Asian Journal of Social Science and Management Technology
ISSN: 2313-7410
Volume 8, Issue 5, September-October, 2026
Available at www.ajssmt.com

Cultural Adaptation through Sports: Experiences of International Students in Philippine Universitie

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Abstract: This study explored how sports participation contributes to the cultural adaptation and social integration of international students in Philippine universities. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, five international students were selected through criterion purposive sampling and interviewed using semi-structured questions. Findings showed that sports provided opportunities to learn Filipino culture, language, traditions, and social practices while developing cultural respect and understanding. Shared sports activities also helped participants build friendships, interact with Filipino students, and become more familiar with the university environment. However, language barriers and institutional restrictions sometimes limited participation. Despite these challenges, sports contributed to feelings of acceptance, inclusion, belonging, and university identity. The study concludes that sports can serve as a meaningful avenue for cultural adaptation and social integration among international students in Philippine universities.

Keywords: cultural adaptation, international students, sports participation, social integration

1. Introduction

International students who pursue higher education in another country often encounter challenges as they adjust to a new cultural, linguistic, and social environment. This process, referred to as cultural adaptation, may influence their academic experiences, well-being, and interactions within the host community. International students commonly experience language barriers, cultural differences, academic demands, and difficulties in establishing social relationships as they adjust to their host country (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Participation in sports may provide an avenue through which international students can facilitate their adjustment, as sports create opportunities for communication, relationship-building, and interaction with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Previous studies have indicated that sports participation can promote social interaction, foster a sense of belonging, and contribute to the cultural adaptation of international students (Allen, 2009; Zhou et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023). These findings demonstrate that sports may serve not only as a form of physical activity but also as a social context that encourages inclusion and intercultural interaction.

In the Philippines, the increasing presence of international students in higher education institutions makes their cultural adaptation an important area of consideration. Santillan et al. (2018) found that international students in the Philippines commonly experience challenges related to academics, language, food, and daily living, particularly during the early stages of their stay. The study also emphasized the role of friends, teachers, and university support services in facilitating students' adjustment to their new environment. Similarly, Marino et al. (2017) reported that international students encounter various sociocultural challenges and employ different strategies to adapt to their host environment. Kato et al. (2024) further highlighted the complex

nature of acculturation among international students and emphasized the importance of individual coping mechanisms and institutional support in addressing cultural barriers.

Although previous studies have provided valuable insights into the adjustment and acculturation experiences of international students in Philippine universities, limited attention has been given to the role of sports participation in their cultural adaptation and social integration. Existing research has largely examined academic, linguistic, sociocultural, and institutional factors associated with international students' adjustment. While international studies have indicated that sports and recreational activities can facilitate intercultural friendships, social interaction, and adaptation (Glass, Gómez, & Urzua, 2014; Kim et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2021), there remains limited qualitative evidence regarding how international students in Philippine universities experience these processes through sports participation. This gap indicates the need for further investigation into the experiences of international students who engage in sports within the Philippine higher education context.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of international students in Philippine universities who have participated in sports activities and to examine how such participation relates to their cultural adaptation and social integration. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how international students describe their experiences of cultural adaptation through sports participation, identify the challenges and opportunities they encounter, and examine how participation in sports contributes to their social integration within the university community. The findings may provide universities, student affairs offices, sports coordinators, and other higher education stakeholders with insights that can inform the development of inclusive sports programs and initiatives that support international students' adjustment, social interaction, and sense of belonging.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of international students regarding cultural adaptation through sports participation in Philippine universities. Phenomenology focuses on describing and interpreting the meaning of individuals lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to capture international students' personal experiences and perceptions regarding how sports participation influenced their cultural adaptation, the challenges and opportunities they encountered, and their social integration within the university community.

Participants

The study involved five (5) international students who are studying in Philippine universities. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, specifically criterion purposive sampling. This sampling technique was used because the researchers intentionally selected participants who met specific criteria relevant to the study. The participants were international students currently studying in a Philippine university, had experience as varsity players or members of a university sports team, and had participated in sports in the Philippines. These participants were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences of cultural adaptation, the challenges and opportunities they encountered, and how sports participation contributed to their social integration within the university community.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected international students in Philippine universities. The researchers will use open-ended questions to gather participants' experiences and perspectives regarding their participation in sports. Follow-up questions will be asked when necessary to clarify or further explore their responses. With the participants' consent, the interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure that their responses are accurately captured.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the participants was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. This six-phase methodology include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing the report. By following this six-phase process,

researchers were able to determine the patterns that contribute to cultural adaptation through sports participation, the challenges and opportunities the international students experienced, and how sports participation promoted social integration within the state university in the Philippines.

Ethical Consideration

The researchers ensured that the study is conducted properly, respectfully, and ethically. Before the interview, the participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants. They will be asked to provide informed consent before participating. Participation will be voluntary, and participants will have the right to refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. The information and responses provided by the participants will be kept confidential and will be used only for academic and research purposes. The researchers will protect the participants' identities and personal information throughout the study. The researchers will also respect the participants' opinions, privacy, and well-being and will ensure that no participant is forced, pressured, or intentionally harmed during the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

Sports as a Pathway to Cultural Adaptation

Theme 1*: Learning Filipino Culture through Sports*

Participants described sports as an avenue for learning about Filipino culture through direct interaction with Filipino students, coaches, and other members of the university community. Rather than learning culture only through formal academic activities, participants experienced Filipino customs, language, social practices, and traditions while participating in sports.

Participant 3 explained that his involvement in soccer allowed him to learn cultural practices directly from his Filipino friends:

"They also started to teach me about Filipino culture—what are things to say, what I should not say, and how Filipinos greet people."

Similarly, Participant 5 shared:

"I was able to use those friends to learn new Filipino words. And I was able to adapt to some of the things that Filipinos do and some things that they don't do."

Participant 4 also described learning the Filipino language and experiencing Filipino social practices through interactions with friends:

"This has helped me have, create more friends, and also improved on my engagement with them, learning some more of the Filipino culture, the language."

The findings indicate that sports served as an avenue for cultural learning and adaptation. Through interaction with Filipino peers, participants were exposed to local language, practices, values, and social norms. This is consistent with Santillan et al. (2018), who found that international students in the Philippines experience cultural adaptation through factors such as language, food, and social interaction. Their study also identified cultural empathy, open-mindedness, and social flexibility as relevant to students' adaptation. This is also relevant with Santos et al. (2022), who examined cultural appreciation of the Philippine martial art Arnis, highlighting the potential of participation in Filipino martial arts to contribute to cultural appreciation.

Theme 2: *Developing Cultural Respect and Understanding*

Sports participation also helped participants develop greater appreciation and respect for Filipino culture, particularly through exposure to traditional sports, dances, and local practices.

Participant 1 described his experience learning Arnis and traditional Filipino dance as a way of understanding Filipino history:

"It helped me build more on my cultural understanding of dances in the Philippines."

He further explained:

"Learning the history of the sports, I think taught me more of the culture and how the people of the Philippines preserved their history of fighting and defense through what could be seen as performance."

Participant 2 similarly described Arnis as a way of connecting with Filipino heritage:

"Arnis was a very strong way of connecting with my roots."

For Participant 4, cultural understanding developed through experiencing the warmth and friendliness of Filipino players:

"I have really experienced warmth whenever I meet with the Filipino friends, playing with them."

The participants' experiences suggest that sports encourage cultural awareness and appreciation of differences. Through participation, respondents were able to recognize differences in sporting traditions while developing greater respect for Filipino practices. This supports Allen et al. (2010), who found that sport can provide international students with opportunities for cultural expression and adaptation. This finding is also related to Martin and Santos (2019), who investigated factors associated with Arnis participation among Philippine students.

Theme 3*: Adapting Through Shared Activities and Experiences*

The participants' experiences further showed that cultural adaptation occurred through actively participating in activities with Filipino students. Sports provided an environment where international students could observe how Filipinos interacted, communicated, competed, and formed relationships.

Participant 1 described learning discipline through Arnis and comparing it with his previous sports experiences in the United States:

"It taught me a different kind of discipline that I had no experience with."

Participant 4 also noted that participating in sports allowed him to experience Filipino social relationships:

"I have seen sports as one tool that helps to strengthen relationships and to make life more meaningful."

Participant 3 described how participating in soccer eventually led him to become familiar with Filipino food, language, and everyday practices:

"The more friends I got, the more friends advised me and told me what not to do before I get involved in trouble."

These accounts demonstrate how shared sports activities can support cultural adaptation through repeated social interaction. Participants became more familiar with their university environment by engaging with Filipino students in practices and competitions. Glass et al. (2014) found that recreational participation was associated with intercultural friendship formation and international students' adaptation to college. This finding is also consistent with Martin et al. (2016), who examined physical activity participation among Filipino college students, highlighting the relevance of participation in physical activities within the college context.

Challenges and Opportunities in Sports Participation

Theme 1: *Language and Communication Barriers*

The most consistent challenge identified by the participants was communication, particularly the language barrier between international students and Filipino teammates.

Participant 3 stated:

"The language is just the main thing that serves as a challenge for me."

He explained that although many Filipino students could speak English, some were hesitant to communicate because they were shy.

Participant 4 similarly described:

"Most of my Filipino friends, they would love to really interact deeply. But sometimes we are limited by language."

Participant 5 also emphasized the difficulty of communication during football:

"You cannot play adequately with your teammates."

He added that communication became particularly challenging when he was coaching Filipino players who were accustomed to using Tagalog.

The participants' narratives reveal that language differences could limit deeper communication and social interaction. While sports created opportunities to interact, difficulties in understanding Tagalog sometimes affected communication between international and Filipino students. This corresponds with Santillan et al. (2018), who identified language as one of the challenges experienced by international students adapting to the Philippine environment. Wu et al. (2015) likewise identified language and communication difficulties as common challenges encountered by international students in adjusting to college life.

Theme 2: *Institutional and Participation Restrictions*

Aside from language, some participants encountered institutional restrictions that limited their participation in university sports.

Participant 4 specifically described restrictions affecting graduate students:

"There is a high restriction on graduate students."

Because of this, he mainly participated informally and recreationally at the Oval rather than as an official university athlete.

Participants 3 and 5 also discussed restrictions concerning international students' participation in SCUAA competitions.

Participant 3 explained:

"They said foreign students don't play in SCUAA."

Participant 5 similarly stated:

"You cannot say I'm an international student and you say I should not play in a SCUAA when I am a member of the university."

These experiences demonstrate that participation opportunities were not always equally accessible to international students. Although the participants were able to participate in activities such as intramurals and informal training, institutional policies could limit their involvement in higher-level university competitions.

This finding is important because it demonstrates that cultural adaptation through sports may depend not only on an international student's willingness to participate but also on whether the university provides accessible and inclusive opportunities.

Theme 3: *Personal, Social, and Cultural Opportunities*

Despite the challenges, all participants described numerous opportunities gained through sports. These included making friends, learning about Filipino culture, visiting different places, developing skills, and sharing their own cultural knowledge.

Participant 3 described opportunities to train Filipino players and interact with university officials:

"I have a lot of experience meeting with some top officials of the university, where I help with them."

Participant 4 explained that sports allowed him to travel and experience sporting events outside his usual environment:

"It has helped me to explore different places, which I find rewarding and fun."

Participant 1 also described an opportunity to combine sports and cultural learning through choreography:

"I'm kind of encouraging like a cool choreography performance to inform others about the history of the Philippines."

Participant 2 emphasized the opportunity to connect with his Filipino heritage:

"It was a good way of connecting with my roots."

These responses demonstrate that sports created opportunities that extended beyond physical activity. Participants developed social networks, improved their skills, encountered new places, and became more involved in university life. Glass et al. (2014) reported that recreational activities can provide international students with opportunities for intercultural friendships and adaptation. Allen et al. (2010) similarly found that

sport can contribute to socialization and the development of social connections among international students. The cultural dimension of these opportunities is also relevant to Santos et al. (2015), whose research documented Mangamaru as a creative indigenous Kapampangan folkdance, demonstrating how Philippine physical activities and cultural expressions can provide avenues for engagement with local culture.

Sports as a Means of Social Integration and Belonging

Theme 1: *Building Friendships and Social Connections*

The strongest recurring finding across the five participants was the role of sports in creating friendships and social connections.

Participant 3 described how soccer led to the creation of a group chat called:

"Junior and Friends."

He explained that his teammates and friends continued communicating with him even after games and used these interactions to teach him about Filipino culture.

Participant 2 similarly stated:

"It helps me get to know people on a different level outside of the classroom."

Participant 5 repeatedly emphasized friendship as one of the major benefits of sports:

"It's not about fun, it's about friendship."

Participant 4 also reported:

"Sports has really enabled me to create more friends."

The experiences shared by the respondents indicate that sports created meaningful opportunities for friendship formation and social interaction. Regular participation brought international students into contact with Filipino peers and other members of the university community. This is supported by Kim et al. (2023), who examined international students involved in college sports and found connections among sport-team identification, social capital, sense of community, and acculturation. This finding also relates to Santillan et al. (2018), which examined the role of social interaction and relationships in the cultural adaptation of international students in the Philippines.

Theme 2: *Feeling Accepted and Included*

The participants also reported that sports helped them feel accepted within the university community.

Participant 1 explained:

"It helped me feel more accepted because it showed the idea that… we should invite him in."

Participant 2 described his early experience at CLSU as isolating and explained that Arnis and other activities helped him connect with students:

"It was a very isolating experience… those last couple of weeks where I did participate in our Arnis practice, it was a good chance to get to know students."

Participant 4 similarly stated:

"I have felt accommodated or included."

Participant 5 connected participation directly with inclusion:

"As much as the university has allowed us as international students to participate in sports, I mean, we are inclusive in the university."

These experiences demonstrate the importance of social interaction in helping international students feel accepted within the university. Being welcomed into activities allowed participants to interact with Filipino peers and reduced feelings of isolation. Caligiuri et al. (2020) found that activities designed to increase interaction between international and domestic students can improve international students' sense of belonging and perceived social support. This finding is also consistent with Santillan et al. (2018), which identified social relationships and interaction as relevant aspects of international students' cultural adaptation in the Philippine context.

Theme 3: Developing a Sense of Belonging and University Identity

Beyond making friends and feeling accepted, sports contributed to participants' sense of belonging to the university.

Participant 3 described how his performance during intramurals changed his perception of his place at CLSU:
"After that intramural, it made me believe that yes, I'm actually part of the university."

Participant 5 expressed a similar sense of identity through his college jersey
"When I wear my College of Agriculture jersey, I know that I belong to Central Luzon State University."
Participant 1 also described gaining a stronger feeling of belonging:
"It definitely feels… made me feel like more belonging in the university."
Participant 2 likewise stated:
"I'm for sure I gained a lot, a stronger sense of belonging."
The participants' accounts illustrate how involvement in university activities can strengthen their sense of belonging and connection to the institution. Sports gave respondents a way to identify themselves as active members of their university rather than remaining socially separate from Filipino students. This is strongly supported by Thies and Falk (2023), whose study of 2,998 international students found that extracurricular participation and contact with other students were associated with university belonging.

4. Conclusion

The study explored the experiences of international students in Philippine universities who participated in sports activities, focusing on cultural adaptation, challenges, opportunities, and social integration. Findings revealed that sports provided opportunities to learn Filipino culture, language, traditions, and social practices while developing respect for cultural differences. Sports also helped participants build friendships, interact with Filipino students, and become more familiar with the university community. However, language barriers and institutional restrictions sometimes limited participation. Despite these challenges, sports contributed to participants' feelings of acceptance, belonging, and connection to their university. Overall, the study concludes that sports can serve as a meaningful avenue for cultural adaptation and social integration by promoting interaction, friendship, cultural exchange, and a stronger sense of belonging among international students.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings, Philippine universities should develop inclusive sports programs that encourage international students to participate alongside Filipino students. Sports activities may also incorporate Filipino traditional sports and dances to promote cultural learning and exchange. Universities should provide regular opportunities for intercultural interaction, address language barriers through basic Filipino language support, and encourage inclusive communication among coaches, officials, and students. Administrators should also establish clear policies for international and graduate students' participation in sports programs. Finally, future researchers should examine cultural adaptation through sports using larger and more diverse samples from different universities.

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How to cite/reference this article: Joanel Alviar, Raphael Paulo Baldonado, Tyrone Dave Calixtro, Kate Winslet Montemayor, Gilbert Pascua, Mike Russel Roque, Rea Jenn Toledo, Cultural Adaptation through Sports: Experiences of International Students in Philippine Universitie, Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech. 2026; 8(5): 161-168.