

Social experiment in women's amateur soccer: Is a foreign name a disadvantage?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

To find out if we discriminate against people with foreign-sounding names an experiment with fictional girls who wanted to play soccer yields some answers.

Sports are a way in for people who want to build contacts with other

people. Sports give you an opportunity to integrate and interact with people on an equal footing. For immigrants, sports can be the key that allows them to fit into a society. But how easy is it for people with strange names to join in the fun? That depends on how foreign sounding a person's name is, and perhaps where the person lives.

Results from the experiment were not the same throughout Scandinavia. Some are more similar than others. The rigged soccer experiment actually shows encouraging results for Norway and Denmark, less so for Sweden. The study is published in the journal *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*.

Fictional soccer girls applied for tryouts

In the experiment, the researchers pretended to be girls who wanted to try out for soccer clubs in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. They wanted to see if people responded more negatively if the fictitious girls had foreign-sounding names.

"We contacted every division-based women's club with amateur teams in Scandinavia, apart from the top level," says Tor Georg Jakobsen, a professor of political science at NTNU Business School.

The researchers sent emails under fictitious names to club contact persons at a total of 1,141 soccer clubs. These included 665 clubs in Sweden, 259 in Norway and 207 in Denmark.

The emails were identical, but the researchers varied them by signing some with traditional native names and others with random names from the three largest, measurable minority groups in each country.

The researchers then checked the responses they received—or didn't receive—and noted how they differed depending on what kind of name

the fictional girls had.

What we say and what we do

"What we measured was the proportion of positive responses—that girls would be welcome to come to tryouts," says Jakobsen.

Few soccer contacts were directly negative when they responded to a request. Perhaps that is typical for Scandinavians. But quite a few club contacts simply failed to respond. The researchers categorized the no-responses as a lack of positive response.

"This method is an ingenious way of measuring 'incorrect' opinions. Failing to respond to an email doesn't entail any risk for the contact. But by analyzing this information, we can discern tendencies that we otherwise only find in elections, and not in surveys," says Jakobsen.

What people say and what they do are not always the same.

Swedes discriminated the most

"Sweden is the most interesting country and had relatively clear findings," says Jakobsen. "We found a much clearer tendency towards discrimination here than in Norway and Denmark."

The trend in Sweden was clear. Native Swedish names had a positive response rate of around 77, Finnish around 73, Polish 65 and Iraqi 62. This corresponds to cultural distance, that is, how different the cultures are considered to be.

"The difference between Swedish and Finnish names isn't significant, but for Polish and Iraqi names it is," says Jakobsen.

The researchers did not find this clear tendency in either Norway or Denmark. In Norway, Polish and Lithuanian names did receive somewhat less frequent responses than Norwegian ones, but the difference is not significant. Somali names had almost identical responses to Norwegian names.

Polish, Syrian and Turkish names in Denmark received somewhat less frequent responses than Danish ones, but here too, the difference was not significant. German names should actually have been included for Denmark, since Germans are the second largest immigrant group there. But German names were excluded because they are too similar to the Danish ones.

What Swedes say, and what Swedes do

"It's a paradox that Sweden sometimes scores significantly higher than Denmark and Norway in large surveys when it comes to trusting people of other nationalities," says Jakobsen.

People in Norway and Denmark are apparently somewhat more skeptical of foreigners when asked directly than people in Sweden are. But that's where theory and practice diverge.

However, we shouldn't linger too long on the Swedes' double standards, because that's not necessarily fair.

"We should also mention that Sweden has many more soccer clubs than Denmark and Norway," says Jakobsen.

As the number of clubs increases, the chance of coincidence influencing the results also decreases. For example, it does not take too many desperate coaches in Norway and Denmark for the numbers to change. Filling up the team at almost any cost will convince even the most

skeptical coach to answer yes to allowing someone with a foreign-sounding name to try out.

Foreign-sounding names might have a more exotic ring for some, or indicate soccer traditions and a corresponding skillset, making it more exciting to say yes.

Sweden also has a far greater proportion of immigrants and children of immigrants than Norway and Denmark. In Sweden, the proportion is 20%, compared to 14% in Norway and 12% in Denmark.

Easier for girls?

Similar experiments have shown that boys who want to try out generally have less chance of doing so if they have foreign-sounding names. But the response is not as clear for girls.

"The Scandinavian countries are ideal for this type of research. Most European countries don't have enough women's teams for an empirical analysis," says Cornel Nesseler, who is affiliated with the NTNU Business School and is an associate professor at the University of Stavanger.

Nesseler has previously carried out similar studies on male players.

Girls with foreign-sounding names receive responses more often, including positive answers, than boys did in the other experiments. In other words, it could appear that, on average, the soccer contacts are more positive towards girls than towards boys, but the experiments are so different that we cannot say for sure.

"The demand for female players is probably much higher compared to men, which can also affect the response rate," says Nesseler.

More information: Rasmus K. Storm et al, Ethnic discrimination in Scandinavia: evidence from a field experiment in women's amateur soccer, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (2023). [DOI: 10.1057/s41599-023-01734-7](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01734-7)

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