

Mayeli Halin

**Seasons of Identity:
Visual Narratives of Cultural Adaptation and Belonging
through Collaborative Artistic Photography in Finland**

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Abstract

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This thesis responds to the central question: *How can collaborative artistic photography be used as a tool to narrate and visually represent migrant women's cultural identities and processes of adaptation?* Grounded in Art-Based Action Research (ABAR), the study combines visual and written narratives as well as digital mixed-media tools to demonstrate the potential of collaborative methods to represent how folkloric symbols and traditions function as anchors of identity during migration. Four women—three migrants, including the researcher, and one Finnish participant—co-created portraits inspired by their cultural identities and by the contrast with the Finnish seasons as part of their journey toward adaptation and belonging.

The results show that collaborative photography creates a safe space in which creative expression and emotions can be articulated, giving voice to hybrid identities shaped through negotiation, personal relationships, and the emotional dimensions of migration. A blurred space between reality and fantasy becomes the metaphor through which resilience, continuity, and transformation can be visualized. The study concludes that collaborative photography is not only a method of documentation but also an empowering practice that makes personal narratives, cultural roots, and emerging forms of belonging visible and meaningful. This approach also holds potential beyond migration, offering possibilities for community engagement, emotional healing, and empowerment in diverse social contexts.

The outcomes of this research are presented both in written form and through the photographic exhibition *Seasons of Identity: Threads of Magic*, displayed at the Hämärä Gallery at the University of Lapland, from April 28 to May 13, 2026.

Key words: migration, cultural identity, collaborative photography, ABAR, adaptation, belonging, narrative analysis

Introduction

According to Svašek, M. (2010, p. 865–880), Migrating is an act that transforms people's lives from their foundations, but also from their most intimate layers. Beyond the official procedures, residence permits, waiting periods, and administrative barriers, there is a silent dimension that is often absent from public conversations: the emotional and symbolic experience of living in a new place without giving up what keeps us standing from within, when the missing our loved ones becomes real and our emotional life and relationships are forced to be reconstructed from the foundation (Baldassar, L. 2008, p 247–266).

As mentioned by Oberg (1960), adapting to a new place while staying true to oneself means finding a balance between leaving behind the things that once felt familiar and building new, blended forms of meaning. In this sense, Floya Anthias (2001, p. 626), describes the immigrant as a “cultural hybrid.” Each person who crosses a border carries invisible baggage made of stories, rituals, memories, and traditions that continue to nourish their identity even when the environment has completely changed. This baggage, although intangible, becomes an anchor, a shelter, and sometimes a bridge between two worlds.

This project is born precisely from the in-between space described as “the third space” (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 36–37): a place where cultural adaptation intertwines with the persistence of one's roots. From this, the central question arises: How can collaborative artistic photography be used as a tool to narrate and visually represent migrant women's cultural identities and processes of adaptation? With this in mind, this research question, is approached withing Finland and through symbolic expressions of “magical” cultural power.

Dayal (2025) argues that examining immigration from an artistic and cultural perspective is essential. In a context where migration is often addressed from political, socioeconomic, and bureaucratic perspectives, this research seeks to create space to breathe and portray migration in ways that can capture the endurance, struggles and dreams of those who undertake these journeys.

It does not aim to ignore the difficulties faced by those who decide to move elsewhere (financial struggles, administrative procedures, and constant uncertainty) but rather to

look beyond them. As Oberg (1960) argues, stepping into an unfamiliar culture often means losing the everyday signs, routines, and small comforts that once anchored a person's sense of stability. This sudden absence can leave newcomers feeling disoriented, frustrated, and insecure, this reaction sometimes turns into criticism of the new environment as a way to cope with the discomfort. When groups of newcomers gather mainly to share their complaints about the host society, it is often a sign that they are experiencing the emotional turbulence of culture shock.

My intention with this research is to create a space where participants can recognize themselves while living in a foreign country, acknowledging that, despite the challenges, their identities remain alive and their spirits continue to be nourished through their traditions. From this idea of keeping one's identity alive while living abroad, it is also helpful to see how creative and cultural practices let migrants show who they are in their own way. Through artistic and cultural expression, migrants can be understood as creators and storytellers who actively shape their identities. Their experiences show resilience, imagination, and the many ways people continue to redefine themselves while living far from home (Dayal, 2025, p. 4).

Here, photography becomes both a tool within an art-based research method and an emotional language and it functions as a technical instrument that facilitates deeper inquiry into human experience. In this same line, visual art has the power to show perspectives that are often ignored and offers the possibility to do research in a way that sciences cannot do. This idea is central to Rolling's (2010, p. 102) work, where he explores the way visual culture molds someone's sense of identity, especially in relation to the experience being seen as "other." Because our identity is constantly being negotiated, visual culture becomes a space where thoughts about what is considered normal are produced and questioned (Leavy, 2015, p. 220).

Photography has long been part of ethnographic work, becoming a regular tool for many generations of researchers. As Pink (2013) explains, the camera has been used not only to document reality but also to understand how people live, feel, and make meaning in their everyday environments. Because of this long history, photography continues to offer a way to approach human experience with attention, care, and cultural awareness. Researchers have often worked together with participants to create photography in many ways. This kind of collaborative photography invites researchers

to engage to some extent with the photographic practices and cultures of the participants which help them understand the relationships, actions and feelings that matter to them. Through these shared photographic processes, we are also able to learn how images help express and strengthen personal and social connections and their feelings.

For this research, I have worked over the course of a year and created a series of portraits that allowed each model to represent a particular element of the folklore, traditions, or cosmovision of their own countries. Each photograph was taken in a different season of the Finnish year. When an individual enters a strange culture, they experience sudden removal of the familiar signs and symbols that facilitate social intercourse, which leads to experience the so-called “cultural shock” (Oberg, 1960, p. 142). This seasonal cycle reflects not only the time required for the creative process but also the phases of cultural adaptation described by Oberg: honeymoon, culture shock, recovery, and adaptation. Each season becomes a visual metaphor for these stages, allowing the migratory experience to be expressed in an organic and sensitive way.

Each of all the four series of portraits was developed with the participation of a model from a different nationality (Finnish, Japanese, Pakistani, and Mexican). Through their stories, I explore how cultural traditions, narratives, and folklore function as condensed symbols of identity. Each series represents a meaningful element of their folklore, such as a legend or ritual: Finnish Juhannus, Shamanism from Pakistan, the legend of Kaguya-hime from Japan, and the Day of the Dead celebration from Mexico. These narratives not only evoke each participant’s culture of origin, but also reveal fragments of memory that travel with them. When reinterpreted in a new context, these traditions show how the roots they carry within themselves transform and adapt without disappearing.

In addition to exploring the relationship between identity and tradition, this research is also interested in observing the importance of support networks for migrant women. All four models, when given the opportunity, decided to bring their partners to the photoshoot and include them in the process. This introduces a relational dimension that is essential for understanding cultural adaptation. Listening to their voices and perceptions of their “safe place” (understood here as the intimate emotional space where they feel accompanied, understood, and supported) reveals how migration is experienced not only individually, but also as a couple. Emotional bonds and desires

naturally draw people toward what they value, and these feelings (although shaped by social norms) can shift as individuals encounter new situations and relationships (Svašek, 2010, p. 877).

This comparative focus opens the door to different experiences: the Finnish couple, in which both partners were born in Finland, although in different regions; the Japanese and Pakistani couples, who migrated together from their countries of origin; and my own case as the Mexican participant, who moved alone to Finland and, during my stay, entered a relationship that later became a marriage with a Finnish man. These differences allow for an analysis of how emotional support dynamics vary depending on whether partners share the same origin, and how these networks influence the way each person faces the challenges of cultural adaptation.

The presence of the Finnish participant plays a fundamental role in this research. She functions as a reference point, offering an internal and local perspective that allows for comparison between those who have migrated and someone who was born and raised in Finland. Her participation opens dialogue about how migration is perceived within the host country, how newcomers are viewed, and how intercultural encounters are built, or sometimes strained.

As a researcher and a migrant, I am also part of this framework. My self-representation in this series (through the Day of the Dead) is not accidental, but rather a way of positioning myself within the phenomenon I am studying. My own experience becomes a point of resonance that allows me to understand, from within, the emotional complexity of living between cultures.

This research is relevant because it offers an intimate and humanized perspective on migration. It moves away from dominant discourses to focus on identity, memory, and adaptation. Through art, I propose a space of encounter where personal stories become visible and where traditions serve as a reminder that, even far from home, we remain ourselves through the roots that extend with us wherever we go.

As the final visual outcome of this study, the exhibition “*Seasons of Identity: Threads of Magic*” is also presented at the Hämärä gallery in the University of Lapland from April 28th, until May 13th, 2026, showcasing the results of the collaborative work created between the models and myself.

Literature Review

Migration, Adaptation, and Emotional Transitions

Understanding how artistic photography can narrate the identities of migrant women requires grounding the study in three conceptual areas: migration and adaptation, cultural identity, and hybridity and belonging. These concepts help shape how migrants negotiate who they are, how they relate to others, and how they express their culture as an intangible force during their transition into new environments. Migration is not only about relocating geographically; it is also an emotional, psychological, and relational transformation. Oberg (1960) describes adaptation in his foundational model of culture shock as a cyclical process composed of four phases: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment. Through this framework, we can understand how migrants navigate unfamiliar cultural landscapes, especially when they feel out of place and disconnected from familiar cues at the beginning of their experiences.

Some migration studies emphasize that adaptation is deeply emotional. Svašek (2010) argues that mobility generates shifting emotional landscapes, where feelings of attachment, longing, and disorientation influence how individuals position themselves in new contexts. Similarly, Baldassar (2008) highlights the emotional labor involved in maintaining ties with loved ones across distance, showing how co-presence is constructed through memory, imagination, and symbolic practices. Ryan (2011) demonstrates that migrants rely on social networks to find and use resources, build relationships, and navigate new environments (Castles, 2010, p. 1579). Nshom (2022) adds that adaptation is shaped by mutual perceptions between migrants and locals, revealing how belonging is co-constructed through emotional expectations and social attitudes. With this information, it becomes clear that adaptation is not merely functional — it is relational, affective, and deeply connected to each individual's identity.

Cultural Identity, Hybridity, and Belonging

When individuals move across borders, their identities are disrupted and reconstructed. Cultural identity becomes more visible, more questioned, and more actively negotiated. Anthias (2001) argues that static notions of “culture” should be replaced by hybrid identities that emerge in the “in-between” spaces of migration. Likewise, Bhabha's (2004) concept of the “third space” aligns with this idea, describing a space where

cultural meanings are reinterpreted, contested, and transformed. In this third space, migrants do not simply assimilate or preserve their origins; they create new hybrid forms of belonging (Bhabha, 2004). These hybridities are fluid, relational, and often expressed through symbolic practices — rituals, stories, aesthetic elements, and creative expressions — all of which serve as anchors of identity during transitions.

Ultimately, belonging is not a fixed state but an emotional and cultural process of negotiation, in which individuals must navigate tensions between past and present, self and others, visibility and invisibility. These perspectives on identity are essential for understanding how the symbolic imagery used by migrant women reveals who they are in Finland.

Under the framework of ABAR, several initiatives supporting integration have been developed in the Lapland region of Finland. As documented by Huhmarniemi and Hiltunen (2022, pp. 64–73), these projects have implemented socially engaged and site-specific Arctic art as a means to foster participation and community connection. Another relevant example is the Taidevaihde project (Hiltunen et al., 2018), an interdisciplinary initiative that combined art education and social work to promote inclusion, community engagement, and integration through collaborative artistic practices.

Photography as a Collaborative and Participatory Method

Photography has long been used in qualitative research to explore lived experience. Pink (2013) emphasizes that visual ethnography allows researchers to understand how people create meaning through images, gestures, and material environments. Holm's (2014) perspective adds that photography can reveal emotional and cultural dimensions that remain hidden when expressed only through words.

Participatory photography — in which participants co-create images — has gained prominence in migration studies. Winton (2016) shows that collaborative photography fosters trust, agency, and shared meaning-making. Moralli (2024) adds that participatory visual methods allow migrants to articulate identity, belonging, and transformation through symbolic imagery. Similarly, Valdiviezo Palacios and Marino Jiménez (2026) demonstrate that photography enables migrant women to reclaim narrative control and visually express their cultural identities. All these approaches view photography not

merely as documentation but as co-creation, where participants shape how they want to be seen and understood, In Finland, for example, seeing photography as a mean for empowerment and a tool for community art has become a traditional practice, which this theses continues to follow, as it has been demonstrated that photography in the context of ABAR, also serves as “reflection material” and to strengthen identity and open the dialog (Jokela, T., et al, 2020).

Another visual and methodological inspiration for this thesis comes from the work of Finnish photographer Miina Savolainen, particularly her long-term project *Maaileman ihanin tyttö – The Loveliest Girl in the World*. Over the course of a decade, Savolainen (2008) collaborated with several young women from the Hyvönen Children’s Home in Helsinki, co-creating photographs that enabled them to see themselves as strong, whole, and worthy within the vastness of Finnish nature. Her approach, grounded in empowerment and community-based photography, demonstrates how visual narratives can restore agency and reshape self-perception through symbolic, carefully constructed imagery. This project resonates deeply with the aims of my research, offering a powerful example of how collaborative photography can support identity formation, emotional healing, and the articulation of personal and cultural belonging.

Symbolism, Fantasy, and the Cultural Power of “Magic”

Another important inspiration for this thesis—especially regarding symbolism, fantasy, and the expressive potential of nature—comes from the work of Scottish photographer Gabby Secomb Flegg and her project known as the *Main Character* series. In this body of work, Secomb Flegg creates atmospheric, narrative-driven portraits in Scottish landscapes, inviting participants to inhabit imaginative roles shaped by emotion, storytelling, and place. As she describes on her project website, her aim is to craft experiences that allow individuals to step into a heightened, symbolic version of themselves (Secomb Flegg, n.d.). This approach influenced my own research by demonstrating how fantasy-based visual storytelling can empower participants and open space for emotional expression. It also inspired me to explore how a similar concept could be adapted to the forests, seasons, and atmospheric qualities of Finnish nature, creating a context where migrant women can embody symbolic identities that speak to belonging, transformation, and cultural memory.

Symbols and fantasy play an important role in how individuals express identity. Jackson (2005) describes fantasy as a “subversive” mode that blends reality and imagination, allowing subjects to understand themselves through symbolic forms. This paraxial space — neither fully real nor fully fictional — shares characteristics with Bhabha’s “third space” and Anthias’s hybrid identities. It becomes a site of empowerment, transformation, and cultural continuity, creating a perfect metaphorical connection for this study.

For migrant women, symbolic motifs such as folklore, mythology, or rituals can serve as important anchors of identity. These symbols carry emotional weight and are tied to cultural memory and spiritual meaning. When expressed through photography, they become visual metaphors for resilience, adaptation, and belonging. Dayal (2025) reinforces this by arguing that migration research must include artistic and cultural perspectives to capture the emotional, symbolic, and cultural dimensions of migrants’ lives — dimensions often overlooked in purely economic or political analyses

Relationships and Identity-Making

Relationships are highly relevant in migration. Nichol and Regoczi (2025) demonstrate that intercultural couples co-create a “third culture” that blends traditions, values, and emotional practices. These relationships influence adaptation, belonging, and identity negotiation. This resonates with Baldassar (2008) and Ryan (2011), who emphasize the importance of emotional support and social networks for migrant well-being. This relational dimension is essential for understanding how migrant women in Finland navigate identity — not only as individuals but also through their partnerships and shared cultural practices.

Methodology

Methodological approach

To understand migration from a deeper perspective, more than just statistics and political theoretical frameworks are needed; it is necessary to pay attention to the emotional scenarios that shape how people adapt, negotiate their identities, and seek belonging. For this reason, the methodology of this study is based on qualitative, art-based research, which provides space for participants to express their experiences through visual narratives. I chose specifically Art-Based Action Research (ABAR) because emotional experiences – such as the ones experienced by migrants – are often subtle, personal, and culturally rooted, this type of research offers an appropriate framework for this purpose, since it positions artistic processes as a way to generate understanding through participation, creation and situated experience (Jokela and Huhmarniemi, 2018, p.9). Through a year-long photographic process inspired by each participant's legends and/or traditions and complemented by written interviews and reflections in the form of short contextualization videos, this research seeks to create a space where identity, memories, and creativity intersect. This chapter describes the methodological decisions that make it possible to analyze migration not only as a social phenomenon but also as a creative and deeply emotional process.

The decision to develop this research using a qualitative approach was based on the aim to deeply understand the emotional, identity, and cultural experiences of migrant women in Finland, this type of research, unlike others, allows for the exposure of different viewpoints and even contradictions (Brinkmann, et al., 2014, pp. 17–18). Likewise, the study is carried out within the theoretical framework of art-based research, an approach that uses creative processes (in this case, mainly photography and visual narrative) as tools to explore, represent, and analyze complex and emotional human experiences. (Barone & Eisner, 2012, pp. 1)

With this approach, it becomes possible to capture subjective dimensions such as adaptation, identity negotiation, and sense of belonging in ways that would be difficult to address through quantitative methods. This study proposes that, through collaborative artistic creation, a space can be created where participants can recognize themselves and express their identity, as well as reflect on their migration experience, an idea aligned

with the way participatory visual methods open spaces for self-representation, reflection and meaning (Moralli, 2024, pp. 1–2) All of this is done from an emotional perspective, where participants can feel safe and free to express themselves, as a person and not as a number.

This study is exploratory and interpretive, aiming to investigate how migrant women in Finland emotionally experience adaptation, identity negotiation, and a sense of belonging. The research employs a multiple case study design, considering each participant as a unique case that allows for an understanding of both individual characteristics and shared patterns in their migration processes, which aligns with Holm’s perspectives in which each individual is considered as a unique case, so is possible to understand each visual production separately and visualize their personal journeys as well as finding similar social patterns. (Holm, 2014, pp. 380).

Arts-Based Action Research (ABAR) and Visual Narratives

This research is grounded in Art-Based Action Research (ABAR) (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018, 2025), as it seeks to explore identity and adaptation through creative expression. Barone and Eisner (2012) describe arts-based approaches as methodologies that use artistic processes to generate, analyze, and communicate knowledge. Leavy (2015, 2020) expands this perspective by emphasizing that artistic practices allow researchers to access emotional, embodied, and culturally embedded forms of meaning that traditional methods often overlook.

Rolling (2010) argues that visual culture plays a central role in shaping identity. Images can become sites where norms are both reinforced and challenged, making photography a powerful tool for exploring identity formation. Within this field, ABAR provides a participatory, process-oriented framework. Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018) describe it as a methodology that integrates artistic creation, community engagement, and reflective cycles through which situated knowledge emerges. This approach aligns well with migration research — especially in this study — because it values lived experience, collaboration, and the symbolic dimensions of identity.

Population and sample

The population of my study is primarily composed of migrant women who currently reside in Finland, who arrived in the country within the past two years, and who have experienced processes of cultural adaptation, identity negotiation, and the search for belonging during their stay and who maintain cultural ties to their countries of origin through practices, traditions, customs, and creative expressions. The population also includes one Finnish woman, who serves as a point of comparison.

The sample is composed of four women: three migrant women living in Finland and one Finnish woman. The selection was carried out through intentional sampling, as the participants were chosen based on their willingness to take part in the photographic sessions, their migration background, and their ability to contribute diverse perspectives on the migration experience. Each participant comes from a different country and maintains an active relationship with her culture, which is essential for the development of the photographic project. Each woman was asked to participate by choosing a theme for her photographs, with the only requirement being that it must represent a tradition or legend with a magical or folkloric background typical of her country.

The inclusion of a Finnish woman was decided with the purpose of creating a point of contrast that would allow the observation of differences, similarities, and diverse perspectives related to belonging, identity, and culture, as well as the experience of living in Finland from both local and foreign points of view. Her participation provides an internal perspective on Finnish culture, which enriches the analysis by offering a comparative framework against the experiences of migrant women. Through this inclusion, it becomes possible to observe how identities are constructed and negotiated both from the migratory experience and from the local perspective. While the migrant women contribute experiences shaped by adaptation and identity negotiation, the Finnish participant offers an internal view not only of the culture but also of local perceptions of migrants and migration. In this way, it becomes possible to see how the experiences and opinions of migrants and those who belong to the Finnish context intersect or differ.

The sample is intentionally small, as the qualitative and art-based research approach requires close work and a deeper, more intimate collaboration with each participant.

This size also makes it possible to focus on each participant individually and to provide the time and attention needed for their photographic sessions, as well as to collect more detailed written interviews and short explanatory videos. The reduced and specific amount of participants is justified by the depth of the researcher–participant relationship and the creative approach of the project, since arts-based research and visual methodologies often rely on the collaborative and relational processes that focus on deeper meanings over numbers (Winton, 2016, pp. 428–430; Moralli, 2024, pp. 1–2).

The initial sample was designed to include four women participants. As a gesture of appreciation for their involvement in the project, they were offered the possibility of taking additional photographs with their partners, outside the main focus of the study. However, during the development of the fieldwork, the participants chose to integrate their partners into the theme and dynamics of the sessions. As a result, these interactions began to form part of the creative process and the material produced throughout the research.

Instead of excluding these interactions, it was decided to acknowledge them as part of the relational context in which the research was taking place. This phenomenon made it possible to observe additional dynamics that enriched the study and provided further insight into the role that partners play within the migratory experience. Therefore, although the original selection and the focus of the study were directed exclusively toward women, the research process included the presence and partial participation of their partners, understood from the emotional perspective of the participants and as part of the social reality being observed.

Recruitment process

I recruited the participants through personal contacts, networks close to the researcher, and informal conversations and invitations extended to women who showed interest in the artistic nature of the project. The intentional sampling strategy prioritized individuals who were open to creative collaboration and who were able to contribute meaningful perspectives.

During the development of the project, it became evident that the participants felt more comfortable when integrating their partners into the photographic sessions. This situation led to an additional requirement for the last woman to be recruited: she needed

to be someone who could represent the mixing of cultures within a relationship, meaning a migrant woman in a formal relationship with a Finnish partner. Ultimately, due to the challenges of finding a couple that fully met this criterion within the available timeframe, I – as woman fulfilling all the criteria for the final participant – decided to participate as a model in the final photographic session and take part of the research not only as a researcher but also as part of the population. This decision was made in order to complete the proposed thematic representation and is explicitly acknowledged as part of the reflective and situated nature of the research process.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for selecting participants were the following:

- Being a migrant woman residing in Finland and expressing interest in voluntarily participating as a model in a photographic session within the project.
- Being willing to propose and develop a visual theme inspired by magical, mythical, or folkloric elements related to her culture of origin.
- Agreeing to participate in a photographic session corresponding to a specific season of the year.
- Being able to provide visual references associated with her culture, such as traditional clothing, makeup, symbolic elements, settings, or any other visual resource that would allow the representation of the selected tradition, story, or cultural imagery.
- The Finnish participant was included due to her willingness to collaborate creatively and her personal connection to migration through a close family member living abroad, which provided a relevant perspective for the study.
- For the final session, the study required a couple composed of a migrant woman and a Finnish partner to visually represent cultural mixing. This requirement guided the final selection of participants.

The following exclusion criteria were established:

- Individuals who did not identify as women or who did not align with the study's focus on female experiences related to migration.

- Individuals who were not willing to participate in a photographic session or who did not consent to the use of their images within the framework of the research project.
- Individuals who were unable to provide clear visual references associated with their culture of origin, such as symbolic elements, clothing, makeup, objects, settings, or any other resource that would allow for the visual representation of a specific tradition, myth, or cultural reference.

Because the final session required a couple representing the cultural mix between a migrant woman and a Finnish partner, some potential participants were excluded despite initial interest.

Researcher role and reflexivity

As a researcher, my position within this creative process requires a reflexive acknowledgment. My role in this study has been both analytical and participatory. Because the foundations of this project lie in qualitative and art-based research, my presence was not limited to observation; it was also integrated into the creative process, including my participation as a model in the final photographic session. This decision responded to the need to visually represent the theme of cultural mixing, which I consider a relevant comparative perspective. I recognize that my own experience could contribute meaningfully to the study, while continuously ensuring that my interpretations do not overshadow the voices of the participants.

Throughout the development of this study, I worked closely with the participants, guiding the artistic and creative direction of the photographs and creating a safe space where they could express their cultural identities and emotional experiences. My own position as a migrant woman in Finland shaped the focus of this study, influenced its thematic direction, and heightened the sensitivity with which I engaged with the participants' stories. This aligns with the autoethnographic approach as described by Ellis and Adams (2014), in which the experiences of the research are a valuable source of learning and serve as well as an immersive experience of the culture being studied.

Finally, I integrated an autoethnographic component into the analysis. By going through the same photographic process as the other participants, I was able to examine my own reactions and reflect on my emotions and decisions when incorporating symbolism into

my own session. My dual role as participant and researcher was analyzed reflexively in order to understand my own experiences and interpret my data in the same way as the others. For this reason, I made a deliberate effort to undergo the process as closely as possible to how the other participants experienced it. This approach follows autoethnographic principles that highlight the researcher's embodied presence and the interplay between personal experience and cultural analysis (Ellis & Adams, 2014).

Autoethnographic Layer

Autoethnography is an important practice for understanding how identity, emotions, and cultural meanings intertwine in migratory contexts. Ellis and Adams (2014) describe autoethnography as a qualitative approach in which the researcher's personal experience becomes a site of inquiry, allowing cultural phenomena to be examined from within rather than from an external observational stance. This method acknowledges that the researcher is not a neutral observer. In migration studies, autoethnography is especially valuable because it captures the affective and emotional dimensions of displacement. When combined with ABAR, it strengthens the reflexive component of the research and allows the researcher to engage in the same creative, emotional, and symbolic processes as the participants.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a coherent conceptual foundation for this thesis, demonstrating that migration, identity, belonging, and symbolic expression are best understood through approaches that honor emotional depth, cultural complexity, and collaborative meaning-making. By integrating insights from migration studies, hybridity theory, relational perspectives, and ABAR-based visual methodologies, the research gains a multidimensional framework capable of capturing the richness of migrant women's lived experiences. With these foundations in place, the next chapter outlines the methodological decisions that guide this study and explains how collaborative artistic photography becomes a suitable tool for visually narrating cultural identity and adaptation in the Finnish context.

Fieldwork Procedure

The fieldwork process was carried out following the principles of Art-Based Research (ABAR), which emphasizes collaboration, knowledge emerging from lived experience, context, and culture, and the use of artistic practices not only as a method of inquiry but

also as a way of producing knowledge. Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018, p. 9) describe ABAR as a methodology rooted in artistic processes that generate understanding through participation and creation.

The process began with an initial contact phase in which participants were informed in general terms about the study, its art-based nature, and the expectations regarding their involvement. Once participants agreed to take part in the project, they were asked to choose a cultural theme (specifically a tradition, legend, or piece of folklore related to magical or supernatural elements from their home countries) which would later serve as the conceptual basis for the photographic sessions. This reflects ABAR's artistic principles regarding how creation emerges from lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and personal context, as it allows participants to express their emotional and cultural landscapes through creative expression (Jokela, Huhmarniemi & Hiltunen, 2018, p. 46).

Participants had the freedom to select the visual elements for their photo session, such as traditional clothing, symbolic objects, makeup, or environmental elements connected to their chosen story. The preparation phase also included discussions about locations, seasons, and the emotional direction each participant wished to represent. The photographic sessions were carried out in natural settings, seeking to highlight the contrast between the participants' countries of origin and the Finnish landscape. The researcher guided the artistic direction while always allowing space for spontaneous decisions or changes of mind from the participants.

After the photographic sessions, each participant completed a written interview reflecting on their experience, adding narrative depth to the visual data and allowing them to articulate their feelings and perspectives. Additional meetings were held to show participants the final results of their photographs and gather feedback on how they felt upon seeing the completed images. They were also asked to record a brief video explanation to contextualize their chosen theme.

Throughout the process, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance, acknowledging the relational nature of the fieldwork and the influence of her own positionality as a migrant woman in Finland. Reflexivity is central to ABAR, where the researcher is understood as an active participant in the artistic and social processes being studied.

Jokela (2019, p. 3) emphasizes that ABAR is a “situated practice shaped by identities, experiences, and relationships”, reinforcing the importance of reflexive engagement.

This general procedure ensured consistency across cases while allowing each participant’s cultural background, personal experiences, and creative choices to guide the development of their session. A more detailed account of the project’s evolution, including the specific dynamics of each photographic session, is presented in the chapter “Research Project and Process.”

Data Collection Methods

Photography functioned as the primary method of data collection and as a reflective tool for both the participants and myself as the researcher, allowing me to observe, interact, and engage with them throughout the creative process. Each participant took part in her own photographic session, collaboratively shaping the visual narrative through poses, symbols, and the stories they wished to express. I was the photographer in all sessions and collaborated directly with each participant; only in the case of my self-portraits did I rely on the help of a third person (Verónica Bautista), whose role was limited to pressing the camera shutter according to my directions. This approach aligns with arts-based and participatory visual methodologies, which emphasize the creation of artistic representations as a recognised form of knowledge creation and meaning-making (Moralli, 2024, p. 1).

To complement the visual material, I conducted short written interviews in which each participant reflected on, described, and unpacked the meanings behind her photographs. These written texts provided additional insight into their emotional processes, migration trajectories, identities, and personal interpretations of the themes explored. Written interviews offered participants the opportunity to articulate aspects of their experiences that might not be fully captured visually, adding a second layer of qualitative depth to the study (Leavy, 2020, pp. 276).

I also collected short video excerpts from conversations with the participants, recorded at the moment they viewed their photographs for the first time. These videos captured their genuine reactions and allowed them to verbally contextualize the ideas, emotions, and decisions behind their visual representations. This multimodal strategy aligns with

arts-based research, which values diverse expressive forms as sources of knowledge. (Barone & Eisner, 2012, pp. 1)

Through informal interactions and everyday conversations with the participants, I gained additional perspectives on their thoughts, feelings, and migration experiences. Although these comments were considered in a general and non-identifiable manner, they contributed to a broader understanding of their emotional and cultural contexts. Such relational engagement is consistent with qualitative approaches that recognize the value of naturally occurring dialogue in shaping interpretive insights (Brinkmann et al., 2014, p. 17)

Throughout the data collection process, I maintained field notes and a reflexive journal documenting interactions, emerging themes, and my own position as both a migrant woman and the researcher leading the project. These notes allowed me to reflect transparently on each encounter and on the different experiences that emerged during the photographic sessions, acknowledging my presence both inside and outside the research process. This reflexive practice is central to qualitative and autoethnographic traditions, which emphasize the researcher's positionality and its influence on knowledge production (Ellis & Adams, 2014; Leavy, 2020, pp. 277).

Data Analysis Method

The analysis process in this research is grounded in arts-based research methods and examined through a qualitative, interpretive narrative approach, since narrative inquiry seeks to place the subject and their identity in the spotlight in order to reflect on and interpret not only events but also possibilities (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 195). In this framework, the participants' stories are constructed through the different forms in which the data were collected, including interviews, symbolic decisions, interactions during the photographic sessions, and their reactions when viewing the final results. This approach allows each case to be understood holistically, as a complete narrative shaped by personal history, cultural memory, emotional adaptation, and the meanings each participant attributes to her visual representations. Narratives function in this way because storytelling helps people make sense of what they have lived, reflect on the meanings of their experiences, and connect their past to the futures they hope to build (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 195-197).

Regarding the interviews conducted with the participants, these served as the foundation of each narrative by offering insight into their backgrounds, cultural identities, traditions and folklore, their experiences of adaptation, and the role of their main support network in Finland: their partners; this information is important because the narrative approach, after all, seeks to understand the stories that others communicate regarding their own self (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 202). The information gathered from the interviews is interwoven with observations from the collaborative photography sessions, where our interactions and the participants' own behaviors contributed additional layers of meaning. I not only analyzed the participants' behavior during the sessions but also the symbolic elements they chose to represent themselves in the photographs (such as clothing, objects, and other cultural references), as these elements are an essential part of how they envision and express their culture in a new environment.

To enrich each narrative, it was also important to consider the participants' reactions when seeing their photographs for the first time. Their responses, comments, and emotional expressions provided valuable insight into how they reflected on their own self-recognition in the images and how they understood their sense of identity and belonging. Once the individual narrative of each case was constructed, I conducted a cross-case comparison aimed at identifying shared themes, contrasting perspectives, and patterns related to cultural identity, adaptation, and belonging. This comparison also included the Finnish participant, whose narrative served as a point of contrast for understanding how migrant and local experiences intersect or differ within the same context.

Through this narrative approach, the analysis seeks to honor the complexity and uniqueness of each woman's story while also revealing broader insights into how migrant women construct and negotiate their sense of belonging in Finland through the strength of their cultural roots. With this, I look forward to going further than the story itself and reflect on the narrative in a way that can provide an answer (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 205) of how collaborative photography can empower women through their adaptation to a new environment.

Creating an exhibition



Figure 1. Mayeli Halin, “Seasons of Identity: Threads of Magic” exhibition at the University of Lapland, Finland, April, 2025.

Through the data collection process of this research and the collaborative work between the participants and myself—as both participant and researcher—I aimed to produce, as part of the final outcomes of this study, an exhibition of artistic photographs representing the participants’ cultural identities, their adaptation processes, and the negotiation of identity and belonging. To achieve this, the central concept guiding the photographs was “*inner magic*,” used as a metaphor for the power each woman carries through her cultural roots. For this reason, participants were asked to select a legend or tradition that included some form of magical element. This idea also shaped the title of the exhibition, “Seasons of Identity: Threads of Magic,” which reflects both the cyclical nature of the seasons and the symbolic threads connecting identity, culture, and transformation.

Another important aspect to consider is the temporality in which the photographs were created. The project was designed to unfold over the course of one year, allowing each of the four women to represent her culture during one of the four seasons. This structure made it possible to visualize the contrast between their traditions and the Finnish landscapes across different times of the year, symbolizing adaptation to change, resilience, and the internal negotiation involved in belonging to a new context.



Figure 2. Mayeli Halin, “Seasons of Identity: Threads of Magic” exhibition at the University of Lapland, Finland, April, 2025.

A further element of the exhibition is the artistic editing of the photographs. Subtle digital enhancements were added to reinforce the magical atmosphere, along with careful attention to lighting, tones, ambience, and composition. For this reason, the photographs are not analyzed as documentary material; instead, they are treated as artistic works resulting from collaborative creation, intended to convey symbolic meaning through a photographic series that tells a story.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed ethical principles aligned with qualitative, arts-based, and participatory research traditions, prioritizing respect, transparency, and the protection of participants’ autonomy and well-being throughout the entire process. Because the project involved the creation and public exhibition of visual material, particular attention was given to issues of consent, privacy, representation, and the emotional impact of participation.

All participants—and, when applicable, their partners—received a written informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the nature of the photographic sessions, and the intended use of the images, written interviews, and video recordings. They were informed that their photographs would be included in the exhibition *A Baggage Full of Magic* and that excerpts from their interviews and videos could be used for research and

academic purposes. Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals were free to withdraw at any stage without consequences.

Given the visual nature of the project, anonymity could not be fully guaranteed. This was clearly communicated in the consent process, and participants agreed to the public use of their images with full awareness of the implications. While the photographs are identifiable, all written and verbal data were handled with care to avoid disclosing sensitive personal information. Any details shared during informal conversations were treated respectfully and were incorporated only in a general, non-identifiable manner. For the purposes of analysis and discussion, pseudonyms were used when referring to the participants; each pseudonym was chosen based on the character they embodied in their respective photoshoot.

This collaborative approach ensured that the representations aligned with their own cultural identities and personal comfort, reducing the risk of misinterpretation or imposed meaning. The photographic sessions were conducted in a supportive and respectful environment, allowing participants to express themselves freely. The videos capturing their first reactions to the photographs were recorded only with their explicit permission and with sensitivity to their emotional responses.

The final exhibition was curated with the participants' approval, ensuring that the images were displayed respectfully and in alignment with their intentions. The goal was to honor their stories and cultural identities while avoiding sensationalism or misrepresentation. Participants were informed of the exhibition context, audience, and potential visibility of their images.

Narrative Analysis

Pari (“Fairy”, Pakistan)



Figure 3. Mayeli Halin, *Pari's land of knowledge*, Finland, November, 2025.

The day of the photoshoot has finally come. Pari and her husband are dressed in traditional clothing from their home country, both looking ready for an activity that breaks the routine of life in Rovaniemi. It is a cloudy, cold autumn day; most of the leaves have already fallen from the trees. We had been waiting for the perfect weather, but between classes, work, and life itself, that day never came. Still, we head to their car despite the less-than-ideal conditions. With my camera in hand, we climb inside. It is a cold day, and their traditional outfits are not suited for the weather. Pari's husband takes the driver's seat. I notice a bit of their dynamic as a couple, he seems to enjoy being the one who drives, and she seems comfortable with that. I wonder whether this is simply about transportation or if it reflects a broader dynamic at home. Observing them makes me think about how roles are shared and negotiated within their household.

As these thoughts accompany me, we drive to the first location: a small park with distinctive trees near the university where both Pari and I study. We had planned everything in advance, and Pari—always so organized—had already presented her idea for the theme. At this point, we had decided to create at least five main photographs, following a sequence that would allow us to represent her story.

Pari arrived in Rovaniemi, Finland, from the Hunza Valley in Pakistan in 2024. She made the difficult decision to leave behind what was familiar in search of a better life and new opportunities with her husband. As a first step, she migrated to Finland to pursue a master's degree. Her first days in Finland were filled with emotional and physical challenges. Her partner could not arrive at the same time, so she had to face not only the cultural and climatic changes but also loneliness. Perhaps she even had to adjust parts of her own personality. Although she tries to keep up with her traditions and celebrations, maintaining them can be difficult when everyone around her is unfamiliar with them. Still, she recognizes that a part of her has begun to develop a bit of a "Finnish identity." Today, however, Pari is not thinking about what she left behind. Today, I can see the excitement of having the opportunity to represent a meaningful part of her culture, and even to share it with me.

The tradition she chose is impressive in itself. What we are representing in the photographs is a shamanistic ritual celebrated in the villages of Hunza on special occasions. It is an unforgettable ritual for Pari. As she explains what I need to understand in order to portray it accurately, I can see the excitement on her face and

hear it in her voice. Although she had shown me a video beforehand, hearing it directly from her helps me visualize it more vividly. During the ritual, the shaman performs a specific dance and, at one point, inhales a special smoke produced by certain herbs. This ritual is meant to connect with a being from a higher realm—an entity they refer to as a “fairy”—from whom they seek knowledge. As part of the ritual—and perhaps the most striking or, for some, unsettling element—the shaman drinks goat blood to facilitate this connection with the spirits. As she tells me this part, Pari is careful; she warns me about what is coming and seems shy or cautious when mentioning it. Perhaps she fears being judged. I can sense her watching me, trying to anticipate my reaction. But there is no judgment on my part—only curiosity, and perhaps a bit of awe as I imagine the scene. I reflect on the tradition and try to place myself in the position of those who witness it, including children and adults. I wonder whether it is as striking for them or if it has become something ordinary. She later mentions that when she experienced it, it was “mesmerizing yet scary.” I do not ask further. My role is not to judge someone else’s traditions but to represent them respectfully and as accurately as possible through photography. My mission is for Pari to feel transported back to her memories and her village, even when the surroundings look completely different.

Pari decided that her husband should play a significant role in the photographs. He represents the shaman performing the ritual, while she becomes the fairy he seeks. He wears a *shalwar kameez* from their region and a traditional Hunza cap. Pari, on the other hand, wears attire from Sindh, a region where Sufism and spiritual dancing are part of the culture. I am particularly drawn to the shawl she wears—the colors are a perfect representation of autumn, and on such a cloudy day, they contrast beautifully with the background. The shawl is adorned with small mirrors that reflect light, adding to the magical feeling. To me, she looks proud to wear this outfit beside her husband, and he seems equally comfortable and proud in his own. Their attire adds an additional layer of connection between them. Seeing them dressed this way feels like witnessing their shared pride and complicity, connecting not only with each other but also with their roots, even while standing in a “foreign” place.

Pari appears relaxed and excited. The surroundings and the people passing by do not seem to bother her. She looks comfortable in her outfit, even when climbing trees to embody the magical entity she represents. We take several photos together, and I notice that Pari’s husband becomes more central to the story we are trying to tell. Still, I trust

the process and follow their direction to ensure I represent their idea faithfully. After the first photos, I notice that all three of us begin to feel more comfortable—Pari and her partner as models, and I as the photographer. We are now working together toward the same goal, and we head to our second location. Because we need smoke, we look for a place where we can safely light a fire. Although it is very different from the original setting of the ritual, our only option is to go to the nearest *laavu*. Pari's husband drives again; now we are a team. Once there, we light the fire, gather materials to create smoke, and recreate the most intense scene of the project. For this, we prepared an edible mixture that resembles blood—the moment when, our shaman for the day, drinks it to find the fairy.

At this point, the cold and fatigue have taken over. Responsibilities call, so we return to the car. Once again, I observe the couple. I can see the trust between them. From the outside, with no context other than their actions and closeness, I can tell she feels safe and comfortable by his side, and he seems happy to support and care for her. I wonder whether migrating together has made the experience more bearable simply because they are not alone. We return to our meeting point. Her partner says goodbye, and Pari and I decide to take one last walk to capture a few more photos of her alone. We headed into the forest. The contrast between her outfit and the background is now even stronger, and the daylight is fading. Still, I want to take these photos because, despite the contrast, she now seems to belong to the forest. In that moment, I can see her fully transformed into the fairy—her power and magic now part of the landscape. She becomes a complete representation of how her personality and culture have had to adapt and negotiate her identity as she slowly integrates into this new place. (Figure 3.)

The photoshoot ends, but not our conversations. At this point, I begin to question whether including her partner in this research was a good idea. Yet it was Pari herself who brought him into the project, and he seems to be a crucial part of her adaptation. I decide to adjust the focus and ask about the role her partner has played in her adaptation. Pari opens her heart. He has been a major part of her journey because they started it together. Sharing this path allowed them to understand each other's situations, making him Pari's biggest support.

From the way she describes him—mentioning that the only challenge she remembers was finding a large enough apartment—I can infer that having each other makes the

challenges feel smaller. It becomes a shared battle in which they empower one another. Even in simple moments—listening to each other, making decisions together, cooking for the other when one lacks the energy—their support has shaped her migration process. The sense of safety and not being alone makes a significant difference.

By starting this journey together, ideological or personal differences become secondary, while their shared foundations—culture, traditions, and roots—take precedence. These roots ultimately bring them closer. Even the challenges of cultural shock become more bearable because they face them together. For me, a question arises: How different might the migratory experience be for a couple from the same place compared to a couple in which one partner is local and the other is a migrant? From Pari's perspective, it could be interesting but also challenging. She believes it might be easier to adapt because one partner already knows how to navigate the place and can answer most questions. She sees this as a potential advantage in cultural adaptation.

Living in a new environment has even changed her personality. She has become quieter, enjoys nature, and appreciates her own company. She believes that anyone in a similar situation should try to overcome shyness and interact with locals, as socializing has been difficult for her. These are topics we have discussed many times. I have heard her struggle not only with adapting to the country but also to the university, to loneliness, and to socializing in different contexts. After knowing her for more than a year, I have seen the effort and energy she has invested in this new life project. Ultimately, I wanted to help her see her own power.

The day I showed her the photos, she seemed nervous—just like me. She was probably anxious about the questions I might ask, while I worried about not having represented her correctly. But those fears disappeared as soon as I began showing her the images. I saw expressions of amazement on her face. She was impressed by how the dance movements were captured. She felt she could visualize scenes from her childhood, and the photos brought back many memories. For Pari, the day of the photoshoot felt like we were simply having fun; she could not imagine the final result. Seeing it now made her think that even her family would be surprised. For me, Pari's positive reaction made everything worthwhile. Knowing that she saw her own power reflected in the images—and that she could recognize her traditions despite the unfamiliar environment—responds, in part, to the central question of this research.

Hime (“Princess”, Japan)



Figure 4. Mayeli Halin, Hime’s snow poem, Finland, January 2026.

It is mid-January, and the cold in Rovaniemi has been below -20°C in the previous days, forcing us to postpone the photoshoot more than once. Today, we finally prepare for the session. It is -14°C , but the landscape is beautiful, and rescheduling again would be too risky for everyone. Hime and her partner get ready at the university, away from the eyes of others. They are wearing traditional Japanese summer clothing—the *yukata*—which is far from adequate for this temperature. Hime asks me to meet her somewhere out of sight; she feels a bit embarrassed to wear such a colorful outfit in the middle of winter. With jackets, gloves, and boots, I meet Hime and her boyfriend near the school.

Together, we walk through the cold and the snow-covered trees toward a small forest near the frozen river. The sky is cloudy, and it gets dark very quickly. We must hurry and make the most of the daylight; taking photos in the dark is impossible due to the cold and the equipment. For this session, there is no strict storyline—only the inspiration of a Japanese folktale about a princess born from bamboo. For Hime, the tall, straight Finnish trees resemble bamboo, and the story has stayed with her since childhood. We also drew inspiration from a poem in *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon (1996), where she reflects on the sensory and atmospheric qualities of winter.

Hime moved to Finland from Yamanashi, Japan, in August 2024, attracted by the affordable academic opportunities in some Nordic countries. She was not particularly drawn to Finland itself; she admits that the only image she had of the country was “the happiest country in the world.” When she arrived, she noticed the long hours of daylight and how people enjoyed the summer at the beach. However, compared to Japan, Finland still felt colder.

Now in winter, that cold has intensified, and daylight lasts only a few hours. Even though she has adapted somewhat, today is especially challenging because she must pose in summer clothing. When we reach the river, she and her partner prepare for the photos. Although they added layers under the *yukata*, it is not enough for today’s cold, so we rush to take the first shots. Her partner watches while I photograph her. She looks excited and happy, smiling widely (Figure 4). As I take the photos, I wonder what she feels wearing this outfit in such a different landscape. I can hear her partner behind me, freezing as well, and I notice that when Hime has been without her jacket for too long,

he suggests taking a break to warm up. Luckily, I have some hand warmers in my backpack that I share with them.

In Japan, Hime used to have plans all the time, but here she has learned to enjoy free time and a slower life. Even in these harsh conditions, her attitude remains positive. Still, now that she has moved to Finland, she feels more aware of being Japanese. Seeing her contrast so strongly with the snowy environment makes me wonder if today is one of those moments when she feels that awareness more intensely.

Once Hime warms up a little, we walk together onto the frozen river. Although we cannot capture the moon today because of the clouds, we still take some photos with the sky behind her. Her partner stays close, holding her jacket, ready to cover her during breaks. I can see how much he cares for her. He does not seem as eager to appear in the photos—mostly because of the cold—but we still manage to take a few shots of them together. It is Hime’s first time modeling; everything is new for her. I can see she has enjoyed it and had fun, while her partner seems to suffer more from the weather. Eventually, the cold defeats us, but trusting that we have enough material, we walk back.

After migrating to a new city, Hime does not find it difficult to maintain her roots; she cooks Japanese food at home and stays in touch with her loved ones. I have heard that socially, Japan and Finland share some similarities, and since meeting Hime, I have wondered whether she feels the same. I did not ask her during the session, but in the interview she mentioned that one cultural shock for her has been the expectation outside Japan to actively share opinions in discussions—something that is not as common in Japanese contexts. She prefers the term “immersion” over “adaptation” when talking about her experience in a new country, because she wants to become part of Finnish society. Even though her roots have not changed, she can appreciate the richness of Finnish culture.

Back at the university, we take a break to warm up. We talk about the experience, though the main topic is the cold and the winter. Before we get too comfortable, we hurry to take a few more photos before the daylight disappears. This time, only Hime poses, although her partner joins us to help her if needed. Watching them, I notice how much more comfortable she feels having someone with her while experiencing

something new. We take a few more photos in the forest, with snow-covered trees behind her and the blue hour settling over us. This time, we represent the winter poem. Shōnagon (2021) describes winter as a moment of stillness and quiet transformation:

“Winter at the break of day...”

This passage highlights how early-morning cold and domestic rituals create a sensory landscape that is both intimate and symbolic—something that feels fitting in a moment like this. After finishing this second, quick session, I walk back with them. While they change clothes, I wonder what their experience has been like, especially since Hime’s boyfriend is also studying here. After the cold, I decided not to ask too many questions and let them rest.

Later, during our interview, I learned more. For Hime, speaking the same language as her partner has been essential during the adaptation process, and having him by her side has greatly supported her emotional stability—especially during the cold and dark winter. Living in another country is difficult in many ways: procedures, cultural adaptation, and homesickness can be overwhelming. But experiencing it as a couple divides the stress in two, allowing them to support each other. She also mentions another important point: not having to worry about language barriers and the comfort of not facing cultural differences at home. Curious about her perspective, I asked what she thinks the process might be like for someone in a relationship with a local. She believes it could be an advantage—more social connections, smoother cultural and linguistic adaptation, since the local partner knows more. She thinks both types of couples (same-country or mixed) have advantages and disadvantages in different aspects, even when deciding which country to live in. Through this process, Hime has learned a lot from the migratory experience—especially about herself and the world around her. She summarizes her advice in one phrase: “Trust the process.”

When shown the photos, Hime was surprised to see herself represented and to finally look at the work we created together. She was happy to see how the clothing stood out against the winter landscape and how this traditional outfit could also look beautiful in another country. We ended the interview with laughter and a bit of nervousness as we talked about the photographs and the way I aimed to represent her inner magic through them. It seems the goal was achieved.

Alma (“Soul”, Mexico)



Figure 5. Mayeli Halin, Alma's bittersweet goodbye, Finland, April 2026.

I look out the window and the weather is perfect for photographs. Although I tried to do this photoshoot earlier this year, I was not satisfied with the results, so—on impulse—I convince my partner to join me and call a friend to assist with the camera so we can save time. It is almost the beginning of spring; only a few days of April have passed. It may be risky, but I decide to try again.

I am Alma, a Mexican migrant who arrived in Finland in August 2024, following my dreams and searching for a place in the world where I could feel more comfortable, since I never felt fully connected to the society of my own country. Studying abroad seemed like a good way to learn something new and useful for my future in another country, and it became the foundation that allowed me to move to the place I fell in love with. Although I first discovered Finland through music when I was very young, it was only ten years ago—guided by destiny—that I visited for the first time and knew it was where I wanted to seek better opportunities and living conditions.

Now I get ready quickly in my student apartment, applying the makeup for the photoshoot. I am aware that I now live with my husband in the country of my dreams; sometimes, this realization comes to me out of nowhere, and when I consciously acknowledge it, it feels unbelievable. But two years ago, when I first arrived, despite the excitement, cultural shock took over. I felt lonely, out of place, and as if I did not belong in the place I loved the most. However, migrating also allowed me to enjoy nature more, to live completely on my own, and to find peace and time to learn about myself.

Even after migrating, there are things I cannot leave behind—most importantly, food and the way I prepare it. Now that I am far from my family, I do not celebrate many Mexican traditions, but there is one I try to keep every year: Día de Muertos, a day when, according to Mexican beliefs, the dead return to the land of the living to visit us. This celebration makes me feel connected to my roots and my family. In both cases, it is a connection to something that is no longer here. But just as some things are gone, others remain unchanged—my favorite music, food, and memories.

My Día de Muertos makeup is ready. I am running a bit late, but my friend patiently waits for me. The three of us head to a small forest near a beach close to where we live. Half of my face is painted as a skull, and deep down I hope no one sees me. I chose this

theme because it is the celebration that most connects me to my country—especially because it allows me to feel close to someone who supported me when I decided to travel the world, someone who unfortunately never got to do it with me: my father. That is why every year, on November 2nd, I like to imagine that he comes all the way here to visit me.

With the camera in hand, I explain to my friend the shot I want and from where. I adjust the settings and walk into position, posing between laughter and good humor. We change angles, poses, and camera settings from time to time, following the same process. Standing in front of the camera with my outfit and makeup, I think about the big celebrations in Mexico—the colorful altars everywhere, the makeup, the costumes, and memories of my mother and me preparing the altar at home. (Figure 5).

While preparing the session and developing the concept, and even during the shoot, I had several embarrassing moments—first, because I was doing this on the other side of the world, at the completely wrong time of year, wanting to hide from everyone; and second, because the theme made me emotional. I decided to turn it into a love story that is both romantic and sad: a couple in which the woman has died before her husband, and he waits for her every year so they can spend one day together, go on a date, and remember their life. For a moment, she exists between two worlds (an analogy to migration), and at the end of the day, she returns to the underworld. With all this in mind, I am aware of everything I have had to adapt since moving here—like improvising with food ingredients or finding flowers similar to marigolds, since they do not exist here.

At the beginning, my migration experience went downhill—from the best feeling to the worst. I felt I did not belong and never would, and the language felt like a huge barrier. Feeling lonely and remembering the reasons I came here gave me the push I needed to socialize, learn more, and change my attitude to a more positive one. I began to enjoy my own space and to share my feelings with my partner and my friends back home, which helped.

Living between two cultures sometimes makes me feel that I do not fully belong to either. In Mexico, I understand the cultural context and the language, but my personality does not seem to fit. In Finland, I feel more “at home” in terms of personality, but I do

not fully share the context of a native. It is a bittersweet experience, but it also allows me to see different perspectives.

For some of the shots, my partner—who is Finnish—joins us. I direct both him and my friend, and I begin to feel more comfortable posing. Sharing this moment with my husband makes me realize how much he supports me and how present he has been since my first day in Finland. Thanks to him, I have learned aspects of Finnish culture that would have been harder to understand on my own. He has been my connection to the culture and the local community. I feel safe asking him questions I might otherwise find embarrassing, and he helps me when I do not understand the language. I think that one advantage of having a partner from the local country is that they “take you by the hand” and explain how the system works—bureaucracy, procedures, and everyday structures.

In many ways, I believe that without him I would have struggled much more to understand the environment and social rules. He gives me a safe place to ask questions, and I feel cared for. As a couple, the hardest part was maintaining a long-distance relationship. For the first two years, we lived apart—even when I moved to Finland, he lived in another city, and we could only see each other once a month. I think couples who migrate together can share the challenges of the process and support each other, making the experience less frightening. Being from the same country might help them feel more “at home,” keeping familiar ways of doing things—food, language, jokes—which can create a safe space in an unfamiliar environment. But it can also be difficult, since neither partner truly knows the destination country, its customs, or how things work. Both navigate blindly, without a direct connection to the new place, and it may require more effort to socialize—especially if they begin to spend most of their time within the “safety” of the relationship.

Today, we made the most of the sunlight and the early spring landscapes of northern Finland, and we also had fun. We took a few last photos near the beach before leaving. I find it amusing how we wear long coats while the sun shines on our faces by the river—something that would not happen in the same way in my home country. Being able to adapt to Finland’s climate feels like a metaphor for my inner strength. Migration has made me feel strong and independent. I believe Finland has shown me that *sisu* lives within me—from the moment I packed a suitcase with my life inside and left home. Now I can see things from different perspectives, and that is why, if I had to give advice

to future migrants, it would be to have patience and trust the process. There will be moments of loneliness and despair, but calm will return. And if the place you arrive in does not feel like home, it is always okay to go back or find a place that fills your heart, instead of suffering in a place that is not meant for you. I also think something rarely discussed before migrating is the importance of evaluating and researching the destination beforehand. Even small things may not be insignificant, and a bit of introspection and analysis could save future migrants from disappointment and struggle. As we walk back, I notice my friend behind the camera—also a migrant from my home country—observing the landscape. We share experiences on the way home. We say goodbye, and I give her a product from our country that I found in a Finnish supermarket. She leaves excited, and I return to my apartment.

A few days later, I begin editing the photographs. They definitely express the essence of spring more than my first attempt. Through the editing, I try to represent the path that guides souls back to the land of the living. In the images, I can recognize myself as “Alma.” I can see the idea I had in mind, even my relationship with my husband, and it makes me emotional again—but focusing on the editing helps me process those feelings. In the end, I feel proud of my representation of Día de Muertos in Finland. Despite the embarrassment of being seen in public on the day of the shoot, today I am excited to share the results, because I believe the blending of cultures can be seen in many ways throughout the images.

Noita (“Witch”, Finland)



Figure 6. Mayeli Halin, Noita's midsummer power, Finland, July 2025.

It is midsummer 2025, and the sun is shining over Tampere, Finland. The trees are a vivid, bright green, and flowers can be seen everywhere. Today is Juhannus, but instead of joining the celebrations, Noita and I meet to carry out a photoshoot we have been planning in advance.

Ever since she heard the idea and the proposal, Noita has been excited. The summer festivities have inspired us to create the perfect storyline for the images we want to produce. Noita has spent her entire life living between two large rivers in western Finland. Although she has a loving and supportive family network, she tells me that even though she has always been able to express herself freely here and be who she wants to be, she has often felt as if she never fully fits into Finnish society—an experience that has led to difficulties such as bullying. But today, Noita does not have to think about those challenges. Today she gets to be herself and express her identity through the photoshoot. She looks excited; she has been involved in the creative process from the beginning, together with her partner.

Being so close to the Juhannus celebration also gave us additional inspiration. With her knowledge of her own culture and a bit of online research, we decided to draw from the magical rituals surrounding Juhannus. We also wanted to portray inner power through mythological beings such as *kyöpelinvuori* and other elements from the *Kalevala*. As part of our visual inspiration, we incorporated the aesthetic and atmosphere of *Maailman ihanin tyttö* (Savolainen, M., 2008), whose imagery resonated with the mystical, nature-bound feeling we hoped to evoke in the photographs.

For Noita, Juhannus is a very special part of her culture. She tells me that when she was a child, she practiced some spells with her mother and aunts—spells that greatly inspired this photoshoot. The first one was a ritual in which women pick seven flowers and place them under their pillow at night, allowing them to dream of their future husband. On another occasion, she tried a different Juhannus spell, one in which a girl must look into a lake to see her future partner. Laughing, she tells me she once saw a man with a mustache and was horrified at the time. Now she finds it ironic, since her fiancé actually has a mustache. It feels like a curious coincidence, and I wonder whether these spells truly work. I decide to take her word for it and laugh with them.

With all this inspiration in mind, we head to the Hatanpää Arboretum, with Noita's fiancé driving. When we arrive, I am surprised by how much greenery surrounds us. Fortunately, it is a sunny day—something we had hoped for. At first, although excited, Noita seems a bit unsure of what to do in the photos. But soon her inner model takes over, and the energy begins to flow. I wonder whether it becomes harder or more intimidating to pose with an audience, since this time there are three of us accompanying her, including her partner. Yet at the same time, this hesitation seems to reflect her Finnish identity. As she later told me, it takes getting to know her a little before she shows her warmth and openness—fitting somewhat into the Finnish stereotype. But once she relaxes and begins to pose, the loud, feisty Noita emerges—her emotions, her humor, everything she had described about herself.

When I look at her, I can see the contrast between the “stereotypical” Finnish personality and the friendly, extroverted woman in front of me. I also see the Finnish elements that are central to her identity—*sisu* and sauna—contrasted with her favorite music, metal, which in Finland is “tied to their culture” (in Noita's words) and has shaped her entire life. She considers it part of who she is. With Karelian and Savonian roots, she says it is common for people to tell her she is friendly in a way that is “typical for Karelians.”

As we take the photos, Noita recalls childhood memories—vacations at her grandparents' cottage in Savonia, the family bonfires lit on midsummer's eve, and how special that night always felt, especially being allowed to stay awake all night. When I look at her, I can briefly see that little girl appear through her dark clothing and bright red hair—a representation of the paganism that is part of her identity, which she felt honored to express when I proposed this collaboration, especially since it involved photographing her in nature, something deeply important to her.

Both cultural and family traditions keep Noita grounded in a sense of belonging. Spending time with her family on every birthday and staying close to her kin makes her feel supported. Meeting someone like her—someone who grew up in the local context—is a constant learning experience for me, with every simple question that follows each photo or every comment she makes.

Just as I, a foreigner in her country, learn through her, Noita tells me how her experiences traveling and meeting people from different countries have shaped her perspective on migrants. Through her international experiences—traveling across several countries in Europe, and even all the way to Mexico—meeting all kinds of people has not necessarily changed her thoughts on migration, but it has made her more capable of perceiving and understanding cultural differences. For Noita, whose own family members—such as her brother—have migrated to other countries, having the qualifications, the willingness to learn the local language, and the desire to build a life elsewhere is more than enough reason to migrate.

Throughout her life, Noita has had friends and acquaintances from different countries and cultures, including people who have migrated to Finland. She tells me she has had pleasant experiences even with people she met only minutes before, and she maintains friendships with migrants living in Finland. I remember that there is a part of her that has struggled within the Finnish social context, and I wonder whether that part of her has made it easier to connect with international people—or perhaps it is the influence of her Karelian and Savonian grandparents, from whom she learned to be hospitable and to “set the table fancy” (“laittaa pöytä koreaksi,” in her words).

We move to different locations within the arboretum; the trees and nature offer endless possibilities and beautiful backgrounds. By now, all of us feel more comfortable participating. Even her partner—who seems a bit more uncomfortable standing in front of the camera—agrees to pose with her for a few photos. I reflect on this shared moment, and later, when talking with Noita, she tells me that being with her partner makes her feel safe, able to say what she thinks and express her feelings without worrying that someone will get upset. She does not fear showing her emotions in his presence.

With this in mind, I understand her next answer. The idea of moving to another country with him is something she has considered—perhaps even following her brother—but she also thinks it would not suit her lifestyle, and it would be difficult since they barely speak the language of that place. Regarding her assumptions about couples who migrate together to Finland, Noita believes that one of the biggest challenges is the language, as well as facing discrimination or racism, especially in small towns where many people (in her view, mostly older people) tend to be more racist or rude due to ignorance. And

nowadays, even finding a job in Finland is difficult. Still, she thinks migrating as a couple might be slightly easier, since both share the same experience and support each other. But this also has disadvantages. For example, someone in a relationship with a local might have an easier adaptation, smoother bureaucracy, and fewer obstacles, since at least one partner knows the language and the procedures. Although this does not eliminate cultural shock, the local partner can guide the other.

I ask what advice she would give to locals when supporting a migrant. She says that Finns could welcome newcomers without prejudice, try to get to know them, help when needed, and avoid assuming either that migrants know nothing or that they know everything about Finland. And most importantly, she adds, they should teach them sauna culture, how to say “Vesihisi sihisi hississä,” and all the other useful things—softening the conversation with humor. Finally, she recommends offering foreigners Karelian stew and liver casserole with raisins, “because that might change their lives.” At this point, I cannot hold back my laughter, since I feel this comment was made on purpose—those are exactly the dishes she and her fiancé have offered me during previous visits.

As the photoshoot comes to an end, so does the interview. Just like the experiences of visiting her home and being invited to eat Karelian stew, the session has been pleasant and, in a way, bonding. I have felt welcomed. And this is what sparks my curiosity: understanding how Noita has experienced interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds. She says that, for the most part, these experiences have been good and interesting. There is a sense of unity when she finds similarities with someone, and that feels exciting.

Before finishing, Noita shares a very special part of her story. When her brother married someone from another culture, she gained an extended family. She is now an aunt to two little children, and it excites her to see them grow up learning two languages and embracing both roots.

Finally, after a long wait, Noita is able to see her finished and edited photographs. Many of her expectations were fulfilled, and as she looks at them, fragments of that day return to her—like how difficult it was to climb a tree. She describes the images as whimsical and magical, while still reflecting her true personality, which confirms that the goal was

achieved. She especially enjoyed how some photos made her appear “witchy” and how the compositions look as if they were taken deep in an enchanted forest.

After hearing her thoughts and preferences for the exhibition selection, I say goodbye to an excited Noita—already planning her trip from Tampere to Rovaniemi to attend the exhibition. It feels like a fitting conclusion to our collaboration: her inner magic, cultural roots, and personal story now visible in images she can recognize and claim as her own.

Discussion

When comparing the four cases presented in this narrative analysis (the stories of Pari, Hime, Alma, and Noita), it becomes clear that each woman experiences migration in a distinct way, and that these experiences are closely tied to their identities and to how those identities have shifted throughout the process. At the same time, when looking at Noita's case, it also becomes evident that the construction of a local identity is shaped by the environmental and social conditions of Finland. We can deduce that all four participants are currently engaged in their own ongoing processes of identity construction, each from a different perspective. This construction emerges as a dynamic process in which relationships, emotions, and cultural and/or symbolic practices intertwine and manifest in everyday life—and, in the context of this research, were also translated into the visual languages each of us chose to express in our narratives. The way we were able to make these dimensions visible, both internally and externally, was precisely through the use of collaborative artistic photography. Through this process, each woman gained access to a creative and safe space where identity could be reinterpreted through a fantasy-based theme that opened the necessary dialogue to channel memory and transformation.

Despite the fact that the four women come from vastly different parts of the world, with distinct histories, backgrounds, customs, and social norms, their stories intertwine. They converge at certain points and diverge at others—enough to form a collaboratively woven fabric, a way of telling the same story through different shades and textures. Their photographs reveal the act of living in the present: the emotional framework that sustains the migratory process, the slow adaptation, and the ongoing search for belonging in a context that feels unfamiliar on some days and strangely familiar on others. As Moralli (2024, p. 3) suggests, participatory visual methodologies open spaces where one can speak and be heard by providing environments in which knowledge can be co-constructed from everyday experience. This is precisely what emerged from each session: each woman found in the process a way to narrate her identity from within and to embrace its complexity from a reflective and personal perspective, rather than resorting to the bureaucratic simplifications that often define migrants. These findings resonate deeply with the results of the research conducted by Valdiviezo Palacios and Marino Jiménez (2026).

Emotional processes and relationships

In the narratives of Pari, Hime, and Alma—the migrant participants—it becomes evident that adaptation is neither linear nor homogeneous. Although the three of us come from culturally distinct contexts, we agree in describing the beginning of our lives in Finland as a process marked by loneliness, cultural shock, and disorientation. These descriptions resonate with Oberg’s (1960) notion of the crisis phase that often accompanies arrival in a new country, just before the reconstruction of belonging begins. Even so, our stories demonstrate that adaptation is not shaped solely by structural factors, but also by the creative practices we engage in, the support we receive, our affective networks, and our capacity to reinterpret and reshape our identities within the new environment as we navigate what Bhabha (1994) describes as “the third space.”

We can also observe how the presence of each woman’s partner has played a relevant role by providing support in different ways, either as a link to one’s own culture or as a bridge into Finnish society. This highlights the relational dimension of the migratory process, in the sense of having a “safe place” from which to navigate the ups and downs of adaptation. Partners who share cultural backgrounds—as in the cases of Pari and Hime—offer strong emotional and practical support that helps soften the challenges of displacement (such as bureaucratic processes, potential discrimination, or nostalgia) through trust and shared experience (Ryan, 2011, pp. 708–712). Sharing a cultural background also allows couples to keep cultural practices and traditions alive, such as food, language, or everyday customs.

In contrast, Alma, whose partner is Finnish, does not have a direct cultural link to her home country through her relationship, yet—as the other participants anticipated—she does have greater exposure to the local culture. Her partner acts as a “bridge” to local networks and provides stability and support, both linguistically and in navigating institutional processes, which has also facilitated her adaptation in practical ways. As Nichol and Regoczi (2025) note, intercultural couples co-create a shared space—a “third culture.” The observations regarding the benefits and challenges of both intercultural and intracultural partnerships align with this literature as well as with the conclusions drawn by the participants during the interviews. These results resonate with

Baldassar's (2008, p. 253) words about the way migration transforms not only the person who moves to a new place but also the intimate dynamics of their relationships.

Identity, memory, and culture

An important finding of this research concerns the cultural symbols the four women draw upon to sustain their identities during moments of transition. The spiritual rituals of Pari, the literary aesthetic embodied by Hime, Alma's Día de los Muertos tradition, and Noita's representation of Juhannus traditions all function as emotional anchors that connect the past with the present. Rather than simple expressions of nostalgia, these practices operate as active strategies of cultural continuity through which each woman negotiates who she is in a context where identity becomes more visible and, at times, more vulnerable. As Hime noted, moving to Finland made her more aware of being Japanese. This resonates with research showing that mobility heightens emotional reflexivity and intensifies the need to maintain symbolic ties to one's cultural background (Baldassar, 2008, pp. 247–248; Svašek, 2010, pp. 1–3). Such practices align with Bhabha's (2004) view of cultural identity as a process continually negotiated in the “in-between” spaces of displacement.

Local belonging and the shared condition of liminality

Noita's presence, by offering a grounded local perspective, expands this understanding. Although she has never migrated, she also expresses a search for belonging within her own country and turns to cultural symbols—such as Juhannus, the Kalevala, and pagan imagery—to articulate her identity. Her case demonstrates that the need for symbolic anchoring is not exclusive to migrants but rather a broader human condition that intensifies in moments of transition. This resonates with Svašek's (2010) argument that emotional processes and attachments shape how individuals position themselves in changing contexts (pp. 866–868). Through Noita, we gain a glimpse into how locals interpret migration from the outside, recognizing both the structural challenges and the responsibility of host communities to welcome and accompany newcomers. This aligns as well with Nshom's (2022, pp. 528–530) findings that interactions between Finns and immigrants are shaped by mutual perceptions and emotional dynamics, highlighting the role of local attitudes in shaping migrants' experiences.

The comparison between the three migrants and Noita also reveals meaningful differences in how women see themselves and imagine they are perceived within Finnish society. Pari, Hime, and I describe our internal processes of reconstructing identity as a central focus towards adaptation, whereas Noita contributes an external viewpoint in which she recognizes the existence of social barriers and prejudices toward migrants, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of hospitality from locals in facilitating newcomers' transition toward belonging. This contrast illustrates how migrant identity occupies a liminal space—between self-affirmation and external perception, between the desire to maintain cultural continuity and the need to adapt to a new environment. Such dynamics resonate with Svašek's (2010, pp. 866–868) argument that emotional positioning emerges through interactions with both human and non-human surroundings, shaping how individuals negotiate belonging in shifting contexts. Likewise, Nshom's (2022, pp. 528–530) findings highlight that Finnish–immigrant relations are shaped by mutual perceptions and emotional expectations, underscoring how locals' attitudes can either reinforce or soften migrants' sense of marginality.

Noita's reflections also reveal that feeling out of place is not exclusive to those who migrate. By expressing that she feels “slightly outside” Finnish norms, she suggests that belonging is an ongoing process even for those born in the country—an experience that can create unexpected points of empathy between locals and migrants. This observation aligns with Svašek's (2010, pp. 866–868) argument that emotional positioning and feelings of attachment or dislocation emerge through individuals' interactions with their social surroundings, regardless of whether physical mobility is involved. It also resonates with Nshom's (2022, pp. 528–530) findings that both Finns and immigrants navigate perceptions, expectations, and emotional dynamics that shape how each group understands its place within Finnish society. Together, these perspectives highlight that belonging is not a fixed condition but a relational and negotiated process shared—although differently—by migrants and non-migrants alike.

The role of collaborative photography in representing cultural identities

The arts-based research methodology, grounded in collaborative photography, proved to be an effective tool for creating a co-creative space in which participants could explore, reflect on, and express their identities through trust and imagination. Rather than simply

documenting migration from an external perspective, the images were constructed from within, much like in previous art-based projects documented by Jokela and Huhmarniemi across their broader body of work in Lapland (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018, 2025). This approach allowed each woman to decide how she wanted to be seen or represented, a principle that was maintained through the final stage of the process, where each participant selected the photographs she considered most representative—or simply “best”—from her own perspective. This process aligns with Valdiviezo Palacios and Marino Jiménez (2026), who argue that participatory photography enables migrants to become co-authors of knowledge by using visual symbols that articulate identity, belonging, and resistance. It also resonates with Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2025) and with Moralli’s (2024) analysis of arts-based methods as tools that democratize research by centering participants’ lived experiences and fostering reflexive, collaborative meaning-making. Through this methodological approach, the project shifted power toward the participants, transforming photography into a medium of self-representation rather than observation.

The symbolic characters we embodied—Pari’s fairy, Hime’s bamboo princess, Alma’s liminal Día de los Muertos figure, and Noita’s Nordic Juhannus witch—became more than thematic choices or aesthetic performances. They emerged as visual metaphors for inner strength, memory, and personal transformation. This creative process resonates with Jackson’s (2005, pp. 23–24) notion of the “paraxial” space of the fantastic, where images exist between the real and the imagined, allowing subjects to reconfigure themselves through symbolic forms. Similarly, Valdiviezo Palacios and Marino Jiménez (2026, pp. 1–3) emphasize that participatory photography enables women to articulate identity and belonging through visual symbols that hold emotional and cultural meaning. Through these roles, each participant accessed a symbolic vocabulary that made visible her internal processes—transforming embodied memory into imaginative self-representation.

These images do not merely represent identity; they produce it. By seeing themselves in roles that combine myth, ritual, and personal aesthetics, the participants reaffirm their capacity to narrate themselves beyond social labels. This process confirms that collaborative photography can function as a “safe space” where identity is reconstructed through creativity, shared vulnerability, and mutual recognition. As Moralli (2024, pp. 2–4) notes, arts-based methods democratize knowledge production by creating

collaborative environments where participants feel safe to express themselves and engage reflexively. The imaginative dimension each of us chose became a form of cultural power: a way of transforming complex experiences into symbols that strengthen self-esteem and belonging. Jackson's (2005, p. 24) notion of the fantastic as a mode that "re-combines and inverts the real" further illuminates how these symbolic roles allowed participants to transform lived experience into empowering visual metaphors.

By bringing all these narratives together, we see that identity—whether migrant or local—is not a fixed essence but an ongoing negotiation where emotions, memories and even relationships are constantly modified. Through collaborative photography, each of us had the opportunity to step into a symbolic space where the boundaries between the real and the fantastic became blurred, allowing new forms of self-understanding to emerge. The images we created became more than representations; they became gestures of belonging and visual testimonies of resilience. In this small shared creative space, migration was no longer merely documented but also reimagined, giving rise to identities that are fluid, situated, and deeply human.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to respond to the central question: How can collaborative artistic photography be used as a tool to narrate and visually represent migrant women's cultural identities and processes of adaptation? Based on the data generated through the collaborative work—filled with conversations, the creation of visual and written narratives, symbolic characters, and a shared safe space—this question can be answered by showing that artistic photography is capable of much more than merely documenting. Although this has been shown in previous studies, such as the Taidevaihde project in Lapland (Hiltunen, Jokela, & Huhmarniemi, 2018), what distinguishes this study is the specific way in which photography was transformed into a space where identity could be narrated, reimagined, and strengthened through symbolic expressions of the cultural “magical” power each woman carries.

The findings reveal that collaborative artistic photography allows migrant women to speak from a place of agency rather than being defined solely by external gazes or stereotypes. By choosing symbolic elements rooted in ritual, mythology, spirituality, and cultural memory, the participants became co-creators of their own visual metaphors—bridges between past and present. These “magical” symbols do not function as an escape from reality; instead, they represent inner strength, showing how cultural power can help participants remain connected to who they are while navigating the emotional, relational, and even bureaucratic complexities of adaptation. In this way, the symbolic dimension of the images became a voice of resilience, making visible the emotional weight of migration and the ways in which the culture we carry with us can sustain identity during transitional moments, even as we develop a hybrid sense of self along the path of adaptation.

In many ways, I believe that through this process I was able to bring these two early inspirations together and make them work meaningfully within the new context of Finland—Savolainen's *Maailman ihanin tyttö* (2008) and Secomb Flegg's *Main Character Project*. These were the first works that captured my attention and ultimately led me to redefine my research, shaping a new topic that felt personally relevant and meaningful.

The photographic sessions became intimate spaces of emotional negotiation. By embodying symbolic characters—a fairy, a princess, a spirit, and a witch—we accessed a paraxial space where the boundaries between reality and imagination blurred. In this liminal space, we were able to explore our identities from within, allowing new forms of self-understanding to emerge. The voice that surfaced was not only the one directed outward to the world, but also an internal voice reminding us of who we are and where we come from—making us more aware of our identities as natives of different places. This echoes what Hime expressed earlier when she said that living in Finland made her more aware of being Japanese. It was something I had not considered before, but once I heard it, it resonated deeply with my own experience and prompted further self-reflection.

With all this in mind, it is worth noting that the images we created became more than representations; they became mirrors of belonging, reminders of resilience, and visual testimonies of transformation. They allowed us to see ourselves not only as individuals adapting to a new environment, but as people capable of shaping and transforming our own narratives through creativity, memory, and inner power.

It is important to highlight the role that the collaborative artistic methodology played throughout the research. By working collaboratively—listening to each other’s ideas, allowing creativity and cultural knowledge to guide the process, and integrating my own mixed-media interpretation—we were able to produce a result in which collaborative photography becomes a tool of empowerment. It provides metaphorical and visual forms through which inner strength can be made visible, becoming a daily reminder that accompanies us even on days when that strength feels weak. By seeing ourselves in these images, we are able to remember our own identity. Reflecting in this way captures the essence of what this project achieved: a shared creative space where we felt safe to explore, affirm, and transform our identities.

The presence of Noita, with her background as a local participant, expanded the horizons of the research by showing that the desire and search for belonging are not exclusive to migrants. Instead, they can become a point of convergence for empathy and mutual understanding between migrants and Finns. Her reflections also offered a context in which we could identify the relational dimension of identity and how it takes shape through emotional states as well as through the social expectations of others.

Thanks to Noita, it was also possible to draw a point of comparison between the romantic relationships of each participant. She expressed that her partner functions as a source of support and a safe place—just as partners do for the migrant participants—while also emphasizing an important cultural nuance: from her Finnish perspective, a partner is, of course, an individual with personal freedom, yet intimacy still provides a space where one can be fully oneself. This mirrors what the migrant participants expressed as well. In this sense, it becomes relevant to note how the perception of a relationship can shift under the stress of migration, making the bond feel tighter in certain ways. Individuality is not lost, but the need to stay close and navigate experiences as a team becomes stronger during the process of negotiation and adaptation. The partner becomes the only constant and consistent presence—transforming alongside us.

Through dialogue between migrants and a local participant, it became evident that cultural identity is co-constructed, negotiated, and constantly changing through interaction—aligning with theories of liminality understood as relational and boundary-crossing identity work (Anthias, 2001), hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), and emotional reflexivity (Svašek, 2010). Noita also offered important insight by showing that feelings of displacement can emerge even within one’s own cultural context, without the need to migrate, suggesting that belonging is a shared human condition rather than a phenomenon limited to migration.

My research demonstrates that collaborative artistic photography is not only a method but also a tool of empowerment, healing, and cultural affirmation. It can offer safe spaces where women reinterpret their stories, reclaim their narratives, and visualize their inner strength. Through symbolic “magical” expressions, the participants can be able to transform their migratory experiences into images filled with power, meaning, and cultural continuity. This methodology becomes not only a way to represent identity, but also a place from which identity can be accompanied, supported, and resignified—even in processes as demanding as migration.

The insights gained through this project suggest that collaborative photography, when used in this way, has potential far beyond the context of migration. Its ability to create safe, imaginative, and emotionally expressive spaces makes it a powerful tool for representing other experiences that require emotional labor—such as grief, healing from

trauma, navigating cultural change, or reclaiming one's voice in situations of marginalization. By centering trust, creativity, and co-creation, collaborative photography can empower women in many other contexts, offering them a visual language through which to articulate forms of strength, vulnerability, and transformation that are often difficult to express. This type of collaborative project also holds the potential to evolve into a broader initiative—whether as a form of social action, a community-based program, or even a creative business model within the Finnish context and beyond. Its emphasis on empowerment, shared storytelling, and collective meaning-making could serve as the foundation for building a wider community, one connected through creativity, emotional expression, and the affirmation of identity.

However, as in all qualitative art-based (ABAR) projects, the findings of this research must be understood within the context of its methodological limitations. These limitations should not be seen as weaknesses, but as inherent characteristics of a methodology shaped by creativity and artistic processes—elements that are, to some extent, subjective. Yet this subjectivity is also what shapes the knowledge produced, just as it shapes the images themselves. In the context of this research, the beauty and meaning of the work rely precisely on these variable, evolving, and interpretive dimensions.

The small number of participants and the intimate nature of the sessions mean that the findings cannot be generalized to all migrant women in Finland or to all intercultural contexts. The strength of this research lies in its depth rather than its breadth: in the careful attention to each individual narrative, in the co-constructed meanings that emerged through dialogue and interaction, and in the symbolic worlds each woman chose to inhabit. In this sense, the subjectivity of the results is not a methodological flaw but a reflection of the foundational position of art-based research, which values situated knowledge and lived experience.

The decision to present the photographs in a public exhibition introduced another layer of complexity, as anonymity could not be fully guaranteed. Participants may have made choices about how they wished to represent themselves based on the awareness that they would be seen by external audiences. This dynamic cannot be separated from the ethics of visual research: the act of being photographed is always relational and always

shaped by the imagined gaze of others. Rather than diminishing the validity of the findings, this awareness highlights the performative nature of identity and the ways in which self-representation is negotiated in both public and private spaces.

Because this study is grounded in a collaborative methodology, each photographic session unfolded differently. The process was influenced by mood, trust, weather, time, and the emotional states of everyone involved. This makes an exact replication of the project impossible—although replication is not the goal of art-based research. Instead, the value lies in the uniqueness of each encounter and in the meanings that emerge from them. The variability of the sessions also reflects identity itself: fluid, relational, and in constant motion.

Finally, my dual role as participant and researcher introduces an inevitable layer of subjectivity. My own experiences as a migrant woman in Finland, my cultural background, and my emotional responses inevitably shaped the analytical process. While this may be seen as a limitation in traditional research paradigms, within an autoethnographic and arts-based framework it becomes a source of insight. My presence in the project—both behind and in front of the camera—allowed me to reflect on the shared emotional landscapes of migration and to understand the participants' experiences not only intellectually but also viscerally. Complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable in this context; instead, reflexivity becomes a methodological strength.

Taking all of this into account, the findings of this research reveal that collaborative artistic photography can serve as a powerful tool for narrating and visually representing migrant women's cultural identities and adaptation processes in Finland. Through symbolic expressions of magic and power, the participants were able to observe their inner strength, reclaim their narratives, and create images that hold emotional, cultural, and personal meaning. The methodology does not simply capture identity—it accompanies it, sustains it, and gives it new meaning. Collaborative photography offers a space where the negotiation of identity—rooted in memory, emotions, and relationships, all of which are constantly changing—can be explored creatively. It transforms cultural symbols into sources of power, and the act of co-creation becomes a way of remembering who we are, where we are, where we come from, and how we continue to transform.

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AI Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this thesis, artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited and responsible manner to support specific tasks such as brainstorming, translation, grammar correction, identifying key points, and drafting preliminary versions of paragraphs based on my own ideas and data. AI was not used to generate academic arguments, theoretical frameworks, research design, or final interpretations. All substantive decisions regarding content, structure, critical analysis, and conclusions were made solely by the author. All AI-generated text was reviewed, edited, and rewritten when necessary to ensure accuracy, coherence, and alignment with the aims of the study. Final translations were also rectified and corrected by the author.

Process stage	Use	Used tool
General (through all the sections)	Finding examples of structures, methodological processes and ideas. Brainstorming to help shape my topic and title. Crafting drafts of the sections based on all my own information and data. Translating from Spanish to English and correcting grammar and structure of my text. Help to give structure and order to my ideas. Finding tutorials to edit documents.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Copilot 2. ChatGPT 3. NotebookLM 4. Google
References and citations	Finding the key concepts in the documents, help with structure of APA citations, help to locate files and original documents. Double check that my in-text citations match my final references.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. NoteboookLM 2. ChatGPT 3. Copilot

Writing and Analyzing	Drafting sections and different versions of the text with the input of the information needed to analyze. Organizing the data obtained from the narrative analysis.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Copilot2. ChatGPT
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Attachments

Consent form

Consent to participate in research

You have been invited to participate in Mayeli Halin's master research, which aims for a Sustainable Art and Design degree at the University of Lapland. Please read the consent text carefully before signing and ask if you need more information about any details.

The aim of this research is to explore the emotions related to migration among foreign women living in Finland and to understand how they express, maintain, and negotiate their cultural identity through traditions, experiences, and their support networks. The study also incorporates a Finnish perspective as a local point of reference, allowing for meaningful contrast and contextualization. These aims are represented through thematic photographs inspired by cultural traditions and folklore, contributing to a deeper understanding between migrants and locals that can support smoother cultural adaptation in Finland. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to be a model for a photoshoot in which you will represent any folkloric aspect (ritual, tradition, legend, etc.) of your own culture within the Finnish seasonal landscapes. You may as well be asked to write or record a short video in which you briefly express the theme of your photoshoot, the connection to your culture and your feelings during the photoshoot and after the final exhibition. Participation does not pose any harm, danger, or threat to you.

The following types of data will be collected in the research: First name, nationality, photography, videos, Experiences in written, voice or video format. Those will be stored in the researcher's drive for an indetermined time, unless requested by the participant in such case, the information will be stored for two years. The raw data will be only accessible by the researcher, curated photography, text and videos will be presented as part of a final exhibition at the University of Lapland. The final pieces presented at the exhibition will be kept as part of the Researcher's portfolio for future reference even after the end of the study. The participants will have access to their own selected and edited photos, even the ones not presented during the exhibitions. The non selected images will be deleted from all the devices.

Parts or the entirety of the data may be reported, presented, or published as part of the final dissertation, in future publications and as part of a final exhibition at the University of Lapland from April 27, 2026, to May 13, 2026. The exhibition may be presented in different venues and formats (such as social media) in the future.

Your participation does not provide immediate benefits to you or others, but it may help migrants feel supported in their experience and encourage a more empathetic and humane perspective toward those arriving in a new country. As compensation, you will receive a set of edited photographs of the photoshoot that you can keep and publish freely as long as you mention the credits to the photographer.

Mayeli Halin and the University of Lapland are committed to protecting your privacy and personal data. The data will be processed lawfully and with respect to research ethical principles. By ticking the below box, you agree to give permission for the publication of material such as portraits of yourself, videos of yourself, first name (or a nickname if requested) from which you can be identified.

Yes, I give permission to publish the material described above, from which I can be identified.

Participation is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study without consequences. A copy of the consent has been made for both the researcher and the participant. The signed consent given to the researcher will be stored as part of the research data.

NAME/ Participant

Date (pp/kk/vvvv)

Signature / Participant

Signature / Mayeli Halin

Written Interview for migrants

Personal context

1. Where are you from, and when did you arrive in Finland?
2. What were your motivations for moving to Finland?
3. What do you remember about your first months in Finland?
4. What aspects of your life changed after migrating?

Identity and cultural roots

1. What elements of your culture do you feel came with you when you migrated?
2. Are there any rituals, celebrations, or practices that you keep alive even while being away from your country?
3. What feelings arise when you take part in any of them?
4. Has your identity changed since you moved? How?
5. What part of yourself do you feel remains intact no matter where you go?

Traditions, folklore and memory

1. What does the tradition or legend you chose to represent in the photoshoot mean to you?
2. What memories or images from your country came to mind during the creative process?
3. What emotions did you experience when representing this concept in a completely different context?
4. Do you feel that your traditions have changed or evolved since you moved to Finland?

Cultural Adaptation

1. How would you emotionally describe your adaptation process?
2. Were there any particularly difficult or transformative moments (cultural shocks)?
3. What helped you keep going during the most uncertain moments?
4. What does “feeling at home” mean to you when living in a different country?
5. What has been the most surprising aspect of living between two cultures?

Support Network and relationships

1. What has been the role of your partner in your adaptation process?
2. How does your partner’s presence influence your sense of stability or “safe space” in the new country?
3. What kinds of challenges have you faced as a couple during the migration process?
4. Do you believe that migrating as a couple can make the experience smoother than migrating alone? Why?

5. What do you think is the impact of sharing the same culture and origin during the adaptation process?
6. Which aspects of the migration process do you think become easier (or more challenging) when both partners come from the same country?
7. How do you imagine the adaptation process would be for someone who forms a relationship with a person born in the host country?
8. Do you think having a local partner could offer advantages or types of support that differ from what you have experienced as a couple from the same country? Why?

Final questions

1. What has migration taught you about yourself?
2. What advice would you give to someone who is just beginning their life in a new country?
3. Is there anything I haven't asked that you feel is important to share?

Written interview for locals

Personal context

1. Where in Finland are you from, and how would you describe the place where you grew up?
2. What has been your experience living in Finland throughout your life?
3. Have you visited any other countries? If so, did those experiences influence the way you think about migration or cultural differences?
4. What do you remember about your first encounters or relationships with people from other countries?
5. What aspects of your life have been influenced by interacting with people who have migrated to Finland or to a different country?

Identity and cultural roots

1. What elements of Finnish culture do you feel are most central to your identity?
2. Are there any rituals, celebrations, or practices that you consider especially meaningful in your life?
3. What feelings arise when you take part in these traditions?
4. How would you describe your identity within the Finnish cultural context?
5. What part of yourself as a Finnish person do you feel remains constant regardless of the environment or people around you?

Traditions, folklore and memory

1. What does the Finnish tradition or legend represented in the photoshoot mean to you personally?
2. What memories or associations from your own life or upbringing came to mind during the creative process?
3. How did it feel to represent this cultural element in the context of this project?
4. Do you feel that Finnish traditions have changed or evolved in recent years, especially with increasing cultural diversity?

Cultural Adaptation

1. How would you describe your emotional experience when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds?
2. Have there been any particularly meaningful or challenging moments in intercultural encounters?
3. What helps you navigate situations where cultural differences become visible?
4. What does “feeling at home” mean to you as someone who has always lived in Finland?

5. What has been the most surprising aspect of seeing others adapt to Finnish culture?

Support Network and relationships

1. How would you describe the role that emotional support plays within your own relationship?
2. What does “feeling supported” or “having a safe space” mean to you in the context of your relationship?
3. Would you, or have you ever, considered migrating to a different country with your partner?
4. From your perspective, what kinds of challenges do you think migrant couples might face when adapting to life in Finland?
5. Do you believe that migrating as a couple could make the experience smoother than migrating alone? Why do you think that might be the case?
6. How do you imagine the experience differs for couples who share the same cultural background compared to intercultural couples?
7. Which aspects of the adaptation process do you think might be easier (or more difficult) for couples who come from the same country?
8. Do you think having a local partner could offer advantages or types of support that differ from those available to couples who migrate together from the same country? Why?

Final questions

1. What have your interactions or relationships with people from other cultures taught you about yourself?
2. What advice would you give to someone who is welcoming or supporting a person who is just beginning their life in Finland?
3. Is there anything I haven't asked that you feel is important to share and relevant for the topic of this study?