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# **Adjustment of Self-Initiated Sports Expatriates in Finland**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Globalisaation ja vuonna 1995 pelaajasiirrot vapauttaneen Bosman-säännön myötä urheiluekspatriaattien määrä on kasvanut huomattavasti. Aiempi tutkimus luokittelee joukkueurheiluekspatriaattit oma-aloitteisiksi ekspatriaateiksi (self-initiated expatriates). Jalkapallossa ulkomaiset pelaajat rekrytoidaan usein johtaviin rooleihin, jolloin heidän työsuoritusellensa on iso vaikutus seuran menestykseen. Tutkimus osoittaa, että ekspatriaattien sopeutumisella on suora vaikutus suoriutumiseen työssä. Silti urheiluekspatriaattien sopeutumista ei juurikaan olla tutkittu. Jalkapallosekspatriaattien työ- ja uraympäristö on poikkeuksellinen muun muassa uniikkien sidosryhmien paineen, helposti mitattavan työsuorituksen sekä poikkeuksellisen kilpailun ja yhteistyön kombinaation takia.

Tässä tutkielmassa tutkittiin kvalitatiivisesti tekijöitä, jotka vaikuttavat jalkapallosekspatriaattien sopeutumiseen Suomessa. Otoksena oli kuusi Suomeen ammattijalkapalloilijaksi muuttanutta ekspatriaattia, joiden kokemuksia kerättiin puolistrukturoiduin teemahaastatteluin. Haastatteluiden teemoina olivat henkilökohtaiset tekijät, yleiset työnulkopuoliset tekijät, vuorovaikutus-tekijät ja työhön liittyvät tekijät. Tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys koostui lähetettyjen ekspatriaattien (assigned expatriate) sopeutumista selittävästä teoriasta, jota sovellettiin kattamaan oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattien ja urheilun konteksti.

Tutkimustulosten perusteella Suomeen saapuneiden jalkapallosekspatriaattien piirteet kattavat oma-aloitteisen ekspatriaation keskeiset määritelmät vaikkakin prosessissa on epätyypillisiä piirteitä kuten vastaanottavan organisaation vahva aloitteellinen tuki sekä urheilijoiden poikkeuksellisen suuri uraorientaatio. Keskeinen löydös on se, että nuoresta iästä kilpailullisesti urheilteena jalkapallosekspatriaattit sopeutuvat Suomessa työhön melko helposti, mutta työn ulkopuoliseen elämään huonosti vähäisten vapaa-ajan mahdollisuuksien, rajoittavan työn sekä paikallisten varautuneisuudesta johtuvan vuorovaikutuksen hankaluuden vuoksi. Tämä osoittaa, että seurojen tulisi keksiä uudenlaisia keinoja jalkapallosekspatriaattien työnulkopuolisen sosiaalisen sopeutumisen tukemiseksi.

Kaiken kaikkiaan jalkapallosekspatriaattien sopeutumiskokemukset ovat melko uniikkeja verrattuna muihin oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattien alaryhmiin. Tämä tutkielma vahvistaa aiempia näkemyksiä siitä, miten oma-aloitteisia ekspatriaatteja tulee tutkia yhden suuren kokonaisuuden sijaan erikseen alaryhminä.

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**KEYWORDS:** Self-Initiated Expatriates, Sports Expatriates, Cultural Adjustment, Adjustment, Sports Industry

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## Abbreviations

**SIE = Self-initiated expatriate**

**AE = Assigned expatriate**

**HRM = Human resource management**

**IHRM = International human resource management**

# 1 INTRODUCTION

In this section the study is introduced via discussion of the background of sports expatriation and justification for studying adjustment of sports expatriates. Thereafter, research gap, and research question are addressed. Further, definitions of key concepts are presented and limitations of the study discussed. Lastly, the structure of the study is declared.

## 1.1 Background of the study

Globalization has led to continuously increasing international labor movement. The phenomenon and cultural adjustment when moving abroad to work has been studied in depth through the concept of expatriation. Expatriate is an individual living and working abroad for a decent time (McNulty & Brewster, 2017; Aycan & Kanungo, 1997; Harrison et al., 2004). However, majority of the research has focused on traditional corporate-assigned expatriation whereas recently significant amount of international labor movement can be defined as self-initiated or other less researched subclassification of expatriation. Likewise, sports expatriates meet the definition of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017) due to initiating relocation themselves or with the help of an agency. Sports expatriates face unique international work and career environments where performance is highly measurable (Dolles & Söderman, 2013) and prompt cultural adjustment crucial. In this study, the focus is on football expatriates who have self-initiated their expatriation.

In 1995, the movement of noncontracted football players was liberated in the European Union by the European Court of Justice (case C-415/93) (Binder & Findlay, 2012) leading to rapid increase of sports expatriation. In season 1990/91, 9,1% of players in the five big leagues of football were foreign whereas in 2010/11 the share was 42,8% (Poli et al., 2016; Naakka, 2014). The trend has not been apparent only in big leagues as for instance the top Finnish football league had an increase of 335% of foreign players from 1990 to 2010 (Naakka, 2014). During season 2023, foreign players were on the pitch for 41,7% of

the total playing minutes in Veikkausliiga (Suomen Palloliitto, 2023). Globally, the number of professional football expatriates has further increased by 19,2% from 2020 to 2024 (Poli et al., 2024). Although sports governors have introduced club- and league-specific restrictions to enhance opportunities for local talent (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017), sports expatriation holds an essential role in today's professional sports.

Cultural adjustment of expatriates is a multifaceted process of which dimensions have been categorized in various ways as for instance behaviors, cognitions, and emotions (Haslberger & Brewster, 2009) or general-, interaction-, and work-related aspects (Black et al., 1991). In this study, a categorization from Black et al. (1991) is used for a theoretical framework. The cultural adjustment model is not fully adopted but adapted to suit self-initiated expatriation and the unique characteristics of sports industry. General non-work-related factors affecting adjustment refer to individual's experience of, and getting used to new living conditions, interaction-related factors affecting adjustment for instance to communication with people in the new host-country, and work-related factors affecting adjustment to for example role expectations on job. In addition to the three categories of post-arrival in-country adjustment factors, individual factors affecting adjustment such as prior experience are studied as the fourth category, and as explaining factors to in-country factors affecting adjustment.

While cultural adjustment as a factor for expatriation success is an established subject among research (Kraimer et al., 2001), SIEs in sports encounter a particularly fast-paced and pressuring work and career environment where cultural adjustment has complex features. Athletes are expected to perform instantly in a highly measurable job (Dolles & Söderman, 2013) while adjusting to novel culture, social integration, and practical arrangements off-field (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017). In addition, opposite to other industries, athletes are surrounded by pressure from peculiar stakeholders such as fans and media, balancing between a complex setting of cooperation and competition among the team (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017), and adjusting to different sports tactics and leadership style on-field (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Agergaard &

Tiesler, 2014; Linton, 2016). Moreover, while mentally adjusting, sports expatriates are often also physically burdened and expected to adjust to new physical training and expectations (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017).

According to Kraimer et al. (2001), cultural adjustment has a direct impact on expatriate's job performance. More closely, an old work from Tung (1982) found adjustment of an AE or the AE's spouse to the host-country work and environment the most significant reason for expatriation failure. While a lot has changed in forty years, it is reasonable to assume adjustment as the priority aspect of successful expatriation. Further, as studies have found a slump in expatriates' work performance during the adjustment period (Black & Stephens, 1991), it is in both employers' and employees' interests to define, understand, and support the factors affecting expatriate's adjustment.

## **1.2 Justification for the study**

There is both practical and societal justification for studying cultural adjustment of sports expatriates. In a practical manner, clubs want their expatriates to adjust effectively and thus perform better on-field. Similar to expatriates in other fields (Hung-Wen, 2007), foreign players are recruited to be the key contributors of clubs and hence impacting the team success or failure the most. In addition, since the Bosman-ruling, the number of sports expatriates has rapidly increased further strengthening the impact of sports expatriates' performance to clubs' success.

While dealing with limited resources, clubs must optimize their expatriate management processes in order to succeed both on the pitch and off the pitch financially. This thesis aims to explore the most crucial cultural adjustment factors of sports expatriates in Finland, in order to guide clubs for effective resource utilization. Furthermore, it must be taken into consideration that for clubs, recruiting sports expatriates is both a risky investment to success on the pitch, and an investment for future financial stability. More closely, due to limited talent pool in Finland, clubs are forced to scout talent abroad and in the best-case scenario, clubs can make significant financial profit from the transfer of

their successful sports expatriate (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018). Thus, investing in – and studying – the cultural adjustment of sports expatriates is justified and reasonable.

Throughout history, sports have held a vital role in creating cultural exchange, inspiration, and social change (Sandy et al., 2004). In fact, even battlefront of the First World War was interrupted for the Christmas Truce of 1914, a football match between German and Scottish soldiers (Miller, 2023; Nordling, 2024). Likewise religions have shaped the cultural development and social structure, sports have had similar intangible effects to today's society. Whether it is a religion worshipping the legendary Diego Maradona (Hall, 2023), cemetery of the fans of Schalke 04 (Nordling, 2024), or symbolic and culturally significant sports monuments around the globe, the unexplainable enticement of sports is worthy of research.

Lastly, as a result of strong internationalization and constant commercialization, the sports industry mirrors society as a laboratory reflecting cultures, values and traditions (Woods & Butler, 2020). Even though sports industry is argued to be a financially small industry, its importance and intangible effects are widely acknowledged as Humphreys & Ruseski (2009) among others suggest. They mention the intangible benefits sports creates to society for example as cohesion when following the team of a city or a nation. They also state that the size of the sports industry would be calculated much larger if the intangible effects were taken into consideration. In fact, study of Hedman (2022) revealed that, although making an operating loss, a Finnish multisport club TPS has an output of six times their financial input to the local area. Moreover, Sandy et al. (2004) state that sports is worthy of research because it generates intriguing economic questions. Therefore, it is significant to study cultural adjustment through sports expatriation. Eventually, findings from sports context might reveal insights to rapidly increasing need for innovative integration systems in surrounding society as well.

### 1.3 Research question

Whereas cultural adjustment is an established topic among traditional assigned expatriation research, less is known about SIEs and specifically sports expatriates. For instance, Selmer et al. (2022) point out that sports expatriates are a small but important group of SIEs that need more research. In addition, the topic is timely as seen in recent degree works from colleges (e.g. Thiaw, 2024). Still, prior research of cultural adjustment of sports expatriates is scant, and nonexistent in the context of Finland. The aim of this study is to reveal which factors impact the adjustment of football expatriates the most, in a unique context of sports industry in Finland.

Based on this background, the research question of the study is:

***Which factors impact the adjustment of sports expatriates in Finland?***

Thus, this thesis on cultural adjustment of sports expatriation in Finland not only contributes to our understanding of sports expatriates but also offers practical knowledge of the phenomenon for sports clubs operating with limited resources. Regarding research gaps, this study advances the research of heterogenous subgroups of self-initiated expatriation by focusing on sports SIEs.

### 1.4 Definitions of key concepts

Recently, the concept of expatriation has widened and diffused to many meanings and subclassifications. However, to research this topic there must be an understanding and bounded clarification of the concept of *self-initiated expatriation*. Although traditional corporate-assigned expatriates (AEs) are extensively studied, the research by McNulty & Brewster (2017) reveals a distinct lack of defining the terms expatriate or expatriation. According to them, almost all the most cited literature seem to presume the terms self-explanatory. Nevertheless, most of the existing definitions agree that expatriate is an individual living and working abroad for a decent time (McNulty & Brewster, 2017; Aycan & Kanungo, 1997; Harrison et al., 2004). As a disparity to immigrant, expatriates are

individuals working abroad for a variable but decent period of time without the purpose to fully adapt or immigrate to the host country (McNulty & Brewster, 2017; Aycan & Kanungo, 1997; Harrison et al., 2004). Furthermore, SIEs differ from AEs by four categories: initiation, goals, funding and career type (Inkson et al., 1997). Whereas an AE is initiated, set objectives and funded by a parent company, SIEs seek a job, fund the leave, plan and manage their career individually.

*Cultural adjustment* refers to the state of how an individual living in a foreign environment is comfortable, aware, and familiar with the novel aspects surrounding (Black, 1988). In research, cultural adjustment is sometimes mixed with cultural adaptation. However, the difference is that adjustment refers to short-term acclimation whereas adaptation refers to long-term integration to a new country (Lysgaard, 1955). Thus, as self-initiated sports expatriation rarely targets long-term integration, but usually strives for eventual move to bigger leagues in other countries, the term cultural adjustment is adopted in this study. More closely, as this study discusses sports expatriation in the context of Finland, due to the low level of the football league, it is arguable to assume that athletes desire a move to bigger leagues as fast as possible.

## **1.5 Limitations**

The limitations of this study are mainly related to sample affecting its generalizability. The sample of this study is rather small and non-representative of the whole diverse backgrounds of football expatriates in Finland. The interviewees of the study are different ages, nationalities, and have spent various time as a sports expatriate in Finland. The different time spent in sports expatriation in Finland can affect the perception of the interviewees' cultural adjustment. In more detail, interviewees are in different points of the cultural adjustment U-curve theory (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960) and thus, interpreting their impressions may be biased. In addition, while interviewees from diverse cultural backgrounds create versatile views and perceptions, their way of communication and cross-cultural beliefs can affect the comparison of the empirical results with those from other studies. In order to reduce this methodological constraint, the results

of this study can be extended into more comprehensive quantitative research in the future.

In addition, the sample of this study consists of footballers who stayed in Finland after playing at least one season. This indicates that their expatriation and adjustment have been to some extent successful. On the contrary, due to high measurability of sports, expatriates who fail to fulfill expectations or adjust are quickly transferred to other leagues. Thus, the results of this study may be somewhat skewed in favor of “positive experiences”. Moreover, the writer of this study is inexperienced and is conducting an empirical study for the first time. Lastly, there is little previous research on the concept of sports expatriation and specifically in the context of Finland. Hence, there is scant evidence that could be utilized when implementing the study.

## **1.6 Structure of the study**

This study consists of a theoretical and an empirical part. The theoretical part is divided into three main chapters: introduction (1), self-initiated expatriation (2), and adjustment of SIEs (3). In this introduction chapter background of the study (1.1), and justification for the study (1.2) are presented, research questions (1.3) addressed, and definitions of key concepts (1.4) are introduced. Thereafter the limitations (1.5) of the study are discussed.

The second main chapter (2) is started via discussing different types of expatriates (2.1) and presenting existing research on SIEs (2.2) by their characteristics (2.2.1) and motives (2.2.2). This exploration of the key concept of self-initiated expatriation is thereafter followed by applying it to the context of the study via discussing SIEs in sports industry (2.3) and Finland as a destination for sports expatriation (2.4).

The third main chapter is structured similarly by first introducing the second key concept of the study, cultural adjustment (3.1). Thereafter, cultural adjustment is further discussed by dividing it into general nonwork-related adjustment (3.1.1), interaction-

related adjustment (3.1.2), and work-related adjustment (3.1.3) based on categorization applied from Black et al. (1991). Thereafter, challenges of SIEs (3.2) are discussed. Lastly, factors affecting adjustment SIEs are listed based on literature and followed by concluding the theoretical part of the study with a summary of the theoretical framework (3.3).

The methodology of the study is presented in main chapter 4. First, research design (4.1) is addressed. Thereafter, sampling and data collection (4.2) is explained, and data analysis (4.3) process described. Moreover, ethical considerations (4.4) as well as reliability and validity (4.5) of the study are discussed.

The findings of the empirical study are presented in chapter 5. More closely, the findings are discussed in the order of individual factors affecting adjustment (5.1), general non-work-related factors affecting adjustment (5.2), interaction-related factors affecting adjustment (5.3), and work-related factors affecting adjustment (5.4).

Lastly, in discussion and conclusion (6) chapter, key findings and contributions of the study (6.1) are presented. Thereafter, the empirical findings are also utilized to develop practical implications (6.2) for clubs to support the adjustment of sports expatriates. Finally, limitations of the findings and future research suggestions (6.3) are discussed.

## **2 SELF-INITIATED EXPATRIATION**

In this main chapter self-initiated expatriation is analyzed by examining different types of expatriates, defining the term, and exploring the existing research on SIEs. Further, SIEs in sports and peculiarities of sports industry mobility and work environment are addressed. Lastly, Finland as a destination for sports expatriation is discussed. The purpose of this chapter is to define and separate self-initiated expatriation from other expatriation types and introduce the particularities of sports industry affecting its labor mobility and work environment.

### **2.1 Different types of expatriates**

As a consequence of globalization, the mobility of products, services, capital and labor has exceeded the borders of states, nations and continents. Due to globalizing markets and for example free labor mobility areas, movement of employees has been an increasing trend all over the world. Following the trend, especially labor movement regarding knowledge assets, intangible assets and intellectual capital has become a hot topic for researchers. Furthermore, motives, challenges, and adjustment of expatriates have risen to be an important theme in western societies. However, despite plenty of research, Alshahrani & Morley (2015) suggest that explaining and analyzing the causes and consequences of international mobility remain complicated.

Expatriates are individuals working abroad for a variable but decent period of time without the purpose to fully adapt or immigrate to the host country (McNulty & Brewster, 2017; Aycan & Kanungo, 1997; Harrison et al., 2004). While expatriation has been studied plenty, research of McNulty & Brewster (2017) reveals lack of defining the terms expatriate or expatriation. According to them, almost all the most cited literature seem to presume the terms self-explanatory. On the other hand, recently the concept of expatriate has widened and diffused to many meanings due to globalization and rapidly changing ways to work, as well as opportunities and desires for global mobility. In addition to established and the most common expatriation types – AEs and SIEs – Shaffer et al. (2012)

cover nontraditional expatriates. As nontraditional expatriates, they address concepts like flexpatriates from work of Mayerhofer et al. (2004), short-term assignments from work of Tahvanainen et al. (2005), and international business travelers from work of Welch et al. (2007). All in all, the established hyponyms for expatriates are traditional AEs, SIEs, and nontraditional expatriates in its many forms.

Although Konopaske & Werner (2005), note that a frame classifying general duration of company-backed global assignment is yet to be unveiled, most studies agree on that expatriation differs from migration and immigration by its short-term duration and lack of purpose to fully stay, adapt, or immigrate to the host country (McNulty & Brewster, 2017; Aycan & Kanungo, 1997; Harrison et al., 2004). However, to reach a classification, Konopaske & Werner (2005) suggest that based on inquiries, a usual long-term expatriate assignment is seen as a one-to-four-year allocation. Still, as expatriation has recently been studied to include rapidly raising amount of SIEs and nontraditional assignments, a common duration cannot be stated. While Suutari et al. (2018) have found global work experience beneficial for employee's career, expatriation process remains challenging. According to old work from Swaak (1995), from 10% to 45% of expatriate assignments fail. Since then, reported expatriation failure rates have been indicated inadequate, but the impacts of adjustment challenges to on-job performance remain well-founded.

Whereas AEs are a well-known and widely researched group of expatriates, the increase of research on SIEs is a relatively new trend and a hot topic among researchers. In an early work which has been a platform for future studies, Inkson et al. (1997) separate overseas experience – quite accurately reflecting to SIEs – from AEs by four categories: initiation, goals, funding and career type. Whereas an AE is initiated, set objectives and funded by a parent company, SIEs seek a job, fund the leave, plan, and manage their career individually. In addition, while the duration of an assigned expatriation is mostly predetermined, length of a self-initiated expatriation is often not sealed beforehand (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010).

Furthermore, Vaiman et al. (2015) state that there is no standard definition for the heterogeneous group of SIEs. Similarly, Selmer et al. (2022) note that self-initiated expatriation contains various subgroups and that the future research should focus on each group more profoundly. Suutari & Brewster (2000) listed subgroups based on their diverse characteristics and motives as young opportunists, job seekers, officials, localized professionals, international professionals, and dual career couples. On the other hand, Selmer et al. (2022) distinguish SIEs based on industries for instance as healthcare and schoolteacher professionals, culture sector expatriates, defense and security fields expatriates, sports expatriates, and low-status expatriates relocating from poorer to richer countries for instance for construction work. As said, according to them, self-initiated expatriation research should focus on specific subgroups to delimit core characteristics and enable more comprehensive understanding of specifics of such SIE groups.

## **2.2 Existing research on SIEs**

While assigned expatriation has been studied since the 1970s, self-initiated expatriation was first introduced in literature as a concept in the 1990s by Inkson et al. (1997) and further established by Suutari & Brewster (2000). These works created the foundation for studying expatriates who initiate, fund, plan, and manage their careers abroad themselves without the support of a parent company. Thereafter, the term self-initiated expatriation has been a hot topic for scholars throughout the 2000s and 2010s due to technical developments, globalization, increased international labor mobility, and emerging opportunities and motives. In fact, the amount of SIEs is clearly higher than the number of traditional AEs (Doherty et al., 2008; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). In addition, due to the pandemic, working styles have been at a turning point further enabling international mobility as working remotely became common. However, especially today, SIEs are a highly heterogeneous group and lack standard definitions (Vaiman et al., 2015; Selmer et al., 2022). Still, due to increasing research on the topic, there have been many generalizations made regarding the characteristics, motives, and challenges of SIEs, specifically distinguishing them from AEs.

To discuss the characteristics and motives for self-initiated expatriation it must be understood which aspects have enabled the opportunity of relocating for work on one's own. The following summary is based on asking AI "What are the causes or circumstances that enabled the phenomenon of self-initiated expatriation?" First and foremost, rapid globalization has enhanced global networks. Further, the internet has enabled global networking for more people, effective information sharing and access, and for instance the opportunity for online job markets. Simultaneously, countries and trade unions have progressively liberated the movement of workforce by changing immigration and visa policies allowing individuals to relocate and work legally and through less excessive bureaucracy (ChatGPT, 2025). Keeping in mind the issues of the current AI technology, this output seems to be on the right track. In addition – or rather due to globalization – younger generation has a different attitude towards work, work-life balance, and career (Grabowska, 2016). More closely, Grabowska (2016) among others suggests that unlike the older generations, the new generation wants to adjust work to life and not the other way around. Whereas assigned expatriation is motivated and initiated by the company and relate with a job task that needs to be conducted, motivation and initiation for self-initiated expatriation are described as "existential" rather than work- or career-related (Madison, 2006). Moreover, corporations have decreased their inputs in assigned expatriation which has further established the increase of self-initiated expatriation in international mobility. Additionally, increased remote work has enabled novel modes of international work mobility, such as moving abroad but working for a home-country company.

### **2.2.1 Characteristics**

Suutari & Brewster (2000), Selmer & Luring (2010), and Cerdin & Pargneux (2010) describe SIE as an individual who decides to move abroad to work without a company-backed support network. In their overview of self-initiated expatriation research Selmer et al. (2022) add that the essential characteristic of a SIE is the initiation on their own expatriation. On the other hand, they also highlight that due to diverse groups and sub-categories of self-initiated expatriation, other equally generalizable characteristics are

challenging to point out. Furthermore, discussing the troubles of self-initiated expatriation research, Selmer et al. (2022) emphasize how future studies should focus on sub-categories of self-initiated expatriation. Thus, this study eventually discusses the unexplored group of sports expatriates, and specifically football expatriates. Therefore, while discussing characteristics of a SIE, not every form of self-initiated expatriation is taken into consideration, but some generalizations can be made. For example, the large group of low-status expatriates who initiate from poorer to richer countries for instance construction work (Selmer et al., 2022) and their characteristics are more or less ignored.

Addressing characteristics of SIEs is effective when compared to the more established group of AEs. SIEs are more often single, live on their own, women, in lower-level job positions, childless, and younger in age (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Peiperl et al., 2014; Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010; Dickmann et al., 2018). According to Alshahrani & Morley (2015), SIEs have less previous work-related but more nonwork-related international experience. Moreover, SIEs tend to have more international mobility during childhood (Alshahrani & Morley, 2015). Further, SIEs often face poorer employment situation in home-country and are more interested in internationalism (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Also, in contrast to AEs, SIEs often relocate from less developed countries to more developed countries (Peiperl et al., 2014). In addition, opposite to AEs, SIEs value the destination more while career factors are not as important (Doherty et al., 2011). Additionally, a major distinction between AEs and SIEs is that due to lack of company-backed support, assignment duration and repatriation of a SIE is often unplanned (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Moreover, SIEs tend to spend longer time in assignment (Baruch et al., 2013) and are more willing to repatriate (Andresen et al., 2015), even though lacking organizational repatriation support as well (Fontinha & Brewster, 2020; Mayrhofer et al., 2020).

While more often in less skilled or below their education or capability roles (Inkson et al., 1997), SIEs have less job satisfaction than AEs (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). In addition, SIEs see more variation in salary (Suutari & Brewster, 2000) perhaps due to more

frequent employment in public sector and as entrepreneurs than AEs who mostly work for private companies (Jokinen et al., 2008; Dickmann et al., 2018). However, SIEs are studied to be more focused and invested in their individual career path (Andersen et al., 2014; Biemann & Andresen, 2010) which may be the cause of higher motivation, willingness, and success to adjust to host-country (Fontinha & Brewster, 2020; von Borell de Araujo et al., 2014). Moreover, as SIEs have the power to choose their destination, they are often more familiar with the host-country culture and language (Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009). Thus, SIEs tend to interact, form relationships, and rely more on the locals than AEs (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013; Sargent, 2002; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013; von Borell de Araujo et al., 2014). According to von Borell de Araujo et al., (2014) SIEs also adjust more to the host-country behaviors. Furthermore, as Grabowska (2016) indicates that younger generation's attitude towards work life is different than the older generation, it is assumable that "job adjusted to life" is more efficient for expatriation adjustment than older generation and AEs' exaggerated "live to work".

Furthermore, whereas SIEs lack the opportunity for predeparture expatriation processes such as briefings and cross-cultural training, individual characteristics have an impact on the eventual cultural adjustment (Black et al., 1991; Shaffer et al., 1999). Ashamalla (1998) compiles personal attributes and capabilities multinational corporates seek from an expatriate as cultural empathy and decision making ability (Marquardt & Engel, 1993), awareness of environmental constraints (Feldman & Tompson, 1993), cross-cultural communication, interpersonal skills and ability to build personal networks (Hofstede, 1980), language proficiency, adaptability, entrepreneurial mindset, self-motivation, independency, and tolerance for ambiguity (McEnery & DesHarnais, 1990). Whereas Ashamalla (1998) addresses these as characteristics desired from an AE, Selmer et al. (2022) indicate in their overview of SIE characteristics that SIEs seem to possess beneficial personal attributes for international assignment more often or at least have a better motivational state towards pursuing adjustment.

### 2.2.2 Motives

While the motives for assigned expatriation are career advancement, compensation package, and fulfilling a job task set by a parent company (Suutari & Brewster, 2000), motives for self-initiated expatriation have been studied to focus more on aspects outside of work (Inkson et al., 1997; Madison, 2006). The motive basis that Madison (2006) depicts as “existential” is evident in multiple qualitative studies regarding self-initiated expatriation motives as phrases “seeing the world” (Inkson & Myers, 2003), “travel and get new experiences”, “follow the dream” (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018), explore the world and seek a better life (Richardson & McKenna, 2002), and adventure (Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Selmer & Luring, 2010; Doherty et al., 2011). Additionally, contrary to assigned expatriation in which repatriation is often predetermined, SIEs mention lifestyle as a motive for expatriation (Grabowska, 2016; Jackson et al., 2005). In fact, Baruch et al. (2013) note that the duration of a self-initiated expatriation tends to be longer than an assigned expatriation which supports the indication of self-initiated expatriation as a long-term choice rather than an assignment. SIEs are also more willing to take on another international assignment when one is finished (Andresen et al., 2015).

However, research supports also compounding motivations between assigned expatriation and self-initiated expatriation such as increased salary (Richardson & McKenna, 2002; Froese, 2012; Thorn et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2005; Grabowska, 2016; Thorn, 2009) and career enhancement (Froese, 2012; Doherty et al., 2011; Thorn et al., 2013; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). Still, while AEs tend to see expatriation as a tool to advance in the parent company, SIEs are studied to accept lower-level roles (Selmer et al., 2022) and appraise the international work experience as a benefit for their individual career path (Andersen et al., 2014). Further, while self-initiated expatriation research indicates that motives behind relocation are focused on off-work aspects, personal growth, and “adjusting work to life” (Grabowska, 2016), most studies still highlight international work experience important for self-initiated expatriation motive (Froese, 2012; Doherty et al., 2011; Thorn et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2005; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). However, it must be noted that SIEs are a highly heterogenous group (Vaiman et

al., 2015) and their primary motives for international assignment can vary for instance due to personality traits, economic and political situation, family, life situation, and industry specific peculiarities (Froese, 2012; Doherty et al., 2011; Thorn et al., 2013; Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Jackson et al., 2005; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Selmer & Luring, 2010). For example, in the sports industry, depending on the sport and the level, an individual may have an opportunity to practice professional sports in some country while not in their home country.

Another major theme raising in self-initiated expatriation motive research is desire to travel. In fact, travel opportunities, attraction of novel culture, and crave for challenges seem to be the preferred motive for self-initiated expatriation (Richardson & McKenna, 2002; Thorn et al., 2013; Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Jackson et al., 2005; Inkson & Myers, 2003; Selmer & Luring, 2010; Madison, 2006; Grabowska, 2016; Thorn, 2009). Moreover, SIEs are motivated by assignments in specific destinations countries (Thorn, 2009) and by the freedom to choose the destinations on their own (Al Ariss, 2010). Further, according to Doherty et al. (2011) location for expatriation is more important for SIEs than AEs. Study from Inkson & Myers (2003) worded this self-initiated expatriation motive as “love for a specific country”. They also found imitating friends going abroad as a motive basis which is most probably an arising theme due to social media, and intensifying information sharing and access. Moreover, seeking a job while traveling has become increasingly common for instance among backpackers. In addition, some studies note how a relative, a spouse, or a family can be the motive for initiating self-initiated expatriation either by joining their assignment or moving to someone in another country (Doherty et al., 2011; Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Inkson & Myers, 2003). In addition, the recent revolution of remote work has increased the phenomenon of expatriating with the motive of lifestyle change for instance to warmer countries.

### **2.3 SIEs in sports industry**

Sports is a peculiar industry involving unusual economics, societal attention, commercialization, and diversity. Moreover, sports organizations operate in a special

combination of competition and cooperation. In more detail, the sports industry is multifaceted due to the amount, effect, and diversity of stakeholders which the athlete, organization and even the sports itself must take into consideration. Whereas according to Finnish law, corporation's legal task is to make profit to shareholders (Finlex, 2006), the reality of a sports organization is more complex. Sports have diverse performance logics due to balancing between financial and athletic success (Ferri et al., 2017; Smith & Stewart, 2010). Further, the balance is disrupted by particular participation of stakeholders. Linton (2016) divides stakeholders of sports into participants (clubs, teams, coaches, players), spectators, governing bodies (leagues, associations, governments), financial stakeholders and community. In addition, media and volunteers play an important role in sports. On the other hand, an important peculiarity of stakeholders in sports is competitors. Whereas the athletic side of sports organizations strives for maximal winning, sports economics indicate that the best financial success comes with an evenest league possible. Thus, in theory, sports organizations must cooperate with competitors to maximize income.

"Learning" sports is not as dependent on conditions such as educational system or language skills as other industries. Thus, recruiting talent outside of national borders has always been an effective opportunity among sports industry, and sports organizations invest a lot on talent identification, recruitment, and development through scouting networks (Mangtani, 2021; Leite et al., 2021). In addition, due to hierarchy of sports leagues and varying tiers between countries, seeking career enhancement in sports often involves going abroad (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017). In more detail, while in many industries an individual can advance from a low-level position to numerous higher positions internally among one company, in sports the next level position is often in a league abroad. While the best athletes around the world are recruited to the major leagues, local talent that does not reach the top level seek to the next highest reachable level, which is often elsewhere due to peculiar sports economics (Rosen & Sanderson, 2001; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017). Therefore, sports have very efficient talent markets (Binder & Findlay, 2012) and more international mobility than many other industries.

Further, similarly to other industries, globalization has led to continuously increasing international labor movement in sports as well. Importantly, in 1995, the movement of noncontracted football players was liberated in the European Union by the European Court of Justice (case C-415/93) (Binder & Findlay, 2012) leading to rapid increase of sports expatriation. In season 1990/91, 9,1% of players in the five big leagues of football were foreign whereas in 2010/11 the share was 42,8% (Poli et al., 2016; Naakka, 2014). The trend has not been apparent only in big leagues as for instance the top Finnish football league had an increase of 335% of foreign players from 1990 to 2010 (Naakka, 2014). During season 2023, foreign players were on the pitch for 41,7% of the total playing minutes in Veikkausliiga (Suomen Palloliitto, 2023). Globally, the number of professional football expatriates has further increased by 19,2% from 2020 to 2024 (Poli et al., 2024). Furthermore, commercialization through the internet and especially increased tv broadcasting revenues have changed the economics, awareness, and attractiveness of international sports in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Buraimo, 2009). Although sports governors have introduced club- and league-specific restrictions to enhance opportunities for local talent (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017), sports expatriation holds an essential role in today's professional sports.

Whereas expatriation in sports is still a scant subject in research, Selmer et al. (2022) note internationalizing professional athletes as an interesting group for self-initiated expatriation research. However, studies from van Bakel & Salzbrenner (2018) and Dolles & Egilsson (2017) are still the only research on this group of SIEs. Both studies agree that athletes pursuing a career away from their home country are mostly SIEs. In more detail, while foreign working team sports athletes fulfill the key characteristics of self-initiated expatriation (McNulty & Brewster, 2017), there are some exceptions such as high-level tennis and golf players (Maguire & Falcons, 2010). Those individual sports athletes have features more of nontraditional expatriation (e.g. business travelers) due to the short amount of time spent in each country arranging tournaments. In addition, there are characteristics of assigned expatriation in top-level football clubs loaning players to

smaller clubs abroad. This study is focused on Finnish football clubs and thus, the term self-initiated expatriation is adequate as agreed by existing sports expatriate research (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017). However, it must be noted that in professional level sports, athletes are often headhunted by clubs which has been ignored by prior self-initiated sports expatriation studies.

Still, sports expatriates often match the discussed characteristics and motives of SIEs (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017). Additionally, sports expatriation contains some peculiarities and faces a more challenging environment than SIEs in other fields. First and foremost, similarly to other SIEs, sports expatriates initiate their leave without parent company support as the connection to previous organization terminates when transferred (Howe-Walch & Schyns, 2010; Doherty et al., 2013; Black et al., 1991; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018). Different to other SIEs, athletes usually seek and negotiate their job abroad through an agent (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018). However, similarly to other SIEs, due to initiating on their own, sports expatriates lack supporting networks such as IHRM especially in nonwork-related aspects (Howe-Walch & Schyns, 2010; Black et al., 1991; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018). Also, there are no compensation packages typical to AEs (Stahl & Bjorkman, 2006; Howe-Walch & Schyns, 2010). A notable aspect of team sports athletes' characteristics applying to self-initiated expatriation is that contracts are fixed- and short-term for one or few seasons but lack the purpose of repatriation to home country (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018). Moreover, research of self-initiated expatriation motives applies also to sports expatriates: ability to choose the host-country, adventure and crave for challenges (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Inkson et al., 1997; Doherty et al., 2011). However, sometimes when seeking to maximize earnings and level of play, athletes do not hold the full power to choose their destination.

Lastly, it is essential to comprehend how challenging the environment of self-initiated sports expatriates is due to peculiar participation of diverse stakeholders. Whereas due to assigned expatriation research, a slump in AE's performance during adjustment period

is expected (Black & Stephens, 1989), sports expatriates often face instant pressure and performance expectations due to high measurability and passionate involvement of spectators and media. In addition, expatriates are studied to be key contributors of organizations' success (Hung-Wen, 2007) which applies to sports where expatriates are mostly recruited to be leading athletes of a team – further highlighting their performance. Thus, whereas issues in expatriate adjustment are common, sports expatriates are in an even more vulnerable position.

## **2.4 Finland as a destination for sports expatriation**

This chapter aims to discuss Finland as a destination for expatriation through characteristics of its environment, regulation, people, and cultural identity. Again, it must be noted that sports expatriates face a particular work environment where many of the aspects may vary to other skilled labor fields. In addition, when addressing expatriation in Finland, majority of the existing material is based on assigned expatriation while self-initiated expatriation and especially sports expatriation material is scant. However, discovering the prejudices of Finnish society certainly has some truthfulness and comparing global statistics contain indicative aspects. Furthermore, as SIEs have the freedom of choosing their destination on their own (Al Ariss, 2010), it is interesting to evaluate Finland as a target country.

First and foremost, Finland is known for high scores when compared globally by fundamental measurements such as human capital index, freedom, and Gini index as well as environmental, institutional and social aspects (World Bank, n.d.). In addition, while facing crises, Finland is still comfortably on the economically richer side of countries globally. In addition, Finland has somewhat by accident been branded of having the happiest people in the world (Lahti & Seppälä, 2024). However, fascinatingly, Finland was estimated the third last of 53 countries in a survey report ranking expatriate destinations in 2024 (Expatriate Insider, 2024). More closely, Finland saw a large fall from 2023, and expatriates' happiness living in Finland dropped from 78% to 51%. The report rationalizes the poor ranking by low scores in "ease of settling in (50<sup>th</sup>)", "working in Finland (46<sup>th</sup>)", and

“personal finances (52<sup>nd</sup>)”. Moreover, indications of the report from a comprehensive expatriate survey of Expat Insider are next discussed further.

While ranking miserably overall (51<sup>st</sup>), Finland succeeded in categories of environment & climate (8<sup>th</sup>) and digital life (6<sup>th</sup>). Worth noticing is the high score on environment & climate. A closer stat shows that only 31% (globally 58%) of the respondents evaluate weather & climate in Finland favorable. Thus, whereas rough winters and unstable seasons are not in the favor of expatriates, clean air, forest- and lake-rich nature, and archipelagos are a major advantage of expatriation in Finland. Further, digital life such as stable internet connection and high technological development are appreciated.

On the other hand, in category of personal finances, Finland’s ranking (52<sup>nd</sup>) dropped 22 positions from 2023 to 2024. This is explained by high cost of living (42<sup>nd</sup>), sufficiency of household income (51<sup>st</sup>), and dissatisfaction with their financial situation (53<sup>rd</sup>). While the report does not point out the amounts of AEs and SIEs among the respondents, it is arguable to apply even higher financial challenge to SIEs who are not supported or allocated compensation packages from parent companies. Surprisingly, while the high taxation has historically been an enabler for free healthcare and education, 56% of survey respondents were unhappy with the availability of medical care in Finland. Moreover, in category of healthcare Finland was ranked 38<sup>th</sup>, dropping 21 positions from 2023.

Furthermore, while positioning in top three in 2023, Finland had huge drops in quality of life (26<sup>th</sup>), work & leisure (31<sup>st</sup>), and work culture & satisfaction (27<sup>th</sup>), which is interesting as Finland is previously described to have good work-life balance, flexible working hours, wide labor rights, equality, and strong labor unions. Moreover, Finland ranked dead last in career prospects (53<sup>rd</sup>) and only 53% (79% globally) think moving there increased their career prospects. Whereas low satisfaction on work and personal finances is quite surprising, low position in ease of settling in (50<sup>th</sup>) is presumable due to the notorious reservedness and individualistic communal attitude of the Finnish. In the survey Finland positioned as follows: local friendliness (48<sup>th</sup>), culture & welcome (51<sup>st</sup>), finding

friends (52<sup>nd</sup>). While communication with Finnish people seems to be challenging, language barrier complicates it further as 83% (40% globally) of respondents perceive the local language difficult to learn. According to Black et al. (1991), studies consistently indicate that some countries are tougher to adjust than others due to higher nonwork-related cultural distance. Based on the recent survey findings, it can be assumed that Finland is a relatively tough environment for a SIE to adjust.

When discussing sports expatriates, Finland offers relatively easy immigration policies, in football one professional level league but relatively low wages, and proper working conditions. Similarly to other industries, outside of work sports expatriates face a rough climate but clean environment and a functioning society for family (e.g. education, child-care). In addition, notable aspects of Finland regarding Hofstede's cultural dimensions are power distance and individualism. Finland scores low on power distance which is seen for instance in hierarchy at workplace (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, specifically athletes who may have been used to high power distance coaching can face confusion when adjusting into more inclusive and conversational leadership style. Further, while Finland scores relatively high in individualism, this is arguably not the case among sports teams when compared to other countries. In contrast to countries such as Italy, Finnish teams tend to emphasize team spirit and cooperation over competition among players at least in behavior (Mömmö, 2024). Thus, players coming from more "competitive" environments, may face conflicts as showing competitive behavior between teammates is not as accepted.

To understand the motives and factors affecting sports expatriation in the Finnish Veikkausliiga, there must be a discussion regarding the position of the league globally. The best athletes from around the world are recruited to the major leagues as they generate the most revenue due to best quality (Rosen & Sanderson, 2001). On the other way around, local talent which does not reach the top level, seek to the next highest level possible, which is often elsewhere. According to UEFA (2025), Veikkausliiga is ranked as the 38<sup>th</sup> best top league in Europe. Thus, when added lower divisions of larger countries,

as well as higher level leagues globally, Veikkausliiga is an extremely low-level league. However, the Finnish league still offers an opportunity to practice football professionally. Therefore, the league and its labor market are part of the sports economics globally, attracting appropriate talent from all around the world.

### **3 ADJUSTMENT OF SIEs**

In this main chapter cultural adjustment theory is first examined through defining the term. Thereafter, the three adjustment categories applied from Black et al. (1991) are introduced: general nonwork-related factors affecting adjustment, interaction-related factors affecting adjustment, and work-related factors affecting adjustment. Furthermore, challenges of SIEs are discussed. Moreover, factors affecting cultural adjustment are aggregated and categorized to individual factors affecting adjustment and post-arrival in-country factors affecting adjustment. Lastly, the theoretical part of the study is concluded by explaining the theoretical framework that serves as a base for the qualitative interviews.

#### **3.1 Cultural adjustment**

Cultural adjustment refers to the state of how an individual living in a foreign environment is comfortable, aware, and familiar with the novel aspects surrounding (Black, 1988) or commonly as “the general satisfaction with one’s life in the new environment”. As cultural adjustment is a multifaceted process, the dimensions of it have been categorized in various ways such as behaviors, cognitions, and emotions (Haslberger & Brewster, 2009) or general nonwork-, interaction-, and work-related aspects (Black et al., 1991). In this study, the categorization of Black et al. (1991) is adapted and applied for a theoretical framework. General nonwork-related factors affecting adjustment refer to an individual’s experience of, and getting used to new living conditions, interaction-related factors affecting adjustment for instance to communication with people in the new host-country, and work-related factors affecting adjustment to for example role expectations.

In literature, four stages of cultural adjustment have been introduced already in the 1950s: honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and adaptation. The process is described and figured as U-curve of adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960). Further, Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963) expanded the model to W-curve theory adding the adjustment process of repatriation. Whereas expatriates may arguably follow the U-curve model of

adjustment to some extent, the most decisive phase is culture shock. Culture shock is described as the reaction to the combination of all novel factors an expatriate is surrounded by in the new environment. The culture shock of a new, uncertain, and unpredictable environment can result in anxiety, surprise, confusion, hurt, rejection, nervousness, and feeling of powerlessness (Adler, 1975; Oberg, 1960). The depth of culture shock is individual but one of the leading causes of expatriation issues and premature return from expatriation (Tarique & Caligiuri, 2004).

In research, cultural adjustment is sometimes mixed with cultural adaptation. However, the difference is that adjustment refers to short-term acclimation whereas adaptation refers to long-term integration into a new country (Lysgaard, 1955). Thus, as self-initiated sports expatriation rarely targets long-term integration, but usually strives for eventual move to bigger leagues in other countries, the term cultural adjustment is adopted in this study. More closely, as this study discusses sports expatriation in the context of Finland, due to the low level of the league, it is arguable to assume that athletes desire a move to bigger leagues as fast as possible. Interestingly, there has been lots of discussion in sports over the so-called “second season syndrome” where athletes’ on-field performance “inexplicably” mirrors the U-curve chart of cultural adjustment referred in expatriate research (Griffin & Pustay, 2013). Still, little is addressed about this resemblance and influence of honeymoon, culture shock, acculturation, and stability existing also in sports and specifically sports expatriation. Furthermore, as sports contracts and careers are short, and on-job performance expected instantly, reducing culture shock is crucial for sports expatriates to even reach the adjustment phase.

While cultural adjustment as an important factor for expatriation has been established in assigned expatriation research, Agha-Alikhani (2017) among others note that self-initiated expatriation research on the topic is lacking. For instance, whereas assigned expatriation studies highlight anticipatory adjustment as a crucial factor for eventual cultural adjustment during expatriation (Black et al., 1991; Black & Mendenhall, 1990), self-initiated expatriation process is different. While AEs are carefully selected and cross-

culturally trained predeparture, SIEs' assignment is often more sudden and less prepared. Thus, SIEs' culture shock is arguably more profound due to less preparation and anticipatory organizational support. However, as mentioned, perhaps due to the higher individual responsibility, SIEs tend to be more personally invested in the adjustment and thus succeed in it better outside of work (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013; Sargent, 2002; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013; von Borell de Araujo et al., 2014). Further, while SIEs are described to have the power of choosing their destination and hence, being more familiar with the host-country (Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009), this may not always be the case for sports expatriates. In order to maximize earnings, level of play, and career prospects, many athletes have only a few destinations to "choose" from. Thus, the athlete may lose the self-initiated expatriation characteristic of freedom to choose their destination, as well as the advantage of being familiar with or interested in the destination, and thereafter enthusiasm to adjust. All in all, cultural adjustment research is lacking regarding SIEs and specifically sports expatriates.

Lastly, according to Kraimer et al. (2001), cultural adjustment has a direct impact on expatriate's job performance. More closely, an old work from Tung (1982) found adjustment of an AE or the AE's spouse to the host-country work and environment the most significant reason for expatriation failure. While a lot has changed in forty years, it is reasonable to assume adjustment as the priority aspect of successful expatriation. Further, as studies have found a slump in expatriates' work performance during the adjustment period (Black & Stephens, 1991), it is in both employers' and employees' interests to understand the factors affecting expatriate's adjustment and create necessary support mechanism to enhance the adjustment of SIEs.

### **3.1.1 General nonwork-related factors affecting adjustment**

When examining facets of international cultural adjustment, many scholars refer to the work of Black et al. (1991). They divide cultural adjustment of expatriates to general nonwork-related, interaction-related, and work-related adjustment. General nonwork-related adjustment is impacted by the new environment, cultural distance, and

adjustment of the expatriate's spouse and family. In other words, adjustment is impacted by for instance new climate, environment, living and housing conditions, food, economic situation, quality of life, leisure opportunities, and local culture (Black & Stephens, 1989). These factors have been described as cultural novelty (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985) or more often as cultural distance (Church, 1982). According to Church (1982), the more distant or different the host-country culture is from the expatriate's, the more difficult it is to adjust. Additionally, Black et al. (1991) add that some countries seem to be tougher to adapt to than others. Further, Torbiörn (1982) noted that cultural novelty or cultural distance has its most impact during the first two years of an international assignment, decreasing thereafter.

Interestingly, based on the expatriate survey discussed in chapter 2.4, Finland tends to be extremely difficult destination for adjustment. However, the most negatively impacting factors of adjusting to Finland are interaction-related and work-related. In general nonwork-related adjustment factors such as quality of life and environment, Finland ranked roughly average. Furthermore, Black et al. (1991) among others emphasize adjustment of spouse and family as an important factor of general adjustment during expatriation. Whereas SIEs are more often single and childless than AEs (Suutari & Brewster, 2000), this aspect can be expanded to their relationship management overall. Although not having relatives aboard abroad, support from family and friends in home-country is a factor affecting expatriate's general adjustment, especially as there is no IHRM support. More closely, van Bakel & Salzbrenner (2018) found staying in touch, homesickness, and social isolation impacting SIEs' general nonwork-related adjustment. Importantly, as the general adjustment category contains diverse and continuously evolving set of factors, research is not complete. Thus, the empiric part of this study aims to explore this category further specifically regarding unique features of Finland as a destination.

### **3.1.2 Interaction-related factors affecting adjustment**

The second facet of cultural adjustment is interaction-related adjustment (Black et al., 1991). Specifically, for SIEs who lack parent company-backed organizational support,

interaction-related adjustment to host-country nationals is crucial. These aspects are for instance interaction with the locals, cross-cultural communication skills, language barriers, networking, handling mandatory host-country legalities, and finding friends. According to the expatriate survey discussed in chapter 2.4, interaction-related adjustment is the most difficult aspect of expatriates' adjustment in Finland. Out of the 53 countries, Finland is ranked in bottom positions for instance in categories of "culture and welcome", "local friendliness", "ease of settling in", "finding friends", "language barrier", and difficulty of learning the local language.

Moreover, discussing sports expatriates, another factor regarding interaction-related adjustment is that they tend to work on evenings and weekends which makes social adjustment harder (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; van Bakel et al., 2016). Also, as sports expatriates are often recruited particularly young (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018) and as the job does not require for instance university education, athletes' language skills are arguably lacking. On the other hand, sports expatriates in team sports arguably spend more time with teammates outside of work than expatriates in other fields. In addition, sports expatriates face unusual factors regarding interaction with the locals. For instance, athletes are often recognized in public and can even be local celebrities, making interaction with new people peculiar. Further, especially in Finnish football context, expatriates aim for a move to bigger leagues as soon as possible. Hence, due to career uncertainty and lack of long-term planning, enthusiasm for instance to learn local language can be low.

### **3.1.3 Work-related factors affecting adjustment**

The third facet of cultural adjustment is work-related adjustment (Black et al., 1991). Again, without the support of parent company IHRM, SIEs are more vulnerable for workplace adjustment challenges regarding performance expectations, job clarity, different work culture, hierarchy and feedback, and leadership style. Black et al. (1991) concluded work-related factors affecting adjustment in particular as role ambiguity, role conflict, and role novelty. In addition, especially older literature seems to ignore the aspect of job

satisfaction as a factor for adjustment. On the other hand, more recent studies do emphasize it especially noting that SIEs tend to be less satisfied on their job than AEs (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). This may be explained by SIEs undertaking more often lower-level positions (Inkson et al., 1997) and having more variation in salary (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Still, as the younger generation is described to have a different attitude towards work life (Grabowska, 2016), job satisfaction is assumably a rising theme in adjustment of expatriates.

Regarding self-initiated sports expatriates, work-related adjustment plays a crucial role. Whereas other SIEs are studied to be more encouraged by nonwork motives (Madison, 2006), athletes are arguably more enthusiastic and motivated by career enhancement when relocating, due to hierarchy of sports leagues and thus less freedom to choose their destination. Therefore, success of self-initiated sports expatriation is defined more by work-related adjustment and on-job performance. While facing the same adjustment factors as other SIEs, sports expatriates are affected by industry-specific aspects such as pressure from fans and media, and instant highly measurable performance expectations (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; Dolles & Söderman, 2013). Further, athletes must communicate more rapidly and in more stressful situations. In addition, athletes must adjust to different coaching and sports tactics they have been used to (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017). Moreover, while mentally adjusting, sports expatriates are often also physically burdened and expected to adjust to new physical training and expectations. In fact, many players have described a higher physical and competitive environment as a shocking factor when relocating to higher level abroad (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; Mömmö, 2024).

### **3.2 Adjustment challenges of SIEs**

In order to understand the factors affecting adjustment of sports SIEs, their challenges predeparture, post-arrival, and during the assignment need to be briefly discussed. Ashamalla (1998) points out a primal challenge for expatriation: suitability and recruitment of an expatriate. He emphasizes how challenging it is even for professional IHRM

personnel to select a suitable candidate from a large corporation for traditional assigned expatriation. Thus, it is arguable that the suitability of SIEs is more often inappropriate, resulting in challenges before, during, and after expatriation. In addition, unsuccessful adjustment process of spouse and family seems to be one of the leading reasons for expatriation failure (Black, 1988). Therefore, the primal challenge of suitability of an individual for expatriation extends also to them.

Further, research on assigned expatriation suggests that predeparture preparation and training have a positive impact for expatriation success (McDonald, 1993). Hence, multinational corporations often have processes of briefing, cross-cultural training, and language training before the departure of an AE. On the other hand, SIEs lack pre-departure organizational support (Howe-Walch & Schyns, 2010; Black et al., 1991; van Bakel & Salzbranner, 2018). When addressing pre-assignment challenges of expatriates, opposite to AEs, SIEs must in the first place seek and apply for a job. While the internet and for instance online job markets have enabled easier and more effective job seeking, differences in job requirements and accreditation of education acquired in other countries complicate SIEs getting employed. In fact, in contrast to AEs, SIEs sometimes relocate prior to employment hoping for a better chance to land a job when already present in the host country (Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

Thereafter, when relocating to another country for work, all expatriates face legal and financial challenges (Palander, 2019). Legal challenges include navigating visa and work permits, and country-specific immigration bureaucracy. Financial challenges involve dealing with both host-country and home-country tax compliance as well as funding the relocation. While the relocation of AEs is supported by their parent company financially and by work force, SIEs face a significant financial challenge both directly of the move, and indirectly by needing external support for instance for legal instruction and finding housing. More closely, lack of support network for errands outside of work when relocating is a major distinction between AEs and SIEs (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014), causing SIEs troubles.

Moreover, challenges of expatriation during the assignment are adjusting to the new environment, job, and host-country culture. Ashamalla (1998) notes that support during expatriation assignment is crucial for psychological sustenance and job performance. Again, while multinational corporations have developed IHRM processes for supporting AEs throughout the assignment, SIEs are often responsible for their adjustment on their own. However, perhaps due to the responsibility SIEs tend to be more personally invested in the adjustment and thus succeed in it better outside of work (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013; Sargent, 2002; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013; von Borell de Araujo et al., 2014). On the other hand, IHRM's support for AEs regarding job matters is surely impactful when examining the previously discussed difference of job satisfaction (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). Further, without the support of a home-country HRM, SIEs face the workplace challenges of different work culture, role clarity, feedback style, hierarchy, performance expectations, and leadership style more on their own. In more detail, while management practices are mostly standardized for both expatriates and regular employees, SIEs are not as aware of them as briefed AEs and domestic employees (Tahvanainen, 2000).

In addition, while many studies of expatriation focus on work-related aspects and cultural adjustment to new host-country conditions, some research emphasize the interaction back to home-country. Especially for SIEs, who are more often single (Suutari & Brewster, 2000) and relocate alone, distance to home seems to cause challenges during the assignment. In their study, van Bakel & Salzbrenner (2018) stated these challenges as staying in touch, homesickness, and social isolation and found them quite crucial. Moreover, while the duration of self-initiated expatriation is often not predetermined (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010), career uncertainty and lack of long-term planning and repatriation can cause challenges, and thus homesickness. Furthermore, whereas SIEs often "romanticize" working abroad perhaps based on previous international experiences such as traveling, exchange studies, or nowadays social media, the reality can be more challenging. Thus, managing expectations is a factor influencing expatriates'

cognition when relocating. More closely, when discussing the sports industry, self-initiated expatriation motives such as “following the dream” are arguably strong due to the money, fame, and reputation evident at the top level of sports. However, SIEs in sports must manage their expectations as the conditions of the sports industry in the host country may not be what they have been used to or what they expect (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017).

Furthermore, sports expatriates face more challenges than other SIEs as they are often even younger and recruited even underaged (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018) as sports ability is not reliant on for instance university education or work experience. Thus, sports expatriates are arguably less prepared regarding language competence, life skills, and cross-cultural communication skills. Further, peculiar challenges of sports expatriates are short career, physical requirements, risk of career-ending injury, and constant pressure of performing which emphasizes even more due to short-term contracts in sports (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Agergaard & Tiesler, 2014). Another peculiar aspect of sports expatriates is that they tend to work on evenings and weekends which makes social adjustment harder (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; van Bakel et al., 2016). Moreover, team sports contain a unique setup where players are simultaneously competing for the limited spots in the team and cooperating to win together (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017). In addition, similarly to varying business management and strategy approaches around the world, sports expatriates face the challenge of adjusting to different coaching and sports tactics they have been used to (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017). Furthermore, many football expatriates have reported the challenge of adjusting to different physical and mental requirements of on-job training when relocating to higher level leagues abroad (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; Mömmö, 2024).

### **3.3 Theoretical framework of the study**

Expatriate is an individual living and working abroad for a decent time (McNulty & Brewster, 2017; Aycan & Kanungo, 1997; Harrison et al., 2004). Whereas traditional AEs are

initiated, set objectives and funded by a parent company, SIEs seek a job, fund the leave, plan, and manage their career individually (Inkson et al., 1997). While prior research has identified varying subgroups of SIEs, their common characteristic is the initiation of expatriation on their own (Selmer et al., 2022). Further, the few existing studies have established sports expatriates as SIEs (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017) and therefore, this study is built upon that.

Cultural adjustment is an individual process of which time needed, and depth varies and is impacted by both internal and external factors (Black et al., 1991). Timeline wise, Black et al. (1991) and Shaffer et al. (1999) among others divide factors explaining adjustment to predeparture factors such as training, organizational selection mechanism, and previous experience, and to after arrival in-country factors such as job factors, organizational factors, positional factors, non-work factors, and individual factors. However, most of the adjustment research has focused on AEs, whereas for SIEs, predeparture training or advantages of organizational selection process are often not options. On the other hand, previous experience, and individual characteristics such as language proficiency and cross-cultural skills are factors in SIEs' adjustment process (Black et al., 1991; Shaffer et al., 1999).

Thus, when exploring factors affecting adjustment of self-initiated sports expatriates in this study, predeparture factors are taken into consideration by analyzing whether and how individual factors such as attributes, capabilities, motives and previous experience impact on adjustment of sports SIEs. The individual factors based on literature are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Individual factors affecting adjustment of SIEs**

Age	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018)
Family situation	(Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Peiperl et al., 2014)
Prior international work-related experience	(Jokinen et al., 2008; Alshahrani & Morley, 2015)
Prior international nonwork-related experience	(Alshahrani & Morley, 2015)
International mobility during childhood	(Alshahrani & Morley, 2015)
Language proficiency	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017)
Initiation and support	(Inkson et al., 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000)
Motivation/willingness to adjust	(Fontinha & Brewster, 2020)
Power/freedom to choose destination	(Al Ariss, 2010)
Familiarity with host-country culture	(Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009; Inkson & Myers, 2003)
Familiarity with host-country language	(Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009; Inkson & Myers, 2003)
Familiarity with host-country environment	(Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009; Inkson & Myers, 2003)
Willingness to interact and form relationships with locals	(Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013, Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009)
Willingness to adjust to host-country behaviors	(von Borell de Araujo et al., 2014)
Motive and motivational state for expatriation	(Madison, 2006)
Cultural empathy	(Marquardt & Engel, 1993)
Decision-making ability	(Marquardt & Engel, 1993)
Awareness of environmental constraints	(Feldman & Tompson, 1993)
Cross-cultural communication skills	(Hofstede, 1980)
Interpersonal skills	(Hofstede, 1980)
Ability to build personal networks	(Hofstede, 1980)
Adaptability	(McEneary & DesHarnais, 1990)
Self-motivation	(McEneary & DesHarnais, 1990)
Independency	(McEneary & DesHarnais, 1990)
Tolerance for ambiguity	(McEneary & DesHarnais, 1990)
Confidence/self-believe	(Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)

Lastly and importantly, the factors affecting adjustment of sports expatriates in Finland post-arrival and during the expatriation assignment are grouped to general nonwork-related factors affecting adjustment, interaction-related factors affecting adjustment,

and work-related factors affecting adjustment by applying the categorization of Black et al. (1991). The factors from literature are categorized and listed in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

**Table 2. General nonwork-related factors affecting adjustment of SIEs**

Personal financial situation	(Black & Stephens, 1989; Expat Insider, 2024)
Cost of living	(Black & Stephens, 1989; Expat Insider, 2024)
Quality of life	(Black & Stephens, 1989; Expat Insider, 2024)
Local culture	(Black & Stephens, 1989; Expat Insider, 2024)
Ease of settling in	(Expat Insider, 2024)
Environment	(Black & Stephens, 1989; Expat Insider, 2024)
Weather & climate	(Black & Stephens, 1989; Expat Insider, 2024)
Leisure opportunities	(Black & Stephens, 1989; Expat Insider, 2024)
Staying in touch with people at home	(van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018)
Homesickness	(van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018)
Social isolation	(van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018)
Housing conditions	(van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Black & Stephens, 1989)
Different food	(van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Black & Stephens, 1989)
Working during evenings and weekends	(van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018)
Adjustment of spouse and children	(van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018)
Mandatory legalities	(Palander, 2019)

**Table 3. Interaction-related factors affecting adjustment of SIEs**

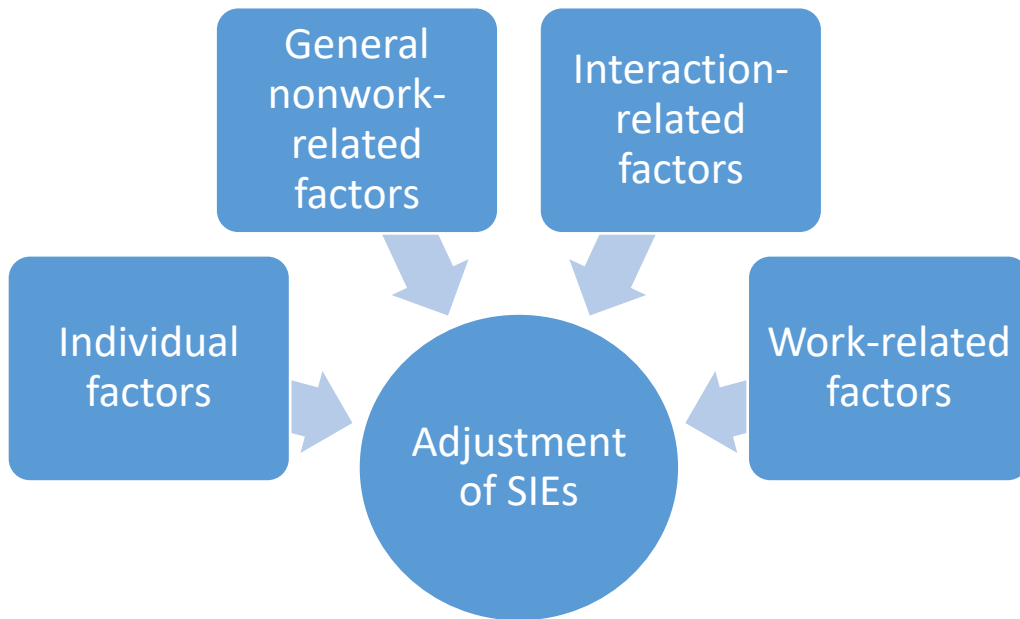
Language barrier	(Expat Insider, 2024)
Difficulty of learning local language	(Expat Insider, 2024)
Communication with locals	(Expat Insider, 2024)
Local friendliness	(Expat Insider, 2024)
Finding friends	(Expat Insider, 2024)

**Table 4. Work-related factors affecting adjustment of SIEs**

Coaching style	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Communication with managers	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Communication with teammates	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Communication with fans and media	(van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018)
Different style of play/sports tactics	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Level of play	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Role ambiguity	(Black et al., 1991)
Adequate performance expectations	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Job facilities	(van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018)
Job satisfaction	(Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013)
Job position in relation to capabilities	(Inkson et al., 1997; Selmer et al., 2022)
Physical training	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Physical expectations	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Competition among team	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Support from host-organization	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017)
Support from teammates	(Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Managing expectations	(Egilsson & Dolles, 2017)
Constant pressure to perform	(Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018)

To conclude the theoretical framework of the thesis, factors affecting SIEs' cultural adjustment are individual factors and post-arrival factors. In this study, the post-arrival factors affecting adjustment are grouped to general nonwork-related factors affecting adjustment, interaction-related factors affecting adjustment, and work-related factors affecting adjustment from the applied categorization from Black et al. (1991). This framework is used when collecting and analyzing the data as well as in the findings chapter. The framework is visually presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the study**



## 4 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter the methodology of the study is presented. First, the research design is discussed through philosophical considerations, research purpose, research strategy, research approach, and time horizon. Further, the sampling of the study is displayed, data collection process explained, and data analysis demonstrated. Further, ethical considerations are reviewed. Lastly, reliability and validity of the study are discussed.

### 4.1 Research design

**Research philosophy** refers to the belief system and view of the world a scholar reviews when collecting and analyzing data, and presenting results (Saunders et al., 2023). In more detail, what is subjective or objective (ontology), what is accurate knowledge and how it is acquired (epistemology), and how beliefs, values, ethics, norms, and biases influence a research process (axiology). Based on these branches of philosophy, research can apply a philosophical stance of positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism, or pragmatism. As the topic studied, factors affecting adjustment, contain a lot of subjective variables such as personal opinions, perceptions, and sentiment, an interpretivism philosophy was applied. More closely, rather than aiming toward generalization as typical to positivism, this study regarded that for instance a sample athlete from Africa perceived many internal and external factors affecting their adjustment differently than a sample athlete from a country with closer cultural distance to Finland.

**Research purpose** aims to portray why a study is conducted. According to Saunders et al. (2023), research purposes can be exploratory, explanatory, descriptive, evaluative, or a combination. Usually, the main difference between these is what kind of research questions are answered. For instance, a research question of an exploratory study often begins with “what” whereas the research question of an explanatory study with “how” or “why”. The concepts of this study, self-initiated sports expatriates and adjustment, are together a relatively unexplored topic specifically in the context of Finland. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to offer explanatory findings on how different factors

impact the adjustment of football expatriates. However, studies can include multiple purposes (Saunders et al., 2023). The discussion chapter of the study aimed to highlight which adjustment factors have the most impact on adjustment and thus, some evaluative purpose was included as well.

**Research strategies**, or methodological choices, are labeled as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (Saunders et al., 2023). Qualitative data collection includes for instance interviews or participant observation whereas quantitative data collection for instance questionnaires or secondary data analysis. Mixed methods strategy combines both qualitative and quantitative methods in one study. Different research strategies have their strengths and weaknesses. A qualitative method is flexible and can provide more in-depth understanding whereas it includes subjectivity and has limited generalizability. A quantitative method is efficient and can offer more objective findings and the possibility of statistical analysis whereas it lacks flexibility, depth, and is vulnerable to misinterpretation and bias. This study was conducted with a qualitative semi-structured interview strategy. The choice of semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer to diverge from the interview guide and go in more detail when a novel topic was raised by the interviewees.

**Research approach** refers to how a study takes into consideration existing theories during the data collection and data analysis process. The common approaches are inductive, deductive, and abductive (Saunders et al., 2023). Inductive approach dismisses prior theory and analyses findings from a plank page. On the contrary, deductive approach starts from the theory and aims to support or reject the theory based on the data. Abductive approach is a mix of both inductive and deductive and used when studying a phenomenon via incomplete or unexplained theory. In this study, an abductive approach was applied in order to reveal novel or unique factors but also incorporating prior knowledge about cultural adjustment from other fields. More closely, factors affecting adjustment of football expatriates were categorized based on applying the work of Black et al. (1991), but the theory was incomplete in the context as sports expatriation research is scant.

Thus, the interviews started with an inductive approach for the purpose of generating novel insights and proceeded to a deductive approach in order to connect, support, or contest the findings from literature to the sports industry and to the interviewees' experiences.

Research can contain two types of **time horizon**: cross-sectional or longitudinal (Saunders et al., 2023). Cross-sectional research studies a topic or a phenomenon at a particular time whereas longitudinal research incorporates the dimension of time as for instance executing the same questionnaire yearly to picture the change. Although a longitudinal study would be an optimal option for studying self-initiated expatriation and specifically their adjustment, this thesis was conducted as a cross-sectional study.

## 4.2 Sampling and data collection

As the purpose of this thesis was not to make statistical inferences, a non-probability sampling was appropriate (Saunders et al., 2023). Moreover, as there were little suitable sample candidates to interview in person, the sampling procedure naturally led to haphazard sampling, and in more detail, convenience sampling. More closely, out of the eight conveniently available sample candidates, the first six that were contacted agreed to participate.

Thus, **the sample of this study** consists of six professional football expatriates that have stayed in Finland after playing at least one season. It must be noted that due to continuing their careers in Finland, it is assumable that their expatriation and adjustment has been to some extent successful. On the contrary, due to high measurability of sports, expatriates who fail to fulfill expectations or adjust are quickly transferred to other leagues. Hence, the results of this study may have been somewhat skewed in favor of "positive experiences". The sample size of this study was adequate, though limited, for a qualitative study. However, football expatriation contains professionals from all around the world and thus the sample did not reach full representativeness. However, the

interviewees were from three different continents, which turned out to offer a good number of varying perceptions.

The interviewees of the study were different ages, nationalities, and had spent various time as sports expatriates and in Finland. The different time spent in sports expatriation in Finland could have affected the perception of the interviewees' cultural adjustment. In more detail, interviewees were in different points of the cultural adjustment U-curve theory (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960) and thus, interpreting their impressions may be biased. In addition, while interviewees from diverse cultural backgrounds created versatile views and perceptions, their way of communication and cross-cultural beliefs could have affected the comparison of the empirical results. Moreover, in some interviews it was clear that the interviewees were very polite and hesitant to express possible negative aspects frankly. The sample consisted of only men as women's football leagues in Finland do not hold many fully professional athletes. A closer look at the sample demography is displayed in Table 5.

**Table 5. Sample description**

Code	Nationality	Age	English proficiency	Family situation	Seasons played in Finland (Seasons abroad in total)	Motive for expatriation in Finland	Familiarity with Finland before relocation
A	Ghanaian	25	Good	Local partner, family in home country	3 (4)	Career oriented. No opportunity to play professionally in home country. Also "life is easier in Finland".	Only cold weather
B	Australian	21	Native	Partner and family in home country	1 (1)	Career oriented. First professional contract. "To do what I have always dreamed of". Also "life experience".	Cold weather and had discussed with a prior Australian player about the club.
C	English	27	Native	Brother living in another city of Finland, rest of family in home country	3 (4)	Career oriented. Would have finished his football career without taking the next step abroad.	Only cold weather
D	Senegalese	30	Bad	Wife and a child living in Finland	2 (12)	Career oriented. "A step towards bigger leagues".	Cold weather and had discussed with a friend playing in Finland.
E	Danish	22	Good	Local partner, family in home country	1 (4)	Career oriented. "To Prove myself as a footballer and earn a move to bigger leagues".	"Not much" but arguably more familiar than others due to close geographical distance.
F	English	22	Native	Family in home country	1 (1)	Career oriented. First professional contract. Also "interesting life experience".	Cold weather and had visited for one week for a trial.

**Data collection** of this study was executed via six semi-structured one-to-one face-to-face interviews. The sample individuals for the interviews were contacted first through an assistant coach and a media officer of a Veikkausliiga club via phone. Thereafter, the sample individuals were approached in-person in order to ask for willingness to

participate. All six contacted sample individuals agreed for an interview. Further, some interviews were agreed in-person, some via WhatsApp. The interviewees were informed about an approximate time needed and were proposed a timing and a location for the interviews to be held. The interviews were held in span of eleven days, each on a different day to allow the interviewer the best possible focus, and the interviewees the best possible timing. All interviews were held in-person and in English as it was the common language between the interviewer and the interviewees. However, to reduce the constraints of language barrier, all interviewees were encouraged to utilize translator and internet whenever needed. All interviews were audio-recorded to create interview transcripts for coding. Moreover, all interviewees signed a consent form agreeing with the audio recording, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

The interviews were held in March 2025, and the interview lengths varied from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 40 minutes. More closely, the first five interviews lasted 50-65 minutes whereas the last interview lasted 1 hour and 40 minutes. In fact, the last interview was exceptional and dived a lot deeper than the first five. In addition, the last interviewee confirmed by his own words aspects that were underlying between the lines during the other interviews. Further, after the expatriate interviews, an assistant coach of a club was briefly interviewed to offer a different perspective. The interviews were structured based on the theoretical framework of this study by discussing the themes of individual factors, general nonwork-related factors, interaction-related factors, and work-related factors separately in that order. The interview guide for the semi-structured interviews is attached to appendix 1.

### **4.3 Data analysis**

Next, **data analysis** of the qualitative raw data is discussed. The qualitative interview transcripts were thematically analyzed with an abductive approach combining both inductive approach to spot novel factors affecting adjustment, as well as deductive approach to group the risen themes into the theoretical framework categorization. In more detail, the interviews were transcribed into writing using Microsoft Teams AI transcribing

tool. In addition, the interviewer made notes throughout the interviews to highlight the most important topics. Thereafter the 145 pages of raw data were cleaned from spelling errors, filler words, and irrelevant discussion. Further, all interview transcripts were coded by highlighting themes relevant to the research objectives. Specifically themes that were unique for sports industry or Finland as a destination were emphasized. Furthermore, some particularly descriptive phrases were copied to another document for further quotation in the findings chapter. Thereafter, the transcripts were compared and combined into a single document based on risen themes and analyzed by the frequency and emphasis of each theme. Finally, the findings were presented and discussed in chapters 5 and 6. More closely, in chapter 5, the findings from each interview were presented separately in order to highlight the differences and similarities. Further, in chapter 6, the findings were concluded thematically and analyzed in more detail.

#### **4.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethics refers to moral principles, rules and norms regarding what is wrong or right. In research, multiple institutions have conducted code of ethics guidelines. Ethical considerations review how a researcher acknowledged and acted by these principles throughout the study. Saunders et al. (2023) list ethical principles as integrity, fairness, and open-mindedness of the researcher, avoidance of harm and respect for others, privacy, voluntariness, consent, and right to withdraw of the participants, and confidentiality, anonymity, and responsibility regarding data management.

First and foremost, the process of this thesis was supervised and regularly guided by an experienced scholar. Further, the topic and research objectives are in no way harmful, disrespectful, or negative towards anyone or anything. Moreover, the researcher strived for utmost respect towards the participants in all parts of the study. More closely, the participants were voluntarily involved, informed about their rights to for example withdraw or refuse to answer any question for any reason, and communicated with respectful cross-cultural communication. The participants were informed about objectives of the study and usage of data, and terminology of the study was explained allowing the

participants a full understanding of their contribution. Collected data was saved only for the researcher, and was deleted after the study was completed. On the other hand, the researcher is unexperienced and familiar with the sports industry in Finland. Thus, there were subconscious prejudices regarding the topic that may have influenced interpretation of the results and open-mindedness during the research process.

#### **4.5 Reliability and validity**

Reliability refers to the repeatability of the study and consistency of used research design. It measures how well another study in similar conditions with same design would produce similar results (Saunders et al., 2023). First and foremost, this study used a qualitative strategy with interpretivism philosophical stance. Thus, the collected data and data analysis leaned on subjective perspectives and experiences that are in the first place vulnerable to bias of reliability, at least when compared to a quantitative research strategy. To strengthen the reliability of this study, a standardized semi-structured interview guide was used in all interviews to enable consistency and comparable data. Further, the theoretical framework used, data collection, and data analysis were described as detailed as possible. In that sense, another study would create similar results making this study reliable.

However, it must be noted that the sample used was diverse but non-representative of the large amount of football expatriate nationalities in Finland. Different samples or context studied would most probably create different results due to different backgrounds of expatriates, and varying conditions of football clubs. Further, a limitation for the reliability of this study was using English as the language for the interviews. While English was not the first language of the interviewer and three of the interviewees, all participants were encouraged to exploit a translator or the internet in any matter to reduce the language barrier constraint. Moreover, Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009) note that an important aspect for a reliable study is to have adequate time for the process. As a thesis work, this study was conducted in five months and would have benefitted from a prolonged time.

Validity refers to the appropriateness of used research design. It measures if the used design, concepts, theoretical framework, and analysis accurately describes what is aimed and meant to (Saunders et al., 2023). The chosen research design was adequate in relation to the objectives of this study. The concepts of cultural adjustment and sports expatriation are unexplored specifically in the context of Finland and thus, it was appropriate to explore them through qualitative strategy. Moreover, an abductive approach was adequately chosen to combine novel findings with prior knowledge of cultural adjustment from other fields. Further, the interview guide was structured based on the theoretical framework supporting the construct validity of the study. However, due to the lack of studies on the peculiarities of sports industry, the theoretical framework of the study was somewhat unfinished. To strengthen the validity of this study, a pilot interview with a foreign amateur ice hockey player was conducted. Based on that, the interview question formulation and structure were slightly modified to support the study objectives better. In addition, although the interviewer was unexperienced, every interview enabled development and a more successful process towards the later interviews.

## 5 FINDINGS

In this chapter, findings from the qualitative semi-structured interviews are presented in the same order as the categorization is discussed in the theoretical framework. Further, findings are presented in order by each sample interviewee to highlight the differences and similarities of their perceptions. Findings are further thematically analyzed and discussed in chapter 6.

### 5.1 Individual factors affecting adjustment

Sample interviewee A is shy, calm, mentally strong, and adaptable. When discussing willingness to adjust to Finland, he mentioned that he is willing to adapt but wants to keep a balance between Finnish and his own culture and habits. He described that the most impactful individual factors to his adjustment are the attributes of being positive, adaptable and mentally strong. In addition, while he is faced with a long distance to his family, he thought that a supporting family makes his life in Finland easier. Moreover, he detailed that for some African athletes in Europe the distance can be a burden as they may be expected and asked to support their family back home financially.

*“I am a very positive and mentally strong person, and I am able to adjust anywhere I go. I am very good at adapting... I have adjusted so good into the system because I am mentally strong and I have never complained about anything because I do not expect anything from anyone... I have a supporting family who believe in me and always checks up on me and that motivates me. Some families of other players always call demanding money and stuff. My family understands my situation which is positive for my life here.”*

Sample interviewee B is outgoing, independent, mostly self-confident, motivated, mentally strong, positive, disciplined, and curious. As an Australian, his time difference to home is the worst possible which makes it difficult to be in contact with close ones affecting adjustment negatively. He is willing to get to know Finnish culture and told for

instance that he has started going to sauna. He described that the most impactful factors to his adjustment are staying positive and being mentally strong. In addition, his attributes of being independent, disciplined, and self-motivated help his life in Finland. Further, he has a good ability to build personal networks that he said is crucial as he receives help when needed. Moreover, for him a long distance to home is sometimes difficult as in addition to the time difference complicating staying in touch, he knows that there are several months until the opportunity to travel back home again.

Sample interviewee C is stubborn, nonchalant, “keeping to himself”, independent, confident in his abilities, and motivated to get further in career. Additionally, he has good interpersonal skills. During free time he spends a lot of time at home and described that he is “good alone”. He described that the most impactful individual factors to his adjustment are being independent, having good interpersonal skills, and being motivated to get further in career. Specifically, being independent and “good alone” was discussed multiple times during the interview as supporting factors for his adjustment. He also described that due to that, distance to home is not affecting his adjustment.

*“Family situation does not really affect me. I am happy alone, I do not get homesick, I have been away from home since I was 16 years old. I do not really need anyone.”*

Sample interviewee D has had a lot of international experience through football and has played in multiple European countries. He is independent, family oriented, determined, confident, self-motivated, and has good interpersonal skills. When discussing willingness to adopt Finnish culture, he described that he has mostly kept his own values and habits and underlined his religiousness. He described that the most impactful individual factors to his adjustment are having a lot of prior international experience and having his family with him in Finland. He mentioned that the first time he relocated to Europe, the cultural difference was a shocking factor but now with experience he feels no difficulty in adjusting to new cultures.

*“My first experience in Europe was difficult. The weather, the language, the culture was difficult. But now, everywhere I go it is easy to adjust... When I have my family here, there is a big difference compared to when they are at home.”*

In addition, as in many of the interviews, independency, self-motivation, determination, confidence, and interpersonal skills were discussed as traits of the interviewee D and as positive factors for adjustment. During interviews of the African interviewees A and D, it was quite evident that they were at times polite and hesitant to go into factors that affect adjustment negatively. While due to long cultural distance there must be some negatively affecting factors, these individuals seem to overcome those by staying positive, having “no expectations”, and having an attitude of “not complaining”.

Sample interviewee E is hard-working, demanding, leader, independent, determined, self-confident, motivated, and has the ability to build personal networks. When discussing about willingness to adopt Finnish culture, he mentioned that it is “pretty much the same as back home”, and that there is not much to adopt. He described that the most impactful individual factors to his adjustment are prior experience and ability to build personal networks as via those he now can and has the courage to ask for help when needed. In addition, he mentioned that a young age and life situation are helping his adjustment positively because he receives support from his family and can focus on building his football career. On the other hand, although being from a closer geographical distance than other interviewees, distance to home is sometimes difficult due to being away from family, familiar habits, and little opportunity to travel back home during the season. Moreover, again during this interview it was clear that attributes such as independency, determination, confidence, and self-motivation are positively affecting factors to adjustment. In fact, all interviewees moved away from home at a particularly young age to live and play in academies and thus seem independent although still young.

*“I think I learned very young how to adjust to a new system, to new people, to like just to ask. When you come as a new, you are a little bit afraid to ask people how to do this or what is this? Now, I just do not care. I will ask about everything.”*

Sample interviewee F is outgoing, social, disciplined, hard-working, curious, and has excellent interpersonal skills. When discussing willingness to adopt Finnish culture, he described that at the beginning he actively tried to “throw himself out there” but not as much after the novelty faded. He described that the most impactful individual factors to his adjustment are being disciplined, working hard, and being curious to find habits outside of work. To lay some background, interviewee F was the only interviewee who directly admitted that his adjustment to Finland has been “a process” rather than “good”, “quite good” or “quite easy”. Interestingly, while he definitely possesses attributes such as great interpersonal skills and ability to build personal networks, he stated that these attributes have not been that useful for his adjustment. In more detail, he for instance pondered how having good interpersonal skills does not affect his adjustment outside of work that much because there is so little opportunity to interact with other people than teammates and staff at work. In addition, when there is, Finnish people tend to be very reserved and hesitant to getting to know. In fact, individual attributes basically all interviewees presented as positively affecting factors to their adjustment such as self-motivated, disciplined, hard-working, determined, and confidence in abilities seem to be based on their “work self” and adjusting to work. However, the arguable lack of adjustment outside work is discussed further in more detail.

*“I would say that I have quite strong interpersonal skills, like I think like I can get on with people and I can talk to people, new people and people I do not know. But I do not think it matters so much if you have good interpersonal skills here, because people are slightly hesitant to meet new people here. You can have the best interpersonal skills, but it does not make that much of a difference if people are not that keen on interacting. But maybe that is a slight exaggeration as well.”*

## 5.2 General nonwork-related factors affecting adjustment

General nonwork-related factors affecting interviewee A are, in particular, the high cost of living and high taxation. However, he mentioned that although the taxation is high, the usage of tax money is highly visible in Finland as in high quality of life and proper healthcare unlike in his home-country. Further, he praised the living conditions, ease of settling in, and housing conditions as positive factors for his life in Finland. Moreover, he stated that there is no racism, and “Finnish people like foreigners”. Furthermore, he explained that as he feels welcomed and liked, life is comfortable. On the other hand, interviewee A thought that although he likes spending time at home, leisure time can at times be boring. Importantly, he described that his local partner has vastly facilitated his adjustment to Finland. Navigating mandatory legalities has not affected his adjustment after relocation as the club handles all necessary bureaucracy. During the interview, interviewee A discussed multiple times that before relocation he had no expectations of Finland, and thus there were no shocking negative factors affecting adjustment.

*“Finnish people are not racist. They love foreigners which is the most important thing for a foreigner, to be loved by everyone. It makes you happy to live in the country... I adjusted so well in Finland because of my girlfriend because if not her, I would be very lonely.”*

Coming from Australia, interviewee B has had difficulties adjusting to the cold weather and lack of light in Finland. In addition, he mentioned that different food has been a factor to get used to. Furthermore, he thought that the housing conditions are not as good as he has been used to back home. Also, the high cost of living was raised as a topic although coming from a country of extremely high cost of living. Moreover, due to the difficult time difference to home and knowing there are still months until travelling back, he sometimes feels homesick. On the other hand, he thought the living conditions and quality of life are good and has had no difficulties with mandatory legalities as the club has supported in those. Importantly, he described that he has a close teammate that he spends time with and deals with everyday things. He emphasized that without that

connection, life in Finland would be boring and lonely. Further, he mentioned how getting injured impacts overall life satisfaction negatively.

*“Obviously it is hard a lot of times, but especially now that I have been injured for a while. Sometimes you just feel like you are not really sane... The most positive thing has been becoming really good friends with a teammate, another bloke who is in sort of same page as me. He lives next to me and I think we have really helped each other because we can go to the training and back together and shop together. It just gives you that person. If it were doing all that alone, it would be a lot more depressing than having someone that you can talk to and joke about things and talk about football. Talk about things outside of football and do things outside of football with him. So, because we are the same age and in the same situation, I think that has helped the most.”*

For interviewee C, cold weather and lack of light are a big factor affecting adjustment. He described how during times with little sunlight, his overall mood is affected negatively. In fact, he thought that the climate in Finland during winter affects also working as hard physical training is affected by the body not being as energized.

*“Winter is the worst part I think. It is cold. It is just difficult to do your job. It is difficult to live. Everything about like this period up until April, is really really hard.”*

Moreover, he mentioned that housing and living conditions are “fine” and similar to what he has been used to back home. However, he mentioned how he is still adjusting to some societal norms such as having silence at home at ten during night. In addition, he described how Finnish people have incredible sense of duty to follow rules by book which is sometimes difficult to understand. Further, while interviewee A has had positive experiences from the usage of tax money in Finland, interviewee C raised a different perspective. When he first moved to Finland, he had a substance abuser as a neighbor. He described being irritated by how someone in that condition can live in a similar

housing via social benefits as him by working hard to pay for it. Moreover, by comparing to home-country, he thought that social system in Finland has been made too easy to exploit. Furthermore, the cost of living was discussed on which he thought that especially cost of food is high. Similarly to all interviewees, he thought that there are not much leisure opportunities in Finland. However, he stated multiple times that he is fine spending time alone and pondered that for an athlete, boredom can also be beneficial as one can focus on being disciplined for the physically demanding work.

Similarly to others, interviewee D described that during winter, cold weather affects adjustment and working negatively. However, during summer when most of the season is played, the weather is not a problem. He also mentioned the very high cost of living and high taxation compared to previous European countries he has lived and played in. On the other hand, he thought living conditions, housing conditions, and quality of life are good. Moreover, similarly to interviewee A, he stated that there is no racism in Finland which is a big factor for being comfortable. More closely, he described how in a previous country he faced racism which made his and his family's living not so comfortable. In fact, he described how his family liked living in Finland which is assumably a reason he continued his career here. Moreover, he thought that having his family with him in Finland is the biggest factor for his adjustment. More closely, during the beginning of a season when his family has not yet arrived, he feels lonely and at times homesick. Further, he thought different food is a factor to adjust. On the other hand, mandatory legalities have not affected his adjustment as the club has been helpful.

*“Sometimes you go somewhere where your family is not happy. Like when I was in Poland, my family was not happy and that affected me. But here, my family is happy and that has helped me a lot... Cost of living is so expensive, I was surprised during my first year here. It is so much more expensive than in other European countries such as Italy”*

Although coming from a close geographically and culturally distant Denmark, interviewee E described that he at times feels homesick as there is no opportunity to travel back home during the season. Furthermore, he was surprised by the amount of snow in Finland. On the other hand, he described Finland as a “good country” where it is easy to settle in and thought that the Finnish culture is very similar to Danish. Further, he described the local culture and specifically the club as a “big family” that is supporting his adjustment. He mentioned being very happy with the housing conditions, and thought that meeting new people, learning new things, and trying new stuff helps his adjustment. Importantly, while he has adjusted to Finland well, he mentioned that a local partner has changed a lot. He described how in his prior experience abroad, although while adjustment to work was fine, leisure time was extremely tough due to loneliness. Furthermore, he emphasized that it would be similar in Finland without his partner.

*“When I met my girlfriend, everything just became easy. I always have someone to be with when I feel lonely. When I was in Sweden, when I trained with the boys, it was fine. But when I came home and closed the door, that was the difficult part. Like, what can you really do.”*

Similarly to others, interviewee F mentioned that there is not much to do outside of work, and figuring out things to do after work can be wearing. In fact, while he also thought that the cold weather and lack of light during winter is tough for both working and overall living, he raised a descriptive perspective of leisure time loneliness. He discussed how short days during winter can be a blessing in disguise as it reduces the hours of a day for which he needs to figure out stuff to do. Moreover, he highlighted how for instance an overnight away match trip is good for him by stating “the busier the better”. Further, he also raised a topic that was also slightly discussed with others, injuries. From personal experience, he described how when getting injured and not being able to fully work, life in Finland is difficult. This emphasized how much his and the other interviewees’ life and overall adjustment revolves around work. More closely, he went in more detail by stating how his general adjustment is highly dependent on work performance. When work is

going well, overall life and adjustment feels good and vice versa. Further, he described how due to the physically demanding work, he is in some way always working as for instance diet and rest directly affects work performance. In addition, he mentioned that while his social life is already somewhat restricted due to work, the later in more depth discussed difficulty of interacting with Finnish people complicates it.

*“I think loneliness has been a factor that I have had to kind of grapple with quite a lot over the last year. Especially when I got injured. That was not easy because there was less going on here. You are less apart of things.”*

Interviewee F also thought living conditions and housing conditions are fine, cost of food is high, and different food is a factor to adjust. On the other hand, he described how a lunchtime culture is new to him and how he enjoys it as it is an opportunity for instance to go out to the city with a teammate. Moreover, he discussed how he has a close teammate that he shares everyday things with and how without that connection it would be even more lonely and boring. In addition to “having people to rely on”, he stated that being curious and discovering habits outside of football affects his adjustment positively. For instance, he discussed on many occasions how learning Italian with a teacher is a great activity to get his mind out of football, interact with a person outside of work, and thus feel comfortable also outside of it. Moreover, he mentioned how while distance to family in some way affects his life in Finland, he has learned to stay in contact more.

### **5.3 Interaction-related factors affecting adjustment**

Interaction-related factors affecting football expatriates’ adjustment in Finland that interviewee A discussed are difficulty to learn local language, difficulty of getting familiar with the locals due to their shyness, and difficulty of finding friends outside of work. More closely, he discussed how local people are friendly but because they are hesitant to approach, getting to know is hard. However, he described that Finnish people have good English proficiency and communicating with them is easy but often requires initiating the conversation. Moreover, as there is little interaction with locals during leisure

time, finding friends is difficult. On the other hand, due to good English proficiency of locals, he has not faced much of language barrier. Furthermore, whereas Finnish is extremely difficult to learn despite attending language class offered by the player association, he thought that the second official language Swedish is easier to understand. Interestingly, he discussed how Finnish people may seem rude at first as there is no word “please” in Finnish language which often translates to their spoken English.

*“It is a bit difficult to interact with Finnish people because they are shy. But it does not mean that they are bad people, if you approach them, they are nice people to talk to. And because everyone speaks good English, it is easy to communicate”*

For interviewee B, the affecting factors are language barrier, difficulty of learning local language, and lack of opportunity to find friends. More closely, he described how language barrier is evident in everyday errands such as in grocery stores where he needs to rely on using a translator. Further, he mentioned how it is at times difficult to be around people discussing in Finnish as he cannot understand what is said. However, while stating the difficulty to learn local language, he mentioned that specifically younger locals are friendly and have a good English proficiency which helps communication. On the other hand, he also noted that as Finnish people tend to speak English by translating directly from their own language, the absence of word “please” may seem rude. Similarly to interviewee A, he described that Swedish is easier to understand. Furthermore, due to work, lack of leisure activities, and the reservedness of the locals, there is little opportunity to find friends. Thus, he pondered how an invitation from the local teammates to join activities outside of work means a lot for the expatriates.

*“Support from teammates, I think that is a big thing. I think the international players stick with each other more because we are in the same situation. I think there is not as much from the Finnish teammates. But I think it is improving, like today when the Finnish teammates asked us if we wanted to go to a fireplace and cook*

*lunch on it. Stuff like that may not seem like a big thing to them, but it is a big thing to us. And just to know they want to do that with us is good.”*

According to interviewee C, specifically younger locals in Finland speak good English which is a positive factor affecting adjustment. He further described how in his prior international experience in another European country it was the opposite making life difficult: “The language barrier does not affect me here but it affected me in Moldova.” However, he mentioned that even in a social team sport environment, his local teammates were at first very shy, which made it seem he was not welcomed. He described how Finnish people are “friendly but not approachable”, and specifically not initiating conversation. Further, he thought that Finnish people are different to people at home for instance in high sense of duty and being “genuinely nice people” by elaborating how small talk is replaced with honesty. Moreover, he thought that locals are helpful but as a foreigner help must be asked as Finnish people do not actively approach and support. Again, interviewee C felt that there is not much interaction with the locals outside of work and thus finding friends is difficult. However, he also mentioned that as there are twenty possible friends at work, he does not feel a need to reach out to people during leisure time. Similarly to other interviewees, he described that the local language is impossible to learn, and that the lack of word “please” may at times seem rude. In addition, there is a language barrier in everyday things such as in grocery stores.

*“When I came back to Finland, few fans greeted me by saying they are happy I am back. Before, I had never even interacted with a local here. So it took around three years for a local to come up to me to say hi and have an actual interaction. It did not happen before... They are wondering if someone will judge them.”*

Similarly to interviewee C, interviewee D described how the good English proficiency of locals is different to his prior experiences and positively affects adjustment. Furthermore, he mentioned having no problems with communicating with Finnish people. However, differently to others, he thought that Finnish people are interested in discussing with the

foreign teammates and actively try to get familiar. However, he also mentioned that outside of work, there is not much interaction with the locals and finding friends is difficult. Similarly to others, he also faces language barrier in for instance grocery store where he must utilize translator a lot. In addition, he thought the local language is impossible to learn.

Interviewee E mentioned having no problems in interaction with locals and that they have good English proficiency which is why he has not faced much language barrier. However, he thought that even with local teammates, it takes few weeks to get familiar and conversational as Finnish people are shy. Further, he described Finnish people as “super nice”, “relaxed”, and “humble in their appearance”. Moreover, while he thought Finnish is a difficult language, he mentioned how a bilingual city is an interesting experience. Moreover, interestingly he discussed how due to his native Danish, he understands the Swedish spoken in Finland better than the Swedish spoken in Sweden, which has been a positive factor for adjustment. Furthermore, while he acknowledged the lack of interaction with locals outside of work, he enjoys being noticed by fans. In fact, he has attended local kids’ birthday parties at the requests of their parents.

*“My initial thought was that Finnish people are shy, but it took 2-3 weeks before people started speaking properly, and since there has been no problems. Now, I only know some, but I think that the local people here are super nice when you start speaking to them. Never any problems and everyone helps each other.”*

While having similar experiences about interaction as other interviewees, interviewee F went a bit further when discussing the topic. In fact, compared to others, since relocating to Finland he has been willing to and actively tried to interact with locals outside of work. He described how at the beginning he would actively “throw himself out there” by going to cafes and occasionally out at night. However, he mentioned that interaction with locals even when going out at night is difficult as “we were more keen on getting know them than they were to know us”. Further, he compared that while initiating interaction

with locals was hard when there were local teammates along, going solely with other expatriates was even tougher interaction wise. Furthermore, even when they initiated conversation with locals, he felt that locals were hesitant to get familiar. Moreover, he described the locals as friendly but reserved. Thus, due to socially restricting work, lack of leisure activities, and the locals' lack of willingness to get familiar, he thought that finding friends outside work is extremely difficult.

*“They are happy to speak to you and really engage and that is a nice thing. People are welcoming. But I do not think that when (Finnish) people meet someone, they think like, oh a foreign person, that could be like a genuine friend or someone that you see on a regular basis... Especially as a footballer, interactions and our possibilities for interactions outside of the work are limited. I do not know where I could meet a friend.”*

Further, interviewee F thought that there is not much language barrier due to locals' English proficiency but does need a translator for instance in grocery stores. However, he mentioned how it is difficult to tolerate the ambiguity when people around are discussing in Finnish. Moreover, he thought that while the local teammates are honest, he often feels it is difficult to read them due to their reservedness. Thus, while local teammates have supported his adjustment to Finland, he thought that the expatriates interact more between themselves. Interestingly, interviewee F discussed how his best interaction with locals outside of work has been with people that have foreign origin but are integrated to Finland. More closely, he described how for instance a barber and a restaurant owner with foreign origin seem to understand the expatriates' situation and are thus willing and active to interact. Furthermore, he also thought that fans noticing him is positive as it initiates interaction and pondered if he would be even more socially isolated in Finland if not a recognizable footballer.

## 5.4 Work-related factors affecting adjustment

Positive work-related factors affecting adjustment of interviewee A are discussive coaching style, good job facilities that are nearby, prior experience of European coaches and football tactics, and support from teammates and fans. In fact, he mentioned that due to lack of leisure activities, work keeps him sane. Further, he described that practice is more tactical but less physical than what he has been used to. Moreover, while he thought that there is more competition among the team, it is collectively supportive. Furthermore, he discussed how the staff is discussive and approachable which affects adjusting to work positively. In addition, he mentioned that there is only little external pressure to perform due to the low-level, little audience, and low media attention of football in Finland. On the other hand, he mentioned that fans positively affect his work adjustment even during tougher times.

*“Trainings keep my mind of home and make me want to stay in Finland... Coaching here is nice and more discussive. Us players also have a voice and can explain things to the coaches.”*

Opposite to interviewee A, interviewee B thought that football in Finland is more physical than what he has been used to. Thus, he has had to adjust to new physical training and physical expectations. Further, he mentioned that while coaching style is tough, it is discussive and supportive. He also discussed how the club and staff offers practical support that helps with adjustment. Further, he described how support from teammates and fans affects his work positively. Moreover, he mentioned that uniquely to football, there is constant pressure to perform, and that footballers' adjustment is affected by having to be disciplined at all times.

*“You cannot ever have an off day even if you have a day off, because you have to stay fit. You have to stay healthy. You have to eat all the right foods. That plays a massive part. Say you have a bad sleep two days before a game, that affects you*

*two days later in the game and then that affects your job, and next week you could be benched, because you played bad because you were tired.”*

Interviewee C thought that football in Finland is the least physical he has experienced and that due to prior experience, he has no difficulties adjusting to different tactics. On the other hand, he mentioned that the most impactful factor for his work adjustment has been having “trust and respect” from staff, teammates and fans. Moreover, he described the coaching style “conversational but not approachable” and elaborated that while the staff speak little, they communicate honestly and create fair competition which affects work positively. Furthermore, he mentioned that sports is a social work environment where one is forced to communicate and form relationships among teammates. On the other hand, he thought that he feels no pressure to perform due to being mentally strong, having confidence in his abilities, and being trusted by people around him. Importantly, he highlighted that adjusting to artificial turf fields that are common in Finland is difficult: “my body struggles in the astroturf”.

Interviewee D also thought that football in Finland is more physical than he has used. In fact, he mentioned that specifically when joining a team during season, adjusting to physical training and expectations is difficult. In addition, he thought that while football tactics in Finland are different, it does not affect adjustment due to prior experience. Moreover, while he discussed that sports is a particularly social work environment, communication with staff in Finland is easy and practical support from club has impacted his adjustment positively. On the other hand, he mentioned how artificial turf fields in Finland affect work adjustment negatively. Interestingly, while he thought that there is a lot of pressure to perform, it pushes to focus which affects work positively.

Interviewee E thought that higher physical expectations and different tactics in Finland are factors to adjust. Moreover, he mentioned that coaching style is different than he has experienced by describing that while the coaching is at times “old school”, the staff is discussive, supportive, and non-hierarchical. In addition, he described that there is less

competition among the team because there are less players in the squad. Moreover, in contrast to his prior experiences, teammates are equal which helps adjustment. Further, he discussed how due to low-level and little media attention of football in Finland, there is only little external pressure to perform. However, he also mentioned that due to the little resources, the club offers less financial and practical support such as equipment and available nutrition than in his prior experiences. On the other hand, while acknowledging that football expatriates in Finland desire a move to bigger leagues, he mentioned that acquiring a fulltime photographer to the club has been great as the players get promotional material both for their own use and are promoted better by the club itself. Importantly, interviewee E discussed how transition from being a squad rotation player in his previous club, to being in a leader role is a big factor to adjust.

*“I think we are supporting each other quite a lot here. It is different here. I remember when in Denmark I came up as an 18-year-old guy, first training, I got smacked down. That was just how they took you off. Then you just go from that. So compared, I think people here are way more nice, almost too nice. When I played there, it was always the youngsters taking the balls, taking the bottles, cleaning the boots. Here, it is everyone... Coming from a role where I was kind of a little guy to coming here to suddenly be the main guy needed sort of an adjustment.”*

Again, while having similar observations to others about work adjustment as a footballer in Finland, discussion with interviewee F went a bit deeper. Firstly, he acknowledged that as football expatriates in Finland know they are here primarily for work and to earn a move to bigger leagues, adjustment to work is “hit or miss” due to the high measurability of sports performance. Thus, they are at work around the clock and emphasized that the coaching style in Finland being equal and staff having “no favorites” is a big factor affecting adjustment positively. Moreover, he discussed how as work performance affects overall adjustment, there is an internal pressure to perform at all times to feel comfortable. Furthermore, he highlighted how getting injured is a major factor affecting both work adjustment and adjustment outside of work. Moreover, he described how the

discussive, “open-minded”, and somewhat individual oriented coaching style in Finland helps adjustment but noted that in sports industry players are not always communicated in full transparency which is a factor to just accept. Furthermore, he mentioned that different tactics do not affect adjustment, and that competition among the team is supportive. In addition, while getting support from teammates and practical support from the club, he discussed how there could be more active social support from the local teammates, perhaps as a named local player to support expatriates’ adjustment. Interestingly, the club has recently acquired an opportunity to meet a sports psychologist of which interviewee F is optimistic regarding helping adjustment. Further, he thought physical training in Finland is different and affects adjustment little. Importantly, he mentioned how artificial turf fields are a huge factor affecting adjustment.

*“Sometimes, when you are in a team, you kind of just assume that because there is enough people around that new players and foreign players will be supported enough... I think that (a named player to support expatriates’ adjustment) might be good. Especially when you first arrive, quite useful. Otherwise, I think that you are tending to discover the local culture with foreigners and as a foreigner rather than with locals.”*

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the results of the study are discussed based on connecting the empirical findings to theory. First, key findings and contributions of the study is started with analyzing how football expatriates in Finland fit to the characteristics of self-initiated expatriation and thus, how the characteristics of their expatriation process impact their adjustment. Thereafter, key findings are summarized through the research question “Which factors impact the adjustment of sports expatriates in Finland?” Further, in practical implications chapter, the results are discussed from the perspective of how clubs could support their expatriates’ adjustment. Lastly, limitations and future research suggestions are presented.

### 6.1 Key findings and contributions of the study

As the theory of this study bases on prior research identifying sports expatriates as a subgroup of self-initiated expatriation (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Dolles & Egilsson, 2017), it must be briefly discussed how studied football expatriates in Finland fit the definition. More closely, research on SIEs separate and generalize them from AEs by details of the expatriation process that significantly affect also their adjustment. First and foremost, most studied expatriates themselves actively sought a move abroad in order to receive a professional contract. Thus, their expatriation is definitely self-initiated which is a key definition of self-initiated expatriation (Selmer et al., 2022). However, while players often “apply” for the jobs through agents offering them to clubs, sometimes the move is initiated by the club reaching out to a player or their agent. Thus, particularly in higher levels, football expatriation is sometimes “self-recruited” rather than self-initiated. Moreover, whereas SIEs in many fields lack relocation packages and practical support from their parent company IHRM (Stahl & Bjorkman, 2006; Howe-Walch & Schyns, 2010), football expatriates do receive a relatively similar package from the club they move to. In more detail, perhaps because clubs want their expatriates to perform instantly, and due to high competition of talent recruitment, clubs manage

expatriates' housing, relocation costs, and mandatory legalities such as work permits and taxation bureaucracy.

Further, compared to AEs, SIEs are described to relocate less career oriented (Madison, 2006), value destination over career (Doherty et al., 2011), adjust work to life rather than life to work (Grabowska, 2016), have the power to choose their destination (Al Ariss, 2010), and be thus more familiar with the host-country (Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009; Inkson & Myers, 2003). However, football expatriates' relocation to Finland is definitely career oriented, life adjusted to the restrictive work, and destination selected solely based on career opportunity. In fact, SIEs are described to often have worse employment situation in their home country (Suutari & Brewster, 2000) which applies to football expatriates as their opportunity for highest income, level of play, or even playing professionally is usually abroad. Therefore, and because the eventual relocation often occurs quickly, football expatriates are far from being familiar with Finland as a host-country. Moreover, due to rapid relocation, football expatriates are not cross-culturally trained or briefed regarding the host country which is typical to SIEs. On the other hand, Andersen et al. (2014), found that SIEs are highly invested in individual career path which is the case for football expatriates who desire a move to bigger leagues as soon as possible. Hence, they are also willing to repatriate which is studied to be more common among SIEs than AEs (Andresen et al., 2015).

Furthermore, whereas Froese & Peltokorpi (2013), found SIEs to have less job satisfaction than AEs, football expatriates differ as they relocate career oriented for instance "to do what I have always dreamed of". Moreover, while research indicates that SIEs tend to interact, form relationships and rely on the locals, and adjust more to the host-country behaviors than AEs (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013; Sargent, 2002; Peltokorpi & Froese 2009; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013; von Borell de Araujo et al., 2014), football expatriates' life in Finland revolves around work and earning an opportunity for a move to another country. Thus, and due to found difficulties of interacting with Finnish people, expatriates tend to form relationships mostly with other expatriates, have little interaction with locals,

and adjust little to local culture and behaviors. In addition, the findings of this study indicate that in their highly social work environment, football expatriates rely on and form relationships more at work than outside which is arguably more typical to AEs than SIEs. Lastly, all studied sample individuals are young, and most childless, unmarried, and living on their own, which are often characteristics more of SIEs than AEs. All in all, these findings contribute to our understanding of specific features of sports SIEs. This replies to calls for future research on sports SIEs (Selmer et al., 2022).

Next follows discussion of the key findings of each category of the theoretical framework in relation to the research question “Which factors impact the adjustment of sports expatriates in Finland?” To begin with, there were three clear patterns found regarding **individual factors impacting football expatriates’ adjustment in Finland**. Firstly, several personal attributes that support the work adjustment of SIEs positively were identified: being self-motivated (McEnery & DesHarnais, 1990), determined, disciplined, hard-working, confident in their abilities (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017), and having good interpersonal skills (Hofstede, 1980) in the particularly social work environment. Secondly, factors that support their adjustment outside of work positively were prior international experience (Jokinen et al., 2008; Alshahrani & Morley, 2015), having a positive mindset, being independent (McEnery & DesHarnais, 1990), adaptable (McEnery & DesHarnais, 1990), mentally strong, curious to find habits outside of work, and ability to build personal networks (Hofstede, 1980) so one can ask for help when needed. However, interestingly, some interviewees thought that due to the reservedness of locals and little interaction opportunity outside of work, having good interpersonal skills does not impact adjustment during leisure time.

Thirdly, negatively impacting factors are family situation and a craving for an active life outside of work. More closely, as most of the interviewees are young and childless, distance to home is impacting on their adjustment negatively. Further, specifically the most outgoing and social interviewees were seemingly impacted by the lack of leisure opportunities. Lastly, while most interviewees described to have adjusted well to Finland, it is

evident that the highly emphasized positively impacting attributes of being “mentally strong”, “independent”, and “staying positive” reflect a rather weak actual adjustment outside of work. However, this kind of coping mechanism attributes were highlighted in prior research as traits IHRM look for when selecting an AE (McEnery & DesHarnais, 1990). In addition, all but one interviewee had an excellent English proficiency which impacts their adjustment positively (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017).

All in all, the contribution of this study to individual factors impacting football expatriates’ adjustment is clear. In addition to attributes that support their adjustment outside of work similarly to all SIEs, football expatriates’ adjustment emphasis is on work, which is positively impacted by being particularly determined, disciplined, and hard-working. Importantly, uniquely to sports, all interviewees moved away from home at a particularly young age to play in an academy and have thus developed confidence to seek help when needed.

Furthermore, findings of **general nonwork-related factors impacting football expatriates’ adjustment in Finland** are consistent. To start with, while there was minor perception differences based on prior experience, interviewees thought that living conditions, housing conditions, and quality of life (Black & Stephens, 1989) in Finland are good and impact adjustment positively. In more detail, it seems that expatriates who have experience from various conditions, praise conditions in Finland more. Thus, it could be argued that these factors are more impactful than interpreted also for those who have less experience. In addition, two interviewees emphasized that they have not faced racism which is highly impactful factor to comfortable life. Further, another positively impacting factor for expatriates’ adjustment was receiving support from the club. Different to usual characteristics of SIEs (Stahl & Bjorkman, 2006; Howe-Walch & Schyns, 2010), football expatriates’ relocation costs, housing, and mandatory legalities are managed by the club. While this was acknowledged by all interviewees, the impact of this support is arguably even stronger than interpreted as football expatriates are used to that support.

On the other hand, negatively impacting factors to adjustment are cold weather and lack of light during winter (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Black & Stephens, 1989), high cost of living and taxes (Expat Insider, 2024), and slightly impacting factors adjusting to different food (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Black & Stephens, 1989) and homesickness (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018). Importantly, the most negatively impactful factor impacting football expatriates' general satisfaction in Finland is lack of leisure opportunities and interaction (Black & Stephens, 1989; Expat Insider, 2024). This is due to their restrictive work, difficulty finding activities outside of work, and difficulty interacting and getting to know the locals due to their reservedness. In contrast, the most impactful factor impacting their general adjustment positively is having someone close such as family, partner, or a close teammate physically with them in Finland. In more detail, almost all interviewees emphasized that without having that close person to share everyday things with, life in Finland would be extremely difficult, socially isolated and boring. In addition, while only one interviewee had a wife and a child, it is clear that the adjustment of family (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018) impacts the expatriates' adjustment and is a deciding factor when relocating. Lastly, as all interviewees highlighted being in Finland solely for career enhancement, their general adjustment is highly impacted by work adjustment and work performance. For instance, one interviewee described his feeling of general adjustment often directly reflects from performance at work and how for instance getting injured has a huge impact on life satisfaction.

Whereas the findings support prior knowledge of Finland as a destination for expatriates in factors such as good living conditions and difficulty of adjusting to cold weather (Expat Insider, 2024), the contribution of this study is that football expatriates' general non-work-related adjustment is particularly impacted by restrictive work, social isolation (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018), and lack of leisure opportunities (Black & Stephens, 1989; Expat Insider, 2024). In fact, a novel finding of this study is how crucial it is to have at least one close person to share everyday things with outside of work. Further, while discussed little in literature, the findings reveal that interviewees have not faced racism in Finland which is a fundamental factor for a comfortable life. Lastly, different to usual

characteristics of SIEs (Stahl & Bjorkman, 2006; Howe-Walch & Schyns, 2010), football expatriates receive initiative support from the host country organization with relocation costs, housing, and mandatory legalities.

Again, there are clearly recurrent findings of **interaction-related factors impacting football expatriates' adjustment in Finland**. First and foremost, all interviewees thought that adjustment is positively impacted by the locals' good English proficiency. Further, due to that, they have not been impacted much by spoken language barrier. However, most interviewees mentioned to be quite reliant on using a translator in errands such as shopping. In addition, it seems that the most outgoing interviewees were a bit affected by the ambiguity when people are discussing Finnish around them. Secondly, most interviewees described the locals as nice and friendly, but at the same time shy, reserved, and specifically hesitant to initiate conversation. Moreover, whereas it takes some weeks to get familiar with local teammates, there is little opportunity to get to know locals outside of work which makes finding friends (Expat Insider, 2024) extremely difficult, impacting adjustment negatively. Hence, all interviewees seem to have very little interaction with locals outside of work, even when actively initiating as the locals seem hesitant to speak English and getting to know the expatriates. Furthermore, while interviewees described the locals as "genuinely nice people", they emphasized that when in need, they must ask for help as the locals are not actively reaching to support.

Whereas all interviewees perceived Finnish as a difficult language to learn (Expat Insider, 2024), many noted that they can understand some Swedish which slightly impacts adjustment positively. Moreover, some interviewees discussed how the lack of word "please" in Finnish language translates to their spoken English which at times makes the locals seem rude. In addition, some interpreted the reservedness of locals at first of being not welcomed impacting adjustment negatively at first. Descriptively of interviewees' lack of interaction outside of work, they thought being noticed by fans is a positively impacting factor as it initiates at least some interaction with the locals. Lastly, while local teammates are supporting, one interviewee described that in a social team sport

environment in Finland, locals tend to assume that expatriates adjust with the locals' naturally occurring interaction style while in reality the expatriates would appreciate for instance an invitation to leisure activities more than is understood.

All in all, interaction-related findings affecting adjustment are definitely in line with prior knowledge of Finland as a destination for expatriation discussed in chapter 2.4. On the discussed survey from Expat Insider (2024), Finland was ranked to bottom positions in categories such as local friendliness and finding friends. In this study, interviewees were consistent and perhaps at times polite when describing the local people as nice but not approachable. Moreover, findings reveal that locals are very hesitant to initiate conversation which is why interviewees have not even had many interactions with the local people outside of work. Thus, due to reservedness of locals and restrictive work, most interviewees emphasized that finding friends is extremely difficult. Descriptively, one interviewee noted: "I do not know where I could meet a friend". Therefore, due to culturally distant interaction norms, it is evident to point out that in interaction-related adjustment, Finland is a tough country to adjust for expatriates (Black et al., 1991).

**Work-related factors impacting adjustment of football expatriates in Finland** are highly influenced by prior experience (Jokinen et al., 2008; Alshahrani & Morley, 2015) and impact overall adjustment arguably more than on other SIEs due to particularly high career orientation. In more detail, as all interviewees are in Finland with a career-oriented motive and desire a move to bigger leagues sooner than later, their life in Finland circles around work and adjustment is highly impacted by work adjustment and work performance. In fact, due to restricted social life outside of work, interviewees mentioned that work is an important routine and even keeps them sane. Thus, interviewees noted that an injury preventing working is a big factor impacting their overall adjustment negatively. Moreover, as all interviewees have played in competitive football environments from a young age, they discussed that different sports tactics (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017) and competition among the team (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017) are not impacting adjustment much negatively.

In fact, most interviewees mentioned that although playing time and opportunity to proceed in career is important, competition among the team in Finland is collectively supportive rather than competitive against each other which positively impacts adjustment. Furthermore, most interviewees described that while coaching style (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017) in Finland is different than they have used to, discussive and non-hierarchical work environment is positive. More closely, interviewees described that in contrast to previous experiences, the staff has “no favorites” and that everyone in the team is equal which positively affects work.

Moreover, all interviewees noted that good enough job facilities (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018), support from teammates (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017), and practical support from the club (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017) impact on their adjustment positively. However, one interviewee mentioned that expatriates tend to lean more on to other expatriates and a more active social support from local teammates could be beneficial. Interestingly, interviewees had varying perceptions about the physical expectations of football in Finland. More closely, subject to their prior experience, some interviewees noted that higher physical expectations, more physical training, or different physical training (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017) are factors to adjust whereas some not. Moreover, most interviewees noted that artificial turf fields are a huge factor impacting adjustment negatively. Furthermore, most interviewees mentioned that due to little attention, there is not much external pressure to perform (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2018; Egilsson & Dolles, 2017) but most seem to have lots of internal pressure as they are in Finland to proceed their careers. One interviewee noted how a different role to his previous team is a factor to adjust which is in line with Black et al. (1991) finding how role novelty impacts adjustment. Furthermore, while interviewees acknowledged the club’s limited resources impact offered support, acquiring a photographer and a sports psychologist have been positive additions for their work adjustment. In addition, interviewees thought that coaching style and work environment in Finland is discussive and equal which has a positive impact on adjustment.

All in all, the main contribution of this study is that football expatriates' adjustment to Finland is most impacted by work adjustment and performance. In fact, while football performance is highly measurable – “hit or miss” – and expatriates are in Finland solely for work, failure to adjust and perform on the field leads particularly fast to relocation. Moreover, many interviewees emphasized how performance on the field reflects directly on general feeling of adjustment and life satisfaction and, thus, uniquely to sports, getting injured has a particular impact on general adjustment. On the other hand, life outside of work is restricted as they must be disciplined at all times to perform in the physically demanding work. When it comes to factors affecting work adjustment, findings reveal that expatriates are not that impacted by different sports tactics and different level of play due experiences of competitive football from a young age. However, different physical training and expectations as well as artificial turf fields are factors to adjust.

**All things considered**, it is clear that studied football expatriates' adjustment and perception of adjustment to Finland is highly influenced by work adjustment and work performance, due to highly career-oriented relocation. While most of them interpreted adjusting well to work, it can be read between the lines that they are not that adjusted to Finland outside of work. As one interviewee worded, football expatriates know they are in Finland solely for work and desire a move to athletically and financially bigger leagues as soon as possible. Thus, adjustment to life in Finland outside of work may not be a priority which is arguably unique in sports industry and contradictory to prior studies of SIEs. Further, their overall adjustment is impacted by being somewhat at work around the clock due to leisure time choices affecting work performance on the pitch. However, it was clear that interviewees' adjustment to Finland is positively impacted by good living conditions, housing conditions, and quality of life, while negatively impacted by high cost of living and cold weather during wintertime.

On the other hand, findings indicate that although work is their priority, football expatriates crave more activity and interaction during leisure time. However, Finnish people

tend to be extremely difficult to interact with, getting to know, and even hesitant to speak English although good language proficiency, which makes finding friends outside of work difficult. Thus, studied expatriates emphasized that even one close person to share everyday things with has a crucial impact and reduces social isolation. In fact, interviews indicated that the most useful personal attributes for overall adjustment are having a positive mindset and being mentally strong and independent as their life outside of work is lonely. Interestingly, most studied expatriates seem to possess these traits possibly due to the fact they have all moved away from home at a very young age to play in an academy, which is unique in sports industry.

Furthermore, while football expatriates seem to have only a little difficulty adjusting to different football tactics and leadership due to prior experience, the highly social work environment plays a role in their overall adjustment. In more detail, while receiving some support from teammates and practical support from the club, expatriates tend to lean more to other expatriates as the local teammates are reserved. In fact, two interviewees noted that more initiative support from the local teammates such as an invitation to join activities during leisure time has a more significant positive impact on adjustment that is perhaps understood. Lastly, due to little attention of football in Finland, expatriates are not impacted by external pressure but are impacted by their internal pressure to perform due to high career orientation. Surprisingly, and descriptively of their social isolation, football expatriates in Finland are positively impacted by getting recognized by fans outside of work as it initiates at least some interaction.

To conclude, these findings support the view that the adjustment experiences of sports expatriates are quite unique in comparison with other kinds of SIEs. This provides evidence for the need to study different subgroups of SIEs separately as suggested by Selmer et al. (2022), instead of treating all SIEs as one group.

## 6.2 Practical implications

Football expatriates in Finland adjust easily to work but have difficulty adjusting to life outside of work due to lack of leisure activity and difficulty of interacting with locals and finding friends. As a paradox, some interviewees noted that lack of leisure activity helps to stay disciplined and focused on work. Harshly, do clubs want their expatriates to reduce their focus on the highly measurable and physically demanding job in order to improve their leisure time satisfaction? On the other hand, could clubs improve their expatriates' commitment to the club by improving their general adjustment? Would this lead to a more efficient position during contract negotiations and thus financial advantage? However, whereas Kraimer et al. (2001) found general adjustment to increase work performance, it remains unexplored to which extent leisure time adjustment impacts football expatriates' work performance.

Further, it is evident that Finland offers good living conditions and quality of life (Black & Stephens, 1989) for expatriates, although cost of living is high, weather cold, and interaction with locals complicated (Expatriate Insider, 2024). In addition, football clubs offer expatriates practical relocation support rare for SIEs (Stahl & Bjorkman, 2006; Howe-Walch & Schyns, 2010). However, while the workplace environment is particularly social, expatriates would appreciate more initiative support from the local teammates. In fact, should there be an assigned local teammate whose job is to support the social adjustment of expatriates both on and off work? Or should there be an employee for this in order to create continuity and possibly impact even the recruitment process by making Finland familiar to the possible expatriates already before relocation? In fact, these kind of support mechanisms have been used successfully in bigger European clubs as well as to some extent in Finland (see Thiaw, 2024).

Findings of this study indicate that having a close person to share everyday things with is the most positively impacting factor of adjustment. Should the clubs take into consideration during recruitment that most young players relocate alone and have difficulty finding friends in Finland? For instance, by recruiting simultaneously two players that are

friends or improving the chances of expatriates making new friends by recruiting multiple players from culturally similar countries. All in all, findings of this study offer clubs quite consistent information about factors impacting the adjustment of football expatriates in Finland. However, making a difference requires further research on how much general adjustment impacts footballers' work performance, or in contrast, boldness to invent and invest into novel ways supporting expatriates' adjustment off-work and thus test it in practice.

### **6.3 Limitations and future research suggestions**

While prior studies identify sports expatriates as a subgroup of SIEs, the findings of this study indicate that football expatriation contains features that are not usual for self-initiated expatriation process, such as strong initiative support from the host-country organization and particularly high career orientation. Therefore, characteristics of sports expatriation must be studied further to create more comprehensive understanding, and in order to generalize the findings.

Secondly, the sample size of the study is small. In addition, it is evident that during the interviews, some interviewees were at times too polite and somewhat hesitant to discuss negatively impacting factors to their adjustment. For example, some interviewees described having positive mindset as an adjustment mechanism which was seen during the interviews as phrases "not complaining" and "no expectations" when discussing some factors possibly impacting their adjustment negatively. Thus, and because the sampling criteria was expatriates who have stayed in Finland at least one season, the findings may be somewhat positively skewed.

Thirdly, while the topic of this study – adjustment – is highly subjective, the qualitative findings are vulnerable for perception differences and are hence not the most generalizable. Additionally, in sports context, clubs operate with highly varying resources and facilities. Thus, while the findings are indicative, it is questionable to generalize them even in the context of football industry in Finland.

Whereas this study does not reveal revolutionary findings, it encourages to study the adjustment of football expatriates further in order to understand how they could be supported by the club. Thus, as it was found that football expatriates in Finland adjust relatively well to work but arguably poorly to life outside of work, the future research suggestions are to study if footballers' leisure time adjustment impacts work performance, how football clubs could support their expatriates' social life outside of work, and on which support systems should clubs allocate their limited resources. Moreover, as it was found that the most positively impacting factor for football expatriates' adjustment is having a close person to share everyday things with, another suggestion for future research is to study whether clubs should consider the expatriates' family situation and the probability of finding close people in the host country when recruiting.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview guide

#### Individual predeparture factors affecting adjustment

1. Describe your personality traits, attributes, and capabilities.
2. Talk through the process of how you ended up in Finland.
3. Describe your language proficiency and international experiences before relocating to Finland.
4. How familiar were you with Finland before the relocation?
5. What was your motive and motivational state for expatriation in Finland?
6. How do you spend your free time in Finland?
7. Talk about your willingness to interact and form relationships with the locals, and willingness to adjust to Finnish culture and behaviors.

*\*The interviewee is shown Table 1 in order to create further discussion*

#### General nonwork-related factors affecting adjustment

8. Describe which general nonwork-related factors have impacted your adjustment to Finland.
9. Which nonwork-related factors have impacted your adjustment positively or negatively the most?
10. Is there something specific about Finland regarding these factors?

*\*The interviewee is shown Table 2 in order to create further discussion*

#### Interaction-related factors affecting adjustment

11. Describe which interaction-related factors have impacted your adjustment to Finland.
12. Which interaction-related factors have impacted your adjustment positively or negatively the most?
13. Is there something specific about Finland regarding these factors?

*\*The interviewee is shown Table 3 in order to create further discussion*

#### Work-related factors affecting adjustment is presented

14. Describe which work-related factors have impacted your adjustment to Finland.
15. Which work-related factors have impacted your adjustment positively or negatively the most?
16. Is there something specific about Finland regarding these factors?
17. What do you think is unique about adjustment in sports industry?

*\*The interviewee is shown Table 4 in order to create further discussion*

18. Describe your adjustment to Finland so far.
19. Do you have anything to add, or something else you would like to discuss?