



Exploring Equity and Demographic Reach in 'Ireland Lights Up': Implications for Health-Promoting Sports Clubs

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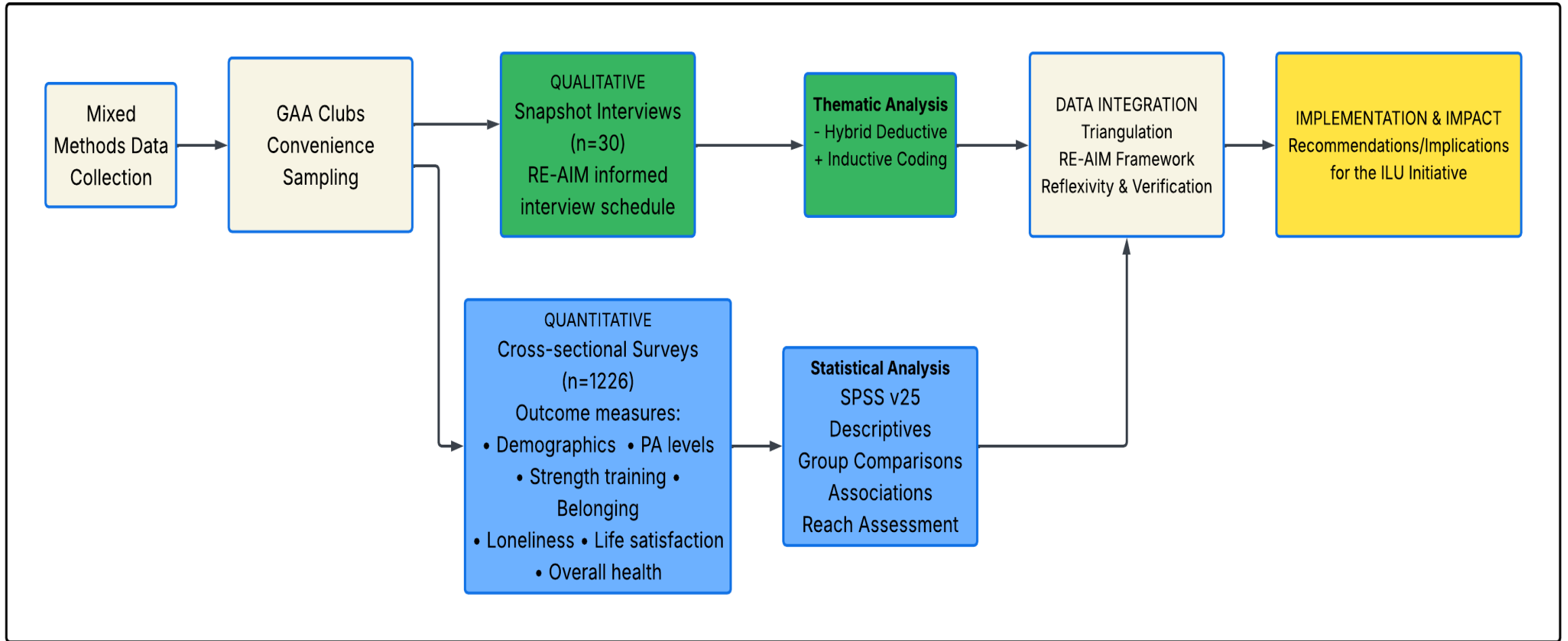
Background

- Sports clubs increasingly recognised as important community settings for health promotion.
- Ireland Lights Up (ILU) is a nationwide community walking initiative through which GAA clubs provide floodlit walking opportunities over 6 weeks during winter to engage communities in physical activity (PA).
- Who takes part in these types of initiatives? Is there equitable access to community-based PA?



Methods

GAA Clubs (2024-25) - Convenience Sampling



Results

Ireland Lights Up : Club Participation & Reach

National Club Adoption

- 784 clubs participated in 2024

Healthy Club Connection

- 56% of clubs involved in the Irish Life Healthy Club Programme also participated in ILU

Club Infrastructure

- 79% (619 clubs) used dedicated walking tracks

Programme Reach

- Approximately 40,000 participants per week
- 81.5% of participants learned about ILU from GAA social media
- 88% of participants were affiliated with a local GAA club

ILU PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

99%



White (Irish, any other White background)

80%



Third level/Postgraduate Education

80%



Employed full or part time

81%



Married/cohabiting

80%



Rural Location

85%



GAA Club Affiliated

77%



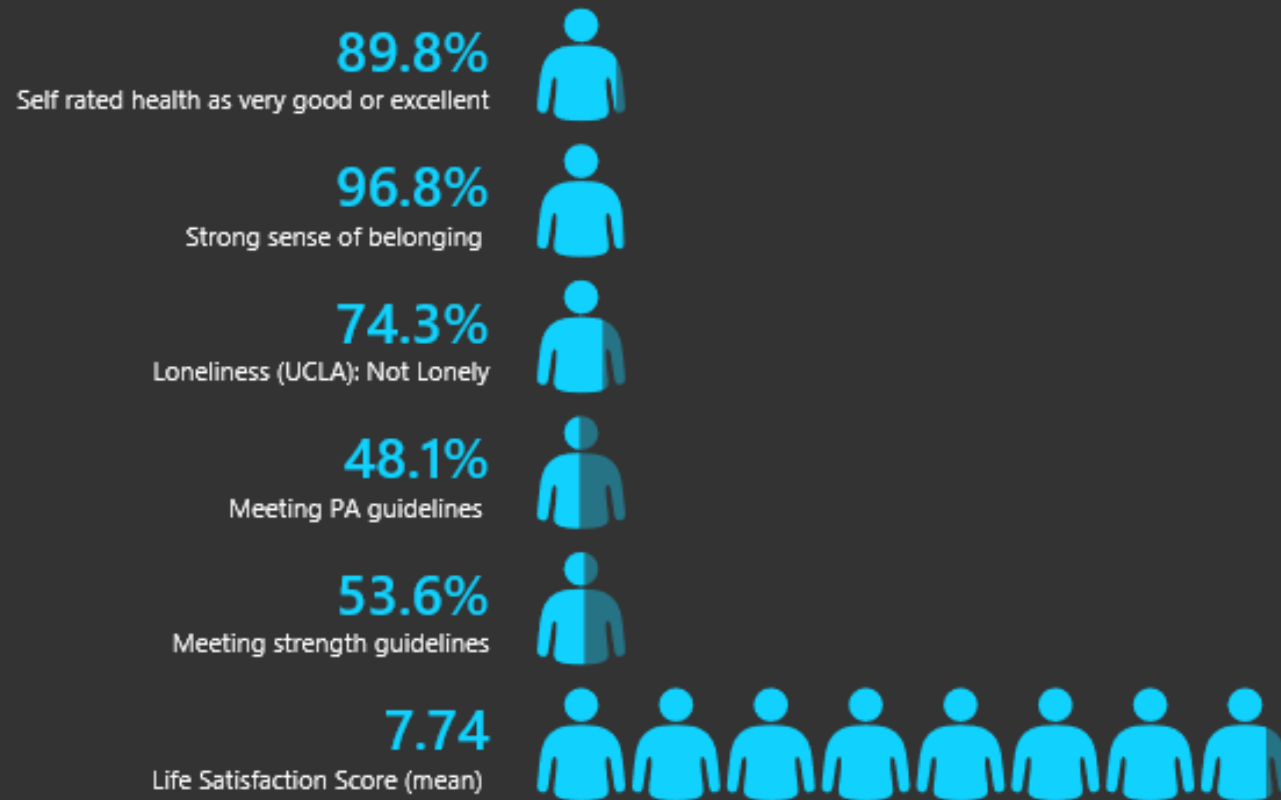
Gender - Female

46.9



Age in years (mean)

ILU Participant Health and Wellbeing Characteristics



Drivers of Participation in Ireland Lights Up

A Safe Place Where None Existed

“a great initiative as it gives people a safe place to walk at night-time. Where I live it’s not safe as the roads are dark and lonely” (P56).

“...only safe place in the village” (P542).

“I wouldn’t go walking in the village by myself – but in a group, you get the chat, the safety and the motivation.” (P368).

Walking as a Mechanism for Social Connection

“... a great initiative to bring the community together and meet people you wouldn’t ordinarily meet” (P16).

“the walks have fostered ... a real feel of togetherness in what can be a very tough few months for people.” (P86).

“ILU gets people from all ages walking and chatting together and creates a real sense of community and belonging.” (P46).

From Sporting Venue to Community Asset

“... if you stand here from 7am to 9pm, you’ll see the track is used all day long – that’s the success for the club.” (P55).

“The track is fantastic for the village and ILU has kicked it off in a great way – it’s like the hook to promote it and tells people, ‘Come in – this is for you’!” (P289).

Discussion

- Women as primary participants, highlighting ILU's success in engaging a group that often faces barriers to PA, particularly in rural areas.
- High rural participation demonstrates the value of local, safe, floodlit walking facilities in supporting PA and social connection.
- Some populations, including ethnic minority groups, lower-income groups, and those without prior club affiliations, are not being adequately reached
- Younger adults were underrepresented despite reporting higher levels of loneliness, indicating a potential target group for future engagement.



Key Implications

ILU is effective at promoting wellbeing, belonging, and physical activity amongst women and in rural communities.

Current reach appears strongest among those already connected to the GAA ("preaching to the converted").

Future growth may require:

- Broader communication channels beyond GAA networks
- Targeted outreach to younger adults, ethnic minorities, and non-GAA community members
- Messaging that emphasises social connection, wellbeing, and inclusivity.

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INSPIRING FUTURES

