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**The role of communities in social integration: an impact model approach to international female network building through events**

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## **Abstract**

Social integration is crucial for enabling migrants to fully participate in host societies; however, international women often encounter overlapping structural, cultural, and gender-specific barriers. Community-based initiatives offer a promising yet underexplored pathway. This study examines the OutGirls Social Club, an international women's community in Strasbourg, to explore how participation promotes integration and to assess its effects using an Impact Model framework. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines surveys with semi-structured interviews, the research tracks how community events influence participants' trajectories. Findings reveal that participation reduced loneliness, strengthened a sense of belonging, and generated both bonding and bridging social capital. These immediate benefits evolved into wider networks, increased confidence, leadership opportunities, and long-term settlement intentions. Persistent barriers, including structural, gendered, and cultural, were also identified, underscoring the limitations of community initiatives acting alone. The case study shows that the community serves as an essential complement to formal integration efforts, providing safe and inclusive spaces where women experience recognition and empowerment. By linking activities to outcomes and impact, this study demonstrates the value of Theory of Change and Impact Model frameworks in mapping complex pathways of integration. Practical recommendations are provided to enhance community-based and policy-level support systems.

**Keywords:** social integration, gender and migration, community-based initiatives, theory of change, impact model

## **AI usage statement**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used during various stages of this research to improve efficiency, increase clarity, and ensure methodological consistency. The use of AI tools served multiple purposes. They were used for idea generation and organization, assisting in refining research questions, theoretical framing, the business model, and concepts related to events and marketing for the case study. AI-assisted writing support helped enhance clarity, coherence, and the academic tone of selected thesis sections, including the introduction, research design, input, and discussion. In marketing communication, AI tools helped draft and edit social media announcements, event descriptions, and outreach messages for the OutGirls Social Club. Additionally, AI contributed to data processing by cleaning and organizing interview transcripts, transforming survey responses into numerical data, and verifying Python code for accuracy. Finally, language and grammar tools were used to improve the grammar, style, and readability of the final document. All AI applications were supplementary and did not replace the author's critical judgment, interpretation, or original analytical work.

# 1. Introduction

Migration is more than just a demographic or economic event; it is a complex social process that transforms communities, identities, and daily life. Integrating newcomers into host societies influences their opportunities and well-being, as well as the cohesion, resilience, and inclusiveness of those societies overall (OECD/European Commission, 2023, p. 17). Although integration has been widely studied, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding the experiences of migrant women and the role of local community-based initiatives in shaping pathways of belonging and participation. In this context, the present study examines how grassroots communities can support social integration and how their impact can be systematically evaluated.

## 1.1. Background and context

International migration plays a major role in shaping modern European societies. As of 2023, the European Union (EU) hosted approximately 63 million foreign-born individuals, representing over 14% of its total population, with 71% originating from outside the EU (*Migration and asylum in Europe – 2023 edition - Interactive publications - Eurostat*, 2024). Annual inflows remain significant, with 4.3 million immigrants arriving from non-EU countries in 2023, in addition to 1.5 million intra-EU migrants, making the region one of the world's major destinations for international migration (Eurostat, 2025). In several Western European countries, immigrants comprise over 15-20% of the resident population, particularly in Germany, France, Spain, and Italy, making a demographic shift closely tied to economic transformation, population ageing, and global mobility trends (*Migration and asylum in Europe – 2023 edition - Interactive publications - Eurostat*, 2024). The main factors driving migration to the EU include labor shortages, strong and diverse economies, and access to extensive welfare, education, and healthcare systems (EURES, European Labour Authority, and Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini Srl SB, 2024). Simultaneously, population projections show that Europe is aging, and the number of people of working age is decreasing. By 2050, 22 out of 27 EU countries are expected to experience significant workforce declines, making migration increasingly vital for maintaining stable economies and balanced populations (Mentzelopoulou, 2025).

Although migration plays a central and unavoidable role in Europe, the way immigrants integrate into society remains uneven. On average, people from outside the EU are less likely to be employed than those born in the country. In 2023, the employment rate for non-EU citizens was 63%, compared to 76.2% for nationals, creating a gap of about 13 percentage points. At the same time, the unemployment rate among non-EU citizens stood at 12.2%, which was more than double that of nationals (Migrant Integration Statistics – Labour Market Indicators, 2025). Migrant women face even greater challenges, including limited access to affordable childcare, weaker social networks, and combined gender and migration-based discrimination. Language barriers, cultural differences, and closed ethnic networks can also foster separation and limit successful social and economic integration (Orav and European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023).

Across society, integration is often hindered by xenophobia, limited funding for support programs, and pressure on public services. These issues can raise tensions and weaken social unity (*Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2023*, 2023, pp. 76–77). If integration does not succeed, many migrants may face long-term social exclusion, unemployment, and reliance on welfare. However, if integration works, everyone benefits — more people contribute to the economy, tensions decrease, and communities become more inclusive. Studies indicate that bridging gaps in employment and integration could add an extra €1,000 to €3,500 per migrant annually (Alain *et al.*, 2020, p. 10). This underscores the urgency of developing fair and effective ways to support integration, particularly for migrant women, who face multiple disadvantages but also bring essential skills and potential. Additionally, many integration policies still emphasize assimilation or “adaptation” rather than genuine inclusion, often pressuring migrants to give up parts of their cultural identities. Combined with discrimination and limited community support, this can lead to self-segregation, the development of parallel societies, and falling social trust. If these challenges are left unaddressed, they may increase polarization, strengthen exclusionary narratives, and weaken public trust in both government institutions and migrant communities (Scholten *et al.*, 2015, pp. 27–29, 36–37).

Within this context, the integration of migrant women presents both a significant challenge and a valuable opportunity. Community-based and tailored measures may help reduce social divides, improve access to employment, and support long-term inclusion. However, there is still limited clarity about which strategies are most effective, how their impact can be systematically measured, and which indicators best capture sustainable integration outcomes. This research aims to contribute to addressing these gaps.

## **1.2. Problem statement**

Migration is important for maintaining Europe’s population balance and economic stability, but ongoing challenges still make it hard for newcomers to fully integrate into society. Unrecognised qualifications, language barriers, limited access to the job market, discrimination, and a shortage of affordable housing make it especially difficult for migrants to build meaningful connections and gain full social participation (OECD/European Commission, 2023, pp. 11–13, 176). These challenges are often intensified for women, who must navigate the overlapping effects of gender, migration status, and socioeconomic inequalities (Mentzelopoulou, 2025; EMN, 2022). Despite policy efforts, many national and local initiatives still prioritise assimilation over genuine social inclusion, often leading to self-segregation, marginalization, and weaker social trust between migrants and host communities (Scholten *et al.*, 2021). Migrant women, especially, face risks of exclusion due to gaps in targeted support, limited recognition of their skills, and lack of access to networks that promote social belonging.

There is limited evidence on which community-based strategies best promote social integration for migrant women, how to systematically capture diverse integration pathways, and which indicators most effectively measure sustained social inclusion (Slootjes, Zanzuchi, and Migration Policy

Institute Europe, 2023, pp. 18–22). This research addresses these gaps by focusing on the social integration of international women in Europe, exploring both the barriers they encounter and local strategies that can empower their participation and sense of belonging, especially by examining the impact and potential of building an international female community through events.

### ***1.3. Research questions***

This research explores complex questions about social integration to deepen our understanding of integration processes. The study examines how communities can support the social integration of international women and aims to generate practical, evidence-based insights by applying the Theory of Change and Impact model frameworks (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020). This approach not only helps identify meaningful indicators and mechanisms of successful integration but also highlights best practices and policy recommendations for creating sustainable, inclusive, and empowering communities. The research is guided by the following main question and sub-questions.

**Central research question:** How can communities effectively support the social integration of international women, and how can their impact be measured using an Impact Model framework?

#### **Sub-questions:**

- What specific aspects of community-building contribute to the social and professional integration of international women?
- How can an impact model framework be applied to measure the effectiveness of community-driven integration efforts?
- What are the most relevant indicators for evaluating the success of community-driven integration initiatives in the short, medium, and long term?
- What are the key challenges in fostering sustainable, inclusive communities for international women, and what best practices can address these obstacles?

### ***1.4. Significance of the study***

This study addresses one of the most pressing demographic and social challenges in Europe: the integration of international populations, and specifically, international women. Migration has become a permanent component of European societies. As of January 2025, the European Union (EU) population stood at 450.4 million, with net migration outweighing natural population growth (*Population and population change statistics, 2025, p. 1*). Non-EU citizens accounted for approximately 29 million individuals, or 6.4% of the total EU population, and women represented slightly more than half of this group (*EU population diversity by citizenship and country of birth, 2025*). In addition, Europe hosts more than 1.7 million international students, of whom 43% are

women (*Learning mobility statistics*, 2025). These figures illustrate not only the scale of international migration but also the central role of women within it.

Despite this demographic weight, international women continue to experience persistent disadvantages. Employment rates for non-EU female citizens remain significantly below those of nationals, while unemployment is more than twice as high (European Migration Network, 2022, p. 13). Female migrants in particular face a “double disadvantage,” resulting from the intersection of gender and migration status. Barriers such as insufficient childcare, weaker professional networks, and discrimination compound their vulnerability and limit their full participation in host societies (European Migration Network, 2022, pp. 5–6, 13–14). If left unaddressed, these integration gaps risk reinforcing social exclusion, dependency on welfare, and the formation of isolated communities. Conversely, successful integration enhances economic sustainability, strengthens social cohesion, and contributes to demographic renewal (European Migration Network, 2022, p. 38).

Strasbourg provides a particularly relevant context. Immigrants make up 22.3% of the city’s population, more than double the national average in France, with women accounting for over 34,000 individuals. This makes international populations a significant part of its demographic profile (Dossier complet – Commune de Strasbourg (67482) | Insee, 2022). The University of Strasbourg hosts more than 11,300 international students from 156 countries, representing over 20% of the student body (Université de Strasbourg, 2021). The city’s role as a European and international hub further strengthens its relevance. Strasbourg hosts the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and the European Court of Human Rights, each employing large numbers of international staff and drawing professionals from across Europe and beyond. The European Parliament alone brings thousands of officials, assistants, and translators from all 27 EU member states to the city for its monthly plenary sessions (*The members of the European Parliament*, 2024). The Council of Europe employs between 1,000 and 5,000 international staff, while the Court employs approximately 640 staff and judges representing 46 member states (Council of Europe, 2025; *The Council of Europe: Key facts*, 2023). This concentration of international institutions makes Strasbourg the second-largest diplomatic city in France after Paris and creates a constant flow of newcomers, including students, professionals, and civil servants, whose integration experiences vary in scope and duration (*European institutions and international organisations*, no date).

This study explores how local community efforts can support the integration of international women. While national governments and EU institutions design the legal and policy frameworks, the lived experience of integration often occurs at the local level. Community initiatives, ranging from language training and mentorship to social networking and targeted employment support, are frequently decisive for newcomers’ ability to participate socially and professionally. However, there is limited evidence on which forms of community-building are most effective and how their outcomes can be systematically evaluated. This research addresses this gap by applying the Theory of Change to a case study of an international women’s community in Strasbourg (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020, pp. 2–3). The insights from this case study have implications that go far beyond Strasbourg. They can

guide how local communities across Europe promote inclusive and sustainable integration in practice. In addition to providing practical tools for measuring success, the findings should be valuable to scholars, policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders. By focusing on the experiences of international women in Strasbourg, this research addresses a pressing need for gender-sensitive, context-aware integration strategies and supports ongoing efforts to create more cohesive, resilient societies across Europe.

## **2. Literature review**

This chapter critically reviews the existing research on the social integration of international women, with a particular focus on community-building, network formation, and the specific challenges faced by female migrants and refugees. It draws on studies from migration, gender, social policy, and community development to demonstrate how structural, cultural, and policy factors influence integration. The review also highlights common approaches for assessing the effectiveness of integration initiatives.

### ***2.1. Understanding social integration***

Understanding social integration is essential for this research, as it highlights how migrants, especially international women, navigate and contribute to the host society. Examining its multidimensional and context-specific nature provides essential context for analysing the barriers, pathways, and outcomes that shape integration experiences. Insights from migration studies, gender theory, and policy research reveal that while social integration is multi-dimensional and highly dependent on context, there are core elements that define it, along with common processes and approaches to its assessment.

Esser's (2006) model views social integration as a multidimensional process rather than a straight, one-way path. He outlines four connected aspects: learning the language and cultural norms (culturation), gaining access to institutions like education and the labor market (placement), building relationships outside one's own group (interaction), and developing a sense of belonging to the host society (identification). Esser stresses that learning the language or culture alone is not enough if it does not lead to real participation and social connections. Central to his model is the idea of "interactive integration," which means forming genuine, two-way relationships with locals. These connections open access to networks, resources, and rights, while also changing both migrants' and the majority population's identities over time. In this way, the paper shows that integration relies not only on migrants adapting, but also on the host society providing chances for ongoing, mutual engagement (Esser, 2006).

Alba and Nee (1997) advance the understanding of social integration by reframing it within assimilation theory. They argue that integration is not simply about minority groups abandoning cultural identities but a multifaceted process with both subjective and objective dimensions. Subjectively, it involves identity redefinition, belonging, and perceptions of inclusion. Objectively, it includes participation in core social, economic, and civic institutions, access to education and employment, residential mobility, and intergenerational shifts such as language change or intermarriage. The research also stresses that integration is uneven, varying by group, context, and opportunity structures, and that it is not a one-way process: mainstream norms and institutions adapt as well, producing cultural hybridity. Thus, Alba and Nee (1997) conceptualize integration as dynamic, flexible, and context-dependent, requiring both belonging and participation for migrants to be recognized as full social actors.

Finally, modern research, such as The Social Integration Measurement Toolkit (PRD et al., 2021), frames social integration around three interlinked domains: relationships (social bonds/networks), participation (active engagement in community, civic, and public life), and equality (fair opportunities, representation, and inclusion). The toolkit emphasizes that assessing integration requires both systematic measurement and a nuanced understanding of how these domains interact, highlighting the importance of capturing experiences, perceptions, and access to opportunities across diverse groups. By providing practical metrics and guidance for tracking change over time, the toolkit enables organizations and policymakers to evaluate not just outcomes but also the processes and environments that foster genuine social inclusion.

Importantly, as highlighted in Graham-Brown's (2021) work, integration is not only about objective participation in institutions but also about the subjective feeling of belonging. Graham-Brown's (2021) doctoral thesis provides a qualitative perspective on the social integration of newly arrived migrant women in the UK, focusing on those attending community ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes. It conceptualizes integration as a dynamic process shaped by women's everyday interactions across four domains: community, services, work, and home. The study shows that integration goes beyond formal access to resources and is rooted in informal exchanges, such as conversations in shops, schools, or on public transport, that build trust and confidence. The analysis highlights four forms of belonging: material (familiar places), relational (supportive relationships), cultural (knowledge of local norms), and temporal (a sense of continuity over time). Women face barriers such as limited language skills, lack of confidence, and few opportunities for social contact outside their networks. Yet, the study demonstrates that small, everyday interactions can foster both belonging and participation. The study concludes that policies and integration programmes should prioritize opportunities for informal social interaction, recognizing belonging as a key dimension of integration (Graham-Brown, 2021).

Overall, the literature agrees that measurement of social integration must capture both objective and subjective dimensions. Objective indicators include employment, education, housing, use of social services, and level of voluntary or civic participation. For example, the OECD/EU's indicator framework tracks contact with natives, friendship networks, volunteering, and participation in local or public events as factors for social integration (OECD/European Commission, 2023). Subjective indicators probe migrants' sense of belonging, self-identification, emotional connectedness, trust, and perceived discrimination. Recent meta-analyses (Hu and Cheung, 2024) find moderately strong and consistent relationships between social identity and self-reported integration outcomes, confirming that how migrants feel about their inclusion often shapes the extent and quality of their integration. However, studies distinguish between "bonding" social capital (strong ties within the group) and "bridging" capital (ties with the broader community), underscoring that both are crucial bonding ties provide emotional and practical support, but bridging ties enable access to new opportunities, trust-building, and fuller participation (Graham-Brown, 2021). Therefore, community-based organizations, particularly those led or co-designed by migrants, have emerged as

important actors for not only providing support but also enabling “bridging” encounters, mediating access to public services, and advocating for policy change (Martinez-Damia *et al.*, 2023).

Additionally, recent studies highlight well-being as both a consequence and a catalyst of social integration. A large-scale study of China’s “floating” migrant population shows a strong positive connection between integration and subjective well-being, mediated by physical and mental health (Fei *et al.*, 2023). Social capital, such as the quality and breadth of social networks, further enhances these effects. The findings indicate that integration goes beyond institutional inclusion to encompass everyday experiences that shape emotional balance, self-worth, and life satisfaction. Social support, health-promoting activities, and community ties directly and indirectly boost well-being, while barriers like discrimination, weak networks, and limited access to services hinder it (Fei *et al.*, 2023).

In summary, social integration is best understood as a multidimensional and dynamic process that involves both objective participation in society and the subjective experience of belonging. It includes access to institutions such as education, employment, and public services, but equally depends on everyday interactions, trust, well-being, and recognition that foster inclusion. Integration is not just a one-way process of migrant adaptation; it also requires host societies to create opportunities for mutual engagement and to adjust their own norms and institutions. In this way, social integration involves both what migrants do to participate in society and how societies foster the conditions for them to feel accepted, valued, and connected.

## ***2.2. Structural barriers to integration for international women***

Research consistently shows that international women face a complex intersection of challenges rooted in the “triple disadvantage” of gender, migration status, and, for some, displacement. These factors increase their vulnerability to social isolation, economic insecurity, and exclusion from services, which are different from what migrant men or non-migrant women experience (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018). Migrant women encounter many challenges when trying to settle and integrate into a new country. Structural barriers, such as unrecognized foreign qualifications, limited language skills, and little work experience in the host country, make it difficult to find stable employment. Additionally, women often face limited access to affordable childcare, ongoing workplace discrimination, and family responsibilities that are not shared equally because of traditional gender roles (Yazdankhoo *et al.*, 2025). Even when highly educated, women are more likely than men to be overqualified for their jobs and to have trouble using their skills effectively (Migrant Integration Statistics – Over-qualification, 2025).

Social networks can also be weak or fragmented, especially for women who have recently arrived. Language barriers and limited knowledge of local rights and services make it more difficult to build connections and participate in the community (European Migration Network, 2022, p. 1). Experiences of xenophobia, racism, and gender-based violence can further restrict social interactions (European Migration Network, 2022, p. 1,5,7). Stereotypes, such as assumptions about motherhood or religious background, may also limit access to support and inclusion. Additionally, language difficulties, fear

of discrimination, and lack of awareness of available resources can hinder access to healthcare (OECD/European Commission, 2023, p. 122). Finding safe and affordable housing remains a common challenge, especially for women with uncertain legal status or those separated from their families (OECD/European Commission, 2023, p. 112).

Despite these challenges, most EU countries have integration policies that do not specifically address the needs of women. Few mainstream programs directly support migrant women. Local projects, often run by NGOs, attempt to fill this gap but tend to be small, short-term, and lack consistent funding (European Migration Network, 2022). Many women face significant workplace challenges even before migration, with research showing they experience higher levels of stress, exhaustion, and mental health issues than men (Wang et al., 2025). These struggles are closely linked to increased caregiving responsibilities, less job flexibility and security, ongoing pay gaps, and greater exposure to workplace discrimination and microaggressions. National survey data reveal that women experience severe psychological distress and anxiety at roughly double the rate of men, and are nearly three times more affected by depression. Additionally, women report working while ill and missing workdays due to illness at higher rates than men, a pattern especially evident among women of color (Wang et al., 2025).

Additionally, research consistently finds that friendship formation and maintenance are more complex and emotionally demanding for women than for men. Women's friendships are often characterized by higher levels of intimacy, greater emotional investment, and increased expectations for support, reciprocity, and trust, resulting in deeper, but potentially more fragile relationships. Elkins and Peterson (1993) found that “women’s friendships are richer, more intimate, and emotionally laden, but also more susceptible to disappointment and conflict”. Felmlee and Muraco (2009) and related literature confirm that men’s friendships typically center around shared activities and group interactions, involve lower expectations for personal disclosure, and tend to be less emotionally intense on average. As a result, while the process of sustaining meaningful female friendships is more nuanced and requires greater emotional work, it also provides distinct emotional benefits and a more powerful sense of relational support compared to men.

Overall, international and refugee women in Europe face a unique combination of labor market, social, and legal obstacles driven by structural gender inequality, policy shortcomings, and intersectional vulnerabilities. Effective integration, therefore, requires gender-sensitive and intersectional approaches, both in policy and community efforts, to unlock the potential of migrant women as active, empowered members of host societies.

### ***2.3. The role of communities***

Recent research consistently highlights the pivotal role that communities play in enhancing social connectedness, mental health, and overall well-being, particularly for individuals experiencing vulnerability or times of transition. Across diverse populations, participation in community-based

friendship groups and social networks is strongly linked with measurable reductions in depression and loneliness, alongside increases in perceived social support, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.

Supporting this, a meta-analysis by Grishina et al. (2023) found that structured community friendship groups produced a small but statistically significant reduction in depressive symptoms compared to controls, confirming that these groups are a promising, low-cost strategy for improving mental health in a variety of settings. This review, which included eight studies of over 1,000 participants, found that programs with structured formats were especially effective. Together, these findings suggest that community-based friendship groups are a promising and cost-effective approach for improving mental health in a wide range of settings.

Further emphasizing the social benefits of community spaces, a longitudinal study in Japan by Ide et al. (2025) followed more than 6,000 older adults who participated in community gathering places. Over the course of two years, this involvement led to more frequent contact with friends, increased membership in local organizations, greater instrumental support, and higher levels of trust and reciprocity, which is powerful evidence that participation in communal activities significantly boosts social capital and subjective well-being. The importance of such connections is further illustrated by a comprehensive meta-analysis by Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton (2010), which found that the absence of social relationships increases mortality risk by 50%, making social disconnectedness as significant a health risk as well-established factors like smoking or obesity; this elevated risk is consistent across genders and age groups, as shown by a large-scale meta-analysis of over 300,000 participants (Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton, 2010).

Neighbourhood-based community capital is another vital factor in adult health. In a sample of over 3,200 adults from Los Angeles, Carpiano (2006) found that higher social support increased the odds of reporting good health by 45%, while active participation in neighborhood groups reduced risky behaviors like smoking and binge drinking. The presence of trust and informal social control among neighbors, such as a willingness to look out for each other, predicted both better self-rated health and daily safety. Notably, these health benefits were stronger for those who felt a deep attachment to their local area, highlighting that the accessibility and quality of social resources have tangible effects on well-being (Carpiano, 2006).

Certain types of social connections can be particularly beneficial for women. Bedrov and Gable (2022) note that, during stressful periods, women are more likely than men to cope by seeking companionship and mutual support, looking for trusted friends and building supportive networks rather than simply reacting with instinctive responses like confronting the problem directly or trying to escape the situation. This behavior has a physiological basis, involving the release of oxytocin, which encourages protective and affiliative responses and helps lower stress-induced cortisol levels (Bedrov and Gable, 2022). Female friendships are also characterized by higher levels of self-disclosure and are more often relied upon for social support than male friendships, enhancing both psychological and physical health benefits. Furthermore, women are not only more likely to seek social support but also more effective at providing support to others, which further improves the well-

being of both giver and receiver. These dynamics are consistent across cultures, although the specific ways women seek and provide support may differ globally (Bedrov and Gable, 2022). Overall, maintaining strong, trusting social networks enables women to better manage stress, build resilience, and flourish both emotionally and physically.

Taken together, these studies confirm that strong communities offer not only practical and informational support but also help build lasting identities, trust, and ongoing psychological health. Importantly, community engagement addresses both mental health prevention and recovery by reducing isolation, easing symptoms of anxiety and depression, and fostering belonging and empowerment. For women, such networks are particularly essential, as supportive female communities have been shown to buffer stress, provide mutual encouragement, and enhance mental health resilience. This effect extends to at-risk groups such as immigrants, mothers, and older adults, for whom inclusive social networks act as both a “social cure” and a foundation for integration, confidence, and meaningful participation in society. Ultimately, community-based support systems promote healthier, more connected, and more empowered life paths, especially during moments of transition or vulnerability such as adapting to a new culture.

### **2.3.1. Communities at work**

Research indicates that workplace communities play a vital role in supporting women’s well-being, professional development, and social integration. By fostering connection, shared learning, and mutual support, these communities create environments where women can thrive both personally and professionally.

A systematic review by Najafabadi et al. (2024) found that workplace female communities, group workshops, and peer networks significantly reduce stress, boost self-esteem, and improve work-life balance among women employees. The most effective interventions involve supportive peer groups and group-based activities that enable women to share experiences and feel valued as individuals, not just as employees, creating psychologically safe spaces that directly combat isolation and burnout (Najafabadi et al., 2024). Organizational research by McKinsey & Company (Krivkovich *et al.*, 2024) confirms these effects: women in organizations with strong support systems enjoy greater satisfaction, engagement, and retention. These findings establish female support groups as a best practice for promoting women’s health, equity, and organizational success.

Enabling these initiatives offers clear organizational benefits: improved well-being, faster integration, and a more inclusive work culture. International women who join supportive communities report higher confidence, stronger professional networks, and a greater sense of belonging — outcomes that help build resilient, high-performing teams. In summary, female workplace communities are proven, evidence-based drivers of integration, health, and sustainable success for both employees and organizations.

### ***2.3.2. Friendship influence***

Friendship is one of the most immediate and tangible ways to build community, directly influencing individual well-being and broader social integration. Psychological and neuroscientific studies consistently show that social bonds with friends are associated with less anxiety, better mood, and increased resilience to stress (Adams, Santo and Bukowski, 2011). Even short but regular chats with friends can boost daily happiness, emphasizing the importance of ongoing social connection over the depth of individual interactions (Hall et al., 2023). For migrants, who often face isolation when they arrive, friendships offer not just emotional support but also a structural pathway into their new societies.

Empirical evidence highlights the importance of friendship for immigrant well-being. A recent international survey found that immigrants usually report having two to three close friends in their new country, and the frequency of communication with these friends is strongly linked to a greater sense of belonging. Friendship also serves as a buffer against the stressors of migration and acculturation: longitudinal studies show that those with strong friendship ties report higher self-esteem, greater resilience, and a better capacity to recover from setbacks. Experimental data also show that having friends during stressful experiences reduces not only psychological distress but also physiological responses like cortisol spikes, supporting healthier adaptation to new environments (Adams, Santo and Bukowski, 2011). Friendship networks also shape the composition of migrants' social ties. About 28% of foreign-born adults report that all their friends share the same ethnicity, yet immigrants generally tend to have more ethnically diverse friendship networks than non-migrants (Lessard-Phillips, Fajth and Fernández-Reino, 2020). These diverse networks expand social capital by helping with language learning, gaining access to local resources, and navigating workplace and civic institutions more easily.

However, friendships not only support migrants but also influence host society attitudes. Kende et al. (2024) provides a large-scale longitudinal analysis across nine North American and European countries (N = 27,513), demonstrating that non-migrants with more immigrant friends consistently report more positive views of immigration and greater support for inclusion. Importantly, national contexts matter: when integration policies are more inclusive, non-migrants are more likely to form friendships with immigrants, and these relationships, in turn, predict higher societal support for integration (Kende et al., 2024). Friendship networks thus function as both bonding ties, strengthening trust and solidarity within immigrant communities, and bridging ties, opening pathways to cross-cultural understanding, employment, and civic engagement (Kende et al., 2024). This dual role positions friendships as a core mechanism of integration, reducing social isolation while also transforming community relations in ways that benefit both migrants and host populations.

Therefore, the evidence confirms that friendships are not just interpersonal comforts but fundamental drivers of integration. They support psychological well-being, build resilience, and strengthen migrants' sense of belonging, while also influencing host community attitudes and facilitating

intercultural exchange. Integration initiatives that create opportunities for community engagement, through peer networks, local groups, and inclusive public spaces, therefore hold great potential. Policies that encourage conditions for diverse friendship formation not only benefit individual immigrants but also help create more cohesive, inclusive societies (Kende et al., 2024).

#### ***2.4. The role of community-based initiatives in integration***

Recent studies highlight community support as a key factor in integration, alongside employment and government policies (Pan *et al.*, 2024). Local spaces and grassroots organizations provide newcomers, especially women facing marginalization, with a sense of belonging, greater confidence, and opportunities for collective action.

Zhang et al. (2023) conducted a scoping review, systematically analyzing 28 studies published between 2011 and 2021 on migrants' community participation and social integration in urban settings. The search covered major social science databases and included both international and internal migrants, focusing on formal and informal community engagement and its effects on belonging, social relationships, and urban adaptation. The review shows that community participation is a strong facilitator of social integration. Engagement in local associations, support networks, and public activities strengthens bonding social capital within migrant groups while simultaneously fostering bridging connections with the host community. These connections help migrants access essential resources (such as language instruction and job training), strengthen their sense of belonging, and improve psychological well-being, including increased confidence and dignity. Community participation also provides migrants with meaningful opportunities for civic contribution and urban life, helping them develop a "right to the city" and a new sense of home. The findings indicate that both immediate practical needs and long-term integration outcomes are improved through consistent community engagement across diverse migration and urban situations (Zhang et al., 2023).

To better understand how communities influence migrant integration in practice, Martinez-Damia et al. (2023) conducted a case study of Migrant Community-Based Organizations (MCBOs) in Milan, Northern Italy. Their research combined interviews with 29 leaders and members from 15 MCBOs, document analysis, and direct observation. This approach provided one of the clearest pictures of how MCBOs operate in the European context. The study showed that MCBOs play a vital role: they help improve integration outcomes, enhance well-being, and give members a stronger sense of belonging. At the same time, these organizations also serve as spaces for advocacy and collective action, enabling migrants to challenge exclusion and promote fairness and justice (Martinez-Damia et al., 2023).

Building on these findings, research from other parts of the world confirms the vital role of community support. For example, Pan et al. (2024) studied migrant integration within relocation communities in Guizhou province, China. Their survey across five sites measured integration through psychological, economic, communicative, and cultural factors. The results clearly showed that community support is just as important for integration as government policies and individual resources. Features such as safe and welcoming environments, good housing quality, and accessible

spaces were especially important for creating a sense of belonging and positive identity in the new community. These community factors also made it easier for migrants to adjust economically and build connections with local residents. Overall, the study highlights how well-designed, inclusive communities directly improve migrants' integration experiences (Pan et al., 2024). Importantly, the authors explain that the benefits of community support come from both practical and social aspects. On the one hand, supportive communities provide physical safety and basic resources. On the other hand, they offer everyday opportunities for social contact, mutual help, and shared activities. This combination helps migrants cope with the isolation and stress often following major relocations, while also encouraging strong bonds within migrant groups and connections with local people. The study concludes that improving the built environment and strengthening community-level support are just as vital for integration as job programs or policy reforms, especially in settings marked by rapid change and diversity (Pan et al., 2024).

Revealing how individual and contextual factors influence social integration outcomes, recent research provides a clearer picture of how immigrants develop and experience a sense of belonging in Canadian cities. Quantitative studies, such as Gyan and Chireh (2024) use large survey data to identify what influences belonging. The results indicate that age, life satisfaction, income, homeownership, and strong language skills all enhance immigrants' feelings of connection to their communities. Conversely, newcomers who have recently arrived or struggle with language are more likely to feel isolated. The study also demonstrates that cities with inclusive policies, robust municipal support, and active ethnic associations foster a greater sense of belonging among immigrants. This is important because belonging is closely linked to better mental health, increased social participation, and higher civic trust, while weak belonging correlates with loneliness and exclusion (Gyan and Chireh, 2024).

Adding to this, Salami et al. (2019) take a qualitative approach through interviews with 53 immigrant service providers in Alberta. The study examines the everyday realities behind the numbers and shows how jobs, language learning, and discrimination strongly influence feelings of belonging. Service providers note that newcomers often first connect with their own ethnocultural communities before integrating into broader Canadian society. They also emphasize the importance of immigrant service agencies and faith-based organizations in helping people feel included and supported. The authors advocate for more diversity-focused policies, stronger anti-discrimination measures, and expanded community programs. According to the findings, creating opportunities for social participation and mutual support not only improves mental health but also helps break down barriers to integration (Salami et al., 2019). Overall, these studies demonstrate that belonging has both structural and social aspects.

Overall, the evidence shows that community-based initiatives are not just supplementary but central to successful migrant integration, as they provide both practical resources and meaningful social connections. By fostering belonging, confidence, and participation, these initiatives address immediate needs while also laying the groundwork for long-term inclusion and resilience.

## ***2.5. Gender-responsive design in integration programs***

Effective integration strategies for women increasingly emphasize the importance of gender-responsive and gender-transformative approaches. Rather than focusing solely on meeting immediate needs, such frameworks aim to address systemic inequalities and shift underlying power dynamics. They emphasize that women's integration is linked to broader issues of gender inequality and that successful efforts must consider the intersecting structural, cultural, and socio-economic barriers migrant women face (Policies and Practice: A Guide to Gender-Responsive Implementation, 2021).

Examples from practice clearly demonstrate this principle. In Berlin, the “Intercultural Bridge Builders in Care” project uses a low-threshold, diversity-sensitive approach by training intercultural language and integration mediators to help migrants navigate the care system (Intercultural bridge builders in care, no date). The initiative provides access to information in 18 languages and works with care centers across the city. By reducing barriers and increasing participation, the project empowers migrant women to become advocates and connectors within their communities, ensuring ongoing engagement and equal care access (*Intercultural bridge builders in care*, no date). In Slovenia, the “City of Women” (Mesto žensk) initiative combines artistic, activist, and community-driven strategies to promote empowerment since 1996 (City of Women – Association for the Promotion of Women in Culture | City of Women, no date). Through participatory art projects, the initiative amplifies the voices of marginalized women, builds solidarity networks, and creates strong connections between artists, cultural professionals, and local communities. Its co-creation methods and decentralized governance foster agency, creativity, long-term social involvement, and collective belonging. Women-led governance and ongoing advocacy further push for equality and enhance women's agency within the wider cultural landscape. This initiative shows how building a supportive community based on shared creativity can boost social integration and empowerment. In India, SEWA Shakti Kendras combine employment, health, and legal services within women-led governance structures, making sure women are not only recipients of support but also active participants in decision-making (Thomas et al., 2022). These models show the importance of creating trauma-informed, culturally safe environments, as well as embedding flexibility in delivery, through childcare provision, hybrid participation formats, and opportunities for women to lead or co-create activities. Such design features significantly enhance engagement, long-term impact, and the development of women's agency.

Research also emphasizes the crucial role of participation in promoting empowerment. Röger-Offergeld, Kurfer, and Brandl-Bredenbeck (2023) examined community-based participatory research (CBPR) in the area of physical activity and health promotion among socially disadvantaged women. Their findings show that women who participated as equal partners, rather than passive participants, reported multi-level empowerment, including increased self-efficacy, skill development, and broader social networks. Notably, women who served as co-researchers gained more confidence and influence within their communities, highlighting the transformative power of active involvement (Röger-Offergeld, Kurfer and Brandl-Bredenbeck, 2023). Evidence from fragile and marginalized environments confirms that even activities that seem non-political, such as sports, arts, and theater,

can serve as vital tools for empowerment. Lwamba et al. (2022), in a comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis, found that these forms of community engagement improve women's opportunities for social participation, leadership, and voice. Beyond personal advantages, they also enhance women's roles as agents of social cohesion, especially in settings characterized by instability or exclusion (Lwamba et al., 2022).

Grassroots initiatives represent another crucial dimension of gender-responsive integration. The Huairou Commission (2019) reported on global case studies where women's groups successfully translated community-based empowerment into formal political influence. Through training, mentorship, and advocacy, 780 women gained leadership training and 184 secured formal leadership roles in local councils (*Huairou Commission Annual Report 2019*, 2019). These outcomes illustrate how community-based programs can bridge the gap between informal support networks and formal governance structures, amplifying women's voices in policy-making and resilience planning. In addition to political empowerment, economic participation is also a core focus of gender-responsive integration. A systematic review by Orton et al. (2016) shows that group-based microfinance programs in low- and middle-income settings can foster collective empowerment, particularly among women. Participation in these savings and credit groups is linked not only to economic benefits, such as increased access to small business opportunities, but also to broader improvements in social status, confidence, and community engagement. The review highlights that these programs often include literacy, legal rights, and leadership training, and that such group activities encourage women to take more active roles in community decision-making (Orton *et al.*, 2016). While not all outcomes directly lead to measurable integration, qualitative evidence indicates that these initiatives strengthen women's agency, well-being, and peer support. Taken together, these effects create a foundation for enhanced social integration and contribute to positive community development.

Overall, the literature highlights that integration programs for women work best when they do more than just offer services; they aim to empower women as active participants, leaders, and decision-makers. Whether through co-research, cultural and leisure activities, grassroots organizing, or entrepreneurship, these methods emphasize the importance of agency and ownership. Gender-responsive frameworks therefore broaden the idea of integration beyond merely adapting to host societies, positioning women as key players in creating inclusive, resilient communities.

## ***2.6. Challenges of integration initiatives***

Despite decades of policy development, integration initiatives continue to face significant challenges. Many formal programs focus mainly on structural indicators like employment, education, language skills, or legal status, while ignoring the everyday, relational, and subjective aspects of integration, such as belonging, agency, and well-being (Heath & Schneider, 2021; Paparusso, 2021; OECD/European Commission, 2023). As a result, a gap forms between institutional goals and migrants' real experiences. For example, language classes or job-placement programs may improve skills on paper but fail to provide meaningful opportunities for interaction with local residents, leaving

newcomers feeling isolated and disconnected from the host society (European Migration Network, 2022). These issues are worsened by structural and institutional barriers like limited access to jobs, recognition of foreign credentials, language support, affordable childcare, and gender-based discrimination, along with fragmented service delivery across regions (European Migration Network, 2022; Yazdankhoo et al., 2025).

Another ongoing challenge is the fragmented nature of integration policies. Different agencies and levels of government often work without coordination, which results in uneven access to services and inconsistent support across regions (OECD/European Commission, 2023). Many programs also focus more on assimilation than mutual adaptation, prioritizing measurable outcomes such as employment or language skills while overlooking subjective aspects like belonging, agency, and well-being (OECD/European Commission, 2023). Migrant women face multiple overlapping barriers, including childcare responsibilities, workplace discrimination, and limited chances to engage outside family or ethnic networks (Martinez-Damia et al., 2023). Legal and housing difficulties, especially for those with uncertain status, further increase vulnerability and limit opportunities for social and economic integration (European Migration Network, 2022). In addition, many policy-driven initiatives continue to promote assimilation by focusing on conformity to host society norms instead of supporting mutual adaptation. This often places most of the responsibility for integration on migrants, while the role of institutions and communities in creating inclusive environments is overlooked (Alba & Nee, 1997; Esser, 2006; European Migration Network, 2022). Policies that emphasize assimilation can unintentionally lead to self-segregation or parallel societies, as migrants may feel pressured to give up their cultural identities instead of taking part in mutual adjustment with the local community.

In this context, community-based initiatives have become essential complements to government-led programs. Grassroots and migrant-led organizations provide the relational and emotional aspects of integration that formal policies often overlook. They promote bonding within migrant groups, offer safe spaces for cultural expression, and create opportunities to build bridges with the broader society—supporting trust, informal language learning, and access to social networks vital for mobility and a sense of belonging (Martinez-Damia et al., 2023; Graham-Brown, 2021). However, these organizations face challenges such as limited funding, unstable leadership, and dependence on volunteers. Research shows that when migrant community-based groups work with larger national or institutional entities, problems can emerge. These include not being fully recognized as equal partners, being involved mainly to recruit migrants without meaningful input in decision-making, and being asked to follow cultural or professional practices that may not align with participants' experiences (Martinez-Damia et al., 2023). These issues can limit the independence of community groups, hinder their ability to truly represent their members, and potentially decrease participation if activities do not match migrants' actual needs and identities. Despite these challenges, evidence indicates that migrant-led groups play a key role in facilitating access to services, advocating for rights, and amplifying voices often excluded from policy discussions (Martinez-Damia et al., 2023).

Overall, while existing integration initiatives often face challenges like narrow definitions, fragmentation, and limited responsiveness to migrants' lived realities, community-based approaches provide alternative options. By focusing on everyday interactions, mutual recognition, and locally grounded support, grassroots and migrant-led programs can overcome the limitations of formal initiatives and promote more sustainable, inclusive, and gender-sensitive social integration.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

Social impact measurement can be divided into four main approaches: multisector activity, multisector outcome, single-sector activity, and single-sector outcome (Rawhouser, Cummings and Newbert, 2017). Activity-based approaches often assume that prosocial behavior will lead to positive results without directly measuring outcomes (Rawhouser, Cummings and Newbert, 2017). Outcome-focused approaches, on the other hand, emphasize direct assessment, such as measuring reductions in poverty and conflict as indicators of entrepreneurial impact. These approaches are important because they offer different levels of comparability, validity, and contextual sensitivity, which affect how social performance is demonstrated and understood.

In this study, the Theory of Change framework was chosen because it allows for a structured connection between activities and outcomes while providing flexibility to capture both sector-specific and broader integration effects (Vogel, 2012).

#### ***3.1. Methodology***

This study employs a case study approach, using frameworks from Yin (2018) and combining the Theory of Change with an Impact Model to assess social integration outcomes. Case studies are appropriate for examining current phenomena in real-life settings, especially when exploring how and why processes occur and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its environment are unclear (Yin, 2018). These conditions match the goal of this research: to understand how the OutGirls Social Club, a community for international women in Strasbourg, promotes social integration through events and activities.

The OutGirls Social Club was created specifically for this study to provide a structured environment for observing community-building and integration. Data were gathered over nearly one year through surveys, semi-structured interviews, and event observations. This mixed-methods approach captures both structural aspects (employment, education) and relational or subjective elements (friendships, sense of belonging, identity), enabling triangulation and a thorough understanding of social integration (Yin, 2018).

Guided by Yin's principles, the research was framed around theoretical propositions regarding the role of community in supporting integration, and the analysis applied pattern-matching and explanation-building to compare empirical findings with these expectations (Yin, 2018). Systematic documentation throughout the study ensured transparency, reliability, and contextualized interpretation of the results.

#### ***3.2. Theoretical foundations: Theory of Change and Impact Model***

This study employs a methodological approach grounded in two complementary frameworks: Theory of Change and the Impact Model (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020; Taplin et al., 2013). Together, these

frameworks provide a systematic way to map how community-based interventions, such as those organized by the OutGirls Social Club, are expected to generate specific outcomes and, ultimately, achieve long-term impact for participants (Serrat, 2017, pp. 239–240). This approach enables the connection of every activity, whether it's a networking event, mentoring session, or wellness workshop, to meaningful changes in participants' lives. These changes can range from immediate improvements, such as increased confidence or improved language skills, to longer-term outcomes like empowerment, a stronger sense of belonging, and an intention to settle in the host community. The Theory of Change is an essential framework for designing and examining social interventions. It clarifies the reasoning behind how and why specific activities are expected to produce desired results, providing a causal pathway from daily actions to long-term impact (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020). In the case of the OutGirls Social Club, Theory of Change served as the guiding framework for activity design, ensuring that each intervention directly contributed to the broader goal of fostering social integration among international women in Strasbourg.

The Theory of Change process consists of several interlinked components that together clarify the pathway from intervention to impact (Laing & Todd, 2015; Vogel, 2012):

1. **Defining the long-term vision:** the process starts with a clear statement of the ultimate goals the intervention aims to achieve. For OutGirls, this vision includes women feeling a sense of belonging, empowerment, and a desire to stay in Strasbourg. Establishing this vision sets the scope and direction for both planning and evaluation.
2. **Mapping causal pathways:** next, the methodology involves identifying the sequence of changes needed to achieve the vision. These causal pathways typically include immediate outputs (such as participation numbers), intermediate outcomes (such as increased confidence, language skills, or friendships), and the ultimate impact (such as durable settlement and integration). Mapping these steps ensures that the progression logic is clear and testable.
3. **Defining assumptions:** a key feature of the Theory of Change is its clear identification of assumptions underlying the pathways. For instance, it assumes that participating in community events strengthens friendships, which then promote a sense of belonging. By making these assumptions explicit, the model enables them to be critically examined, tested, and refined (Van Es et al., 2015; Taplin et al., 2013).
4. **Stakeholder involvement:** developing a Theory of Change is most effective when done collaboratively with a diverse group of stakeholders, including program participants, organizers, and partner organizations (Laing & Todd, 2015). This inclusive approach not only improves understanding of integration challenges within the context but also promotes ownership, accountability, and legitimacy of the intervention model.
5. **Indicators and evaluation:** Theory of Change also involves defining indicators for each step in the pathway. These indicators enable continuous monitoring and evaluation, helping researchers determine if activities are achieving the expected results, identify successes and challenges, and make necessary adjustments over time (Laing & Todd, 2015).

6. **Dynamic revision:** finally, the Theory of Change is not a static framework but a dynamic one, meant to be continuously updated based on new evidence, participant experiences, and contextual changes (Vogel, 2012). This iterative process helps ensure that the intervention stays relevant and effective as conditions change.

Overall, implementing the Theory of Change requires establishing measurable indicators for each step in the change pathway to enable ongoing monitoring and evaluation. These indicators support objective assessment of progress, identification of successes and challenges, and provide feedback to guide strategic adjustments and improve intervention effectiveness (Laing and Todd, 2015; Taplin et al., 2013). By applying the Theory of Change from the beginning, this study structured all OutGirls activities around clear links to intended outcomes and allowed continuous evaluation as the program unfolded. This approach prevents the impact gap. Instead, the Theory of Change approach enabled the formulation of a clear hypothesis: participation in OutGirls activities strengthens social networks, boosts confidence, and fosters a sense of belonging, ultimately supporting deeper integration in Strasbourg.

Closely related to the Theory of Change is the Impact Model, also called a logic model (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004, pp. 1–6). While the Theory of Change emphasizes why change is expected to happen, the Impact Model provides a structured framework to map what occurs during the change process and in what order (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020, pp. 4–5). It organizes the intervention into interconnected elements, making it especially useful for designing research tools and structuring data analysis (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004, pp. 1–6). For this study, the Impact Model was central in shaping the survey, guiding the interview protocols, and informing the analysis of results. Its systematic structure offered several advantages. First, it offered causal clarity by tracing how participation in OutGirls activities could lead to both personal and social change (Taplin et al., 2013; Laing & Todd, 2015). Second, it enabled comprehensive measurement, capturing not only immediate outputs, such as event attendance, but also deeper outcomes, including a sense of belonging and empowerment (Taplin et al., 2013, pp. 5–6). Third, the model allowed for contextual adaptability by considering the diverse backgrounds of participants and the barriers they might face. Finally, it supported evidence-based development, helping the study identify which elements of the program were most effective in promoting integration (Vogel, 2012; Taplin et al., 2013). The Impact Model is represented as a sequence of elements (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004, pp. 1–6):

1. **Inputs:** resources invested in the intervention, including volunteers' time, organizational efforts, and logistical support for events.
2. **Activities:** the specific interventions provided, such as community management, marketing and communication, the organization of workshops, and the hosting of social events.
3. **Outputs:** the immediate, countable results of activities, such as the number of events organized or the number of women participating.

4. **Outcomes:** the short- and medium-term changes experienced by participants, such as building friendships, improving language skills, developing confidence, or accessing new professional opportunities.
5. **Impact:** the long-term societal changes resulting from these cumulative outcomes, including empowerment, durable settlement, stronger participation in local civic life, and enhanced social cohesion in Strasbourg.
6. **Assumptions and external factors:** the conditions required for success, such as participants' willingness to engage, the existence of supportive local policies, and the absence of severe structural barriers.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the Impact Model created for the OutGirls Social Club case study, illustrating the sequential connections between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact, along with the assumptions at each stage. By aligning both survey questions and interview themes with these stages, the study ensured that data could be systematically organized and analyzed against the integration pathway (Laing & Todd, 2015). This structured approach also enabled meaningful comparisons between intended outcomes and participants' reported experiences.

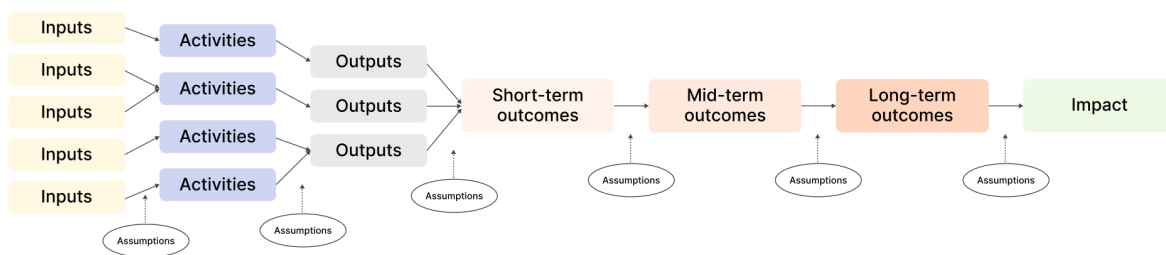


Figure 1: Impact model conceptual framework for the OutGirls Social Club case study (Van Es et al., 2015)

The Impact Model and Theory of Change play complementary roles in this study. The Impact Model provides a structured sequence of inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts, offering a measurable framework for evaluation (Vogel, 2012; Van Es et al., 2015, pp. 55–57). Theory of Change adds depth by examining the assumptions and contextual factors that explain why these steps should lead to integration (Taplin et al., 2013; Vogel, 2012). Used together, they offer both structure and rationale, enabling systematic measurement of social integration while critically assessing the mechanisms and conditions that shape it.

Through the application of the Theory of Change and the Impact Model, this research was able to structure the OutGirls program around clear, testable pathways of change. Together, these frameworks enabled the integration of practical program design, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, and critical reflection on assumptions and mechanisms of change. This methodological approach offers both rigor and flexibility, ensuring that the study captures not only the observable effects of participation but also the deeper processes through which international women build belonging, empowerment, and integration in Strasbourg (Taplin et al., 2013; Van Es et al., 2015).

### ***3.3. Social integration and community impact measurement***

The literature review demonstrates that social integration is not a single outcome but a multidimensional and evolving process. It includes both structural participation in institutions such as education, employment, and civic life, as well as subjective experiences like belonging, recognition, and emotional well-being (Esser, 2006; Alba & Nee, 1997; OECD/European Commission, 2023; Fei et al., 2023). Therefore, integration should be measured using tools that account for both objective indicators (e.g., participation, networks, language) and subjective aspects (e.g., belonging, identity, perceived inclusion).

For migrant women in particular, the literature highlights that gendered barriers, such as limited professional networks, restricted access to services, childcare responsibilities, and unequal recognition of qualifications, influence integration pathways (Graham-Brown, 2021; Martinez-Damia et al., 2023). This study therefore focuses on dimensions that reflect both the everyday experiences of international women and broader systemic opportunities. Based on recurring themes in current frameworks and empirical studies, this research uses six dimensions as the foundation for measuring social integration indicators.

1. **Participation in community life:** civic, cultural, and voluntary engagement.
2. **Networks and relationships:** bonding ties (within-group) and bridging ties (between-group) that enable trust and resource access.
3. **Sense of belonging:** emotional connection to place, community, and society.
4. **Well-being and mental health:** psychological resilience and confidence as both outcomes and drivers of integration.
5. **Cultural adaptation and language:** host-language proficiency and knowledge of norms.
6. **Recognition and agency:** migrants' ability to be valued, express identities, and exercise influence.

To implement these dimensions, the study uses a Theory of Change framework through an impact model that sorts outcomes into three time-based categories (Vogel, 2012):

1. **Short-Term outcomes:** new social connections, a stronger sense of belonging, and improved well-being.
2. **Mid-Term outcomes:** increased support for adaptation, confidence in overcoming barriers, and participation in collaborative or community activities.
3. **Long-Term outcomes:** Empowerment, identity consolidation, leadership development, and decisions to build long-term roots in the host community.

This measurement approach combines quantitative indicators (e.g., participation rates, network breadth, language proficiency) with qualitative insights (e.g., perceptions of belonging, narratives of agency). It thus reflects the multidimensional nature of integration and captures the dynamic

processes through which community-based interventions, such as the OutGirls Social Club, support migrant women in navigating structural and relational challenges.

#### 4. Defining assumptions

An essential part of both Theory of Change and Impact Models is understanding assumptions. In this context, assumptions are the beliefs or conditions that must hold true for the causal links in the model to work as intended — that is, for inputs and activities to produce outputs, and for outputs to lead to outcomes and ultimately impact. These conditions often remain implicit, but making them explicit is vital for research transparency and program evaluation. Assumptions point out the external, social, or behavioral factors that success depends on, and clearly stating them helps researchers assess risks, uncertainties, and boundary conditions (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020, pp. 9–10; Van Es *et al.*, 2015, pp. 22–25).

Assumptions are important because when they are weak or invalid, the expected paths may break down (Taplin *et al.*, 2013, pp. 7). For instance, even well-designed community activities may not yield results if participants lack motivation, resources, or the right environment to engage. By identifying assumptions early, they can be treated as hypotheses to be observed, tested, and adjusted over time, rather than hidden background expectations (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020, pp. 3). This makes the Theory of Change not just a static map of goals, but a flexible framework for learning and adaptation.

Assumptions are usually identified at several points in a linear or Theory of Change model. They should be clearly stated early in the development process, when mapping the pathway from inputs to long-term outcomes (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020, pp. 10). Each causal link or “arrow” should ideally include an assumption, such as regular participation or that contextual barriers do not fully prevent engagement (Vogel, 2012, pp. 26–27). Finally, these assumptions should be revisited repeatedly during implementation and evaluation to ensure the model reflects not only the intended change but also the real-world conditions where change occurs (Taplin *et al.*, 2013, pp. 8, Vogel, 2012, pp. 23, 26).

The assumptions developed in this study were designed to help the project achieve its main goal, such as supporting the social integration of international women through the OutGirls Social Club, a female-led community initiative based in Strasbourg.

Given this, the following **initial assumptions** were identified in the Table 1:

*Table 1: Assumptions across the Impact Model pathway*

<i>Model link</i>	<i>Key assumptions</i>
Inputs → Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial resources, venues, and volunteer capacity will remain sufficient and stable to sustain programming over time.</li> <li>- Target audiences will become aware of the community through effective marketing strategies (social media, flyers, partnerships, word-of-mouth) and be motivated to attend.</li> </ul>

Activities → Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A diverse range of activity types will address different interests and help maintain participants' motivation to stay engaged.</li> <li>- Participants will attend events consistently, not just once, so outputs can accumulate.</li> <li>- Small-group and recurring formats will foster openness, trust, and inclusivity, minimizing risks of cliques or social fragmentation.</li> <li>- Online platforms (WhatsApp group, social media) will complement in-person engagement by facilitating communication, coordination, and peer support, rather than replacing face-to-face interaction.</li> </ul>
Outputs → Short-term Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Event participation and interactions will foster genuine initial connections rather than remain superficial encounters.</li> <li>- Participants will experience a sense of emotional safety and belonging that encourages openness, sharing, and trust-building.</li> <li>- Regular engagement in activities will begin to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation among participants.</li> </ul>
Short-term Outcomes → Mid-term Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Early connections and reduced loneliness will encourage continued participation and deeper relationships.</li> <li>- Emotional support and early friendships will encourage members to share practical advice and resources for navigating local challenges.</li> <li>- Informal networks will gradually evolve into professional and collaborative opportunities, helping women expand both personal and career-related social capital.</li> </ul>
Mid-term Outcomes → Long-term Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Genuine friendships and professional ties will sustain beyond the community and extend into local society.</li> <li>- Increased confidence and autonomy will encourage members to take initiative, including hosting events, pursuing career development, or engaging in civic life.</li> <li>- Skills and experiences gained through the community (organizing, networking, leadership) will be transferable to wider professional and social contexts, reinforcing long-term empowerment.</li> <li>- Members will increasingly view Strasbourg as a place to settle and build a long-term future.</li> </ul>
Long-term Outcomes → Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sustained participation and empowerment will translate into durable social integration, extending beyond temporary improvements in well-being.</li> <li>- A strengthened sense of belonging will translate into deeper identification with Strasbourg and the local cultural context, fostering long-term settlement intentions.</li> <li>- Regular and routine participation in community and city life will reinforce sustained engagement with the host society.</li> </ul>

The definitions of assumptions at each stage of the Impact Model provided both the conceptual foundation for developing community activities and the methodological basis for evaluating their effects. These assumptions guided the design of OutGirls programming by ensuring that activities addressed diverse needs, fostered trust, and offered pathways to social integration. At the same time, they informed the research strategy by shaping the construction of survey and interview Protocols. Quantitative data (survey responses) and qualitative data (interview transcripts) were collected and analyzed in ways that directly tested whether these assumptions held in practice, enabling a systematic assessment of how participation translated into integration outcomes.

## 5. Research design

### 5.1. Overview and methodological rationale

This study adopts a mixed-method research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative components to provide a comprehensive understanding of how community participation fosters social integration among international women in Strasbourg. The mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation of findings, blending the scope of survey data with the depth of qualitative interviews to create a detailed and credible view of both individual experiences and collective patterns (Timans, Wouters and Heilbron, 2019; Yin, 2018).

The design follows a convergent parallel structure, where both strands of data are collected and analyzed independently and then integrated during interpretation. This allows for mutual validation and complementarity: while the survey identifies general trends in integration outcomes and community engagement, the interviews provide contextual insights into motivations, emotions, and social dynamics underlying those patterns.

The analytical framework guiding this research is based on the Impact Model and Theory of Change approach (Vogel, 2012). This model views social integration as a process that progresses through sequential stages, including inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. Therefore, the research design was structured to capture evidence at each stage: resources and participation levels (inputs), community programming (activities), direct experiences (outputs), and perceived changes in well-being, belonging, and empowerment (outcomes). The OutGirls Social Club was selected as a single explanatory case due to its unique role as an international women's community. The case is defined as the experiences of women participating in OutGirls activities in Strasbourg during the study period.

### 5.2. Data collection

#### 5.2.1. Quantitative component: survey

A self-administered survey was distributed both online (via Google Forms). The survey was designed to capture demographic background, integration experiences, and community engagement, while also probing self-assessed outcomes. It included both closed and open-ended questions to balance statistical comparability with qualitative depth.

The survey structure followed a multidimensional design inspired by the Indicators of Integration Policy Lab (IPL) framework, which offers a standardized scoring system to assess integration outcomes (Harder *et al.*, 2018). Respondents rated relevant items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("completely"). In this scoring system, higher values indicate greater levels of social integration and well-being.

This approach enables both quantitative interpretation and cross-group comparison, while maintaining conceptual clarity and analytical rigor. Additionally, by extending the IPL model to include elements of subjective well-being (Paparusso, 2021), the study captures both structural

aspects (e.g., participation, language, networks) and experiential dimensions (e.g., belonging, confidence, life satisfaction), resulting in a more holistic understanding of integration outcomes.

The instrument included: (i) Demographics; (ii) Integration barriers and self-assessed integration; (iii) Community participation (frequency, formats, channels); (iv) Outcomes (belonging, well-being, social capital, empowerment); (v) Open feedback. Closed items enabled descriptive statistics; open responses provided qualitative nuance.

**The full survey transcript is available here: [link](#)**

The mixed-format (closed and open-ended) questions enable both statistical trend identification and thematic exploration. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, highlighting prevalence and distribution of integration barriers, participation patterns, and perceived outcomes. Open-ended responses were thematically categorized to surface recurrent themes, nuances, and lived experiences not fully captured by fixed-response items.

### ***5.2.2. Qualitative component: semi-structured interviews***

To complement the survey data, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of OutGirls participants. This qualitative component provided the opportunity to explore personal narratives, contextual experiences, and nuanced viewpoints that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods. Participants were recruited from different parts of the OutGirls membership to ensure diversity in age, nationality, length of residence in Strasbourg, employment status, and how often they participated in OutGirls activities. Inclusion required attending at a minimum of three community events and being actively involved for a minimum of four months, so participants could provide informed and thoughtful insights. Recruitment was voluntary, and participation was based on informed consent. This purposive sampling approach helped to gather interview data reflecting a broad spectrum of integration paths and experiences among international women.

Interviews were conducted following ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Before starting, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Participants then gave either verbal or written consent before the interview. All personal identifiers were anonymized during transcription and analysis to protect privacy and ensure that quotes could not be traced back to individual participants.

**The set of interview questions is accessible via [link](#).**

The protocol was developed to align with Theory of Change and structured into six thematic sections (Vogel, 2012). This ensured systematic coverage of both the program activities and their short-, medium-, and long-term effects:

1. **Introductory context:** Migration background, initial expectations, and integration challenges.

2. **Community participation:** Nature, frequency, and motivations for involvement in OutGirls activities.
3. **Short-term outcomes:** Early shifts in social connectedness, friendship development, and emotional well-being.
4. **Mid-term outcomes:** Navigating local services, employment opportunities, adaptation to daily life, and development of professional/cultural networks.
5. **Long-term impact:** Evolving sense of belonging, empowerment, personal identity, leadership experiences, and intention to settle in Strasbourg.
6. **Barriers and future needs:** Ongoing challenges, inclusivity concerns, and participant-generated recommendations.

The primary aim of these interviews was to obtain a deeper qualitative understanding of how participation in the OutGirls Social Club affects the social integration trajectories of international women in Strasbourg. This approach makes it possible to explore the community's role in fostering well-being, connectedness, and a sense of belonging, and to identify both measurable and intangible improvements in participants' lives, such as new friendships, professional opportunities, greater confidence, and emotional support. The interviews also examine how involvement in OutGirls shapes adaptation to local culture, daily life, and the development of a lasting sense of rootedness, while highlighting which aspects of community engagement are most impactful and what barriers or unmet needs remain.

By focusing on the detailed experiences and perspectives of participants, the interview method reveals the nuanced processes of social integration that cannot be fully captured by quantitative data alone. This design is consistent with Theory of Change framework, allowing for systematic mapping of community activities and outputs, as well as a comprehensive assessment of outcomes and long-term impacts as experienced by international women in Strasbourg (Vogel, 2012). Overall, the qualitative interview component serves to deepen understanding of integration pathways and provides actionable insights for future program development and improvement.

The qualitative results were analyzed using the Gioia methodology, a structured framework for qualitative data analysis that emphasizes clarity and rigor (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). Interview data were transcribed and examined with an inductive approach to ensure consistency and reliability. The analysis started with open coding, where transcripts were reviewed line by line to identify recurring concepts, experiences, and challenges. These codes were then organized into a codebook with clear definitions to maintain consistency in the coding process. Using the Gioia method, these first-order codes, drawn directly from participants' own words, were grouped into second-order themes, which highlighted broader patterns and processes (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). Finally, these themes were integrated into aggregate dimensions, capturing the main insights of the study. This step-by-step process enabled the analysis to transition from participant accounts to broader theoretical conclusions. The Gioia methodology enhanced the quality of the analysis and

ensured that the findings accurately reflected the genuine voices and experiences of OutGirls Social Club participants.

### ***5.3. Instrument–assumption alignment***

The design of both the survey and interview tools was directly guided by the Impact Model, ensuring conceptual and empirical consistency between the study’s framework, its initial assumptions, and its data collection methods (Taplin et al., 2013; Vogel, 2012). Each tool targeted a specific layer of insight within the logic chain, from activities and outputs to long-term impact.

The survey was primarily designed to collect broad, generalizable data about participants’ demographic profiles, involvement patterns, perceived benefits, and self-assessed integration. The semi-structured interviews were created to explore depth, context, and causality, following the sequential logic of the Impact Model’s outcome chain (Taplin et al., 2013). This dual design ensured that the quantitative data established the scope and prevalence of observed effects, while the qualitative interviews explained how and why those effects occurred.

Both research tools were explicitly created to test the main assumptions underlying the Impact Model. Each assumption, from how activities encourage meaningful participation to how social interaction fosters belonging, empowerment, and long-term integration, was turned into specific survey and interview questions. The goal was to confirm or challenge these theoretical connections with empirical evidence. For instance, questions about event frequency, perceived atmosphere, and communication channels checked whether activities produced the expected results; queries on friendship formation, confidence, and emotional safety evaluated short- and mid-term outcomes; and reflections on leadership, professional growth, and settlement intentions examined long-term impacts. In this way, the data collection process directly aimed to validate or disprove the causal assumptions of the model, ensuring the analysis extended beyond description to systematic testing of how and why integration changes happen through community participation (Taplin et al., 2013; Vogel, 2012).

### ***5.4. Data analysis***

A mixed-methods analytical approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative strands to ensure both breadth and depth of understanding. Following a convergent parallel design (Timans, Wouters and Heilbron, 2019), survey and interview data were analysed separately and then integrated at the interpretation stage to identify convergences, divergences, and causal insights within the Impact Model framework.

#### ***5.4.1. Survey analysis***

Survey data from Google Forms were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) to summarise demographic profiles, participation patterns, and perceived integration outcomes. All descriptive statistics were cross-checked and interpreted alongside qualitative feedback to validate patterns and ensure that numerical trends accurately reflected participants’ lived experiences.

Responses to Likert-scale items were numerically coded from 1 to 5, where higher scores indicated stronger agreement or more positive perceptions of integration and well-being. Where relevant, Spearman's rank correlations were computed to test associations between participation frequency and key outcomes such as belonging, confidence, and emotional well-being (Schober, Boer and Schwarte, 2018, pp. 4–5). In addition, p-values were calculated to assess the statistical significance of these relationships, and confidence intervals were examined to evaluate the precision and reliability of the estimates (Andrade, 2019).

The original dataset consisted of categorical and open-ended qualitative responses. To enable statistical analysis in Python, all data were cleaned, standardized, and converted into numerical codes. The transformation process, from text to numeric form, was carefully tracked and documented in the accompanying Jupyter Notebook to ensure transparency and reproducibility. Ordinal variables such as Likert-scale items were kept as numeric values, categorical variables were coded as representative numbers, and binary indicators were used for “Yes/No” or thematic responses. Quantitative correlation analysis was conducted in Python using the *pandas*, *seaborn*, and *scipy.stats* libraries. Although the sample size was limited, these analyses provided preliminary evidence of meaningful links between community engagement and integration outcomes.

#### **5.4.2. Interview analysis**

The qualitative component followed the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012), a systematic, inductive approach designed to preserve participants' voices while developing higher-order conceptual insights. Interview recordings were first transcribed verbatim and lightly edited for clarity, following a “clean verbatim” approach (Hill et al., 2022). Each transcript was reviewed iteratively to identify first-order codes, capturing participants' own terms and expressions. These codes were subsequently clustered into second-order themes, representing broader patterns such as social belonging, empowerment, professional growth, or identity development. In the final stage, aggregate dimensions were derived, aligning these thematic categories with the Impact Model's higher-level constructs, such as background, integration drivers, outcomes, and feedback.

Coding was conducted manually, following a structured codebook developed from an initial sample of transcripts and iteratively refined throughout the analysis. Thematic saturation was reached near the final interviews, as few new first-order concepts emerged, confirming the adequacy of both sample size and analytic depth. To complement the thematic analysis with quantitative insight, the coded data were converted into a binary matrix, where each code was assigned a value of 1 if present in a participant's response and 0 if absent. This transformation enabled the calculation of descriptive statistics on code frequencies across participants, providing a complementary quantitative view of recurring themes and strengthening the interpretive robustness of the qualitative findings.

Integration occurred during interpretation, where quantitative trends were compared with qualitative narratives to confirm, deepen, or nuance understanding. Quantitative results identified what changes occurred, while qualitative findings explained how and why these changes happened. This

triangulation strengthened the study's internal validity (Fetters, Curry and Creswell, 2013), linking measurable trends to lived experiences. Together, both approaches offered a multidimensional understanding of OutGirls' impact, capturing not only observable outcomes like friendship formation and reduced loneliness but also the psychosocial mechanisms underlying sustained integration.

## **6. Input: OutGirls Social Club**

OutGirls Social Club was established in August 2024 in Strasbourg to address a clear gap in informal support networks for international women arriving in the city. Many newcomers, even when utilizing formal services and institutions, reported feeling isolated and lacking easy opportunities to make friends, get practical advice, learn about local culture, or practice French in casual settings. From the start, the goal was to create a welcoming and safe space where women from diverse backgrounds and life stages could meet, connect, and support one another.

The club started with a simple, community-focused model, organizing events twice a month such as picnics, coffee meetups, informal yoga sessions, and workshops. This approach quickly gained popularity through word of mouth, attracting women seeking low-pressure social spaces and a sense of belonging. As membership increased, so did the variety of activities. A key milestone was encouraging member-led initiatives: women began volunteering to run workshops, host cultural exchanges, or start new groups based on shared interests, like a book club and a running group. A private WhatsApp chat was also added, providing members with a way to stay connected, share resources, and keep conversations flowing outside of official events.

From the beginning, OutGirls established a reputation as a safe and inclusive space for intercultural exchange, shaped by its members' contributions. By the end of its first year, the club had expanded its offerings to include regular workshops, well-being and movement classes, social networking events, and micro-trips to explore both Strasbourg and nearby destinations. An onboarding process was introduced, featuring a personalized welcome, a community code of conduct, and a matchmaking system (“Bestie Match”) to help new members connect with like-minded people. The club’s outreach efforts also evolved over time. What started as simple launch posts and organic social media activity soon grew into a more coordinated approach, including Instagram campaigns, mailing lists, flyers in local hotspots, city-wide community groups, and event ticketing platforms. Sharing highlights after events and sending regular reminders helped increase visibility and keep members engaged, ensuring that growth stayed steady throughout the first year.

In its first year, OutGirls established itself as a flexible but resilient community, grounded in member-led programming and responsive to the evolving needs of international women in Strasbourg. This adaptability, together with a strong commitment to inclusivity, has positioned the club not only as a support system but also as a catalyst for positive social impact in the city’s diverse international landscape.

### ***6.1. Value proposition***

The OutGirls Social Club provides an important support structure for international women in Strasbourg, with a focus on fostering social connections, promoting empowerment, and supporting integration through community-based activities.

OutGirls Social Club is based on the idea that recurring small-group interactions are the most effective way to create a safe social environment and foster a sense of belonging. Its activities aim to build connections not just within similar cultural groups but also across different cultures and professions, allowing members to grow their networks and opportunities. By encouraging member-led workshops, skill-sharing, and networking events, the club supports both personal and professional growth, while also boosting confidence and social capital. An equally important focus is on well-being, with regular movement sessions, mindfulness practices, and shared leisure, recognizing that healthy integration depends on both mental and physical health. Overall, OutGirls aims to help international women integrate more smoothly into French society and culture, while also building lasting social circles of like-minded women.

To deliver on these goals, OutGirls has developed a diverse suite of activities and formats tailored to varying interests, availability, and integration needs:

1. **Workshops:** Creative and therapeutic sessions such as pottery art and incense therapy, designed to both teach new skills and spark conversation in a relaxed environment.
2. **Networking and socials:** Picnics with structured icebreakers, cocktail meetups using networking cards, and the “Bestie Match” profile-matching program, which connects new members with potential friends and mentors.
3. **Practices and sessions:** Well-being and movement sessions, such as yoga, and unique female-energy meditations with tea-ceremony-based practices.
4. **Members-only formats:** Private, opt-in events like random match meetups under the Bestie Match program, fostering deeper and more intentional connections among members.
5. **Fun/sport and discovery:** Monthly running club, dance classes, pilates, vision board creation, and rented boat tours, combining exploration, fitness, and social bonding.

Each OutGirls event is structured to include opportunities for informal interaction, allowing participants to introduce themselves, exchange experiences, and form genuine connections. This emphasis on community-led and interest-based engagement positions OutGirls not only as an event platform but also as a facilitator of belonging, cultural exchange, and personal development, supporting a smooth integration of international women in Strasbourg.

## ***6.2. Business model***

The business model of OutGirls Social Club is explained through the Business Model Canvas framework (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). This canvas highlights the key components of the initiative and demonstrates how its community-focused structure creates and provides value for women worldwide in Strasbourg.

### **Key partners:**

- **Local venues and spaces:** cafés, cultural centers, yoga and wellness studios, restaurants, bars, pottery and art studios, and other community-oriented spaces that host events.

- **Educational and student organizations:** international student associations, university groups, and city-based newcomer networks.
- **Media and outreach partners:** Instagram bloggers, city guide platforms, and local influencers who support visibility and promotion.
- **Local businesses and brands:** food and beverage providers, equipment suppliers, and service-based partners offering in-kind or discounted support.
- **Artists and professionals:** painters, craft instructors, yoga and pilates teachers, wellness practitioners, dance instructors, and city tour guides, contributing skills and expertise.
- **Institutional stakeholders:** potential collaborations with NGOs, municipal integration offices, and cultural institutions.
- **Community members:** volunteer participants contributing time, knowledge, and organizational support.

#### Key activities:

- **Community events and programs:** planning and organizing social, cultural, and well-being activities such as picnics, coffee meetups, yoga sessions, workshops, and cultural exchanges.
- **Networking and mentorship:** developing structured formats like Bestie Match and themed social events to foster personal and professional connections.
- **Member-led initiatives:** supporting and coordinating groups and activities proposed by members, such as book clubs, running groups, or creative workshops.
- **Digital community management:** maintaining active communication channels through Instagram, WhatsApp, newsletters, and event platforms.
- **Outreach and promotion:** creating and sharing announcements, social media posts, and marketing content to promote activities and expand visibility.
- **Member support:** onboarding new participants, facilitating communication in member chats, and ensuring inclusivity through clear guidelines and codes of conduct.
- **Partnership development:** identifying, negotiating, and managing collaborations with local venues, businesses, and institutions.
- **Administration and finance:** coordinating organizational tasks, documenting activities, and managing financial resources to ensure sustainability.

#### Value propositions:

- A **safe and inclusive space** designed specifically for international women in Strasbourg.
- **Recurring, small-group interactions** that build trust and foster a strong sense of belonging.
- Opportunities to form **long-lasting friendships** and expand personal and professional networks.

- **A dedicated members' chat** that provides continuous connection, resource sharing, and peer support beyond official events.
- **Social, cultural, and professional integration** through diverse activities that encourage intercultural exchange and collaboration.
- **New experiences** through events such as workshops, cultural outings, and leisure activities that help participants explore the city and its surroundings.
- **Support for well-being** through wellness, movement, and mindfulness sessions, recognizing the link between health and integration.
- **Empowerment and ownership** via member-led initiatives, skill-sharing, and collaborative programming, strengthening confidence and social capital.

#### **Customer relationships:**

- **Community-first, trust-based engagement:** All activities are designed to create a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment where international women feel supported.
- **Personalized onboarding:** New members receive a warm introduction to the group, are informed about the community's code of conduct, and can join the Bestie Match program to connect with potential friends or mentors.
- **Peer-to-peer support:** A private WhatsApp chat allows members to stay connected between events, share resources, ask questions, and provide mutual encouragement.
- **Informal interaction opportunities:** Events are intentionally structured to leave time for casual conversations and storytelling, helping members build trust and authentic connections.
- **Active participation and shared ownership:** Members are encouraged to co-create the community by hosting events, suggesting new initiatives, and taking leadership roles, fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility.

#### **Customer segments:**

The OutGirls Social Club primarily serves international women living in Strasbourg, encompassing a wide range of backgrounds and life situations.

- **Immigrants** seeking both social support and opportunities for smoother cultural adaptation.
- **Expatriates** who relocate for professional or family reasons and wish to expand their social circles.
- **International students** pursuing higher education in Strasbourg and looking for community outside academic settings.
- **Professionals and short-term residents**, such as interns, researchers, and trainees, who face similar integration challenges despite temporary stays.
- **Local French women with English proficiency**, who join to participate in intercultural exchange, broaden their networks, and connect with the international community.

### Key resources:

- **Volunteer leadership and active members:** The community relies on the dedication of volunteers who organize events, manage logistics, and provide ongoing support to members.
- **Digital infrastructure:** Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, mailing lists, and event management tools serve as essential resources for communication, promotion, and coordination.
- **Social capital and reputation:** OutGirls' image as a safe, inclusive, and welcoming space is one of its strongest assets, driving word-of-mouth growth and member retention.
- **Skills and expertise of members:** Participants contribute their own knowledge and talents, such as hosting workshops, leading yoga or fitness sessions, or offering cultural insights, which enrich the community's programming.

### Channels:

- **Social media platforms:** Instagram and Facebook pages serve as the primary tools for outreach, event promotion, and community storytelling.
- **WhatsApp communication:** A dedicated group chat and main information channel ensure continuous updates, peer-to-peer exchange, and quick coordination.
- **Mailing lists and newsletters:** Regular updates provide structured communication, reminders, and event highlights for both active members and interested newcomers.
- **Printed promotion:** Flyers distributed in local cafés, universities, and community hotspots help reach women who may not yet be connected digitally.
- **Event platforms:** Tools such as Billetweb, Meetup, and Eventbrite facilitate event registration, visibility, and outreach beyond existing members.
- **Word of mouth:** Personal recommendations remain a central driver of community growth, reinforcing trust and authenticity.
- **Collaborations and cross-promotion:** Partnerships with local experts, event hosts, and Instagram bloggers expand reach and strengthen credibility through shared networks.

### Cost structure:

- **Event-related expenses:** venue rentals when required, materials and supplies, refreshments, and small payments to external experts such as yoga instructors, workshop leaders, or cultural facilitators.
- **Communication and promotion:** printing flyers, running ad campaigns on Instagram, and using digital tools such as AI-supported text.
- **Administrative costs:** domain registration and website hosting to maintain an online presence.

- **Ticketing fees:** small per-participant charges collected by external platforms (e.g., Billetweb, Eventbrite) for event registrations.

Overall, costs are kept low thanks to volunteer work, in-kind contributions from members, and the use of affordable or partner-provided venues.

**Revenue streams:**

- **Current model:** volunteer contributions, in-kind resources, and small event registration fees to cover direct expenses.
- Potential revenue sources include membership fees, donations, sponsorships, and Grants from local institutions, universities, or NGOs.

At this stage, OutGirls functions as a mission-driven community initiative rather than a profit-oriented venture. Future revenue development would primarily aim to secure sustainability and expand programming while maintaining accessible participation.

<b>Key Partners</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local venues and spaces:</li> <li>• Educational and student organizations</li> <li>• Media and outreach partners</li> <li>• Local businesses and brands</li> <li>• Artists and professionals</li> <li>• Institutional stakeholders</li> <li>• Community members: volunteer participants</li> </ul>	<b>Key Activities</b> Community Events Networking and Mentorship Member-Led Initiatives Digital Community Management Outreach and Promotion Member Support Partnership Development Administration and Finance	<b>Value Propositions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A safe and inclusive space</li> <li>• Recurring, small-group interactions that build trust</li> <li>• Opportunities to form long-lasting friendships</li> <li>• A dedicated members' chat</li> <li>• Social, cultural, and professional integration</li> <li>• New experiences</li> <li>• Support for well-being</li> <li>• Empowerment and ownership via member-led initiatives</li> </ul>	<b>Customer Relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-first, trust-based engagement</li> <li>• Personalized onboarding</li> <li>• Peer-to-peer support</li> <li>• Informal interaction opportunities</li> <li>• Active participation and shared ownership</li> </ul>	<b>Customer Segments</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immigrants seeking both social support and opportunities for smoother cultural adaptation.</li> <li>• Expatriates who relocate for professional or family reasons and wish to expand their social circles.</li> <li>• International students</li> <li>• Professionals and short-term residents</li> <li>• Local French women with English proficiency</li> </ul>
	<b>Key Resources</b> Volunteer leadership and active members Digital infrastructure Social capital and reputation Skills and expertise of members		<b>Channels</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social media platforms</li> <li>• WhatsApp communication</li> <li>• Mailing lists and newsletters</li> <li>• Printed promotion</li> <li>• Event platforms</li> <li>• Word of mouth</li> <li>• Collaborations and cross-promotion</li> </ul>	
<b>Cost Structure</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Event-related expenses: venue rentals, materials and supplies, refreshments, and payments to external experts</li> <li>• Communication and promotion: printing flyers, running ad campaigns on Instagram</li> <li>• Administrative costs: domain registration and website hosting to maintain an online presence.</li> <li>• Ticketing fees: small per-participant charges collected by external platforms for event registrations.</li> </ul>			<b>Revenue Streams</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current model: Volunteer contributions, in-kind resources, Small event registration fees to cover direct expenses</li> <li>• Potential revenue sources: Membership fees, Donations and sponsorships, Grants from local institutions, universities, or NGOs</li> </ul>	

Figure 2: OutGirls Social Club business model canvas (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010).

**6.3. Customer persona**

Understanding the customer persona is essential for OutGirls Social Club because it ensures the community is centered around the genuine needs, motivations, and challenges of its members. By clearly identifying who the typical member is, the club can create activities, communication strategies, and support systems that truly resonate with the women it aims to empower. A well-developed persona highlights not only demographics but also lifestyle, values, and personal goals, enabling OutGirls to offer meaningful experiences that foster belonging, inclusion, and lasting

engagement. In short, the customer persona serves as a guiding framework for making decisions that align with the club's mission of inclusivity, cultural exchange, and women's empowerment.

**Demographics:**

- Age: 27
- Gender: Female
- Location: Recently moved to Strasbourg
- Status: Early-career professional (first job after university)
- Background: International; has lived or studied abroad; speaks fluent English and some French

**Lifestyle and interests:**

- Values meaningful friendships and a strong social circle
- Enjoys self-care practices (yoga, mindfulness, wellness activities)
- Maintains an active and healthy lifestyle (running, fitness, outdoor activities)
- Curious about local culture and traditions; likes exploring the city and nearby regions
- Open-minded and globally oriented, with previous travel experience
- Balances healthy living with social enjoyment, happy to join for coffee, drinks, or casual chats

**Goals and needs:**

- To integrate into French society, while also maintaining a connection to the international community
- To build long-lasting friendships and a supportive, inspiring network
- To expand her professional and personal opportunities through intercultural connections
- To feel welcomed, safe, and included in a new environment
- To have structured but low-pressure spaces for language practice, cultural exchange, and networking

**Challenges and pain points:**

- Limited social connections upon arrival in Strasbourg
- Feelings of isolation despite access to formal services
- Difficulty navigating cultural differences and integrating into local life
- Lack of informal, safe spaces for international women to connect authentically

- Fear of speaking French or lack of opportunities to practice the language in a supportive, low-pressure environment

**How OutGirls addresses her needs:**

- Provides a safe and inclusive environment for building friendships
- Offers events and activities that combine socializing, wellness, and cultural discovery
- Encourages member-led initiatives, giving her a chance to share her skills and interests
- Facilitates integration by connecting her with both internationals and open-minded locals
- Creates opportunities for both casual socializing and meaningful engagement, supporting her social, personal, and professional growth
- Offers chances to meet French-speaking participants, attend events in French, and practice the language in a supportive setting

The customer persona provides a practical guide for aligning OutGirls’ activities and communication with the real experiences of its members. By highlighting their goals, challenges, and motivations, it ensures that the community remains responsive, inclusive, and supportive of women’s integration and long-term engagement in Strasbourg.

**6.4. Branding**

Branding is a crucial component in the development and sustainability of community-based initiatives, particularly those operating in diverse, intercultural contexts. Branding extends beyond visual design elements such as logos or color palettes; it encompasses the articulation of values, identity, and purpose, and how these are consistently communicated to target audiences (Alvarado-Karste and Guzmán, 2020). For social organizations and grassroots communities, branding functions not only as a tool of visibility and recognition but also as a medium for trust-building, legitimacy, and long-term engagement.

In the case of OutGirls Social Club, branding is central to establishing a distinctive identity in Strasbourg’s multicultural landscape, while simultaneously reflecting the club’s mission to support the integration and empowerment of international women. As the initiative is not profit-oriented but mission-driven, branding takes on an additional role: it communicates inclusivity, accessibility, and authenticity, ensuring that potential members perceive the community as a safe and welcoming space. Moreover, effective branding provides the foundation for consistent communication strategies, coherent marketing activities, and the creation of a recognizable and trusted presence both online and offline (Xi *et al.*, 2022).

This chapter explores the branding of OutGirls across several interconnected aspects. It begins with brand identity design, focusing on the visual and symbolic choices that communicate the club’s mission and values. Next, it examines communication strategies, emphasizing how messages are

crafted and delivered to engage both members and external stakeholders. Attention is also given to tone of voice, understood here as the community’s personality expressed through written and verbal communication, balancing professionalism with warmth and inclusivity. Finally, the chapter discusses marketing practices, including outreach, promotion, and relationship-building activities that enhance visibility, growth, and long-term sustainability. Together, these elements position OutGirls within the broader literature on community branding, social capital, and intercultural engagement, demonstrating how branding can serve as a strategic tool for fostering integration, empowerment, and a sense of belonging in a grassroots setting.

### 6.4.1. Brand identity design

Brand identity and design strongly influence how potential members perceive a community or organization. Research shows that visual coherence, symbolic choices, and consistent narratives can reduce uncertainty, build trust, and inspire confidence among prospective participants (Alvarado-Karste and Guzmán, 2020, pp. 9–11). In community-based initiatives, branding is not limited to promotion but also functions as a form of identity-building. It demonstrates organizational professionalism while simultaneously reflecting authentic values, both of which are essential factors in fostering participation within grassroots movements. For OutGirls Social Club, branding provided recognition and a sense of belonging even before women attended their first event, making it a central element of the club’s success.

The visual identity of OutGirls was designed to appeal specifically to its target audience of international women between the ages of 24 and 40. A consistent color palette of light yellow, red, pink, and gray was chosen to combine femininity with modernity, avoiding overly youthful aesthetics while presenting a chic and stylish impression.



Figure 3: OutGirls brand color palette and logotype

Typography followed contemporary design trends, further positioning the community as forward-thinking and relevant. Research shows that both color psychology and typography strongly influence perceptions of attractiveness and credibility, supporting the importance of these design decisions (Bottomley and Doyle, 2006).

Decorative font: Nyght Serif

Main text font: Lato

*Bonjour  
OutGirls!*

WE'RE HERE TO UNITE ALL  
THE INTERNATIONAL GIRLIES  
IN STRASBOURG AND HELP YOU BUILD  
REAL, MEANINGFUL FRIENDSHIPS

*Figure 4: OutGirls brand typography*

Photography played an equally central role. OutGirls relied on real-life images of women laughing, hugging, and engaging in shared activities, visually communicating joy, energy, and authentic friendship. Promotional visuals were matched to the specific atmosphere of events, for example, sunset imagery for a boat trip or picnic scenes for outdoor meetups, allowing prospective participants to imagine themselves in these settings.



*Figure 5: Photographic representation as a tool of OutGirls visual communication*

Such strategies helped establish an emotional connection, aligning expectations with lived experience (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012).

Branding extended beyond visuals into content practices, particularly on Instagram. Before events, posts and stories show the atmosphere and promise of upcoming activities. During events, images and short clips were captured to showcase authentic experiences, while after events, posts highlighted key moments, expressed gratitude, and shared photo collages. This cycle not only celebrated participants but also acted as an outreach tool, showing the reality of the community in action.

Tone of voice was carefully curated to reinforce these messages. Warm greetings (“Bonjour, ladies!”), playful invitations (“Darling, get ready”), and empowering statements created a distinctive personality for the community. Rather than transactional announcements, posts framed each event as an invitation to belonging, fun, and empowerment.

Branding It also served as an important trust-building tool. Feedback from participants showed that the visual aesthetic of OutGirls’ Instagram account was often what first attracted them to the community. The modern, stylish design was linked to professionalism and reliability, while the consistent look and feel indicated that the group was well-organized and serious, yet still approachable. By consistently featuring real women in groups, the branding reassured newcomers that OutGirls was active, welcoming, and safe.

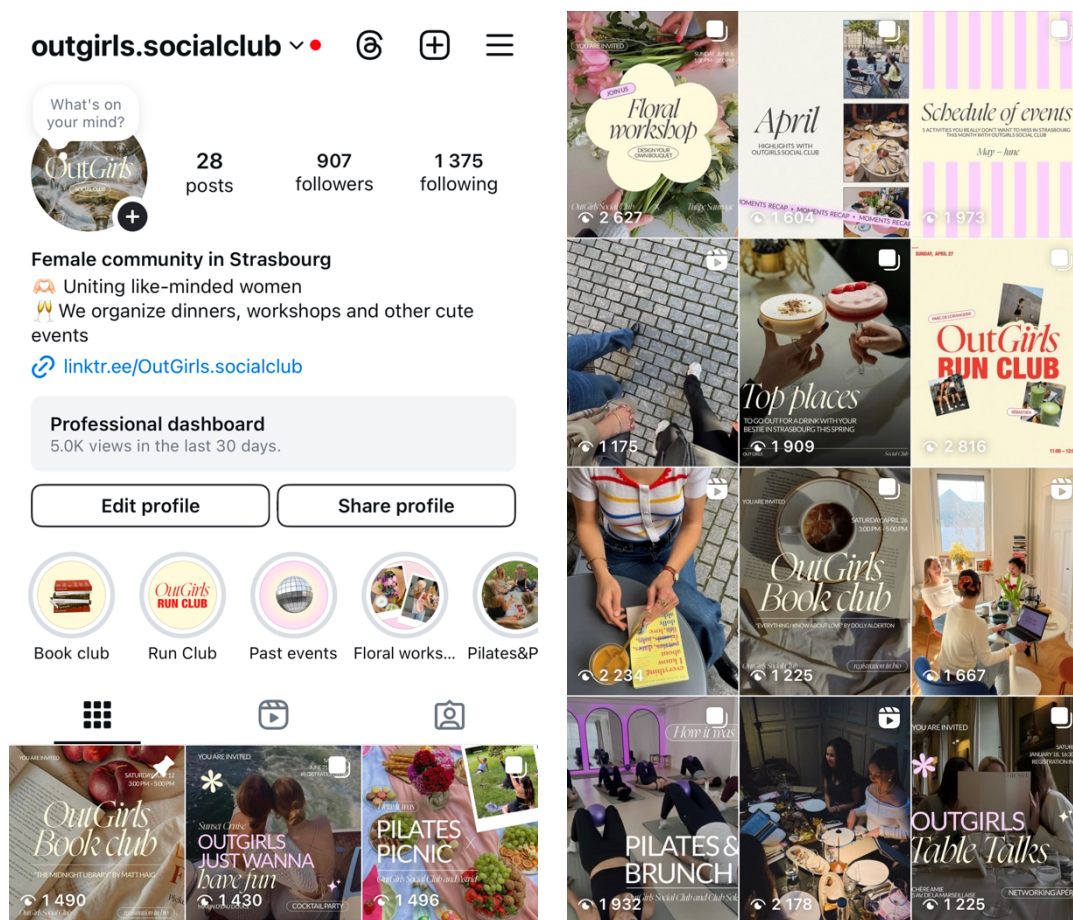


Figure 6: OutGirls’ Instagram page design

In this sense, branding functioned as an initial point of connection, allowing women to identify with a vibrant, modern, and inclusive group even before taking part in their first event. This reduced hesitation and uncertainty, as they had a clear sense of what to expect and could trust that the experience would align with their lifestyle. This finding is consistent with prior research. Hwang and Kandampully (2012) show that emotional connections created through consistent visual identity, authentic imagery, and storytelling can strengthen attachment, commitment, and loyalty among

younger consumers. Their study further indicates that emotionally engaging branding not only captures initial interest but also fosters lasting identification and a sense of belonging.

Taken together, OutGirls' brand identity design illustrates the strategic role of branding in community-building. Every post, story, and flyer simultaneously reinforced the community's values of friendship, inclusivity, energy, and empowerment; positioned OutGirls as a lifestyle movement rather than simply a social club; and created emotional resonance with its audience, making members feel safe, excited, and proud to belong. Branding was therefore not an accessory aspect of promotion but a core mechanism of identity creation, directly influencing many women's decisions to join and remain active in the community.

#### **6.4.2. Tone of voice**

The tone of voice is a key part of OutGirls' branding and communication strategy. In community efforts, tone is not just about style; it plays a crucial role in shaping ideas of accessibility, inclusivity, and emotional connection. For OutGirls, communication aims to feel like a direct chat with a group of friends — warm, playful, and a bit cheeky, while still being rooted in values of empowerment and cultural inclusivity. The values of the community form the foundation of its messaging approach: belonging, empowerment, and joy. Rather than adopting a neutral or overly professional register, the tone is intentionally casual and modern, employing colloquial expressions, emojis, and light humor. Phrases like “hot news,” “super special,” or elongated forms such as “Giiiiirls” and “loooovely” give communications a spontaneous, energetic quality. Affectionate greetings (“Coucou, ladies!”) and playful references (“Mamma Mia vibes,” “golden hour”) reinforce intimacy, while emojis (🌸🐘💍❤️) create a visual shorthand for enthusiasm and femininity. This style reflects a deliberate positioning of the community as an informal yet empowering space, lowering entry barriers for newcomers who may feel intimidated by more formal environments. Importantly, this tone does not sacrifice inclusivity. Messages often acknowledge diverse experiences and maintain cultural sensitivity, ensuring that all members, regardless of nationality or background, can recognize themselves in the communication. Friendly questions (“Hope you're all having an amazing summer!” / “How are your mussels today?”) and playful typos or winks (“Feeling in shape?;)”) enhance relatability and humanize the brand voice.

OutGirls' tone of voice is particularly visible in its event announcements and social media storytelling. The communications not only inform about logistics but frame each activity as a lifestyle experience — something glamorous, fun, and socially meaningful.

#### ***Example: event announcement (boat tour)***

The announcement for the summer boat tour illustrates how communication transforms a standard event into an aspirational cultural moment:

*“Darling, get ready to step into your summer movie moment – we’re talking sparkle, music, laughter, and a private boat ride that’s giving total Mamma Mia! energy 🥂🌸 Babe, it’s time to live your summer movie moment. Think: sparkles in the air, music in your soul, laughter all around... and yes — a private boat ride!*

*On June 21st, we’re cruising into the golden hour with Crémant in hand, surrounded by incredible women, delicious bites, and the magic of Fête de la Musique lighting up the city... After the cruise, let’s take to the Strasbourg streets, let the music guide us, and see where the night wants to go – whether it’s a dance under the stars or the best spontaneous adventure of the season 😊.”*

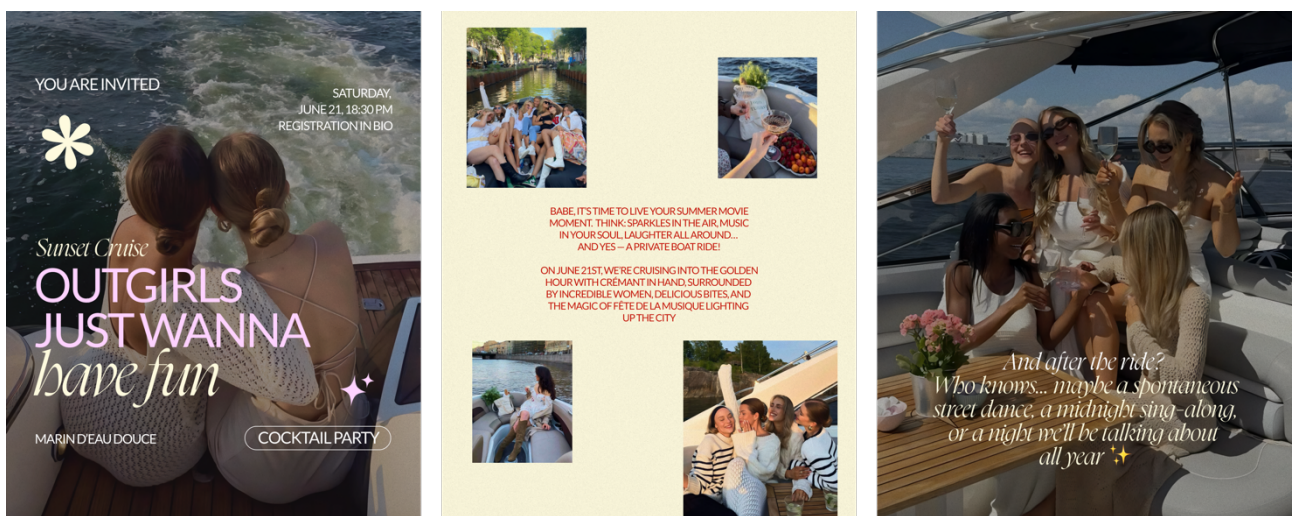


Figure 7: Example of an event post announcement

Here, the tone combines pop culture references (Mamma Mia!) with sensory imagery (“sunset with Crémant in hand”), creating an atmosphere of excitement and exclusivity. By providing access to a members-only chat and emphasizing scarcity (“space is limited”), the announcement strengthens feelings of belonging and intimacy.

**Example: social media story (Pilates & Picnic)**

Instagram stories use a slightly different, more immediate tone, shorter, visual, and conversational:

*“Bonjour, ladies! Just wow!! 4/8 spots for Pilates & Picnic are GOOONE! ... Soft grass under your mat, blue skies above and an energizing pilates flow that makes your body and your soul say ‘YES’ ... This is your sign to step into your healthy girl era and connect with other amazing women.”*



Figure 8: Example of a social media storytell

In this example, urgency and scarcity (“4/8 spots... GOOONE!”) drive quick registrations, while sensory immersion (“soft grass under your mat, blue skies above”) and lifestyle framing (“healthy girl era”) create emotional appeal. The message not only promotes the event but also connects participation with identity, empowerment, and personal growth.

By using this tone of voice, OutGirls creates a recognizable and emotionally engaging communication style that fosters both trust and excitement. Messaging does not simply advertise events but expresses belonging, empowerment, and joy. This strategy transforms promotional material into lived experiences of integration, ensuring that women feel part of the community even before attending their first event. Therefore, tone of voice operates as a bridge between branding and lived participation. It translates OutGirls’ values into everyday interactions, strengthens social cohesion, and turns integration into a desirable, shared lifestyle.

### 6.5. Marketing

The growth and visibility of the OutGirls Social Club were shaped by a multi-channel marketing strategy that combined digital communication, local community promotion, and personal recommendations. In line with the literature on community-based organizations, marketing here was not just about raising awareness but also served as a trust-building tool, reducing uncertainty for newcomers and encouraging participation (Lansing et al., 2023, pp. 2–4). Since the primary target group included international women aged 24 to 40, many of whom are very active on social media, the strategy focused on platforms that could generate both visibility and relationship building credibility.

### 6.5.1. Digital strategy

Instagram served as the main platform within the OutGirls marketing ecosystem, functioning both as a showcase for the brand and as a practical tool for promoting events. Content was intentionally varied to maximize engagement. Stories were used for time-sensitive messages like event reminders, polls, and interactive voting (for instance, choosing Book Club titles). Reels focused on themes of female friendship, empowerment, and the challenges of forming social connections in new cities, stories that deeply resonated with the experiences of the target audience.



Figure 9: Instagram stories design

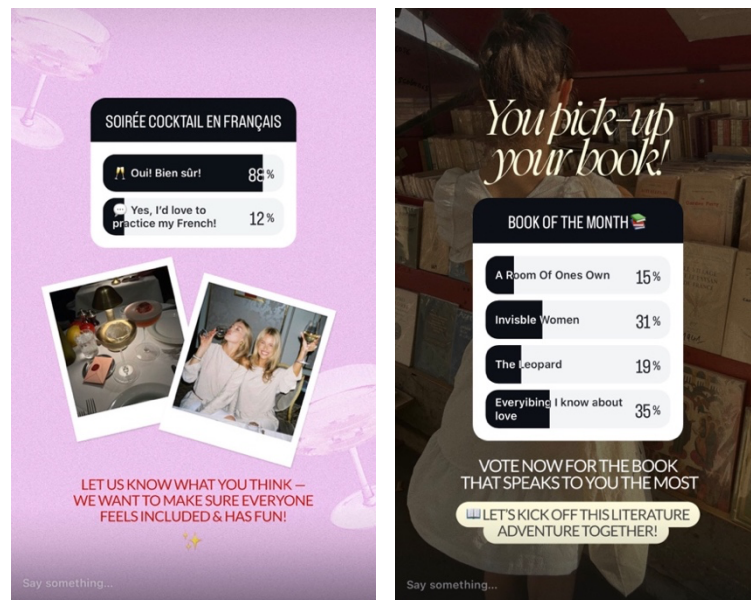


Figure 10: Instagram stories polls

Carousels had informational and lifestyle content, such as guides to Strasbourg cafes and restaurants, positioning OutGirls as both a social community and a practical local guide for newcomers. Along with these lifestyle posts, the account also displayed monthly event schedules, detailed announcements, and post-event reflections with descriptions and photos. This mix not only kept

members informed about upcoming events but also highlighted the community's experiences, building trust, transparency, and a sense of belonging among current and potential members.

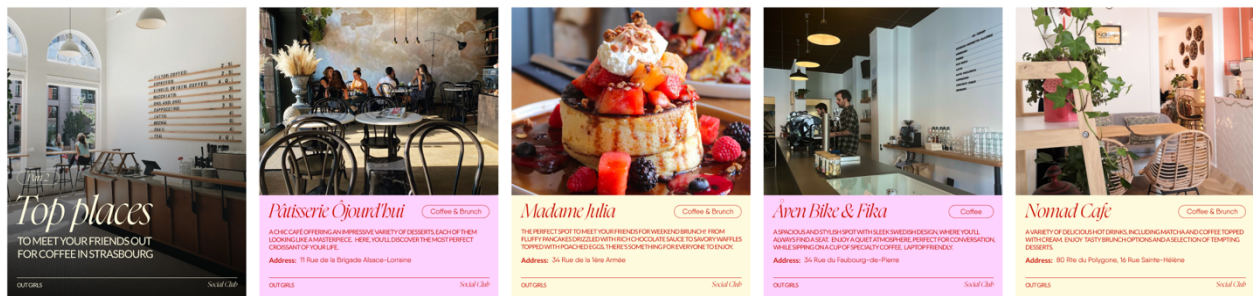


Figure 11: Example of city places guide post

During the launch phase, paid targeted Instagram ads were used to build an initial following. Campaigns were specifically aimed at women aged 20 to 40 living in Strasbourg and nearby cities like Mulhouse, Colmar, Kehl, Offenbourg, Basel, and Freiburg. These paid ads ran for the first three months and gained about 300 followers directly from the campaigns. This early digital audience was essential for the first wave of events and helped increase the community's initial visibility.

<b>Completed</b>		<b>Boost Again</b>
	Profile visits	111
	Spend	€9.29 of €10.00
	Audience	Strasbourg girls
<a href="#">View insights</a>		>
<b>Completed</b>		<b>Boost Again</b>
	Profile visits	35
	Spend	€4.99 of €5.00
	Audience	Strasgirls
<a href="#">View insights</a>		>
<b>Completed</b>		<b>Boost Again</b>
	Profile visits	45
	Spend	€5.29 of €10.00
	Audience	Strasgirls
<a href="#">View insights</a>		>

Figure 12: Targeted Instagram advertisements

Promoting events required a multi-platform strategy to reach both existing members and potential newcomers. On Instagram, posts and stories announced dates, themes, and venues, always directing users to the BilletWeb ticketing platform for registration. Facebook was used in parallel, with event cross-posts not only on the OutGirls page but also in relevant local groups such as *Internationals in Strasbourg* and *Students of Strasbourg*. Additionally, the WhatsApp announcement channel provided

direct, low-friction communication to existing members, ensuring timely awareness of new opportunities to participate.

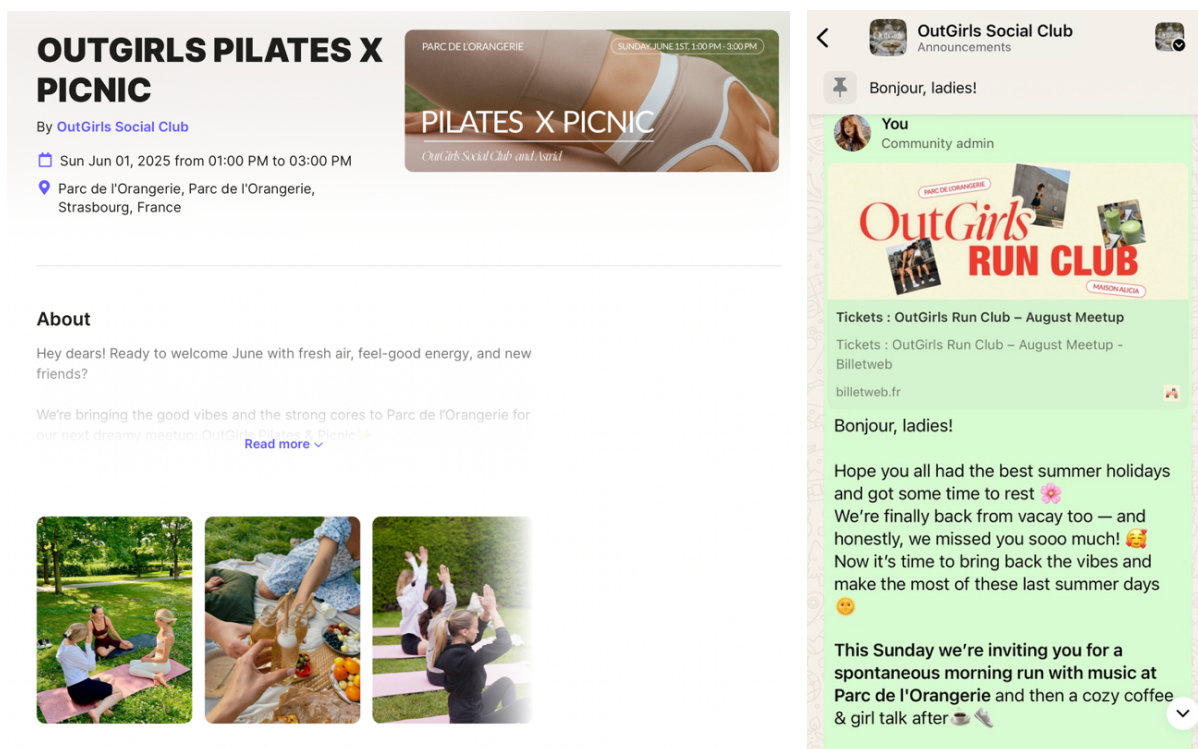


Figure 13: Multi-platform event announcement examples

This integration of digital platforms aimed to maximize both discovery by new audiences and retention among existing ones. The cross-platform consistency also helped ensure uniform branding and messaging. After the initial advertising phase, the marketing strategy shifted to more organic, low-cost methods. Manual outreach involved systematically following women in Strasbourg who were active on Instagram accounts related to local spaces like cafés, yoga studios, pottery workshops, and international student or migrant groups. This targeted approach achieved a follow-back rate of about 60 percent per batch of 100 accounts. Unlike broad advertising, this method directly reached women already engaged in cultural or social activities, making them more likely to attend OutGirls events.

### 6.5.2. Offline visibility

OutGirls complemented digital strategies with offline visibility in the Strasbourg city landscape. Flyers were distributed in cafés, co-working spaces, and community venues popular with the target audience. These offline materials not only led to increased online engagement, with a noticeable rise in Instagram followers and event attendees mentioning they first learned about the community through physical flyers, but also made OutGirls visible to women who are not active on social media. In this way, offline visibility served as a vital bridge between the community's digital and physical presence, strengthening trust and recognition in everyday urban life spaces.



Figure 14: Flyer design example

### 6.6. Outcomes of the marketing strategy

By mid-2025, the OutGirls Social Club had built a steady online presence, reaching 907 followers on Instagram and 143 subscribers to the WhatsApp announcement channel. These figures reflect significant growth for a grassroots community initiative with limited resources and no paid staff. More importantly, they show the effectiveness of combining digital outreach with grassroots efforts and member-driven word-of-mouth promotion.

Overall, OutGirls' marketing strategy demonstrates how multi-channel approaches, centered on visual storytelling, trust-building, and authentic engagement, can position a community-driven initiative not only as an event organizer but also as a recognizable lifestyle brand. In this way,

marketing played a strategic role in building the community's social capital, boosting its reputation as a safe, modern, and inclusive hub for international women in Strasbourg.

### **6.7. Input summary**

Inputs are the essential building blocks in any impact model, widely recognized in the literature as the resources, capacities, and contextual assets a project mobilizes to create change. According to social impact models, "inputs" are all the foundational investments needed to deliver a program, ranging from funding and equipment to volunteer time, digital tools, community reputation, and partnerships (Rawhouser, Cummings and Newbert, 2017). The careful planning and mobilization of these inputs, supported by context and need, is what enables activities and results to emerge in later stages.

In summary, for OutGirls Social Club, these inputs included:

- 1) **Founding vision and mission:** the club's purpose was established in response to a clear gap in informal support networks for international women in Strasbourg, aiming to offer a welcoming environment for building friendships, exchanging practical advice, and easing integration.
- 2) **Volunteer leadership and member engagement:** OutGirls began as a volunteer-driven initiative, relying on the time, energy, organizational skills, and creativity of its founding team and early members.
- 3) **Community reputation and social capital:** OutGirls rapidly developed a reputation for safety, inclusivity, and member-driven programming, which became a crucial asset for trust- and momentum-building within the international women's community.
- 4) **Digital infrastructure:** the club made strategic use of digital tools, including WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, email newsletters, and event management platforms, facilitating communication, coordination, outreach, and community building.
- 5) **Partnerships and local connections:** early links with local cafés, event spaces, wellness studios, artists, and city networks provided venues, expertise, and support.
- 6) **Physical and promotional materials:** branded visuals and cohesive graphic design reinforced the club's identity, which became a valuable nonverbal input for attracting newcomers.

As described in Theory of Change framework, assembling strong, relevant inputs is the first strategic move in setting the stage for effective community-driven impact. By ensuring the availability and suitability of these foundational elements, OutGirls Social Club create the necessary conditions for subsequent activities, outputs, and outcomes to unfold successfully, increasing the likelihood of meaningful and sustainable change (Taplin et al., 2013, p. 20; Rawhouser, Cummings and Newbert, 2017). These inputs set the foundational conditions necessary for OutGirls' operations, ensuring that resources, partnerships, and community capacities align with its mission. Collectively, they create the basis for testing the assumptions that connect available inputs to the effectiveness and sustainability of future activities.

## 7. Activities

Within the impact model framework, activities represent the practical translation of inputs, such as resources, skills, and organizational capacities, into concrete actions that drive change. They are the visible processes through which intentions are enacted, enabling the production of outputs and, eventually, longer-term outcomes (Van Es *et al.*, 2015, pp. 106–107). As emphasized in logic model literature, inputs alone are insufficient to achieve social impact; it is the delivery of well-designed and responsive activities that initiates pathways of transformation.

For OutGirls Social Club, activities were both the core and driving force of the initiative. They offered a daily space where international women could gather, connect, and gradually develop a sense of belonging in Strasbourg. In its early stages, OutGirls focused on regular events like picnics, coffee meetups, yoga sessions, and creative workshops. These gatherings formed the foundation of the community, providing informal yet meaningful opportunities for interaction and exchange. As the club expanded, activities grew in both scope and variety, with an increasing emphasis on member-led initiatives. Participants were encouraged to suggest and organize their own events, such as book clubs, running groups, cultural exchanges, and craft workshops, embedding empowerment and co-creation into the community's DNA.

Over time, additional layers of activity emerged to strengthen the quality of connections. Networking and mentorship formats, such as the Bestie Match program, and themed social facilitated deeper personal and professional bonds among members. Alongside in-person activities, digital community spaces, including a WhatsApp members' chat and regular newsletters, ensured ongoing interaction between events, supporting resource sharing, informal advice, and peer support. A structured onboarding process also enhanced these efforts, giving newcomers a personalized welcome, clear community guidelines, and optional tools to facilitate integration. Outreach and marketing efforts also played a key role: through digital communication, targeted outreach, and offline visibility, OutGirls was able to continually attract new participants and establish itself as a trusted and inclusive community.

In summary, OutGirls' activities were deliberately designed to balance consistency with flexibility, combining regular formats that built trust with member-led initiatives that fostered creativity and ownership. They not only created welcoming social environments but also built pathways for empowerment, mentorship, and intercultural exchange. The following sections will analyze these activities in detail, showing how each contributed to the club's overall goal of supporting the integration of international women in Strasbourg and illustrating how they align with the principles of the impact model.

### 7.1. Events

OutGirls Social Club designs its event programming around the principle that social integration requires multiple entry points: social, educational, and empowerment-focused (OECD/European Commission, 2023). Understanding that participants bring diverse interests, backgrounds, and

comfort levels, the events are intentionally varied to ensure that each member can connect with like-minded people. This diversity of formats allows women to bond over shared passions such as literature, fitness, creativity, or nightlife, and encourages both bridging ties (connections across cultures and groups) and bonding ties (close friendships through repeated encounters).

The range of events organized by OutGirls reflects this multidimensional approach. Social networking events such as cocktail soirées, boat cruises, picnics, and running clubs provide informal opportunities for leisure, intercultural exchange, and community building. Alongside these, educational and creative workshops, including book clubs, bouquet-design sessions, ceramics painting, and vision board creation, offer spaces for skill-sharing and deeper dialogue. Complementing these are empowerment and well-being activities, ranging from yoga, meditation, and Pilates to hip-hop dance classes and aromatherapy sessions, each designed to promote self-care, confidence, and personal growth.



Figure 15: Visual representation of OutGirls community events

Events are usually organized two to four times a month, with programming becoming most active during the spring and summer when outdoor activities attract higher participation. Over time, the club has refined its calendar to establish three recurring “pillar events” that create consistency and structure in the broader programming: the Run Club, the Book Club, and the Cocktail Party (networking event). These key events serve as dependable touchpoints for members, providing a familiar rhythm of engagement while still leaving space for experimentation and member-led initiatives.

The activity portfolio is also designed to test the assumptions connecting activities to outputs by ensuring that a variety of formats meet different interests and keep participants motivated. Recurring activities promote consistent attendance, allowing outcomes to develop over time. Small-group and repeated interactions are structured to encourage openness, trust, and inclusivity while reducing the risk of fragmentation within the community. Digital channels are used to support, not replace, face-to-face engagement, facilitating coordination and ongoing connection among participants. Together, these design elements ensure that activities effectively turn inputs into measurable and lasting community engagement.

### ***7.1.1. Recurring events***

#### ***1) OutGirls Run Club***

The OutGirls Run Club was created as a regular wellness program that combines physical activity with social and intercultural exchange. It serves as an accessible entry point into the community, especially for women looking for informal yet organized ways to connect through shared interests in health, sports, and outdoor activities. Including running in the OutGirls Run Club was motivated not only by its ability to foster social bonds and a sense of belonging, but also by extensive research showing that regular physical activity, particularly running, is linked to better mental health and overall well-being. Recent studies confirm that participating in sports like running can significantly reduce stress, depression, and anxiety while boosting psychological well-being, happiness, and self-confidence, especially for women and individuals involved in community-based programs (Eather et al., 2023). In this context, improved mental well-being is also understood as a crucial factor in facilitating social integration, since greater confidence, resilience, and emotional stability enable fuller participation in community life and stronger feelings of belonging.



*Figure 16: Visual documentation of the OutGirls Run Club*

The format is intentionally simple but carefully designed to balance accessibility and community-building. Once a month, a small group of up to ten participants meets in one of Strasbourg's parks on

a weekend morning. The session is led by a volunteer host, usually a community member with previous running experience at a local sports club. Activities start with a light warm-up and then proceed with a three- to four-kilometer run. Importantly, both pace and distance are adapted to the abilities of the group, ensuring that beginners feel welcomed and included. The presence of a peer instructor lowers potential barriers to participation by providing a non-competitive, supportive environment.

After the physical activity, the group transitions into a shared social ritual, ending the run at a nearby café. Organizers serve coffee or matcha, while participants often contribute by buying pastries or light snacks. This ritual turns the physical effort into a collective experience of reward and relaxation, strengthening group cohesion. The social aspect is further supported by intentional conversational structures: each participant is invited to introduce herself, sharing her background, occupation, and motivation for joining the community. To facilitate meaningful interaction beyond small talk, the host uses prepared icebreaker prompts, such as reflecting on positive moments from the week or travel goals. This approach ensures inclusive dialogue and helps build interpersonal trust.



*Figure 17: Visual documentation of the OutGirls Run Club's coffee time*

From an integration perspective, the Run Club is more than just a sporting activity; it serves as a space for intercultural exchange where women from different nationalities and professional backgrounds come together to share both physical activity and social interaction. The combination of sport and structured conversation lowers psychological and social barriers, creating a safe context for newcomers to participate. Moreover, the recurring and small-scale nature of the event enhances intimacy, making it possible for participants to form stronger ties that may extend beyond the activity itself.

In conclusion, the OutGirls Run Club illustrates how recurring, small-group wellness initiatives can simultaneously address health, social, and integration goals. By combining physical activity with

regular social interaction and intercultural exchange, the initiative supports participants' well-being while also reinforcing their sense of belonging within the wider community of Strasbourg.

## 2) *OutGirls Book Club*

The OutGirls Book Club represents the community's intellectual and reflective dimension, creating a space for ongoing dialogue, critical thinking, and intercultural exchange. While many of the club's activities focus on leisure, wellness, or networking, the Book Club enables deeper engagement with stories and ideas that transcend cultural and social boundaries. This aligns with research highlighting reading groups as important settings for social bonding, cultural participation, and the negotiation of identity (Craig, 2019).

The selection of books occurs through a participatory and democratic process, reflecting OutGirls' community-focused approach. About five weeks before each session, members and followers are invited to submit book recommendations via Instagram. These suggestions are combined with additional options curated by organizers to form a shortlist of four titles. Each title is briefly introduced through Instagram stories, and the wider community votes in a poll to select the final book. This collective decision-making process helps members feel a sense of ownership over the activity and ensures that the chosen book represents diverse interests. Participation in the Book Club is intentionally inclusive rather than prescriptive. Reading the entire book isn't required; members are encouraged to join even if they've only partially read the book or engaged with it in translation. This flexible rule reduces pressure and makes it more accessible, especially for women balancing work, family, or language challenges. While discussions are mainly conducted in English at a conversational level, bilingual hosts who can translate into French help local women participate and promote intercultural exchange.

The meetings usually last two to three hours and take place in a relaxed, homey setting, often in a Parisian-style apartment with a dedicated library room. The atmosphere is intentionally cozy and casual, complemented by refreshments like fruit, pastries, tea, and coffee.



Figure 18: Visual documentation of the OutGirls Book Club

Each session is facilitated by a volunteer host from within the community, who prepares guiding questions to encourage both analytical engagement with the text and personal reflection. Prompts

often connect literary themes to participants' lived experiences, for example, by inviting them to discuss resilience, love, or challenges specific to women's lives. This approach transforms the discussion into both a literary exercise and a forum for mutual support. The thematic focus of selected books has generally gravitated toward contemporary novels exploring women's struggles, relationships, and personal growth, such as *Everything I Know About Love* or *The Midnight Library*. These narratives offer points of identification that cut across cultural backgrounds, enabling participants to connect through universal themes while also articulating their own culturally specific perspectives. In this way, the Book Club facilitates what integration theorists describe as both bonding capital (through shared vulnerability and trust within the group) and bridging capital (through dialogue across cultural and national differences) (Graham-Brown, 2021).

From an integration perspective, the Book Club plays a unique purpose compared to other OutGirls activities. While fitness- or leisure-focused events often prioritize casual interaction and enjoyment, the Book Club encourages depth, reflection, and ongoing conversation. By involving members in intellectual exploration, it provides space for self-expression and intercultural understanding, fostering not only friendships but also shared views on identity, resilience, and belonging. Therefore, the OutGirls Book Club demonstrates how recurring intellectual activities can complement social and wellness initiatives in a community-based integration model. Its design combines participatory decision-making, inclusivity in participation, and the cultivation of reflective dialogue, making it a unique vehicle for both personal empowerment and intercultural connection within the broader OutGirls framework.

### 3) *OutGirls Just Wanna Have Fun: Cocktail Party*

The Cocktail Party is the main social and networking event of the OutGirls community and has become one of its most popular and accessible regular activities. Unlike wellness- or reflection-oriented activities, this initiative is explicitly designed to foster informal yet structured interaction, making it particularly effective as an entry point for newcomers who may be hesitant to attend more specialized events. Its format is inspired by research on small-group dynamics, which shows that using structured prompts in a friendly setting can reduce barriers to participation and help build trust-based relationships (Sandstrom and Dunn, 2014).

The structure of the Cocktail Party reflects a deliberate balance between intimacy and openness. Once a month, a group of 7–8 participants meets at a stylish Strasbourg restaurant. The small group size makes it easier for everyone to participate meaningfully, while the comfortable and welcoming setting creates a relaxed atmosphere that encourages social connection and cultural exchange. Upon arrival, each participant is welcomed with a glass of Crémant, symbolically marking entry into the community space. Shared platters, typically including options such as hummus, cheese boards, oysters, and fries, are ordered in advance, with dietary preferences collected to guarantee inclusivity. This attention to detail underscores the community's commitment to accessibility and hospitality.



Figure 19: Visual documentation of the OutGirls just wanna have fun event

To guide conversations and avoid the fatigue that can come with superficial small talk, the Cocktail Party uses networking cards. The activity begins with a first round of icebreakers, featuring light and accessible prompts such as “What’s your favorite way to spend a day off?” or “Which country surprised you the most?” This is followed by a second round of more thought-provoking and humorous questions, for example, “If you could have any superpower, what would it be?” or “Do you believe money can buy happiness?” These prompts function as catalysts for storytelling, shared laughter, and deeper personal disclosure, thereby facilitating bonds that go beyond initial introductions. Once the group atmosphere is relaxed, the structured rounds give way to free-flowing conversation. The event typically lasts around three hours, providing time for both guided interaction and organic relationship-building.

Language accessibility is a key feature of the format. Originally conducted only in English, the event later added French-language sessions. This bilingual approach increased participation by including local French women and created a space where international guests could practice their French in a relaxed, supportive environment. This linguistic flexibility makes the Cocktail Party an important site of integration, combining international and local perspectives in the same social space.

From the perspective of the Impact Model, the Cocktail Party functions as a recurring activity that directly converts inputs, such as volunteer organization, restaurant partnerships, and member engagement, into tangible outputs like small-scale gatherings (Taplin et al., 2013). The immediate outcomes include new social connections, increased confidence in intercultural communication, and opportunities for language practice. Over time, these outcomes lead to longer-term impacts such as expanded social capital, a greater sense of belonging, and stronger settlement intentions among participants. As one of the most accessible formats, the Cocktail Party has established itself as a “first touchpoint” for many newcomers. Its focus on fun, openness, and low barriers to participation creates conditions for both immediate enjoyment and lasting social integration. In this way, the event demonstrates how structured yet informal activities can serve as gateways to deeper involvement in community initiatives, promoting both individual well-being and broader social cohesion.

#### 4) Bestie Match

The Bestie Match initiative offers a unique approach within OutGirls’ programming, created specifically to provide social connection opportunities beyond formal events. Unlike activities such

as the Run Club, Book Club, or Cocktail Party, which depend on scheduled gatherings, Bestie Match functions as a decentralized, peer-to-peer system for building meaningful connections. Its goal is to shift the community from just a group of event participants to a network of personal relationships based on mutual support and familiarity.

The *Bestie Match* process is intentionally simple and accessible. Participation begins with an interactive poll launched in the private, members-only WhatsApp chat, ensuring that only active community members can participate. The following day, the organizer randomly pairs participants into “matches,” guaranteeing that each individual is connected with a new acquaintance. Pairs are then given a two-week window to arrange their own meet-up in a setting of their choice, typically over coffee, drinks, or other low-pressure activities. This design not only grants participants flexibility but also fosters autonomy in shaping the interaction according to their preferences and schedules.

From an integration perspective, *Bestie Match* serves as a valuable complement to group-based events. The pair-based structure facilitates more intimate exchanges than are possible in larger gatherings, lowering barriers for participants who may be shy, new to the community, or hesitant to engage in group conversations. Such one-to-one encounters allow for deeper discussions about personal backgrounds, migration experiences, or shared interests, thereby accelerating the formation of trust and friendship. In the language of social capital theory, the initiative strengthens both bonding ties (close, supportive relationships) and bridging ties (connections across diverse cultural and professional backgrounds) (Graham-Brown, 2021).

Equally significant is the way *Bestie Match* animates the digital infrastructure of the community. While the WhatsApp group chat primarily functions as a space for coordination, announcements, and resource sharing, *Bestie Match* brings this virtual environment to life by converting online engagement into offline encounters. Participants often return to the chat to share their experiences or express gratitude for meaningful pairings, further reinforcing OutGirls’ reputation as an active, supportive, and interconnected network rather than a passive event organizer. Within the impact model framework, Bestie Match demonstrates how a modest amount of organizational effort can yield substantial results. The activity requires only simple digital facilitation (a WhatsApp poll and manual pairing), yet it consistently generates new personal connections that can grow into lasting friendships and extended professional networks.

In summary, Bestie Match demonstrates the innovative potential of affordable, member-focused initiatives for community-building. By limiting participation to members and integrating the activity into the private WhatsApp chat, the initiative both protects trust and enhances community exclusivity. It ensures that OutGirls is not just a space for group gatherings but also a catalyst for genuine, lasting relationships that continue to grow beyond scheduled events.

### 7.1.2. Special events

In addition to its recurring formats, the OutGirls Social Club also organized a variety of occasional or thematic events that added energy to the community program. These activities broadened the scope of engagement beyond the familiar formats of book discussions, running sessions, and cocktail networking, providing participants with fresh opportunities to connect, try new experiences, and explore different cultural activities. For example, *OutGirls Just Wanna Have Fun: Sunset Cruise* was organised to celebrate Strasbourg’s annual *Fête de la Musique*. Framed as a glamorous summer outing, the event combined a private boat ride with music, drinks, and an evening walk through the city’s lively streets. The aim was to foster a festive and welcoming atmosphere that not only encouraged participants to connect across cultural backgrounds but also allowed them to take part in celebrating a distinctly French cultural tradition.

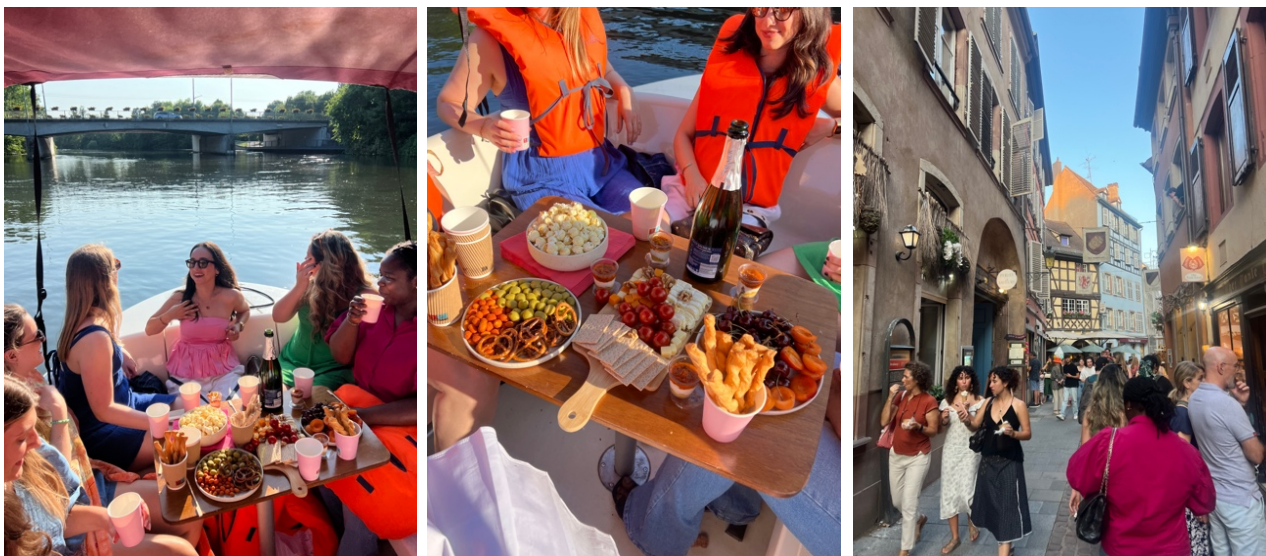


Figure 20: Visual example of OutGirls Sunset Cruise

Similarly, the Floral Workshop: Design Your Own Bouquet emphasized creativity and artistic expression. Participants engaged in hands-on flower arranging, which, beyond its visual appeal, provided a calm and reflective space that encouraged informal conversation and relaxation. Questions of empowerment and self-development were explored through workshops such as Magnetic Women – Using Aromatherapy for Dating & Self-Worth. This session combined wellness elements with discussions on confidence and self-perception, giving participants an opportunity to reflect on personal growth and relationship dynamics. Toward the end of the year, the community came together for Dream, Reflect, Create: A Year-End Gathering, an event designed to encourage reflection on personal experiences and goal-setting for the future. Finally, Awakening the Feminine: Yoga, Meditation & Tea Ceremony offered participants a spiritual and restorative experience. By incorporating cultural rituals into the session, the event highlighted the importance of holistic well-being within the broader process of integration and belonging.



*Figure 21: Visual documentation of OutGirls special events*

The diversity of these additional events ensured that participants with different personalities and preferences, whether introverted or extroverted, creative or sporty, reflective or socially oriented, could identify accessible entry points into the community. From festive collective celebrations to intimate wellness sessions, these formats broadened participation, deepened member engagement, and reinforced the community's inclusive ethos. Together, they demonstrated the adaptability of the OutGirls model and its ability to provide multidimensional pathways for social integration and empowerment. The variety of additional events highlights the importance of offering different types of activities to strengthen community engagement and support integration. By designing formats that appealed to different preferences, whether social, creative, reflective, or wellness-oriented, OutGirls provided multiple entry points into the community, lowering barriers to participation and enhancing inclusivity. This range, spanning festive celebrations to intimate gatherings, demonstrated the organization's capacity to balance breadth of appeal with depth of experience, thereby broadening participation while also deepening member commitment.

From an analytical perspective, the event portfolio served two main functions. First, it acted as an integration engine, meeting diverse needs and promoting repeated intercultural encounters that kept engagement going. Second, it functioned as a community identity builder by presenting events not just as gatherings but as lifestyle experiences that fostered a shared sense of meaning, boosted recognition, and encouraged loyalty. The balance between recurring pillar events (such as the Run Club, Book Club, and Cocktail Party) and rotating thematic formats (including workshops, sports sessions, and seasonal celebrations) was crucial in maintaining interest over time. This combination ensured both continuity and predictability while also introducing novelty and flexibility. Inclusivity measures across events further supported safe, sustainable growth, strengthening OutGirls' role as both a support system and a source of empowerment within Strasbourg's intercultural community.

Table 2 below summarises the core activity streams through which OutGirls translates inputs (resources, skills, partnerships) into concrete actions that drive change. These activities are

deliberately designed to balance consistency (recurring formats) with adaptability (member-led and thematic events), and to integrate in-person programming with ongoing digital community practices.

*Table 2: Core activities of the OutGirls Social Club*

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Description and examples</i>
Recurring pillar events	Core formats that provide consistency and reliable entry points. Examples: Run Club, Book Club, and Cocktail Party with structured networking.
Member-led initiatives	Activities proposed and hosted by members, fostering empowerment and ownership. Examples: workshops, cultural exchanges, run and book clubs.
Well-being and empowerment sessions	Programs supporting physical and mental health as part of integration. Examples: yoga, pilates, meditation with tea ceremony, hip-hop dance, aromatherapy workshops.
Creative and educational workshops	Spaces for learning and dialogue in relaxed settings. Examples: ceramics painting, bouquet design, vision boards creation.
Social and discovery events	Leisure-based activities that promote intercultural exchange and exploration. Examples: picnics, cocktail soirées, city trips, boat tours.
Networking and mentorship	Formats designed to deepen social and professional ties. Examples: Bestie Match (1:1 peer matching), spontaneous small-group meetups linked to thematic city events or cultural occasions.
Digital community management	Online spaces that maintain daily connection and coordination. Examples: WhatsApp members' chat, newsletters, event platforms.
Onboarding and governance	Processes ensuring safe and inclusive participation. Examples: personalized welcomes, community code of conduct.
Outreach and marketing	Activities expanding visibility and attracting newcomers. Examples: Instagram campaigns, flyers in local cafés, cross-posting in city groups.

In summary, OutGirls' activity portfolio combines dependable, recurring formats with member-led and thematic events, providing various low-threshold entry points into the community. This structure, supported by small-group settings, 1:1 pairing (Bestie Match), and an agile digital infrastructure, turns resources into steady participation, trust, and ongoing interaction. Collectively, these activities facilitate the Impact Model pathway from inputs to outputs, establishing the foundation for measurable short-, mid-, and long-term integration outcomes.

The assumptions connecting inputs and activities were largely validated in practice, as OutGirls effectively translated its available resources, volunteer capacity, and partnerships into a consistent and diverse activity program. Although the network expanded gradually and there were occasional challenges in securing enough varied venues to host different types of events, the existing infrastructure proved adequate to sustain regular programming over time. The reliance on volunteer efforts and affordable partner spaces showed that financial and human resources were stable enough to support continuity. Compared to local French communities, reaching the international women's audience was more demanding due to its smaller size and greater mobility, requiring ongoing marketing and word-of-mouth efforts. Nonetheless, these efforts were successful, with most events reaching full capacity, indicating that the inputs were sufficient to maintain engagement and support sustainable community programming.

## 8. Output: Event statistics and community reach

Within Impact Model, outputs refer to the immediate and measurable results of organizational activities, such as the number of events delivered, attendance levels, or patterns of member engagement (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004, pp. 2-3,8) For OutGirls Social Club, outputs provide critical evidence of the initiative’s operational capacity and its success in translating inputs and activities into integration results. These indicators are central to assessing both the reach and resonance of the community’s programming during its formative year.

### 8.1. Number of events held

Across its first year of activity, OutGirls Social Club organized a total of 21 events. These included recurring formats such as the Run Club, Book Club, and Cocktail Parties, alongside thematic or one-off activities like the Sunset Cruise, floral workshops, ceramics sessions, Pilates and Picnic, and empowerment-focused yoga and meditation gatherings. The program followed a consistent rhythm of two to four events per month, with a seasonal peak in spring and summer, when outdoor formats attracted particularly strong participation. The consistent calendar provided both predictability and variety, creating regular opportunities for participation while addressing different interests and levels of comfort.

### 8.2. Attendance figures

Attendance data further demonstrate strong member engagement. OutGirls deliberately employed small-group formats, up to 10 participants, to encourage intimacy and meaningful interaction. These events frequently sold out within days of announcement, indicating high demand and resonance with members’ expectations. Average monthly participation across events stabilized at 16–17 attendees, suggesting sustained involvement rather than occasional engagement. The Bestie Match program added another layer to participation, generating an average of four peer-to-peer matches per month and complementing group-based formats with interpersonal encounters. Taken together, these outputs show that OutGirls succeeded not only in attracting attendees but also in fostering repeated, active participation.

Table 3: Event participation overview

<i>Event Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Participants</i>
OutGirls Book Club	Sat Jul 12, 2025	5
OutGirls Just Wanna Have Fun: Sunset Cruise	Sat Jun 21, 2025	7
Floral workshop: design your own bouquet	Sun Jun 08, 2025	4
OutGirls Pilates X Picnic	Sun Jun 01, 2025	10
OutGirls Run Club – May Meetup	Thu May 29, 2025	7
OutGirls Just Wanna Have Fun: Soirée Cocktail	Sat May 17, 2025	5
OutGirls Run Club – April Meetup	Sat Apr 27, 2025	5
OutGirls Book Club	Sat Apr 26, 2025	2
OutGirls Just Wanna Have Fun: Cocktail Party	Sat Apr 12, 2025	6
Magnetic Women	Sat Apr 05, 2025	7

OutGirls Ceramics painting	Sun Mar 16, 2025	6
OutGirls Book Club	Sat Mar 08, 2025	2
OutGirls Pilates & Brunch	Sun Mar 02, 2025	7
Girly Hip-Hop Class	Sat Jan 25, 2025	6
OutGirls Table talks: Networking Apéro	Sat Jan 18, 2025	6
Dream, Reflect, Create: A Year-End Gathering	Sun Dec 15, 2024	9
Awakening the feminine:Yoga, Meditation & Tea Ceremony	Sun Dec 01, 2024	7
Inner flow: A Yin Yoga & Relaxation practice	Sun Nov 17, 2024	9
OutGirls Just Wanna Have Fun: Cocktail Party	Sat Oct 12, 2024	6
OutGirls Yoga X Coffee	Sat Sep 28, 2024	3
OutGirls Opening picnic	Sat Aug 17, 2024	6
Overall attendees		125

### **8.3. Community growth indicators**

Quantitative indicators of community growth demonstrate the initiative’s ability to expand its membership while keeping high engagement levels. From March to July, membership grew from 46 to 62 women, reflecting approximately 35% increase over five months. Digital activity within the private WhatsApp group also showed this growth: an average of 119 messages were exchanged each month over the past five months, with 16–17 active posters, resulting in a chat engagement rate of 30.7%. A core group of 15–20 regularly active members formed the foundation of the community, providing stability and continuity as new members joined.

Although in-person events served as the main form of interaction, online activity in the members’ chat proved to be an important outcome in its own right. The WhatsApp group expanded OutGirls’ reach beyond scheduled meetings by allowing everyday engagement. Members shared information about local opportunities, practiced French informally, and offered each other emotional and practical support. Post-event follow-ups, like sharing photos or recommendations, helped strengthen social bonds, while pre-event reminders increased excitement and attendance. For members who couldn’t attend events regularly, the chat provided an alternative way to participate, ensuring continued involvement. The Bestie Match program was also managed through this channel, further emphasizing the role of digital interactions in maintaining relational ties.

Table 4 below summarises the community growth indicators of OutGirls Social Club over the past 6 months. These indicators combine membership growth with measures of digital engagement, such as activity in the WhatsApp members’ chat and participation in the Bestie Match program. Together, they demonstrate both quantitative expansion and qualitative depth of interaction, showing how the community not only attracted new members but also maintained active participation and strengthened relational bonds.

Table 4: Community growth and digital engagement indicators

Month	Total members at the end of the month	Active posters	Messages sent	Number of Bestie match pairs	Chat engagement rate	Average messages per active participant
July	62	13	26	2	21%	2,00
June	62	22	156	4	35%	7,09
May	55	19	188	4	35%	9,89
April	50	16	100	3	32%	6,25
March	46	14	124	7	30%	8,86

#### 8.4. Output results

Taken together, these outputs demonstrate OutGirls’ ability to generate consistent, measurable engagement through a mix of structured programs and member-driven interactions. The high attendance, quick sell-outs of events, and active online participation indicate that the formats effectively addressed the needs of international women looking for social connection and integration opportunities. Membership growth, along with the development of a highly engaged core group, demonstrates the community’s credibility and appeal. In terms of impact, these results represent the important first step in creating pathways toward outcomes like improved well-being, increased social capital, and long-term integration.

Table 5 summarizes the outputs of the OutGirls Social Club, as defined within the Theory of Change framework (Vogel, 2012). In this context, outputs refer to immediate, tangible, and measurable results of program activities. They reflect the translation of inputs and activities into concrete evidence of engagement, outreach, and community growth, providing the basis for evaluating subsequent outcomes and long-term impact.

Table 5: Outputs summary of the OutGirls Social Club

Output category	Description and indicators
Events Delivered	21 events in the first year; mix of recurring (Run Club, Book Club, Cocktail Parties) and thematic or one-off activities (Sunset cruise, workshops, yoga, Pilates and picnic). Consistent rhythm of 2–4 events per month.
Attendance and participation	Average 16–17 attendees per month; events limited to around 10 participants for intimacy; frequent sell-outs; cumulative attendance of 125 participants; Bestie Match program generated ~4 peer-to-peer matches per month.
Community growth	Membership increased from 46 to 62 women between March and July (35% growth); emergence of a stable core of 15–20 active members sustaining the community.

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<i>Output category</i>	<i>Description and indicators</i>
Digital engagement	WhatsApp group averaged 119 monthly messages; 16–17 active posters ( $\approx 30\%$ engagement rate); content included event coordination, information sharing, language practice, and emotional or practical support.
Sustainability indicators	Rapid event sell-outs, repeated participation, and active digital follow-up before and after events; development of an engaged inner circle ensuring continuity.

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### **8.5. Practical insights**

The experience of building and operating the OutGirls Social Club over its first year offers several practical insights relevant to the design and sustainability of community initiatives. These lessons address the domains of inclusion, engagement, and organizational sustainability, illustrating both the strengths of the model and its inherent challenges.

An initial insight relates to event planning and responsiveness to demand. Many events sold out quickly, indicating that the formats closely matched participants' needs. However, fewer activities were harder to fill, emphasizing the importance of validating ideas with the community before scheduling. Using polls on Instagram and WhatsApp regularly proved effective for gauging interest and adjusting programming based on actual demand. Second, the design of small-group formats proved to be crucial for fostering intimacy, reducing barriers to participation, and enabling authentic friendships. Empirical observation indicated that the ideal group size was between 7–8 participants for networking-focused events and up to 10 participants for workshops or sports sessions. This structure balanced manageability with a diversity of perspectives while ensuring that all participants had the chance to engage meaningfully. Third, the case demonstrated the strategic importance of visual branding and digital presence. A consistent design and an active Instagram profile not only supported outreach but also built trust and credibility among newcomers even before their first event. Branding thus acted as a pre-entry mechanism for integration, lowering uncertainty and encouraging participation.

Regarding inclusion, the findings highlight the importance of providing multiple entry points. OutGirls attracted women with diverse personalities and interests, sport-oriented, creative, reflective, or socially motivated, by offering a mix of recurring events and one-time thematic activities. This programming balance supported both stability, through recurring formats that encouraged repeated encounters and deeper friendships, and novelty, through varied events that kept engagement fresh and inclusive. Another key insight into inclusion came from reviewing events in the first half of the year. It became clear that hosting activities in both English and French was crucial for accessibility. While English served as the default language for many internationals, some participants had stronger skills in French, often because they planned long-term settlement in France and prioritized learning the local language. For these participants, English-only formats risked creating barriers. Keeping group sizes small ensured that even women with limited language confidence could participate, but incorporating French-language events further increased participation. Starting mid-year, selected

formats like the “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” Cocktail Party and Bestie Match were also offered in French, led by bilingual facilitators. This change not only created opportunities for internationals to practice French but also motivated local French women, who were less confident in English, to join. Consequently, bilingual programming enhanced intercultural exchange and promoted integration between internationals and locals.

The issue of sustainability offered both opportunities and challenges. Volunteer effort was a crucial resource, but dependence on unpaid contributions exposed structural weaknesses. As the community grew, the organizational workload, including event planning, communication, and administrative duties, increased. By the time the community reached approximately 50 members and held four events per month, the scale of operations began to exceed what the original volunteer structure could handle. Lessons here highlight the importance of diversifying resources through modest participation fees, institutional partnerships, and external support to ensure long-term stability.

Finally, onboarding practices proved essential for inclusion and member retention. A warm welcome, clear communication of the community’s rules, and an explanation of participation opportunities helped to lower barriers for newcomers and reduced uncertainty about “how things work.” This structured introduction not only enhanced the newcomer experience but also limited the volume of repetitive logistical questions directed at organizers, thereby improving efficiency. Taken together, these insights emphasize that the success of community-driven initiatives such as OutGirls depends on a careful balance between flexibility and structure. Responsiveness to member demand, thoughtful event design, and inclusive programming are critical for fostering engagement, while sustainable growth requires attention to organizational capacity and diversified resources.

#### ***8.6. Validation of assumptions in the activities–outputs relationship***

The results of the output phase confirmed the assumptions linking activities to outputs. The diverse range of activity types successfully met participants’ varied interests and maintained motivation over time, as evidenced by steady participation, repeat attendance, and frequent event sell-outs. Although consistent attendance was initially a challenge, with some participants attending only once, this improved significantly after introducing more varied formats and bilingual options, which encouraged members to return and engage repeatedly. The small-group and recurring structures proved effective in fostering openness, trust, and inclusivity, helping participants form genuine relationships while minimizing risks of cliques or fragmentation. Similarly, the online platforms effectively complemented in-person engagement by sustaining communication, coordination, and peer support between events. While challenges remained, particularly regarding the scale of resources and the limited size of the international women’s audience compared to local French groups, the evidence shows that OutGirls’ activity design successfully translated assumptions into tangible, measurable outputs and built a solid foundation for sustainable community growth.

## 9. Outcomes

In the impact model, outcomes are defined as the short- and medium-term changes that result from a community initiative's activities (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004, pp. 3, 8). These are crucial markers of progress toward the long-term impact of integration, capturing how community participation shapes members' social experiences, confidence, well-being, and professional opportunities (Taplin *et al.*, 2013, pp. 5–6).

For the OutGirls Social Club, outcomes are most clearly measured through survey data collected from members, accompanied by qualitative reflections from semi-structured interviews and observations during community events in the first year of operation. Collectively, these sources offer a more comprehensive picture of impact: survey data identifies quantifiable patterns of change, interviews provide insights into personal stories and lived experiences, and event observations record the dynamics of participation, interaction, and inclusivity in real time. This triangulation of methods enhances the validity of the findings by connecting measurable indicators with deeper understanding of how integration is demonstrated in practice (Yin, 2018).

### 9.1. Quantitative results

This section presents the quantitative aspect of the research, explaining how numerical data were gathered, processed, and analyzed to evaluate the integration outcomes of the OutGirls Social Club. Quantitative analysis offers a structured understanding of patterns in participation, belonging, and well-being among international women in Strasbourg, complementing the qualitative insights discussed later. It allows for the identification of statistically significant relationships between involvement in community activities and key integration indicators. By turning participants' experiences into measurable trends, this analysis shows how individual participation leads to broader social impact within the community.

#### 9.1.1. Quantitative data analysis

To examine the outcomes and evaluate the integration effect of OutGirls Social Club, a targeted survey was developed and shared among its membership. The purpose of this survey was twofold: first, to better understand how international women navigate integration challenges and community life in Strasbourg; and second, to assess the extent to which participation in OutGirls advances their social, emotional, and cultural well-being.

The questionnaire, designed using Google Forms, balanced quantitative and qualitative elements to provide a holistic understanding of community influence. Taking 5–7 minutes to complete, the survey included a variety of question types: demographic multiple-choice, Likert-scale ratings, event attendance frequencies, and open-ended narratives describing lived experiences. The survey was structured into five thematic sections:

1. **Demographics and background:** assessed age, nationality, length of stay in Strasbourg, and occupation to contextualize results and reveal integration patterns by life stage or timeline.

2. **Integration experience in Strasbourg:** explored common barriers, including difficulty making friends, language obstacles, bureaucratic challenges, and emotional adjustment.
3. **Engagement with OutGirls Social Club:** asked how members discovered the club, the frequency and type of event participation, and any obstacles to involvement.
4. **Community impact and personal outcomes:** focused on the role OutGirls played in members' lives, measuring changes in social network, well-being, confidence, belonging, and professional contacts. Respondents also rated how connected they felt since joining.
5. **Feedback and vision for the future:** provided space for participants to reflect on community values, propose improvements, and share ideas for future programming.

This survey, completed by **18 participants** through online and event-based outreach, yielded both robust quantitative data and rich qualitative feedback for evaluating outcomes.

**The survey script can be found here:** [link](#)

Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their feedback would be used solely for community development and research purposes. While email addresses were collected for the purpose of distributing a thank-you gift, no personal data was published or associated with individual responses in the research analysis. However, the collection of emails introduces a potential source of bias, as participants may have felt inclined to provide overly positive responses in order to align with the organizers' expectations. To minimize this risk, members were explicitly informed that honest feedback was in their own interest, as it would directly contribute to shaping the future of the community and improving its activities.

The original qualitative survey table was transformed into a numerical dataset to enable the computation of descriptive statistics and correlations in Python. This conversion allowed for clearer visualization of participant demographics, event engagement levels, and perceived integration outcomes. By translating categorical and open-ended responses into standardized numerical codes, the data became suitable for statistical exploration and interpretation of community impact trends.

### **9.1.2. Results**

The survey revealed that international women in Strasbourg face a consistent set of challenges related to social integration. **A detailed overview of responses is presented in the accompanying table:** [link](#).

An overwhelming 83.3% reported difficulty making local friends, while many also struggled with feelings of isolation, cultural misunderstandings, and limited opportunities for meaningful social interaction. Other major challenges include feeling isolated or homesick (44.4%), cultural misunderstandings or friction (22.2%), difficulty speaking or understanding French (11.1%), limited networking opportunities (11.1%), and stress or anxiety due to adjustment (11.1%). Only a minority cited trouble finding a job (5.6%) or experiences related to living abroad as a local (5.6%). This

distribution highlights that social and emotional integration barriers are much more prevalent than economic or administrative ones in this group.

18 responses

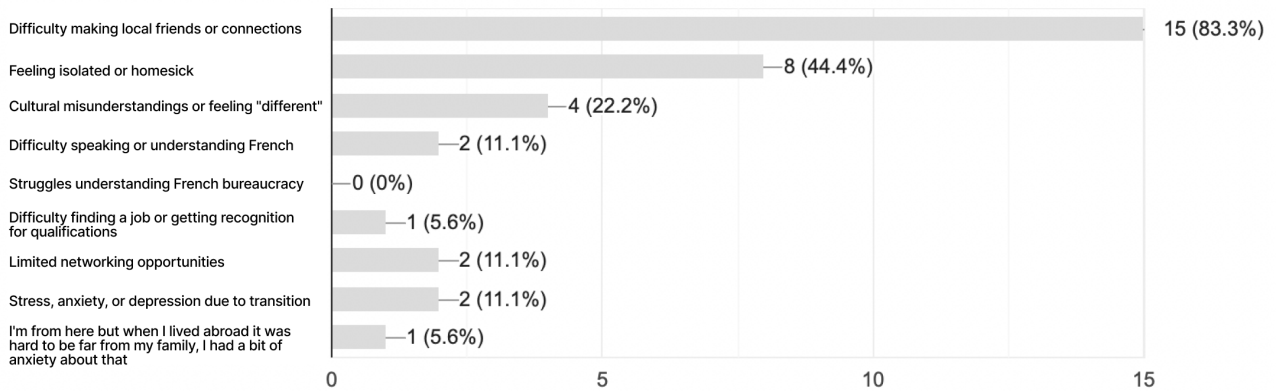


Figure 22: Reported challenges related to social integration

These results were strongly supported by qualitative feedback from survey participants, who described the personal and social barriers they encountered while trying to fit into Strasbourg society. Several women emphasized the long time required to build meaningful friendships and the particular difficulty of achieving a comfortable level in French, noting that *“it took me time to get to a comfortable level in French, [and] not many events to meet local people.”* Many highlighted how challenging it was to find *“your people who have ambition, who also go through challenges in a new culture, and with whom I could discuss my struggles and get support.”* Others spoke to the experience of meeting people but finding that it *“often stays at surface level,”* or feeling that *“making friends as an adult is harder; I got some but I still feel alone at times, and it stops me from going out because they don’t like to.”*

For some, social integration was hampered by *“not knowing French”* or by a lack of opportunities and spaces for making connections, as one respondent put it: *“Not having a place or an opportunity to find friends. If it wasn’t for the OutGirls club, I wouldn’t even know where to go to be able to socialise.”* The importance of shared interests and life stage also emerged, with comments like *“finding people who share the same values and maturity”* and *“my age, I’m not a student anymore, not knowing other people out of my hobbies,”* as well as challenges in building lasting connections beyond short-term or event-based meetings. These narratives make clear that language barriers, age, lifestyle fit, and the absence of accessible, values-aligned social spaces are key obstacles to deep integration, further underlining the need for sustained, community-driven support.

In light of these challenges, the OutGirls Social Club showed itself as as a vital bridge toward social integration. Every respondent reported joining the community to make new friends, with many also seeking emotional support, quality time, and cultural belonging. The impact of participation is notable: 61.1% of respondents reported improvements in their social life, 50% reported an increased sense of belonging, and 33.3% noted enhanced mental well-being.

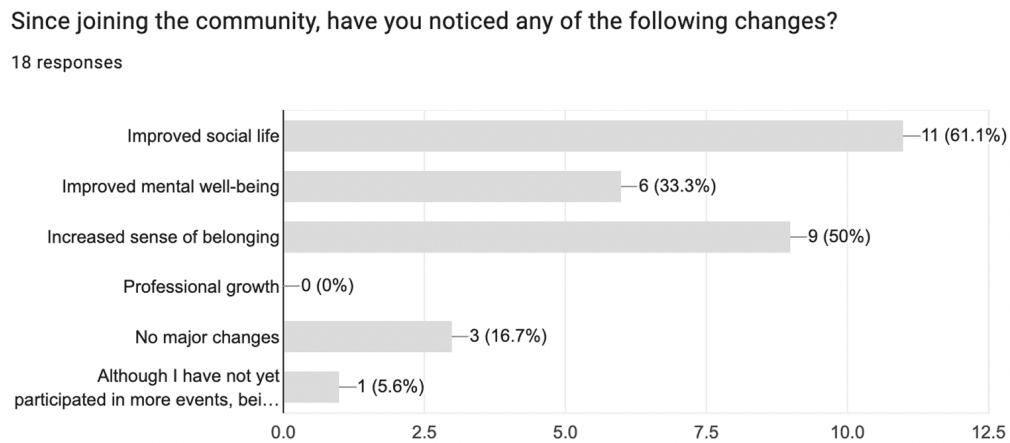


Figure 23: Reported impacts of participation in OutGirls Social Club

Descriptive statistics reveal strong networking outcomes for OutGirls Social Club members: 72% of respondents reported making some connections, and another 22% indicated they had formed friendships. Only about 17% said they had not really expanded their network through the community.

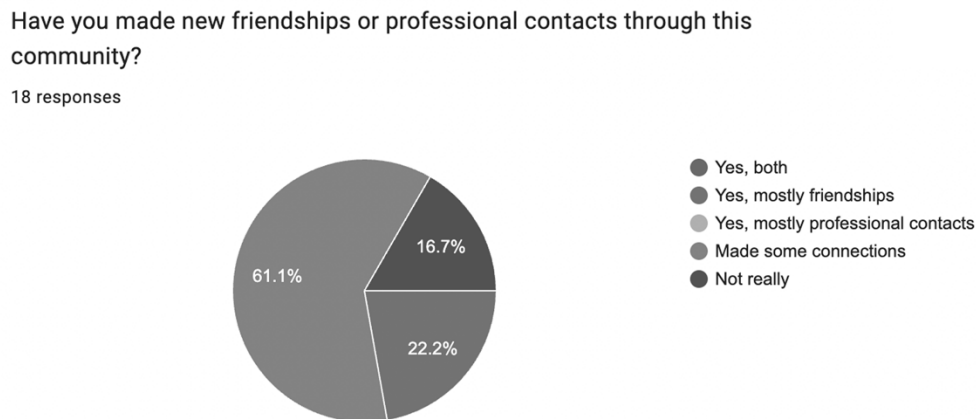


Figure 24: Networking outcomes reported by OutGirls participants

Further emphasizing these outcomes, nearly two-thirds of participants (67%) rated, on a scale from 1 to 5, that the events helped them feel much more socially connected in Strasbourg, selecting a score of 4 or 5 and indicating a high or very high benefit. Specifically, 39% chose 4 and 28% selected the

maximum rating of 5. Very few participants gave low scores: 17% rated the impact as 2, another 17% as 3, and none rated it as 1.

Together, these results highlight that membership in OutGirls is strongly associated with both expanding social networks and increasing subjective feelings of social connectedness, showing the club's effectiveness as a bridge for integration and belonging among international women in Strasbourg.

On a scale from 1 to 5, how much have these events helped you feel more socially connected in Strasbourg?

18 responses

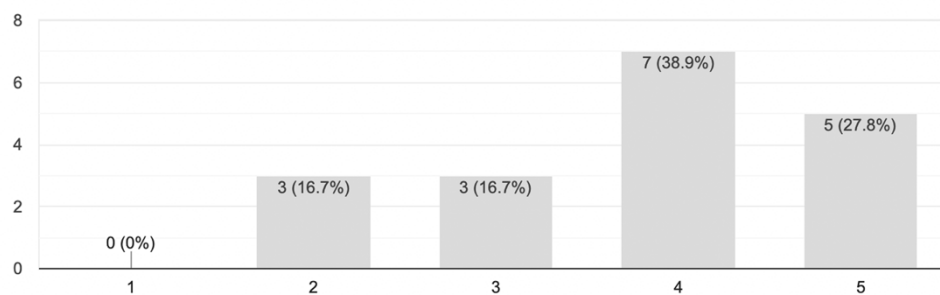


Figure 25: Reported impact of OutGirls on social connectedness

Qualitative feedback further reinforces the community's value. Members of OutGirls highlighted what they found most valuable about the community in their own words: *"Very easy, non intimidating, free atmosphere to talk,"* and *"Makes me feel like I am going out there and making efforts to make friends, but it doesn't feel like efforts because it's also fun."* Others described *"a quality time and new connections plus it motivated me to start running regularly,"* *"having fun while making connections,"* and found reassurance in *"feeling like there always is someone a text away for advice, recommendations, a simple drink out or a run."*

Several appreciated the *"diversity of events (something for every interest), the easiness of booking a pre-organized event, the calm and peaceful and diverse vibe and woman empowerment behind it."* Respondents also celebrated *"the diversity of women from all ages, professions and nationalities,"* and the *"ability to spend time with inspiring girls, as well as feeling of being included."* For some, the highlight was *"having a dinner of meaningful conversations with inspiring women and reflect through questions on my thoughts"*, showing that OutGirls is valued for both genuine friendship and opportunities to connect, belong, and grow.

### 9.1.3. Statistical significance of the results

When analyzing survey results, it is essential not only to report descriptive statistics but also to assess the dependencies between key variables using correlation analysis. For this study, the statistical

analysis was performed using Python, which provided an efficient framework for data cleaning, transformation, and correlation computation. The full analysis process and code can be accessed in the accompanying **Jupyter Notebook**: [link](#).

For this study, the Spearman correlation coefficient was selected as it evaluates monotonic relationships between ordinal or non-normally distributed variables making it well-suited for survey data rated on Likert-type scales or when assumptions of linearity and normality are not met (Schober, Boer and Schwarte, 2018, pp. 4–5). The Spearman correlation ranks the data and measures the strength and direction of association between two variables, with coefficients ranging from -1 (perfect negative relationship) to +1 (perfect positive relationship) (Schober, Boer and Schwarte, 2018, pp. 4–5). Alongside, the p-value tells whether the observed correlation is statistically significant (with a value below 0.05 indicating significance) (Andrade, 2019).

In this analysis, a statistically significant correlation was found between the frequency of event attendance and participants’ reported sense of belonging (Spearman’s  $r=0.59$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.011$ ). A positive Spearman coefficient of 0.59 indicates a moderate to strong monotonic association: as the frequency of event attendance increases, the likelihood of reporting a stronger sense of belonging also rises. The p-value of 0.011 means this finding is statistically significant at the conventional 5% threshold, providing strong evidence that the relationship is unlikely to be due to random chance. In practical terms, this result shows that women who regularly engaged with OutGirls Social Club were much more likely to report meaningful gains in their sense of belonging within the community, compared to those who participated less often. This statistical insight underscores the value of frequent engagement in community activities for promoting inclusion and social connection among international women.

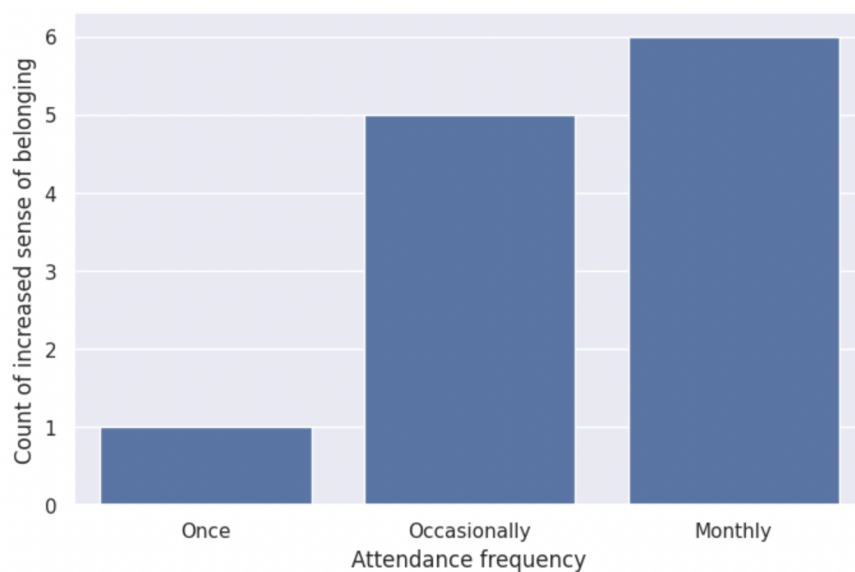


Figure 26: Relationship between attendance frequency and increased sense of belonging

A statistically significant Spearman correlation was also found between event attendance frequency and participants who reported making new friends since joining the community (Spearman’s  $r = 0.65$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.004$ ). This coefficient of 0.65 reflects a strong, positive monotonic association: women who participated in OutGirls Social Club events more regularly were much more likely to say they had formed new friendships in the community. The  $p\text{-value}$  of 0.004 indicates that this relationship is statistically significant at well below the 0.05 threshold, providing confidence that the observed pattern is not a result of random variation.

In detail, this means as attendance increased from “once” to “occasionally” to “monthly” or more, the likelihood of reporting new friendships rose consistently. This pattern further highlights the importance of regular, structured engagement in fostering both social capital and tangible relational outcomes within migrant and international women’s communities.

The plots below illustrate the relationship between event attendance and making new friends. The first chart shows the raw count of women in each attendance category who reported making friends, while the second chart displays the proportion of participants within each group who did so, demonstrating that higher attendance frequency is associated with a substantially greater likelihood of forming new friendships.

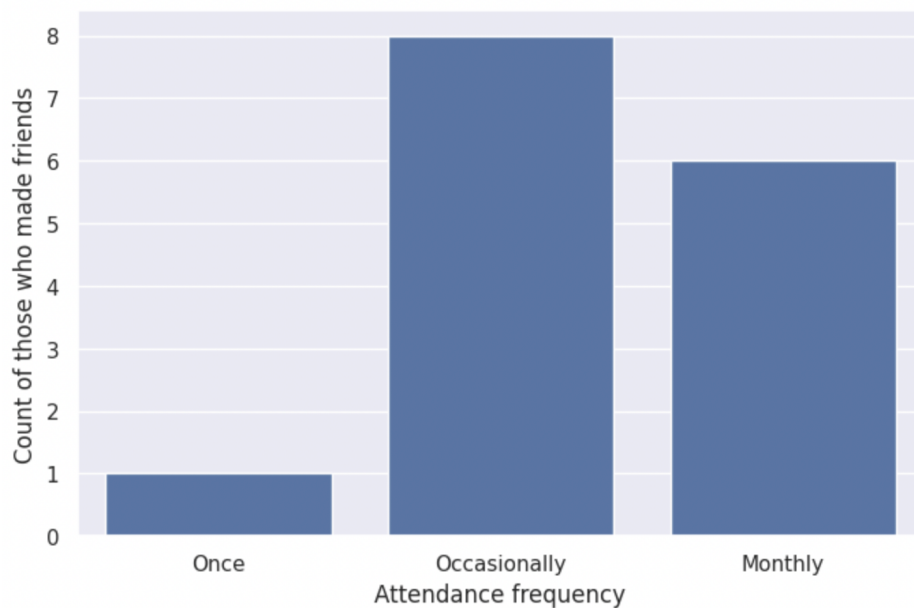


Figure 27: Count of those who made friends by attendance frequency

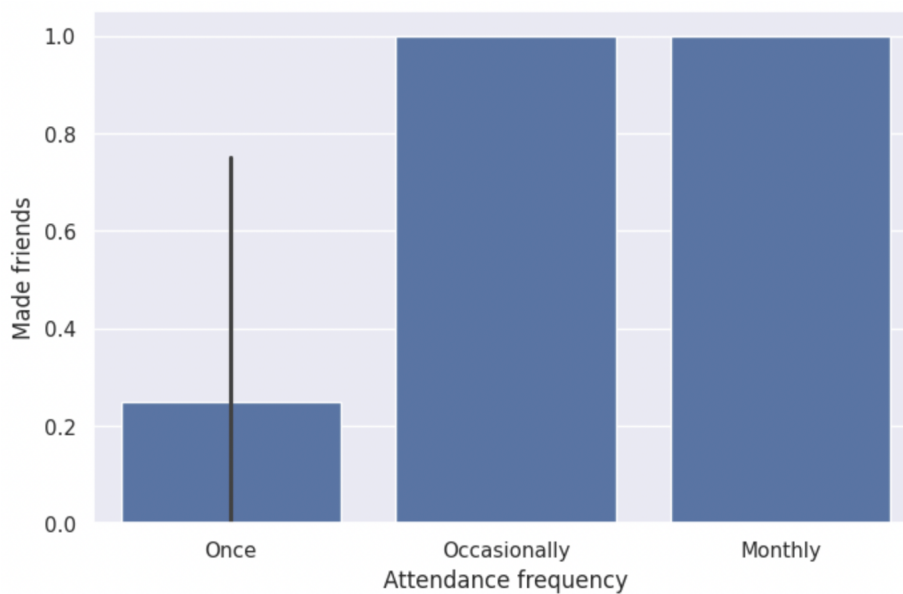


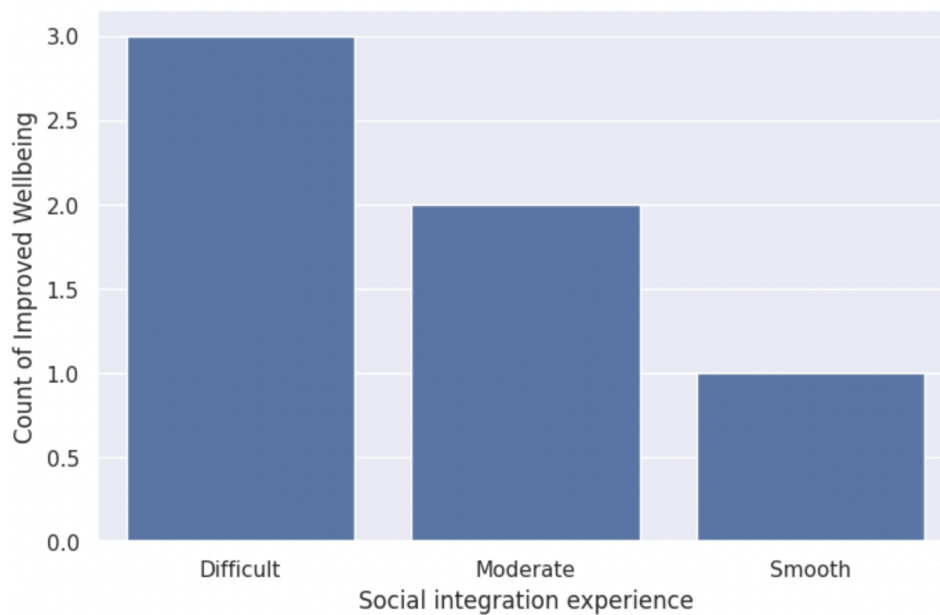
Figure 28: Proportion of respondents who made friends by attendance frequency

Applying the impact model, these results show a trajectory from concrete activities (events, workshops, discussions) to outputs (friend networks, event engagement, resource access) and, ultimately, to key outcomes: greater social confidence, increased well-being, new friendships, stronger cultural belonging, and new professional opportunities. These outcomes make a tangible difference in members' capacity to adapt, participate, and thrive within their new environment, embodying the short- and medium-term changes that are foundational for long-term integration.

The social integration experience within the OutGirls community provides a key indicator of group well-being and success. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents a very difficult integration experience and 5 indicates a very smooth integration process, the group currently reports an average score of 3.39, a level that reflects moderate to good integration overall. Most participants gave a rating of 3 or 4, with some reaching the maximum of 5, and the lowest reported value was 2. Monitoring the mean integration score is important: it offers a clear, quantifiable picture of how members experience social inclusion and highlights the ongoing impact of group activities in supporting members' integration journeys.

Notably, many participants who reported greater difficulty with social integration were also most likely to experience improvements in well-being. As integration experiences become smoother, the number of participants reporting further well-being gains declines, suggesting that those who start with the most significant integration challenges receive the most tangible benefit. This relationship is supported by a statistically significant negative Spearman correlation ( $r = -0.51$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ), confirming that well-being benefits from community participation are strongest for women facing the biggest social integration barriers. This pattern demonstrates the unique value of OutGirls for those

who need it most, while also highlighting how targeted support can make a measurable difference in well-being.



*Figure 29: Relationship between social integration experience and reported improvements in well-being*

In summary, this chapter demonstrates that OutGirls Social Club provides clear and statistically significant benefits for international women in Strasbourg. Frequent participation in community events is strongly linked to increased feelings of belonging and the formation of new friendships. Women facing the greatest integration challenges report the most pronounced improvements in well-being, showing that OutGirls plays a crucial role in supporting those with higher barriers to inclusion. Overall, regular engagement in this supportive community fosters meaningful connection, builds social networks, and drives positive change for its members.

## **9.2. Qualitative results**

To supplement the quantitative findings, qualitative data were gathered to gain a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences and the ways community participation affects social integration. The qualitative phase aimed to capture the nuances, emotions, and personal meanings that survey data alone cannot fully express. Through in-depth interviews, participants shared their motivations, challenges, and their perceptions of the OutGirls Social Club's impact on their personal, social, and professional lives. This section explains the methodological approach, coding process, and key findings from these interviews, showing how individual stories contribute to broader integration outcomes.

### ***9.2.1. Interview procedure and data processing***

To capture the lived experiences of participants with sufficient detail and accuracy, each interview was recorded with prior consent. This ensured that no relevant information was lost and allowed the researcher to focus on the flow of the conversation rather than extensive note-taking. Following the interviews, all recordings were transcribed into text. These transcripts were then systematically organized into a tabular format, with responses structured by question to facilitate comparative analysis across participants.

The transcription process aimed to retain the richness of participants' narratives while minimizing distortions. Raw transcripts were only lightly edited, with the removal of filler words, repeated hesitations, or obvious mis-transcriptions. This approach, commonly referred to as clean verbatim transcription, preserves the substance and meaning of participant accounts while enhancing readability and analytical clarity (Hill *et al.*, 2022). Subsequently, the transcripts were examined manually to generate an initial set of descriptive codes. This stage involved iteratively reviewing the material and capturing key words or short phrases that closely reflected participant language. These preliminary codes were then organized into a codebook, which formed the foundation for systematic qualitative analysis.

The results presented in this chapter were derived using the Gioia methodology, a structured framework for qualitative data analysis that emphasizes transparency and rigor (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2012). The analysis followed three key stages. First, first-order concepts were identified, staying close to participants' own words and expressions. Next, these concepts were grouped into second-order themes, representing broader patterns and recurring challenges, motivations, or impacts identified across cases. Finally, the second-order themes were distilled into aggregate dimensions, higher-level categories that provided theoretical structure to the findings. This approach ensured that the voices of participants were not only preserved but systematically integrated into a robust analytical framework. By combining careful data preparation with a transparent coding process, the analysis provides both descriptive richness and conceptual clarity in understanding the integration experiences of international women and the role of OutGirls in shaping them.

A total of **11 participants** were interviewed, generating **78 distinct coding categories**. The results presented in the following section highlight both the challenges faced by international women and the ways in which participation in OutGirls shaped their social integration trajectories. A codebook-driven Gioia procedure, together with an audit trail and reflexive memos, was used to ensure the analysis was consistent and transparent (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2012). Thematic saturation appeared near the final interviews, with minimal emergence of new first-order codes, indicating adequacy of sample size and analytic rigor.

**The full interview transcripts and the corresponding codebook are available via the following link: [link](#).**

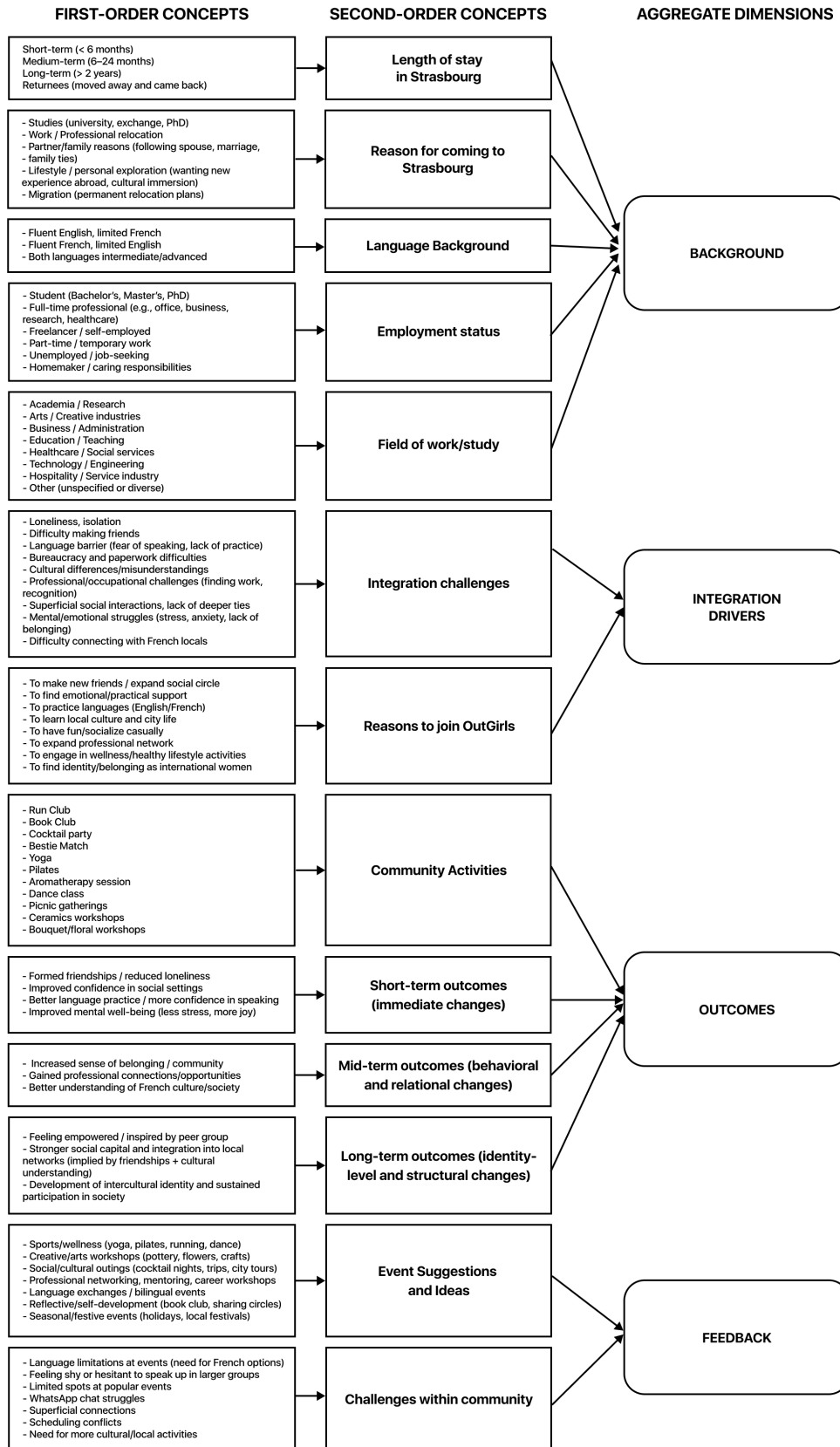


Figure 30: Conceptual framework of collected qualitative data (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2012)

The conceptual framework developed through the Gioia methodology organizes participant data into three analytical levels: first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2012). At the base level, first-order concepts capture participants' own words and experiences, such as feelings of loneliness, language difficulties, or enjoyment of specific activities. These were then clustered into second-order concepts, which represent broader thematic categories, such as integration challenges, reasons for joining, or short-term outcomes. Finally, these themes were distilled into aggregate dimensions, namely Background, Integration Drivers, Outcomes, and Feedback, which provide a higher-order structure for interpreting the data.

This framework reflects a systematic progression from descriptive detail to conceptual abstraction, ensuring both the richness of participant voices and analytical clarity. Importantly, it also aligns with the Impact Model: inputs and participant backgrounds provide the foundation; integration drivers act as motivating conditions; community activities translate into outputs; and outcomes capture immediate, mid-term, and long-term changes, while feedback informs adaptive learning (Vogel, 2012). In this way, the coding framework not only organizes interview data but also directly maps onto the stages of the Theory of Change, providing coherence between lived experiences and evaluation structures.

**In addition, to derive basic descriptive statistics from the qualitative dataset, the coding table was transformed into a binary matrix:** [link](#). Codes were placed in the first row as column headings, and each row represented an individual participant's responses. For every participant, a value of 1 was assigned when a specific code was relevant to their answer, and 0 when it was not. This allowed the frequency of codes to be calculated across participants and provided a complementary quantitative perspective to the qualitative findings, enabling more nuanced analysis of recurring patterns.

### ***9.2.2. Background of participants***

The study involved 11 international women living in Strasbourg or nearby cities, representing diverse migration trajectories, cultural backgrounds, and occupational statuses. To ensure sufficient familiarity with the community and its activities, all interview participants had been members of OutGirls for at least four months and had attended a minimum of three events prior to the interview. This criterion ensured that responses reflected sustained engagement rather than first impressions.

Participants originated from countries including Ukraine, Tunisia, Germany, Russia, Poland, North Macedonia, and Serbia, with varying lengths of stay in France. The majority had resided in France for several years, though some were more recent arrivals, and their occupations spanned a range of professional fields such as law, therapy, marketing, project management, and public service.

For some, the move to France was closely tied to education and professional aspirations. One participant explained: "I came to France five years ago now for my master's degree... and today I work in a wine company as a project manager." Another, with a background in law, described her career shift as part of her relocation: "The story is that I am originally Polish, but for the last 10 years,

I was living in Switzerland and working... At some point, I just applied for a job here in the Council of Europe... Long story short, I got the job and I had to decide whether I want to take it or not.” Others highlighted experiences of displacement and forced migration. One woman from Ukraine described her journey in detail: *“I was living in Ukraine. Then I originally moved to France because of the war. So straight away when the war began, I moved to France because I had a boyfriend in Paris ... I came to Paris, and after a couple of months, I found a job as a nanny.”*

One recurring theme was relocation linked to family ties and romantic partnerships. A significant share of the women interviewed described moving to Strasbourg in order to join or support partners, or because of existing family connections in the city. One participant explained how her connection to Strasbourg was rooted in family history, even though most of her life had been spent abroad: *“My family is in Strasbourg. But most of the time is spend in US, New York... So we go on and off for a few months here and there.”* Another described how a relationship was the decisive factor in her move: *“...I moved to Strasbourg for personal reasons due to my boyfriend’s job.”* A similar narrative came from another participant who emphasized that her relocation followed her partner’s invitation to settle in Strasbourg together: *“... I moved to study in the Erasmus program in Lille. And during my studies in Lille, I met my future husband, and he invited me to move to Strasbourg together.”* Notably, not all participants were newcomers. One participant, who was born in Strasbourg, described how her engagement with OutGirls was shaped less by migration and more by her interest in cross-cultural exchange: *“I am french originally from Strasbourg, but I was travelling for a while abroad in Australia, Spain and other countries. For me, it's a bit special because I'm from here...I really want to recreate the experience of being abroad and to meet new people...”*

Overall, the participants’ backgrounds illustrate the diversity of international women’s migration experiences. While their motivations varied, from education and employment to forced displacement or personal relationships, they all described navigating challenges of belonging, professional recognition, and social adaptation. This diversity of trajectories provided a rich foundation for analyzing how OutGirls shaped processes of integration across different starting points.

### **9.2.3. Challenges for social integration**

Across the interviews, the most consistently reported difficulty was making friends in the host country. All eleven participants (100%) identified this as a central challenge. As one woman recounted: *“It was hard to find a group of people with whom I can relate, actually. It was hard because everyone is very young... sometimes it’s hard to find people who know what it is to live abroad.”*

This difficulty was closely tied to broader feelings of loneliness and isolation, described by eight participants (73%). One reflected: *“Homesickness appeared. Because in Paris, I already had a base of friends. Here, I was just home alone. I was lonely.”* Another explained how cultural barriers made integration more difficult: *“The thing is that in my experience, the French are very clicky. They're very much into their groups, and it's very hard to get into their groups. Afterwards? My issue is that*

*for the French in Strasbourg, I'm not very French, and I never really belonged. And I always felt like I preferred international girls because I have more in common with them, because I'm more international than I am French in some respects. And usually when I'm in Strasbourg by myself, I feel very alone, very isolated. It's very hard to make friends. It's very hard to feel included, to feel young, to feel like you can exchange ideas and feel like you belong to something."*

For many participants, the absence of established support networks left them vulnerable to emotional distress, including stress, anxiety, and a diminished sense of belonging. Mental and emotional struggles were reported by the same proportion of participants (73%), underscoring the psychological weight of migration. As one woman put it: *"At some point, I had an existential crisis: 'Why am I here? I can't find a job. I can't find friends. Maybe this is not my country.'"*

Language barriers emerged as another significant obstacle and were reported by seven participants (64%). Respondents commonly described a fear of speaking, limited opportunities for practice, and reduced confidence in everyday interactions. One participant recalled: *"For the first almost three years, I was very hesitant to speak French. I was not confident... I did not have a good time during parties or social events because obviously everyone would speak French. And even if I said, 'Oh, can you speak English for me?' They would speak English for five minutes, and then they would go back to speak in French again."* Another participant complained about the language preferences of locals: *"The French people prefer speaking French, but there are a few helpful people that sometimes can tell you something in English."* These quotes underscore the critical nature of language as a barrier to social integration and highlight the psychological burden of struggling to communicate fluently within the host community.

Professional and occupational challenges were equally salient (64%), often linked to difficulties in finding work or having qualifications recognized in France. These barriers contributed to broader concerns about underemployment and financial insecurity. One participant reflected on her experience: *"For me, I had the most challenging period was when I was searching for a job, say six years ago. And that's when I learned that networking and community is really important..."* Another shared: *"I didn't know who to contact, where to find the job offers, how it works here in this region... How are the steps? What is the procedure to find a job here?"*

A further set of challenges related to social interaction with locals. Six participants (55%) expressed frustration at the superficial nature of social encounters or at the difficulty of forming deeper, more meaningful ties with French people: *"The thing is that in my experience, the French are very clicky. They're very much into their groups, and it's very hard to get into their groups... And I always felt like I preferred international girls because I have more in common with them..."* While less universal, issues such as bureaucratic complexity (45%) and cultural misunderstandings (36%) were still reported frequently enough to highlight the diverse and multi-layered nature of integration challenges. Taken together, these findings illustrate that international women in this study navigated both structural barriers (e.g., language, employment, bureaucracy) and relational ones (e.g., loneliness, difficulty connecting with locals), with clear consequences for mental health and well-being.

Table 6: Reported integration challenges from interview data

<i>Integration challenge</i>	<i>Number of interviews</i>	<i>Percentage of interviewees</i>
Difficulty making friends	11	100.0%
Loneliness, isolation	8	72.7%
Mental/emotional struggles (stress, anxiety, lack of belonging)	8	72.7%
Language barrier (fear of speaking, lack of practice)	7	63.6%
Professional/occupational challenges (finding work, recognition)	7	63.6%
Superficial social interactions, lack of deeper ties	6	54.5%
Difficulty connecting with French locals	6	54.5%
Bureaucracy and paperwork difficulties	5	45.5%
Cultural differences/misunderstandings	4	36.4%

#### **9.2.4. Motivations for joining OutGirls**

The decision to join OutGirls was mainly motivated by the desire to make new friends and expand social circles. All participants (100%) emphasized this as their primary reason for participation. As one member put it: *“Just make new friends and make new connections... But it was just to make friends. And I got close to a few of the girls, including Marie. She and I, we got really close through books, actually. It's fun... So I was very happy about that. It's just feeling included, not feeling alone, not feeling so much like an adult who has to adult all the time.”*

Closely linked to this were motivations related to socializing and enjoyment (91%), and the search for emotional and practical support (82%). Participants described OutGirls as a safe space: *“I think all of the above because I wanted to meet new people. This was one of the ways that helped me meet new people... The second thing would be to grow a network here, so also professionally, and also to relax and to be in a safe space with girls that probably share either the same struggles or the same challenges in life and everything. I would say all of the above.”* The community provided a nonjudgmental space for sharing challenges: *“Yes, I have met a lot of different people through these events. And it's also nice that... I think you have managed to create a safe space, almost. I don't know*

how, but maybe it's also the women who do bring that energy, where you feel comfortable in sharing your own thoughts. And at least I didn't ever feel like, Oh, I can't talk or I don't feel comfortable in saying something. So that's really nice.” Other significant motivations included seeking a stronger sense of identity and belonging as international women (64%). One woman said: “Mainly, let's say, it's really to have a good time, a good time that really feels true to myself... Make new friends. And grow professionally, I think it's not my primary goal, but I would also be open to it. I find it inspiring because most of the women in this community have very different backgrounds... I found that every time that I was at an event, I met interesting people with interesting jobs or lifestyles.” Language practice and learning about other cultures were also mentioned: “Yes. First of all, practice English because my English is now so poor. I need to improve my English because I use only French...”

Professional networking was highlighted as well (54.5%), as the group was seen as a source of inspiration and career advice: “To be honest, a bit of everything. It's a nice thing to do, to socialize with people, maybe have long-lasting friendships come from it, even professional, like acquaintances... You sometimes need your friends to help you with your job search... It's always good to have a small community.”

Finally, 36.4% cited the desire to learn more about French culture and everyday life: “... And to rediscover the city as well with new eyes because for me, I love to explore... It's so refreshing and so funny to see how people from abroad see it...”

Table 7 summarizes the reported reasons for joining the OutGirls community.

Table 7: Reported reasons for joining OutGirls Social Club

<i>Reason to join Outgirls</i>	<i>Number of interviews</i>	<i>Percentage of interviewees</i>
To make new friends / expand social circle	11	100.0%
To have fun/socialize casually	10	90.9%
To find emotional/practical support	9	81.8%
To practice languages (English/French)	7	63.6%
To find identity/belonging as international women	7	63.6%
To expand professional network	6	54.5%
To engage in wellness/healthy lifestyle activities	6	54.5%
To learn local culture and city life	4	36.4%

### 9.2.5. Short-term outcomes

Participation in OutGirls Social Club led to meaningful short-term improvements in the lives of participants, as evidenced by their interviews. Many described forming new friendships or connections almost immediately, such as one member who said, *“Yeah. A lot of the girls. Yeah. And when I came back for the boat event, a lot of the girls, we recognized each other. I was happy to see a lot of them. And it just felt very easy and fun... So you have friends already in the city, and you're coming back to go out with somebody, even just spontaneously.”* Others shared how OutGirls events resulted in spontaneous catch-ups, one-on-one meetings, and lasting relationships: *“I met two people, you and Maria, that became my friends, definitely. Then I also met other people that has common interest... The first time we met was through the chat... So we kept texting each other.”* Many noted that these emerging connections extended outside of organized events, from meeting for coffee to finding activity partners like tennis or running.

The club was often credited with helping participants feel significantly less isolated and contributing to an immediate sense of belonging. As one put it, *“I just felt less alone because otherwise I wasn't seeing many people my age... And it just made me feel young again... This allowed me to have fun.”* Another described, *“Yes, definitely. It was more the sense of belonging and the fact that we can share same experiences. There are as well expats who share the same struggles. I think this is what unites people sometimes.”* These changes also extended to a sense of practical support and everyday confidence, with participants frequently mentioning that they now knew whom to ask for help, ranging from practical advice about local life to personal support. *“Well, definitely it helped this feeling of belonging and also knowing that if you need help for anything... since we know each other a little bit, I definitely trust these people with those things. So yeah, definitely a feeling of home and safety about any topic.”*

Participants also highlighted the immediate emotional impact, such as feeling happier, re-energized, and more hopeful about building a network in Strasbourg: *“For me... after this [Pilates] class, and during this class, this place was discovered by me from another side. It was so important for me to discover Strasbourg like a new place. I think I'm feeling more home...”* A few mentioned that while deeper integration with locals would take more time, the foundation for support and lasting connections was being established quickly: *“... I have met people, yes, who I would like to meet again. Of course, friendships take time. So you have to meet many times. I'm hoping that it will develop further. But yes, I've definitely met some really interesting people who I would want to keep in touch with”.*

Overall, short-term outcomes included new friendships, reduced loneliness, a greater sense of belonging, practical support, and early steps toward building a more connected and active life in Strasbourg.

### 9.2.6. *Mid-term outcomes*

Mid-term outcomes are measured through targeted interview questions on integration and participation. Specifically, participants are asked whether the community has helped navigate challenges related to settling in, adapting to life, or accessing support. Another key dimension is the identification of any professional or collaborative opportunities accessed through the OutGirls network. These responses capture both practical integration, such as receiving advice, making local contacts, or navigating local systems, and psychosocial integration, including feelings of belonging, confidence, and support. Mid-term outcomes are conceptualized as the shift from short-term emotional relief and initial friendships to routine participation, increased mutual support, proactive help-seeking, and the emergence of professional or collaborative exchanges within the community.

Participation in OutGirls Social Club in the mid-term brought about a range of deeper benefits for members, going beyond initial feelings of connection. Many women reported a growing sense of belonging and confidence in navigating life in Strasbourg. One member shared, *“I couldn’t say that I used the community for [practical support]. Maybe more in the future, but definitely to get more of a sense of belonging. I think that was the theme of me joining... I know that it’s rather a safe place to ask for advice or practical questions that we can be sure of.”* Integration was enhanced as women saw themselves as part of an international community, with one participant emphasizing, *“It was so important for me to integrate the community, to feel with another who are like me, international community.”*

Several participants highlighted emotional support, noting how OutGirls contributed to a more stable and positive outlook: *“I have a lot of fun every time that I’m hanging out with the OutGirls. I mean, this is also important for a stable life, let’s say, or settled life.”* Others described the club as a resource for practical advice, even if they hadn’t personally needed help yet: *“I saw that if I have a question... there is always someone online, I feel. Because it’s always quick to answer.”*

A strong perception of support, even among those less likely to ask for it directly, reinforced the community’s value. As one woman described, *“I think because I have seen other girls asking for advice on the group. I think it is a platform that could be useful for advice about different things, but I myself have never asked anything on the group, so I can’t say that it has helped me in that way. But it has helped me in the sense that whenever I am feeling sad and a bit hopeless that, Oh, I don’t have many friends, or something like that, knowing that this group is there, or whenever I’m feeling like that, maybe you put a message that, Oh, this is a new event that we have coming in two weeks. That makes me feel good.”*

As connections deepened, women described a shift from casual acquaintances to genuine friendships and professional networks. Several interviewed women indicated that meeting ambitious peers motivated them to pursue master’s studies, job applications, or new projects, with one recounting, One member reflected, *“But then, I think what at least influenced me in a way, is that all the girls, well, almost majority of girls, have really cool jobs. They work in somebody in IT, somebody in a restaurant, quite a lot in the parliament. Those are cool jobs. For me, job was something very*

*important. I'm trying to prove myself and I don't succeed. ...being around all the girls who are motivated to do something cool in life, I'm like, Me too... I should do it as well.* Professional opportunities also began to emerge, with stories of collaborative workshops, sharing job leads, and networking in fields ranging from human rights to travel. One participant said, *"I met someone from the Courts of Human Rights... It's interesting to make a connection like this."* Others saw great potential: *"I haven't started a business with anyone from the community, but let's say I'm open to it. ...I know that it's the right place to find the right people."* Regular attendance and participation helped some members feel more integrated with city life, as repeated encounters with familiar faces cemented a sense of routine and community.

In general, mid-term outcomes included growing networks, greater inclusion, emotional security, and increased aspirations, showing that OutGirls played an active role not only in day-to-day well-being but also in promoting proactive steps toward personal growth, professional development, and long-term integration.

### **9.2.7. Long-term outcomes**

Long-term outcomes for OutGirls Social Club were measured through participant reflections on lasting changes, using qualitative interview prompts specifically focused on empowerment, sustainability, and social integration. Participants were asked about changes in confidence, career direction, sense of belonging, professional networks, social roots, and their motivation to stay longer in Strasbourg. Hosting and organizing events was explored separately, with questions on the skills gained and personal or professional impact.

Many interviewees described significant changes in self-confidence, emotional autonomy, and personal growth. As one reported, *"I think more courage and self confidence appeared in me because I saw that I can speak with people and it's actually fun and easy because normally I am very shy and I'm terrified of people... now it's way easier for me to talk to new people, do new acquaintances... believe, encourage in myself because I'm like, Okay, I can do better jobs. I can do better stuff... you have all the examples of girls who can, and that for me too."* Several members noted the development of an independent self-identity, stating, *"Also, the fact that I had some more life apart from my boyfriend also gave this a bit, I don't know, reassurance... feeling that, Okay, I am my own person as well."*

Professional and career-related transformations were reported, with one participant explaining, *"It was mostly a sense of direction in my career because it opened my eyes regarding... connecting people and being very comfortable to speak whatever language in front of many people, share ideas, being open-minded. It's something that I didn't use in my previous job... now I feel like this has to be used in the next job that I'm doing."* Many highlighted the inspiration they drew from others, particularly women in male-dominated fields: *"There is a load of role models in this community... There's a lot of women being super independent, being super happy about their life...and having a sense of*

*growing up, being always more healthy and everything, pushing you above... Being examples for your career, but also personal growth.”*

A key component of long-term integration within the OutGirls Social Club was a growing desire among members to settle down in Strasbourg for a longer period. Social roots and a stronger sense of belonging surfaced repeatedly. Members described a broadened knowledge of Strasbourg’s cafés and spaces, a sense of being included and welcomed. Statements such as *“I feel like home here now because I have my community, I have my friends here and you showed me new places that also became mine,”* and *“social roots in the city is my best point, I think. I feel like less depression because I need the support and I need the recognizing maybe of my problems, of my challenges of the life to share with somebody. And I think I have more positive vibes in my life right now,”* attest to the transformative emotional effect of the club. For many, these social connections and increased well-being contributed directly to viewing Strasbourg as a place worth investing in for the future, making the idea of staying and putting down roots more attractive and realistic.

For hosts and event organizers within OutGirls Social Club, the experience of leading activities produced a range of meaningful and practical outcomes, both personally and professionally. Organizing events required applying and developing skills that were not always used in other areas of life or career, and also inspired several members to consider career changes or further professional development. As one organizer described, *“I loved hosting all of the events that I host because it made me use some of the skills that I never really use in my life and career, which is connecting people and trying to find a sense of common interest... I learned a lot, mostly about organizational skills, I would say. And also how to make space for everyone... That helps to include everyone in the conversation, even people that are more shy, for example, or more introverted.”* Event hosts also reported increases in self-assurance and practical confidence. As another participant reflected, *“I was surprised when I did the workshop that so many of the girls loved it, resonated, because it was my first once... it didn’t boost my confidence a little bit that what doing is useful and that its resonating. So I was happy.”* The positive feedback and real-time engagement from attendees helped hosts see the impact of their efforts and provided reassurance that their contributions were valued. Furthermore, organizing provided a platform to discover or confirm personal strengths, such as motivating others, facilitating group cohesion, and adapting to the needs of both extroverted and more reserved participants. One noted about hosting Run Club, *“I think I’m using skills that I had, but I’ve never had a chance to use them. I love to motivate people and make them feel better... I see when the girls, even though they are super tired in the end, there is a smile on their face, and some of them really coming back because they enjoy that... It gave me an idea, maybe I should do something in that direction, to also know a bit more about my own body and performing sports because I really like it.”* Networking effects were also apparent, as hosts expanded their own community and professional visibility, sometimes receiving referrals or support in their personal projects from event attendees.

Additional outcomes included increased willingness to explore and participate in the city, and a pronounced shift in integration motivation, often linked to the desire to stay longer and invest further in local life. Several members formed close friendships through the community, providing meaningful social ties and everyday support. The community also served as a source of inspiration: one participant gained the confidence to apply for, and was admitted to, a master's program at Strasbourg University; another, motivated by examples set by other members, initiated a career change and began planning a new business venture. The club consistently facilitated these profound changes by helping members build social roots, broaden local knowledge, expand professional networks, and recognize previously unrealized potential for career pivots and new professional directions.

Overall, long-term outcomes already indicate increased empowerment, stronger social and professional networks, emotional resilience, development of soft skills, and a lasting sense of community connection and belonging. OutGirls Social Club fostered broad personal, social, and professional development, nurtured self-identity, strengthened connections, and motivated long-term engagement with the city and new life directions. More robust measurement of these impacts would benefit from tracking a stable cohort of community members over an additional year of club activity and regular event participation, allowing deeper insight into sustained changes and integration effects.

#### ***9.2.8. Summary on the outcomes of participation***

The reported outcomes of participation in OutGirls were highly consistent and positive across the sample. Nearly all participants formed new friendships and saw reductions in feelings of loneliness (91%), as well as a significantly stronger sense of belonging to a community (91%) and increased empowerment inspired by the peer group (91%). Strengthened social capital and broader local integration were also nearly universal, showing how community participation expanded members' networks beyond the group.

Additionally, improved social confidence (72.7%) and enhanced mental well-being, described as reduced stress and increased joy (72.7%), were frequent outcomes. The majority reported developing an intercultural identity and a sustained commitment to social participation (81.8%). Confidence in language use improved for nearly half of the participants (45.5%), particularly through informal and low-pressure opportunities to practice during community activities. Though fewer participants (27%) mentioned a better understanding of French culture and society, this still represents a clear benefit for some. However, the relatively lower proportion suggests that future efforts should place greater emphasis on culturally oriented events and initiatives that foster deeper interaction between international and French participants. Strengthening these cross-cultural exchanges could enhance mutual understanding and support more balanced, two-way integration.

These results highlight that OutGirls served as an effective vehicle for integration, addressing loneliness, lack of belonging, and limited social networks, while also fostering empowerment, intercultural identity, and the accumulation of social capital. Formation of meaningful friendships,

increased willingness to explore and invest in local life, and expanded professional networks were prominent achievements. The club also inspired concrete life changes: participants gained motivation to apply for further education (including successful admission to a master's at Strasbourg University), were encouraged to pursue new business ventures, and discovered fresh confidence in their social and professional potential.

*Table 8: Reported outcomes of participation in OutGirls Social Club*

<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Number of interviews</i>	<i>Percentage of interviewees</i>
Formed friendships / reduced loneliness	10	90.9%
Increased sense of belonging / community	10	90.9%
Feeling empowered / inspired by peer group	10	90.9%
Stronger social capital and integration into local networks	10	90.9%
Development of intercultural identity and sustained participation	9	81.8%
Improved confidence in social settings	8	72.7%
Improved mental well-being (less stress, more joy)	8	72.7%
Gained professional connections/opportunities	8	72.7%
Better language practice / more confidence in speaking	5	45,5%
Better understanding of French culture/society	3	27.3%

As shown in the Impact Model, these outcomes resulted from deliberate inputs like well-designed events, guided networking, and community chat, which fostered consistent participation and rich small-group interactions. The outcome directly led to the development of sustainable social connections, increased confidence, exposure to role models, improved language skills, expanded professional opportunities, and ultimately ongoing integration in both personal and community settings.

When asked whether communities like OutGirls could help other international women integrate more easily, responses were overwhelmingly positive. One member emphasized the practical and emotional support: *“Absolutely. Because if you’re alone in a new place, you don’t know where to go,*

*who to meet, or what to do... If you have a community who knows the ins and outs, who's tried things, it's going to make your integration so much easier and so much smoother.*" Others highlighted the value of a safe, welcoming atmosphere, where everyone is *"very nice and genuine because everybody has the same problems. Everybody wants to connect. So you are coming with an open heart and you are just looking for connection."* Respondents also pointed out that such a network provided critical advice on topics from housing scams to local services, empowered newcomers to explore more of the city, and helped them feel less alone, making integration more accessible and less daunting.

The findings confirm that informal, community-led initiatives such as OutGirls can amplify social integration, accelerate empowerment, and provide multidimensional support that complements formal institutional pathways. Tracking regular event participants over more than one year would enable even better measurement of these long-term outcomes and provide deeper insights into community impact.

### **9.2.9. Outcome gaps and areas for growth**

Despite notable successes, feedback and interview data reveal important gaps between immediate benefits and more sustained integration for OutGirls participants. While nearly all respondents stated that the community helped build friendships, foster well-being, and create a welcoming atmosphere, many expressed a desire for deeper, more stable connections and stronger links to local society.

A recurring theme was the wish for more continuity and regularity in relationships: *"Maybe the only challenge could be that maybe you don't meet the same people necessarily every time, even though there are some people that I met a couple of times... if I think about the very first event that I joined, which was the dinner, I'm not sure that I ever saw one of the girls after, again."* Several highlighted the importance of seeing familiar faces and establishing routine meetups for building trust and depth.

Language remained a partial barrier for some, both in informal socializing and in accessing French-speaking circles. Others signaled a desire for more French-language events to help bridge gaps with locals, noting that *"it would also be nice to have language tandems or some workshops with the language or with writing... to mix it."*

Professional integration was also a frequently mentioned area for further development. While some found connections and inspiration through OutGirls, participants suggested that more targeted initiatives, like mentorship, career-focused workshops, or guidance on navigating local systems, would directly address their needs: *"I think it could be nice as well to try to learn more about the historical parts of the city. Especially because I feel that in the group, most of the girls, they are here for long term. If you plan to stay for long term, it's always nice to understand maybe a bit more, especially in Strasbourg, because we are so close from Germany. I think it could be very interesting."*

Suggestions from respondents were practical and diverse, including more weekday or afterwork events, clearer event scheduling, an expanded range of activity types, recurring wellness and yoga clubs, structured opportunities for language practice, bestie matching by language preference,

mentorship for new arrivals, and more accessible communication channels, such as separated Book Lovers threads and guided city tours. Some advocated for greater use of flyers, a LinkedIn page, or a dedicated website to boost visibility and outreach.

Building on these identified gaps, participants offered a range of practical suggestions to enhance the community’s role in fostering both continuity and deeper integration. The table 9 below summarises these proposals, outlining concrete ideas for diversifying activities, strengthening connections, and broadening OutGirls’ reach.

*Table 9: Suggestions for future development of OutGirls Social Club*

<i>Suggestion</i>	<i>Description</i>
More weekday/afterwork events	Increase event options for those unavailable on weekends
Activity schedule in advance	Publish event calendar earlier for better planning
Expand marketing (flyers, LinkedIn, website)	Broaden visibility in cafés, coworking spaces, EU institutions; create LinkedIn and website
Recurring wellness (Yoga, Pilates)	Make Yoga Club, Pilates regular fixtures, not occasional events
Language tandems or more French-language events	Facilitate FR/EN tandems, create bilingual events to bridge local–international gap
Split Bestie Matches by language preference	Pair participants by preferred language for deeper connections
Mentorship and career-focused workshops	Launch targeted programs for professional integration and advice
Orientation and settling-in support	Offer city tours, support with local bureaucracy, and shared local tips
Peer-led and co-hosted events	Encourage more members to host or organize activities and special interest events
Wellness retreats and outdoor trips	Arrange spa days, nature walks or hikes, or overnight retreats for deeper bonding
Running table dinners and cooking events	Organize home-based shared meals or cooking events to foster more intimate connections
Deeper connections with locals	Seek collaboration with local French-led groups or host integration-focused events

In summary, while participants overwhelmingly reported positive outcomes, they also identified specific areas where the community could improve, especially in strengthening routine connections, supporting language learning, and expanding opportunities for local and professional integration. These suggestions are not just theoretical; they have already begun influencing OutGirls’ growth. The introduction of Bestie Match language-preference pairing, the launch of a dedicated website to enhance outreach, and the creation of a recurring Yoga Club are clear examples of how participant feedback was quickly put into action. This responsiveness shows not only the initiative's flexibility but also its dedication to co-creation with members, ensuring OutGirls continues to develop as a meaningful and sustainable space for integration and empowerment.

### ***9.3. Integrated analysis: comparing quantitative and qualitative results***

The integrated analysis combines findings from the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of how participation in the OutGirls Social Club contributes to integration outcomes. By examining both similarities and differences between the two data sources, this section evaluates the causal assumptions of the Impact Model and clarifies not only whether change occurs, but also how community participation facilitates it (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020).

Across both methods, a consistent pattern emerges: regular participation in OutGirls is strongly associated with an increased sense of belonging, connectedness, and well-being among international women in Strasbourg. Quantitative results show statistically significant correlations indicating that higher attendance predicts a stronger sense of belonging and a greater likelihood of forming new friendships. Qualitative interviews support these findings, with participants consistently describing friendship formation, reduced loneliness, and an immediate sense of emotional safety after joining the community. Together, these findings empirically support the Impact Model's early pathways, confirming that repeated small-group activities generate meaningful relational and emotional benefits. While the survey data show that participation leads to positive outcomes, the interviews provide insight into how these changes occur. Interview data often show perceptions of a welcoming and inclusive environment, which facilitates continued interaction and informal contact among members beyond formal events. These mechanisms closely match the Impact Model's focus on repetition, small settings, and diverse activities as key factors for forming genuine rather than superficial social ties.

Both data sources also indicate that women facing greater barriers to integration experience the most significant benefits. Quantitatively, those reporting higher initial isolation showed the greatest improvements in well-being, while qualitative accounts revealed that participants who initially felt displaced or lonely described deep emotional relief and renewed motivation after engaging with the community. These patterns highlight OutGirls' particular effectiveness in reaching those most in need of social and emotional support. Additionally, survey results show that most participants expanded their social networks (72%), and nearly one in four (22%) formed lasting friendships. Interview accounts demonstrate how these initial connections developed into everyday support systems through regular interaction, shared activities, and professional exchanges. Over time, participants described transitioning from social connections to practical integration, gaining confidence, informal advice networks, and new opportunities. Although the survey primarily captured short- and mid-term effects, interview data suggested longer-term outcomes: participants discussed hosting events, taking on leadership roles, setting clearer professional goals, and developing stronger intentions to remain in Strasbourg. These accounts reflect empowerment, independence, and the formation of lasting social roots.

Despite this overall alignment, two challenges still exist. First, connections with local residents remain limited, with only 27% of participants reporting a better understanding of French culture. Interviewees recommended more bilingual and collaborative events to bridge this gap. Second,

several participants mentioned that meeting different people at each event sometimes made it difficult to develop deeper, ongoing relationships. Structured and recurring small groups could help sustain continuity and strengthen long-term integration.

Overall, the integrated analysis demonstrates a strong convergence between the quantitative and qualitative findings. The statistical results and personal accounts reinforce each other, revealing the same underlying dynamics and outcomes. Quantitative data confirm the strength and significance of observed relationships, while qualitative evidence explains the mechanisms behind them. Together, they provide a coherent and mutually supportive picture that strengthens the validity of the Impact Model and enhances confidence in the study's overall conclusions.

#### ***9.4. Validation of assumptions***

The analysis confirms that the assumptions throughout the Impact Model were largely validated, highlighting the strong internal logic and coherence of OutGirls' project design. The connections between outputs, short-term outcomes, mid-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes follow a consistent, evidence-based path, indicating that the initiative's structure effectively turns participation into real social, emotional, and integration-related changes. Although some challenges related to continuity, local integration, and language accessibility remain, the overall progress from immediate outputs to long-term empowerment and belonging provides solid validation of the project's theory of change.

##### ***9.4.1. Validation of assumptions in the outputs and short-term outcomes relationship***

The assumptions linking outputs to short-term outcomes were mainly supported by both numerical and descriptive data. Event participation and small-group interactions effectively fostered genuine connections rather than superficial ones. The high frequency of sold-out events, repeated attendance, and ongoing communication through the WhatsApp group showed that participants built meaningful social bonds and stayed engaged beyond formal activities. Members consistently reported feelings of emotional safety and belonging, which encouraged openness, sharing, and trust within the community. Regular involvement also led to measurable decreases in loneliness and isolation, as seen in survey results highlighting improvements in well-being and self-reported happiness among active members. However, some challenges appeared, especially in maintaining contact with the same peers across multiple events and ensuring consistent bilingual access. While these issues sometimes limited the depth of connections, the introduction of bilingual formats and recurring core activities greatly reduced these problems, reinforcing the overall support for this assumption.

##### ***9.4.2. Validation of assumptions in the short- and mid-term outcomes relationship***

The progression from short-term to mid-term outcomes was also successfully validated, with clear evidence that early social bonds evolved into routine engagement, mutual support, and increased confidence. Participants who initially described feeling welcomed and emotionally safe later reported greater willingness to take initiative, contribute ideas, and support others, confirming that belonging

and emotional security translated into more active community participation. The club's small-scale, recurring events and online interactions enabled relationships to deepen over time, transforming initial acquaintances into genuine friendships and support networks. These developments also improved members' ability to navigate daily life in Strasbourg more confidently, with several women describing the group as a trustworthy source of both practical and emotional support. However, maintaining consistent interactions with the same participants across events remained a challenge. The introduction of structured mechanisms like the Bestie Match program and more stable event formats helped enhance continuity, but ongoing focus on member retention and relationship depth will further strengthen this stage of the model.

#### ***9.4.3. Validation of assumptions in the mid-term and long-term outcomes relationship***

Both survey and interview data strongly supported the assumptions linking mid-term and long-term outcomes.

Regarding the sustainability of friendships and professional ties, evidence shows that relationships formed through OutGirls extended beyond organized events into personal and professional life, confirming the assumption of lasting social integration. The assumption of growing confidence and autonomy was also validated: many members began hosting events, proposing ideas, and pursuing new professional or educational goals, showing increased initiative and self-efficacy. Findings further support the transferability of skills and experiences, as participants applied organizational, networking, and leadership competencies gained in OutGirls to broader professional and civic contexts. Finally, results confirmed that members developed a stronger attachment to Strasbourg and intentions to remain long-term, though full integration with local French networks remains a continuing challenge.

Overall, these findings verify that the OutGirls model effectively facilitates a gradual and sustainable progression from participation to empowerment and long-term integration

## 10. Results: social integration impact

Building on the outcomes identified through quantitative and qualitative data, it is important to consider how these observable changes relate to broader and more lasting forms of social integration. Theory of Change and Impact Model frameworks provide a clear structure for making this link, tracing how specific community activities evolve into long-term impact (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020). By mapping the sequence from inputs and activities through outputs to short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes, these approaches show how immediate experiences accumulate into sustained transformations such as empowerment, resilience, and integration into local society. Assessing impact, therefore, requires more than describing activities or outputs; it requires a systematic approach to understanding how and why change occurs, with the Theory of Change offering a framework for connecting outcomes to the deeper, cumulative effects of participation (Taplin *et al.*, 2013).

As outlined in the literature review, this study understands social integration as a multidimensional process. Six key dimensions form the basis of measurement: participation in community life through civic, cultural, and voluntary engagement (PRD *et al.*, 2021; OECD/European Commission, 2023); networks and relationships that build bonding ties within groups and bridging ties across groups (Graham-Brown, 2021; Martinez-Damia *et al.*, 2023); a sense of belonging expressed as emotional connection to place, community, and society (Alba and Nee, 1997); well-being and mental health understood as both outcomes and drivers of integration (Hu and Cheung, 2024; Graham-Brown, 2021); cultural adaptation and language acquisition, including host-language proficiency and knowledge of norms (Esser, 2006); and recognition and agency, referring to the extent to which migrants are valued, can express their identities, and exercise influence (Alba and Nee, 1997; Martinez-Damia *et al.*, 2023).

The analysis of short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes shows that the OutGirls community created measurable and cumulative impacts on the social integration of international women in Strasbourg. In the short term, participants reported forming new connections, feeling less lonely, receiving practical support, experiencing a sense of belonging, and feeling welcomed. These results highlight the essential role of community-building in reducing isolation and the lack of local networks, demonstrating that safe, inclusive spaces provide immediate benefits for integration. Over the mid term, these early gains evolved into more structured participation, such as regular attendance, forming genuine friendships, increased confidence and autonomy, and the growth of professional networks. Participants also reported stronger feelings of belonging and the development of intercultural identities. This phase indicates a shift from short-term relief to active engagement with the host society, illustrating that community initiatives support both social support and pathways to cultural and professional integration. In the long run, members reported outcomes with lasting importance: continued social participation, deep roots in the city, emotional resilience, career changes, entrepreneurial efforts, leadership skills, and a stronger desire to stay in Strasbourg. Hosting and organizing events further promoted empowerment and skill development, linking personal growth to

community resilience. These outcomes extend beyond the community itself, encouraging integration into professional, civic, and cultural life.

Figure 31 illustrates the outcome pathway, showing how short-term results of participation develop into intermediate and long-term changes, ultimately leading to measurable social integration impact.

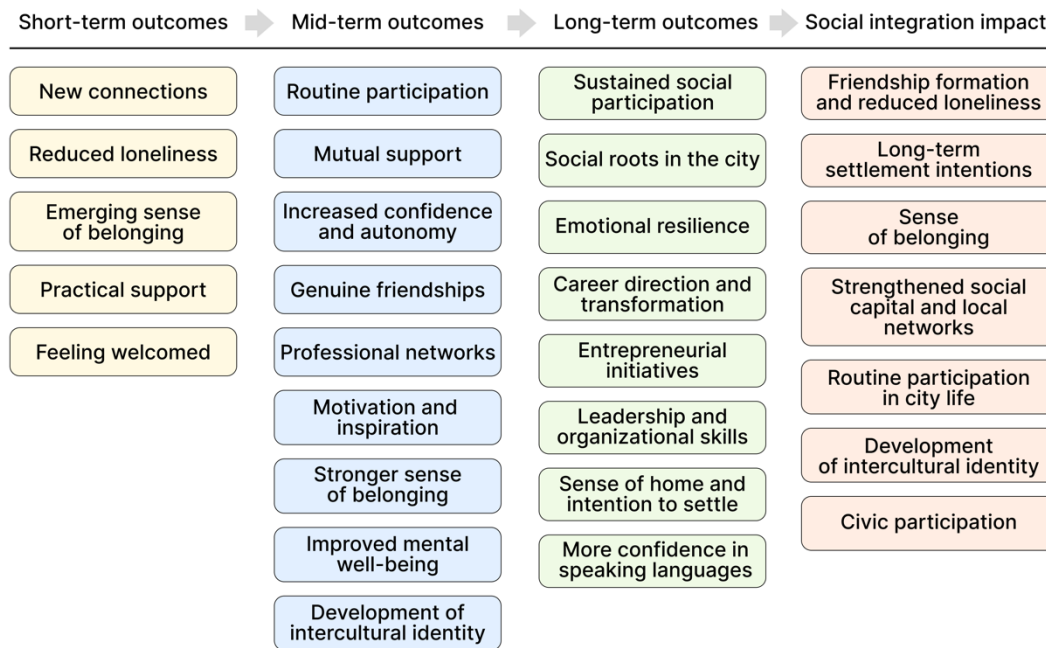


Figure 31: Outcome pathways to social integration impact

Therefore, taken together, the documented outcomes produce a clear social integration impact:

- Friendship formation and reduced loneliness created emotional stability and trust.
- Long-term settlement intentions anchored participants in Strasbourg as a future home.
- An increased sense of belonging strengthened identification with the local context.
- Expanded social capital and networks opened opportunities otherwise out of reach.
- Routine participation in city life reinforced daily engagement with the host society.
- The development of intercultural identity allowed participants to navigate across cultural settings.
- Civic participation demonstrated how grassroots communities can open pathways to wider societal inclusion.

The evidence shows that OutGirls’ impact extends beyond immediate activities. By reducing isolation, building networks of trust, and fostering belonging, the initiative acts as a grassroots driver of social integration. Its role in creating both bonding ties within the international women’s community and bridging ties to the wider local context positions it as a vital mediator in the

integration process, complementing, and in some cases compensating for, the limitations of formal institutional support.

The assumptions linking long-term outcomes to impact were also validated, confirming the strength of the project's overall Impact Model. Evidence from both quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that sustained participation, empowerment, and belonging consistently translated into lasting forms of social integration. Regarding the assumption that empowerment and long-term engagement would lead to stable integration, members reported ongoing participation in local life and increased agency in social and professional settings. Data supporting the idea that a stronger sense of belonging fosters settlement intentions are evident in participants' expressions of emotional attachment to Strasbourg and their desire to remain in the city long term. Finally, the assumption that routine participation reinforces engagement with the host society was validated through members' continued attendance, growing involvement in organizing activities, and increased participation in broader social and cultural life beyond the community itself. Overall, these results confirm that the project's outcomes developed into measurable and lasting impacts on integration.

Ultimately, the impact of the OutGirls Social Club lies in enabling international women in Strasbourg to move from initial isolation toward empowered, resilient, and socially connected lives. By fostering lasting friendships, strengthening intercultural identity, enhancing confidence, and creating a sustained sense of belonging, the community contributes to long-term social roots, emotional well-being, and active participation in local life. In line with Theory of Change and Impact Model (Reinholz and Andrews, 2020), these outcomes converge into measurable social integration impact: international women gaining the networks, agency, and confidence to establish meaningful and enduring lives in their host society.

These results are consistent with earlier research demonstrating that community-based initiatives, peer networks, and friendship groups play a crucial role in enhancing social integration, fostering belonging, and supporting migrants' well-being, particularly for women, across diverse settings and migration contexts (Graham-Brown, 2021; Martinez-Damia et al., 2023; Grishina et al., 2023; Carpiano, 2006; Zhang et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2024).

## 11. Discussion

This research examined how communities support the social integration of international women and how to systematically measure these efforts using an impact model framework. The combination of theoretical insights and empirical results from the OutGirls Social Club in Strasbourg shows both the complexity of integration and the potential of grassroots efforts to create meaningful change.

The literature review emphasized that social integration is multi-dimensional, involving both structural participation in economic, civic, and cultural life and subjective aspects such as belonging, recognition, and well-being (Esser, 2006; Alba & Nee, 1997; OECD, 2023). Integration is not linear but dynamic and collaborative, requiring effort from both newcomers and host societies. The OutGirls case study supported these theoretical ideas: participants experienced practical benefits like expanded networks and increased confidence, while also reporting deeper relational outcomes such as belonging, empowerment, and intercultural identity. The Impact Model and Theory of Change frameworks proved useful in connecting program activities to outcomes at various stages of change. They showed how short-term results like forming friendships and emotional relief can develop into mid-term changes like routine participation and professional networks, and ultimately lead to long-term impacts including leadership, resilience, and settlement goals. By making these pathways clear, the frameworks offered both conceptual clarity and empirical evidence measurability. This progression directly addresses the main research question: communities can effectively support the social integration of international women by creating layered pathways that begin with emotional support and move toward structural inclusion.

OutGirls facilitated both bonding ties, such as friendships and trust within the group, and bridging ties, such as connections to local society, both of which are essential for belonging and opportunity. The impact model proved effective for capturing integration as a process rather than a single outcome, linking activities such as networking events, workshops, and wellness sessions to outcomes including enhanced well-being, stronger social capital, and, over time, durable integration. This structured mapping clarified how participation generated immediate benefits while also laying the groundwork for more lasting transformations. The study also identified relevant indicators for evaluating community-driven integration initiatives. In the short term, these include the number of friendships formed, reductions in loneliness, and a sense of welcome. Over the mid-term, indicators shift toward participation frequency, self-reported confidence, and the development of professional networks. In the long term, intentions to remain in the city, the establishment of social roots, career transformations, and leadership roles provide evidence of sustained impact. Despite these positive findings, the research also highlighted limitations: communities cannot resolve all integration barriers. Structural issues such as recognition of qualifications, childcare constraints, and gendered discrimination remain beyond the full reach of grassroots initiatives. Nevertheless, communities can play a crucial mitigating role by offering support, resources, and a sense of agency that enables international women to navigate these broader challenges more effectively.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that communities such as OutGirls are not secondary but central to the integration process. They create spaces that reduce isolation, build trust, and foster belonging, while also acting as gateways to professional, cultural, and civic participation. The impact model framework allowed these contributions to be systematically documented and measured, providing a roadmap for both research and practice. Ultimately, the study shows that grassroots communities play an indispensable role in supporting international women's integration by fostering the networks, confidence, and resilience necessary for building meaningful and enduring lives in their host societies.

### ***11.1. Effectiveness of community-building through events***

The findings also demonstrate that several interconnected aspects of community-building contribute to the social and professional integration of international women, thereby directly addressing the research question.

First, the creation of safe and inclusive spaces was essential, with small-group formats deliberately chosen to foster intimacy, trust, and meaningful interaction. Regular recurring events, such as the Run Club, Book Club, and Cocktail Party, provided continuity and predictability, while the introduction of occasional new formats maintained novelty and adaptability. This balance of familiarity and variety encouraged sustained participation and engagement. Second, initiatives designed for deeper or personalized interaction, such as the Bestie Match program, proved crucial in enabling one-to-one encounters outside formal events. These meetings lowered barriers for newcomers, facilitated more intimate exchanges, and accelerated the building of trust and friendship beyond the group context. Third, the combination of different event types addressed multiple dimensions of integration. Wellness and sporting activities, such as yoga, Pilates, and running, not only supported physical health but also enhanced mental well-being, confidence, and resilience, factors that directly facilitate social integration (Fei *et al.*, 2023). Intellectual and reflective formats, such as the Book Club, created space for dialogue, self-expression, and intercultural understanding, fostering deeper connections than casual encounters often allow.

Finally, collaborative event design and the blend of online and face-to-face interaction were key to strengthening the community. The encouragement of member-led events reinforced agency and empowerment, while the WhatsApp group extended community life beyond scheduled gatherings, sustaining peer support and informal exchange. Together, these practices facilitated both bonding ties (friendships and solidarity within the group) and bridging ties (connections to local society and professional networks), thereby advancing social integration (Graham-Brown, 2021).

### ***11.2. Challenges and limitations***

While the findings demonstrate the potential of community-based initiatives, several challenges and limitations emerged. The reliance on volunteer leadership and unstable funding streams threatens the

sustainability of initiatives like OutGirls. Although the community was highly effective in reducing loneliness, building friendships, and creating local support networks, its scope remains limited when confronted with broader structural barriers. Challenges such as labor market discrimination, difficulties with the recognition of foreign qualifications, complex bureaucracy, or restrictive legal frameworks lie outside the reach of grassroots initiatives. While communities can provide emotional resilience and peer support to navigate these barriers, they cannot by themselves remove systemic obstacles that require institutional and policy-level responses.

A particularly noteworthy finding was the degree to which participants became active co-creators of the community. Women not only attended events but also shaped activities, organized gatherings, and provided peer-to-peer support. This participatory approach fostered a strong sense of ownership, belonging, and empowerment, as members were not passive recipients but active agents of community life. However, this dynamic also carried risks. Dependence on volunteer energy created vulnerabilities: when a few individuals carried much of the organizational burden, the risk of burnout became significant, and the continuity of the initiative was tied to the personal capacity of its leaders. This highlights the fragility of sustainability when communities lack stable financial or institutional support. Another practical challenge was the importance of cultural awareness in program design. For integration initiatives to resonate fully with participants and foster bridging ties to the host society, activities must be aligned with the cultural rhythms of the local context. Organizers need to take into account national holidays, seasonal events, and local traditions, not only to increase participation but also to foster opportunities for intercultural learning and shared experiences with local residents. Without this alignment, even well-intentioned events risk remaining isolated within the international community, rather than serving as genuine bridges to the host society.

From a methodological perspective, the single-case study design limits generalizability, and the reliance on self-reported outcomes may have introduced positive bias. Nevertheless, the integration of both qualitative and quantitative data helped mitigate this limitation, providing triangulation and strengthening the validity of the results (Yin, 2018).

### ***11.3. Practical implications and recommendations***

The findings highlight that for community organizers, the creation of safe, inclusive, and flexible spaces is essential, with programming that balances regular recurring formats with occasional one-off activities. This balance ensures both continuity and novelty, sustaining engagement while responding to diverse needs. Supporting participant leadership further strengthens ownership and empowerment within the community, but it must be managed carefully to prevent organizer burnout. Rotating responsibilities, co-hosting systems, and offering recognition or skill-building opportunities can help distribute effort more equitably. Equally important is the adoption of gender-sensitive and inclusive practices, such as offering childcare during events, scheduling activities at accessible times for working women, and designing entry points for different language abilities. Trauma-informed facilitation approaches, alongside culturally responsive programming that aligns with local holidays,

traditions, and rhythms of public life, further lower barriers and foster stronger connections with the host society. Communities should also implement ongoing feedback and evaluation systems, combining quantitative measures such as attendance and participation rates with qualitative reflections on belonging, empowerment, and well-being, ensuring adaptability to members' evolving needs.

At the policy level, the study underscores the importance of stable and predictable funding streams that move beyond short-term project grants, as financial insecurity undermines continuity and sustainability. Community organizations should be included in formal integration strategies, recognized as key actors that connect institutions with the real-life experiences of migrants, and supported through collaborative platforms that link grassroots groups, NGOs, and government agencies. Policymakers should also broaden evaluation frameworks, looking beyond structural indicators like employment or education to include subjective outcomes such as belonging, empowerment, and mental well-being, which are central to successful integration but often overlooked. Finally, while grassroots communities can mitigate isolation, foster networks, and build resilience, it is difficult for them to fully resolve structural barriers such as labor market discrimination, recognition of foreign qualifications, or childcare accessibility. Addressing these systemic obstacles at the policy level would enable initiatives like OutGirls to maximize their strengths and deepen their role in supporting international women's integration into local social, cultural, and civic life.

Finally, while this study offers valuable insights into the mechanisms of community-based integration, future research should further examine how similar grassroots models operate in different cultural and institutional settings to determine if the findings are generalizable. Longitudinal studies that follow participants over several years would also be helpful to see how community engagement results in lasting social, professional, and civic integration over time.

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## Appendix

**Ethics statement:** This research was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical principles. Participants gave informed consent, no sensitive or personally identifiable data were collected, and participation was voluntary. Formal ethics approval was therefore not required.

### AI usage documentation:

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools supported multiple stages of this research and its associated community practice. ChatGPT (GPT-5, OpenAI) and Perplexity AI were primarily used for idea generation, conceptual refinement, literature searches, and organizing text. They helped summarize research findings, enhance the coherence and tone of academic writing, and create communication materials like event announcements and outreach messages to increase the visibility of the OutGirls Social Club. Perplexity AI was also used for verifying Python code, clarifying statistical logic, and finding reports and case studies related to female empowerment, social integration, and women's experiences in international settings. Grammarly assisted by providing grammar checks, stylistic improvements, and language polishing to ensure clarity, consistency, and professional readability. The author carefully reviewed, edited, and integrated all AI-generated content to ensure accuracy, contextual relevance, and compliance with academic and ethical standards.

### Overview of tools used:

#### 1) *ChatGPT (GPT-5, OpenAI):*

**Purpose:** Idea generation, refining research structure, editing academic text, summarizing results, and creating social media announcements for the OutGirls Social Club.

### Typical prompts:

1. "Improve an event announcement for OutGirls Yoga Club from this text..."
2. "Give me ideas for potential research assumptions on social integration through community-based clubs."
3. "Help design survey and interview questions based on the project's theory of change and impact model to gather participants' experiences related to social connection, empowerment, and personal well-being."
4. "Help me summarize qualitative findings on social integration outcomes."

**Use of output:** The AI-generated outputs were critically reviewed and selectively adapted. Academic text was rewritten in the author's own words, ensuring conceptual and stylistic alignment with the research. Social media texts were adjusted for tone and context before publication. ChatGPT was also used to help refine phrasing in methods and discussion chapters, while all analytical interpretations remained the author's own. During instrument development, the tool provided linguistic and

structural support in drafting survey and interview questions, ensuring that each question reflected the literature-based social integration indicators. The author then rephrased and finalized these questions, verifying their validity and alignment with ethical and methodological standards.

## 2) *Perplexity AI:*

**Purpose:** Perplexity AI was used primarily to support the verification of Python code and to check the statistical reasoning behind correlation analyses, ensuring methodological accuracy. In addition, it served as a supplementary research assistant for identifying relevant projects, case studies, and reports related to female empowerment, social integration, and women’s challenges in international contexts. The tool was particularly helpful in locating references and examples of community-based initiatives that align with the OutGirls Social Club’s objectives, as well as in clarifying the application of quantitative and qualitative indicators used in similar studies. Perplexity AI also assisted in converting the original survey table into a numerical dataset suitable for statistical analysis in Python.

### **Typical prompts:**

1. “Is my Python code for Spearman correlation written correctly?”
2. “How should I interpret a negative Spearman correlation between integration experience and attendance?”
3. “Find recent projects or case studies related to female empowerment and social integration in Europe.”
4. “Search for reports discussing challenges faced by women in international or multicultural settings.”

**Use of output:** Perplexity AI was used to confirm code accuracy, verify statistical logic, and improve the clarity of data interpretation in the analysis. Its research suggestions helped identify comparable initiatives and relevant literature, which were then cross-checked with academic sources for reliability and citation accuracy. No text was copied directly from the AI outputs into the thesis; instead, they served as background support for refining research understanding, enhancing technical precision, and ensuring that analytical explanations were both accurate and contextually grounded.

## 3) *Happy Scribe:*

**Purpose:** Automatic transcription of semi-structured interviews with members of the OutGirls Social Club.

**Typical input:** Audio recordings from participant interviews were uploaded for transcription.

**Use of output:** The raw transcripts produced by Happy Scribe were manually verified, corrected for transcription errors, and cleaned to prepare data for coding and thematic analysis. No AI-generated interpretations or summaries were used.

### ***Grammarly premium:***

**Purpose:** Grammar correction, punctuation checking, and refinement of academic tone.

**Typical use:** Applied during the final editing stage to ensure language accuracy and consistency.

**Use of output:** Suggestions were selectively accepted to enhance readability and style. No changes were made to the substantive meaning, results, or interpretations of the research.

Therefore, AI tools were used as supportive instruments throughout the research process, from transcription and idea generation to technical verification and stylistic refinement. All outputs were carefully evaluated, manually adjusted, and responsibly integrated. The researcher retained full intellectual ownership of the thesis content, ensuring that all analytical reasoning, data interpretation, and final writing remained original.

### **Reflection on AI usage:**

AI tools significantly improved the efficiency of idea development, the refinement of academic writing, and the precision of statistical analysis in this research. Their use was especially helpful for structuring complex arguments, verifying analytical procedures, and improving the overall clarity and coherence of the text. However, their integration was always guided by a strong commitment to academic independence, critical reflection, and adherence to scholarly standards.

All AI-generated outputs were considered supporting material rather than authoritative sources. The author critically reviewed, verified, and significantly rephrased all AI-generated content before incorporating it. None of the text was accepted verbatim; instead, AI assistance served as an iterative tool to assist thinking, helping to refine structure, and clarify the presentation of results. This approach ensured that the intellectual and analytical contributions remained fully original.

Each tool offered both advantages and limitations. ChatGPT (OpenAI GPT-5) was particularly effective at enhancing clarity, summarizing sections, and exploring alternative phrasings. However, it occasionally generated over-generalized claims or stylistic inconsistencies that required significant human editing. Perplexity AI proved useful for verifying Python code, assessing the statistical validity of correlation analyses, and finding examples of projects related to female empowerment and social integration. Still, some reports and case studies it retrieved were of questionable reliability or came from non-academic sources. This highlighted the importance of verifying all references through peer-reviewed journals or by consulting the original publishers and official project databases to ensure data credibility. Happy Scribe simplified interview transcriptions, though human correction remained essential to ensure accuracy and retain nuance. Grammarly Premium improved grammatical precision but needed careful oversight to maintain an appropriate academic tone and avoid stylistic uniformity.

The experience highlighted the importance of relying on peer-reviewed academic sources, official reports, and verified statistical datasets when supporting theoretical claims or empirical findings. AI outputs, while efficient, cannot replace scholarly evidence or the interpretative rigor required in academic research. Therefore, all theoretical arguments and data interpretations were cross-verified

against scientific journal articles, recognized frameworks, and verified sources to maintain accuracy, reliability, and credibility.

Finally, engaging critically with AI tools underscored the importance of human oversight, methodological awareness, and ethical responsibility. The integration of AI was guided by the author's independent evaluation, ensuring transparency, accuracy, and alignment with academic standards. While AI tools enhanced productivity and supported clarity, the overall quality and integrity of the research ultimately relied on human judgment, scholarly verification, and disciplined critical reflection.