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| A qualitative analysis of the motivations behind participation in grassroots football: thematic analysis |

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# Abstract

Grassroots football possesses a stranglehold on the participation of millions of people worldwide on an annual basis. However, despite its popularity, there is currently a limited pool of research relating to the factors that influence initial and sustained involvement within the game. By employing a qualitative approach, this study aims to explore members of a youth grassroots football team’s motivations for participating. The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews as a means of gathering in-depth insights into their experiences and motivations. Through thematic analysis, three themes were discovered for grassroots football participation: recreational enjoyment, skill development and social connections. These findings further contribute to self-determination theory by emphasizing the importance of intrinsic motivation in sustaining involvement in grassroots football. In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the motivations behind participation in grassroots football.

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# 1.0 Introduction

## Background

**Grassroots Football**

Grassroots football is a world conquering participation phenomenon that plays host to millions of young people every week, month and year. In 2007, a study conducted by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) found that 9.4 million people under the age of 18 were registered with football clubs (O’Gorman, 2018). While it is important to note that this study is over 15 years old and therefore outdated, it highlights the great surge in participation when compared to more modern figures. Although exact figures are near impossible to come by without a centralised investigation by one of the key governing bodies (such as the FA or FIFA), it is estimated that as of the 2018/19 season (the last season pre-pandemic) 40% of children in England participated in an organised form of football, with the majority being grassroots (Pitchford et al., 2023). When considering that there were roughly 13 million people in England under the age of 18 as of 2019, this equates to roughly 5 million involved in football at this time.

Furthermore, when viewing long-term continued participation, participant retention should always be at the forefront of the minds of the key stakeholders, and reasons for dropout should be utilised to reduce future exits (Stirrup et al., 2023). Whilst research suggests that dropout figures in grassroots football are consistent with that of general child and adolescent sport, it can be argued that due to the popularity and participation levels, more needs to be done to understand why children both initially get involved, and then why they continue with football (O’Gorman, 2018). By understanding the intrinsic and extrinsic incentives is crucial in better understanding the draw it possesses to young people, therefore allowing for better strategies regarding retaining their participation (Temple & Crane, 2018).

As mentioned, there can be a multitude of reasons behind initial and continued participation in grassroots football, and these motivations can be categorised as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivations could include skill development, social interaction and enjoyment, whilst extrinsic motivations might involve earning rewards and gaining recognition from others (Burgess et al., 2019). Better awareness of the key catalysts will also provide significant support in ensuring that grassroots football continues to expand its attraction towards young people and maintain its place as a cornerstone of communities.(Parnell, 2023).

**Initial Participation**

When separating initial participation with that of long term continued involvement, it can be interesting to determine whether or not there are significant differences. Deciding to join a grassroots football team will often be comprised of reasons pertaining to parental influence, social factors and internal fulfilment. It is common for parents to take an active role in supporting their children in their participation in football, and they will often feel a desire to encourage them to take it up as an activity as early as six years old (Palou et al., 2020). Children at this age are very easily influenced by their parents and will therefore want to join a grassroots team and impress them.

Grassroots football also offers young people an opportunity to do an activity that will provide them with enjoyment and improve both their physical and mental wellbeing. The aspect of being able to learn and develop a wide range of skills is creates a positive and happy environment that they can feed off (Hindmarsh et al., 2024), whilst the high intensity nature of football allows for them to improve their physical fitness whilst maintaining the enjoyment aspect (Larsen et al., 2015). There is then the social aspect to consider. Grassroots football allows for young people to interact with other people that share similar interests, and therefore integrate themselves into new friendship groups (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2018). This also ties in with the mental well-being side of grassroots football as it helps to create a sense of belonging within a group of children or adolescents (Nowy & Breuer, 2019).

**Continued Participation**

Meanwhile, being able to preserve the long-term engagement of children and adolescents within the grassroots football structure is seen is vitally important. Whilst the friendships built over time and the enjoyment of the game still entice their involvement, other factors will often develop. One major example is the extrinsic desire for recognition and success. Whilst coaches are more and more trying to prioritize participation and skill development over the importance of winning and glory (Gallacher, 2019), their often builds up a natural competitive edge within grassroots football players, which can also be fuelled by their parents, teammates and often players from other teams (Gallacher, 2022). This can be an integral part of why a young person is incentivized to continue playing, as they are eager to chase personal and team achievements.

**Rationale**

The researcher decided upon grassroots football as a topic for a combination of reasons relating to convenience and reliability. To begin with, grassroots football is very accessible to young people of all ages and ability levels looking to participate (Prabhakaran, 2017). There are also very few external factors that can influence involvement, such as financial or socio-cultural determinants, due to the fact that football is seen as being available to anyone. Football is also the sport with the most exposure both in the UK and worldwide (Ayenor, 2020) and therefore the study will be applicable to young people of all backgrounds. Furthermore, the researcher possessed an interest in grassroots football due to their own involvement and were therefore more likely to be driven to generate more effective conclusions.

By creating a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature, the researcher decided upon conducting this study due to the current lack of research pertaining to the involvement of young people in grassroots football, specifically their motivations for doing so (O’Gorman et al., 2018). By investigating this topic area their aim was to first create a clear comprehension of why they participate initially, before exploring why they choose to continue as opposed to dropping out. The long term intended benefits of the study would aim to drive participation figures to a new high whilst reducing the dropout rate due to avoidable factors.

Ultimately, by understanding the most prominent reasons behind participation in grassroots football, the key stakeholders will be able to begin implementing effective interventions to attract and sustain young people’s involvement (Zwolinsky et al., 2018). In the subsequent sections the researcher will review the existing literature before attempting to come to a consensus over the most common motivations behind why young people choose to participate in grassroots football.

## 1.2 Literature review

**Introduction to Literature Review**

The participation of young people in grassroots football contains a myriad of potential motivational considerations that ultimately create a platform for initial and continued involvement. By beginning to comprehend the most prevalent determinants, the key stakeholders will be able to create initiatives to maximise the participation and retention rates within the game (García & Welford, 2015). In this literature review researcher will attempt to investigate and analyse the existing literature to provide a clear picture of the current understanding landscape, before identifying the present gaps in the knowledge base.

**Limiting Factors**

Previous research into football participation is plentiful, however there is an overwhelming focus on the elite level, and the development pathway towards becoming a professional (Sugiyama et al., 2017). In contrast, there is a limited pool of existing literature surrounding the participation of young people in recreational forms of the sport. This is surprising when considering that, as previously highlighted, grassroots football is a significant part of millions of children and adolescents lives across the world (Bennike et al., 2020).

Of the available studies that the researcher could find, many took place with a specific view on grassroots football within a country. The researchers also had more of a fixation on the structure within grassroots football in a particular country, leaving research done on reasons for participation as a mere afterthought (O’Gorman, 2018). This meant that the researcher could find it challenging to be able to draw relevant comparisons with existing research, due to the fact that little has been done to gain information that could answer their research question.

**Social Networking**

Some studies found that social networking was the ultimate attraction for young people choosing to partake in grassroots football. They suggested that the opportunity to meet people of similar ages with similar interests provided an allure that ultimately resulted in the participation figures in grassroots football becoming and staying at an immense level (Mauro, 2018). Further research reflects this view by stating that motivations for joining and staying in grassroots football are largely fuelled by the friendships formed during the course of being involved in a team (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2018). However, other research by Rosso & McGrath (2013) indicates that whilst forging new social networks is instrumental as to why younger players have the urge to participate, their continued involvement will begin to stem from other factors such as developing a competitive edge and a desire for sporting achievements. This is common as the motivational climate in grassroots football teams will often shift towards being extrinsically driven, which can come from the players, their parents and often even the coaches (Søvik et al., 2017).

**Extrinsic Motivation**

Players who are motivated by extrinsic factors such as winning trophies and gaining recognition from others have been cited as the most likely to drop out of grassroots football (Fabra et al., 2023). This would suggest that extrinsic motivation does not provide a good source of commitment to continued participation, due to the fact that these players will be more affected by conditions outside of their control, such as the ability level of their opposition, and this will therefore negatively affect their enjoyment of playing grassroots football (Myers et al., 2023). However, it is important to note that this study had a focus on the drop out rates in grassroots football, and therefore did not examine the key factors behind why people choose to continue their participation. As such the results, whilst useful to a degree, are not entirely valid when taking the aims of the current research into account and should be utilised accordingly.

However, Wikman et al. (2019) argues that extrinsically motivated players are more likely to be subject to long term participation in grassroots football. This is said to be down to both the personal motivation from the individual, as well as the motivation created within a team due to the extrinsic factors such as striving to win competitions and accolades. On the other hand, studies have found that extrinsic forms of motivation will often create an ego-based environment that does not lead to personal fulfilment within players, which would back up the previous research that correlates extrinsic motivational factors with drop out as opposed to long term continued participation (Smith et al., 2016). The contrast in findings indicates that it is currently unclear as to whether extrinsic motivation acts as an impetus for participation in grassroots football, or as a limiting factor towards the retention of young footballers over a longer period of time.

**Intrinsic Motivation**

A study conducted by Russell (2021) suggests that young grassroot footballers who feed off of intrinsic sources of motivation such as enjoyment of the game, skill development and personal challenges will be less likely to suffer from “burnout”, meaning that it is more likely for intrinsic motivation to be a significant factor when observing long term continued participation levels. Furthermore, it is argued that young footballers will be more likely to participate due to intrinsic means as they are much easier to come by than extrinsic forms of motivation. This is due to the fact that, whilst there is no guarantee of rewards and recognition, intrinsic benefits such as personal satisfaction can be gained both instantaneously and without any external factors (Ommundsen et al., 2013). This therefore means that young people who are looking to participate for intrinsic reasons will have no barriers to be afraid of. Other studies further the argument that intrinsic motivations provide young footballers with a high level of intention to continue their participation, through the instruments of enjoyment and personal satisfaction (Castillo-Jiménez et al., 2022).

However, other research suggests that, although intrinsic motivation is a healthy means of fuelling initial participation, if left as the exclusive catalyst for why a child or adolescent is involved then the level of competitiveness will ultimately act as a determinant for them to withdraw (Potrac et al., 2018). This is due to the fact that their ability to gain enjoyment from grassroots football will be overwhelmed by their teammates, coaches and opponents desire to win, which becomes more and more prevalent as they get older (Cruz et al., 2017). By this same logic it is also highly possible that the majority of young players who join due to intrinsic means will gradually shift towards extrinsic rewards being the key motivator in their continued participation.

## 1.3 Research question

What are the motivations behind members of a grassroots football team’s initial and continued participation?

## 1.4 Theoretical framework

**Self Determination Theory**

For the purposes of this study, self-determination theory (SDT) was used as the primary theoretical concept. SDT hypothesized that an individual’s level of motivation were determined by the gratification of their psychological necessity for autonomy, relatedness (social connections) and competence (ability level) (Deci & Ryan, 2012). These factors could then be linked to participation in grassroots football. Firstly, the researcher highlighted that it is logical to think that individuals that derived intrinsic enjoyment from playing football would be more likely to be involved in grassroots football (Fenton et al., 2016). The ability to forge new relationships with teammates was also identified as a potential contributing factor towards sustained involvement in grassroots football, as well as the ability to be part of a community and feel a sense of belonging (Vlachopoulos & Karageorghis, 2000). Finally, it was ascertained that an individual’s perception of their own ability level, and the realisation of their progression would maintain their engagement and therefore would preserve their participation (Standage & Ryan, 2020).

When observing this theory, the researcher hypothesized that all three of these key constructs would be instrumental in the initial and continued participation of individuals in grassroots football. They argued that through the autonomous enjoyment of grassroots football, the interpersonal relationships built and the development of football abilities, participants would be intrinsically motivated to sustain their association with the game due to the inclusive environment created that ultimately allowed them to foster their skills in a manner that they enjoyed (Ommundsen et al., 2013). In conclusion, the researcher opted for using self-determination theory as a tool for granting a comprehensive framework to gain a perception of some of the motivations that drive individuals. The theory puts an emphasis on psychological needs and the influence that they possess over behaviour, making it well-suited for analysing the key motivations for participation in grassroots football (McCann et al., 2022).

# 2.0 Methodology

**Ethical Considerations**

Before collecting the data, the researcher ensured that they undertook the necessary procedures to maintain the validity and usability of their study. To begin with, information sheets were provided that allowed the potential participants (and their parents) within the parameters of the study to attain key pieces of information, whilst being able to make any queries to the researcher. This was important as it gave an overview of the procedures, benefits and risks involved, as well as informing participants of their rights. They also ensured that they obtained ethical clearance from Staffordshire University, as without it the study would not be able to take place (Place, 2023). The researcher then reached out to participants and parents with consent forms for them to fill out on the condition that they were happy to proceed. The researcher provided separate consent forms for parents and participants to ensure that they were both willing to participate before continuing. It also allowed the researcher to use language that a 13-14 child would understand (Ogloff & Otto, 1991). The researcher also made sure that any non-face-to-face contact was made exclusively with parents, due to the age of the participants. In addition to this, the researcher aimed to ensure the anonymity of their participants by labelling them with generic names for the purpose of the study such as ‘Participant A’.

Prior to conducting each interview, the researcher gave the participants an explanation of their rights during the interview. For example, they explained that they could choose to not answer any of the questions, and that they could end the interview if they were experiencing any discomfort or reluctance. Furthermore, the researcher acknowledged that should an incident had occurred that caused psychological distress to a participant, they must have stooped the interview immediately and provided details of mind.uk to parents for any distress caused.

**Research Approach**

When conducting their research project, the researcher utilised a qualitative approach to investigate the motivations behind participation in grassroots football. By choosing a qualitative approach they ensured that they could provide a detailed and thorough examination of subjective opinions related to involvement in grassroots football which would aim to create a deeper understanding of the key motivators (Teherani et al., 2015). In addition to this, qualitative research took a preference over quantitative research due to its ability to allow the participants in the study to generate their own responses as opposed to providing them with a generic set of answers to choose from (Gelo et al., 2008). This was particularly important when taking the participants ages into account, as children of the ages of 13-14 would have been likely to complete a questionnaire with less effort and attention, whereas with qualitative research approach the researcher considered that they would need to provide their own point of view (Platt, 2016). Furthermore, the researcher highlighted that their relationship with the participants would be less formal than with quantitative research, which would be beneficial for the effectiveness of the study, as the age of the participants indicated their probable preference for a less formal and strict approach (Choy, 2014).

**Participants**

For the purposes of the study, the researcher selected a target demographic of youth grassroots footballers aged 13-14. They employed a convenience sampling approach to identify participants, with the priority being ease of access and proximity to the researcher (Sedgwick, 2013). This was also because the researcher was a coach at a local community grassroots football club and therefore had the benefit of being able to select members of their own team as participants, as they fit the selection criteria. The fact that the researcher had a preexisting relationship with their participants was identified as an enabling factor in ensuring the effectivity of the study, due to the fact that the participants would be more comfortable with someone that they knew, and ultimately would provide more detailed responses during data collection (Pinnegar & Quiles-Fernández, 2018). The researcher highlighted that a potential drawback of their already formed relationships with their participants would be that they could have an influence on the feedback. To combat this, the researcher needed to ensure that they followed recommended guidelines and did not provide participants with any bias (Eide & Kahn, 2008).

Convenience sampling was beneficial to the researcher due to the time constraints that they were conducting the study under. By being able to contact optimal participants immediately, the researcher would be able to focus more on their ability to maximise the potential findings in their data, rather than spending the majority of their time looking for participants (Suen et al., 2014). The main limitation of deploying convenience sampling was that it could create an over representation of a certain group. In the case of this study, the researcher identified that with the participants all being members of the same football team, the data could be specific to the motivations within one group, rather than in grassroots football as a collective (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

**Data Collection**

The researcher collected data through the use of semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant separately. This was because it allowed them to prepare focused questions designed to answer the research question, whilst also allowing them the autonomy to investigate any suitable ideas that the participants may have provided during the course of the interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This was important when considering that the participants were reflecting on their own experiences and therefore the outcome of their responses would be a matter of subjectivity. Because of this, the researcher decided that they would be able to gain more effective data by not sticking to a rigid format like in a structured interview (Raworth et al., 2012).

Although the researcher took focus groups into consideration, they decided against this. The primary reason was the fear of members of the study feeling afraid to speak out and so ultimately only the opinions of a few would be heard (Smithson, 2008). However, the researcher did concede that there were benefits to utilising focus groups, one of which being that they would be less time consuming than interviews due to not having to collect data from each participant one by one (Longhurst, 2003).

During data collection, the researcher chose to record the interviews via an audio recording device. Prior to conducting the interviews, they ensured that the participants fully understood the means of the audio recording and that they had the opportunity to withdraw their participation should they have wished to – the right to withdraw from the study is a fundamental aspect in any research project (Schaefer & Wertheimer, 2010).

**Data Analysis**

When analysing the data, the researcher decided upon adopting a thematic approach. By observing the data to analyse patterns, trends and key words, this allowed them to convert a large amount of data into its most important and consequential interpretations (Terry et al., 2017). By utilising guides on thematic analysis, the researcher was able to determine the most crucial pieces of information which they could then begin to draw conclusions from (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The researcher also highlighted that they had to establish that their analysis described the bulk of the data, instead of being judicious in the data they include in order to support a particular narrative, which would be counterproductive to the reliability of their study (Joffe, 2011).

**Limitations of the Study**

During the data collection process of the study, the researcher identified several disabling factors with regards to the effectiveness of the results. They understood the importance of acknowledging these restraints as a means of contextualising the findings (Ross & Bibler, 2019). Prior to the study, the researcher had set a target of including eight participants in the study. This was in line with guidelines that stated that between six and twelve participants would be sufficient to reach data saturation, also known as the point at which no new themes would be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, due to the time constraints of the study, the researcher was only able to use four participants. This negatively affected the credibility of the study because they will not have been able to reach data saturation, as per the findings from their own research. Whilst there is ultimately no universally agreed upon “magic number” of interviews, the researcher fell short of their target and therefore a strong argument could be put forward to disprove any potential findings from the study (Cobern & Adams, 2020).

Another drawback of the study was that the variability of the participants. By opting for convenience sampling, the researcher was limited to participants who were a member of an individual grassroots football team. Whilst they identified several benefits to justify their preference, they also were aware of the factors that could ultimately reduce the impact of their findings (Emerson, 2021). To begin with, the researcher outlined how including a more random selection criteria would have been likely to present them with results that were more varied. This meant that any themes that could be identified would carry more weight when considering that in a more random sampling process the participants would only have shared that they were a part of a grassroots football team (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012). In contrast, by excluding the participants to members of an individual grassroots football team, the results were at risk of suffering from certain biases such as shared experiences.

# 3.0 Results

**Overview**

When attempting to ascertain the reasons for individuals initial and continued participation in grassroots football, the researcher used thematic analysis. Their process involved coding the data within the interview transcripts in order to group together the most frequently occurring motivations that the participants identified. The researcher then identified the key themes found within the coding process (Alhojailan, 2012). Supported by verbatim quotes, these themes provide a deeper understanding of the research question and contribute to expanding the pool of knowledge within research surrounding grassroots football.

**Theme 1 – Recreational Enjoyment**

Undoubtedly, the most commonly recurring subject matter within the data was the participants inclination towards playing for recreational purposes such as fun and enjoyment. When asked by the researcher about their preferences for initially choosing to take part in grassroots football, the participants gave responses such as “It was more for the enjoyment for me to be honest” and “I just decided to do it and it was really fun”. Providing these answers to a direct question aimed to isolate their most influential motivation behind their initial involvement showed a clear bias towards enjoyment as opposed to alternative factors (Tjomsland et al., 2018). Furthermore, when describing their emotions before their most recent match, participants supported this point with statements such as “Excited to play football” and “Excited. It’s fun to play”, which highlighted the positive relationship enjoyment has had with their continued involvement in grassroots football.

**Theme 2 – Skill Development**

Throughout the interview process, participants described their commitment to improving their skills on the football pitch through training and playing in matches. The researcher then identified this when analysing the data through quotes such as “I want to play because I want to challenge us and see how much better we can get”. When asked what their favourite aspect of being involved in grassroots football, participants gave responses relating to skill development and progress, for example “Improve myself and improve the team as well” and “Improving my skills”. All four participants articulated the significance that skill development holds on their participation within grassroots football, making it a key motivator (Howie & Allison, 2018).

**Theme 3 – Social Connections**

The final theme that the researcher observed was the participants’ enthusiasm for building relationships with their teammates, as well as the influence that their friends hold on their participation in grassroots football. Quotes such as “I love playing (football) with all my mates” and “(team achievements) will make me more proud” illustrated the active role that the social side of the game plays in their decision making. One participant cited making friends as the most influential determinant of their continued involvement in grassroots football – “More of the friends and the team part because I as a person, I think that's more what I'm leaning towards”.

# 4.0 Discussion

**Interpretation of Findings**

At the outset of this study, the researcher had one key intention; to create a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind participation in grassroots football, both initially, and over a longer period of time (Elliot et al., 2020). By deploying a qualitative approach utilizing thematic analysis, they sought to unearth the underlying reasons as to why individuals within a football team partake in this recreational activity (Kozinets, 2010). The thematic analysis of the data collected during the interview process was able to expose three primary motivations for participation in grassroots football: recreational enjoyment, skill development and social connections.

**Recreational Enjoyment**

Firstly, when observing participants recollections of their initial participation in grassroots football, the researcher was able to draw attention to their preference of enjoyment of football as an activity (Elliot et al., 2013). Participant D stated “I really like football. I like playing it.” which indicates that they were motivated intrinsically as opposed to joining for extrinsic reasons such as getting recognition from others and winning trophies. This aligns with some of the studies that the researcher identified regarding the togetherness that can be created within an intrinsically driven group, as opposed to extrinsically motivated players often leading to an ego-based atmosphere (Knaving et al., 2018). The significance placed upon their enjoyment of playing football is also in unison with similar studies that targeted the same age groups within grassroots football, although as previously mentioned, it is important to highlight the fact that such research is currently scarce (Tjomsland et al., 2018).

Enjoyment was also found to be a deciding aspect of their prolonged participation within the grassroots game, and greatly contributed towards their decision to maintain their commitment to playing in training and matches (McCarthy et al., 2008). This is supported by quotes directly from the participants. When asked about their emotional state immediately prior to matches, participant B declared that they are “Excited to play football” whilst participant A expressed that they are “Excited more than anything” whilst affirming their passion for the game – “I love playing football”. These accounts demonstrate the impact that recreational enjoyment possesses upon participation over a sustained period of time, with the participants’ descriptions of their pre-match excitement emphasizing the importance that young grassroots footballers place on their ability to experience a level of intrinsic satisfaction (Nielsen et al., 2014). The researcher also noted that due to the pull factor regarding recreational enjoyment, there would be a negative relationship with burnout, which aligns with previous research observing the relationship between burnout and enjoyment (Russell, 2021). Participant D reaffirmed these notions by stating “It’s just great fun”, when describing their favourite facet of playing in matches.

It is also important to take into account some of the factors that might have an impact on enjoyment being a key motivation within the participants participation in grassroots football (Hu et al., 2021). The researcher emphasized that the age of the participants (13-14) would provide an explanation behind their strong inclination towards enjoyment as a significant factor in their choice to participate, as children of this age generally want to take part in extra-curricular activities and hobbies for personal satisfaction (Tammelin et al., 2003) as opposed to adults, who look at sport from a more extrinsic perspective, with their focus generally being on winning as a way of earning trophies and recognition from others (Allender et al., 2006). Moreover, children are said to be highly motivated to participate in sports for their own enjoyment due to the intrinsic benefits of exercise, and the enjoyment of being involved in a competitive activity such as grassroots football (Hirvensalo & Lintunen, 2011).

**Skill Development**

During the course of the interviews, the participants displayed a bias towards being motivated through the growth of their football skills and their development gained from training and playing matches. This was illustrated by participant A who declared “I want to play because I want to challenge us and see how much better we can get”. This point of view clearly demonstrates the relationship between skill development and the retention of grassroots football players, as they their participation is fostered by a desire for the betterment of their abilities within their sport, which ultimately generates a sense of achievement within young footballers (Moradi et al., 2020). This is supported by participant B who asserted unequivocally that their favourite element of being involved in grassroots football was “Improving my skills”. These viewpoints reaffirm the importance of skill development when attempting to assert the motivations behind sustained grassroots football participation, and ultimately explains how being driven to improve their skills prevents young footballers from “dropping out” (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Skill development is also a key motivation due to the fact that young grassroots footballers are aware that by improving their abilities they will be able to participate at a higher level and be a more influential member of the team, which will increase their enjoyment of playing the game (Erdoğdu et al., 2014). Participant C backed this up by stating that their priority was to “Improve myself and help the team improve as well”.

The age of the participants would have had an effect on the impact that skill development had on their motivation to participate in grassroots football, due to the fact that young people aged between 9-15 will have a tendency to be driven by internal factors, with skill development being said to be a prime inspiration within teenagers specifically (Gürbuz et al., 2007). Another consideration that has to be taken into account is the gender of the participants, and the effect it could have on the results. The factors that influence sports participation motivation levels are widely different when comparting males and females, with one of the key determinants in males being skill development, whilst females are instead more impacted by the health and fitness benefits from being involved in sport (Moradi et al., 2020). It is important to consider this information when observing the findings of this study, as the participants are all males who play for a male football team, which could significantly impact the usability of the research.

**Social Connections**

The theme of social connections was identified as having an integral role in the motivation for participation in grassroots football. The researcher was able to discover a recurring narrative that emphasized the crucial role that building relationships and being a part of a community has upon the initial and continued involvement of people within grassroots football (Nathan et al., 2013). The participants highlighted the importance of being able to build friendships with their teammates, with participant D citing their friends playing football as the prominent reason for their initial involvement – “All my mates started doing football so I wanted to join a football club”. Participant A, when asked why they chose to participate on grassroots football, stated “I had a lot of friends playing”. These extracts demonstrate the effect that being able to interact with friends has on the participation rates in grassroots football, as well as clearly representing the effect that social connections has on enticing people to participate in grassroots football to begin with, as it is often found that individuals choose to participate because of friends who are already members of a team (Dalen & Seippel, 2021). Participant B backed this up by stating that their initial involvement in grassroots football was heavily dependent on the fact that they had friends that were already participating, and so without these social connections they probably would not have been motivated to start playing.

Meanwhile, participant D described social interactions as the most instrumental reason for their continued involvement – “I just love playing football with all my mates”. This outlines a clear negative relationship between social connections and dropout within grassroots football, due to the fact that participation allows them to meet new people whilst benefiting from being able to pursue a shared interest (Espedalen & Seippel, 2024). Furthermore, a lot of adolescents use grassroots football as a vehicle to facilitate social interactions between people who share similar characteristics and interests, which creates an argument for social connections being the single most influential motivation for the participation of young people in grassroots football (Schüttoff et al., 2018). Within the theme of social connections, the researcher identified the role that the age of the participants would play. This is due to the value that adolescents place upon the social benefits of sport, such as the importance of community and having a sense of belonging (Warner & Leierer, 2015).

**Self-Determination Theory**

When comparing the findings of the study with the theoretical framework set out at the beginning of the project, the researcher observed that the results were consistent with the hypothesis of the self-determination theory. The three themes identified during the thematic analysis of the data – recreational enjoyment, skill development and social connections – are all systematic of the components of the self-determination theory. The theme of recreational enjoyment reflects participants intrinsic autonomy in engaging with grassroots football as an activity (Deci & Ryan, 2012). The themes of skill development and social connections also align with the principles of competence and relatedness within the participants motivations for participation, which further supports the theoretical framework behind the self-determination theory (Balaguer et al., 2018).

Ultimately, these findings contribute to extending the self-determination theory’s application within grassroots football research by highlighting the multifaceted nature of motivations behind initial and continued participation in grassroots football (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Furthermore, by developing a more comprehensive overview of the relationship between enjoyment, skill development and social connections, researchers will be able to gain a better understanding of the motivational dynamics within sports participation as a whole (Teixeira et al., 2012).

# 5.0 Conclusions

At the outset of the project, the researcher presented the following research question: What are the motivations behind members of a grassroots football team’s initial and continued participation? After completing the study, they have been able to conclusively identify the three most prominent determinants of participation in grassroots football: recreational enjoyment, skill development and social connections. These findings will attempt to enhance the currently limited research involving sports participation, particularly when isolating grassroots football. The study also contributes to the self-determination theory by emphasizing the impact that autonomy, relatedness and competence has on individual’s motivation levels.

The findings of the study also present a clear bias towards intrinsic motivation as opposed to extrinsic motivation when observing individuals’ reasons for participating in grassroots football. One determining factor in this could be the specificity of choosing football as the focus of the study, instead of widening it to contain sport in general, as it is expected that participation in team sports such as football is largely driven by intrinsic factors, whereas individual sports participation will be more likely to stem from external factors (Moradi et al., 2020). This therefore contributes to the understanding behind motivation for participation in grassroots football, as participants are more likely to be intrinsically motivated from their choice of sport, before considering their own contextual determinants.

**Limitations of the Findings**

Whilst it is important to acknowledge the valuable insight that this study has provided regarding grassroots football participation, the researcher was able to identify a few limiting factors. Although it is important to understand that whilst they had every intention not to provide the participants with any loaded questions, at points the researcher felt an obligation to provide the participants with suggestions due to their misinterpretation of the initial question (Bergelson et al., 2022). Whilst not being enough to definitively identify as a loaded question, this could affect the reliability and validity of the results due to the participants potentially being inclined to agree with the researcher’s suggestion (Macaulay, 2017). Furthermore, this could have impacted on the potential findings of the study, as a participant could be motivated by another factor that previous research has not considered. However, the researcher interjecting during the interview process could ultimately have prevented new data from being discovered.

Another limitation of the study was that it had a sole focus on individuals within a single grassroots football team. This meant that the participants were limited to being all 13–14-year-old males within a specific geographical area, which in turn limits the generalizability of the findings, as research suggests that different demographics will ultimately be motivated through different means (Moradi et al., 2020). Therefore, by opting for a convenience sampling approach, the researcher was unable to distinguish between the motivational factors of different demographics, for example gender, age and socio-economic background, which ultimately has a negative impact on the external validity of the study (Beletsky et al., 2019). Future research should aim to investigate the relationship between sports participation motivation within different demographics by studying the similarities and differences.

One possible drawback of the study was the potential for misinterpretation of the data or researcher bias. This is because the study was conducted by one researcher who was solely responsible for the data analysis process, which involved using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes within the interview transcripts. However, it is important to note that this analysis was based upon the researcher’s subjective interpretation of qualitative data, which could have affected the outcomes involved in the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). To prevent this issue in future research, multiple coders should be utilised as a means of ensuring that the data analysis process is rigorous and trustworthy, to ultimately maintain the credibility of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

**Future Recommendations**

Despite the effectiveness of this study as a means of gaining valuable insights relating to motivations behind grassroots football participation, there remains a persistent necessity to investigate the factors that impact participation in recreational sport as a whole (Cummins & Byrne, 2024). As such, researchers should recreate this study with a wider lens on participation in sport as a collective to better identify the determinants specific to individual sports and analyse how they differ from the results of the current study. To address the limitations of this study, future research should employ a wider sample of participants to ensure that there are a range of demographics covered within the pool of participants (Hammer, 2011). Furthermore, researchers should consider expanding the radius of the sampling of participants, as a way of avoiding the data being specific to a geographical area and not conclusive of the overall population within grassroots football (Faulkner, 2003).

In conclusion, this study has gained practical insights into the motivations behind participation in grassroots football by attempting to fill an existing gap in the current knowledge base, whilst drawing upon the self-determination theory as an integral theoretical framework (O’Gorman, 2018). Beyond academic discourse, the relevant perceptions obtained from the study have implications that could be beneficial for the key stakeholders within grassroots football, such as the organizers, policy makers and governing bodies. Moving forward, this study should act as a catalyst for future research attempting to investigate the motivations behind sports participation, with a wider range of demographics required to generate a better understanding of the subject area (Hammer, 2011).

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