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**Crossen, W, Wadsworth, N, Ronkainen, N, Haslett, D and Tod, D (2023)
Identity in elite level disability sport: a systematic review and meta-study of qualitative research. International Review of Sport and Exercise
Psychology. ISSN 1750-984X**

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Identity in Elite Level Disability Sport: A Systematic Review and Meta-Study of Qualitative Research

Abstract

This meta-study evaluated qualitative identity literature within elite disabled sport. Following a systematic search of EBSCO SPORTDiscus, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, and Web of Science, nine articles met the inclusion criteria. The meta-study examined how identity was framed from participant or author perspectives, employing narrative analysis to understand the participant stories and broader storylines crafted by authors. Two distinct narratives were co-constructed; *Re-birth*: characterising athlete identity experiences and how overcoming career challenges developed traits necessary for elite athlete status, and *Tragedy*: how authors' interpretations indicated that although athletes achieved personal sporting success, the 'bigger battle' of how disability was presented within society remained. The *Re-birth* and *Tragedy* narratives update the prospective gap between how elite disability athletes story their experiences and their framing within society.

Keywords: athlete, narrative analysis, storytelling, society

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27 Elite level disability sport is becoming more popular and professional. Contemporary
28 research exploring empowerment (Powis, 2020), high-performance coaching (Townsend et
29 al., 2018), and classification (Powis & Macbeth, 2020), have readdressed how disabled
30 people¹ in sport are framed in social discourse. Research identifies disabled athletes have
31 complex contradictions regarding their sporting participation, advocating for further research
32 on how athletes may refute dominant disability stereotypes (Guerrero & Martin, 2018). One
33 example, the ‘supercrip’, is defined as an inspirational disabled person, glorified, and lauded
34 in the media (Schalk, 2016), which emphasises individual attitude, work, and perseverance as
35 the key to thriving. This highlights the person with a disability as living a ‘normal’ existence
36 as a result of overcoming or defeating their disability (Martin, 2013). However, this
37 stereotype implies disability can be overcome through hard work, framing disability as a
38 deficit, located in the person. Yet, athletes in this population retain positive perceptions about
39 the supercrip identity, with it portraying athletes positively and a better alternative to being
40 ignored completely (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). Nevertheless, the broader landscape where
41 disabled people may feel ‘more’ or ‘less’ disabled when encountering daily challenges may
42 reflect a different outlook. These may exhibit a stereotype, where athletes in elite competition
43 (Paralympics) may be distanced from the general population of disabled people (Cherney et
44 al., 2015). On the contrary, not all disabled athletes may view themselves, or wish to be
45 viewed, as “elite” (Brittain, 2004). Cherney et al. (2015) share Blauwet and Willick’s (2012)
46 view that disabled athletes should be viewed equal in skill and worth as nondisabled athletes.

47 Identity refers to our understanding of ourselves and other people, and their
48 understanding of themselves and us (Jenkins, 2014). Approaches to identity focus on the

¹ This paper follows the UK Social Model of disability (Oliver, 2004) using identity-first language (‘disabled people’ and ‘disabled athletes’). We acknowledge ‘disabled people’ globally refer to themselves in various ways, such as ‘persons with disabilities’ as used in the UN Convention of Rights for Persons with Disabilities or ‘athletes with disabilities’ as language recommended by the International Paralympic Committee.

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49 context in which the individual operates to form their behaviour. In some contexts, a person's
50 sense of self is based on seeing themselves as a unique individual (personal identity); in other
51 contexts, self-definition and behaviour are underpinned by the individual's sense that they
52 share a common group membership (Rees et al., 2015). Here, two main approaches have
53 explored identity; a cognitivist and a cultural perspective. These approaches influence how
54 scholars conceptualise disability: the medical model understands disability as a problem
55 residing in the individual, and the social model outlines disability as a cultural phenomenon.

56 Cognitivist approaches, view identity as fixed, permanent, or innate. Identity involves
57 a self-schema that interprets information about an individual's role in society (Guerrero &
58 Martin, 2018). For example, an athletic identity adopts this, defined as the degree to which a
59 disabled individual identifies with the social role of an athlete (Tasiemski & Brewer, 2011).
60 Disability identity, when shaped as more of a personal identity, is a "unique phenomenon,
61 shaping a person's way of seeing themselves, their bodies, way of interacting with the world
62 and adapting to their disability" (Forber Pratt et al., 2017; p.15). The cognitivist lens
63 promotes a medical understanding of disability (see Smith & Perrier, 2014). This
64 understanding views disability as a 'personal loss' (impairment), to be 'fixed' through
65 intervention (Smith & Bundon, 2018). For example, therapeutic approaches underpinned by
66 cognitivism (e.g., REBT) imply athletes' psychological challenges, such as compromised
67 self-identity, are linked to specific biological conditions such as visual impairment (Wood et
68 al., 2018a; 2018b). Therefore, scholars accuse the cognitivist approach is pre-occupied with
69 rational thought, reduces identity to individual psychology, targets only individual agency,
70 and promoting the neoliberal viewpoint that disabled people are responsible for their
71 identities (Smith & Perrier, 2014).

72 Scholars who adopt a cultural sport psychology (CSP, e.g., McGannon & Smith,
73 2015) lens, look to challenge individualist assumptions underpinning cognitivist approaches.

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74 A CSP approach assumes thought and emotion reside in social relations and seek to facilitate
75 contextual understandings of identities (McGannon & Smith, 2015). This challenges
76 persisting meanings of identity embedded in cognitivist approaches, and regards identity as
77 non-essentialist (i.e., changeable). Identity, from a CSP approach is constantly negotiated and
78 socially constructed (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Schinke et al., 2019); it is seen as the
79 product of (dis)empowering histories and discourses (Bundon et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2016).
80 CSP researchers often endorse qualitative methods and a social constructionist philosophy to
81 capture social context (Perrier et al., 2012). CSP approaches complement a social-relational
82 model understanding of disability, in which disability reflects a problem with society not the
83 individual (Smith & Bundon, 2018). For example, the social model highlights how people
84 with impairments are disabled by the attitudinal and environmental barriers they encounter
85 (Goodley, 2016). A social-relational model considers the meaning of exclusion in different
86 contexts and how this impacts disabled people's wellbeing (Smith & Bundon, 2018, Thomas,
87 2004), with these models promoting psychological intervention at an environmental level
88 (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Schinke et al., 2019).

89 Despite studies into disability identity in non-sporting populations (e.g., Forber-Pratt
90 et al., 2017) and athletic identity in elite disability sport populations (e.g., Guerrero & Martin,
91 2018), few reviews of disability identity in elite disability sport populations exist. Haslett et
92 al. (2020) advocate for further clarity surrounding different disability contexts and how
93 athletes negotiate these, to further understand the various forces contributing to psychological
94 adversity within disability studies (Smith & Perrier, 2014). Moreover, with a complex
95 relationship existing between embodiment, identity and disability sport, there is value in
96 focusing on athletes' lived experiences and voices (McKay, 2022). On a cultural level, Maher
97 et al. (2022) identify the need to consider how sports environments and relationships are
98 constructed to foster a shared sense of belonging, acceptance, and value. Consequently, a

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99 review of disability identity may identify how elite athletes story their lived identity
100 experiences, the meaning behind these, and how these are (re)told. Peers (2016) outlines the
101 importance of disabled people being active in the (re)production of disability, through de-
102 composing the stories and cultures that disable and interrogating these. The concept of
103 narratives may bridge the gap between stories told by individuals and the dominant
104 discourse(s) within their lives (McLeod, 2006). In the current review, the stories provide an
105 understanding of identity development, with individuals understanding themselves through
106 the stories they tell and feel part of (Smith, 2007). This review explores what Frank (2010)
107 termed socio-narratology, where value is in what stories *do* and their capacity to shape
108 meaning, personal experience, embodiment, and social life. Here, comparing how athletes
109 story their experiences and how authors re-tell these, addresses the cultural approach by
110 conducting narrative analysis at two levels. This understands how stories present a co-
111 constructed appreciation of how society, environment, and cultures shape dominant sporting
112 narratives. Stories often limit the values people can hold (Frank, 2010), which may close
113 down conversations as opposed to opening them up. Therefore, critically analysing the ‘good’
114 and ‘bad’ ways stories act (Caddick, 2018), may shed light on marginalised narratives, which
115 may contradict the supercrip/empowerment storyline often seen in the area.

116 The aim of the present study is to review and synthesize qualitative studies on identity
117 in elite disability sport to investigate: (a) how elite disability athletes construct their
118 identities; (b) how authors are interpreting these stories; and (c) the meanings behind identity
119 construction within this population. It is anticipated the study will outline how authors review
120 and interpret data relating to the social significance of disability sport (Cherney et al., 2015).
121 This is significant given that previous literature (Braye, 2017) has highlighted that events
122 such as the Paralympic Games may often provide a false impression that disabled people
123 have equal opportunities in wider society.

124

Method**125 Review Design**

126 The meta-study method is based on a constructivist approach and provides tools for
127 analysing and synthesising qualitative research (Ronkainen et al., 2022). Meta-study involves
128 meta-method, meta-data, meta-theory analysis, and meta-synthesis (Paterson et al., 2001).

129 The first three components take place concurrently; the meta-synthesis is presented as the
130 outcome of a meta-study. The meta-study combines the results of multiple studies, identifies
131 patterns amongst these results, sources of disagreements, and other relationships (Rothman et
132 al., 2008), leading to knowledge generation in the area. We used the meta-study method to
133 understand how identity in disability sport contexts is differently viewed, defined,

134 understood, or acted upon in relation to how the research is conducted. Furthermore, we
135 acknowledge the role of both research participants and study authors within the process and
136 how these shape identity meanings in the reviewed studies. While the meta-study method is
137 growing in popularity in sport and exercise psychology (see Ronkainen et al., 2022, for a
138 review), no studies have yet focused on a disability athlete population nor adopt a narrative
139 approach to data analysis. Despite potential gaps, Pereira Vargas et al. (2021) provide a
140 comprehensive account of narratives in meta-study methodologies. Here, Pereira Vargas et al.
141 showed the significance of how participants shaped their mental illness through narratives.

142 Search Strategy**143 *Keywords Development.***

144 Key words were developed via a scoping review, hand searching research in the area,
145 and subsequent discussion by authors. These were underpinned by CHIP (Shaw, 2010) (Table
146 4.) to break the research question down into key components: Context of the study (identity
147 in elite disability sport); How it was conducted (qualitative methods); Issues investigated

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148 (identity construction and meaning); and Population involved (elite disability athletes). The
149 search strategy consisted of four separate term searches: (1) *disab** OR *paralympi** OR
150 *parasport* (2) *identit** OR *character* (3) *sport** OR *athlet** OR *exercise* 4) *1st* AND *2nd* AND
151 *3rd* keyword search. Pilot testing indicated these keywords and search combinations yielded a
152 concise and sensitive (wide breadth and depth) data retrieval to maximise reliability.

153 *Search Strategy*

154 The search databases were: EBSCO SPORTDiscus, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, and Web of
155 Science. The first author completed electronic searches on June 2021. An additional search
156 was completed on December 2022, which resulted in the addition of one further study
157 (Kirakosyan, 2021). Backward (scanning reference lists of included articles) and forward
158 (searching works citing included articles) manual search strategies were conducted to check
159 articles fitting the criteria were collected, identifying any key research articles missed through
160 electronic searches. These records were screened and assessed for eligibility. The titles and
161 abstracts of sixteen journals exploring identity in competitive disability sport were explored.
162 The general search strategy is shown in *Table 1*.

163 *Inclusion Criteria.*

164 The meta-study focuses on qualitative research studies only. Studies were included if
165 they reported: (a) primary data obtained through at least one qualitative data collection
166 method, (b) exploring the role of identity in elite disability sport and were (c) peer-reviewed
167 research articles. There were no date limitations. Elite athlete was defined as someone who
168 either participated in elite talent programs, competed at high level events like the
169 Paralympics, and/or experienced sustained success at the highest level (Swann et al., 2015).

170 **Data Extraction**

171 Following meta-study guidelines (Paterson et al., 2001), key features of retained

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172 research articles were collated (see *Table 2.* and 3.). These templates were constructed by
173 assessing other published meta-studies (e.g., Ronkainen et al., 2016) to identify helpful
174 groupings and subsequently choosing categories to best fit the current review's purpose.

175 **Data Analysis**

176 **Meta-method analysis.** Meta-method analysis assesses the influence of each study's
177 method on findings. Following examples set in previous qualitative meta-studies (Massey &
178 Williams, 2020; Ronkainen et al., 2016) the included articles were reviewed with specific
179 methodological data extracted from each paper and summarised in *Table 2.* *Table 2.*'s content
180 was examined for patterns across the literature and reported in the meta-method analysis
181 results section. We achieved this by following a process similar to that of Massey and
182 Williams (2020), involving reviewing: (1) the philosophical assumptions underpinning the
183 research design, (2) whether the research questions and role of the researchers aligned to this
184 philosophical stance, (3) the researchers' rationale for data collection and data analysis
185 methods, and (4) how the methodological approach influenced the research finding.

186 **Meta-theory analysis.** Meta-theory analysis identifies the key theoretical paradigms
187 within the literature base, with theoretical and analytical data extracted from each paper and
188 presented in *Table 2.* Here, focus is on larger social, historical, cultural and political contexts,
189 and how theoretical underpinnings influence a body of work (Paterson et al., 2001).

190 Challenges may arise when authors do not explicitly reference their theoretical framework,
191 form of inquiry, or method of analysis. This is common when, due to journal word length
192 restrictions, qualitative papers focus on research findings at the expense of detailing their
193 methodology (Williams & Shaw, 2016).

194 **Meta-data analysis.** Here, we critically examined how the research process
195 (methodology, research design, method) influenced the research findings. The first and

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196 second authors initially engaged in the meta-data process independently, by reading and re-
197 reading the articles. We then collectively appraised the articles in chronological order to gain
198 historical context and examine whether there had been changes in how the topic had been
199 explored over time. Cross case analysis (Riessman, 2008) was utilised throughout, with the
200 research team acting as ‘critical friends’ to review the data collected and the primary
201 researcher’s conclusions.

202 Data analysis (narrative analysis) was conducted on two levels. First, we explored the
203 stories told by participants within each study (primary data), presented as the verbatim quotes
204 in the articles results’ sections. The research team reviewed the meaning attributed to each
205 participant experience, whilst acknowledging the story structure and the dominant narrative
206 features underpinning these. This enabled a shift between the narrative (how is the story
207 being told?) and the product of the story (what is being said?) (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The
208 structure of the stories were explored through The Seven Basic Plots (Booker, 2004), with
209 this framework helping story how participants described their identity experiences and how
210 authors then interpreted these. All participant stories followed a similar structure, with some
211 divergence in end points; a) the participant embarks on a journey towards a goal, b) they
212 experience some form of obstacle or threat, c) resulting in some form of change when
213 attempting to overcome the obstacle, and d) there is an ending to the story, or the story
214 continues. Structuring in this format, paralleled common storytelling plots around:
215 Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy,
216 and Rebirth (Booker, 2004). The plots storied key narratives outlined throughout the review
217 and explored areas that may have previously been overlooked. Furthermore, the author
218 interpretations consider how participant stories fit within society with regard to disability.
219 The meta-data analysis is summarised in *Table 3*. and discussed within the meta-data results.

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220 **Meta-synthesis.** This stage integrates the interpretations from the meta-data, meta-
221 method, and meta-theory analyses. A meta-synthesis explores beyond the descriptive
222 meanings of findings, and towards generating an explanatory or integrative theoretical
223 framework to extend upon what is already known (Paterson et al., 2001). The purpose of the
224 current meta-synthesis was to review how identity is constructed in elite disability sport, to
225 clarify what identities are made available to elite disability athletes, their engagement, and the
226 meaning behind identity construction. Two key stories were co-constructed surrounding
227 participant and author experiences of disability identity in elite disability sport: (1) Rebirth -
228 *'Supercrip': 'You are doing extraordinary things!'*; (2) *Tragedy: The 'bubble' of sport and*
229 *the 'bigger battle' within society.*

230

Results

231 **Meta-Method Analysis.** Six of the nine studies included in the review provided
232 sufficient detail to fully evaluate methodological quality (Bantjes et al., 2019; Campbell,
233 2018; Kirakosyan, 2021; Pack et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2016; Wickman, 2007). Of these six
234 studies, three explicitly outlined the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research
235 study (Bantjes et al., 2019; Kirakosyan, 2021; Smith et al., 2016). In the other three studies,
236 philosophical stance was implied (Campbell, 2018; Pack et al., 2017; Wickman, 2007). The
237 remaining three studies did not outline (explicitly or implicitly) the methodology
238 underpinning the study design. When reviewing the philosophical assumptions underpinning
239 the studies, we identified a number of methodological inconsistencies across the sample;
240 especially in relation to how the research methodology aligned to data analysis techniques.
241 For example, Pack et al. (2017) stated “the aim of IPA is to understand lived experience,
242 rather than the aim of producing objective accounts” (p. 2064) and yet regularly used
243 ‘emerging’ or ‘emergent’ when describing the data analysis process. The words ‘emerging’,
244 ‘emerge’, ‘emergence’, and ‘found’ were used in three other studies (Huang & Brittain, 2006;

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245 Kirakosyan, 2021; Smith et al., 2016), which contradicted the stated philosophical stance (i.e.
246 *epistemological constructivism*; Smith et al., 2016) by implying that reality is objective and
247 readily available to discover through the data collected. We identified further inconsistencies
248 between research methodology and methods with researchers' use of member checking (Pack
249 et al., 2017; Wickman, 2007) and data saturation (Smith et al., 2016; Pack et al., 2017). Both
250 member checking (Smith & McGannon, 2018) and data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021)
251 have been criticised within qualitative literature and may also be seen to contradict the
252 philosophical positions of these studies.

253 Despite these inconsistencies, across the sample, there were a number of
254 methodological strengths. For example, six of the studies clearly outlined a connection
255 between the research aims and methodology (Bantjes et al., 2019; Campbell, 2018; Hu et al.,
256 2021; Kirakosyan, 2021; Pack et al., 2017; Wickman, 2007), which allowed the authors to
257 create a 'golden thread' in their research and explicitly highlight how their findings
258 contributed towards knowledge advancement in the area. The majority of the studies utilised
259 a purposeful sampling technique to recruit participants (Hu et al., 2021), which represented
260 both males and females, as well as a variety of sports (Taekwondo, Swimming, Volleyball,
261 Wheelchair Rugby etc.) across a number of countries (Britain, Taiwan, Canada, Brazil etc.).
262 Participants included in the studies were described as belonging to an 'elite' status, with most
263 competing at an international level (Paralympics). However, only one study (Smith et al.,
264 2016) explicitly defined what elite meant. All studies used semi-structured interviews to
265 collect data. However, in some cases, the interviews were particularly short in length (19
266 minutes; Hu et al., 2021) or the interview timings were not provided (Le Clair, 2011)
267 reducing the transparency of the research findings. Some interviews were conducted
268 alongside participant observations (Le Clair, 2011) and fieldwork observations (Smith et al.,
269 2016). Le Clair's (2011) study was the only study to explore the topic longitudinally. Sole

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270 use of semi-structured interview guides may have impacted the research findings, by 1)
271 preventing participants from exploring areas of the topic important to them, and 2)
272 encouraging the creation of ‘themes’ to represent similar experiences across the sample.
273 Taken together, this may have contributed towards the silencing of already marginalised and
274 unexplored narratives. Furthermore, the variety of sample sizes (six - Campbell, 2018 to 41 –
275 Kirakosyan, 2021) may also have contributed towards the silencing of alternative narratives.
276 Studies with a smaller sample size (nine – Wickman, 2007) were able to celebrate the
277 idiosyncrasies of the participants’ stories. Sample size should be closely considered in line
278 with research methodology, methods, and research aims. Moreover, we recognise the value of
279 open-ended or even unstructured interviews (Dale, 1996). Furthermore, focus groups have
280 been found useful for participants to interact and relate to one another’s experiences. This
281 may allow identity to discuss subjective meanings and interpretations, and enable individuals
282 to align themselves more readily with those facing similar experiences. Regardless of the data
283 collection method undertaken, authors should outline their position, through a process of
284 reflexivity, and how this may impact the interpretation of data (Hu et al., 2021). When this
285 was not achieved, it was also unclear how the authors’ wanted the quality of their research to
286 be judged (Huang & Brittain, 2006; Le Clair, 2011; Wickman, 2007).

287 **Meta-Theory Analysis.** In the meta-theory analysis, we investigated what major
288 traditions of thought were represented in the theoretical frameworks and conceptualisations
289 of identity in the primary research (see Paterson et al., 2001). Campbell (2018) mapped
290 findings to the social-relational model of disability to better understand the relationship
291 between individual perception, impairment and environment. Kirakosyan (2021) discussed
292 the ‘continuum’ in which theories of disability are explored, bounded by the medical model
293 and the social model. In itself, Kirakosyan (2021) showcased the challenges disabled people
294 faced when equated to the medical model (medical professionals should provide a ‘solution’

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295 to the individual) and the social model (difficulties surrounding disabled peoples' ability to
296 take independence). The remaining seven studies did not specify explicitly, the model of
297 disability they adopted (studies such as Smith et al., 2016 implicitly discussed models of
298 disability within the discussion, however this was not clear). Given the umbrella term
299 'disability' encompasses (broad range of physical, sensory, psychological, and cognitive
300 capacities) and language which is fluid and evolving (especially within identity); the
301 implications of studies not explicitly outlining the authors' understanding of what is meant by
302 disability, may provide barriers to the reader in their understanding of disability and the
303 transparency of the research. Referring back to reflexivity, Massey & Williams' (2020) meta-
304 study previously cited that researchers should be reflexively aware of the decisions they take,
305 to justify and communicate the rationale behind them. Thus, by not being explicitly clear on
306 their theoretical frameworks and conceptualisations of identity in disability, it may lack
307 transparency for readers to understand how knowledge is constructed, its role and impact in
308 the process, and arrival at their own conclusion.

309 While in some articles it was challenging to locate a named identity theory (e.g.,
310 social identity theory, narrative identity theory), it was clear that some studies gravitated
311 towards 'a thick individual' and others 'a thick social-relational' perspective on identity
312 (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). From a thick individual perspective, Campbell (2018) highlighted
313 the lack of literature uncovering the lived experiences of student-athletes who participate in
314 Paralympic sport, and analysed her data using IPA. When interpreting the findings, Campbell
315 (2018) emphasised that, despite shared life environments, participants had unique ways of
316 making meaning of their identities as 'athletes', 'students' and 'disabled', and also
317 highlighted the importance of differentiating the impairments that student-athletes may have.
318 An example of a thick socio-cultural perspective, Wickman (2007) drew from a
319 poststructuralist lens, arguing that identity is multiple, unstable, and constituted through

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320 discourse. In discussing her findings, she highlighted that normative discourse of able-ism
321 was oppressive and led participants to dis-identify from being ‘disabled athletes’. Overall,
322 several studies drew on narrative and discursive theoretical perspectives and ways that
323 identities are culturally shaped and negotiated within narrative-discursive resources (Bantjes
324 et al., 2019; Huang & Brittain, 2006; Kirakosyan, 2021; Smith et al., 2016).

325 **Meta-Data Analysis.** The structural meta-data analysis began by identifying the
326 beginning, middle, and end of each story within the dataset. These were compared to the
327 Seven Basic Plots to connect the participant journeys and the narrative structure of the plots.
328 The temporal nature of the data (themes) co-created stories aligning to the broad structure of
329 beginning, middle, and end. For example, Bantjes et al. (2019) results’ begin by outlining
330 participants’ struggles with discrimination and being a disabled athlete (introduction). They
331 present sport as a ‘way out’, despite on-going discrimination (middle). Finally, they outline
332 sport as a way for participants to transform themselves and reach ‘self-acceptance (end). The
333 second level of data analysis also used this structure to analyse the authors’ interpretations,
334 reflected in the introduction (beginning), results (middle), and discussion (end).

335 Meta-data analysis results are constructed around the two main stories of: 1) Re-born
336 as ‘Supercrip’ - ‘You are doing extraordinary things!’; (2) The ‘bubble’ of sport and the
337 ‘bigger battle’ within society. These stories reflect accounts of the participant(s), and
338 author(s) interpretation of the participants’ stories. Framing the results in this manner,
339 allowed us to achieve the first two aims of the study. Through primary data analysis, we
340 interpreted that the athletes’ stories were best captured by the Re-birth plot. However, we felt
341 the authors’ interpreted these stories within the Tragedy narrative, because although
342 participants had achieved success within their own journeys, this was often at the expense of
343 losing a wider perspective of the bigger battle. This represented the challenges experienced
344 by disabled people within society, including retirement, marginalisation, politics, and

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345 disability rights. One exception was Kirakosyan (2021), where there were several references
346 by participants to broader society when discussing disability identity and prejudice.
347 Kirakosyan (2021) was the only study that explicitly discussed activism outside of a sporting
348 context (i.e., in society) from the perspective of the participants. Here, the ‘superhero’
349 narrative was rejected by participants as this devalued their sporting achievements, with
350 participants underlining the significance of being role models in sport and life. As such, the
351 participant and author stories aligned more closely.

352 Re-born as ‘Supercrip’ - You are doing extraordinary things!

353 The participants followed this narrative through: (1) the participant becomes aware of
354 their disability and/or sporting identity status (depending on where the story begins), (2) they
355 encounter initial struggle with this identity status due to stigma, marginalisation, and
356 exclusion, (3) these encounters involve negotiation of their identity(ies) in order to establish
357 ‘normality’ within their experience(s), (4) although achieving some success, there remains a
358 gap between the participant and their counterparts (e.g. able-bodied athletes), (5) through
359 success and overcoming challenges, the traits developed here, enabled the participant to
360 emerge from the darkness to demonstrate their status (e.g. as an elite athlete or ‘supercrip’).

361 Participants demonstrated their athletic ability through the status and success of
362 competing at an elite level. In the early stages of this plot, participants were presented with
363 varying levels of challenge and acceptance concerning their disability, showcasing the ‘dark
364 shadow’. Five of the nine stories detailed these in terms of marginalisation and exclusion at
365 an early stage (childhood). This represents the initial ‘dark shadow’ of the Rebirth plot:

366 When I was growing up, they imitated the way I walked... they called me retard
367 because it was the only thing they knew and understood about my disability (Le Clair,
368 2011; p.1119).

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369 Yet, as the dark shadow grew, many participants discovered sport, which ran parallel
370 as a core narrative. How this was framed by participants at an early age, was perhaps central
371 to overcoming experiences of exclusion: ‘My brother and I started lessons [swimming] just
372 like any other child’ (Pack et al., 2017; p. 2065). Maintaining a close allegiance with sport
373 from an early age eclipsed notions of indifference: ‘since I was little, I always tried to get into
374 as many sports as I possibly could, and been like that ever since’ (Hu et al., 2021; p.6). In
375 Kirakosyan (2021), although no mention of their own childhood experiences, participants
376 revisited these stages by now visiting schools: ‘I visited, I talked about my experience, and
377 kids without impairments were curious. They can grow up to become future physiotherapists
378 or coach a Paralympic sport’ (p.17). This helped ‘break the stereotype of a victim who cannot
379 do anything’ (p.17). Although participants in the study may not have their own experiences at
380 that age, they endeavoured to help ensure it would not happen to others. For Kirakosyan
381 (2021) this draws on activism in sport and wider society.

382 After early disability identity experiences, all nine studies highlighted the participants’
383 current status. These experiences often lacked clarity surrounding identity, with participants’
384 struggling to accept their identity as a disabled (sports)person. In Kirakosyan (2021), this
385 revolved around impairment acting as a barrier to masculinity, as society often associated
386 able-bodiedness with being masculine. Yet, the participants challenged these views
387 throughout Paralympic wheelchair rugby: ‘We are not some poor souls ‘playing’ sport. They
388 saw how competitive we were... we do things that many people without impairment could
389 never do’ (p.11). In Huang & Brittain (2006), participants framed their identity as a blend of
390 impairment and disability: ‘I think it [the impairment] is always there... you just can’t get
391 away from it... sometimes I do wish I was able-bodied’ (p. 358); whereas other participants
392 in the study did not view themselves as disabled: ‘I see myself as someone that goes around
393 on wheels, but just a normal person’ (p.360). This ambiguity was demonstrated further within

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394 sport by Wickman (2007): ‘Subconsciously I see myself as a disabled sportsman, but when I
395 am competing, I don’t think like that’ (p.162), with this lack of familiarity challenging for
396 some: ‘I didn’t have people there who were similar to me... training and studying, yeah I was
397 a bit of a loner’ (Campbell, 2018; p.778). At this stage, participants have begun to fall under a
398 dark shadow, within childhood or more contemporary experiences. This shadow grows, with
399 it providing contested meanings of identity. Here, sport and identification as an athlete,
400 demonstrates either an embracement or rejection of disability, with the latter showcasing how
401 identifying as an athlete, enabled them to embrace their disability:

402 Body image is huge, it’s been huge my whole life with my leg, always wanting to fit
403 in or identify with something. It was very easy for me to identify with being an
404 athlete. I look like an athlete, I act like an athlete. I’m an athlete. (Hu et al., 2021; p.7).

405 The authors frame this stage of the journey from multiple angles (Sport as an arena for
406 personal transformation - Bantjes et al., 2019; Rejecting disability and embracing ability - Le
407 Clair, 2011; Questioning disability sport – Wickman, 2007). The events offer both positive
408 and negative experiences and how this shapes participant status. As is the nature of the
409 *Rebirth* plot, the darkness grows and reveals its true impact on the individual, with this
410 impacting participants in different ways. For some, this provided a concept of normality: ‘my
411 impairment is normal to me. All the inconvenience and unequal treatment become normal to
412 me’ (Huang & Brittain, 2006; p.359), with participants highlighting disability as a trait and
413 that everyone is different:

414 Disability is normal to me and all that I have known... who is normal? Everyone is
415 different, but to them that difference is normal. Society puts normal labels on people.
416 (Huang & Brittain, 2006; p.362)

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417 This normality provided participants' own perception of status: 'You can do anything really,
418 anything a 'normal person' would do' (Campbell, 2018; p.775) and 'I do not think about
419 what I could not do because of my impairment. I think about what I can do because of it... it
420 is a tool... With it, I am a Paralympic athlete and a more active citizen'. (Kirakosyan, 2021;
421 p.13). Yet, this often coincided with the darkness provided by reminders from others: 'When
422 people refer to me but can't remember my name, they mention my impairment. They
423 automatically regard me as a disabled person.' (Huang & Brittain, 2006; p.359).

424 When transferring this to sport the darkness remained, with participants often required to
425 align with being a disabled athlete, as opposed to being an athlete:

426 I struggled because to participate in Paralympic sport you have to first say I have a
427 disability... I'm an athlete first and happen to have a disability (Le Clair, 2011; p.
428 1124)

429 In Smith et al., (2016, p.11) participants battled with the darkness by maintaining a consistent
430 view of achievement: 'my goal is to win, and be the best I can'. Often reached through
431 closing the gap between themselves and those able-bodied, this conflicted with whether it
432 closed or widened the gap between themselves and their disability (seven out of nine studies):

433 I don't accept the inequalities between what we have and what Olympic, able-bodied
434 have... inequalities are wrong and really stressful, but I don't take it lying down...
435 (Smith et al., 2016; p.11).

436 People cannot identify with a disabled person... when Sweden wins a gold medal in
437 archery, or ice hockey... then it is "we" who win... If a disabled person wins a gold
438 medal – then it is "they". My identity is not disability sport. (Wickman, 2007; p.157).

439 Although the first quote indicates the participant promotes disability rights to foster change,
440 the second implies society is yet to buy into and view disability sport alongside able-bodied

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441 sport. Kirakosyan (2021) demonstrates inconsistency relating to the Paralympics and cultural
 442 perception: “I was in London [2012], they had a different view of Paralympic sport...
 443 featuring Olympic and Paralympic athletes together... In Brazil, before the Paralympics, I
 444 would tell people I was a Paralympic athlete, they would ask, “Para what?” (p.8)

445 Nevertheless, the battles experienced, allow the supercrip narrative to be (re)born, where the
 446 participants’ stories emerge from the darkness and demonstrate extraordinary abilities and
 447 mind-sets. This emphasised hard-work, resilience, and competing at an elite level:

448 I train hard, I lift weights, I cover hundreds of miles... I am an athlete, and want to be
 449 seen as one, not disabled, but an athlete outright, a winner... I’m a Paralympian and
 450 for me that is all about being an athlete, not disability (Smith et al., 2016; p.13)

451 Furthermore, when framed by authors, the acceptance and integration of those with a
 452 disability was achieved through focusing on present behaviour and performance to achieve an
 453 athletic identity (Pack et al., 2017), with liberation accomplished through mastery of physical
 454 skill on the sports field and witnessed by spectators (Bantjes et al., 2019). Ultimately, the
 455 narrative plot of rebirth and the participants’ stories and authors framing of these, provides
 456 the notion that the participants have achieved a sense of normality in the sporting arena. This
 457 itself, may be quite powerful:

458 I became a swimmer rather than just someone with a disability swimming up and
 459 down... I was doing the same sort of training and had the same mentality as some
 460 able-bodied swimmers (Pack et al., 2017; p.2067)

461 **Tragedy: The ‘bubble’ of sport and the ‘bigger battle’ within society**

462 Here, we discuss the participant lived experiences in sport and society, prior to moving onto
 463 how the authors’ framed these within a tragedy narrative. This narrative plot involved: (1) the
 464 participant is valued, identifies with their sport and being an athlete, however challenges

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465 surrounding their disability surface, (2) these instances demonstrate how disabled people may
466 be regarded, which prompts the participant to advocate change, (3) yet, the participant's
467 immersion of an athletic identity and one aspect of their life (sporting achievement), (4) often
468 screens what may occur for disabled people outside sport, (5) for participants who are aware,
469 they attempt to (re)address marginalisation, with this an ongoing battle.

470 Participants in all nine studies referenced how elite sport had positively impacted their
471 life achievements: 'Sport gives you recognition, it gives you a certain place, you're seen on a
472 level' (Bantjes et al., 2019; p.825). Although highlighting the positive impact sport and
473 retaining an athletic and/or disability identity had on participants, their elite status produced
474 thoughts of life without it: 'I've always played sports... to think about not playing anymore...
475 I don't have an identity outside of goalball' (Hu et al., 2021; p.8). This drew attention to the
476 'bubble of sport' and that participants, although satisfied with their present status, became
477 aware of either their life without sport, or the wider context of non-sporting disabled people:
478 'Sport changed the way I thought about disabled people' (Bantjes et al., 2019; p.824). For
479 those discussing their subjective experiences, this drew comparison with the 'darkness' of
480 tragedy (depression and death):

481 After impairment, one experiences depression. I used to practice sport before the
482 accident, liked sport, and suddenly everything stopped... you begin mourning.

483 (Kirakosyan, 2021; p.11)

484 Personal experience provided insight into the prospective day-to-day lives of disabled people.
485 For some, this empowered participants to return to the definition of the self and how they
486 may use their status to create change. Within the tragedy narrative plot, this involved
487 committing to a course of action:

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488 I'm disabled, and that defines me... disabled athlete, in that order... disability isn't
489 just about me, my body, Paralympic sport, or winning a medal. It's political... society
490 treats you like a 2nd class citizen, as if being disabled is a horrible, abnormal thing,
491 and we should be grateful for pity... (using) my status as an athlete to bring disability
492 rights to people's attention, is as good as any gold medal (Smith et al., 2016; p.14).

493 This course of action heightened perspectives: 'Sport gave me a different view – that I look
494 differently at life' (Bantjes et al., 2019; p. 824) and 'Everybody has a story to tell, something
495 to learn from everybody, so respect everybody for the way they are' (Le Clair, 2011; p.1120).

496 As a result, participants in six of the nine studies explicitly engaged in activism in sport.

497 However, this was often carried out on a personal level, through a) avoiding marginalisation
498 within society, through personal investment to alter how they were viewed: 'I proved that
499 most people with disability can fit in somewhere as long as they're willing to work' (Pack et
500 al., 2017; p.2066) or b) attempting to tackle the issues at the heart of disability sport:

501 Activism for me is all about getting equality in sport... my goal is to win...
502 sometimes it feels as though I can't do this... It's the fault of the organization to come
503 up with good training facilities, parking, lack of good coaches that understand my
504 needs and being a Paralympian. (Smith et al., 2016; p.11)

505 This disparity between what elite disability athletes are provided with and their able-bodied
506 counterparts, characterised a lack of funding and resources, or suggested that the disabled
507 person has to either conform, fit in with ableist structures, or prove their worth. When
508 confronting these: 'Challenging the physical and psychological abuse disabled people face is
509 now second nature to me' (Smith et al., 2016; p.23); the participants may have engaged in
510 acts that conflicted with their personal self and 'blur the lines' of authenticity:

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511 Being an elite powerlifter is my major identity... I was nobody... didn't think I could
 512 be somebody (Huang & Brittain, 2006; p.365)... only when you are good at
 513 something can you feel you actually exist, because people take notice of you. (p.369)

514 This suggests that without their sport, participants would either be a 'nobody', not 'exist', or
 515 felt little worth outside of sport. This is evident in five studies: 'I don't think you can accept
 516 yourself right away. I'm still working on it. It's a day-by-day thing' (Le Clair, 2011; p. 1121).
 517 Yet, there was resistance to this narrative, with participants outlining their disability made
 518 them who they are: 'All this was meant to happen... end up at this university... go to the
 519 games [Paralympics]' (Campbell, 2018; p.779) and 'Being an athlete has opened so many
 520 doors to opportunities, influenced my life in such a positive way... life would be totally
 521 different without it' (Hu et al., 2021; p.7).

522 *Author Interpretations*

523 Eight out of nine authors (consciously or subconsciously) presented *tragedy* as the
 524 prevailing narrative of the participants' stories, when discussing these within a broader
 525 context. The bigger picture of disability rights, disability in society, and activism, indicated
 526 that these 'darker sides' were prevailing amongst the participant stories. Kirakosyan (2021)
 527 presented both *tragedy* and *the quest* narratives, demonstrating that disability rights and
 528 activism were actively being broken down, yet negative societal attitudes toward disability
 529 still remained. This indicated participants' collectively overcoming their battles and arriving
 530 at their goal (the quest), yet also retained elements of the dark side still prevailing (tragedy).

531 Within sport, authors framed the participant storyline in one of two ways: 1) sport
 532 prompted participants to move away from negative connotations around disability
 533 (restriction, frailty) and towards the athletic narrative: 'I'm not a disabled sportswoman. I am
 534 a wheelchair athlete, because I don't compete in disability' (Wickman, 2007; p.162); or 2)

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535 sport prompted participants to embrace disability and place it alongside their athletic role:
536 '[swimming] gave me the confidence to recognize that I've got a disability, embrace it.'
537 (Pack et al., 2017; p.2067). These alternate perspectives shaped how activism may be
538 accessed or promoted within the sporting context(s). On the one hand, highlighting the
539 sporting excellence itself (exclusive of disability) and drawing focus to success had motivated
540 the participants to succeed, and as such may motivate others. Alternatively, joint exposure to
541 being an athlete and how disability carried participants there, was viewed as the most
542 befitting for exploring elite disability athletes' identity experiences. Kirakosyan (2021)
543 identified an empowering view of disability was offered by sport, which resisted stigma
544 surrounding impairment. Yet, there was a lack of recognition and appreciation in sport for
545 participants. As these were limited to sporting context(s), although experiencing sporting
546 success, the 'bigger battle' of disability within society remained (tragedy).

547 When considering activism out of sport, societal impact was an area scrutinised in all
548 nine studies, where from the current review's perspective, these were arranged to both
549 precede (i.e., introduction) and proceed (i.e. discussion/conclusion) the participant narratives.
550 This framed the current outlook of disability in sport and society (which was negative for six
551 studies - e.g., 'Elite disability sport as a context to disrupt societal attitudes' - Bantjes et al.,
552 2019; p.821), discussed the participant experiences, and then applied them to pre-existing
553 narratives to add further support or critique. For example, Campbell (2018) highlighted that
554 the generic policies to support teaching and learning often did not meet the specific needs of
555 disabled students in higher education. This was mirrored in the results section of the study by
556 the participants. This is as opposed to Le Clair (2011) and Pack et al. (2017) who maintained
557 a more neutral outlook prior to the participant stories ('sport as a domain has been identified
558 as a venue that can facilitate opportunity for favorable self-perceptions to develop among
559 individuals with disabilities' (Pack et al., 2017; p.2063). The reason we highlight its

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560 significance, is that this immediately frames the context of the study, which may highlight
561 either a) a lack of coverage, with exclusion and marginalisation highly prominent, or b)
562 disability sport is an ongoing area of discussion, where the above elements may have or may
563 still be present, but some focus has shifted from disability to proficiency. The authors'
564 decision on how to frame the backdrop to their study, may impact the reader(s) interpretation
565 and meaning of the participants' stories.

566 Within the studies' discussion sections, the authors applied the participant stories to wider
567 contexts. Although two studies within their introduction(s) maintained a more neutral (or
568 even favourable) stance, in the discussion section(s), tragedy is the overriding theme in eight
569 studies, and in Kirakosyan (2021) as a co-theme. For those who consciously framed a tragedy
570 narrative, the authors', although emphasising the positive aspects associated with participant
571 experiences, referred to the broader context in which they operated. Here, although there was
572 either personal recognition of disability success, or sport had reframed public perception of
573 disability, both stigma and difference remained outside of sport. This again emphasises the
574 'bigger battle'; For example, Huang & Brittain (2006), Smith et al. (2016), and Wickman
575 (2007) all drew attention to the ideology that to be accepted and generate change, the
576 participants have to somewhat sacrifice their disability and appear 'attractive' to society:

577 The fit able-bodied sportsperson is central to discourses of national identity. Disability
578 sports do not seem to work this way... interviewees expressed feelings of otherness.
579 They tried hard to position themselves within the discourse of able-ism (Wickman,
580 2007; p.157)

581 Participants rejected the term disability to describe themselves, preferring to define
582 themselves as simply an athlete... 'athlete only identity discourse' legitimised their
583 athletic status, competence, and talents as a sportsperson. (Smith et al., 2016; p.13)

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584 Alternatively, Kirakosyan (2021) viewed these as ‘tensions’ between identity-related
585 goals of agency, communion and coherence. This suggests that sacrifice may not be required,
586 and accepting the uncertainty of change, instead of changing the ‘light’ participants are seen
587 in, is most appropriate. For authors who perhaps subconsciously framed a tragedy narrative,
588 they initially discussed positive aspects of identity: ‘Participants said they had assumed the
589 function of a role model and embraced becoming a person of influence... being an elite
590 athlete entailed a responsibility to motivate others and have a positive impact’ (Bantjes et al.,
591 2019; p.826). Yet, when considering societal impact, and although assigning positive
592 connotations, the tragedy narrative and ‘bigger monster’ became apparent:

593 Participants drew a distinction between “successful disabled people” (presumably
594 those who have made some kind of visible mark on society or achieved some position
595 of status) and others who were unsuccessful. (Bantjes et al., 2019; p.826)

596 This demonstrates the challenges associated with wider contexts. Here, when
597 interpreted by the authors’, whether there is a requirement to be a role model for others
598 (which in itself may pose an issue), rejection of disability, marginalisation in society, or
599 sacrificing of values to be ‘accepted’, it is visible that sport (in the most part) provides the
600 ability for participants to form an identity. Yet, this often characterises the bubble of sport,
601 wherein the authors’ go on to describe the bigger battle of tragedy within society.

602 Discussion and Meta-Synthesis

603 The current review explored identity literature within elite disability sport, investigating how
604 elite disability athletes described their identity experiences and how authors’ interpreted
605 these. Through a storytelling approach, after analysing narrative structure, we identified two
606 plots as best representing athlete narratives and author interpretations; *Re-birth*, and *Tragedy*.

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607 Our first contribution to knowledge is identifying a divergence between how identity
608 is constructed and applied based on the lens it is discussed through (i.e. participant or author).
609 For example, the supercrip narrative has often underplayed social barriers, where in the
610 apparent need for elite athletes to ‘defeat’ their disability, there lacks clarity on whether: a) is
611 this wanted by elite athletes? and b) if so, how do they approach this? This is due to a
612 previous lack of coverage on the comprehensive aspects associated with identity in elite
613 disability athletes and how this is then appraised by disabled people. The current study’s
614 narrative plots, demonstrate that due to being wholly committed in their pursuit of athletic
615 achievement, participants identify heavily with being elite athletes and were provided with
616 status and recognition. For example, when showcasing their sporting ability, participants
617 were immersed in their identity as an athlete and ability to look, act, and feel like an athlete
618 (Hu et al., 2021). This aligned with dominant notions of identity and physicality, with McKay
619 (2022) identifying that disability is a contested label for participants, whereas ‘athlete’ is a
620 shared identity that is celebrated. Through being elite athletes, participants possessed
621 desirable ‘able-bodied attributes’ of strength, fitness, skill, and competitiveness (Richardson
622 et al., 2017; Perrier et al., 2012). This detached participants from negative connotations
623 around disability (restriction, frailty), and aligned them with able-bodied athletes. Here, being
624 an athlete contributed to disabled athletes’ self-worth, confidence, and management of ableist
625 stigma, which may motivate athletes to be increasingly active in promoting disability rights
626 (Cherney et al., 2015). This characterised the *Re-birth* plot surrounding elite disability athlete
627 identity, and how overcoming challenges in sport developed traits for athletic success. Yet,
628 this contrasted with the majority of the author interpretations, which when framed within a
629 wider context (society), provided a negative outlook (*Tragedy*).

630 One key area concerned how disability had empowered participants to achieve elite
631 sport status, however it was alignment with how able-bodied athletes were viewed that

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632 portrayed them more favourably. This often went unnoticed by participants and was made
633 apparent by the authors, noting that fit able-bodied males were often the role models sought
634 after. In the current review, we identified that meaning is heavily attached to identity
635 construction through sporting achievement. Yet, participants were unaware of broader
636 societal discourse, which did not come to light until participants' experienced critical
637 moments (i.e., retirement issues, employment concerns). This may have been a way to
638 'survive' within their personal journeys, but often resulted in being unprepared in taking steps
639 to help them cope, regretting that they had not been more proactive (Bundon et al., 2018;
640 Campbell, 2013; Day, 2013). Sport seemingly 'protected' participants from the severity of
641 the challenges faced in a disabled person's daily life. The authors indicated the challenge for
642 athletes to comprehend these, due to their sporting endeavours ('the individual has to contend
643 with the difficulties of being accepted as an athlete by challenging dominating values, norms,
644 and standards of the culture in which elite sport operates... for instance independency and
645 individualism, which stand in sharp contrast to the meanings of dependency that disability is
646 commonly associated with'; Wickman, 2007; p.163). This highlights the difficulty in
647 participants maintaining an awareness of their identity within society, due to an inherent need
648 to possess and maintain high levels of independency, and focus on their own strengths and
649 skills to overcome adversity. As stated, this likely conflicts with connotations associated
650 around society and how disability may be perceived. An exception to this, was Kirakosyan
651 (2021), being the only study where both participant and author stories aligned, and
652 highlighted both an awareness and explicit discussion of activism in and out of sport. This
653 linked to the rationale for the current review, wherein Kirakosyan (2021) provided the
654 opportunity to discuss alternative narratives that are often underrepresented in elite disability
655 athletes. This included the unanimous dismissal of the supercrip ('superhero') due to it
656 undervaluing sporting performance, and collective focus on active attempts to break down

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657 barriers and stereotypes, change societal attitudes, and create opportunities for all. Crucially,
658 this pertained to both those with and without impairment and celebrated the individual stories
659 of participants (with the author closely aligning). This study indicates a contemporary
660 approach to exploring identity in elite disability sport.

661 To understand the lack of preparation for critical moments throughout their life, we
662 question the narratives accessible to elite disabled athletes pre-, within-, and post-career and
663 how this translates to the general population. Most apparent during sport retirement, the
664 transition from being a disabled athlete to a disabled person is often more problematic than
665 those able-bodied (see Patatas et al., 2018). Bundon et al. (2018) described this ‘buffering
666 effect’, as exposing the profound disablism that often exists within society. Linking to our
667 aims, the portrayal of identity by participant and author highlights both the social impact elite
668 disability sport may have, but also its complex issues. Here, there may be value in reframing
669 elite disability athletes as ‘educational’ figures, instead of ‘empowerment’ ones. What we
670 mean by this, is the participants demonstrated a mixed response in relation to how disability
671 was experienced in sport and were often unaware of societal impact, with the authors framing
672 these within predominantly negative narratives. It was suggested that the participant has to
673 either conform, fit in with ableist structures, or prove their value through an ability to work
674 and contribute to sport and society. As such, empowering individuals may promote a
675 medicalised understanding of disability by placing increased emphasis on the origins of
676 thought and emotion residing in the individual, and para-athletes required to act as a form of
677 empowerment for the disability community (Kolotouchkina et al., 2021). Here, disabled
678 people may adhere to the cognitivist approach wherein if they do not possess the
679 characteristics often exhibited by elite disability athletes (i.e., competitive, powerful,
680 resilient), how can they expect to feel empowered or empower others? Empowerment is often
681 accessed through reducing social barriers, changing perceptions of disability and stimulating

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682 political action (Barnes, 2014), which lends well to an elite disability sport level, where as
683 demonstrated by the narratives, the participants have achieved mastery and success. This
684 changed perceptions of what a disabled athlete is, as sport gave them recognition and to be
685 seen on a level; yet, outside of this, there was minimal recognition from others and a lack of
686 awareness from themselves. Furthermore, we are implying that empowerment is the
687 fundamental goal here, whereby disabled people may not want to feel empowered or deem it
688 is inappropriate to them. This highlights concerns raised by McPherson et al. (2016), where
689 focus is increasingly aimed at sporting success and highlighting the value of elite para-sport
690 competition. This is achieved through strengthening para-athletes as models of empowerment
691 for the disability community and their ability to gain elite status. Yet, McPherson et al. argue
692 that the contrast in coverage further complicates the normalization and representation of
693 disability in para-sport, and may actually be contradictory.

694 With this in mind, the current review advocates for elite disability athletes to be
695 viewed as educational figures. This highlights the second contribution to knowledge, by
696 demonstrating the power of storytelling as a means of data analysis in qualitative research.
697 Here, the lived experiences provide value through what the narratives do, incorporating both
698 the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ways in which stories act (Caddick, 2018). The good (*Rebirth*) and bad
699 (*Tragedy*) stories act as educational pieces through providing individuals with the
700 information to attach meaning to personal experience, which likely fosters a deeper
701 awareness of how society, environment, and cultures may shape dominant sporting
702 narratives. This is as opposed to employing elite disability athletes’ experiences as
703 empowerment tools, resulting in disabled people being unable to feel part of them, and as
704 such may struggle to feel empowered. As stated by Frank (2010), this limits the values people
705 can hold and solely offers one perspective (elite disability sport), which closes down
706 conversations as opposed to opening them up. In opening conversations up, it enables what

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707 Williams et al. (2021) identified in Frank's work: 'People do not simply listen to stories.
708 They become caught up... stories get under people's skin. Once stories are under people's
709 skin they affect the terms in which people think, know and perceive' (2010, p.48). As such,
710 the current review argues how disabled people may not benefit from being empowered by
711 elite disability athlete experiences; instead, providing a narrative structure, enables
712 individuals to increasingly resonate and apply meaning to narratives, view alternate
713 perspectives (participant and author), and comprehend how this affects their interpretation of
714 identity. This is as opposed to feeling 'required' to view narratives through one lens, and the
715 possibility that they either a) do not feel empowered, or b) feel empowered by the narrative,
716 yet disheartened that this is an elite athlete and may not apply to them.

717 Future research should continue to integrate storytelling within disability sport, yet
718 may wish to consider the use of alternative narrative approaches such as 'small stories'. Here,
719 the small story (see Ronkainen & Ryba, 2020) focuses on narratives-in-interaction, how
720 people use small stories, their inconsistencies and contradictions, and what is achieved by
721 stories (Bamberg, 2011). From our perspective, future small-story research may provide
722 varying storytelling possibilities that are on-going, and not solely presented as one finished
723 coherent product, viewed through a singular lens. Here, studies may gather past, present, and
724 future stories that range in size and meaning, to form a more comprehensive picture that
725 considers wider societal context alongside elite disability sport, and how these influence
726 identity on an ongoing basis. Understanding the context surrounding elite disability athletes
727 and their disability identity will continue to update the existing gap in literature. In addition,
728 studies adopting a similar approach to Kirakosyan (2021) may be warranted, exploring
729 underrepresented narratives in disability and celebrating individuality, with authors providing
730 coherence with this. A concentrated focus on the theoretical orientations adopted by studies
731 may increase clarity surrounding the participant stories and author interpretations of these.

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732 The present review explored the stories of elite disability athletes and the role of
 733 identity in elite disability sport. This encompassed how athletes tell and authors interpret
 734 these stories, to understand identity construction meaning. The results provide a critical
 735 insight into the journeys and challenges faced throughout the participants' careers and the
 736 factors critical to these. The stories were most closely represented by the Re-birth and
 737 Tragedy plots, which highlighted the success experienced by the participants in their own
 738 journeys, but the potential 'bigger battle' that remained within society. This may offer key
 739 information around 'future proofing' athletes for life beyond/outside of sport.

Data Availability Statement

741 Availability of data: Data openly available in a public repository that issues datasets with
 742 DOIs

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