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

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4   **Abstract**

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6 This meta-study evaluated qualitative identity literature within elite disabled sport. Following

7 a systematic search of EBSCO SPORTDiscus, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, and Web of Science,

8 nine articles met the inclusion criteria. The meta-study examined how identity was framed

9 from participant or author perspectives, employing narrative analysis to understand the

10 participant stories and broader storylines crafted by authors. Two distinct narratives were co-

11 constructed; *Re-birth:* characterising athlete identity experiences and how overcoming career

12 challenges developed traits necessary for elite athlete status, and *Tragedy*: how authors'

13 interpretations indicated that although athletes achieved personal sporting success, the 'bigger

14 battle' of how disability was presented within society remained. The *Re-birth* and *Tragedy*

15 narratives update the prospective gap between how elite disability athletes story their

16 experiences and their framing within society.

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18   *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   people[1] 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

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[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.

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.

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

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

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

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

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.

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;

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

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'

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

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

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).

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

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)

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

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

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:

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:

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)

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

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)

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*.

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

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

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

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

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.

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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