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

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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

Elite level disability sport is becoming more popular and professional. Contemporary research exploring empowerment (Powis, 2020), high-performance coaching (Townsend et al., 2018), and classification (Powis & Macbeth, 2020), have readdressed how disabled people[1] in sport are framed in social discourse. Research identifies disabled athletes have complex contradictions regarding their sporting participation, advocating for further research on how athletes may refute dominant disability stereotypes (Guerrero & Martin, 2018). One example, the 'supercrip', is defined as an inspirational disabled person, glorified, and lauded in the media (Schalk, 2016), which emphasises individual attitude, work, and perseverance as the key to thriving. This highlights the person with a disability as living a 'normal' existence as a result of overcoming or defeating their disability (Martin, 2013). However, this stereotype implies disability can be overcome through hard work, framing disability as a deficit, located in the person. Yet, athletes in this population retain positive perceptions about the supercrip identity, with it portraying athletes positively and a better alternative to being ignored completely (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). Nevertheless, the broader landscape where disabled people may feel 'more' or 'less' disabled when encountering daily challenges may reflect a different outlook. These may exhibit a stereotype, where athletes in elite competition (Paralympics) may be distanced from the general population of disabled people (Cherney et al., 2015). On the contrary, not all disabled athletes may view themselves, or wish to be viewed, as "elite" (Brittain, 2004). Cherney et al. (2015) share Blauwet and Willick's (2012) view that disabled athletes should be viewed equal in skill and worth as nondisabled athletes.

Identity refers to our understanding of ourselves and other people, and their 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Method

Review Design

The meta-study method is based on a constructivist approach and provides tools for analysing and synthesising qualitative research (Ronkainen et al., 2022). Meta-study involves meta-method, meta-data, meta-theory analysis, and meta-synthesis (Paterson et al., 2001). The first three components take place concurrently; the meta-synthesis is presented as the outcome of a meta-study. The meta-study combines the results of multiple studies, identifies patterns amongst these results, sources of disagreements, and other relationships (Rothman et al., 2008), leading to knowledge generation in the area. We used the meta-study method to understand how identity in disability sport contexts is differently viewed, defined, understood, or acted upon in relation to how the research is conducted. Furthermore, we acknowledge the role of both research participants and study authors within the process and how these shape identity meanings in the reviewed studies. While the meta-study method is growing in popularity in sport and exercise psychology (see Ronkainen et al., 2022, for a review), no studies have yet focused on a disability athlete population nor adopt a narrative approach to data analysis. Despite potential gaps, Pereira Vargas et al. (2021) provide a comprehensive account of narratives in meta-study methodologies. Here, Pereira Vargas et al. showed the significance of how participants shaped their mental illness through narratives.

Search Strategy

Keywords Development.

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

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

Search Strategy

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

Inclusion Criteria.

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

Data Extraction

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

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

Data Analysis

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

Meta-theory analysis. Meta-theory analysis identifies the key theoretical paradigms within the literature base, with theoretical and analytical data extracted from each paper and presented in *Table 2.* Here, focus is on larger social, historical, cultural and political contexts, and how theoretical underpinnings influence a body of work (Paterson et al., 2001). Challenges may arise when authors do not explicitly reference their theoretical framework, form of inquiry, or method of analysis. This is common when, due to journal word length restrictions, qualitative papers focus on research findings at the expense of detailing their methodology (Williams & Shaw, 2016).

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

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

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

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

Results

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Re-born as 'Supercrip' - You are doing extraordinary things!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tragedy: The 'bubble' of sport and the 'bigger battle' within society

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

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

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

> After impairment, one experiences depression. I used to practice sport before the accident, liked sport, and suddenly everything stopped… you begin mourning. (Kirakosyan, 2021; p.11)

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

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

This course of action heightened perspectives: 'Sport gave me a different view – that I look differently at life' (Bantjes et al., 2019; p. 824) and 'Everybody has a story to tell, something to learn from everybody, so respect everybody for the way they are' (Le Clair, 2011; p.1120). As a result, participants in six of the nine studies explicitly engaged in activism in sport. However, this was often carried out on a personal level, through a) avoiding marginalisation within society, through personal investment to alter how they were viewed: 'I proved that most people with disability can fit in somewhere as long as they're willing to work' (Pack et al., 2017; p.2066) or b) attempting to tackle the issues at the heart of disability sport:

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

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

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

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

Author Interpretations

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

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

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

561 When considering activism out of sport, societal impact was an area scrutinised in all
562 nine studies, where from the current review's perspective, these were arranged to both
563 precede (i.e., introduction) and proceed (i.e. discussion/conclusion) the participant narratives.
564 This framed the current outlook of disability in sport and society (which was negative for six
565 studies - e.g., 'Elite disability sport as a context to disrupt societal attitudes' - Bantjes et al.,
566 2019; p.821), discussed the participant experiences, and then applied them to pre-existing
567 narratives to add further support or critique. For example, Campbell (2018) highlighted that
568 the generic policies to support teaching and learning often did not meet the specific needs of
569 disabled students in higher education. This was mirrored in the results section of the study by
570 the participants. This is as opposed to Le Clair (2011) and Pack et al. (2017) who maintained
571 a more neutral outlook prior to the participant stories ('sport as a domain has been identified
572 as a venue that can facilitate opportunity for favorable self-perceptions to develop among
573 individuals with disabilities' (Pack et al., 2017; p.2063). The reason we highlight its

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion and Meta-Synthesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Data Availability Statement

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

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