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## An exploration of elite Japanese female footballers' acute cultural transition experiences in Europe

Kotone Hirose and Carla Meijen 

Faculty of Sport, Allied Health and Performance Sciences, St Mary's University, London, UK

### ABSTRACT

The globalisation of women's football reflects the increasing number of female football players moving abroad for their professional careers. Yet, the cultural transition of Asian female athletes into western culture is merely studied. This study focused on the experiences of nine elite Japanese female football players competing in the professional league in Spain and Portugal in the immediate period after moving from Japan. During the semi-structured interview participants shared their experiences of their sporting and non-sporting lives abroad and the impact of this transition on their athletic and non-athletic self and well-being. By using thematic analysis three themes illustrating their positive acculturation experiences were identified: opening up to people's kindness, redefining family, and learning a new mentality. Based on the concept of two types of happiness (interdependent and independent), and the collectivism versus individualism dichotomy, the influence of culture on the relationship between life satisfaction and athletic performance, personal growth, and expanding the support system were critically discussed. Practical implications include insights for sport professionals on how cultural change can affect transnational athletes' sporting and non-sporting lives and influence their mental health.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Happiness; coping; life satisfaction; women's soccer; acculturation

### Literature review of transnational migration

Transnational migration has become a major pathway to compete on the international stage (Schinke et al. 2012; Agergaard and Ryba 2014; Ryba et al. 2016, 2018; Stambulova et al. 2020), which has found its place in women's football and can now be considered a global phenomenon (Botelho and Agergaard 2011; Roberts and Rood 2021). The introduction of the home-grown player's quota in the FA Women's Super League (BBC 2020) demonstrates how well-established the international movement of female football players has become. Whilst moving abroad to play football can provide female football players with opportunities to compete in professional leagues with good facilities, training and potential economic gains, and cultural and football experiences (Botelho and Agergaard 2011), transnational migrations can have an impact on an individual's subjective, psychological, and social well-being. For example, challenges during the cultural transition such as culture shock and new languages have been linked to homesickness, loneliness, social isolation, and pressure (Richardson et al. 2012; Schinke et al. 2017; Cosh et al. 2021; Muscat, 2017).

### Cultural transition model and need for a culturally sensitive research

The temporal model of cultural transition (Cultural Transition Model: CTM; Ryba et al. 2016) identifies three phases that an athlete goes through when moving from one culture to another, these are: (1) the pre-transition phase, (2) acute cultural adaptation phase, and (3) sociocultural adaptation phase. This model helps to explain the impact transnational migration

can have on a person's well-being. Well-being reflects two perspectives and levels. Typically the two perspectives are *hedonic (or subjective)*, based on the higher level of positive affect compared to negative affect and *eudaimonic (or psychological)*, based on the personal growth and positive relation to others (Lundqvist 2011). In addition, and relevant to the current work, one's consideration of their well-being in the environment they are in is relevant, and the levels of well-being can be *context-specific* (i.e., athletic life) and *global* (Lundqvist 2011) respectively. During the pre-transition phase, athletes gather information about the new team, place, and culture to physically and mentally prepare for moving to a new country, and start disengaging with their familiar culture and original support system. This includes seeking advice from people who have already been to the new country or getting open-minded to discover socially and culturally diverse experiences. The acute cultural adaptation phase occurs right after arriving in a new location. During this phase, an athlete may experience intense feelings of loneliness when facing the gap and the difference between two cultures but also excitement for the chance of personal evolution. This phase can last for a continuous period depending on how well the athlete adapts to a new culture. Finally, the sociocultural adaptation phase is related to a long-term or permanent stay. This is when the athletes reach a healthy physical and psychological adjustment to the new culture, with a higher level of satisfaction with their sporting and non-sporting life, indicative of improved subjective and psychological well-being (Lundqvist 2011; Ryba et al. 2016). Yet, the original CTM has a lack of information on how to

reach this 'healthy adjustment' and to consider global and context-specific levels of well-being during this phase (Lundqvist 2011). Moreover, a majority of cultural transition studies are conducted within western population (eg., Muscat, 2017, Richardson et al. 2012), and it seems relevant to explore the cultural transition of non-western populations (Prato et al. 2021). One's cultural background plays a role in the adaptation to a new culture. Culture 'shapes how we think, feel and behave' (McGannon & Smith, 2015, p. 79), it influences the transition experiences (Ryba et al. 2015), and has an impact on one's identity, motivation, and well-being (Ryba et al. 2020). With the globalisation of the sport industry (Agergaard and Ryba 2014; Stambulova et al. 2020) and the increasing transnational migration of Asian female athletes (Edwards 2018), it has become increasingly easy for two distinct cultures to interact. To better understand the process and offer practical support for those athletes who experience the transnational migration, having more transnational and cultural studies in both Western and Eastern sides of the world will benefit sport professionals, including athletes, coaches, physiotherapists, and sport psychologists who work with people from all around the world (Naoi 2010). As such, the current study focuses on a non-western population by exploring Japanese female footballers' acculturation experiences.

### Women's sport in Japan

In addition to the increase in transnational migration of Asian, and Japanese, female athletes, another reason to focus on Japanese female athletes is the position of women's sport in Japanese culture. On one hand, with the emerging popularity of women's football after Nadeshiko Japan (national female team) won the 2011 Women's World Cup, many Japanese female footballers have been migrating overseas to improve their athletic performance. Despite the international successes of Japanese female athletes for more than half a century, there still exist disadvantages in terms of material, media coverage, and ideological support in an androcentric culture of the Japanese sports industry (Itani et al. 2001; Kelly 2013). Especially, the media coverage of female achievement focuses, intentionally or unintentionally, on gender marking compulsory heterosexuality, 'appropriate' femininity, infantilization, sexualization, non-sport-related aspects, and ambivalence (Wensing and Bruce 2003). For example, it is not rare to see that on TV shows female athletes are asked about their private life, beauty routine, or for female athletes to get comments on their appearance (e.g., 'you look like a model') rather than their athletic performance. Ho (2014) called it *ambivalence* of the Japanese media coverage when they confound the glorification of the world champion with the trivialisation of 'femininity' of Nadeshiko athletes. Therefore, giving the Japanese female athletes the voice to tell a real story on their life as an athlete competing on the international stage would empower not only these female athletes but also young female athletes aspiring to continue their career at elite level. On the other hand, one of the distinctive features of Japanese culture is the unique willpower (Seishin-ryoku: 精神力) that involves the ability to endure despite difficulties and to deal continuously with physical and psychological burdens (Manzenreiter 2013). Sport is

considered an important way to develop this unique willpower in Japan. Those involved in sport, like student-athletes, are considered mentally tougher and more patient than those who have never participated in a competitive sport. Hence, they are valued in Japanese society as those who possess the unique willpower (Manzenreiter 2013; Tsukahara et al. 2018).

Therefore, the culture of Japanese sport industry views female athletes from an androcentric and gendered environment combined with an effort-focused ideology making women to act like men and also be under the pressure of the gendered norm of Japanese society (Blackwood 2010; Mikami 2022). As such it is intriguing to study how this perception of women's sport in Japan manifests in another cultural environment, particularly in regard to 'healthy adjustment' including their identity, motivation, emotions, and also their perceived athletic performance.

### Aim and research questions

By considering the unique position of women's sport in Japan as well as the exponentially developing sport globalisation and female football industry, cultural transition model, and a current lack of culturally sensitive research, this study focuses on both the athletic and non-athletic (everyday) life of Japanese female footballers who moved to Southwestern Europe for their football career. To this end, this study will address two research questions: (1) how did Japanese female (semi) professional footballers experience the cultural transition? (2) which factors (sport related and non-related) helped them to achieve a healthy adjustment in a new environment?

### Method

The study was underpinned by interpretivism, with ontological relativism and epistemologically subjectivism (Ryba & Schinke, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This is because the author takes the view that reality depends on each person's mind and it is possible that multiple people in the 'same' situation experience completely different realities (Ryba & Schinke, 2009). In addition, the same person would see the world differently whether an individual has exposed to one particular event or culture before or not, because interpretivism believes that knowledge is socially constructed, fallible, and subjective (Sparkes and Smith 2013).

### Participants

Nine Japanese female footballers (age range 20–28) were recruited to this study by sending an invitation letter to the Japanese female footballers' community in South Western Europe. The number of the participant was influenced by considering the specific inclusion criteria: female athletes, who moved from Japan to Southwest Europe (Spain and Portugal) within the last three years of the data collection (i.e., during 2019). Five participants were playing in the second division of the Spanish league, and two in the premier division of Spain and Portugal. Although all the participants were receiving a salary some had another job to top up their income. Given that the meaning of professional status varies a lot in women's

football (for Spain, it is clearly mentioned that even first division of LaLiga Feminina, 'does not have the distinction of being professional'; Garcia 2021), all of participant were considered as semi-professional in this study, regardless of the division they play in. All of the participants except one experienced their transnational career move for the first time, one participant was based in Portugal and eight participants in Spain, as those two countries share similar cultural tendencies (i.e. family-oriented; Minguez and Crespi 2017).

### **Data collection procedure**

The study was ethically approved by the first author's Faculty Ethics Board. Participants, after giving informed consent, took part in a 60 to 90 minutes long semi-structured interview through Zoom. Interviews were conducted in Japanese enabling a deeper investigation and understanding of players' life experiences. The interview guide (available on request from the first author), which was tested in a pilot interview, focused on the acculturation process based on the CTM in the participants' athletic and non-athletic life through three sections: (a) process before moving to Europe, (b) cultural and social change experience and, (c) change in the meaning of life as an athlete. Example questions were: *Can you think back about the first month after arriving in your new country? How did you feel?* as well as *I would like to ask about the support that you experience here: How do you deal when facing a difficulty? Where applicable, questions were followed up with probes such as: could you recall the different emotions you have had in regard to cultural and social change? or how available and effective do you perceive the social support is here?* Although the interviewee's narrative shaped the content of the interview, the interview guide played the role of facilitator of storytelling and guided the participants to tell about their life experience rather than their athletic experience only.

To enrich the conversation between the researcher and interviewed athletes, a co-participatory process was employed for the interview (Smith and McGannon 2018). For example, participants were asked to bring a picture of a memorable moment outside of the pitch in the host country to generate their life story (Glegg 2019; Prato et al. 2021), followed by a probe such as: *Is there any difference about the amount of 'off the pitch' time compared to Japan? How much and what does it mean to you?* This allowed both participants and the researcher to share the common image of athletes' narratives for a better understanding. There was also a creative task in the third section, to express their current motto by picking one Japanese letter. It is a common task in Japanese culture, as confirmed by the athlete from the pilot interview.

### **Data analysis**

The interview contents were transcribed in Japanese then translated by using the software DeepL. By adopting reflexive thematic analysis guidelines (Braun and Clarke 2019; Braun et al. 2019), the author analysed the transcripts following six steps: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) constructing themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6)

producing the report. The authors identified relevant themes illustrating the experience of cultural transition and how the Japanese female athletes made sense of these experiences. To both illustrate and interpret the cultural transition in Southern Europe, a semantic approach was employed (Braun et al. 2016) because instead of giving the meaning to the data from the theoretical assumption, the researcher explores the cultural transition by giving the voice to the athletes to tell us what they see and feel during their life abroad.

### **Rigour and trustworthiness**

Despite such an approach, it is necessary to recognize the researcher's *a priori* conceptual understanding and personal experience that can influence in generating knowledge for the quality of this research (Ryba et al. 2016). A reflexive diary was employed for each interview (Smith and Sparkes 2017), to maintain the quality of the interview and to record any relevant thoughts of the first author. The author also organised meetings with a critical friend to have reflective discussion about the methodology, data collection, and data analysis (Smith and McGannon 2018). More concretely, to enhance the coherence and relatedness of the themes identified, the critical friend stimulated author's critical thinking and encouraged for a deeper understanding of athletes' narratives.

### **Results**

Three themes were generated to gain an insight in how Japanese female (semi) professional footballers experienced the cultural transition and which factors (sport related and non-related) helped them to achieve a healthy adjustment in a new environment. The themes summarised the transition experience that Japanese female footballers experienced in southern Europe and were 'Allowing themselves to take in people's kindness', 'Redefining family' and 'Learning a new mentality'.

#### **Allowing themselves to take in people's kindness**

During the pre-transition phase (before leaving Japan), the participants were enthusiastic about and looking forward to a new stage of their football career, yet many of them were nervous and anxious about the idea of 'living abroad'. Some athletes struggled with understanding the culture and how to communicate at the beginning of the transition and they were unsure about what to do: 'there are two girls who live with me (...) they're having a conversation, and I don't know if I should join in' reported Ayako. Chisato, who played in Portugal, also mentioned that she felt worried to interrupt the flow of conversation when native speakers were talking between themselves, even if they welcomed her to join in. However, almost all athletes were impressed by the unconditional kindness of Southern European people. Many participants referred to the local people as 'friendly', 'warm' and 'caring'. This kindness, which is linked to inclusiveness, rather than 'helping for a concrete task' is unfamiliar in Japan. The surprising and confusing reaction reported by Emi when one local supporter called her by her name in a supermarket also illustrates how

she felt welcomed in her new environment, yet it also highlighted the cultural gap and participants noted that they felt surprised by this behaviour at first:

At first I was really, really surprised! I didn't know they could talk like that. I didn't know them at all. I didn't even think they knew me, so I was really happy that they talked to me like that. It's not that I'm discriminating, but there are some things like that. It's not discrimination, but that kind of thing still exists. As a country. So ... I was thinking about that, and I was really happy that they accepted me.

(Emi)

This welcoming and caring attitude helped Japanese athletes to open up themselves, and increased their psychological well-being by creating a deep connection with their new teammates and staff. They started to speak up about a problem, instead of pretending everything was going all right. Mai explained how this was evident in an interaction with a staff member: 'Even though we didn't have a deep conversation, I could see the atmosphere of the people and the place, and I realised that I could enjoy myself more ...'. This kind of support which is person- and emotional-focused rather than problem-focused enabled a trusting relationship with the others and a positive feeling of themselves, from the feeling of being welcomed by the new environment. As Ichika described 'direct and generous kindness', opening up to a different type of kindness than the one they used to know in Japan is culturally different but helpful to benefit the subjective well-being of the participants. In summary, Japanese athletes coped with the difficulties by opening up to the 'kindness' of Southern Europeans. Empowered to speak about their emotion without being shy or anxious, they could also overcome the language barrier and experience more psychological safety.

### **Redefining family: expanding the support system**

To go through challenging moments and difficulties of the acute cultural adaptation phase, participants drew on coping strategies. A key function of these coping strategies was often to put negative emotions outside of the mind. Negative emotion include: tiredness for language barrier and frustration to not able to involve in the game as they used to back in Japan. One athlete summarised it well:

I wanted to help, I wanted to play in games, I wanted to send out messages, but I couldn't understand anything, and it was quite tiring ... I mean, it was mental. I wanted to play in the game, I wanted to communicate, but I couldn't understand anything.

(Laughs)

(Nobuyo)

Social support was identified as a key coping strategy. However, limited physical contact with their family back home prevented them from dealing with difficulties they experienced, which created a feeling of loneliness. This loneliness was experienced less when a player felt the support of 'family' in her new place during the acute adaptation. Fumi mentioned, 'My two families [in Spain] are very good to me, they call me 'half family'. I've been very lucky. The support system is very good'. Belonging to a community other than football can also help the player to spend less time worrying, reduce overthinking the football-related problem or miss loved ones in Japan less. One witnessed

'The fact that the only community I've ever known is football, football, football (3 sec silence) ... it's made me feel a bit lonely' (Mai) whereas the other said '[people from the part-time job] treated me like family, and that helped me a lot.' (Ichika). The sense of family could also be found in the Japanese community in Europe, language school, part-time jobs, and teammate's families that host them for holidays. In line with this, five players chose the picture of the local families' or friends' moment as 'the most memorable moment in Southern Europe'

Living abroad also changed the way they perceived their family. Despite the physical distance from home, some observed a stronger bond with their family in Japan. Ayako revealed that she had never discussed her problems with her mum until she came to Spain and experienced an interpersonal issue with her housemate. This discussion brought her to tears by seeing and feeling how much her family cared about her. In Japanese culture, the relationship with parents often becomes weaker once living away from home and it is not uncommon that after graduation, people do not see or call their parents frequently. Yui, who started living far from her family after high school, was inspired by her new teammates to call her family more often since she moved to Spain. A lot of athletes were surprised to see their teammates going back home every weekend or having a video call with their family during off days. In summary, the cultural transition required not only adapting to the cultural differences but also, dealing with the absence of significant others. This difficulty is transformed into an opportunity to expand the social support system and to become closer to their own family despite the physical distance.

### **Learning a new mentality: from play and live to live and play**

The third theme illustrated the personal development from experiencing a new culture. Beyond language acquisition and cultural adaptation, learning a new mentality evolved through football-related and non-related experiences. The absence of the *hierarchical relationship* (上下関係: joge-kankei) in Southwestern Europe is reported as a major cultural difference. Athletes were surprised to see a young player in the squad, speaking as a friend to the elder players and engaging in the team meeting, even by responding to them with no sign of politeness. Some struggled at the beginning to show the involvement and motivation within the team, as abovementioned in two previous themes:

In Japan, for example, when you are not able to play in a game, you can't complain to the coach (...). But in Spain, it's the opposite, it's seen as a lack of motivation ... If you don't show more of yourself, people won't understand what you want to do or how good you are.

(Mai)

They don't say sorry during the game. In Japan, people always say, 'I'm sorry.'. So when I just came here, I used to apologise for fouls ... I don't know, if I thought I made a mistake, I would apologise ... It was customary, it was considered a virtue (in Japan). But since I've come here, I've learned that football is a game, and that people argue with each other, and if you say you're sorry, you lose, so I think that's made me stronger.

(Fumi)

The participants could also put their own culture in a new perspective. They learned that there are many more ways to live and see life than they used to do in Japan. All of the athletes mentioned the change in how they see their life after these first years of transition. Hina shared: 'I think that there are many people who are laughing [in Spain]. When I go to Tokyo, I see so many people looking down and walking fast. I think that Spaniards seem to be enjoying their life'. Some struggled to enjoy their private life in Southern Europe because of the 'all or nothing' mentality. Living in Spain or Portugal made participants realise that to play better and improve their performance on the pitch, they needed to separate their life as a footballer from their private life. Learning how to simply enjoy life as who they are sometimes acted as an efficient way to maintain their well-being and improve their performance:

I was the type of person who couldn't enjoy the things I enjoyed because of football. If I didn't enjoy football, I couldn't enjoy anything. But I learned that it's not like that, if your life is full of fun, you can bring that feeling to football.

(Nobuyo)

Finally, Chisato described a 'culturally-rich experience' when she talked about religion with her teammate. She was amazed to discover that one would say 'God will make everything better' during the difficulty, whereas she believed only her effort and perseverance can change the situation that pressures hard work and herself. Knowing that there is a different way to live, to behave, and to think opened a new perspective of life for most athletes. This allows them to relax more, think more optimistically and feel more in control of their happiness, as Ayako's motto, 'Puede ser feliz donde sea que estés' (= 'be happy wherever you are'). In summary, life in Southern Europe made the Japanese athletes seek more happiness in their non-football life to increase football-related performance, rather than the other way around: all of the participants chose positive words for their motto, such as 'happiness', 'joy', 'novelty', 'freedom'.

## Discussion

Exploring the experiences of the acute cultural transition of Japanese female footballers in Southern Europe showed that despite the difficulties during the transition, opening up to local people facilitated the integration into the new culture. This first theme illustrated overcoming a cultural difference. The second theme illustrated how social support reduced homesickness and loneliness. Being physically away from family changed how the athletes perceived their family back home. The last theme demonstrated the personal development of athletes who experienced different values and habits than Japanese culture and learnt a new mentality from the new culture. Overall, the participants felt that they managed the acute cultural transition well. This research has revealed that, despite difficult moments during the transition process, the participants were satisfied with their life in Spain and Portugal. Social support was a key factor that facilitated the cultural transition. Previous research (Chen et al. 2012; Gherghel and Hashimoto 2020) found that although emotional support exists in Japanese culture, tangible and instrumental support (e.g., offering an object or helping

a concrete task) is more natural for Japanese people. This was evident during the pre-transition phase where players did not talk much about their anxiety and nervousness before moving. During the acute cultural adaptation, the importance of another community outside of the professional sporting environment was integral. The presence of friends or 'new family' beyond the club culture helped the participants to maintain their well-being, which is consistent with other research (Agergaard and Ryba 2014; Prato et al. 2021).

Social repositioning (Ryba et al. 2016) may have also contributed to the healthy adjustment. The beauty of knowing diverse cultures is not only understanding the behaviour of people from different backgrounds but also discovering and 're-appreciate' one's original culture from a new cultural standpoint. The meaning of social repositioning seems more open-ended than dichotomic and standing between two cultures is possible and perhaps even necessary for a psychologically healthy transition. More intriguingly, social repositioning might explain performance enhancement reported by Japanese athletes. The question is what influenced this change in their mentality in Southern Europe. The possible answer would be the shift from an interdependent to independent happiness (Uchida 2010), and the transformation of obsessive passion into harmonious passion (Vallerand et al. 2003, 2010). Japanese society is known as 'relatively traditional, rigid social structures with predetermined life courses and career paths.' (Tiefenbach and Kohlbacher 2013, p. 1). In Eastern culture, happiness is considered as an interdependent idea, rather than an individual and independent concept (Uchida 2010; Hitokoto and Takahashi 2020). Interdependent happiness refers to the idea of harmony with in-group others, by accommodating the behaviour to in-group expectations and norms. This helps to explain why 'hierarchy culture' still exists in Japan (Ikeda & Takemoto, 2016). The younger players would rather listen to the older players than giving them their opinion to maintain the harmony of the group. Giving one's opinion would go against the older players and/or manager's expectations and would cause in-group tension (Kitayama et al. 2010). This also explains why requesting support is an uneasy task in Japanese culture, because it may arise interpersonal concern such as the depreciation of one's ability or might negatively affect in-group harmony (Taylor et al. 2004; Kim et al. 2006).

The current study demonstrated that the absence of the hierarchical relationship in Southwestern European football culture made the athletes feel freer and able to give one's opinion. This change contributed to a deeper engagement in football. It also seems to have triggered the shift from obsessive passion to harmonious passion (Dualistic Model of Passion, Vallerand et al. 2010; Lafrenière et al. 2012). The life-satisfaction of the athletes is not defined by the success in their profession but by playing football without sacrificing the other aspect of their personal life such as family and friendship, psychological well-being, and personal development (Lafrenière et al. 2012). The finding of this study is particularly informative because the culture in which one has grown up is not necessarily the one where he/she would find the best of him/herself later on in life.

## Implications

Taken together, this study could benefit various stakeholders, it would benefit international athletes relocating from their home country to another country, as well as sport professionals (coach, sport psychologist, physiotherapist, significant others of athletes) to be more aware of what could inform a healthy adjustment. Although this study only focused on how East Asian culture interacts with South European culture, understanding the challenges and benefits of cultural differences during the transition is the first step for a more culturally sensitive practice in the sports industry. This could include a consideration of the two levels of well-being, the contextual and global, and look beyond the sporting context of an athlete. By giving a voice to the athletes who are currently undergoing culturally rich and challenging experiences, the results of this study contributed to the cultural transition literature by giving some clues for 'healthy adjustment' of transnational athletes. For the well-being of transnational athletes, it is recommended that those sport professionals working with transnational athletes show an interest in the home culture of relocating athletes, and ask them non-sport related questions to provide holistic and emotional support from the start of the cultural transition (i.e., *pre-transition phase*). The result of this study also encourages the athletes, during the *acute cultural adaptation phase*, to seek local support system, and find another community that has no direct link to their athletic and professional activity. It is noteworthy that such an integrative and person-centred approach would help to identify other strengths, more than one would be able to find with just taking a performance-oriented approach. This also promotes the idea that global well-being can act as a buffer for sport-related well-being (Lundqvist 2011).

## Limitation and considerations for future research

Two limitations and considerations are important to raise. First, the data collection through Zoom has its disadvantage: connection issues and reliability issues when the call quality temporarily decreases (Archibald et al. 2019) as well as limited non-verbal communication during the interview (Cater 2011). However, this specific method allowed us to collect data from participants based in a different country. Secondly, distinctive patterns were observed between those who were in their first season abroad and those who were in their second season in Southern Europe. Participants who had just moved tended to speak more about the difficulty because it has been recent whereas those who had been here for two seasons have stated a more positive (challenge rather than threat) narrative. As a consideration for future research, a deeper focus on gender is required. This study was more grounded in cultural aspects than gender, and specific questions that could evoke gender differences or inequality were not included in the interview guide. However, as the narrative about having a part-time job indicated, a difference in lifestyle would very likely be observed between professional male and female players. As the financial and material priority is still towards the male football environment (Culvin 2019; Bowes et al. 2020), the psychological support for female athletes needs to be taken into further consideration.

## Conclusion

By exploring the cultural transition experience of the Japanese female athletes, this study found that living in a new culture triggered the evolution of the 'self' of these athletes. For a healthy adjustment to a new environment, the athletes needed to broaden their cultural perspective and perceive to have social support. This experience offered a wider range of 'ways of being' in one's life. With appropriate support to deal with the difficulties of the cultural transition, the athletes can experience holistic and personal growth and a higher level of life satisfaction that would have a positive impact on sporting performance. This research aims to inspire transnational athletes and sport professionals to expand their horizons. Anticipating the difficulties and providing appropriate mental and social support to transnational athletes would help the women's football industry to develop a worldwide network close to men's football, and a culturally diverse environment could also enhance the technical level of women's football.

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## ORCID

Carla Meijen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0191-5344>

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the first author (KH), upon reasonable request.

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