

## The Effect of Artistic and Digital Interventions for Promoting Mental Health in Immigrants: A Theoretical Approach

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### Abstract

Immigrants encounter numerous disparities compared to non-migrants, as migration is a disruptive event that negatively impacts their mental health. Lack of support networks, dual identities, and traumatic experiences contribute to this vulnerability. In response, community-based artistic and digital interventions, such as textile design, embroidery, and digital storytelling workshops, have emerged as promising strategies to promote their mental well-being. However, these interventions often lack theoretical grounding to guide and maximize their individual and combined effects. We address this gap by integrating three theoretical frameworks that can scaffold interventions designed to support immigrants' mental health. First, the Network Episode Model (NEM) provides a foundation for designing community textile workshops where immigrants can create social networks and integrate within their new communities. Second, the Dual Identity Model informs embroidery workshops to help participants navigate identity conflicts, while strengthening belonging and self-esteem. Finally, narrative theory shapes digital Storytelling workshops, allowing immigrants to construct personal stories that give meaning to traumatic experiences through self-expression and catharsis. Building on NEM, the Dual Identity Model, and narrative theory, this paper presents a theoretical approach that facilitates both innovative design of interventions to promote mental health and systematic evaluation of effects based on theoretical concepts.

*Keywords:* artistic and digital interventions, Network Episode Model, Dual Identity Model, narrative theory model, immigrants, mental health

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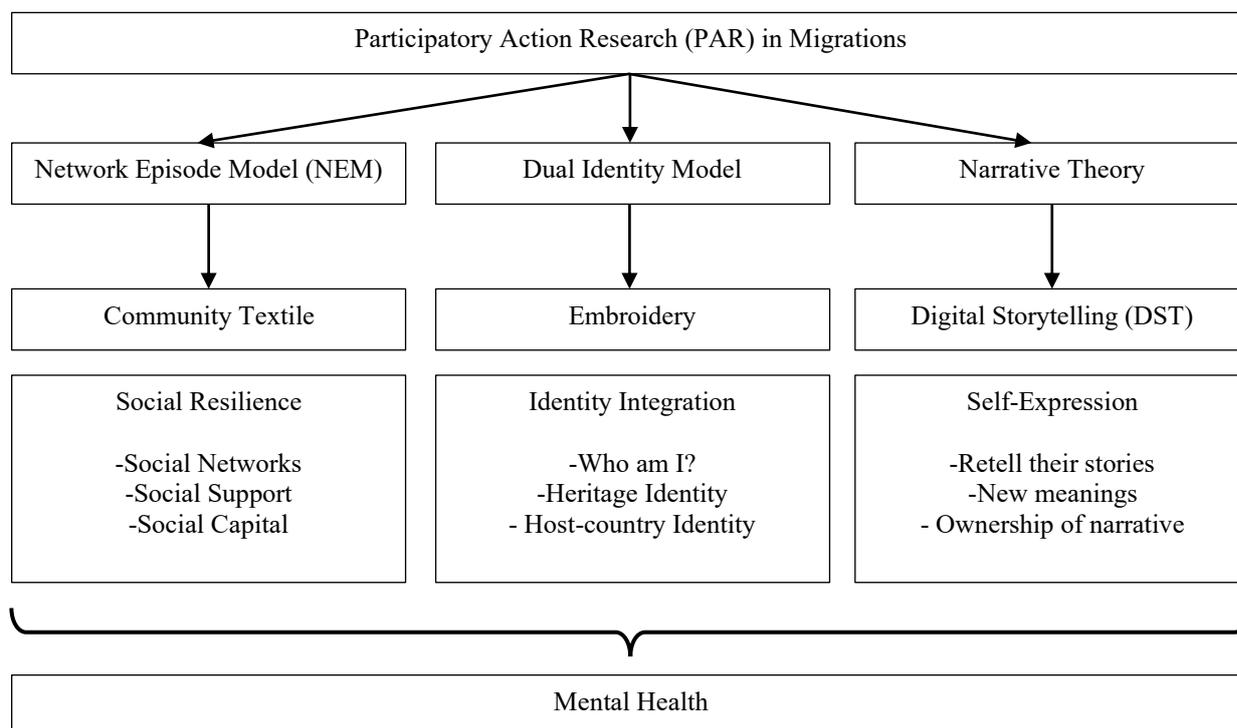
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## Introduction

Migration is a deeply transformative experience that often disrupts migrants social connections and familiar cultural surroundings. Many immigrants arrive in relatively good health, a trend known as the “immigrant health paradox”, but over time, their mental health can worsen due to ongoing stress, social isolation, identity problems, and limited access to culturally appropriate care, i.e., care that is sensitive to the immigrants’ origin culture (Ferrara et al., 2024).

As migration affects mental health, there is growing recognition that traditional healthcare models are not enough. Alternative approaches, especially those that are participatory and creative, such as community-based artistic and digital interventions, are showing potential in promoting immigrants’ mental health (Nascimento et al., 2023a, 2024a). For example, textile arts, such as embroidery, offer migrants a tactile means of expression. These slow, hands-on practices can foster communal healing by creating shared spaces for reflection and connection. Digital interventions, such as video testimonies where immigrants share their experiences, enable personal catharsis while reaching broader audiences. Digital storytelling provides scalable, accessible support for others and can spark social and political awareness. Together, these approaches form a complementary approach for practical intervention: one rooted in tradition, touch, and material expression; the other in voice, reach, and empowerment.

Moreover, we argue that artistic and digital interventions grounded in diverse theoretical approaches can be combined to provide a holistic and culturally sensitive framework for addressing immigrant mental health as a multifaceted phenomenon. This paper introduces a new theoretical model that integrates the Network Episode Model (NEM), the Dual Identity Model, and narrative theory to guide such interventions. NEM highlights the importance of social networks in influencing help-seeking behavior and recovery pathways. The Dual Identity Model addresses the negotiation between heritage and host cultures, offering insight into identity reconstruction and belonging. Narrative theory emphasizes the healing potential of storytelling, enabling migrants to reframe experiences of trauma and displacement. Together, these lenses provide a robust foundation for community-based artistic and digital practices that help immigrants build social resilience, navigate identity complexities, and engage in self-expression. For a visual representation of the proposed model, please see Figure 1.

**Figure 1***Artistic and Digital Intervention for Promoting Immigrants Mental Health***Participatory Action Research in Promoting Immigrants' Mental Health**

One promising methodology in research to promote and support immigrants' mental health is Participatory Action Research (PAR; Blaakilde & Christensen, 2024). This approach is based on the values of fairness and inclusion and involves participants as active partners in the research process (Baum et al., 2006). In the context of migration, this methodology ensures that immigrants, whose voices are often overlooked, can be more involved in the research and intervention, can speak for themselves and help design solutions that fit their cultural needs.

A recent systematic review aimed at supporting mental health within immigrant communities has shown that these practices go beyond mere data collection for research purposes. They also help people grow and heal, with positive and encouraging results for participants' overall well-being. Through PAR, immigrants can reflect on their experiences, give new meanings to their migration experiences, and rebuild their social networks (Nascimento et al., 2023a). This methodology can be particularly relevant for immigrants who leave their origin countries because of conflict or hardship, where feelings of powerlessness are common.

Moreover, PAR offers immigrants the opportunity to actively shape the process through co-creation, fostering not only personal healing but also collective empowerment. By reclaiming authorship over their narratives, immigrants can challenge harmful stereotypes and reshape how their stories are represented and understood in public discourse. However, despite its transformative potential, PAR interventions in migration contexts often concentrate on isolated issues affecting mental health. Yet, immigrant mental health is influenced by a constellation of factors, psychological, social, cultural, and political, that require a more comprehensive approach (Verelst et al., 2022). To address this complexity, multiple, targeted interventions should be implemented, each informed by robust theoretical frameworks to enhance their

relevance and effectiveness. In the following section, we argue for an integrated model that combines key theories and practices to address diverse dimensions of mental health within migration experiences.

### **The Network Episode Model**

The migration process is deeply disruptive, requiring immigrants to rebuild social ties and support systems, learn to trust unfamiliar people, and navigate new environments. These challenges can undermine their capacity to adapt and cope, a capacity referred to as social resilience (Salgado & Patuzzi, 2022). A study on immigrants from Portuguese-speaking countries living in Portugal found that when social networks are homogeneous (networks constituted mainly of ties with other immigrants, referred to as bonding social capital) and lack broader support, the risk of mental health issues such as depression increases significantly (Nascimento et al., 2023b). This underscores the need for interventions that actively foster immigrants' social resilience, not only to protect their mental health but also to strengthen their ability to thrive in new contexts.

Artistic interventions can play a vital role in fostering immigrants' social resilience. A PAR project involving community textile workshops in London – where participants stitched their migration journeys onto maps – demonstrated promising outcomes (Mazzarella & Mirza, 2023). These workshops created a space for immigrants to share personal migration experiences, build trust, and form new social connections. As their support networks expanded, participants gained access to valuable information, discovered new local resources, and improved their employment prospects (Mazzarella & Mirza, 2023). This collective engagement not only enhanced their overall well-being but also strengthened their capacity to adapt and thrive in unfamiliar environments.

Both research and interventions could benefit from incorporating the Network Episode Model (NEM), developed by Pescosolido (1992). NEM views mental health care as a socially embedded process. It highlights how individuals navigate their mental health journeys through a series of interactions (referred to as episodes) that are shaped by formal systems (such as healthcare providers), informal networks (like family and peers), and broader social contexts. Thus, NEM provides a framework for understanding how individuals interact with health systems, emphasizing the influence of social networks on help-seeking behaviors, access to care, and recovery paths.

In the context of migration, NEM has proven especially useful for exploring social resilience, as it underscores the importance of constructs such as social support and social capital in affecting mental health outcomes. Studies applying NEM to immigrant populations in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic found that migrants tend to have more unstable and homophilic networks, characterized by limited diversity and fewer bridging ties, compared to non-migrants, which increases their risk for mental health challenges (Nascimento et al., 2023a, 2024b). Meanwhile, immigrants with more diverse networks (those including non-migrant ties and varied sources of support) benefit from better access to information, resources, and opportunities, which can boost their well-being and resilience (Nascimento et al., 2021). Incorporating NEM into PAR to design community-based artistic projects, such as textile workshops, provides a valuable perspective for assessing not only the mental health impacts of these practices but also how social networks are created and mobilized. This approach can shed light on ways to strengthen social resilience and promote broader social integration within host societies.

In summary, NEM can help explain how people deal with health issues by relying on their social networks. Instead of seeing health decisions as purely individual choices, this model emphasizes how friends, family, and institutions influence mental health care trajectories and outcomes. This perspective is relevant as immigrants often lose their social support during migration. Thus, applied through PAR, such as community textile workshops, NEM can help demonstrate the effectiveness of these interventions by revealing how rebuilding social ties in the host country contributes to resilience, access to resources, and improved mental health outcomes. However, while NEM highlights the importance of rebuilding social ties, it does not fully account for the internal psychological tensions immigrants face as they navigate multiple cultural identities. To bridge this gap, Dual Identity Model offers a complementary perspective that provides insight into how individuals reconcile belonging across both heritage and host societies.

### **The Dual Identity Model**

In addition to the disruption of social networks commonly experienced during migration, immigrants often face psychological complexities in discerning which elements of their cultural heritage to maintain and which aspects of the host culture to integrate. This identity conflict can significantly affect well-being. However, in the Netherlands, longitudinal research revealed that immigrants who were able to identify with both their origin culture and non-migrant groups in the host community demonstrated better mental health over time, including higher life satisfaction and lower levels of depression and loneliness, compared to those with monolithic identity profiles (Zhang et al., 2018).

Artistic interventions such as embroidery offer immigrants a meaningful way to express themselves and explore complex questions of identity. In addition to being a valuable creative practice in itself, embroidery can serve as a powerful medium for conveying cultural and personal narratives (Silva, 2023). When embedded in community settings, embroidery-based interventions create spaces for migrants to share experiences, build social connections, and reflect on who they are—ultimately supporting their mental health and sense of belonging. A participatory embroidery workshop in Norway, for example, successfully brought together migrants and locals to co-create, fostering social encounters and dialogue around integration and identity (Aure & Al-Mahamid, 2021). Thus, interactions between immigrants and non-migrants are essential for providing expressive outlets and cultivating inclusive communities that validate both aspects of the immigrants' identity.

These community interventions can be strengthened by the Dual Identity Model (Berry, 1997), which emphasizes the importance of creating spaces where immigrants can actively engage with identity negotiation. This model highlights the need for individuals to reflect on which aspects of their heritage they wish to preserve, and which elements of the host culture they feel comfortable integrating into their evolving sense of self. Achieving a balance between origin and host country identities is essential for safeguarding mental health and well-being (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). Interventions guided by this model can help reduce acculturative stress, foster self-esteem, and support a more inclusive and resilient process of identity integration.

In summary, these findings in the migration field highlight encouraging prospects for interventions that support immigrants' mental health through the lens of the Dual Identity Model. By being both accessible and culturally familiar, embroidery emerges as a powerful therapeutic and community-based tool. It not only sustains a meaningful connection to heritage

traditions but also provides a safe space for exploring new dimensions of identity within the host society. Framed through the dual identity perspective, such practices enable individuals to integrate both cultural affiliations, thereby fostering psychological mental health. Yet, while the Dual Identity Model highlights the importance of the successful negotiation between heritage and host cultures for immigrant mental health, it does not account for how individuals process their lived experiences, particularly those marked by trauma. To address this complexity, narrative theory offers a crucial extension, revealing how the act of storytelling enables individuals to reconstruct meaning and reclaim ownership of their personal histories.

### **Narrative Theory**

Migration is also a process in which immigrants can face traumatic experiences, such as violence, persecution, and displacement, resulting in higher levels of stress, anxiety, which affect their overall mental health negatively (Kirmayer et al., 2011). These experiences impact immigrants' mental health not only during the migration transition but also in the post-migration phase. In this latter stage, they often encounter stress-inducing challenges such as prejudice, overqualification, discrimination, language barriers, housing difficulties, and limited social integration with the non-migrant population, all of which can intensify feelings of isolation and loneliness. (Fazel et al., 2005). For these reasons immigrants, particularly those who have harder migration trajectories, such as refugees, are at increased risk of developing mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression (Steel et al., 2009).

To promote immigrants' mental health, Digital storytelling (DST) workshops have shown positive results, helping them to see their trajectories in another perspective, and giving new meanings to their stories. In DST workshops, participants are responsible for telling their story on their own terms, through short videos using their own words, images, and voices. These workshops usually happen once a week, over a period of a month. Previous research shows that DST helped Brazilian and Venezuelan immigrants in Portugal express themselves, understand their emotions, and feel seen and heard (Nascimento et al., 2024a). Moreover, telling and sharing personal stories in a safe, supportive group has the potential to reduce loneliness and promote social support networks.

Moreover, narratives serve as transformative tools. Another study with Latin American immigrant women, revealed positive results, in processing difficult experiences, regain voice, and reconstruct identity. Telling their story is an opportunity to express their emotions, reflect on their own experiences and give new interpretations of those stories, giving immigrants agency, rather than passive individuals. Thus, DST can act as a therapeutic intervention allowing participants to produce personal narratives that can restore emotional well-being, enhance social connections, and foster resilience (Pereñíguez et al., 2025).

Additionally, according to Bruner's (1990) narrative theory, humans make sense of the world through stories. He argues that narrative is a fundamental mode of thought, one that organizes experience and constructs reality. Thus, narration of their story allows individuals to interpret their stories in new ways and feel more in control of their lives. This is particularly relevant in the migration field, as migration stories often are distorted from their realities. Through narrative theory interventions, immigrants can better understand challenging or perplexing situations, such as trauma or significant life transitions.

Moreover, there is a greater goal when narrative theory and digital storytelling are combined. These stories have the power to alter public opinion and impact policy when they are shared with decision-makers, educators, and the general public by conveying genuine feelings (Lambert, 2013). In this sense, storytelling serves as a means of social and political empowerment in addition to being a therapeutic tool for individuals.

In summary, in our framework, the narrative lens serves as the integrative layer that brings together the insights of the Network Episode Model and the Dual Identity Model. While social networks foster resilience and dual identity negotiation supports psychological balance, storytelling enables immigrants to weave these elements into coherent, meaningful narratives. It is through narrative that individuals make sense of disrupted connections, cultural tensions, and emotional complexity – bridging the gap between past and present, home and host, loss and hope. Positioned as the final lens, narrative theory operationalized through digital storytelling can transform fragmented experiences into agency-driven stories, offering both personal healing and catharsis as well as collective understanding. While our framework does not address biomedical models or structural determinants like legal status or formal healthcare access, it fills a critical gap in the literature by emphasizing the social and cultural dimensions of immigrant mental health.

### Application of Framework

In this section, we present an example illustrating how the three theories can inform the design of three different types of interventions, as well as how the theoretical constructs can be applied for systematic evaluation (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Using Theoretical Constructs to Guide Intervention Design and Evaluation*

Theoretical Framework	Constructs	Application in Intervention Design	Systematic Evaluation of Effects
<b>Network Episode Model (NEM)</b>	- Social network formation	Textile design workshops where participants collaborate on community textile designs, fostering new social ties and resource-sharing.	- Pre- and post-workshop mapping of participants' social networks (size, diversity, frequency of contact)
	- Access to social support		- Self-reported sense of belonging, perceived support availability and mental health indicators.
	- Integration into community		- Observation of group dynamics and collaboration quality
<b>Dual Identity Model</b>	- Maintenance of heritage identity	Embroidery workshops that encourage incorporating traditional motifs with host-country designs, symbolizing dual belonging.	- Changes in self-reported bicultural identity integration and identity conflict
	- Integration into host community identity		- Increases in self-esteem and sense of cultural pride
	- Reduction of identity conflict		- Qualitative analysis of symbolic meaning in embroidered pieces

Theoretical Framework	Constructs	Application in Intervention Design	Systematic Evaluation of Effects
Narrative Theory	- Story construction		- Pre- and post-measures of psychological distress and meaning in life
	- Meaning-making of traumatic or disruptive experiences	Digital storytelling workshops where participants create short videos narrating migration journeys and resilience.	- Narrative analysis of stories (coherence, agency, positive reframing)
	- Emotional expression & catharsis		- Post intervention focus group, exploring the impact of creating their own narratives - Feedback on emotional release and empowerment experienced during storytelling

## Conclusion

Migration is a profoundly disruptive experience that affects multiple dimensions of immigrants' lives, often in ways that traditional healthcare research and interventions cannot fully address. In response to this, this paper introduces a framework that synthesizes several established theoretical perspectives from migration research. By strengthening the conceptual foundation that guides artistic and digital interventions and their systematic evaluation, the framework opens new avenues for participatory action research focused on enhancing immigrant mental health.

Our theoretical framework highlights the significance of comprehending mental health not only as an individual problem but also as being entwined with social networks, cultural identities, and personal narratives. We do this by combining the Network Episode Model, the Dual Identity Model, and Narrative Theory. The Network Episode Model shows how reconstructing and broadening social networks improves social resilience, the Dual Identity Model emphasizes the psychological advantages of preserving a balance between heritage and host-country identities, while Digital storytelling, which operationalizes narrative theory, helps immigrants process painful events, reclaim agency, and create meaning on both a personal and a collective level.

Overall, this paper highlights a theoretical integration combined with artistic and digital practices to enhance the efficacy of community interventions in promoting immigrants' psychological well-being. Several constructs impact immigrants' mental health, and the theoretical model proposed reinforces the necessity of holistic, participatory, and culturally attuned approaches. With this model, we expect that future interventions can help immigrants build their social resilience and support systems, negotiate their dual identities, and promote their overall mental health.

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