

Creative Communities as Bridges:
The Role of Cultural Participation Spaces in Migrant Social Integration

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Abstract:

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In an increasingly globalized world, migration continues to shape the cultural and social dynamics of host societies. This raises important questions about how migrants engage with their new environments, not merely through everyday, informal practices. Cultural participation plays a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging and promoting social integration. This study explores how cultural participation spaces such as dance collectives, theatre groups, pottery workshops, or creative writing circle, support the social integration of expatriates in the Netherlands. These creative communities function not only as outlets for artistic expression but also as vital platforms for building social networks, fostering a sense of belonging, and navigating identity in a new cultural context.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of cultural capital, social capital, sense of community, and social identity theory, this research employs a qualitative methodology that includes preliminary site visits and in-depth semi-structured interviews with recent expatriates engaged in three distinct cultural spaces. Using thematic analysis, six overarching themes emerged: (1) Negotiating Belonging and Community, (2) Cultural Capital and Creative Expression as Tools of Integration, (3) Building Social Capital through Participation, (4) Identity Transformation and Self-Exploration, (5) The Role of Language: Bridge or Barrier?, and (6) Inclusion and Accessibility: Structural and Perceived Barriers. Findings show that these cultural spaces act as dynamic sites for connection, emotional resilience, and identity negotiation. However, despite their informal and inclusive nature, participants still faced barriers related to cost, language dominance, and limited interaction with local Dutch residents. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the social dimensions of expatriate life and underscores the importance of creative, community-based cultural practices in fostering inclusive and socially cohesive urban environments.

Keywords: cultural participation spaces, social integration, sense of belonging, identity negotiation, inclusivity

1. Introduction

In today's highly interconnected world, migration has become a defining feature of contemporary societies. It is crucial to consider how migrants meaningfully engage with their new environments. Cultural participation plays an essential role in promoting social integration and fostering a sense of belonging, particularly for migrants navigating unfamiliar social landscapes (Salgado & Patuzzi, 2022, p. 9; Grosvenor et al., 2024, p. 36142). Cultural participation spaces—such as dance groups, theatre collectives, pottery workshops, and art clubs—function as more than mere creative outlets. They serve as important sites for creating community, expressing emotion, and negotiating identity (Aure & Al-Mahamid, 2021, p. 411; Clini et al., 2019, p. 6, 8). These environments enable migrants to establish new relationships, experience a sense of belonging, and explore their emerging identities in the context of the host society (Aure & Al-Mahamid, 2021, p. 408; Berasategi Sancho et al., 2023, p. 427; Clini et al., 2019, p. 5, 8; McIntyre et al., 2023, p. 40).

This study examines the role of such cultural participation spaces in the Netherlands as impactful platforms where recent migrants experience social connection, symbolic recognition, and self-expression. The term “cultural participation spaces” is used intentionally to distinguish these environments from more institutionalized cultural organizations, which often convey hierarchical structures and standardized programming. In contrast, participation spaces are typically flexible, informal, and participant-driven, offering more accessible and emotionally resonant opportunities for migrant engagement.

Social integration is a multi-dimensional process that goes beyond institutional inclusion to encompass emotional safety, interpersonal acceptance, and symbolic belonging (Berry, 1997, p. 10-11; Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 204). For migrants, especially expatriates, the process of identity formation is ongoing and shaped by both personal reflection and social dynamics, as they continuously adapt and reframe their sense of self in new cultural contexts (Adams & Van de Vijver, 2015, p. 324; Guo et al., 2021, p. 562). In this context, cultural participation spaces can serve as spaces where migrants feel seen, heard, and socially anchored.

The Netherlands has emerged as a major destination for expatriates, drawn by its strong economy, international work culture, and globally respected educational institutions. As the international population continues to grow, questions of integration beyond professional and academic life have become increasingly relevant. Despite this, current academic literature has focused mainly on refugees, economically marginalized migrants (Boda et al., 2023; Clini et al., 2019; Namata et al., 2025; Phillimore, 2024), and, to a lesser extent, international students (Kristiana et al., 2022; Knox et al., 2019; Misirlis et al., 2020; Sin et al., 2025a; Sin et al., 2025b), overlooking the social integration

experiences of mobile, highly educated newcomers such as expatriates and highly skilled migrants. These groups are often analyzed through an economic lens, emphasizing their labor market contributions (Brell et al., 2020; Grosskopf et al., 2024), while their affective, social, and cultural integration remains underexplored (Hajro et al., 2021, p.2).

This research seeks to address this gap. Academically, it contributes to migration studies, sociology, and cultural theory by shifting the focus from policy-level integration frameworks to the everyday, micro-level practices through which belonging and identity are negotiated. Societally, it provides timely insight into how creative infrastructures in the Netherlands can better support migrant populations, not only by promoting inclusion but by fostering intercultural dialogue and resilience through participatory artistic engagement.

The following research questions guide this research:

1. How do cultural participation spaces in the Netherlands facilitate migrants' social integration and sense of belonging?
2. In what ways does participation in creative communities impact the identity and self-expression of migrants in the Netherlands?
3. How inclusive are cultural participation spaces for diverse migrant groups, and what factors influence their accessibility?

To investigate these questions, this study adopts a multi-theoretical framework, integrating four key lenses: cultural capital, social capital, sense of community, and social identity theory. These frameworks help uncover how migrants mobilize resources, form meaningful relationships, and reshape their social identities within creative spaces. This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how migrants experience belonging within cultural participation spaces. By examining emotional realities and everyday interactions, it reveals how these spaces function as relational environments where migrants build social ties, express identities, and actively co-create a sense of belonging in Dutch society.

2. Theoretical Framework

Within the broader context of global migration, understanding how individuals integrate into host societies goes beyond mere economic or legal aspects. They also involve cultural, emotional, and identity-based processes. Social *integration* is not only limited to participation in institutional systems; it also encompasses the creation of meaningful social connections and the cultivation of a sense of belonging in daily life (Berry, 1997, p. 11). The concept of *belonging* is complex and multifaceted, capturing emotional attachment, social acknowledgment, and inclusion within

community environments (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 204). For migrants, especially expatriates, this often entails a continuous *negotiation of identity* (Papafilippou & Efthymiadou, 2022, p. 94), a process in which individuals redefine their sense of self in response to shifting social and cultural landscapes. Within this context, *cultural participation* emerges as a vital platform for social connection and cultural adaptation (Arroyo, 2020, p.10, 24).

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on sociology, migration studies, and cultural studies, to examine how cultural spaces support migrant integration. It draws on four theoretical frameworks—*cultural capital*, *social capital*, *sense of community*, and *social identity theory*—to analyze how creative communities can serve as platforms for belonging, identity development, and the building of social bridges.

2.1. Cultural Capital and Migrant Cultural Participation

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *cultural capital* provides a foundational lens for understanding how migrants engage with and navigate cultural participation spaces. Cultural capital is a form of non-economic assets that significantly influence social mobility. Bourdieu identifies three forms of cultural capital: embodied (dispositions, skills, and habits), objectified (material cultural goods), and institutionalized (formal qualifications, such as academic degrees) (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Notably, these forms of capital are not static for migrants—they are continually re-negotiated and re-assessed within the cultural hierarchies of the host society (Erel, 2010, p. 643; Smith et al., 2019, p. 861-862).

Migrants typically come with embodied cultural knowledge shaped by their home contexts. However, this capital may be devalued or unrecognized in the host culture, necessitating that migrants adjust or convert their cultural capital accordingly. This transformative process is highlighted by Erel (2010, p. 647), who suggests that migrants are not passive bearers of culture but active agents who reshape and recontextualize their cultural capital in relation to their new environment (p. 645). She points out that cultural participation provides spaces where these resources can be exchanged, made visible, and validated.

This is reinforced in Kim and Kim's (2009) study, which points to a positive association between cultural capital and quality of life of migrants in host societies. They find that migrants who participate in cultural activities reported higher subjective well-being and social integration, largely due to the recognition and affirmation of their skills and expressions (p. 298). Therefore, cultural capital becomes a key means for achieving symbolic inclusion and emotional adjustment.

Creative participation spaces serve as sites in which cultural capital is both expressed and reconstructed. Arroyo (2020, p. 24) explores how migrant artists reappropriate such spaces to build bridges and foster community, while also asserting their cultural identity in meaningful ways.

Likewise, Bertacchini, Venturini, and Zotti (2022) find that immigrants in Italy who engage in artistic practices are more likely to report increased cultural awareness and social ties, illustrating the potential of such spaces for intercultural exchange and recognition (p. 63).

Much of the literature on cultural capital and migrant participation pertains either to refugees or marginalized ethnic minorities, and, to a lesser extent, international students (Clini et al., 2019; Kristiana et al., 2022; Knox et al., 2019; Misirlis et al., 2020; Namata et al., 2025; Phillimore, 2024). There is limited understanding of how highly educated mobile migrants, such as expatriates, mobilize their cultural capital in creative spaces. This group often brings significant pre-existing cultural capital but may face subtler forms of exclusion or misrecognition.

2.2. Social Capital and Creative Participation

While cultural capital refers to the skills, knowledge, and aesthetic sensibilities that migrants bring to and develop within creative spaces, social capital emphasizes how these settings nurture interpersonal connections, relationships of support, and access to resources. Social capital, according to Woolcock (1998), consists of "the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively." It may be further divided into two types: bridging capital, which links people from different backgrounds, and bonding capital, which creates bonds within relatively homogeneous groups (p. 155). Bonding capital provides cultural and emotional security, while bridging capital provides access to wider social interactions and opportunities, making both types indispensable for migrants.

It has been argued that traditional explanations of social capital, especially those influenced by Putnam (2000), overemphasize community cohesiveness while underplaying the power relations that shape who can benefit from social ties. Anthias (2007) contends that Putnam's model ignores the structural constraints that govern social interactions, presuming that bridging is always desirable and that ethnic ties are inherently exclusive (p. 790). A more grounded perspective comes from Ryan et al. (2008), whose study of recent Polish migrants in London shows that the usefulness of a network depends less on its size than on the nature of its ties: weak, diverse ties established in informal settings often proved more effective than close kinship ties for securing local information, employment, and recognition in society (pp. 675-677). These relationships, while not always intimate, provide significant functional support and a sense of shared experience in the host country. Venues for cultural participation can play a comparable role. By offering low-stakes spaces where people together around shared cultural interests, they nurture exactly the sort of weak ties that deliver practical support and a sense of belonging.

This is crucial for international students and expatriates who often occupy liminal social roles, embedded in academic or professional systems yet lacking stronger connections to the local

community. As Arroyo (2020, p. 10) suggests, arts-based spaces are capable of bridging these disparities by facilitating mutual recognition and co-creation. Similarly, Giovanis (2021) finds that cultural engagement significantly increases subjective well-being and promotes trust among native and immigrant communities (p. 428).

2.3. Sense of Community and Belonging in Cultural Spaces

In migrant lives, integration is not solely defined by access to jobs or services. It also depends on whether individuals can experience a sense of ‘home’ within their new surroundings. This sense of belonging—emotional, symbolic, and social—is crucial to migrants’ well-being. Drawing on McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) seminal framework, belonging comprises four interrelated components: *membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection* (p. 9). These components offer a useful lens through which to understand how cultural groups provide migrants with spaces of connection, identity, and safety.

Membership refers to the feeling of being part of a collective, marked by emotional safety, boundaries, and a shared sense of identity (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9-10). As Yuval-Davis (2006) argues, it is always layered and politicized, shaped by socio-cultural hierarchies and embedded in practices of inclusion and exclusion (p. 204). Belonging does not merely reflect emotional attachment—it also marks the boundaries of who is seen as an "insider" or "other." Cultural spaces offer low-threshold entry points where new migrants can claim a form of symbolic membership, even when broader societal structures might deny or complicate it. These spaces often become emotional sanctuaries where migrant identities are affirmed in the new environment (Sonn, 2002, p. 206). By providing non-institutional environments for expression, cultural groups offer migrants an initial foothold in unfamiliar societies (Bertacchini et al., 2022, p. 80).

Influence, the second element, suggests a reciprocal relationship: members must feel they can shape the group and that the group matters to them, which is bidirectional (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.11). this is vital for migrants who may otherwise feel politically or socially excluded. This shifts them from passive recipients of integration to active agents of belonging (Allen et al., 2021, p. 88), enhancing their self-efficacy and recognition within the group. The third element, *integration and fulfilment of needs*, highlights how groups provide resources—emotional, social, or material—that meet individual desires for support and connection. In cultural participation spaces, these may be informal (e.g., companionship, mentorship) or symbolic (e.g., identity affirmation). Plöger and Kubiak’s (2019, p. 314) findings align closely here, emphasizing how local social networks, usually international groups are instrumental for belonging and identity formation. These needs are not only

social but also cultural and symbolic, allowing migrants to navigate the challenges of transnational lives and fluctuating identities.

Lastly, *shared emotional connection* emerges from a group's history, interactions, and shared narratives. This aspect is especially significant in migrant settings, where shared stories of displacement or adaptation can create bonds that cut across cultural difference. In cultural groups, these experiences are not just shared but reframed through creativity and solidarity. According to Sonn (2002, p.206), such emotional ties are vital to psychological resilience and a sense of safety. Ultimately, cultural participation becomes more than artistic expression—it is a site of relational belonging, symbolic affirmation, and emotional anchoring. As Førde (2019, p. 51) emphasizes, creative initiatives can transform urban anonymity into spaces of encounter and possibility. For migrants, these spaces offer not only creativity but also connection, care, and the feeling of finally being 'seen'.

2.4. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40) offers a foundational lens for understanding how individuals construct self-concept through group affiliation. This theory posits that people define themselves in part by the social groups to which they belong, identifying as members of “in-groups” while differentiating from “out-groups.” For migrants and expatriates, this group-based identification is a powerful psychological resource in navigating new cultural terrains.

The Social Identity Approach further illustrates how shared group membership fosters belonging and well-being. When individuals identify with a social group, they experience shifts in cognition, emotion, and behaviour that strengthen their connection to others. The more deeply one identifies with a group, the greater the mutual support, reinforcing both personal and collective efficacy. Shared social identity acts as a psychological resource, offering connection, meaning, social support, and agency (Jetten et al., 2017, p. 789). For migrants, forming social identities within cultural spaces enhances their sense of belonging, enabling them to navigate identity-related challenges while fostering psychological stability and integration (Grosvenor et al., 2024, p. 36143).

Participation in creative collectives enables migrants to co-produce identities through collaborative practice—sharing stories, aesthetics, and experiences that affirm both individual and collective narratives. As Jetten et al. (2017, p. 790) argue, this group identification provides a "social cure" that improves mental health, resilience, and emotional well-being. These spaces allow migrants to be more than “foreigners”—they become collaborators, contributors, and co-creators.

Papafilippou and Efthymiadou (2022, p. 95) show how “expat bubbles” often reinforce sameness and inhibit deep integration. In contrast, culturally diverse creative spaces encourage migrants to question, mix, and rework identities. However, Guo et al. (2021, p. 564) highlight a persistent challenge: even when expatriates view themselves as part of the “in-group,” host country nationals may still regard them as outsiders, showing the inherently relational and contested nature of social identity.

Ultimately, cultural communities offer a dynamic site where identity is performed, challenged, and reimagined, enabling migrants to craft belonging and reassert agency within often unfamiliar social landscapes.

The interplay between *cultural capital*, *social capital*, *sense of belonging*, and *social identity* forms a continuous cycle: migrants engage with cultural participation spaces, developing or exchanging cultural capital, to cultivate social capital through networks and establish a sense of belonging through shared identity. This framework underscores how cultural spaces are not merely sites of artistic expression but crucial arenas for fostering belonging, identity formation, and meaningful social connections in a migrant’s journey.

3. Methodology

3.1. Qualitative Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how cultural participation spaces influence social integration, identity formation, and a sense of belonging among migrants, specifically expatriates, in the Netherlands. These experiences are not only shaped by structural factors but are deeply embedded in emotions, relationships, and everyday interactions (Berry, 1997, p. 9-10; Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 204). A qualitative design is particularly appropriate here, offering a nuanced, narrative-driven understanding of how individuals interpret and make sense of their lives in new cultural environments (Maxwell, 2005).

Employing qualitative methods provides rich, in-depth insights into the ways individuals navigate complex cultural and social transformations (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018, p.2). This approach allows for the refinement and redefinition of existing concepts, such as “integration” or “borders”, while also making room for emergent meanings and alternative perspectives. In fact, qualitative approaches are particularly valuable in migration studies because they are better attuned to hearing the voices of migrants, especially those underrepresented or misrecognized in mainstream discourses (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018, pp. 2–3). Thus, this study tries to understand not just what integration looks like on paper, but how it is *felt, lived, and resisted* in cultural participation spaces.

This study uses an *interpretive lens*, drawing on Geertz's (1973) notion of "*thick description*" to analyze participants' experiences in relation to the symbolic and social meanings attached to belonging and identity. Migrants' creative engagements are not merely expressive—they are acts of social positioning, cultural negotiation, and emotional survival. Thus, the study employs two complementary methods to explore these multilayered subjective realities. Firstly, *preliminary site visits* to observe the dynamics and accessibility of cultural spaces, followed by *semi-structured in-depth interviews* to capture participants' personal narratives, relationships, and reflections.

This approach also embraces the flexibility and responsiveness inherent in interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999, p. 118-119). It allows the interview to unfold more like a real conversation than a rigid procedure. By staying present and engaging with participants in the moment, researchers can actually sense those subtle shifts—the power plays, the ways people tweak their identities as they talk.

In line with Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz's (2018) assertion that qualitative inquiry can generate new theoretical paradigms and "redefine existing categories" (p. 2), this design supports the goal of developing fresh insights into migrant cultural participation as a dynamic, relational, and meaning-rich process.

3.2. Preliminary Site Visits and Semi-Structured Interviews

As Boccagni and Schrooten (2018) argue, even in non-ethnographic studies, being "there" and observing the rhythms of everyday life offers unique value. Close observation enables researchers to connect spoken narratives with lived practices and to situate individual experiences within the broader cultural frameworks in which they are situated (p. 211). In this study, *preliminary site visits were conducted to contextualize the environments* in which migrants engage in creative cultural participation. These visits were not ethnographic in nature, but they played a crucial context-building role, aligning with the idea that even short-term, embodied presence allows the researcher to understand "social life as it is being lived" (Boccagni & Schrooten, 2018, p. 212).

The site visits shaped my research in four ways: (1) they provided insight into the day-to-day participant experience, (2) helped me identify the most active and diverse sites, (3) informed the development of my interview guide, especially around access and inclusion, and (4) guided the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participant selection. Following Boccagni and Schrooten (2018), these field-based impressions added interpretive depth to my study by revealing social practices not always captured in spoken accounts, thus enhancing both the design and validity of the research (p. 216).

The semi-structured interview, in particular, is a central tool for exploring the voices of migrants. Fedyuk and Zentai (2018) argue that interviews, when applied reflexively, can unravel the “multi-layered links of global connectivity” and capture the contextual embeddedness of migrant lives (p. 173). Interviews function as dialogues, where participants reflect on their personal narratives, link past and present identities, and articulate both subtle and overt forms of inclusion or exclusion encountered in their participation in cultural spaces. In this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for a balance between comparability and narrative depth (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999, pp. 105-121; Maxwell, 2005, p. 58). These interviews functioned not as rigid questionnaires but as flexible conversations centered on the participants’ lived experiences, memories, and reflections. This format enabled participants to articulate how their creative engagements intersect with personal identity, cultural belonging, and everyday challenges in Dutch society.

The interview guide (see Appendix C) was carefully designed to align with the study’s three core research questions on (a) Integration and belonging, (b) Identity and self-expression, (c) Inclusivity and accessibility, and four theoretical lenses—Cultural Capital, Social Capital, Sense of Community and Social Identity. These sections addressed motivations for participation, the nature of social ties, cultural recognition, and perceived barriers to participation. The conversational nature of the interviews reflects what Díaz-Bravo et al. (2013, p. 163) and Fedyuk & Zentai (2018, p. 173) describe as the interview’s ability to contextualize lived migration through personal narrative, while enabling respondents to reflect meaningfully on their experiences. In line with May (1997), this format ensures both depth and consistency while remaining attentive to emergent themes that participants introduce organically. Ultimately, the interviews serve as sites of reflexivity, representation, and revelation, ideal for uncovering the complexity of migrant integration within cultural spaces.

3.3. Sampling Method and Data Collection

This study used a purposive sampling strategy, which is well-suited for qualitative research that aims to capture the depth and variation of lived experiences within a defined population (Maxwell, 2005, p. 58). Rather than aiming for statistical generalizability, purposive sampling allows for the intentional selection of participants who possess relevant experiential knowledge. I visited multiple cultural participation spaces across Rotterdam and Amsterdam, ranging from community-based art clubs to grassroots dance collectives. Three cultural spaces were selected based on preliminary site visits, which allowed for a contextual understanding of the activities, physical setting, social dynamics, observed inclusivity and accessibility of each space. The chosen spaces included:

- a drawing club (community-based and informal bi-monthly meetings),
- a writing collective (informal but structured through weekly meetings), and
- a dance collective that operates as a formal organization, offering classes.

This combination was deliberately chosen to examine how the level of structural formality influences participants' experiences of inclusion, creativity, and identity expression. During each visit, I observed the physical layout, noting how open or intimate the space felt, and whether the arrangement encouraged interaction or isolation. I also recorded the *atmosphere* (e.g., relaxed or formal), *language use* (Dutch vs. English or multilingual settings), and visible signs of *multicultural inclusion*, such as flags, bilingual materials, or artworks reflecting diverse heritages. These observations provided valuable contextual grounding and directly influenced the design of the interview guide and the choice of research sites.

A total of 13 participants were interviewed: 4 from the drawing club, 4 from the dance collective, and 5 from the writing group. The sample included participants from varied cultural and national backgrounds, with a gender distribution of 10 women and 3 men, aged between 24 and 45 years (see Appendix D). All participants met the inclusion criteria:

1. Identified as expatriates
2. Lived in the Netherlands for five years or less
3. Were actively engaged in one of the selected creative spaces

Data collection took place over six weeks. Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability and conducted either in-person or online, ensuring convenience and comfort. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, depending on the amount of information that participants chose to share, and were conducted in English. Prior to the interview, participants received an informed consent form (see Appendix A) outlining the study's purpose, interview format, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. The form also explained data handling procedures, including anonymization and secure storage as per Erasmus University Rotterdam guidelines. Participants signed the form before interviews began, granting permission for audio recording and use of anonymized data for academic purposes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The combination of purposive sampling, immersive site observation, and semi-structured interviews created a methodologically coherent foundation for generating rich, contextualized data on migrant experiences within cultural participation spaces.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study utilized ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program, to systematically explore the narratives and discussions from 13 semi-structured interviews with expatriates. The primary aim was to uncover how cultural participation spaces shape migrant experiences of integration, identity, and belonging in the Netherlands. The analysis followed a thematic analysis framework, providing a flexible yet rigorous approach to identifying and interpreting patterns within the collected qualitative data.

The process began with familiarization, which involved repeated readings of transcripts and observation notes to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data. In the initial stage, open coding was conducted in ATLAS.ti, where segments of text were labelled based on how participants expressed and framed their experiences. This coding was done inductively, allowing insights to emerge from the data itself, resulting in 222 codes. As the analysis developed, these initial codes were organized into code categories and higher-level themes, which were subsequently mapped to the research questions and theoretical framework. Codes such as “Belonging,” “Social Interaction,” “Self-expression,” “Identity re-evaluation,” and “Language accommodation” were used to tag and organize relevant segments of the data. A hybrid coding strategy was applied, balancing inductive coding with deductive structuring based on the research questions and four theoretical lenses. Through this categorization process, the codes were clustered into five primary categories, which were then synthesized into six overarching themes:

1. Negotiating Belonging and Community
2. Cultural Capital and Creative Expression as Tools of Integration
3. Building Social Capital through Participation
4. Identity Transformation and Self-Exploration
5. The Role of Language: Bridge or Barrier?
6. Inclusion and Accessibility: Structural and Perceived Barriers

The final themes emerged through constant comparison and iterative refinement, ensuring they remained grounded in the participants' voices while reflecting the theoretical framework and the research questions. For instance, the theme Identity Transformation and Self-Exploration included codes such as “Cultural identity negotiation,” “Self-awareness,” and “Identity exploration,” capturing how participants redefined themselves through artistic engagement. The analysis provided deep insights into the nuances of migrants' experiences of integration, identity, and cultural participation.

3.5 Measures to Ensure Trustworthiness and Ethical Integrity

To strengthen the credibility and validity of findings, the study employed several strategies.

Triangulation was used by combining insights from site visit observations with interview data, providing a richer contextual understanding. Member checking was conducted by sharing transcripts or early interpretations with participants for feedback. Throughout the study, I engaged in deliberate reflexivity, critically examining how my own positionality, biases and experiences as a migrant researcher might shape my research. These practices collectively enhance the trustworthiness and transparency of the analysis, especially in the complex terrain of migration, culture, and identity.

Ethical considerations in this study prioritized participant welfare and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, outlining study objectives, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation during both phases of the data collection. Participant identities were pseudonymized, and identifying details were removed from the transcripts to ensure anonymity in reporting. Sensitivity towards spiritual and personal topics was carefully managed during interviews, with participants given autonomy to share as they felt comfortable. Measures to protect well-being included providing a supportive environment and offering breaks during lengthy discussions. Ethical guidelines ensured respect for participants' rights and minimized potential harm throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussion

This section begins with an overview of the three cultural participation spaces visited during the study, which offered rich observational insights into their day-to-day dynamics. Each space—the dance club, writing group, and drawing collective—was Dutch-initiated and had between 7 and 15 participants per session. The groups maintained an informal, inclusive atmosphere, with a notable mix of locals and migrants; local Dutch residents made up at least 10–20% of attendees. Interaction between locals and migrants was common, especially during social breaks. Language use varied across groups, with English, Dutch, and other languages spoken; the dance club primarily used English due to its structured, instructor-led format. In the writing club, held in one of Amsterdam's busiest cultural hubs, a migrant volunteer facilitated the sessions, which included four 20-minute writing blocks and short breaks that encouraged discussion and sharing. The drawing club, situated far from the Rotterdam city center, was coordinated by a Dutch organizer and followed a drop-in model, encouraging informal engagement and free conversation throughout its 2.5-hour sessions. The dance class, led by a professional Dutch teacher, took place centrally in Rotterdam and followed a structured one-hour format, often followed by an optional open practice time that facilitated interaction. While none of the spaces charged high fees, only the dance club had structured funding

and operated as a formal organization. The writing and drawing clubs were self-organized wasn't funded, which has implications for the sustainability and accessibility of such spaces. These observations enriched the analysis by offering firsthand insight into the spatial, linguistic, and social dynamics at play, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of the migrant experiences.

Building on this, the thematic analysis of 13 in-depth interviews with recent migrants actively engaged in cultural participation spaces revealed six overarching themes: Negotiating Belonging and Community, Cultural Capital and Creative Expression as Tools of Integration, Building Social Capital through Participation, Identity Transformation and Self-Exploration, The Role of Language: Bridge or Barrier? and Inclusion and Accessibility: Structural and Perceived Barriers. These themes shed light on the diverse and often overlapping ways that creative organizations help migrants navigate integration, develop social connections, and negotiate their identities. Each theme is grounded in rich participant narratives, offering direct insights into their lived experiences and emotional landscapes.

4.1 Negotiating Belonging and Community

Cultural participation spaces provide migrants with opportunities to move from feelings of isolation toward a lived sense of community and belonging. For many participants in this study, these spaces served as the first meaningful site of relational connection in the Netherlands. Rather than simply being platforms for artistic or creative expression, they became environments where emotional bonds, social rituals, and symbolic forms of inclusion could be formed and maintained.

A recurrent pattern across interviews was the role of these groups in transforming the migrant experience from solitary to social. FDP expressed this directly, stating: "I think it's really nice to be part of a group that feels a bit more like a community... what is nice about the group is that it's a lot of relationships..." Similarly, VM emphasized how long-term, frequent interaction created deep ties: "It's been like now two, two and a half years that I'm meeting them already every week... moving from the city right now would be hard because of that." These accounts align with McMillan and Chavis's (1986) framework, which identifies membership and emotional connection as core facets of community (p. 9-10). For some, participation led to the construction of a dependable social network that was foundational to daily life. KF highlighted this, saying: "90% of my friends... are from this community." BF similarly noted, "Some of my closest friends are from that group also, so I'll do my own thing with them, just like regular socialising." These relationships provided emotional safety and social continuity, fulfilling what McMillan and Chavis describe as integration and fulfillment of needs (p. 13).

A striking moment came from ANS, who noted, "I'm not a solo person in this country anymore... I'm on the inside." This shift reflects a repositioning within the host society—from outsider to insider—something Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 39) describes as a movement into an “in-group” that reshapes how individuals see themselves and are seen by others. Feeling recognized as “one of us” was central to ANS’s self-perception: When a fellow participant introduced her as “one of our regulars,” the moment symbolized more than routine participation—it affirmed her emotional and social belonging within the group. As Sonn (2002, p. 206) notes, such cultural spaces can become emotional sanctuaries, where migrant identities are not only expressed but deeply validated within the new environment.

However, the path to belonging often began with a sense of disconnection. Many migrants spoke of loneliness and the challenge of building friendships, a condition often mitigated by forming “expat bubbles.” As KV noted: "Expats... stick together... they just share a similar situation." While such homogeneous groups may offer initial comfort, several participants identified broader and more diverse cultural spaces as better strategies for long-term integration. As ANS advised, "Whatever your hobby is... find other people who like it. That could help in this feeling of just living life alone." Importantly, belonging was not portrayed as passively received but rather as something actively constructed. ANS emphasized personal agency, stating: "We as individuals have the agency to also create that space for ourselves." This demonstrates how migrants become active agents of belonging (Allen et al., 2021, p. 88). JL added that these spaces enabled a greater understanding of local culture, including Dutch politics and language.

In short, the results indicate that cultural participation spaces do more than host activities – they provide platforms where a sense of belonging is actively negotiated and emotionally grounded. These spaces facilitate a shift from isolation to connection, enabling migrants to form meaningful relationships and feel recognized as community members. Consistent with McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) framework and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), belonging here proves to be both emotional and symbolic, negotiated through shared practices, regular interaction, and mutual recognition. Importantly, participants emphasized personal agency, suggesting that integration and belonging are co-constructed through active engagement within these creative communities (van der Klashorst, 2024, p. 35; Zhang et al., 2023, p. 8).

4.2. Cultural Capital and Creative Expression as Tools of Integration

Creative participation spaces provide migrants with powerful tools for integration, enabling them to express their identities, build connections, and make their cultural capital visible and valued in the host society. These findings align with Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital as a set of non-

economic assets—including knowledge, skills, and dispositions—that can facilitate social mobility (p. 243). For many participants, creative practices served as a vehicle to exchange and assert their cultural capital, while fostering both personal and intercultural growth.

While some individuals discovered new hobbies after arriving in the Netherlands, the majority had already been involved in artistic or creative communities in their home countries. FDP, for example, described participation as both a social and expressive bridge: "to pick that up and also to connect with people" emphasizing continuity and social intent. ANS described creative practice as a deliberate integration tool: "Dance studios... that's kind of like my cheat code of finding people I can connect with, because it's a hobby that I enjoy." This reflects Erel's (2010) idea that migrants are not passive cultural recipients but active agents who recontextualize their cultural resources in new settings (p. 645).

Through active artistic engagement, migrants both mobilize and reconstruct their cultural capital. These spaces are not only about preserving heritage but also about exchanging and evolving cultural expression. JW shared that "It bridges the differences.... It transcends borders," while KV emphasized how connection deepens over time through embodied creative practices like dance. Similarly, AS emphasized shared artistic identity as a basis of connection: "I'm just connecting as artists." This suggests that creative spaces provide a common ground that transcends social hierarchies, highlighting a shared artistic identity that cuts across cultural lines. These expressions of symbolic inclusion align with findings by Arroyo (2020, p. 59) and Bertacchini et al. (2022, p. 63), who argue that artistic participation fosters mutual recognition and cultural exchange.

Moreover, the process of cultural expression reinforces both identity and personal agency. Migrants contribute not only skills but also values shaped by their cultural backgrounds. As ANS reflected, "you do carry your national identity or your culture when you exist in these spaces," highlighting the persistent presence of cultural identity in creative environments. Similarly, JL emphasized that values from her Hong Kong upbringing—such as hard work and resilience—continued to inform her artistic practice: "I will also be resilient when it comes to... dance practices." These reflections illustrate that embodied cultural capital is not erased through migration; rather, it is adapted and reasserted. Such narratives reveal how migrants recontextualize their cultural frameworks within artistic practices, affirming their identities while navigating and adapting to the host society.

These creative communities also served as platforms for cultural awareness. ANS mentioned efforts to "understand your roots," and KV noted that they provide opportunities to "learn a lot about different cultures... you meet people who you wouldn't in other places." Migrants were not only

sharing their own cultural capital but also engaging with that of others—turning artistic spaces into dynamic arenas for mutual exchange and personal empowerment.

Finally, for many participants, creativity served as a social strategy. Some engaged in cultural activities beyond their primary communities to meet people and explore local culture—an intentional effort to integrate. AS and RS, for example, initiated their own participation space—demonstrating that migrants are not just consumers but also producers of cultural integration platforms. In line with Erel's (2010) assertion that migrants are not passive bearers of culture, these findings emphasize how artistic participation allows migrants to mobilize, convert and expand their cultural capital in meaningful, socially connective ways (p. 645).

These results underscore the importance of recognizing migrants' creative capacities not merely as hobbies but as culturally and socially valuable assets. Artistic participation fosters both recognition and resilience, providing a dynamic context in which migrants rework their identities while engaging others. Ultimately, cultural spaces emerge as inclusive environments for mutual growth, intercultural dialogue, and symbolic integration.

4.3. Building Social Capital through Participation

Participation in cultural spaces provides fertile ground for building social capital, through forming friendships, sharing knowledge, and developing informal support networks. These creative communities not only provide opportunities for artistic engagement but also serve as informal settings where interpersonal connections naturally evolve.

Initially, many participants joined creative communities with the intention of meeting new people or combating social isolation. ANS stated plainly: *"It's not just the activity... it's actually to socialise."* Others described how casual, activity-based interactions evolved into deeper connections. JL said: *"We meet in the weekly class... we have a WhatsApp group, we hang out."* This transition from acquaintance to friendship highlights the informal, low-pressure environment of these spaces, which helped facilitate sustained interaction. Many participants spoke about forming new social circles entirely through these spaces. KV said, *"90% of my friends or anybody who I know in the Netherlands... are from this community,"* while AL shared, *"My main friends are through dance."* These ties often extended beyond the activities themselves—manifesting in WhatsApp groups, birthday invitations, and shared outings.

Participants in this study frequently described experiencing both bonding capital and bridging capital. RS, for example, noted the comfort of connecting with fellow Irish participants: *"Jack is Irish and his partner Jess goes a lot... you have more English-speaking people."* Similarly, BF observed that *"people who speak Hebrew stick together."* These are instances of bonding capital that

offer emotional familiarity. However, AL reflected: *“I do feel connected with people from different nationalities,”* and BF noted that *“most of my friends from that group are from all over.”* This supports Putnam’s (2000) view that diverse social networks promote broader societal cohesion, while also aligning with Ryan et al. (2008, p. 675–677) who argue that weak ties and cross-cultural links can offer access to vital resources.

For many, these spaces provided both relational depth and practical support. AS remarked that friendships helped her *“discover more places, to hang out with people, and get recommendations for cafes or art spaces.”* Meanwhile, KV spoke about receiving guidance on *“local things... like the municipality, administration, or which bank to go to,”* often from local Dutch members. MD similarly reflected: *“I went to her birthday... I could see how birthdays are celebrated in the Netherlands.”* These encounters exemplify bridging capital, where social networks serve as informal pathways to cultural learning and access to everyday knowledge. The depth of these connections was echoed by participants like MD, who emphasized that *“meaningful are people that I can share deep thoughts [with]... it’s not superficial.”* RS, reflecting on the emotional importance of her group, said, *“I’m so lucky to have found a group of people who are there for me to that extent.”* Similarly, VM reflected: *“At first it’s standard questions, but soon people start talking about more interesting topics.”*

Importantly, regular participation was a key factor in deepening these social ties. RS shared: *“I’m doing stuff with them multiple times a week,”* and noted how this consistent engagement yielded not only strong friendships but also emotional support and creative validation. This regular rhythm created what some called a “third space”—a social sphere outside of work and home that fosters belonging and continuity. FDP reflected, *“I see this sometimes as a third space... you just go on a weekly basis... and still have that interaction.”*

These patterns suggest that long-term involvement in creative spaces nurtures not just surface-level contact, but meaningful, durable relationships built through co-creation and cultural sharing (Clini et al., 2019, p. 6; Sonke et al., 2025, p. 15). This supports Putnam’s (2000) view of social capital as the glue that binds communities through mutual support, trust, and shared values. Such spaces enable bonding and bridging, becoming vital sites of social integration and resilience (Eriksson, 2023, pp. 36–38).

4.4. Identity Transformation and Self-Exploration

Participation in cultural spaces offers migrants a safe and expressive environment to explore, affirm, and renegotiate their identities. These spaces enable introspection and experimentation, allowing

individuals to reflect on how they are perceived, how they perceive themselves, who they are in a new sociocultural context, and who they wish to become.

Several participants expressed an awareness of how their migrant status marked them in the eyes of others. JL and KV both stated, “they know I am a foreigner” and “they do view me as a foreigner,” acknowledging a persistent feeling of external differentiation. Yet, within cultural participation spaces, this perceived foreignness was often softened or reinterpreted, offering room for identity exploration beyond rigid national or cultural labels.

Participants commonly described a sense of identity awareness through creative engagement. JL reflected on how dancing made her more conscious of both her strengths and vulnerabilities: “I think the more I participate in dancing, the more I know about myself... my weakness, my strength.” Rather than framing this as disempowering, participants recognized such introspection as a path to growth. KV noted how participation helped him discover what truly mattered: “I explored the competitive side... and learned I’m more interested in the community part.” These reflective processes resonate with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40-41), which posits that identity is shaped through group affiliation and internal comparison. The results demonstrate how creative engagement reactivated or reaffirmed previously dormant identities. JW, for instance, shared, “I was known as the girl who draws all through my life... That is my identity.” Cultural spaces helped rekindle this essential part of herself.

The act of creating also stimulated curiosity about heritage and self-presentation. ANS said, “They really make you think of your heritage... I’ve done a bit more digging into it,” describing how being in such spaces reshaped how she relates to her Malaysian identity. AL echoed this with a focus on artistic identity: “I could deepen my understanding into what I would like to express, and what I identify in this way.” These experiences demonstrate how cultural participation facilitates the negotiation of multiple identities—artistic, cultural, personal—and enables migrants to construct hybrid or evolving selves.

For some, participation catalyzed a shift in how they structured their lives and values. FDP remarked, “I’ve made a shift from being more individual to more communal,” while MD, after four years in the Netherlands, stated, “I feel more local... my life is organised.” These comments suggest that identity transformation through cultural engagement is not abstract—it extends into routines, relationships, and perceptions of belonging. MN explained how regular participation in a writing group reshaped her self-concept: “I really view myself more like a writer... now I’m more comfortable to talk about writing in my regular life.” For MN, being part of a creative group catalyzed a shift in self-perception, from private hobbyist to someone who publicly embraces their artistic identity.

Notably, while many spaces were described as international or “expat-heavy,” this did not negate the potential for identity exploration. BF said, “We all refer to each other as expats,” while AL observed, “A lot of people there see this space... as a freeing space where to be yourself.” This reflects Papafilippou and Efthymiadou’s (2022, p. 104) finding that identity negotiation can be richer in diverse, international settings, where participants feel less pressure to conform to rigid identity expectations.

These findings highlight how cultural participation fosters more than creativity—it nurtures personal evolution. Through shared artistic practice, migrants find safe spaces to explore, redefine, and express layered identities. This dynamic process not only boosts self-understanding and confidence but affirms that identity, like integration, is not a fixed state but an ongoing journey shaped by connection and creativity.

4.5 The Role of Language: Bridge or Barrier?

Language emerged as one of the most complex and ambivalent dimensions of migrant participation in cultural spaces. While often intended to be inclusive, the use of language within these settings shaped both access and social dynamics—sometimes acting as a bridge for connection and, at other times, as a subtle barrier to full participation.

English frequently served as the functional common language across most creative communities, enabling many participants to engage in group activities without requiring fluency in Dutch. JL explained that instructors often chose English because they knew “there are a lot of internationals” present. MD echoed this, noting, “I would have the possibility to speak in English with everyone,” while FDP confirmed that it was “basically always in English.” These practices reflect a form of embodied cultural capital that determines one’s ability to access and navigate social spaces.

Participants described flexible language practices—code-switching and language fluidity—as markers of inclusivity. AS appreciated how people “would switch back and forth from English to Dutch... and it never feels like a burden.” KV similarly observed that while Dutch speakers naturally spoke among themselves, they readily switched to English when others joined the conversation. These accommodating gestures helped migrants feel welcome without forcing them to assimilate linguistically.

However, language also served as a subtle mechanism of exclusion in certain contexts. JL recounted feeling like an outsider during classes filled with locals: “You want to join the discussion, but you don’t really understand.” Similarly, JW reflected that not understanding Dutch limited spontaneous interactions about art: “It prevents me from jumping into conversations.” This sense of partial exclusion was echoed by AS, who felt “intimidated” being the only non-Dutch person in a larger

group, despite her comfort in smaller settings. These experiences point to a form of symbolic exclusion—where language subtly marks who belongs and who does not—echoing Yuval-Davis’s (2006, p. 204) framing of belonging as both emotional and political.

Several participants also identified instances of passive gatekeeping through Dutch-language dominance. Events, panels, or community activities held in Dutch were less accessible to non-speakers and often perceived as implicitly reserved for locals. As ANS noted, “Dutch language-heavy ... this is a big deterrent.” JW commented that Dutch-only events “telegraph that you only want Dutch people to participate,” while MD would only attend Dutch-language events after first asking, “Can I come because I speak English?” These barriers underscore how language choices impact not only communication but also symbolic inclusion and access to opportunity.

Interestingly, some participants questioned whether the dominance of English itself might also pose challenges. ANS reflected on the potential exclusion of those who speak neither Dutch nor fluent English, particularly in communities with high linguistic diversity. BF acknowledged the subtle difficulties others might face: “It’s like my privilege that I have that English.”

Despite these challenges, some participants viewed language barriers as growth opportunities. AS noted: “It’s an opportunity to grow, to be able to better communicate,” and RS linked language learning with deeper integration: “I’m trying to learn Dutch... it would be a nice way to get to know more Dutch people in creative spaces.” Notably, only one participant, ANS, used Dutch during the interview, describing a sense of belonging with the word *gezellig*, which loosely translates to coziness. This highlights how local language can symbolically anchor emotional connection and support integration.

Language in cultural spaces operates as both gateway and gatekeeper. While flexible, multilingual environments foster connection and ease, linguistic barriers—whether Dutch or English—can subtly exclude. Ultimately, participants’ experiences reveal that language is not just a medium of communication, but a powerful force in shaping integration, identity, and access.

4.6. Inclusion and Accessibility: Structural and Perceived Barriers

As this study explores how cultural participation spaces shape migrant integration, a critical dimension that emerged was the extent to which these spaces are accessible and inclusive—both structurally and experientially—factors that often shape not only who can participate, but also how participation is meaningfully experienced.

At the micro level of participation, many respondents emphasized the ease of access and affordability of their particular spaces. Both the Draw Club and the Writing Club were free to attend,

while the Dance Collective required a modest subscription. This affordability was not perceived as exclusionary. As AL shared, “I don’t feel judged... It’s English-speaking people... so you feel welcome in that way.” Such comments reinforce the idea that cultural spaces can serve as inclusive micro-communities, echoing McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) sense of membership and emotional safety. The provision of English as a default language also facilitated participation and reduced perceived barriers.

Accessibility was not just material but also social and emotional. KV recalled how a participant with a hearing aid was accommodated seamlessly: “He had a little portable microphone which he needed to put on the teacher... That was totally accommodating.” This responsiveness to diverse needs contributed to feelings of belonging and co-ownership, reinforcing McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) concept of mutual influence. Others noted that these environments were co-creative and beginner-friendly, with minimal bureaucratic hurdles or exclusive norms. These examples reflect the role of such cultural spaces in fostering belonging through low-threshold access, a key factor in supporting migrant participation and informal integration.

However, when reflecting on the broader context of cultural participation in the Netherlands, participants identified a more complex landscape. Most participants acknowledged the presence of creative cultural spaces in the Netherlands, yet they highlighted persistent barriers such as cost, language, and travel distance. While these factors limited access, some emphasized that opportunities do exist for those who actively seek them out. As BF noted, “It would take your own investment, your own, like, intentionality to do it.”

Affordability, in particular, was a concern, with MN reflecting, “If we have to talk about free spaces, I don’t think there is that much that exists,” while AL added, “There are never enough!” JL noted that “a lot of events charge... 10 to 20 euros,” which can be inaccessible for students or migrants managing tight budgets. Similarly, MD offered a powerful critique on how financial limitations limited her access to bonding experiences: “There is a price or things that would naturally eliminate immigrants... I can’t pay €70 per hour... it’s just extra, right?” it’s not a basic need in my Maslow pyramid—it’s just extra.” These insights point to a wider structural issue: while cultural capital can be a contextualized tool for integration (Erel, 2010, p. 645), its exchange still depends on one’s access to affordable and inclusive environments. Spatial access also matters. As AL reflected, “Distance can be a factor... travelling to other cities, it’s sometimes not worth it.” As AS noted from an organizer’s perspective described her struggles to find meeting spaces, “A lot of places wanted to charge €40 per hour... it’s quite hard to find places to meet and create, without buying a full meal or reserving a party space.”

A further layer of exclusion is social and cultural. A recurring concern across interviews was the limited engagement between Dutch locals and international migrants in cultural participation spaces. Many participants perceived a social divide between internationals and Dutch locals. As RS observed, “they do seem to stay kind of separate,” highlighting the limited presence of Dutch nationals in such settings. This divide, participants suggested, stems from differing social needs: “When people are local, they are rarely seeking out new connections... while the internationals are constantly,” AL explained. FDP adds, “People just have their own connections... as an outsider, you are coming looking for new connections because you don’t have it.” BF echoed this, noting, “The Dutch are not going to these spaces looking for friends... we’re desperate for friends.” This aligns with social identity theory, which underscores the role of group-based needs in shaping inclusion (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). While creative communities offer spaces of symbolic belonging, deeper integration remains limited. They remain as enclosed “bubbles” of immigrants, with Dutch locals’ linguistic and social distancing limiting full integration and bridging potential (Zisakou & Figgou, 2023, pp. 1661–1662).

As Brance et al. (2024, p. 1690) argue, integration is not solely dependent on migrants’ willingness to adapt, but also on the host society’s readiness to accept and include them. Thus, despite their value, these creative communities alone cannot overcome deeper systemic inequalities—highlighting the need for more inclusive cultural infrastructures in the Netherlands.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated how cultural participation spaces—such as community-based dance classes, writing groups, and art workshops—support the social integration, identity negotiation, and sense of belonging among migrants in the Netherlands. Focusing specifically on expatriates, the research aimed to understand how creative, informal environments serve as relational platforms where migrants build social ties, express personal and cultural identities, and navigate their evolving place within Dutch society.

This study reveals that cultural participation spaces play a critical role in shaping migrants’ experiences of integration, identity expression, and inclusion in the Netherlands. To address the first research question, results indicate that these creative spaces facilitated migrants’ social integration and sense of belonging (Grosvenor et al., 2024, p. 36152; Førde, 2019, p. 51) by serving as relational environments where individuals transitioned from isolation to connection (Arroyo, 2020, p. 59). In line with the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, pp. 9–10), these spaces fostered emotional safety, symbolic membership, and shared influence (Cesário & Campos, 2025, p. 14; Sonke et al., 2025, p. 7). For many, it was the first context they were recognized as “insiders,”

allowing them to develop social capital through friendships and support networks. These relationships often extended beyond the creative activity itself, forming “third spaces” of trust and shared meaning (Zhuang & Lok, 2023, p. 5).

In response to the second research question, creative participation also supported identity formation and self-expression. Migrants mobilized their cultural capital—artistic skills, values, and cultural knowledge to explore, affirm, and reshape evolving identities in a new cultural landscape (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243; Erel, 2010, p. 645). They engaged in group activities, strengthening social capital and reinforcing a sense of belonging through shared artistic identity. This aligns with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40), as participants redefined themselves through group affiliation and mutual recognition.

Regarding the third research question on inclusivity and accessibility, although many spaces were informal, welcoming, and multilingual, participants still encountered barriers related to cost, language dominance, and limited Dutch participation (Giovanis & Akdede, 2023, p. 7). These challenges affected migrants' ability to build social capital, particularly in establishing bridging ties with locals (Saadi et al., 2023, p.5). Language, though often flexible, could still act as a symbolic boundary. These limitations restricted broader integration and access to bridging capital. Together, these findings demonstrate how the interplay of cultural capital, social capital, sense of community, and social identity creates a dynamic, ongoing process of integration (Arias Cubas et al., 2022, p. 767), one grounded not only in social connection but also in creative expression and mutual recognition (Wang & Giovanis, 2024, p. 12638).

Theoretically, this broadens the scope of existing migration and cultural studies, challenging policy frameworks of migrant integration that focus narrowly on institutional or economic indicators. The study contributes to the growing body of literature that foregrounds the role of cultural factors and participatory cultural spaces as vital sites of integration (Cesário & Campos, 2025; Rössel et al., 2025, p. 154; Sievers, 2024, p.3). It shows how social identity and cultural capital, rather than being static attributes, are dynamically altered through creative engagement, extending Bourdieu's (1986) framework into everyday cultural participation. Finally, the findings highlight the emotional and symbolic aspects of belonging that are often overlooked in integration discourse.

Practically, the findings underscore the need for investing in accessible, low-threshold cultural facilities that cater to a wide range of migrant populations. Such spaces should be acknowledged by grassroots groups, cultural institutions, and municipalities as vital social cohesion infrastructure (Penninx et al., 2014, p. 72). Policies that promote intercultural facilitation, subsidized access, and bilingual programming can greatly improve integration outcomes (Costa Neves, 2014, p. 10; Holla et

al., 2025, p. 261; Penninx et al., 2014, p. 37, 74). Furthermore, involving both migrants and local Dutch participants in co-creation may boost bridging capital and facilitate the transformation of these creative communities into truly inclusive social spaces.

While this study offers valuable insights into the role of cultural participation spaces in migrant integration, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to participants who were already engaged in creative communities. This may exclude the perspectives of migrants who face greater barriers to access or who do not seek out such spaces (Holla et al, 2025, p. 261). Second, research was confined to urban areas—Amsterdam and Rotterdam—where cultural resources are relatively high. The results may therefore not be applicable to migrants in smaller cities or rural areas, where opportunities for cultural participation are more limited (Janssen & Verboord, 2023, p. 111). Third, the Dutch perspective was not reflected in the study, which might have provided additional insight into intercultural interaction and how engagement in cultural participation spaces might generate bridging social capital for both migrants and locals.

Future studies should examine how host society members perceive and engage with diverse cultural participation spaces and explore the rationale behind the limited participation in such spaces by Dutch locals. Understanding the dynamics of intercultural exchange would be crucial in evaluating the full integrative potential of such spaces. Methodologically, future research could benefit from longitudinal designs and ethnographic immersion to capture the evolution of identities and relationships over time. Including Dutch voices would also provide a more balanced view of mutual integration. New avenues, such as digital cultural spaces as sites of participation, or comparing creative communities across urban and rural settings, could be explored to identify spatial inequalities referring to migrant inclusion and access.

Cultural participation spaces are not merely sites of creativity but powerful platforms for connection, identity-making, and belonging. With migration an ongoing driver of transformation in our societies, it is indispensable to create inclusive, accessible, and co-creative cultural environments to ensure integration is meaningful and communities remain resilient and interculturally connected.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Informed Consent

Creative Communities as Bridges: The Role of Cultural Participation Spaces in Migrant Social Integration

For Questions About The Study, Contact:

Researcher: Biona Maria Newton Email: 701149bn@eur.nl

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Susanne Janssen, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Description

You are invited to participate in an academic study as part of a Master's thesis at Erasmus University Rotterdam. This study explores how creative and artistic communities—such as painting collectives, dance workshops, and crafts groups—support social integration, belonging, and identity

development for migrants, including expatriates and international students, in the Netherlands.

Your participation in this study means you agree to take part in an interview, which will last approximately 60–90 minutes. The interview will include questions about your personal experiences with cultural or creative participation in the Netherlands, your social relationships, and your sense of belonging and self-expression.

Unless you prefer otherwise, the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription. All material from this study will be used solely for academic purposes such as thesis writing, academic publications, or presentations.

Risks And Benefits

There are no physical risks involved in this study. Some questions may touch on personal or emotional topics, but you are always free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

There is no financial compensation, but your participation contributes to research that may improve understanding and policies related to migrant inclusion in cultural sectors.

Participants' Rights

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without any penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question. Your identity will remain confidential unless you request otherwise.

Privacy, Confidentiality & Data Handling

- Interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized.
- Your real name will not be used in transcripts or publications.

- Data will be stored securely and kept for a maximum of 10 years in accordance with Erasmus University Rotterdam's data policy.
- Only the researcher (Biona Maria Newton) and supervisor (Prof. Dr. Susanne Janssen) will have access to the original data.
- Any quoted material will be anonymized. Explicit permission will be sought before using direct quotes in publications.

Contact Information

For questions or concerns about this study or your privacy rights, please contact: Email: 701149bn@eur.nl

If you have privacy concerns, you may also contact the Data Protection Officer at fg@eur.nl or the Dutch Data Authority via www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl (T: 088 - 1805250).

Consent Declaration

By signing below, I confirm that:

- I have read and understood the information above.
- I voluntarily agree to participate in this interview.
- I give permission for the interview to be audio recorded.
- I understand that I can withdraw at any time.
- I understand that anonymized data may be used in research publications.

Participant Name: Signature:

Date:

Appendix B

Site Visit Observation

Basic Info

Observation Questions	Notes
What is the name of the space?	
Where is it located?	
What date and time did you visit?	

Type of Space

Observation Questions	Notes
What form of creative activity is taking place?	
Is this a formal institution, a community initiative, or grassroots collective?	
Is it affiliated with any public or private body (e.g., municipality, university, NGO)?	

Physical Environment

Observation Questions	Notes
What is the atmosphere like (e.g., casual, formal, vibrant, quiet)?	
How is the space arranged—does it encourage interaction or individual work?	
Are there elements that reflect multicultural presence (e.g., artworks, flags, signage)?	

Demographics

Observation Questions	Notes
What is the estimated age range and gender composition of participants?	
Do you notice ethnic, racial, or national diversity?	
Is there a balance between locals and migrants?	

Facilitators/Leaders

Observation Questions	Notes
Who is leading or facilitating the activity?	
What is their background or relationship to the space?	
Do they appear inclusive, welcoming, or neutral in their interaction style?	

Interaction Styles

Observation Questions	Notes
How do participants interact with each other?	
Are there visible moments of connection across cultures or backgrounds?	
Are newcomers actively included in conversations or activities?	

Language Use

Observation Questions	Notes
What languages are used for instruction and casual conversation?	
Does the language use support or limit access for non-Dutch speakers?	
Is there any translation, code-switching, or multilingual material?	

Inclusivity Signs

Observation Questions	Notes
Are there visible or structural signs of inclusivity?	

How are newcomers introduced or welcomed?

Are there policies or practices mentioned that promote inclusion?

Barriers to Access

Observation Questions	Notes
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Are there any costs or sign-up procedures? Are they flexible or restrictive?

Does the space require prior artistic experience?

Are there potential emotional/psychological barriers (e.g., intimidating environment, cultural unfamiliarity)?

Cultural Capital

Observation Questions	Notes
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Are migrant participants sharing cultural traditions, knowledge, or practices?

Is there learning happening about Dutch or other cultures?

How is artistic or cultural expression valued in this space?

Social Capital

Observation Questions	Notes
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Are participants forming meaningful social bonds within or across groups?

Are there signs of repeated participation, friendships, or support systems?

Does the space facilitate both bonding (within-group) and bridging (across-group) connections?

Sense of Community

Observation Questions	Notes
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Do participants appear comfortable and emotionally engaged?

Are people helping, supporting, or encouraging each other?

Is there a sense of shared experience, joy, or ownership of the space?

Your Impressions

Observation Questions	Notes
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What stood out to you the most?

How did the space make you feel as an outsider or observer?

What did you expect vs. what surprised you?

Ideas for Interviews

Observation Questions	Notes
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What themes emerged that could deepen your interview guide?

Are there any specific questions you would now add or rephrase?

Did you identify any key individuals you'd like to speak with?

Appendix C

Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself? (Country of origin, age, occupation/study, time in the Netherlands)
2. How did you first get involved in this creative space?
3. How long have you been attending, and how frequently do you participate?
4. Besides this drawing workshop, do you currently participate—or have you ever participated—in any other cultural /creative activities here in the Netherlands (and Rotterdam/Amsterdam) or back in your country of origin?

Section 1: Integration and Belonging

1. Have you formed meaningful social connections in this group? [RQ1|SC]
2. Do these relationships extend beyond the group (e.g., friendships, socializing, support)? [RQ1|SC]
3. Do you feel connected to people from different cultural or national backgrounds here or same background as yours? [RQ1|SC, SoC]
4. Do you participate in activities or social events outside this group with people you met here? [RQ1|SC]
5. Would you say this space has helped you feel more connected to Dutch society? How so? [RQ1| SC, SI]
6. Do you feel emotionally safe and welcome in this space? Why or why not? [RQ1|SoC]
7. How would you describe the social atmosphere—collaborative, individual, formal, informal? [RQ1|SoC]
8. Can you share a moment when you felt a strong sense of belonging—or not belonging—in this group? [RQ1 | SoC | SI]
9. Would you say participating here has helped you feel more at home in the Netherlands/Rotterdam?[RQ1| SoC, SI]

Section 2: Identity & Self-Expression

1. Do you feel your skills or cultural expressions are recognized or appreciated here? [RQ2|CC]
2. Do you bring your cultural background or traditions into your creative practice here? [RQ2|CC, SI]
3. Has your participation in this space changed how you view yourself or your cultural identity? [RQ2|SI]
4. How do you think others in the space perceive you (as a migrant, artist, foreigner, etc.)? [RQ2|SI]
5. Do you feel free to express yourself creatively without fear of judgment? [RQ2|SI, SoC]
6. Have you learned anything new about Dutch or other cultures through this space? [RQ2|CC, SI, SC]

Section 3: Inclusivity and Accessibility

1. Was it easy or difficult to join this group? (e.g., sign-up, cost, prior experience) [RQ3|CC, SC]
2. Was language a barrier at any point? How is language handled in the group (translation, code-switching, Dutch vs. English use)? [RQ3|CC, SC]
3. Do you think this space is welcoming to people from different backgrounds? Why or why not? [RQ3|SoC, SI]
4. Are there any unspoken rules or dynamics that might make it harder for some people to fully participate? [RQ3| SoC, SC]
5. Have you ever encountered moments of stereotyping, misrecognition, or feeling “othered” in this space? [RQ3| SoC, SI]
6. What could this space do better to be more inclusive or accessible? [RQ3|SC, SoC]

How has your participation in this space influenced your overall experience of living in the Netherlands? [RQ1 & RQ2]

Would you recommend this space to other expatriates or international students? Why or why not? [RQ1, RQ3|SC]

In your experience, are there sufficient opportunities/spaces for internationals to engage in creative activities in Rotterdam/Amsterdam, particularly together with locals? What is missing in your opinion?

NOTES:

RQ1: How do cultural participation spaces in the Netherlands facilitate migrants' social integration and sense of belonging?

RQ2: In what ways does participation in creative communities impact identity and self-expression of migrants in the Netherlands?

RQ3: How inclusive are cultural participation spaces for diverse migrant groups, and what factors influence their accessibility?

CC: Cultural Capital

SC: Social Capital

SoC: Sense of Community

SI: Social Identity

Appendix D
List of Participants

SL. No	Name	Country of Origin	Sex(M/F)	Approx. Age	No. of years in NL	Occupation
1	AL(Dance)	Spain	Male	24	3	Consultant
2	ANS(Dance)	Malaysia	Female	28-30	3.5	Digital Marketing
3	JL (Dance)	China	Female	30	2.5	Sustainability : Program Manager
4	KV (Dance)	Hungary	Male	30	2.5	Software Engineer
5	AS (Draw)	United States	Female	39	3	Textbook editing/developing
6	JW(Draw)	United States	Female	40s	3.8	Not working now
7	MD (Draw)	Algeria	Female	30s	4	Designing Children books/games
8	VM(Draw)	Croatia	Female	30	3	Architect
9	AL (Writing)	Italy	Female	29	2.5	Was working (started university six months ago)
10	BF(Writing)	United States	Female	33	2.5	Yoga Teacher
11	FDP(Writing)	South Africa	Male	36	3	Chief of staff at an insurance company
12	MN(Writing)	France	Female	34	2	Textile Operations
13	RS(Writing)	Ireland	Female	30	1	Service Designer/ UX researcher

Link for the folder with codebook, themes, transcripts, click on '[DATASET](#)'