

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# “Something You Do with Your Body”: The Experience and Meaning of Physical Activity from the Perspective of Transnational Youth

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## ABSTRACT

**Background.** The transnational young people’s physical activity participation could intermingle with their ingrained dispositions acquired from their pre-migrating periods, experiences of transnational mobility, new cultural learning, and other migration processes. **Objectives.** The current study aimed to investigate transnational youth’s physical activity experience using photo-elicitation interviews. This examination also reported the meaning that the research participants attributed to their physical activity. **Methods.** The participants in this study were a total of 17 teenagers (ages 13-19 years old) who were recent Indonesian immigrants to New Zealand. Informed consent and child assents were sought before the open-ended interviews. Data analysis involved a thematic analysis procedure through category construction, sorting categories and data, and naming the categories. **Results.** The analysis resulted in the description of the experience of participating in physical activity within transnational contexts. This experience gives a succinct background on the account of the other three themes: physical activity as the utilization of the body, physical activity for the healthy body, and beyond the corporeal dimension of physical activity. The discourse of body in terms of corporeality was visible throughout the data. Another dimension of the body was derivative, but it was still important to the experience and meaning of physical activity. It was a physical activity for enjoyment and socialization. **Conclusion.** We conclude that the study provides a new perspective on the meanings of physical activity which can contribute to knowledge development, policy improvement, and practices regarding youth physical activity.

**KEYWORDS:** *Experience, Meaning, Physical Activity, Transnational Youth, Immigrant, Photo-Elicitation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Epidemiological research has enriched the literature on youth physical activity through the provision of important information about the prevalence, patterns, and determinants of physical activity (1-3). Much of this information has been derived from the studies that employed the instrumental conceptualization of physical activity. Such approach conceptualizes physical activity in terms of its types and amounts of the activity and

effectively defines a clear and measurable variable. Despite the potentials, the instrumental approach might unable to depict a more complete portrayal of youth physical activity that encompasses youth’s subjective account of their experiences, meanings, voices, and aspirations. In turn, information obtained from young people’s vantage point and their day-to-day experience could be missed from policy, program, and intervention concerning youth physical activity.

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Some scholars have, however, attempted to contribute to the literature by adopting the broader perspective of physical activity. For example, they reported investigations on how youth's physical activity participations have been complex and diverse involving, for example, constructed gender identities, racial and socio-cultural backgrounds, and disability using the broader perspective of physical activity (4-7). These studies have also made meaningful advances in the body of knowledge by addressing various youth populations. However, minority youth populations such as the immigrants have not yet got much attention. The transnational young people may share similar physical activity experiences with their native counterparts. But their participation could possibly intermingle with their ingrained dispositions acquired from their pre-migrating periods, experiences of transnational mobility, new cultural learning and other migration processes. These aspects can possibly intensify the complexity of their physical activity participation.

The current study was one effort, among others, to work with transnational young people (8-11). More specifically, we aimed at describing what consists of the experience and meaning of physical activity among those who have geopolitically and culturally crossed borderlines by using photo elicitation interviews. In order to guide the study, our research questions included what constitutes the experience of physical activity for transnational youth from Indonesia who had recently migrated in New Zealand and what the meanings are ascribed to their physical activity experience.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current study was qualitative research employing specific techniques in collecting data by integrating photo elicitation interviews. The following sections describe details on how the study had been carried out.

**Participants.** We recruited seventeen young Indonesians (N=5 females, 12 males) to participate in this study. Their ages were between 13 and 19 years old and were relatively recent residents in New Zealand as marked by their migrating generations (1st and 2nd). We gained access through the immigrant community leaders.

**Data Collection.** After informed consents and child assents being sought, open-ended interviews began with an opening question: what

physical activity means to you? Then, more conversational interviews were conducted with open-ended questions to allow a rich elaboration of the participants' experience. Near the end of the interviews, we provided a set of 20 photos for the photo-elicitation interview sessions. We obtained royalty-free photos from Pixabay.com filtered with "free for commercial use" and "no attribution required." Key words for searching the images were "artistic black and white." We selected photos that were predominantly monochrome. Some photos, however, were sepia toned and partially colored images. In line with Berger's theory, the design of our photo-elicitation interviews was to provoke the participants' thoughts and sentiments with predominantly black and white images since such images would potentially be more evocative than the color ones (12).

In addition, we also utilized photos mostly containing images that did not directly relate to the topic, the context, and the research participants. Richard and Lahman (2015) called these decontextualized photos which can serve "as sites of common metaphorical understandings" (13). According to Elliot et al. (2015), researchers investigating the meaning of participants experience can take advantage of using metaphors because metaphors generated from visual images can help research participants reflect on their experiences, identify their thoughts, and construct meanings (14). Anticipating participants who might have difficulty in discovering the metaphors, we provided couple photos that the representation related to the topic of the study, which was physical activity. The procedure of the photo-elicitation interview began with asking the participants to pick one picture and create a metaphor from the image about the meaning of physical activity.

**Data Analysis.** Data analysis involved stages to recover themes through data segmentation and coding, category construction, sorting categories and data, and naming the categories. We specifically looked for the meaning in all the stages of analysis. We also utilized qualitative analysis software, namely ATLAS.ti 9.

## RESULTS

Analysis showed that the participant's physical activity experiences and their

constructed meanings revolve around four major themes: physical activity as transnationally experienced, physical activity as the utilization of the body, physical activity for the healthy body, and beyond the corporeal dimension of physical activity. The following sub-headings present these four themes.

**Physical Activity as Transnationally Experienced.** Most participants had physical activity experiences while they were Indonesia. This is especially apparent among first generation immigrant youth. Some second generations also participated in physical activities when they visited families. Their physical activities were generally informal, non-organized activities. Many of the youth engaged in social games or play on the neighborhood streets or yards. Most commonly played games were pick up soccer or badminton. Basketball courts were generally available in urban school yards. Since most of the first-generation participants used to live urban neighborhoods, they had convenient access to the courts and played the games. Futsal (indoor soccer) had been new favorites since the last decade as most first-generation male participants enjoyed to participate. Additionally, organized physical activity was widely offered by schools through physical education and extracurricular programs. Community-based sport clubs were rarely available and might be managed unprofessionally. Imran who was currently a basketball athlete in New Zealand shared his experience, “I actually played for a club in Indonesia but I just, I quit because I just didn't really like it.”

Once the families of the participants immigrated to New Zealand, the youth have been exposed to vast array of physical activity opportunities. The first generation of immigrants came into their new home with some physical capitals and skills of certain sports, mainly soccer and badminton. Most of the participants engaged in non-organized physical activity. Meanwhile, schools served as the first access to organized physical activity for many of the youth. Some of these youth continued to participate in relatively low pressure of organized physical activity. For example, Imran shared his early participation in low pressure sport, “Back in primary I started playing volleyball, because I didn't have that pressure on me.”

The youth in this study also played informal futsal, soccer, volleyball, badminton, and basketball. In addition to the non-organized

physical activity, some of the youth in this study also participated in organized physical activity. In fact, schools played important roles in providing doors to access formal activities. All of the participants had physical education experience as their organized physical activity. The school subject was the opportunity for the youth to learn various types of activities, especially activities that were new to them. Mardi explained.

“Well, in PE we learn how to play different types of sports. If I didn't do PE, I wouldn't know how to play handball. They give opportunity to play sports that you would normally not play. I wouldn't normally play rugby and in PE sometimes we have to do that too.”

Equally important, PE served as a safe place for the youth to learn sports that are culturally central in New Zealand society. For example, Luthfi did not personally like contact sports. However, he could feel free to stop the activity whenever he felt uncomfortable. Furthermore, Mate considered that the social environment in PE class provided a sense of confidence to try out newly learned skills. He said, “It's not like anyone gonna judge you. You're not playing in a proper team. You're just playing because is an activity.”

Schools extended their role in providing physical activity opportunities through extracurricular physical activity programs. Most of the youth participated in school sports which were low pressure and social in nature. An example is Fara's experience who used to play basketball before coming to New Zealand. She had not been interested in playing the game again for about three years until she tried it last year. She went on a basketball trial with an understanding that her school team was not highly demanding. She said, “Everyone got in because we need the players. We don't care how good or bad you are as long as you wanna play, just get in.” Some other schools emphasized athleticism and competitiveness as told by few participants. However, the sport trials were still organized in a way that they understated competitiveness.

**Physical Activity as the Utilization of the Body.** For most of the participants, physical activity was about the use their body. In other word, they considered that their physical activity experiences have been understood as the action of making practical of their corporeal body (e.g., flesh, bones, skin). More than a half of the participants considered that their body shapes had led to what types of physical activity they would

participate. They were aware about their body shapes which were generally smaller and shorter than the non-immigrant counterparts. They preferred to participate in types of physical activity suitable to their bodies. Among these participants was Muklis who said, “Me being Indonesian is an advantage, some sports, maybe football, but badminton for sure.”

Additionally, it was also apparent that the participants attributed the use of the body for moving in the outdoor settings as the meaning of their physical activity. For example, Azma mentioned, “Basically, all is about moving, going

outdoor, doing sport.” The moving body within the outdoors might not be uniquely immigrant constructed meanings (see Figure 2). However, “going outdoor” could be a powerful statement reflecting their engagement in the new culture and acculturation process either by using or participating in physical activity. In other words, the research participants added elements of cultural learning in their meaning-making of their participation. This construction of meanings might be typical among recently arrived immigrants. Figure 1 shows code network analysis by using ATLAS.ti 9.

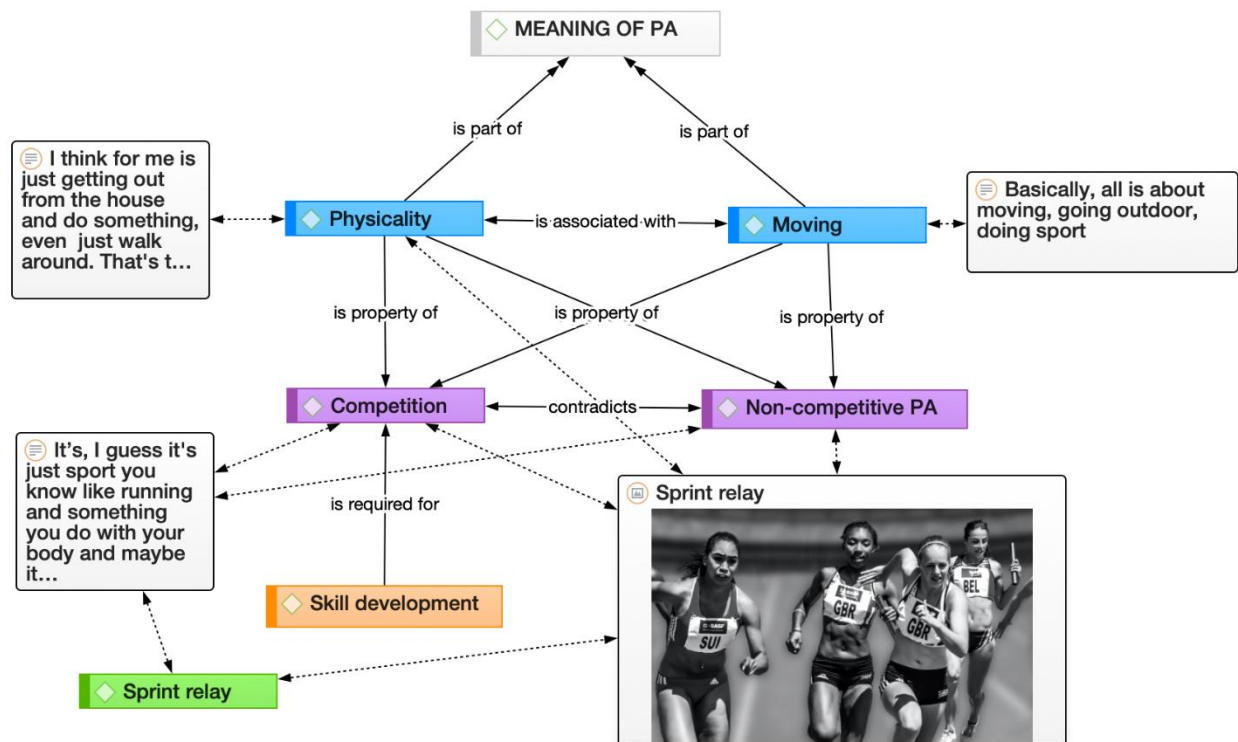


Figure 1. Thematic Depiction of the Meaning of Physical Activity as the Utilization of the Body.

In fact, the first-generation of transnational youth (N=12) in this study tended to regard that much of their physical skills and know-how to play games or sports in the migrating country was not immediately applicable. Take an example of Fara’s experience: she participated in Indonesian traditional martial art prior to migrating in New Zealand. Now, she had to put so much effort to even join in a community boxing because she considered to have the barriers to participation such as language and physical capitals. Fara thought that having strong confidence was essential for physical activity participation. She said about her physical activity as, “Building your

confidence in natural world or environment outside. It’s not like staying inside.”

Another barrier to participation included access to the physical activity that they accustomed to play. Most participants admitted that badminton was not a mainstream sport in New Zealand. They were unable to conveniently play badminton as they used to do it back in Indonesia. However, this situation did not stop them to “use their body” by engaging in any physical activity they could afford. Kardi, for example, concerned that it was not easy to participate in mainstream sports in New Zealand because she did not feel competent enough to

play. Then, she turned her idea of physical activity into any bodily activity in the outdoor as physical activity. She stated, “I think for me is just getting out from the house and do something, even just walk around. That’s the minimum. So, it’s just use your body something.”

It is prominent among the participants (N=11) of this study that the use of the body would require skills to perform the activity. This was especially true among the boys who frequently mentioned physical skills throughout the interviews. An example was Nofri’s statement that physical activities in the form of sport were not easy to perform. Nofri continued to say, “Even twisting the stick (lacrosse), you need the skills for it.” Furthermore, analysis also revealed that the participants tended to be concerned with new skill development mainly because of lacking physical capitals (e.g., the body sizes and types, fundamental motor skills,

and background knowledge of the games). Therefore, the youth would need to strive for meaningful participation in physical activity within the immigration contexts. In the photo elicitation interview session, for example, Mahmood picked an image of multi-nationals female runners competed in a sprint relay. This black and white photograph depicts elite sprinters who were showing high levels of athletic performance. He said, “It’s, I guess it’s just sport you know like running and something you do with your body and maybe it has specific skills to it.” Mahmood continued to underline that developing a skillful body demanded hard work for whatever purpose one did the activity. From his chosen picture, he explained, “I wanna say it should be competitive, maybe but maybe not always competitive, can be friendly sometimes, you know and yeah people working hard, I think.”

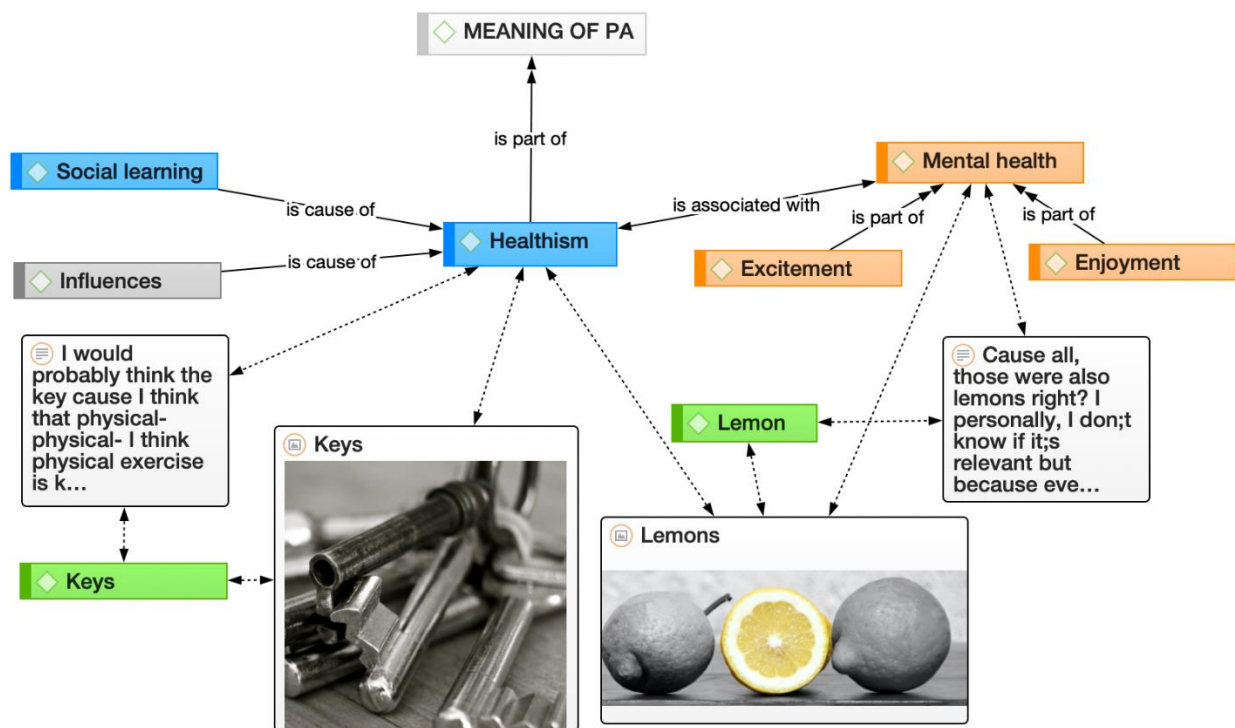


Figure 2. The Concept Mapping for the Theme of Physical Activity for the Healthy Body from ATLAS.ti 9.

It could be expected that corporeal body would be important in the participants’ experiences with regard to physical activity. The meaning that they attached to these experiences, therefore, concentrated around the bodily utilization. While transnational youth may share these meanings with their native counterparts, there were tones in the youth’s constructed meanings that might

reflect the interplays between their cultural origins, immigration experiences, and acculturation process. These included the meanings of outdoor settings, skill development, and uneasy efforts to participate meaningfully in New Zealand’s mainstream sports.

**Physical Activity for the Healthy Body.** In addition to making point about physical activity

as the utilization of the body, the participants also tended to regard that their participation was for physical health. Analysis showed that the terms “health” was notable within the meaning-making of physical activity experience. The following figure describes the concept of physical activity for the healthy body.

More specifically, they considered that physical activity involved maintenance of physical fitness and health in enjoyable ways. Niki, for example, said that physical activity was for, “Keeping fit, staying healthy, having fun.” The element of healthy body within the meaning of physical activity may be typical among young people regardless of their backgrounds. However, it was prominent in the data that the transnational experiences have played out in the participants’ meaning constructions for healthy body. The process of resettling in a new country involves cultural learning in which aspects of the new society are adapted. Participants came to New Zealand and considered that the new people around them were physically active: A phenomenon that they rarely saw back in their home country. The youth socially learnt through observation, inspiration, and motivation as they were exposed in the new culture. Gwen said, “People in New Zealand are very fit and healthy and very active. I’m surrounded by these people who are super fit and to stay active so you kinda get influenced by them to kinda stay healthy.”

Another example was Kardi who arrived in Auckland about a year ago. What she saw in the first days of resettling in the area had led to actually motivate her to do physical activity. She said, “I think just walking everywhere seeing different people looking very fit, some people even quick jog around the shops. I think that the motivation to me.” Some of the participants committed in physical activity because they got inspired by active New Zealanders. For example, Lukman said that his senior neighbor has influenced him to be physically active. He said, “You have to be active as much as possible because my neighbor next door he’s 85 and he’s still really active up till now, and he used to be a firefighter.”

The eminence of physical activity for health was also much articulated in the photo-elicitation interviews. For example, Gwen selected a photograph of a set of different keys laying on a wood surface. This sepia toning image helped her metaphorically describe the meaning of healthy

body on her physical activity experience. In her account, one should attempt to persistently maintain both mental and physical health. This persistent maintenance would turn into a healthy lifestyle. The key to this lifestyle according to her, was physical activity.

“I would probably think the key. Cause I think physical exercise is kinda the key to a healthy lifestyle personally. I think that the key image kind of represents that physical exercise is the key to having a healthy lifestyle whether it be your mental state, your emotional state, your physical state (Gwen).”

Also, Kardi further elaborated that such lifestyle was a choice. It was individual preference and decision to look healthy and good. She metaphorically illustrated the meaning of physical activity through the picture portraying a row of three lemons laying on the table next by some leafy objects. With a cement plaster finished wall in the background, this photograph is monochrome except the half-cut lemon in the middle staying in its original color.

“Cause all, those were also lemons right? I personally, I don’t know if it’s relevant but because everything is black and white and that one, the one is yellow. I picture it as those three lemons is us and then the yellow is the one that do exercise because it shows that one person is more alive and fresh. We’re all the same. We’re all lemons but it’s our choice to be yellow, you know. What I’m trying to say is that it’s a matter of choice. You can be brighter, you can do sport if you want to and that would make you just stand out. We’re the same lemons, same size maybe we’re all sour but that one is more appealing to the eyes (Kardi).”

Analysis also revealed that pleasure was also an important addition to the features of healthy body. Participants tended to regard enjoyment as an integral part of health. Marcus stated, “Well, as long as you’re healthy and fit and you’re enjoying it, that’s the main thing for me.” Located within the domain of mental health, however, enjoyment deemed to be originated from corporeal phenomenon by the youth in this study. For example, Noah joined American football team in his school. From his embodied experience of getting winded, he put meaning on his physical activity as a stimulant to the secretion of adrenaline hormone. The physical side of the physical activity could provide him with exciting experiences. He explained, “Physical activity is

for enjoyment, an excitement for me. I can get excited, the adrenaline.”

Analysis could anticipate healthism as one of major themes when investigating topic related to physical activity. In fact, healthy body prominently recurred in the data of the current study. Some visible ingredients in the constructed meaning of healthy body included physical activity as the key to a healthy lifestyle, choice, commitment, and mental health which might also prevail among other groups of young people. It was evident, however, that some youth with transnational backgrounds shaped the meaning of healthy body by involving their experiences of socially learning new society and culture.

**Beyond Corporeality.** The research participants also ascribed meanings to their physical activity experiences that went beyond physicality. For example, Mate went to a school that offered various options for physical activities despite the greater emphasis was on competitive sports. He stated, “I guess Rosmini College (pseudonym) is invested in this sport and physical activities cause it's one of the strongest departments and like half of our class's really competitive.” Through the metaphor of passengers sitting down in subway carriages, Mate elaborated the meaning of his physical activity as it was further beyond the moving corporeal body. Figure 3 represents the meaning of physical activity beyond corporeal body.

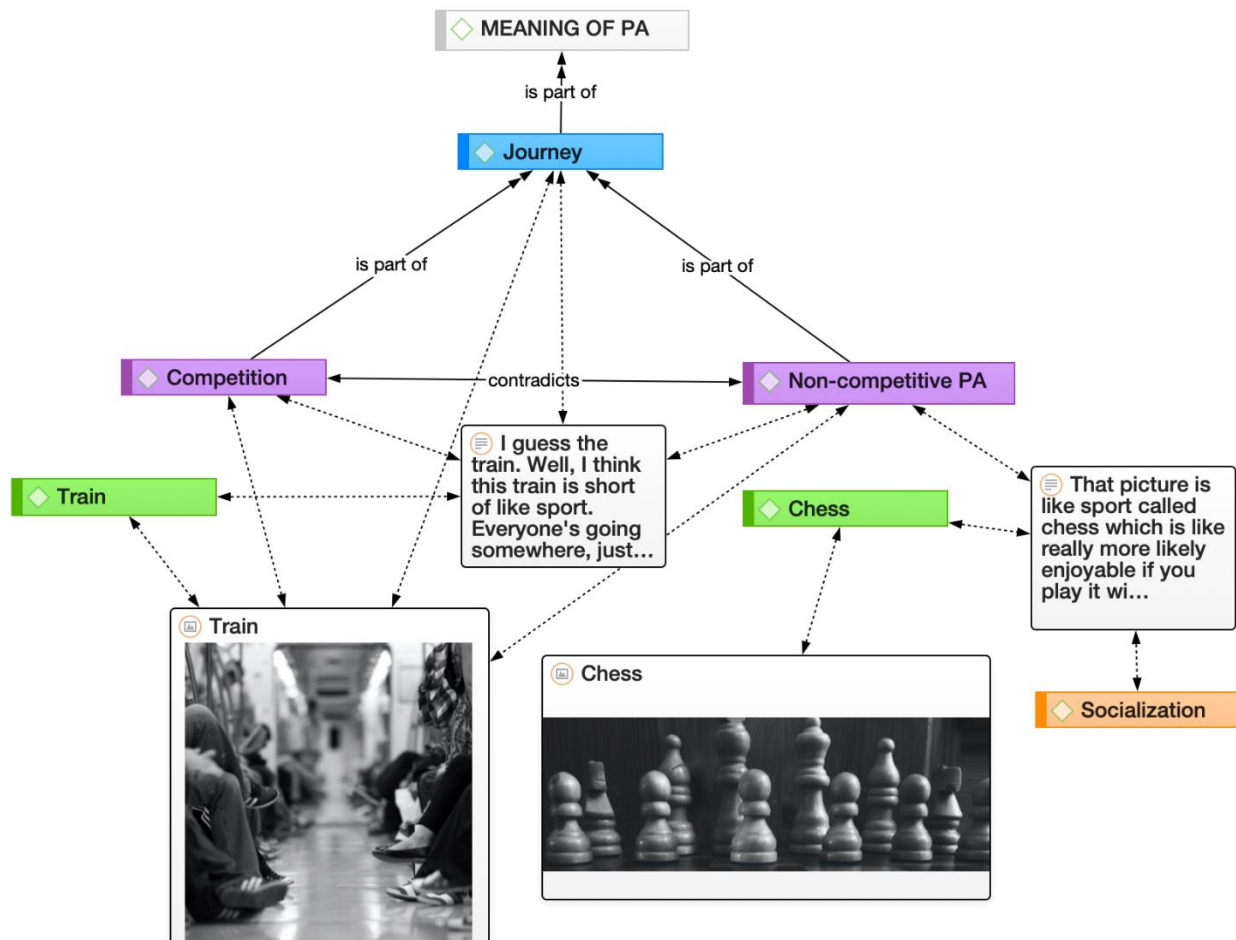


Figure 3. Thematic Description of Physical activity Beyond Corporeality.

In his account, engaging in physical activity could be represented as riding a train in which the on-board passengers might do different things in the carriages but they were literally moving together in one line. More specifically, people

might do various activities even though they actually did relatively similar thing: sports. Important to his meaning was, however, that the train travelers would have different stops which was comparable to different purposes of people

engaging in physical activity. Enjoyment as the purpose of the activity could be paralleled by the metaphor of a short distant trip. Other passengers might go farther out to which competitive purposes of physical activity got more obvious. Mate said,

“Well, I think this train is short of sport. Everyone's going somewhere, just everyone's going to different places with it. Some are gonna get further, some are only there because they want to be. Some are short of forced to get there. Everyone's doing something different. But they all have their own destination. It also shows that there are a lot of people doing the same physical activity but they have different reason why they're doing it.”

Taking Mate's metaphor into account, the research participants tended to travel shorter distances. In other words, their purposes for engaging in physical activity revolved around recreational elements of the activities. Data showed that informal, non-organized physical activities dominated the youth's experiences through which they enjoyed the activities for leisure, personal development, and socialization. Like most of other participants, Mate personally preferred to deemphasize the competitive aspects of his physical activity so it allowed him to have more fun. He said, “I'm not that competitive when it comes to sport and stuff. I only do it because it's fun.” Even though the aspect of enjoyment within the meaning of physical activity may not be unique to immigrant population, the youth in this study added up the dimension of socialization in their constructed meanings. This is worth noting since the first- and second-generation immigrants might still be concerned with integrating into the new society. Mate continued to explain that by participating in a pleasurable physical activity, “You could have more experiences and make friends too and you can also have something to talk about instead of just games like or humor and stuff.” Another participant, Trio chose a photograph portraying the white side of chess pieces setup at the beginning of a game. He said, “That picture is like sport called chess which is really more likely enjoyable if you play it with your friends cause if you play with yourself it's not really enjoyable. You know, it's two players.”

Data showed that the youth in this study tended to participate in less organized physical activity. The meaning attributed to their bodily experiences included the purposes of physical

activity that went beyond corporeality. By deemphasizing competitiveness, they attached recreational and social orientations on their physical activity experiences. These orientations were essential for the participants who had been trying to integrate themselves into the new society, especially purposes with regard to social networking. In either physical activity as a vehicle for acculturation or as one aspect of the prevalent culture to participate in, the process had physically and psychologically been harsh for the research participants leading them to aspire supports deemed important to get through their journeys.

## DISCUSSION

Research participants tended to demonstrate transnational practices through participating in games commonly played in Indonesia and at the same time learning new ones in the migrating country. Games such as soccer, badminton, and volleyball are central in Indonesian physical culture despite they are considered non-mainstream games in New Zealand. The participants usually possessed either partially or entirely the sporting habitus acquired from their homeland. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these habitus directly predisposed first generation's engagement in soccer, badminton, and other peripheral games in New Zealand (15). The second generation might get instilled about participation in those games from the first-generation parents.

Analysis also showed that the youth had concurrently demonstrated a sign of integration into their new society by engaging in organized, mainstream sports (e.g., rugby, lacrosse) through physical education and other school-based sport programs. This was especially obvious for physical education serving the research participants an important outlet to experience physical activity in organized settings. This school subject provided the youth with learning opportunities to develop knowledge about New Zealand's physical culture and skills necessary to participate in. For the youth in this study, physical education was not only institutionalized physical activity they could benefit from but it also provided a safe environment for their engagement with physical activity.

Furthermore, the youth ascribed meanings to their experience which included physical activity as the utilization of body toward healthy body and aspects beyond physicality. More specifically, body was in the first place when the research



participants began to talk about the meanings of physical activity indicating how the body was primarily the rationale for doing physical activity. The element of body within the meaning of physical activity experience is not unique to immigrant populations. Literature has documented studies on this particular area (16, 17). However, it is unique to the research participants because the corporeal dimension featured in their meaning of physical activity may be intertwined with their experience of acculturation. Skuza (2007) took Merleau-Ponty's thought that body is first and foremost the gate way to the world (18). One's life world remains in existence as far as her/his body exists. Skuza stated, "To understand the experience of acculturation, it is important to understand the bodily existence" (18). The centrality of the body within the meaning of physical activity signified the articulation of the youth's bodily existence.

It might be too early to discuss that physical activity participation might reflect acculturation process in terms of the utilization of the body. However, another aspect of their meanings, namely healthy body, could be considered as the degree to which the participants had been acculturated. In other words, they might already be exposed to the metanarratives regulating what to do to have healthy bodies or obesity discourses leading to engagement in physical activity for healthy body through learning from their social environment (19, 20). It is noteworthy that such metanarratives and discourse are uncommon in a developing country like Indonesia whose some of its people still struggle with fulfilling basic needs. Therefore, healthy body emphasized in the youth's meaning of physical activity might be an early indication of the acculturation process as the participants engaged their bodily existence in New Zealand physical culture.

In addition to the corporeal features, the research participants also attributed recreational qualities within their constructed meanings. These qualities are beyond fleshy, corporeal rationales including enjoyment and socialization. The purpose of participation in physical activity involving recreational elements seems to be ubiquitous among young people. For those who have experienced immigration, however, these elements become powerful assets to help them with integrating in the new society. Research in the field of social psychology has concluded that immigrant youth experienced immigration-related stress and other

mental health issues (21, 22). Highlighting enjoyment within the meaning of physical activity might be related to their psychological status. Additionally, socialization is also important for helping them with identification within and belonging to their new society. Immigrant youth's identity, for example, can be constructed by physical activity practices (23). In fact, the youth in this study identified such practices to tackle language barriers and develop peer networking.

## CONCLUSION

Corporeal aspect of the body was predominant to the constructed meaning of physical activity experiences among immigrant youth. The themes generated from the data represented how the research participants had derived the use of the body for achieving healthy bodies as well as purposes beyond corporeality. Although these meanings may be shared with other youth populations, the participants' physical activity experiences and the ascribed meanings highlighted transnationalism and transnational practice. We have been able to craft this finding because we have adopted the concepts of physical activity, young people, and transnationalism from the broader perspective and relational analysis.

Despite having carefully been crafted, the current study has limitations. They included issues of credibility due to short period of data collection (two weeks). Future study should consider longer stay for foreign researchers to ensure prolonged engagement with the participants. The other limitation is that the photo-elicitation session seemed to be cognitively demanding for some of the younger participants. Forthcoming research may use images chosen by the participants instead of researchers' prepared materials. Finally, follow-up studies can extend into topics that focus on how life interruptions other than immigration events may affect people's sporting habitus.

## APPLICABLE REMARKS

- We considered that a photo-elicitation strategy has helped us mine tacit dimensions within the constructed meanings of the participants' experience.
- Additionally, the finding represents a new look at physical activity experienced by those with transnational backgrounds and promises contribution to knowledge development, policy improvement, and practices regarding youth physical activity.

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