

Title:

**Sport, Migration, and Social Capital in Japan:
An Exploratory Study of Initiatives in Hamamatsu, Saga, and Tokyo**

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Keywords: migrant integration, sports, social capital, intercultural relations.

Abstract

1. Background

The Upper House general election in July 2025 brought immigration to the forefront of public debate in Japan: anti-immigration political campaigns and media reports combined to highlight in the public mind the issues that Japan faces as its foreign population grows. The heated public debate over the issue of immigration has moved the government to initiate an overhaul of its immigration policy, aiming to avoid the social division seen in other developed nations. Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for research on how to facilitate positive intercultural relations as Japanese society undergoes rapid change.

Research examining the potential role of sport in migrant integration is a growing field outside of Japan; social capital theory is often used as a means to understand the social impact of sports participation for foreign residents. Some scholars have identified a positive impact on migrant bridging and bonding social capital (Block et al, 2025; Hoyer et al, 2015); and migrant community building (Zhou & Kaplanidou, 2018). At the same time, other scholars question the impact of sports participation on the development of bridging ties between migrant and host community members (Spaaij, 2012); whether migrant participation in sports clubs actually leads to integration (Flensner et al, 2021); and point to the challenges of securing a safe and comfortable environment for migrant participation in sporting activities (Buser et al, 2021; Middleton et al, 2020). Turning to Japan, case studies have examined the potential of sport to contribute to the development of bonding and bridging ties among Japanese and Brazilian community members (Ito et al, 2011; Ueta, 2014; Ueta & Matsumura, 2013). Other studies have investigated how different types of sports clubs in Japan may promote different forms of social capital, providing valuable insight into salient features of sports culture in Japan (Okayasu et al, 2010). However, there are still very few studies attempting a holistic assessment of how sporting activities may function as facilitators of migrant integration in the

Japanese context.

2. Overview of research

The current study is the first stage of a three-year project that focuses on the intersection of sports and migrant integration in Japan. This stage of the project adopts a case study methodology and compares three different sports-related initiatives (one each in Tokyo, Hamamatsu City, and Saga City) that involve Japanese and foreign residents. Through a cross-case analysis, the aim of the study is to understand factors that may facilitate or inhibit the development of relationships between Japanese and foreign residents through sports. The study addresses the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do organizers use sports (and/or recreational) activities to promote interaction between Japanese and foreign residents?

RQ2: How effective are sports (and/or recreational) activities in promoting ongoing contact between Japanese and foreign participants?

Semi-structured interviews with activity organizers and surveys of Japanese and foreign participants are used to answer the above questions, adopting a theoretical framework based on social capital theory and Allport's (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis. The overarching aim of this exploratory project is to understand the potential of sports and recreational activities for migrant social integration in the Japanese context and contribute to prior literature on the intersection between sports and migrant integration. The study findings will also form the foundation for ongoing investigations into practical ways that Japanese universities may facilitate positive and constructive intercultural relations in Japan.

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