



Vaasan yliopisto
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**Career sustainability of self-initiated expatriate
athletes**

School of Management
Master's thesis in International
Business

Vaasa 2025

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA**School of Management**

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Title of the Thesis:	Career sustainability of self-initiated expatriate athletes
Degree:	Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration
Programme:	Master's Degree Programme in International Business
Supervisor:	Vesa Suutari
Year:	2025
Pages:	69

ABSTRACT:

Career sustainability has gained relevance in recent years due to the dynamic nature of modern careers and the increasing awareness of holistic well-being. Based on the idea of careers providing meaning to individuals, career sustainability involves individual agency and interactions between different contexts over the course of careers. Another significant change during recent decades is related to the mobility of professionals between countries. Many of these individuals initiate the relocation to a foreign country themselves and are employed as self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). This also applies to an increasing number of athletes, who move to a foreign country to further their athletic careers as SIE athletes. In addition to the challenges that arise from differences in the foreign environment, SIE athletes also need to manage the high demands that are characteristic to athletic careers. Despite the growing interest towards SIEs, the careers of SIE athletes are yet to receive notable attention from expatriate literature.

This study explores the career sustainability of athletes and how it is impacted by self-initiated expatriation. By analyzing the impacts of self-initiated expatriation on the indicators of career sustainability: health, happiness and productivity, this study aims to further the knowledge related to the careers of SIE athletes and sustainable careers. The objectives of this study also include examining the potential impacts that different contextual- and individual factors have on the career sustainability of SIE athletes.

The data of this study was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with SIE athletes from three different sports. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected qualitative data and provide insights to the career sustainability of SIE athletes. The findings show self-initiated expatriation having varying impacts on all three indicators of career sustainability. Some of the most prominent impacts of being an SIE are found to be related to employability, career satisfaction and performance. This study also identifies different contextual- and individual factors contributing to the experiences of SIE athletes abroad and influencing their career sustainability. The factors that stand out from the findings as being especially impactful include resources provided by organizations, family as a stakeholder and development as a motive.

The conclusions part of this study presents practical implications for SIE athletes and organizations employing SIE athletes. Organizations employing SIE athletes should look to increase their understanding of the typical challenges faced by athletes in foreign environments, which would increase their opportunities to support the career development of SIEs more comprehensively. For SIE athletes, the implications highlight the importance of agency in managing their careers to be more sustainable, taking key stakeholders into account in decision-making and the value of resources gained during athletic careers.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable Careers, Expatriation, Self-Initiated Expatriates, Athletes, Athletic Careers

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ABSTRACT:

Uran kestävyys (Career sustainability) on noussut ajankohtaiseksi viime vuosien aikana, johtuen nykyurien dynaamisesta luonteesta ja kokonaisvaltaiseen hyvinvointiin liittyvän tietoisuuden kasvamisesta. Perustuen ajatukseen merkityksellisestä urasta, uran kestävyys koostuu yksilön toiminnasta ja eri kontekstien välisistä vuorovaikutuksista uran varrella. Toinen merkittävä muutos viime vuosikymmenien aikana liittyy ammattilaisten lisääntyneeseen liikkuvuuteen eri maiden välillä. Monet näistä henkilöistä tekevät itse aloitteen muuttaa työskentelemään vieraaseen maahan ja työskentelevät oma-aloitteisina ekspatriaatteina (SIE). Tämä koskee myös kasvavaa määrää urheilijoita, jotka muuttavat ulkomaille jatkaakseen urheilijauraansa oma-aloitteisina ekspatriaattieurheilijoina (SIE athletes). Vieraan ympäristön eroavaisuuksista johtuvien haasteiden lisäksi, oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattieurheilijoiden on käsiteltävä urheilijauralle ominaisia korkeita vaatimuksia. Huolimatta kasvavasta kiinnostuksesta oma-aloitteisia ekspatriaatteja kohtaan, oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattieurheilijoiden urat eivät ole vielä saaneet merkittävää huomiota ekspatriaatteja käsittelevältä kirjallisuudelta.

Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee urheilijoiden uran kestävyttä ja miten oma-aloitteinen maastamuutto vaikuttaa siihen. Analysoimalla oma-aloitteisen maastamuuton vaikutuksia uran kestävyden indikaattoreihin: terveyteen, onnellisuuteen ja tuottavuuteen, tämä tutkimus pyrkii edistämään oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattieurheilijoiden uraan sekä uran kestävyteen liittyvää tietoa. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on myös tutkia erilaisten kontekstuaalisten- ja yksilöllisten tekijöiden mahdollisia vaikutuksia oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattieurheilijoiden urien kestävyteen.

Tutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoiduista haastatteluista oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattieurheilijoiden kanssa. Haastatellut urheilijat olivat kolmesta eri urheilulajista. Kerätyn laadullisen aineiston analysoinnissa käytettiin temaattista analyysia, jonka avulla on saatu näkemyksiä oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattieurheilijoiden uran kestävydestä. Löydökset osoittavat, kuinka oma-aloitteisella maastamuutolla on vaihtelevia vaikutuksia kaikkiin kolmeen uran kestävyden indikaattoreihin. Oma-aloitteisena ekspatriaattieurheilijana olemisen näkyvimpiä vaikutuksia havaitaan muun muassa työllistettävyyteen, työtyytyväisyyteen ja suorituskykyyn liittyen. Tutkimuksessa tunnistetaan myös erilaisia kontekstuaalisia- ja yksilöllisiä tekijöitä, jotka vaikuttavat oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattieurheilijoiden kokemuksiin ulkomailla sekä heidän uransa kestävyteen. Löydösten joukosta erityisen vaikuttavaksi erottuvia tekijöitä ovat organisaatioiden tarjoamat resurssit, perhe sidosryhmänä ja motivaatio kehittyä.

Tämän tutkimuksen johtopäätökset esittävät käytännön implikaatioita oma-aloitteisille ekspatriaattieurheilijoille ja heitä työllistävälle organisaatioille. Oma-aloitteisia ekspatriaattieurheilijoita työllistävien organisaatioiden tulee pyrkiä lisäämään ymmärrystään urheilijoiden tyypillisistä haasteista ulkomaisissa ympäristöissä. Tämän lisäksi heidän

mahdollisuuksiaan tukea oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattuurheilijoiden urakehitystä entistä kokonaisvaltaisemmin. Oma-aloitteisille ekspatriaattuurheilijoille tarkoitetut implikaatiot korostavat heidän oman toimintansa merkitystä hallitakseen uriaan entistä kestävämmiin, keskeisimpien sidosryhmien huomioimista päätöksenteossa ja urheilu-urien aikana hankittujen resurssien arvoa.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable Careers, Expatriation, Self-Initiated Expatriates, Athletes, Athletic Careers

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1 Introduction

The careers of professionals across different industries consist of several phases, transitions and contexts that contribute to the satisfaction and overall well-being of individuals. The growing awareness related to the diversity of careers and various forms of well-being has also shown as increased attention for studies on career sustainability (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015; De Vos et al., 2020). A sustainable career can be described as a career that aligns with the preferences and personal values of an individual and allows the professional to maintain health, happiness and productivity throughout the different stages of their career (De Vos et al., 2020). As the concept is rather new, there are still several topics left to be discovered through research on sustainable careers. This study contributes to the research on sustainable careers by using the “process model of sustainable careers” by De Vos et al. (2020) as the main framework of the study and applying it to a new context.

Recent decades have also shown notable changes related to the mobility of professionals between countries and continents. Multinational corporations are spreading to new locations, transportation between countries is becoming increasingly feasible and the types of professionals working in foreign countries, along with the countries that they relocate to, has become more diverse (Bonache et al., 2018). These individuals, who are either assigned to relocate to work in foreign subsidiaries of their organizations or apply for a job in a new organization abroad themselves, are called expatriates (Andresen et al., 2014; McNulty & Brewster, 2017).

In the past, expatriates were typically considered to mainly consist of highly ranked employees being assigned to work abroad by their organizations (Bonache et al., 2018). Today, expatriates are commonly divided into the previously described assigned expatriates (AE) and self-initiated expatriates (SIE), who decide themselves to move abroad in order to work for a new employer (Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Bonache et al., 2018). This type of expatriate has existed for centuries, and they are most likely an equally vast if not even a greater population than assigned expatriates (Brewster et al.,

2021). However, they have been studied to a lesser extent than AEs, as they have only been studied in a business context for a couple of decades (Inkson et al., 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Doherty et al., 2013).

As SIEs have received more attention from researchers, certain themes have risen to be more popular than others. According to the literature review by Brewster et al. (2021) the most covered areas in SIE literature have been the motives of SIEs to relocate, different types of SIEs, expatriate adjustment of SIEs and their career outcomes. Extending the knowledge related to less studied types of SIEs is encouraged, thus supporting the selection of SIE athletes to be the studied in this thesis.

Similar to other industries and professions, the movement of athletes between countries has become an increasingly common phenomenon (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019). Athletes relocate to foreign countries for reasons such as competing in higher level competitions, development in their profession, increased salaries and experiencing new cultures. Athletes most often relocate as SIEs, meaning that a lot of the same challenges related to being an SIE also apply to athletes choosing to spend parts of their careers abroad (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019). In addition to the challenges of being an SIE, the demands and stressors characteristic to athletic careers in general can impact the career sustainability of athletes in various ways (Hanton et al., 2005; Richardson & McKenna, 2020). However, the extent to which SIE athletes and their careers have been studied by expatriate literature is still fairly limited, which further supports the objectives of this study (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019).

1.1 Research question and objectives of the study

As SIE athletes move abroad to compete in their sport, they are exposed to and must navigate differences and challenges in several contexts. These contextual- and individual factors can impact their health, happiness, performance. The aim of this thesis is to explore how self-initiated expatriation influences the career sustainability of athletes by

analyzing the impacts of self-initiated expatriation on the indicators of career sustainability of SIE athletes. The research question of this thesis is the following:

How does self-initiated expatriation affect the career sustainability of athletes?

In addition to the main research question, the following objectives are included:

Whether and how individual factors impact the career sustainability of self-initiated expatriate athletes?

Whether and how contextual factors impact the career sustainability of self-initiated expatriate athletes?

1.2 Structure

This thesis consists of seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic of the thesis, the research problem and the theoretical framework of the thesis. The three following chapters consist of theory related to the main elements of this thesis: sustainable careers, expatriates and athletes. The fifth chapter presents the methodological choices, along with the reliability and validity of the thesis. In the sixth chapter, the findings of the study are presented. The final chapter concludes the thesis and presents the limitations of the thesis and suggestions for future research.

1.3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on theory related to sustainable careers, expatriates, SIEs and athletes. The main theoretical component of this thesis is the “process model of sustainable careers” by De Vos et al. (2020). According to the model, career sustainability is analyzed through the following indicators in this thesis: health, productivity and happiness. Out of the three dimensions included in the model by De

Vos et al. (2020), this thesis will be limited on the “person” and “context” dimensions of sustainable careers and the “time” dimension will be discussed to a lesser extent.

In this study the “process model of sustainable careers” (De Vos et al., 2020) is applied to the context of self-initiated expatriate athletes, to explore the individual- and contextual factors related to the expatriation of athletes and increase knowledge about the possible impacts that these factors have on the indicators of career sustainability. Existing theory related to SIEs and athletes is used to develop appropriate research methods and to provide a better understanding of the characteristics of SIE athletes.

2 Sustainable careers

This chapter discusses the concept of sustainable careers and the “process model of career sustainability” by De Vos et al. (2020). The chapter further discusses the indicators- and dimensions of career sustainability before presenting some of the previous studies on the topic.

2.1 Sustainable career framework

Sustainable career as a concept in its current extent was first proposed by Van der Heijden & De Vos (2015, p. 7) and they have provided a definition of it as:

“the sequence of an individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual”.

By *continuity over time*, Van der Heijden & De Vos (2015, p. 7) suggest that due to the ever-changing course of careers, it is critical to understand the long-term influence of choices and that the needs of a certain point in one’s career should be met in a way that is not harmful for their future situation. *Social space* refers to the various contexts that career sustainability is interconnected to, such as work, family and life outside of work (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 8). Studies have found proof for this correlation between career sustainability and resources in different contexts such as support from family members and management (Richardson & McKenna, 2020; Bozionelos et al., 2020). To demonstrate, if a person advances in their career and is offered new role that offers better salary and increased responsibility, they may be required to travel more at the expense of time spent with family, which could mitigate the positive effects of this career opportunity from the long-term sustainability perspective (De Vos et al., 2020).

Furthermore, despite the connectedness with other stakeholders, it is ultimately the individuals who know best what is beneficial for their career, and it is their own responsibility to make decisions that facilitate the sustainability of their careers and find

meaning, which is what the authors mean by *individual agency* (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 8). Finally, *meaning* refers to the personal preferences of an individual and what they truly value in their career (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, pp. 4-5). Being aware of what it is that brings meaning to an individual is a necessity for career sustainability.

Building on the findings of Van der Heijden & De Vos (2015), De Vos et al. (2020) provide a “process model of sustainable careers”, presented in figure 1, that is amongst the first attempts in bringing more consensus to the topic of sustainable careers and creating ways to analyze the sustainability of careers. According to De Vos et al. (2020), the fundamental idea regarding career sustainability can be described as positive long-term outcomes that are beneficial for both the individual and the stakeholders affected by these outcomes. However, the person should be recognized as the main contributor regarding their career.

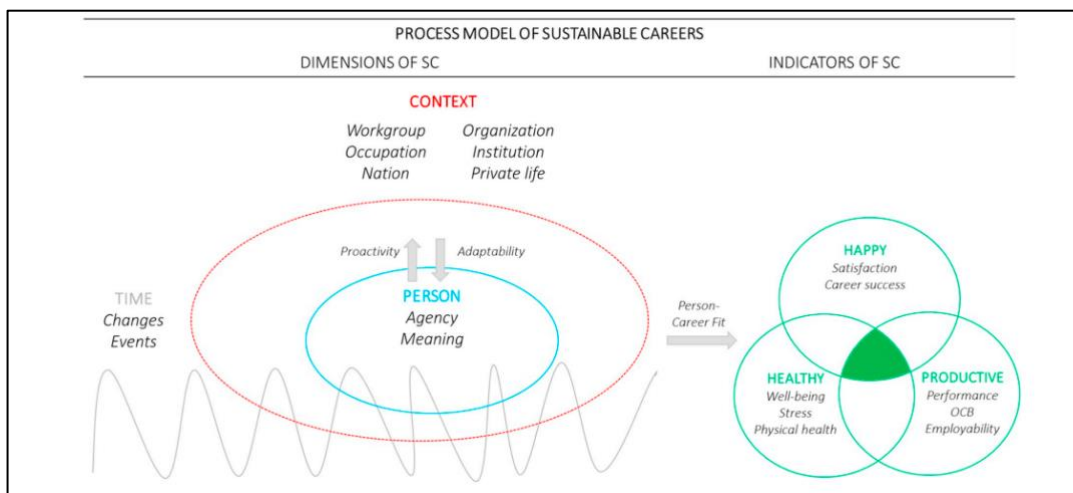


Figure 1 Process model of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020).

The long-term perspective is emphasized due to the dynamic nature of careers and them being prone to changes in the individual and their environment (De Vos et al., 2020). Thus, research on the topic should not be focused merely on a single period of an individual’s career but reflect on the career in its entirety. Further, by drawing on person-career fit theory, where the suitability of careers is seen to depend on how well a

person's career aspirations meet with the career opportunities that organizations can offer them, De Vos et al. (2020) identify strong person-career fits throughout the course of careers as being characteristic to sustainable careers (Cha et al., 2009).

2.2 Indicators and dimensions of career sustainability

Building on the findings of previous research on the topic (eg. Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015) De Vos et al. (2020) suggest sustainable careers to be approached through the following indicators: health, happiness and productivity. These indicators are argued by the authors to represent sustainable careers, as they are considered as requirements for overall success and well-being in different aspects of life, not only to the individual but also to their stakeholders.

According to De Vos et al. (2020), Health refers to physical and mental well-being of individuals and how they are affected by different career choices. The happiness indicator represents the overall satisfaction and feelings of accomplishment an individual gains from the course of their entire career. The authors further describe that happiness in this context demonstrates how well an individual's career aligns with their personal preferences such as career goals or work-life balance. In other words, whether it brings meaning to the individual. However, these preferences may change along the different stages of one's career, and new needs may arise to challenge what a person perceives as career success (De Vos et al., 2020).

According to De Vos et al. (2020), the productivity indicator is demonstrative not only to how well a person performs their job in the present moment but also how their current situation affects their potential and career opportunities in the future. Similar to the other indicators of career sustainability, the long-term perspective must be adopted to truly understand the outcomes of what is perceived as being productive in a certain point of time in one's career (De Vos et al., 2020). For example, changes in context and time may cause the skills that a person has gained in a previous role to become outdated so

that their productivity in a that specific role and point of time no longer translates to potential that would benefit their employability in the present.

In addition to the three indicators, the authors also propose three dimensions that should be utilized in analysis related to sustainable careers. According to De Vos et al. (2020), understanding person, context and time, in addition to their interactions with each other is crucial to sustainable careers. The person dimension is based on the notion that individuals need to manage their career through different phases in their career, which is supported by certain competencies and the ability to adapt to changes that happen during the span of their career (De Vos et al., 2020). In order to manage their careers in a way that is sustainable to them and adapt to changes accordingly, individuals should also be aware of their own needs and preferences that are related to their career, thus finding what is meaningful to them. Therefore, individual factors are to be considered when analyzing career sustainability.

Another dimension that De Vos et al. (2020) find important when analyzing the sustainability of a career is context. As an individual's career is influenced by and influences various contexts such as the organizations they work in, different institutes in their environment along with their personal life, the authors state the importance of including contextual factors in the analysis of career sustainability. The context dimension concerns the different stakeholders and contexts that are interconnected to an individual's career and their role in the development of career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020).

The third dimension, time, is included to analyze how sustainability evolves and changes during a career (De Vos et al., 2020). As career sustainability revolves around the relationship between career development and the goals and preferences of an individual, sometimes the sustainability or non-sustainability of certain actions, decisions or changes can be determined only years after they have happened or began. To conclude,

De Vos et al. (2020) state that career sustainability is not the final result of but instead a feature of career development.

2.3 Existing research on sustainable careers

As stated, sustainable careers as a concept is still rather new and the ideas of Van der Heijden & De Vos (2015) and De Vos et al. (2020) have been available for further research only less than a decade as of now. Thus, the amount of research where sustainable careers are viewed through the same dimensions and analyzed using the same indicators as in this thesis is understandably somewhat limited. Yet, the findings of Van der Heijden & De Vos (2015) and De Vos et al. (2020) have already been used to analyze career sustainability in different contexts and presenting some of the existing studies in this thesis will provide better understanding of what has been learned about sustainable careers and possibly enable linking findings made in this thesis to previous research.

Bozionelos et al. (2020) find support for the contextual and agency dimensions of the sustainable careers model by De Vos et al. (2020), as they study the effectiveness of training programs provided by employers. Regarding the agency dimension of the model, an individuals' openness towards new experiences is found to enhance an individual's learning from the training, which further positively affects their career sustainability through increased employability and better job performance (Bozionelos et al., 2020). This indicator of career sustainability is also impacted positively when the training of an individual is supported by their supervisor, which relates to the context dimension of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020).

The motives behind career decisions and choices are also argued to be a potential factor affecting the indicators of sustainable careers (Auvinen et al., 2020). For instance, individuals who are motivated to lead are more likely to have sustainable careers leadership roles than those in such roles with low levels of motivation towards leading others. The motivation to lead is found to be connected to all three indicators of career sustainability amongst individuals in leadership roles, further supporting the role of

agency in the development of sustainable careers. However, Auvinen et al. (2020) also acknowledge the possible effects that contextual factors, such as not being provided enough resources to lead effectively, may have on the motivation to lead. This further demonstrates the dynamic relationship between contextual and individual factors described by De Vos et al. (2020).

The model by De Vos et al. (2020) has also been used to study the career sustainability of solo self-employed workers, who are independent owners of businesses that have no other employees (van den Groenendaal et al., 2022). The findings of van den Groenendaal et al. (2022) provide insights on the interaction between the indicators of career sustainability, as high levels of happiness and/or productivity amongst solo self-employed workers with specific self-management patterns is found to enable them being content with their careers despite having clear problems regarding their health. This is also an interesting demonstration of the “person” dimension of sustainable careers, as the findings show how individuals can prioritize health, happiness and productivity differently (De Vos et al., 2020). Additionally, different self-management patterns are found to have varying effects on career sustainability, which supports the connection between the agency and context dimensions (De Vos et al., 2020; van den Groenendaal et al., 2022).

3 Self-initiated expatriates

3.1 Definition of expatriate

Due to globalization, the amount of MNCs has kept on increasing in the past decades, which has consequently led to a vast population of professionals finding themselves moving to a foreign country because of work. Originally the need for this movement of professionals was dominantly a consequence of MNCs willing to have better control over their foreign subsidiaries (Harzing, 2001). This was done by assigning an employee from the parent country, typically a manager of some sort, to oversee operations and increase communication between the organization and its subsidiary. Nowadays, MNCs tend to assign employees to subsidiaries for more strategic purposes, such as transfer of knowledge both ways and personnel development (Cheong et al., 2019). These kinds of employees working in the subsidiaries of MNCs, who today would be called AEs, were for a certain period of time the common perception of all expatriates (Bonache et al., 2018). Nowadays, expatriates are categorized into different types of expatriates depending on aspects such as the initiation for the relocation, length of stay and support received from organizations (Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Andresen et al., 2014).

In recent decades, changes related to global mobility and the reasons behind professionals deciding to move abroad to work, have led to various interpretations of the term expatriate, which has been found to cause challenges in defining who are perceived as being an expatriate (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). These inaccurate or varying definitions can also hinder the progress of research related to expatriates. Therefore, researchers have attempted to find more clarity related to the subject by identifying clear definitions and criteria for expatriates (Andresen et al., 2014; McNulty & Brewster, 2017).

Andresen et al. (2014, p. 2308) define the term expatriate as “an individual who moves to another country while changing the dominant place of residence and executes legal work abroad.”. McNulty & Brewster (2017, p. 46) have similar findings related to the

definition of expatriate but go in to more detail by using the term business expatriate, who they define as “legally working individuals who reside temporarily in a country of which they are not a citizen in order to accomplish a career-related goal, being relocated abroad either by an organization, by self-initiation or directly employed within the host-country.”

3.2 Different types of expatriate

In addition to defining expatriation in general, there is also the need to differentiate between the different types of expatriates in this thesis. As mentioned, the movement of professionals between countries has become more versatile and types of expatriates have surfaced. Therefore, it would be problematic to discuss expatriation without describing more specifically what type of expatriate is in question, as the term expatriate is not applicable to be used as a universal concept to cover all people who work in a foreign country (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Therefore, a brief introduction of the two most studied types of expatriates, SIEs and AEs, is provided in this chapter to better understand SIEs and what differentiates them from AEs.

For someone to be identified as a migrant, it is enough that they live in a foreign country and have a legal job in that country (Andresen et al., 2014). However, in defining AEs and SIEs, perhaps the most important differentiating characteristic is the initiation of the relocation. For AEs, the relocation to another country is initiated by the expatriate’s employer and the person moves abroad as an employee of their current organization (Andresen et al., 2014). Contrary to AEs, for SIEs the initial decision to move abroad and work there comes from SIEs themselves as they apply for a job in a foreign country and are typically hired with similar contracts as locals (Biemann & Andresen, 2010).

When relocating, AEs often know how long they are going to stay in the foreign country, as the length of their foreign assignment is typically decided beforehand by their employer (Biemann & Andresen, 2010). SIEs on the contrary, are typically uncertain about how long they will stay in the host-country or if they will return at all, as they

either have no predetermined organization to return to or do not plan to return (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Another difference between these two groups is related to their motives regarding the relocation (Andresen et al., 2014). The motives for SIEs to relocate are often related to their personal goals or preferences, whereas the motives for AEs to relocate are typically related to the needs of their organization. SIEs have also been found to relocate at a younger age and to be more willing to switch between organizations than AEs (Biemann & Andresen, 2010).

3.3 Existing research on SIEs

The concept of self-initiated expatriation has been studied now for a couple of decades, as Inkson et al. (1997) presented the concept of overseas experience as an alternative for assigned expatriation (Doherty et al., 2013). Self-initiated expatriation in their current extent can be seen to be introduced in Suutari & Brewster (2000), where the authors presented the self-initiated foreign work experience, which they refer to as SFE, that differed from the way research had been focused on AEs during that time. (Bonache et al., 2018). Later, Jokinen et al. (2008) introduced the term SIEs (Doherty et al., 2013). Since then, there have been varying opinions on the criteria of SIEs, as some authors have even insisted that only highly skilled individuals fall into the category of SIEs (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014), whereas others have called for a more inclusive view on SIEs (McNulty & Brewster, 2020).

A common approach in research related to SIEs has been to compare them to AEs in different ways (eg. Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Doherty et al., 2011; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). For instance, these studies comparing these two types of expatriates have shown differences in aspects such as the motives to expatriate (Doherty et al., 2011), how motives affect the outcomes of expatriation (Selmer & Luring, 2012) and adjustment to foreign environments (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). However, as the focus of this thesis is on SIE athletes, the aim in this chapter is not so much to compare these two types of expatriates, but instead provide an overview of some of the existing knowledge related

to SIEs. Yet, these comparisons to AEs are seen useful to highlight the reasons and outcomes of certain findings related to SIEs.

For AEs, the country that they relocate to is often determined by the needs of their organization, whereas SIEs have more freedom to choose where they wish to relocate and have been found to place more emphasis on the location as a motive to relocate than AEs (Doherty et al., 2011). Doherty et al. (2011) speculate that the location matters more to SIEs due to them typically staying longer periods of time in the foreign country and having less security related to their employment than organization-backed AEs, therefore gravitating more towards countries where they have alternative options for employment.

Selmer & Luring (2012) study the reasons behind SIEs relocating and the effects that these different motives have on their work outcomes. The findings of their study suggests that SIEs tend to relocate for reasons such as increased salary, career development and adventure. Adventure as a main motive to relocate shows a positive correlation with job satisfaction for SIES, whereas career development as a motive is linked to higher job performance. On the contrary, no clear correlations are found between financial gains as the main motive to relocate and the work outcomes of SIEs (Selmer & Luring, 2012).

Froese & Peltokorpi (2013) find differences and characteristics in the cross-cultural adjustment of SIEs and AEs. According to the authors, AEs tend to have higher job satisfaction than SIEs, which is argued to be an outcome of AEs typically working in higher ranked positions than SIEs. SIEs working under local management and local supervisors is also seen as a potential factor regarding their job satisfaction, as they are likely more prone to cultural differences in their roles (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). However, SIEs are also found to be better in adjusting to interacting with locals, which is argued to be connected to SIEs typically spending more time in the host-country than AEs, thus becoming more proficient in the local language and gaining better understanding the local culture. In terms of adjustment to work related matters and to

the foreign environment, Froese & Peltokorpi (2013) do not find clear differences between the two types of expatriate.

4 Athletes

This chapter discusses athletic careers from several perspectives. First, the career trajectories of athletes are introduced on a general level before moving on to the concept of expatriation in sports. The chapter will then present existing theory related to the career sustainability of athletes and SIE athletes, before summarizing the theoretical background of the study.

4.1 Careers of athletes

The career trajectories of athletes involve certain peculiarities that are not found in most other industries. Wylleman & Reints (2010) provide a lifespan model of sports careers and conceptualize the transitions professional athletes go through in their career. According to their lifespan model, an athletes career consists of transitions related to athletic-, psychological-, psychosocial- and academic vocational level. The transitions in the athletic- and psychosocial level are found to be most applicable to the contents of this thesis and therefore the decision is made to not discuss psychological- and academic vocational levels in more depth.

Wylleman & Reints (2010) further discuss two different types of transitions, which can be defined as normative and non-normative transitions. Transitions that can be expected and are voluntary are considered normative, whereas non-normative transitions are more unpredictable and often unwanted. For instance, the transition to professional sports represents a normative transition and a sudden injury that forces an individual to end their athletic career represents a non-normative transition (Wylleman & Reints, 2010).

According to Wylleman & Reints (2010) the first transition, from initiation of the sport into the development stage, happens before an athlete turns 15. According to the authors, this stage is typically where talent and potential for a professional career is first truly recognized. Athletes then make the second transition around the age of 20, when

they move from development to mastery and start competing at the professional level (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). This transition to professional sports is a stage that can be especially stressful for young athletes and lead to long-term issues regarding their mental health and overall career development (Pilkington et al., 2024). Receiving support related to mental health in this transition is therefore especially important, as it has the potential to guide young athletes in building a sustainable foundation for their careers.

According to Wylleman & Reints (2010), the mastery stage typically lasts approximately ten years before athletes make the transition to the final stage of their athletic level. At this point in their career, typically before they turn 40, athletes reach the point can no longer compete in their sport professionally and need to transition to a new phase (Choi & Kim, 2021). This is what Wylleman & Reints (2010) define as the final stage in their lifespan model, discontinuation. This is when athletes retire from professional sports and often the main reason for such early retirement from professional sports is the physical stress that athletes endure during their careers. In many cases, athletes have to retire at a point where they would still like to continue their athletic careers (Richardson & McKenna, 2020).

Athletes can prepare themselves for this transition from athletic careers to other domains in several ways. Despite the shortness of athletic careers, athletes have been found to benefit from resources that they have gained during their athletic career in their careers after (Richardson & McKenna, 2020). The transition can be made easier through means such as education and building networks during athletic careers. Research has also shown possible differences in the preparation for this transition between types of athletes, as team sports athletes are found to retire at a later age and to have better financial situations than those competing in individual sports (de Subijana et al., 2020). According to the authors, team sports athletes also have higher levels of education upon retirement than individual sports athletes.

Further, the career trajectories of athletes are often rather unpredictable and make it challenging for athletes to plan their lives further than a couple of years. Athletes tend to relocate several times during their athletic careers, as can be seen in the study by Veleman (2018), who makes an interesting comparison by comparing the migratory trajectories of professional football players to “a game of snakes and ladders”. According to Veleman’s (2018) study based on the careers of over 4700 professional footballers, the average footballer relocates six times during their career, which translates to the player changing employers every two years when considering the typical length of athletic careers. Out of the careers analyzed, 40% included relocations between countries. Veleman (2018) further describes how the trajectories are different for players competing in lower levels compared to the very elite. The careers of elite footballers, who represent a marginal minority, continuously progress to higher levels with better wages across different leagues and countries. On the contrary, many low status players struggle to keep earning a living from football and move mostly domestically (Veleman, 2018).

4.2 Expatriation in sports

Previous research on people working in sports abroad has often been from a sports management perspective and the expatriate side of this phenomenon has received less attention (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019). Athletes, coaches and other personnel working professionally in the sports industry face the same challenges as “traditional” expatriates when moving to a foreign country to work. However, the size of this group of professionals working in sports is rather marginal compared to other industries, which likely is one reason behind the scarceness of studies related to sports expatriates.

One of the effects of globalization in the world of professional sports is the movement of athletes between different countries and leagues. Sports organizations are investing remarkable amounts into the search and recruitment of new talent from other countries and continents. Most of the athletes who relocate to a foreign country fill the criterion of SIEs, as they actively seek opportunities to further their career in other countries and

initiate the moves themselves without an organization having their back (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019). However, there are certain exceptions where athletes could be seen to fill the criterion of AEs, such as when players in certain team sports relocate to another country as a loan player, who returns to the organization that loaned them out after a predetermined period of time.

As the professional careers of athletes tend to end before their 40s, the average age of this kind of expatriate is typically relatively young (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Similar to other SIEs, have no guarantees of receiving notable support related to matters outside of their work and if they do, the received support tends to be informal support from within the workgroup (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019). The amount of support received by athletes is also highly dependent on the level that they compete in. For example, a person playing football, one of the most popular and commercially profitable sports in the world, in a top division team within a country where the domestic league is followed by millions, will most likely receive plenty of support in the form of housing, travel and other everyday matters outside of football from their organization. The reality for many athletes in less valuable sports or in lower levels, on the other hand, is that they cannot rely on the support from their organization and have to take care of organizing accommodation and other basic needs by themselves with much lower salaries than the athletes earning millions.

Egilsson & Dolles (2017) demonstrate the often-harsh reality of young athletes looking to create themselves a career in sports by moving abroad and how the mental health of athletes may not necessarily be a main priority for organizations. Egilsson & Dolles (2017) found that the support received from organizations can be rather limited considering the amount of stress encountered by the players in an extremely competitive setting. The study was conducted by interviewing young football players from Iceland, who had moved abroad to play in the academies of professional clubs in hopes of a football career in Europe. The findings also show that the organizations were focused more on developing the technical and physical abilities of their players, whereas the players felt

that their psychological development was not as critical and wished that they would have received more support in that area (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017).

4.3 Career sustainability of athletes in general

Before discussing the career sustainability aspect of athletes living abroad, the existing findings related to the career sustainability of athletes in general need to be discussed. Research on the career sustainability of athletes is still in its early stages, which is understandable as the concept of sustainable careers itself is rather new (Richardson & McKenna, 2020; De Vos et al., 2020; Choi & Kim, 2021). According to the thematic analysis by Choi & Kim (2021), the sustainability aspect has been included in studies regarding athletes mostly from an environmental sustainability perspective instead of using the framework of De Vos et al. (2020) to analyze the careers of athletes. Further, Choi & Kim (2021) suggest that career sustainability of athletes can be analyzed from an athletic career perspective or in the case of student athletes, be focused on the resources they gain during their athletic careers that support their careers in other professions after sports.

Richardson & McKenna (2020) provide insight on the sustainability of sports careers and is one of the few studies in this field so far that include the concept of sustainable careers as described in Van der Heijden & De Vos (2015) and De Vos et al. (2020). Based on the experiences of male professional athletes and Professional Development Managers (PDM), the authors find that the characteristics of professional sports make it challenging for individuals to have sustainable careers as athletes. Yet, the study does not find barriers for athletes to have sustainable careers outside of sports, for example after ending their athletic career.

Richardson & McKenna (2020) use the Job-Demands-Resources Model (JD-R Model) to analyze career sustainability. The JD-R model insists that the combination of the demands and resources of a job are seen to determine the well-being and performance of an individual (Demerouti et al., 2001). Demands such as high workload, have a

negative influence on the well-being and performance of individuals, whereas resources such as support from colleagues correlate positively with well-being and performance.

The demands of athletic careers can be divided into three categories: physical, psychological and social (Richardson & McKenna, 2020). While the physical demands for athletes are certainly rather extreme compared to many other professions, their job also requires a significant amount of mental strength and ability to handle stress related to their performance. Additionally, similar to other public figures such as musicians or politicians whose actions and careers receive plenty of attention from the media, there is also a social demands aspect related to the careers of many athletes (Richardson & McKenna, 2020). The performances of athletes are public in a way that differs from most other professions, as their competitions are open for spectators and often broadcasted live so that the public can follow their careers and dedicate significant amounts of their own time to see their favorite teams and athletes compete. These social demands of sports add even more pressure on athletes, as in times of poor results or failure they might feel that they are not only letting themselves down, but also the fans who support them (Richardson & McKenna, 2020).

Regarding the demanding nature of athletic careers, Hanton et al. (2005) study the different stressors that athletes face during their careers and categorize them into competitive and organizational challenges. Competitive stressors are rather universal and apply to most athletes as they are characteristic to competing in sports. Competitive stressors arise from the need to remain in great condition both mentally and physically, along with the pressure to do well in competitions. These high expectations can cause anxiety that further can have a spillover to their life outside of sports and thus affect their overall well-being (Hanton et al., 2005).

According to Hanton et al. (2005), organizational stressors have a greater influence on the performance of athletes than competitive stressors. Organizational stressors are more contextual and related to the specific environment where an athlete competes.

Athletes need to balance significant amounts of traveling, working lengthy periods of time very closely with team-mates and staff, while also taking care of everyday matters outside of their work. A significant organizational stressor typical to sports is uncertainty that is related to the employment status and contracts of athletes (Hanton et al., 2005). In many team sports, organizations can sell or trade the rights of a player to another team without any discussions with the player.

The findings of Richardson & McKenna (2020) show that these previously discussed demands and stressors are one of the main reasons behind why it is difficult for athletes to create sustainable careers in sports. However, these same demands that have negative correlations with the three indicators of career sustainability, can also act as motivators enhancing the performances of athletes, therefore increasing their career sustainability (Richardson & McKenna, 2020). For example, competing in front of an audience can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress, but it can also have an encouraging effect that helps the athlete perform better.

Regarding the resources side of their study, Richardson & McKenna (2020) find support for a positive relationship between various resources gained during athletic careers and the career sustainability of athletes. Resources related to physical maintenance such as doctors and other staff are found to support the long-term health of athletes, whereas the role of family is found to be crucial in the transition phase from athletic careers. According to Richardson & McKenna (2020), attention from the public not only motivates athletes to better performances during their athletic careers but also potentially opens doors in future careers after sports. Other resources such as studying during athletic careers, savings and learned discipline are also considered to be assets for future careers.

Dohsten et al. (2020) also find evidence for certain types of coaching potentially being a potential factor in the career sustainability of athletes. When coaches use a coaching style that shows care for the coached athlete, they are found to have increased ability to

affect the development of an athlete by being aware of the specific needs of the individual. However, such relationships between coaches and athletes also include the risk of the athlete's non-sustainable needs being supported by the coach (Dohsten et al., 2020).

4.4 Career sustainability of SIE athletes

Moving on to the context of SIE athletes, where there is still a lack of research related to studies analyzing the career sustainability of SIE athletes and expatriate athletes using the "process model of sustainable careers" by De Vos et al. (2020) that needs to be acknowledged. However, van Bakel & Salzbrenner (2019) provide insight on the main motives for athletes moving abroad, typical challenges they face as expatriates and the main sources of support during their time in a foreign country. The findings of their study are used to provide insight on expatriation in sports and act as examples of the impacts that different contextual and individual factors can have on the indicators of career sustainability.

Regarding the agency dimension, findings of the study show that the most common motivators for athletes to continue their career in a new country are related to gaining experience from new environments and challenges (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019). Additionally, increased salary, personal dreams of participating in certain competitions or leagues and higher level of competition are other substantial incentives for athletes relocating. In this regard, similar to the findings by Auvinen et al. (2020), which showed that having personal interest towards leadership positions is connected to all three indicators of career sustainability in leaders, the motives behind moving abroad could be a potential factor contributing to the career sustainability of sports expatriates.

Moving to a new country poses both expected and unexpected challenges that one cannot always be fully prepared for. A common challenge for all expatriates is adapting to the culture and norms of the new environment. This phenomenon called expatriate adjustment is amongst the most covered topics in expatriate literature and is often

discussed through the findings by Black (1988) and Black et al. (1991). According to Black (1988), adjustment is the degree of psychological discomfort and uncertainty that individuals go through in new environments.

Black et al. (1991) further divide cross-cultural adjustment to consist of work-, interaction- and general adjustment. In other words, as expatriates become more aware of their new environment at work, in interactions with natives of the host country and in other matters outside of work, this discomfort and uncertainty decreases, and they have better adjusted to the host country. This adjustment has been found to have a positive correlation with job performance (Bhatti et. al, 2013; Kraimer et al., 2001). Therefore, it is a crucial concept in the field of expatriation, as it supports expatriates performing better in their profession.

According to van Bakel & Salzbrenner (2019), the situation is not different with athlete expatriates, as many of the challenges faced by athlete SIEs are directly or indirectly related to cross-cultural adjustment and being away from home, family and friends. In addition to general culture shock and homesickness, there are also specifically work-related contextual factors that sports expatriates encounter in the foreign country. Based on the same study by van Bakel & Salzbrenner (2019), these factors involve differences in the styles and methods used by coaches, language barriers inside- and outside of the organization and complications regarding the payment of wages by the organization. Such work-related challenges are emphasized due to the irregularity of the schedules and working hours of athletes, as their lives do not typically follow the traditional “nine to five” rhythm and their work includes a lot of traveling to different competitions and training camps.

Further related to contextual factors and the support received by expatriate athletes during their time abroad, van Bakel & Salzbrenner (2019) find that most athletes receive at least some support from different stakeholders. However, this support is often informal, as the main sources of support for expatriate athletes are typically fellow team-

mates and coaches. According to the authors, not enough support is provided in areas such as learning the language or adjusting to the local culture. Therefore, the issues seem to be more related to the quality of, rather than the amount of support athletes receive (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019). To address this issue of not providing athletes adequate support, some organizations attempt to help athletes in their different career transitions through career assistance programs (Hong & Minkin, 2023). Such programs are aimed to provide athletes comprehensive support in the various aspects of their career, including their careers outside of sports. As support from organizations has been found to have a positive effect on career sustainability in sports, these kinds of programs could be adopted by the employers of athletes to guide them towards a more sustainable future after athletic careers that can often be non-sustainable (Richardson & McKenna, 2020). However, these kinds of programs are often unavailable for athletes competing professionally in lower levels or in less financially profitable sports (Hong & Minkin, 2023).

4.5 Summary of theoretical background

The concept of career sustainability is based on the idea of a career providing meaning to the individual and consisting of beneficial long-term outcomes for the individual and the stakeholders affected by the career (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015; De Vos et al., 2020). Literature emphasizes the role of the individual in career sustainability and how it evolves throughout careers, whilst also being impacted by the different contexts that a career is connected to. Even though the concept of sustainable careers has already been applied to several contexts and types of professional (eg. Bozionelos et al., 2020; Auvinen et al., 2020; van den Groenendaal et al., 2022), there are still many areas left to be covered. The “process model of sustainable careers” by De Vos et al. (2020) suggests career sustainability to be approached by including health, happiness and productivity as indicators of career sustainability, which are also used to indicate career sustainability in this study. The model also identifies three dimensions; time, context and person, that can be used when analyzing career sustainability. Out of these three dimensions, the person- and context dimension are included in this study.

As the purpose of this study is to explore the career sustainability of SIE athletes, literature related to SIEs, athletic careers and expatriate athletes is also utilized throughout the study. SIEs are individuals who initiate the relocation to work in another country themselves and do not necessarily know beforehand how long they will stay in the foreign country or whether they will return at all (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Andresen et al., 2014). The discussed literature shows how SIEs are also found to differ from AEs in other aspects, such as their motives to relocate and their adjustment to foreign environments (Doherty et al., 2011; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013).

Regarding the type of SIE covered in this study, most athletes competing in foreign leagues fall into the category of SIEs (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019). Literature shows how athletic careers involve certain industry- and occupation related characteristics, such as high physical demands and unpredictable career trajectories, that can limit the sustainability of athletic careers (eg. Hanton et al., 2005; Veleman, 2018; Richardson & McKenna, 2020). The shortness of athletic careers, along with the transitions that athletes typically make from competitive sports to other professions, bring a rather unique aspect into analyzing the career sustainability of SIE athletes.

Literature suggests that the career sustainability of athletes is positively impacted by certain resources that athletes gain and have access to during their athletic careers (Richardson & McKenna, 2020). Furthermore, previous research on athletes moving abroad to compete in their sport has provided insight to the motives, challenges and sources of support for SIE athletes (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019). To conclude, the literature discussed in this chapter acts a basis for the study and gives direction to the methodological choices and findings presented in the following parts of the study.

5 Methodology

The research- and data collection methods of the study are presented in this chapter. In addition, the background information related to the interviewees and factors affecting the reliability of this study are also discussed. The research methodology will be critically assessed to justify the methodological choices made in this study.

5.1 Methodological approach

The methodological approach of this thesis is exploratory qualitative research. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p. 5), qualitative research is suitable when the aim is to gain understanding of a phenomenon that is complex in the sense that it requires context to be considered in the interpretation of data. Therefore, qualitative research is also often used as the initial method to gain understanding of new topics when there is not enough knowledge to adequately utilize quantitative methods (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 5).

Exploratory studies are used to answer the “how” and “why” questions related to a topic and the main advantage of exploratory studies is the ability to adapt when new themes and insights emerge in the research process (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 179). These reasons relate to the methodological choices of this thesis, as the sustainable career concept is rather new to research and the number of studies on the sustainable careers of expatriates, especially self-initiated expatriate athletes, is still rather limited. As the sustainable career model is rather complex and also requires including social space or context as a dimension, a qualitative research approach is seen appropriate (De Vos et al., 2020).

5.2 Data collection methods

As the data in qualitative research is collected from words instead of numbers, there is a possibility of topics being misinterpreted or being left unclear (Saunders et al., 2023,

p. 185). Therefore, it is important to have the opportunity to ask clarifying follow-up questions from interviewees and this can be achieved by using semi-structured- or unstructured interviews as the method for data collection. The data of this study was collected through semi-structured interviews to ensure that the most essential topics are discussed, while also being able to adjust the course of the interview if necessary (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 95).

The data of this study was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with five Finnish athletes. The criteria for the selection of interviewees were that they should all have experience from self-initiated expatriation during their athletic careers. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p. 54), the selection of interviewees in qualitative research should be purposeful, enabling access to appropriate in-depth data that is useful for the study. It is also seen beneficial to include participants with whom the person conducting the study is familiar with or has some sort of contact. Hence, the interviewees were selected through contacts of the author who were found to have first-hand experience of the studied phenomenon.

The interviewees' who were willing to participate in the study were contacted through phone or email and were introduced to the topic and the methods of the study. The participants were informed about the voluntariness of participating in the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the process without any consequences. Interviews were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams, due to geographical restrictions. The interviews were recorded by using the recording-function of Microsoft Teams with consent from the interviewees to enable transcription and more accurate collection of the data. These automatically generated transcriptions were manually checked before the analysis. Durations of the interviews and background information of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Interviewee	Nationality	Age	Sport	Status of athletic career	International experience	Foreign countries during athletic career	Duration of interview
A	Finnish	35-40	Ice hockey	Inactive	11 years	3	51:09
B	Finnish	25-30	Ice hockey	Active	7 years	2	43:26
C	Finnish	25-30	Volleyball	Active	4 years	2	39:50
D	Finnish	25-30	Football	Active	5 years	4	43:21
E	Finnish	25-30	Ice hockey	Active	2 years	1	34:27

Table 1 Sample description

5.3 Data analysis

The data was prepared for analysis by going through the automatically generated transcripts and correcting them by listening to the recorded interviews. The data was made more readable by correcting mistakes in the transcript and filtering out unnecessary repetitive words. Additional words and phrases used by interviewees when thinking what to say next were also cleaned from the data in a way that did not affect the meaning of the data.

The primary method used to analyze the gathered data was thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, the purpose is to identify themes and patterns from the gathered data and label them in a way that allows meanings to be found and further analyzed according to the objectives of the study (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 664). As the study looked to identify themes related to the indicators and dimensions of career sustainability, an abductive approach was used to provide flexibility, whilst also allowing to find connections to the theoretical framework and the objectives of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 24).

The themes that surfaced from the interviews were labeled by using words or short sentences to describe the contents of specific parts of the data, which allowed to identify prominent themes and contrast views between interviewees. In order to better understand the context behind the themes, the interview structure was used as support by gathering identified themes from different interviews under the sections of the interview that they occurred in. Therefore, a connection to the interview structure is apparent in the themes.

5.4 Reliability and validity

The reliability of a study is based on whether the used research methods provide consistent findings, meaning that research done by another individual using the same data and methods would result in the same findings (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 214). According to the authors, reliability of a study requires transparency in terms of the data and methods used, so that they can be later inspected if needed. Several measures have been taken to meet the requirements of reliability in this study. First, the data collected for this study has been recorded so that it can be accurately littered. Interviews were also conducted in the native language of participants to mitigate the risk of a language barrier affecting the findings. In addition, the methods used in the collection- and analysis of the data have been described accurately.

In addition to being reliable, a study also needs to be valid. Validity demonstrates whether the results of a study are applicable to represent the phenomenon that they are used to describe (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 214). This notion was paid attention to in the different stages of the study. The interview structure was designed in a way that serves the objectives of the study and provides answers to the research questions. The selected interviewees all had experience of being an SIE athlete and were able to discuss their experiences in a detailed manner due to the anonymity of the study. The collected data has been analyzed from a neutral point of view and direct quotes have been included in the study to increase transparency.

6 Findings

In this chapter, the findings from the interviews with SIE athletes are presented in two sections. The first section focuses on findings related to the three indicators of career sustainability and the second on the person- and context dimensions of career sustainability.

6.1 Indicators of career sustainability

Following the “process model of sustainable careers” by De Vos et al. (2020), the impacts of expatriation on the career sustainability of SIE athletes are approached through effects on the following indicators: health, happiness and productivity.

6.1.1 Health

In the context of career sustainability, health is seen to consist of both physical- and mental well-being. The interviews showed that expatriation can impact the physical health of athletes in different ways. Most participants either perceived that the state of their physical health had gotten better or did not see any notable changes in their health as a result of being an SIE athlete. Participants had experienced more time to take care of their physical health and also increase their knowledge related to the topic. One interviewee also named better access to resources such as doctors and physiotherapists to have helped their physical health.

“Well if I take country X as an example, there the resources to do thing are so much bigger. They (the organization) have their own doctors, rehab centers and everything, that I’ve certainly received a lot of help for my health from there. So that has at least helped me in a positive way” B

Physical health was found to have been increased through increased freedom to plan the ways to do physical training in between seasons. An interviewee explained how they were able to spend the time between seasons back home maintaining and developing their performance by training independently. Such increased freedom related to training

had helped one the interviewee to better align their training with their personal needs and schedules during their time abroad. This freedom related to physical training had also awakened the interviewees interest towards finding ways to maintain their physical health.

“That’s where you get more freedom. Your season is of course the same length as here in Finland but then you always got to come back here (Finland) for the summer and you’re basically responsible for your own training. Of course there are fitness coaches and others available, they make the programs and so on, but the freedom for the off-season that you get to schedule it yourself and do it according to that certainly had an impact in a positive way.” A

Moving on to mental health, where a majority of the interviewees stated expatriation to ultimately have impacted in a positive way even though most also named significant challenges that occurred during their time abroad. The increased demands related to mental health that the SIE athletes had experienced when abroad were found to support the development of mental resilience and other capabilities. In this regard, the positive aspects seemed to outweigh challenges such as being away from family, which was a common theme in the interviews.

“Especially in country X, there they have so many resources and tools to sort of handle things and different problems. And there they also want to do it (support mental well-being) so it has helped positively. But then of course, it has also been a challenge at times to be so far from your family and the support system that you are used to. So at times it brings its own challenges. But in the end, I would say that I see everything as being positive.” B

Another theme related to mental health was the higher amounts of pressure when competing abroad. This was described as a two-edged sword in the sense that it made times when the team or individual did not perform as well feel worse but then again, also strengthened the positive feelings from good performances. One of the interviewees also described how being in a foreign environment can lead to athletic performances excessively dictating the mood of individuals if they are unable to find things that bring fulfillment outside of sports.

"I would say that I have experienced more feelings of pressure or that for me volleyball has controlled my life, because when there is nothing else, the mental side is the toughest. When you have a good game, you feel good but then when you have a bad game it carries you away quite easily." C

The same interviewee finds that their experiences of being an SIE athlete have supported in finding ways to balance this kind of effects and better process different situations in their sport so that they do not influence other aspects of life as much.

"Perhaps I have had to learn that I have to try and have something outside of the sport with me all the time. Otherwise it is maybe a bit too much to handle and maybe I have learned a little bit to balance it so that the difference between a good and a bad day in my sport does not affect my mood at home as much." C

6.1.2 Happiness

The happiness indicator represents how well the career of an individual aligns with their values, personal needs and what they want to achieve. All of the interviewed athletes felt that their experiences as an expatriate athlete aligned well with their career goals and most stated how playing abroad had been something that they had dreamt about. Advancement to higher levels of competition and developing in more challenging environments was a common theme amongst the participants when discussing about their career satisfaction.

"Especially when I left to country X it was definitely... it had been sort of a dream and a goal for me for so long, that it aligned quite well (with career goals and success) and then brought positive things to it." B

"Yes, I would say that it has had an effect. I feel that I am more content as a professional abroad than in Finland. I just feel like it is more like a dream come true abroad, as you have dreamt about it in the past. In that sense it has impacted my career satisfaction positively, yes." C

"I would say that in a way it is fulfilling your dreams, of course it is up to every player to decide what their goals are. But for me it was clear, that it would be nice to go (play) abroad because in the end, there are not that many spots and only a

few actually get there (to play abroad). So in a positive way, basically I was able to fulfill some of my goals by getting there. “ A

“You want to play in a better and tougher environment, so it helps that the level is higher abroad than in Finland. Thus, it is better and more challenging to be abroad.” D

One of the participants also stated how during the early stages of their athletic career, the alignment between being an expatriate athlete and career success had been more clear than later on. The participant further explained how the focus used to be on continuously progressing towards higher levels, whereas now they were looking more to enjoy competing and getting better in their sport instead of working towards making it to specific leagues or teams. A different interviewee shared how they had been thinking about retiring from their sport but the opportunity to expatriate had reassured them to keep playing.

“While playing in Finland before it (expatriation) I had already been pondering about quitting ice hockey but then once this door opened, I have rediscovered the joy of playing...” E

The interviewees were also asked to describe more specifically some of the aspects related to being an expatriate athlete that have brought them fulfillment and feelings of accomplishment. The answers demonstrated the significance of different contexts related to happiness. Interviewees identified positive effects from both their sport and life outside of sports. For example, good performances in competitions, seeing the team doing well and personal development are stated to provide fulfillment for interviewees in their sport.

“In sports it’s definitely when you succeed in a match, score a goal or something... Do well in a match, win. That gives you the good feelings.” D

“Of course the achievements, you are able to win something, are able to get medals and do well as a team and personally. Of course those bring the most (feelings of accomplishment).” C

Outside of sports and moving from career satisfaction into a wider perspective of life satisfaction, the interviewees named several different ways that being an expatriate athlete had brought them fulfillment in their personal life. The interviews revealed how the expatriate athletes valued the opportunity to experience new cultures and seeing improvements in areas such as language skills, adaptability and social skills.

“The fact that nowadays I am able to communicate and even find it pleasant to communicate in English, I think that is quite enriching and is something that brings feelings of accomplishment. Then maybe being able to communicate a bit in the local language, learn a little about the local customs and seeing different cultures so that you then maybe understand sort of the bigger picture of people and that is perhaps what brings the feeling of fulfillment to you that...like I have actually experienced some cool things and seen new people and new places and so on.” C

The role of family was another theme that surfaced in this regard. For those that had a spouse living in the foreign country with them, it was rewarding to share the experience of living abroad with them and see them prosper in the new environment.

“...In country X, then of course it was when I saw that everything was well with the family. That helped me feel good about myself too, as I was away from home a lot so it was really nice to not have any problems in the personal life.” A

“The good feelings come from family being able to come visit or when my spouse comes to see a game and I score a goal. It feels good to be able to share the joy of success with your own family. “ D

Regarding the impact of expatriation on the balance between being an athlete and personal life, there were rather differing views amongst the interviewed athletes. Some had found it easy to combine being an SIE athlete and personal life, whereas some found that their profession took a toll on their personal-life and how much time and energy they had for other things outside of their athletic career. One of the participants, who had been studying during their athletic career, described how being an athlete abroad had made it challenging to combine sports and other interests such as studies due to their sport consuming significant amounts of their time and energy. On the contrary,

another participant had decided to start studying to make use of the extensive amount of free time they had when playing abroad.

6.1.3 Productivity

As described earlier, the productivity indicator represents not only the individual's performance in their current role but also their future employability. Here, the shortness of athletic careers presents a peculiarity compared to many other industries, as most of athletes know that they will have to transition into completely different professions at a certain point in their career.

When discussing the impacts of expatriation on the performance of the interviewed athletes in their sport, most of the participants found their time competing abroad to having a clear positive impact on how they perform. The interviewees who were the most certain about the positive effects of expatriation, talked about the higher level of competition, more demanding environment and increased pressure being good for their personal development related not only to their sport but also to other domains.

"Yes, it has had an impact. I have developed significantly simply because the demands are higher when playing abroad and there is more pressure and so on. So certainly it has had an impact on me developing perhaps faster than I would have back home" C

"Yes definitely, in every way. In terms of football and then also as a person, which both are related to me becoming a better athlete in sport X..." D

One participant elaborated on how at least in their sport, players are brought into teams from other countries typically to compete in roles where they receive plenty of responsibility and more playing time, which was described in the interviews to have a motivating affect and to facilitate development in the sport.

"Of course, if you get to go abroad then you are typically envisioned a pretty good role in the team so... in that sense, I was always able to play a lot and I was given a lot responsibility, so maybe that is how it (impact on performance) shows." A

Some also highlighted how living abroad with less things to do made it possible to focus more on the sport and thus noticed improvements in their performance.

“I’ve also had more time to focus on ice hockey itself, so I’ve also been able to focus on body maintenance and all that. Also on working on my physical attributes on my own time.” E

Further related to performance, one of the interviewed athletes had been injured a lot during their time as an expatriate and thus was not able to compete as much as described in the previous example. For them, the relocation had impacted their performance positively in a different way. Moving abroad had supported their development through change of environment and gaining access to resources from the organization that had helped them compete and develop in a way that did not make the injuries worse.

In addition to the impact on performance, the interviewees were also asked about their ways to maintain and develop their performance and whether it was impacted by being an expatriate athlete. Many of the interviewed athletes stated how they mostly kept to routines and methods that they have used in their home-country, whilst also acknowledging the need to make some minor changes in order to adjust to the ways of the country and the organization. Yet, some had found that the improvements in available resources had helped them through gaining more knowledge related to the ways to improve their performance in their sport.

“I have not needed to change but you always need to perhaps change some small things so that you can adapt to new places. But ultimately, it does not really change anything that much in my everyday actions.” D

Moving from performance to employability, the interviews indicated expatriation to have a positive impact on the perceived employability of athletes in their sport. Experience from foreign leagues was found to be advantageous when looking for new

opportunities in sports and the most common theme behind this impact was that the level of competition is seen to be better abroad. Having this kind of international experience was found to bring security related to employment within the sport and to increase the number of options to choose from.

“Well, playing abroad in itself during the athletic career, yes it is much better, especially in volleyball in your CV, compared to just playing in Finland. You notice that now there is no longer such fear when a contract ends, that will there be a place to play but instead you even get to sort of choose.” C

Further, some added that these positive impacts that international experiences have on employment as an athlete are also dependent on the location and how well the individual has performed during their time abroad.

“As an athlete, it has definitely contributed to employment. Yes, it has been a big plus to have been able to play abroad. Then, perhaps I would also consider it to be important where you have played and for which club....It’s not just that you’ve been abroad, it’s not enough, something has also needed to happen there.” A

“Yes, of course it looks good considering ice hockey that you have played a few seasons abroad and played well there. Of course it means that you have better chances of getting a good contract for the next season.” E

Furthermore, the interviews showed that athletes also perceive expatriation to have positive effects on their employment after their athletic careers. As the interviewees were all either still active in their athletic careers or had retired from sports only recently, there was still uncertainty related to the roles and industries where they are looking to continue their careers after sports. However, some of the respondents had already acquired or were currently studying for a degree in order to prepare for their career after sports. One of the interviewees had been a student athlete and stated how relocating had made it possible to combine education and being an athlete more fluently than in other countries.

Overall, being an expatriate athlete was found to increase employability outside of sports through aspects such as networks and general international experience. Language skills were a prominent theme in this regard, as all interviewees had experienced improvements in their ability to speak English and other languages. In addition to language skills, experiencing other cultures and being able to adapt to changes in the environment were also identified as resources that expatriate athletes have gained and find valuable for their life after their athletic careers.

“Having seen different people, different countries and ways of doing things. Also, my English skills have improved” D

“When you go to a new country and a new place where you don’t speak the language, it really pushes you outside of your comfort zone.” E

“Maybe that shows adaptability and cooperation skills that you have been able to perform and work abroad for so long. “ C

Majority of the interviewees were interested in continuing their athletic careers abroad. However, when discussing their willingness to seek employment abroad after their athletic careers, opinions varied. Some felt that after spending much of their athletic careers abroad, they would rather find employment in their home-country and settle down. Yet, none of the interviewed SIE athletes saw expatriation after their athletic careers completely impossible. In this regard, as stated by an interviewee, getting to know new people from around the world and creating networks can be seen as a possibility.

“It’s a huge amount of friends and acquaintances that I’ve made (while abroad) and hopefully I’ll get something from those connections in the future. Job opportunities or something. “ A

6.2 Dimensions of career sustainability

Out of the three dimensions of career sustainability proposed in the “process model of career sustainability” (De Vos et al., 2020), the person- and context dimensions are

included in this thesis. These two dimensions represent the different individual- and contextual factors that impact career sustainability.

6.2.1 Contextual factors

As careers of individuals are connected to several different contexts, it is crucial include them in the analysis of career sustainability. In order to better understand the changes in the indicators of career sustainability, the possible impacts of these different contextual factors need to be considered.

The first contextual factor discussed is the **workgroup** context. In the context of athletes, especially athletes in team-sports, the workgroup can be seen to consist of teammates, coaches and other staff who are involved in the athletic side of the organization on a nearly daily basis. Out of these different types of co-workers, physiotherapists and other staff whose tasks revolved around health maintenance were especially present when discussing the impacts of the workgroup. These people were found to be of great importance during expatriation, as their job directly transfers into how the athletes are able to perform in their sport and maintain their health.

Another group that was found to impact career sustainability was teammates. Especially for SIE athletes, who are foreigners in the country, teammates who are citizens of the host-country are found to be means of learning the local culture and having important social contacts outside of work. Teammates also play an important role in determining the overall atmosphere within the team, the significance of which was also emphasized in the interviews.

“I have had very good friends here since the very beginning, in the first few years, who have invited me to a lot of local events and that way I have been able to become a part of the community a bit, which in my opinion makes things a lot easier and is absolutely essential, because otherwise all contacts are on the phone and on Facetime.” C

“If things are not going well there and the team spirit is really bad, then it’s not fun there. Then you dream of returning home.” E

Regarding the **organizational** context, interviewees found it influential how much support they received from their host organizations related to their performance in their sport and also related to their personal life. Support in finding housing and other everyday matters for the expatriate and their family had helped the interviewed athletes focus more on their performance in their sport and to adapt to their new environment.

“In certain countries it has had a really big impact. For example in country X everything was taken care of really easily there, it was really easy to be there because the club and the people handled everything really quickly. It also made it easier to adapt there.” D

The interviews also demonstrated the variety of resources that are available to athletes in some organizations. Receiving support in areas that directly affect performance and well-being, such as physiotherapy, is seen by interviewees to have a great impact on the expatriation experience.

“Well, a really big impact and again I see that it is mostly a positive impact. As I already mentioned, the amount of resources in organization X is so big that you have a professional in almost every area who is there just to help you in their area of expertise. Whether it was a nutritionist, a psychologist or a physiotherapist, there you had access to all those resources.” B

“There was mental coaching available if you needed it, then there was a person specializing in nutritional things... and indeed all health services were easily accessible in every country where I played, so I have got a lot of help there too” A

Regarding the **occupational** context Professional sports often involves many individuals within the team competing for the same role inside the team. The higher the level, the more uncertain employment becomes as there are multiple athletes competing for the same position. This pressure to perform was considered to be a motivator for development but was also stated to have negative effects on mental well-being. One of

the interviewees elaborated on the feelings of pressure that come with being a foreign player in a sports team.

"When you are in a more competitive environment, there's a certain kind of pressure to be worthy of your salary. Of course it is tougher than in Finland, but it comes from the environment. So that is definitely a certain kind of challenge. But at the same time it is also a good thing because everyone wants to get to the next level. So it is sort of a challenge and a positive thing at the same time." D

Another theme that surfaced under the occupational context was differences in coaching and the relationships between players and coaches. Two of the interviewees stated how they had noticed a clear switch in the focus of coaches when going to a foreign country. For the other participant, the change was related to communication, as they found foreign coaches having less discussions with their players than what they were used to. The other interviewee explained how coaches abroad were more result oriented and did not focus as much on development. However, the interviewee ultimately saw these higher expectations to have positive effects on their performance.

"...And perhaps what I noticed in the beginning when I moved abroad was that coaches no more tried to develop you or were patient. Instead, abroad the expectations are perhaps a bit more based on results. Everything is ok as long as you get results. But there is not a lot of coaching related to technique. It's more like you just have to make things work because that is what you are paid to do, that you have reached a certain level and then you have to be able to perform. And maybe that level of demand and that sort of pressure are the challenges that are in fact bigger than when playing back home. But at the same time I also see it as a positive side that there is that certain level of demand." C

In addition to the athletes themselves experiencing culture shock due to different coaching methods and new environments, the athletes can similarly be something that the locals are not used to, which can have an effect on their ability to support the newcomers in their new environment. This can be seen in the experiences of an interviewee who joined an organization that did not have extensive experience of European players playing for them.

“The first year at organization X was really tough. So maybe in some way we could have received more support and help in that first year. We also happened to be the first Europeans on our team in about 10 years, so even though everything was like a culture shock to us, we were also a pretty big culture shock for our coaching staff and for the other players.” B

The interviews also revealed the host-country itself and its characteristics, such as culture and language, having differing impacts on the career sustainability of SIE athletes, as interviewees discussed about many different aspects related to the **national** context. As mentioned earlier, many of the interviewees had seen the opportunity to experience foreign cultures as fulfilling and providing them personal growth in the form of independence and language skills. Many of the SIE athletes acknowledged experiencing initial culture shock but overall, cultural differences were mostly seen as having more positive than negative impacts on the indicators of career sustainability.

“If I were to think about country X and there the cultural difference is definitely big compared to Finland. But I don’t know, maybe I just thought of it as a positive thing. Because it was different, it gave me a good feeling....For example, the only difficult thing there was that not everyone spoke English. So in that sense it can also make it difficult.” D

“Well, yes especially when I went to country X that first year was really a pretty big shock and it was like a battlefield, where you kind of learned the ways of a new country and got used to it. And it was also pretty tough. But in hindsight, I still see it as a positive even though it was not always easy. “ B

The interviewees had all relocated for the first time in their early twenties and many talked about how they had become more independent because of these experiences in new environments. The interviews also showed how the SIE athletes had needed to make extra efforts to stick to their cooking and eating habits that differed from the local food culture but what they had found most suitable for them.

Another aspect related to the foreign environment that was found to have an impact on the indicators of career sustainability was the city where SIE athletes had lived while abroad. The opportunities for free-time activities not only for the athlete but also for

members of family was found important regarding happiness and mental health. One of the interviewees described how living in a city with mountains and nature nearby had supported their mental health.

“Well, if we talk about my team and where it was located, it was a really wonderful location with mountains. Being close to nature and being able to see the mountains as far as the eyes can see also had an effect. That had a positive impact also on my mental health.” E

The findings related to **private life** showed how much of an impact family and friends have on the careers of SIE athletes. Those with spouses described a definite positive effect of their spouses relocating with them. Living in a different country than the spouse had been a significant challenge for interviewees and one of the participants identified the support from family members to be the most important factor regarding all three indicators of career sustainability. For those with children, the role of the spouse was even more significant, as the profession of athletes typically includes a fair amount of traveling. The presence of the spouse is found to also allow better focus on the athletic careers of SIE athletes.

“Yes, I have noticed that it is very important that you have family (with you abroad)... For example, the first time I went abroad I was alone. So of course it was more difficult. But now I have my spouse here all the time so I notice it is like... Everything is easier and nicer and I find myself being happier.” D

“And then of course, a huge thanks goes to my spouse. Raising the children was after all completely... or not completely but much more their responsibility than mine. So I was able to focus merely on playing. That has perhaps been the biggest help.” A

Furthermore, the participants also raised having friends both within and outside of sports to have a positive impact on their well-being and happiness. Friends from within the sport, especially other expatriate athletes, understand the situation of being in a foreign country as an athlete better and are able to provide important peer support. On

the contrary, friends that are not athletes allow the individual to take time off from their sport.

“...And then again in country X, also having friends outside of sport X helps that you do not have think about ice hockey all the time, that there are also other things in life...” B

6.2.2 Individual factors

According to De Vos et al. (2020), the individual or person is identified as ultimately being the most influential actor in their career. A sustainable career requires individuals to be aware of what gives them meaning and manage their careers accordingly, which is the agency dimension of sustainable careers.

When discussing the interviewees' motives to expatriate, the alignment between being an SIE athlete and **meaning** was once again evident. The main themes in terms of motives to relocate were career development and financial reasons. Through being an SIE athlete, the interviewees looked to maximize their potential in their sport and see what levels of competition they are able to reach. The interviewees found that moving abroad was a necessity that enabled development in their sport and the achieving of career goals as an athlete. The financial benefits of expatriation also weighed in the interviewees' decisions to relocate, as most of them had experienced increases in their salary when moving abroad.

“For me, the biggest thing was definitely ice hockey and the willingness to develop and see how far I could develop and get as a player. At that time at least, league X was the best league in the whole world, so that was a big motivation for me.” B

“Well, the motive was simply to progress in my career, get into better leagues and develop and give myself kind of an opportunity to develop. That was perhaps one. And then of course the money and the financial side is another. You simply get more money abroad and that is still an pretty big part of this, even though many say that sports is the number one thing but the financial side is just as important in that....”C

“Yes, in the end the salary is also quite important. Even though there are many good things related to living abroad, but still if the salary was the same as in Finland then perhaps you would still be in Finland.” E

Further related to increased financial gains as a motive, some of the interviewees gave insight to how the shortness of athletic careers affects their career decisions. The importance of salary as a motive for choosing future employers was found to increase as the athletes became older. Being able to save money during their athletic career was described as a way to prepare for the career after sports.

“...But I would have to say that the older you get, the more you start to think about having your finances in order after your career...” D

However, even though financial gains during the athletic career were found to be important for the transition from being an athlete to other professions, the interviewees stated how they also had to take other aspects into account. As a demonstration of **agency** one interviewee explained how they had decided to relocate to a country where they were closer to home and could better combine sports and their studies. Another participant stated how their family situation had impacted their career decisions.

“However, I have never left merely for the money. For example in country X, for many years I had the chance to go elsewhere but then... and the contracts could have been financially better but when my family... or we had found a good place to be, I did not see the reason to go anywhere else just for the money or change.” A

Overall, the interviews showed that the participants see expatriation aligning with their values and career goals. Development in their sport was an important value and they had actively looked for options abroad to provide them a more challenging environment to accelerate their development. This was done for instance by gravitating towards opportunities where the expectations and demands for performance are at a level that requires the individual to improve.

“Yes, I have probably consciously tried to get myself into places where I definitely have to be in the top register of my skill level in order to compete, so that it sort of inevitably pushes me to perform better every day.” C

Regarding the more specific ways that the interviewed SIE athletes had managed their career to align with their career goals, varying strategies and methods were described. Some focused more on the athletic side of their career, emphasizing how they have adapted their physical training to meet their individual requirements and how they want to perform. Some of the respondents highlighted how they have found it important to prepare for their careers after sports, as some had completed or began studying for a degree or were adding more value to the opportunities outside of sports when deciding where to continue their athletic careers

Further related to agency, the interviewees identified certain individual attributes and skills to have an effect on how being an SIE affects their career sustainability. Age and general life experience were stated to help in adjusting to new environments and controlling emotions. Language skills were also found beneficial along with attributes such as adaptability, resilience and positivity.

“As we already talked about the cultural differences and all that.. and the demands and the competition, that there are so many others who want to take your place. Because of that, there will be difficult moments. So if you can adapt to them or you are good at turning things into something positive, then that will help a lot.” D

7 Conclusions

This chapter aims to provide answers to the research question and objectives of this study. The purpose of this study was to explore how self-initiated expatriation impacts the career sustainability of athletes. This impact on career sustainability was approached through the three indicators of career sustainability: health, happiness and productivity. The two other objectives were to identify whether and how different contextual- and individual factors impact the career sustainability of SIE athletes.

This study contributes to the literature on SIEs and sustainable careers by applying the concept of career sustainability to a new context, SIE athletes. The study extends the knowledge related to the careers of SIE athletes; a group that has perhaps been studied to a lesser extent than many other types of SIE, by providing insights on their experiences from living and competing abroad, in addition to what kind of influence expatriation can have on their careers.

The research question of this study was: “How does self-initiated expatriation affect the career sustainability of athletes? “. The study showed how being an SIE impacts the physical- and mental health of athletes in different ways. Firstly, consensus was not found on whether SIEs perceive their physical health being impacted by being an expatriate. However, access to resources provided by the organization was found to be valued in this regard, as they provide expatriate SIEs with new information related to maintaining and developing their physical well-being. The study also showed how increased freedom and better resources related to maintaining physical performance can have positive impacts on the long-term physical health of SIE athletes, thus also supporting the findings of Richardson & McKenna (2020) in terms of the positive impact of resources and support provided by the organizations of athletes.

The impacts on mental-well-being were found to be more complex, as the interviews showed several aspects of being an SIE athlete opposing challenges for mental health that were ultimately deemed to have impacted their mental well-being positively.

Prominent themes related to mental health were the increased pressure related to more competitive environments and being away from family and the support system back home. These things had caused stress for SIE athletes in the short-term but were later perceived to have facilitated the development of mental resilience and productivity related to the sport, thus demonstrating the dynamic relationships between the indicators of career sustainability as found in van de Groenendaal et al. (2022).

Moving on to happiness as an indicator of career sustainability, where the study found expatriation clearly having a positive impact on career satisfaction SIE athlete. The positive impact on career satisfaction was found to be a result of fulfilling dreams of competing abroad and development from being exposed to more demanding environments in the sport. The interviews also showed how the perceived career success of SIE athletes is directly connected to performances in their sport. Being an expatriate also has impacts on the life satisfaction of SIE athletes. International experience, learning new languages and being able to provide family members new experiences were found to bring fulfillment related to aspects outside of sports. However, being an SIE athlete was also found to potentially have negative impacts on the work-life balance, due to the time and energy it consumed.

Expatriation was also found to have various impacts on the productivity indicator. Firstly, the performance of SIE athletes in their sport was perceived to be positively impacted by higher levels of competition, more demanding environments and increased amounts of pressure. Other drivers of performance related development were access to better resources and having more time to focus on developing performance in the sport due to having less things to do abroad.

Regarding employability, the study found expatriation have a positive impact on the perceived employability of athletes in their sport. Due to the higher levels of competition and having international experience, SIE athletes found themselves having more options in finding employment in their sport. However, the positive impacts are also dependent

on how the athlete has performed during their time abroad. The findings of Richardson & McKenna (2020) are also partially supported, as they find no barriers for athletes having sustainable careers after their athletic careers. The findings of this study show that the positive impacts of expatriation are perceived by SIE athletes to have positive spillovers to their life- and career outside of sports, due to improved language skills and adaptability. International experience in general is seen as an asset for future careers after athletic careers, especially due to the networks created during it.

The two other objectives of this thesis were to explore whether and how individual factors impact the career sustainability of self-initiated expatriate athletes. Starting from the individual factors, in regard to the meaning aspect of the person dimension, SIE athletes are found to have clear motives that guided their decisions and their reasons to expatriate. While other reasons were found to also impact decisions, the most prominent motives for SIE athletes in their careers seem to be development in the sport and financial gains. In terms of motives for relocating, the findings are mostly in line with those of van Bakel & Salzbrenner (2019). The findings of Selmer & Lauring (2012) can be seen to be supported to some extent by the findings of the study, as SIE athletes with development in their sport as a motive also perceive to have enhanced their performance in their sport during their time abroad. Further based on the interviews, the importance of financial reasons as a motive is found to increase along the course of athletic careers, when nearing the transition from sports.

The findings of this study show how SIE athletes actively manage their careers to better align with their career goals and what they want to achieve in their careers, further impacting their career sustainability. SIE athletes showed agency by seeking opportunities in foreign competitions with higher levels of competition to develop their abilities in their sport and fulfilling career goals by competing abroad. Relocating to more demanding, whilst also more rewarding, environments is found to be a measure to enhance performance in their sport but also to have more choices regarding future employment in their sport. This is an interesting finding, as Doherty et al. (2011) have

speculated that due to the lack of security for future employment and staying abroad for lengthy periods of time, the alternative options for employment within a country are an important motive for SIEs to relocate. For SIE athletes, having other options for employment within the country does not seem as important, as the findings of this study suggest SIE athletes to actively seek options outside of their current location and not being as tied to the league they are currently competing in. SIE athletes also utilize other methods to increase performance in their sport, such as adapting their ways to train and making use of the increased resources they have access to while abroad. This demonstrates the high expectations and demands related to physical health and condition for SIE athletes, which can also be seen as one of the key characteristics differentiating their careers from other types of SIEs.

SIE athletes also show agency in their preparations for their careers after sports, as majority of the interviewed athletes had found ways to combine being an athlete and studying for a degree. The prioritization of financial aspects in the decision to relocate shows how SIE athletes acknowledge the shortness of their athletic careers and look to have a better starting point for their time after their athletic careers. Further, SIE athletes also promote sustainability by taking important stakeholders, such as family, into account in their career related decisions.

Further related to individual factors, the findings also surface attributes that can potentially influence the impact that self-initiated expatriation has on the careers of SIE athletes. Support is found for the roles of attributes and skills such as language skills, adaptability and mental resilience, which are seen to especially impact the adjustment to new environments.

Moving on to contextual factors, the findings show evidence for the impact of contextual factors on the career sustainability of SIE athletes. Effects were found on all indicators of career sustainability and several contexts were found to directly impact multiple indicators. The findings highlight the significance of other stakeholders in the

development of career sustainability for SIE athletes. In the workgroup context, medical – and other staff along with teammates surfaced as a theme that has an impact on the careers of SIE athletes. Medical staff such as physiotherapists and doctors can provide athletes care and knowledge that impacts not only their performance and health during expatriation but also on the long-term. Teammates were found to impact the overall atmosphere within the sport, whilst also influencing how SIE athletes adjust to the local culture.

The most prominent theme to surface related to the organizational context was the impact of resources and support provided by organizations during the SIE athletes' time abroad. Resources related to the occupational context and private life are found to be of great impact for SIE athletes, as influences were found for all three indicators. An interesting finding in this regard was how cultural differences can affect organizations' capabilities of providing support to SIE athletes.

The pressure of competing abroad and differences in coaching styles were the key findings related to the occupational context. Richardson & McKenna (2020) find the demands of being an athlete also acting as motivators for better performance. This is supported by the findings of this study, as the feelings of pressure while competing abroad were seen as potentially causing challenges for mental health but also as having a facilitating effect on developments in performance and mental capabilities for SIE athletes. Methods of local coaches were also found to impact performances of SIE athletes through different orientations and areas of focus.

In the national context, evidence was found for the impacts of experiencing new cultures and adjusting to cultural differences. SIE athletes were found perceive their experiences of working abroad providing them growth in terms of independence and adaptability. The challenges that come with living and competing abroad are found to ultimately be perceived as having positive impacts on the careers of SIE athletes despite potential difficulties experienced while living in the host-country. Within the national context, the

impact of the location and the opportunities it provides for the SIE athletes' and their stakeholders' lives outside of their occupation also surfaced as having an impact.

Finally, in line with the findings of other studies (van Bakel & Salzbrenner, 2019; Richardson & McKenna, 2020), the importance of family and friends was highlighted in the private-life context, as family as a stakeholder was found to have impacts on all three indicators of career sustainability. The presence of family abroad was found to be of great significance regarding the SIE experience, as they are an important source of support in many ways and being able to share the foreign experience with them is found to bring fulfillment to SIE athletes. On the contrary, being away from family was a prominent theme when discussing challenges and aspects of being an SIE that had negative impacts on the SIE athletes. Friends were also found to impact the happiness of SIE athletes. Other SIE athlete friends can provide the athletes important peer support during their time abroad and friends outside of sports help SIE athletes to take their thoughts off from their sport.

7.1 Practical implications

The findings of this study show several implications for organizations and SIE athletes themselves. Starting with the implications for organizations, in order to facilitate the career sustainability of SIE athletes, organizations welcoming SIE athletes should seek to increase their knowledge on experiences of these athletes working in a foreign country and what kind of challenges they typically face in foreign environments. By better understanding the situation from the athlete's perspective, organizations would likely be more capable of providing appropriate means of support to their athletes. A significant implication in this regard is understanding the dynamic relationships between the three indicators and how satisfaction related to matters outside of sports impacts satisfaction towards aspects within the sport.

Further, by identifying ways to support the career sustainability of their SIE athletes, organizations would simultaneously provide these athletes better opportunities to

develop in their sport and likely increase the willingness of their SIE athletes to remain in their organization. The support provided by organizations should extend to aspects outside of sports, as SIE athletes also find fulfillment from gaining resources that are beneficial in other domains such as their future careers in other professions. For SIE athletes who are accompanied by their families in the foreign country, organizations should look to find ways to support the experience of the family who play a crucial role in how the expatriate experience impacts the career sustainability of SIE athletes.

The study also provides several implications for future SIE athletes. Firstly, SIE athletes should embrace the agency they have related to their careers and actively weigh the opportunities that being an SIE can provide for their career development. However, SIE athletes should thoroughly consider whether being an SIE athlete aligns with the preferences and goals that they have for their careers before relocating. Being an SIE athlete can be demanding and also oppose risks to their career sustainability. Yet, when individuals are able to withstand and adapt to the challenges they face in foreign environments, it can enable them to be exposed to and gain resources and experiences that they would not necessarily find when competing in their home-country. These resources can not only be beneficial for their careers as athletes but also follow them to their careers after retirement from sports. Furthermore, acknowledging the influence of different contexts and stakeholders can increase SIE athletes' ability to manage their careers in a way that is sustainable and meaningful for them. The private life context once again of great significance in this regard and athletes should thoroughly assess how their career decisions affect these stakeholders, as their value in facilitating or mitigating the impacts that being an SIE athlete has on individuals should not be underestimated.

7.2 Limitations of the study & suggestions for future research

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the studied phenomenon, rather than test existing theory or creating new generalizable knowledge related to it. The small sample size of five interviewees and the fact that the interviewees were all team sports athletes from the same country also reduce the possibilities to draw more generalizable

conclusions from the study. In future studies, larger sample sizes from a broader range of nationalities could enable more comprehensive findings and possibly identify how the nationalities of SIE athletes impact findings related to the topic. Furthermore, the SIE athletes interviewed in this study were from different sports and from different leagues, which is also important to acknowledge. Focusing on a single sport or league could mitigate the influence of differences caused by these factors in future studies. It would also be interesting to see what kind of findings a similar study conducted on individual sports athletes would result in.

Another limitation that needs to be mentioned is the way that the “process model of sustainable careers” was utilized without including “time” as a dimension. In addition to not including “time” as a dimension, most of the interviewees were still in the midst of their athletic careers and therefore, the study was unable to accurately identify impacts on the transition from athletic careers to other professions. Future studies including this dimension could provide insights on how the career sustainability of individuals evolves throughout their careers. Also, using individuals who have retired from their athletic careers and are well into their careers outside of sports as the sample would likely provide more accurate findings on the long-term impacts of self-initiated expatriation.

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Appendices

Appendice 1. Interview structure

Background

- Tell me about yourself: age, nationality, sport and current status regarding athletic career and expatriation.
- Elaborate on your experiences as an expatriate: Which countries? How many years of international experience in total?
- Describe the expatriation process: How was the process initiated and organized?

General questions on expatriate experience

- What are your general feelings on being an expatriate?
- Name some of the most significant challenges and benefits of being an expatriate athlete.

Indicators of career sustainability

Health

- Has expatriation impacted your physical well-being? If so, how?
- Do you see or have you experienced expatriation having an impact regarding mental health?
- Have you needed to adapt your approach to maintaining your physical- and mental well-being due to expatriation? If so, how?

Happiness

- How do you see your experiences as an expatriate athlete aligning with your career goals and overall career success?
- What kind of aspects related to being an expatriate athlete have brought you the most fulfillment and feelings of accomplishment?
- How has expatriation affected your work-life balance?
- How has expatriation impacted your career satisfaction?

Productivity

- Has expatriation impacted your performance in your sport? If so, how?
- Have you had to change the ways you maintain and develop your performance in your sport as a result of being an expatriate? If so, how?
- How has expatriation impacted your employability as an athlete and further after your athletic career?
- What kind of resources have you gained as an expatriate that you find to be useful outside of your athletic career?
- Do you see international experience overall being an asset regarding your career after sports? If so, how?

Contextual factors

- How do you see the roles of different contextual factors during expatriation related to your career?
 - o Workgroup (team, coaches, staff)
 - o Occupation
 - o Organization
 - o Private life, family and friends
 - o Nation, cultural differences
 - o Other contexts that have an impact?
- Describe what kind of support you have received from other stakeholders during expatriation. Which types of support have been most influential?
- Do you see room for improvement in certain areas regarding support?

Individual factors

- What were your motives to relocate? Have the motives changed during your career, if so, how?
- How do you see expatriation fitting in with your personal values, capabilities and what you wish to achieve during your career?
- How have you managed your career to align with your career goals and preferences?
- Do you see any specific attributes or skills being especially influential regarding how you are able to adapt to the previously discussed contextual factors? If so, how?

Future plans

- How do you see your experiences as an expatriate impacting your future plans regarding your career?
- How do you see your experiences as an expatriate impacting your career goals for the future?
- Do you see yourself relocating to a new country as an expatriate in the future?

Additional comments

- Any other comments or further discussion?