access through capability development to meaningful empowerment—can inform and enhance social justice initiatives across multiple domains of civic engagement and public policy, potentially serving as a replicable model for social transformation beyond the sporting context.

KEYWORDS

Community sport, Social inclusion, Social exclusion, Meta-synthesis.

