

Inclusion in the Paralympics: Incorporation of Power Soccer for Redefining Disability Rhetoric in Society

L'inclusion aux Jeux paralympiques : l'incorporation du « power soccer » au sein de la reconceptualisation de la rhétorique du handicap en société

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Abstract

Society at large views the Paralympics through an idealized lens as a competitive event that empowers athletes of all abilities to prove that disability is not a limiting factor in athletic success. In reality, many individuals with disabilities cannot play sports presented in the Paralympics. Existing Paralympic recognized sports are designed for disabled individuals with higher mobility, namely quadriplegic and paraplegic injuries. There are, however, numerous adaptive sports not included in the Paralympics that promote greater disability inclusiveness, particularly for individuals with neuromuscular diseases that accelerate muscle weakness. One such sport is power soccer. The impact of Paralympic inclusion on disability identity and empowerment was analyzed using social identity theory (SIT) to compare experiences of identity and empowerment among Paralympic-recognized and power soccer athletes (N=28). The results revealed that adaptive sports players develop disability empowerment regardless of Paralympic inclusion. However, Paralympic inclusion enhanced opportunities to showcase the vibrant abilities among marginalized adaptive sports athletes.

Résumé

En général, la société perçoit les Jeux paralympiques d'une perspective idéalisée en tant qu'événement compétitif qui autonomise les athlètes de toute capacité afin de prouver que le handicap n'est pas un facteur qui limite le succès athlétique. En réalité, plusieurs individus avec des handicaps ne peuvent pas jouer les sports présentés aux Jeux paralympiques. Les sports paralympiques existants sont conçus pour des individus avec des handicaps avec un niveau de mobilité plus élevée en lien avec des blessures tétraplégiques et paraplégiques. Il y a, cependant, de nombreux sports adaptés qui n'ont pas été inclus aux Jeux paralympiques et qui promeuvent un niveau d'inclusivité plus élevée, surtout pour des individus avec des maladies neuromusculaires qui accélèrent la faiblesse des muscles. Un de ces sports est le « power soccer ». L'impact de l'inclusion

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aux Jeux paralympiques sur l'identité et l'autonomisation des personnes avec des handicaps a été analysé en utilisant la théorie de l'identité sociale ; le but de celle-ci était de comparer les expériences vécues de l'identité et de l'autonomisation en lien avec le handicap au sein des athlètes du « power soccer » reconnus par les Jeux paralympiques (N=28). Les résultats ont dévoilé que les joueurs des sports adaptatifs développent une autonomisation vis-à-vis du handicap indépendamment du niveau d'inclusion aux Jeux paralympiques. Toutefois, l'inclusivité aux Jeux paralympiques a servi pour démontrer les capacités vibrantes qui existent parmi les athlètes marginalisés des sports adaptatifs.

Keywords

Social Identity Theory, Paralympics, disability empowerment, disability identity, inclusion

Mots clés

La théorie de l'identité sociale, les Jeux paralympiques, l'autonomisation des personnes avec des handicaps, l'identité des personnes avec des handicaps, l'inclusion

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The Paralympics aim to be a competitive, empowering event that showcases that disability does not limit athletic success (International Paralympic Committee, 2021). But despite incorporating a diversity of sports akin to those in the traditional Olympics lineup, such as wheelchair basketball, wheelchair tennis, and sitting volleyball (International Paralympic Committee, 2021), the Paralympics fails to represent a large majority of individuals with disabilities, many of whom are unable to play the existing sports offered. Neuromuscular conditions are diseases, such as muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis, that affect the neuromuscular system at varying rates of onset, with primary symptoms including muscle weakness and fatigue (Beaumont Neuromuscular Clinic, 2021). Unlike most injuries that result in disability, these diseases tend to weaken one's body over time progressively, and individuals with neuromuscular conditions do not have the stamina to compete in traditional Paralympic sports (Beaumont Neuromuscular Clinic, 2021). There are adaptive sports, such as power soccer, that promote the abilities of those with neuromuscular conditions; however, they are not recognized by the Paralympics.

Power soccer utilizes power chairs with metal bumpers to kick a 13-inch soccer ball around indoor basketball courts with "occasional contact" (United States Power Soccer Association, 2020). Individuals with a wide range of abilities (quadriplegic, paraplegic, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, etc.) can participate in power soccer (United States Power Soccer Association, 2020). Power soccer participants compete in tournaments at national and international levels, and to date, it is one of the fastest-growing adaptive sports worldwide (United States Power Soccer Association, 2020). Though the sport has grown tremendously since its inception in France in the 1970s, the

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inclusion of power soccer in the Paralympics could further its prevalence as a platform for representing a broad range of athletes with different types of disabilities (United States Power Soccer Association, 2020). When differentiating between current Paralympic sports and adaptive sports like power soccer, one must note that the former are identical to their able-bodied equivalents. At the same time, the latter are geared towards more profound disabilities and rely more on specialized equipment. However, the ongoing absence of adaptive sports like power soccer from the Paralympics perpetuates societal stigmas against those with neuromuscular disabilities, suggesting that they do not belong or lack sufficient abilities.

Prior research examining disability and the Paralympics reveals a limited societal understanding of the possible abilities of those with disabilities. Fitzgerald (2012) observed that society views disability through a medical model, in which disability is a deficit to be fixed. Although this view cultivates an intense impression of disabled inferiority among non-disabled people, this could be mitigated with the inclusion of more adaptive sports and media coverage that focuses on athleticism rather than disability. For example, Bartsch et al. (2018) conducted three experiments during the 2012 summer Paralympics on the role of empathy in reshaping disability perceptions. They found that athletic performance, rather than disability-centered Paralympic coverage, increased passion for adaptive sports in mainstream society and facilitated the destigmatization of people with disabilities through upward comparison and closeness.

Collectively, research suggests that Paralympic inclusion—meaning a sport's recognition as part of the International Paralympic Committee's competitive stage—can enhance societal perceptions of disability, including among individuals with a disability

themselves. However, no study has explored how Paralympic inclusion impacts individual perceptions of disability identity and, by extension, disability empowerment, particularly among adaptive sports athletes. Disability empowerment is an increased awareness of self that facilitates a positive perception of ability and circumstance rather than burden (Charlton, 1998). Previous research on disability oppression reveals that, on a societal level, disabilities are stigmatized as deviant and pitiful abnormal circumstances that must be segregated; those with disabilities need mending to earn a place in society (Charlton, 1998). Disability sports, especially those recognized at the most prestigious level, namely wheelchair basketball and wheelchair rugby, serve as a viable arena to bring forth more positive mindsets about disability among the athletes involved as well as society at large, highlighting that the circumstances of impairment can lead to extraordinary abilities. The goal of our research is to make a case for power soccer's inclusion in the Paralympics and thereby enhance a sense of self for individuals with disabilities and improve disability awareness in society, by employing social identity theory and interviews with Paralympic and non-Paralympic athletes.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a valuable framework for exploring identity, disability empowerment, and the in-group/out-group distinctions between those who play power soccer and those who play recognized Paralympic sports. Identity is expressed as a “[person’s] subjectively construed understandings of who they were, are, and desire to become” (Brown, 2015, p. 20). It is broadly agreed that defined meanings are attached to individuals in a reflexive sense and ultimately shaped through social interactions (Brown, 2015). The decision to use social identity theory in our research stems from its ability to

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grasp the differing senses of self-identity among disabled athletes based on Paralympic inclusion versus exclusion. SIT emerged from the work of Henri Tajfel, who studied how social groups functioned in relation to cognitive grouping and the gestalt phenomenon to explain biased and exaggerated perceptions of differences between groups (Islam, 2014). SIT argues that the power of self-identity depends on an individual's identity being defined and welcomed by a particular social group (Islam, 2014). As a result, one's identity evolves in line with group membership (Islam, 2014).

SIT considers how individuals develop a greater sense of self and self-esteem upon gaining acceptance in a group through favorable social comparisons (Islam, 2014). Building a favorable relationship with an in-group is a strong period of group identification that a person from an out-group is compelled to maintain (McKinley et al., 2014). Positive attitudes among groups are present in two scenarios: favorable perceptions of an in-group and favorable representation of out-group members, but the latter is circumstantial rather than based on group characteristics, and all perceptions are distorted by media depictions (McKinley et al., 2014).

Social Identity Theory and Disability Studies

When it comes to disability identity, for many individuals living with a disability, a sense of identity in terms of social belongingness stems from developing a (dis)connection with ability. The identification with (dis)connection is reflected in the theory of complex embodiment, which holds that labelling people with disabilities as inferior to able-bodied individuals is strictly socially constructed (Siebers, 2013). Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick (2017) suggest that society is on the verge of migrating from a problematic, discriminatory medical model to a more progressive social model. The social

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model emphasizes inclusion and counters negative stereotypes of people with disabilities, and it advocates for positive social change, such as through the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, prompting a shift away from the normalcy ideology (Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017). However, the social model can only exist if there is a vested interest in promoting inclusion, and able-bodied people stop seeing disability as an insurmountable burden. Based on the social model, an inclusive Paralympics could be an opportunity to disrupt the longstanding dehumanization of people with disabilities, including the underestimation and exclusion of individuals with more profound disabilities, by making all forms of disabilities in sports more visible and represented. Taken together, SIT provides a lens for exploring the distinction in disability identity between in-group Paralympic athletes and out-group non-Paralympic athletes, as well as empowerment among adaptive sports athletes more broadly and among adaptive sports athletes participating in Paralympic-recognized sports.

To explore the impact of Paralympic inclusion on disability identity and empowerment, and compare in-group and out-group experiences among Paralympic recognized and power soccer athletes, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How do adaptive sports participants' identities as disabled athletes reflect disability empowerment?

RQ2: How does disability empowerment differ among those playing a Paralympic recognized sport versus a non-Paralympic recognized sport?

Methods

Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with eligible participants (N = 28) from October 2020 to February 2021. All interviews were conducted online for about one hour using an online meeting software (i.e., Zoom). Interviews were conducted to obtain in-

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depth insights into disability identities and potential differences in identification based on Paralympic and non-Paralympic involvement. Specifically, the semi-structured interview questions focused on social versus medical disability, visibility, marginalization, and empowerment. Participants were recruited through various adaptive sports and disability organizations, as well as listservs and snowball sampling. The eligibility criteria for participants required that they: 1) must be aged 18 and over, and 2) have prior involvement (i.e., current or former player, disability sporting expert) in power soccer or a Paralympic-recognized sport. The study received Institutional Review Board approval prior to participant recruitment.

Sample

The study involved interviewing participants evenly among individuals involved with power soccer (players, coaches, and members of US and international organizations) (N = 13) and athletes participating in Paralympic recognized sports (N = 13). Two participants identified as both power soccer players and participants in a Paralympic-recognized sport, enabling them to respond to questions from both perspectives to address the inclusion-versus-exclusion dynamic. Among participants (N = 28), 23 identified as men and five as women, which can be attributed to the limited participation of women in co-ed sports specifically. Participant ages ranged from 21 to 70 years old. Adaptive sport involvement ranged from 9 to 48 years of competition. Most power soccer participants were living with more severe neuromuscular (muscle-based) diseases, while most Paralympic athletes had less severe spinal cord or limb injuries. Demographic data on participant race/ethnicity and location were not collected.

Procedures

Upon Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited through snowball sampling and social media announcements on disability sporting listservs and websites. Recruitment efforts directed interested individuals to contact the primary investigator via email for further information on participating. Individuals who expressed interest in participating were asked to confirm eligibility. Upon confirmation of eligibility, participants were emailed a consent form via DocuSign. After consent was confirmed, the primary investigator emailed participants to schedule an online interview. Zoom recording software was used to capture the interview discussion. All video features were disabled to maintain participant confidentiality. The semi-structured interviews included five demographic questions (i.e., gender, age, adaptive sports played, years playing power soccer/Paralympic sports, disability identification) and 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix A for interview questions). Interview audio recordings, all in English with no interviewee speech impairments, were downloaded from Zoom to the primary investigator's computer and transcribed through Canvas Studio.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using the constant comparative method to develop a holistic, implications-based understanding of disability identity and empowerment, and to compare perceptions across the two groups (i.e., Paralympic and non-Paralympic). The constant comparative method is considered a grounded theory approach used to understand the inner workings of a particular construct or experience in the social world (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

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In line with our goal of comparing insights from power soccer and Paralympic sport participants, open coding was used to initially break down and categorize the data. To do this, the primary investigator reviewed all transcripts and generated a codebook that reflected the initial themes and codes in the data. Then, a second coder (a trained undergraduate student) read through all transcripts and adjusted the codebook as needed, including adding to code descriptions and sub-themes. Both the primary investigator and second coder met with a third reviewer to confirm identified codes, code descriptions, and sub-themes. Upon finalizing the codebook, axial coding was then conducted to identify examples of the established codes and sub-themes in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To ensure coding reliability, both the primary researcher and the second coder independently coded six transcripts using the finalized codebook (~20% of the data). Both sets of transcripts were sent to the third reviewer to confirm acceptable reliability. Upon confirming reliability, all remaining transcripts were coded.

Results

The results revealed seven central themes common to power soccer athletes and Paralympic athletes, including: acceptance, heightened confidence, marginalization, media visibility, disability awareness, prestigious motivation/pride, empowerment, and sporting credibility. Although themes were present across both participant groups, distinct differences in meaning were evident. To facilitate conceptual organization, themes were grouped according to the first research question on adaptive sport identity and disability empowerment, as well as the second research question on disability empowerment in relation to Paralympic inclusion.

Adaptive Sport Identity and Disability Empowerment

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Disability empowerment is reflected in adaptive sport athletes' perceived acceptance and heightened confidence in their ability to overcome challenges arising from disability.

Theme 1: Acceptance

Disability empowerment refers to the growth in identity and personality that athletes achieve through playing adaptive sports. From the perspective of power soccer and Paralympic athletes, empowerment arises from sport participation, fostering the perception that success on and off the court is possible despite challenging circumstances. Participants reported experiencing disability empowerment by overcoming barriers to become athletes, adjusting to their respective situations, and connecting with the general public. Elite power soccer athlete Michael, who regularly represents Team USA in international tournaments, stated that he experienced significant growth and identity through the sport that may not have occurred otherwise:

“With all sports, you learn a lot about life. And. . . as I got older and learned how to be on a team and you know went through games and tournaments and then the national team. . . I realized that you know I accept my disability for what it is, and people accept it for what it is.”

The emotional testimony from Michael embodies disability empowerment through his transformation, from viewing his circumstance as a negative to seeing it as a positive display of ability.

None of the Paralympians interviewed expressed a sense of burden from experiencing disability, but rather embraced their disabilities as offering opportunities that would not exist otherwise. Wheelchair basketball Paralympian, Trooper, talked about his particular circumstance of disability as a blessing in disguise in the following manner:

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“When I made the national team and had the opportunity to travel and go compete for the United States in Venezuela, it all of a sudden opened my eyes that my disability wasn't something that confined me but was something that actually opened doors for me because although I couldn't walk anymore, I could still compete and whatever I did.”

Disability empowerment emerges in Trooper's interview through the shift from disability as limiting to a hopeful mindset with limitless opportunities. All adaptive sport participants echoed these sentiments of disability empowerment; by believing in their sporting competence, they became more accepting of their disabilities as blessings in disguise rather than burdens.

Theme 2: Heightened Confidence

Power soccer and Paralympic interviewees explained that they mustered the confidence to overcome their disabilities to accomplish crucial life milestones through adaptive sport participation. In effect, they showed society their valuable potential and equalness to able-bodied individuals. Michael spoke of his confidence boost through power soccer involvement:

“Decision making. . .being able to make those decisions without anybody's help. So, I think that's probably the biggest one. . .that's affected my life all around. So, I'd say the freedom of being able to do what I want and control what I want on the court has made me be able to control what I want off the court.”

The ability to make independent decisions when competing in adaptive sports represents disability empowerment through the power to rely on oneself, which, for some participants, also translated into a more confident lifestyle. In other instances, confidence manifested through interactions with able-bodied athletes as noted by wheelchair basketball Paralympian, Bobbi Jean:

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“I think being a wheelchair athlete allows there to be a shared kind of commonality, I guess, with the able-bodied population. If I'm talking about basketball, I play wheelchair basketball. Someone else plays stand-up [basketball]. Now there's a commonality that we share. . . despite the disability.”

Adaptive athletes experience disability empowerment and, in turn, heightened confidence when interacting with the able-bodied sports community, through a sense of equality that may not be feasible in non-sport settings. Collectively, empowerment for adaptive athletes originates not only from their community but also from their fellow able-bodied athletes who participate alongside them in the athletic arena—all striving for the same goals. Furthermore, the interviewee statements above speak to the development of mutual respect among adaptive athletes and their able-bodied counterparts.

Disability Empowerment in Relation to Paralympic Inclusion

The level and quality of disability empowerment varied widely between athletes in Paralympic-recognized sports and power soccer athletes. The distinct participant groups held different mindsets and sentiments regarding their Paralympic status and a desire for greater recognition. The differences in disability empowerment are highlighted in the themes of marginalization, media visibility, dis/ability awareness, prestigious motivation/pride, representation versus awareness, media exposure deficits, and sporting credibility.

Theme 3: Marginalization

Marginalization refers to the disability identity perceptions of adaptive sport athletes, particularly in terms of participation in Paralympic-recognized versus non-recognized sports. Participants perceived marginalization through Paralympic exclusion of specific sports. Elite power soccer coach Mike expressed disappointment over the

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Paralympic exclusion of the sport, stating that leaving power chairs athletes out of the picture is an unjust decision because athleticism encompasses more than merely the physical component:

“I think for the most part every sport in the Paralympics they have a lot of upper body strength. And I think that's where our sport, power soccer, differs. I don't think that it makes power soccer athletes a lesser athlete. I think it requires a lot more athleticism from [players], mentally more so than strength-wise.”

Mike's comment on power soccer's lack of Paralympic inclusion suggests that those athletes are viewed as lesser competitors among their fellow adaptive athletes, based on physical rather than mental ability. The exclusion of power soccer and similar sports reflects a broader hierarchy within the Paralympic movement—one shaped by societal preferences for certain types of disabilities and athletic performances.

Former wheelchair tennis and current power soccer athlete Steve suggested that broader Paralympic inclusion can improve the execution of the organization's mission to achieve a truly inclusive sporting showcase:

“I think the Paralympics would just be a broader [and] more well-rounded group by allowing sports that are specifically designed for those with disabilities. . . like power soccer. So, I think by them including this that that fulfills their goal of or their motto of including athletes with disabilities. . . very specific to what the Paralympic drive is all about.”

The candid inclusivity rhetoric, with references to improvement provided by Steve, connects with disability identity by further emphasizing Mike's belief in avoiding a negative impression of inferiority toward adaptive athletes through exclusion. Excluding certain athletes from the Paralympic vision exposes a fundamental contradiction in the International Paralympic Committee's institutional rhetoric, which claims inclusivity and

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celebrates all abilities. Elevating some impairments and sidelining others reproduces hierarchies that marginalize athletes within their own community and undermine the representation they claim to uphold.

Taken together, power soccer athletes navigate a paradox in disability sport. As the broader discourse promotes inclusion and mutual respect, these ideals are ultimately not extended to athletes with higher-support needs. A relevant subtheme is evident in Chris's comment on the sense of inequality emerging from power soccer's specific exclusion through his experience as a board member of a local organization for the sport:

"I honestly don't understand why it's [power soccer] not a Paralympic sport. It just makes me feel like they don't see us as equal to, honestly, manual chair sports."

The continued exclusion begins to create a hostile environment with consistent battling between haves and have-nots, in which some individuals feel out of place among disabled athletes rather than striving for social equality together.

Track and field Paralympian Jessica noted the consequences of marginalizing certain disability groups while including others:

"But there is a division, I think, among disability groups. And so I think representation matters because having all disabilities included makes other certain disability groups realize they are not the only players in the game and they are not the only ones who should be highlighted, and it's important for us to see and recognize as a community of people with disabilities that we all have value and we all can participate and compete. And I think sometimes that's forgotten."

Consistent with Jessica's points, several participants acknowledged inequality within the disability community, where Paralympic-included adaptive sports groups view themselves as superior to excluded groups. The result is a hostile environment in which people are

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marginalized and shunned by their fellow team members, where one would expect a supportive membership due to the commonality of adaptive sports participation. The exclusion signifies that they are not receiving sufficient attention to merit a presence and recognition in the public eye. In addition, Paralympic exclusion results in missing the group element of disability empowerment, including fostering feelings of belonging and welcome inclusion for all adaptive athletes to compete.

Theme 4: Media Visibility

The theme of media visibility concerns how greater visibility on the Paralympic stage can foster understanding of disability as a social issue rather than a problem to be medically fixed. Power soccer and Paralympic interviewees alike agreed that inclusion in the Paralympics is integral to educating society on the feasibility of individuals with more severe disabilities, such as neuromuscular conditions, becoming contributing members of society. The evolution of society's attitude towards disability through education can assist people with disabilities, regardless of their involvement in sport, empowering them to see their circumstances as gateways to unexpected possibilities. The awareness of society and people with disabilities could spread through increased media coverage, such as by showcasing all Paralympic sports throughout the event's fortnight on mainstream channels rather than just the select few deemed "athletic." Beginning the discussion on media visibility with power soccer participants, Lexi eloquently underscored the educational value power soccer brings to spearhead social acceptance of people with disabilities:

"I think it [power soccer] could open the door to allowing a lot of other people who have I guess maybe what they would probably categorize as a more severe disability to be a part of what some consider the biggest stage to be

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able to compete at. So, it could show the world how people like ourselves who play power soccer can be a part of a team sport. Reaching towards being good, strong, contributing members of our society. . . . [It's about] Trying to get more people with a disability in the working force and in interacting with people without a disability to where they are more comfortable with that."

Lexi's quote connects to SIT as she underscores that facing severe disability is not a detriment to succeeding in various aspects of life, including becoming a competitive athlete. Due to the possibility of success amid disability, individuals with disabilities find themselves believing in their productive values and the meaningful social belonging that can arise from the abilities they offer society, for gaining in-group membership. In addition to enhancing disability identity and empowerment, societal views may change by seeing that individuals with disabilities are not burdensome out-group members who require fixing to provide reasonable value but can be embraced in the in-group for their resourceful mindset, exuberant outlook, and holistic perspective on life., such that as society recognizes that everyone is useful in their own way, individuals with disabilities themselves may develop increased confidence in their abilities and build on their internal self-belief acquired from their adaptive sport participation prior to earning recognition externally. Disability perception evolution emerges as a subtheme in the testimony of Paralympic-recognized athletes. On the Paralympic side, long-term wheelchair tennis coach Jason confirmed that the IPC's competitive stage can be useful in dispelling negative overall societal views of disability when its coverage is increased to that of Olympic-level leagues. He believes it can alter the perception that disability consists of bedridden individuals and promote integration with able-bodied sports for more widespread exposure. This step can combat the limited coverage currently available for

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Paralympic athletes while keeping in mind that this reality is not the case for all individuals with disabilities:

“I think the Paralympic Games are by far for me the most incredible experience I've ever had as a coach. Every game is absolutely remarkable. And I think it has done an amazing service to the population with a disability, as far as understanding that these athletes' dreams and ambitions are no different than their able-bodied counterparts. And I think everyone who does see a Paralympic sport of any kind does see the potential and the quality and the professionalism.”

Building on Lexi's quote about individuals with disabilities identifying as societal equals, SIT is further reflected in the notion of adaptive and able-bodied sporting programs absorbed into one larger athletic event for the ultimate demonstration of equality. Adaptive athletes could demonstrate authentic athleticism while also helping eliminate the medical model and the ingroup-versus-outgroup mentality.

Another observation made by participants was that the Paralympics fail to garner the same degree of mainstream coverage as the Olympics. The interviewees viewed the Paralympics as a pinnacle of competitive adaptive sports on a worldwide stage; however, positive disability perceptions cannot take shape without adequate media coverage to showcase the event, including appropriate times and accessible broadcast networks that enable vast viewership. Bobbie Jean passionately shared her immense displeasure with Paralympic media coverage in the United States:

“How hard would it be for the news just during the week[s] of the Paralympics. . . .to give a medal count takes you know 10 seconds of the sports network? It's disgusting how poorly we do that compared to other countries.”

Bobbi Jean's frustration with the sheer lack of media coverage of Paralympic competition in the U.S. is relevant from an SIT standpoint as a glaring example of discrimination

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against adaptive athletes. The limited time slots for Paralympic coverage focus on broadcasting the athletic-oriented Paralympic sports like wheelchair basketball, in which disabilities do not require specialized equipment like in power soccer. Regardless of athletic level, athletes using specialized equipment, like power soccer players, are treated as out-group members not worthy of recognition by mainstream society, as the revenue value from Paralympic viewership is not substantial like with Olympic viewership, but awareness, along with increased media coverage, can alter the Paralympic reality in this context.

Theme 5: Dis/ability Awareness

Dis/ability awareness refers to the societal implications of Paralympic inclusion, including public awareness of the abilities of disabled athletes. Both power soccer and Paralympic interviewees believed that Paralympic inclusion serves as a stepping stone towards cultivating a positive understanding of all individuals with disabilities. The evolution in perception is facilitated by increased media coverage and an interactive forum for public engagement. Elite power soccer athlete, Jairo, expanded on the notion of advancing societal awareness that could ultimately influence policy change to improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities:

“[Paralympic inclusion] would put more of a spotlight or draw more attention to people with disabilities. Like a lot of times, we see stuff like laws passed down with, let's say, accessibility and stuff like that. In some cases, people aren't very aware of situations like that, which again more exposure would help. And it does get people more conscious about making easy changes where it's possible.”

Paralympic inclusion through an engaging, interactive platform that broadcasts disability issues on a global scale could enable athletes participating in the Paralympics to feel that

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their sporting performance and activism make a real difference in enacting the changes they wish to witness in their community, thereby facilitating greater equality.

Brent shared his experience as a wheelchair rugby Paralympic athlete, noting the games' open forum where spectators can learn intricate details about living with a disability:

“When you use the word quadriplegic, they automatically think that you’re living a dependent life on somebody else that you might not be able to drive or be independent or go to school or get married or have kids. There’s a lot of things that just come along with that terminology. And so I think the Paralympics, the more exposure it gets, the better it does of educating the public about the lives of people with disabilities.”

The credibility and visibility from the Paralympic competition offer meaningful education and connection that help to discredit misconceptions about living with a disability. This exposure aids in-group acceptance rather than perpetuating the view of outsiders that disability needs to be fixed in order to meet society’s standards. Interviewee testimony on dis/ability awareness from the Paralympic competition emphasizes the opportunity to turn awareness of living with a disability into empowering social acceptance.

Theme 6: Prestigious Motivation/Pride

Power soccer and Paralympic interviewees collectively expressed the prestigious motivation and pride associated with Paralympic inclusion. Power soccer player, coach, and broadcaster Tony discussed the evolving prestige from Paralympic inclusion:

“I think having the prestige of being included in the Paralympics certainly goes a long way in terms of how athletes see themselves. Because you know you now have the credibility of the Olympics and the Paralympics. .. we have our world championships, we have the World Cup where you are competing against the best.”

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Tony echoes earlier sentiments about the Paralympics being a profound, credible platform to showcase disability ability. Inclusion can contribute to empowerment and help defy society's negative stereotypes worldwide.

From a Paralympic point of view, wheelchair basketball and power soccer player Zach exemplified the theme by explaining his motivation for competing in a particular sport:

"The reason why I focus so much on playing wheelchair basketball, even though I knew there'd be a day I couldn't play anymore because my disability would progress, was that I saw how the public saw it, how it was viewed, and the fact that it was in the Paralympics, and I had that to strive for. To me, being the best wheelchair basketball player in the world had a lot more weight than being the best power soccer player in the world, just because it has more recognition."

Zach's anecdote comparing perceptions of playing the non-Paralympic sport of power soccer versus the Paralympic recognized sport of wheelchair basketball reveals his motivation and pride from playing at the highest competitive level. Adaptive sport athletes competing in sports not recognized by the Paralympics do not have access to the same motivation and pride in their athleticism because they are excluded from reaching that pinnacle stage of competition.

Theme 7: Sporting Credibility

Paralympic athletes all agreed that a sport's inclusion on the Paralympic stage is crucial for earning credibility in the mainstream, enabling easier sponsorship acquisition and a sizable income from participating in an adaptive sport. Zach noted the resulting credibility from Paralympic inclusion:

"Paralympics have worked really hard to build their image as. . .the second largest sporting event ever. It's real. It's legit. They've built that reputation."

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They are the big show. And the inclusion of more people with disabilities. More sports for people with different kinds of disabilities legitimizes those sports by being added."

Zach emphasizes that Paralympic recognition for any adaptive sport is an opportunity to gain greater legitimacy within mainstream society. Brent expanded on this point with a more extensive explanation of how sporting credibility functions on a societal level:

"I think the Paralympics just that terminology gives the sport credibility. And so, which I think will aid a lot of different things but mostly funding, which plays a big role in Paralympic sports. And so, if you, as an individual, are able to go out and try to find sponsors, it's much easier to find. If I want to go out and try to find a sponsorship to do water skiing, that's much more difficult because it's not a Paralympic sport. I think that gives the sport a lot more credibility because it's a Paralympic sport."

Considering disability identity and empowerment, Paralympic athletes are likely to have greater self-confidence because of the societal value placed on their abilities. In contrast, athletes in non-recognized Paralympic sports, such as power soccer, may experience societal devaluation that can potentially stifle empowerment. Furthermore, society is more likely to value the abilities of adaptive athletes if their respective sports are part of the Paralympic competition.

Discussion

The results highlight seven themes based on interviewee testimony regarding identity and disability empowerment among adaptive sports athletes, both Paralympic and non-Paralympic. Paralympic athletes expressed disability empowerment through a belief in disability as a blessing, leading to unforeseen achievements rather than a burdensome life. Paralympic inclusion appeared to increase perceived empowerment, namely confidence in societal disability acceptance, excluding those with neuromuscular

conditions. As a whole, the interviews revealed that Paralympic exclusion led to reduced disability empowerment. Power soccer athletes reported that their participation in the adaptive sports community was less meaningful than participation in Paralympic-recognized sports, as perceived by both the disability community and society at large. These perceptions resulted in feelings of marginalization. Paralympic inclusion, however, enhanced perceived disability empowerment due to associated pride in representing one's country. In the sections that follow, interview themes are considered in relation to each research question and the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

Disability Identity and Empowerment in Adaptive Sports

Research question one considered how the identities of adaptive sports members reflect disability empowerment. The question aimed to understand how playing adaptive sports influences athletes to evolve their identities into one that is empowered rather than disempowered by those disabilities. Comprehensive responses to this research question were especially pronounced when analyzing the themes of acceptance and heightened confidence.

Acceptance reflected how athletes' perceptions of their disabilities shifted from negative to positive, contributing to productive interactions with others outside adaptive sports. When examining the reflective quality of disability empowerment without Paralympic inclusion, the perspectives of adaptive athletes suggested an evolutionary transformation from shy, insecure personalities to confident individuals who elected to embrace rather than lament their circumstances. Adaptive sports athletes used the thrill of competition as an outlet for accepting rather than denying their disabilities, and several participants emphasized their abilities as equal to those of able-bodied individuals.

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Individuals with disabilities who are not involved in adaptive sports and may be struggling with their perceived value and worth may therefore benefit from adaptive sport involvement (Coates & Vickerman, 2016). Participating in an adaptive sport can make individuals feel seen, supported, and celebrated, thereby affirming their self-worth and, in turn, fostering a sense of empowerment (Coates & Vickerman, 2016). These perceptions can encourage individuals to take up space, lead, and advocate for themselves and their communities (Kirakosyan & Seabra Junior, 2018). Our findings suggest that these benefits may be enhanced through adaptive sport involvement in Paralympic-recognized programming. Lack of Paralympic recognition may send a message to athletes that their efforts, talents, and bodies do not align with the dominant ideals of disability sport. This could impact how athletes view themselves and hinder opportunities to generate broader recognition and influence.

Empowerment among adaptive athletes participating in Paralympic-recognized sports was largely due to the opportunity to compete at the highest level and to earn support from mainstream media and Olympic athletes. This finding supports Coates and Vickerman's (2016) research on the positive mindsets instilled in young children with disabilities through watching the 2012 Paralympics. Children reported feelings of positivity from watching Paralympians perform, proving that disability cannot suppress dreams and inspiring future aspirations. Children even identified Paralympic competition as more empowering than the traditional Olympics (Coates & Vickerman, 2016). Furthermore, the testimony presented by Paralympic athletes who became emboldened rather than discouraged by their disabilities draws a constructive parallel to Siebers's (2013) article on identity formation from disability, namely how it materializes and advances based on the

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degree of ability mindset. He discusses disability identity's power to ignite renewed ability, where struggles strengthen individuals, leading to a complex embodiment in which athletes view their challenges as blessings in disguise, especially amid Paralympic visibility (Siebers, 2013). For excluded sports, athletes still felt anything was possible, but lower levels of competition and societal visibility limited the empowerment gained from competing.

The connection between heightened confidence and disability empowerment stemmed from adaptive athletes' perceived ability to charge forward in life without hesitation or self-doubt, thereby building an overall positive impression of true independence. Heightened confidence was authentic to adaptive sport involvement and not based on Paralympic inclusion versus exclusion. Although not everyone can compete at the Paralympic level, becoming an athlete in a Paralympic-recognized sport offers a chance to reach the highest level of athletic performance instead of being stifled by exclusion. Power soccer athletes reported feeling deeply empowered at the local or peer level, while simultaneously experiencing a lack of confidence in institutional spaces. The coexistence of these feelings reflects the fact that empowerment is not absolute but context-dependent, shaped by recognition, legitimacy, and access (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008).

Paralympic Inclusion Versus Exclusion

The second research question considered how disability empowerment might differ between those playing a Paralympic-recognized sport and those playing a non-Paralympic-recognized sport (such as power soccer). Relevant responses were identified

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in the categories of marginalization, media visibility, dis/ability awareness, prestigious motivation/pride, and sporting credibility.

Players described being aware of the perception that adaptive sports were excluded from the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) as inadequate. Power soccer athletes, in particular, expressed profound disempowerment due to their Paralympic exclusion. This exclusion contributed to social inequality among the disability community and in general society, reflecting the entrenched hierarchies not only between different disabilities but also among Paralympic sports themselves. Some sports are privileged because they align with dominant norms of athleticism and visibility, reinforcing perceptions of increased versus diminished value. In terms of SIT, successful social identification is best achieved when excluded individuals with disabilities can identify themselves as equals among their fellow disabled athletes without feeling like outsiders (McKinley et al., 2014). Power soccer and Paralympic athletes alike agreed on the disempowering nature of the Paralympics' mission and hypocritical mission statement. Exclusion from the Paralympics merely serves to deny a sizeable portion of the disabled community a chance to further develop their disability identity and empowerment in the same manner as Paralympic-recognized adaptive sport athletes (Islam, 2014). Furthermore, for high-performing athletes, particularly those with disabilities, being excluded from the Paralympic stage can significantly hinder the formation and affirmation of their athletic self-identity, limiting both recognition and sense of belonging within elite sport. Revamping the Paralympics to incorporate adaptive sports like power soccer, which is inclusive of disabilities such as neuromuscular conditions, is key to making sure the global competition is as inclusive as possible and represents athletes of all abilities.

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In addition, the inclusion of power wheelchair sports is an essential step toward ensuring all adaptive athletes have the chance to expand their disability identity and empowerment.

The dis/ability awareness theme revealed that Paralympic recognized athletes viewed the Paralympic stage as a functional platform for spreading positive awareness of disability. Power soccer athletes identified the Paralympics as an ideal environment to raise awareness of the diverse abilities people with disabilities can possess. The opportunity to increase awareness of marginalized disabilities could help to improve accommodations for individuals with these disabilities and change societal perceptions about them. Paralympic athletes all but confirmed the empowering experience on the Paralympic stage, including the opportunity to share their authentic disability experiences with spectators through interviews that work to end harmful stereotypes. Paralympic athletes also candidly stated that awareness could be spread beyond the event itself, since it is held only once every four years. Similar notions were raised in Bartsch et al.'s (2018) exploration of the role of empathy in the 2012 summer Paralympics and in overall societal treatment of disability-related issues. Findings from Bartsch et al. (2018) suggest a positive shift in spectator perceptions, with spectators expressing empathy rather than pity toward people with disabilities. Their findings solidified the educational potential of the Paralympics and related events, which, in turn, promote the destigmatization of disability (Bartsch et al., 2018). The representation versus awareness theme delves into the true disenfranchising and disempowering reality for excluded athletes, whose severe disability conditions are left out of these opportunities. The frustration expressed by power soccer athletes and players of other power chair sports is consistent with the work of Ferez et al. (2020), which evaluated whether the Paralympics meets the reported legacy

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objective of disability inclusivity. In line with our own study findings, Ferez et al. (2020) found discrepancies in the Paralympics' mission to include all athletes with disabilities equally. Specifically, while the movement publicly emphasizes diversity, equity, and empowerment, in practice, it reinforces selective inclusion based on marketability, physical function, and alignment with societal norms. As a result, athletes with higher-support needs or those in less mainstream adaptive sports are systematically marginalized, revealing the limits of the Paralympics' commitment to representation.

Media visibility was the bridge that connected adaptive sport athletes with society at large. Paralympic as well as power soccer athletes agreed that media visibility was the best way to educate able-bodied people about disability through a showcase of numerous abilities amid disabilities, in which individual actions can make a substantial difference in societal attitudes. The interviewees' perspectives on altering society's negative perceptions of disability through athletic performance are supported by Fitzgerald's (2012) study examining the current societal mindset toward people with disabilities and methods for improvement. According to Fitzgerald (2012), shifting away from the deficit-based medical model toward an ability-based model that focuses on the social elements of disability can increase the visibility of Paralympic competition, which a sole focus on athleticism has overshadowed. Participants also noted the need to closely examine media exposure deficits in Paralympic coverage compared to Olympic event coverage. Consistent with previous research (Pullen et al., 2019), their responses suggest that disability empowerment can only be sustainable if society is willing to expand coverage to a level equal to that of able-bodied mainstream sports. Collectively, participants' perceptions of media visibility provide evidence of empowerment for recognized athletes

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while also pointing to areas for improvement in the accurate visibility of disabilities, especially for currently excluded athletes.

The theme of prestigious motivation/pride highlights the notion of disability empowerment through the opportunity to thrive in a competitive sporting environment. Although empowerment did not hinge on Paralympic inclusion, excluded athletes in power soccer maintained that their disability identity and perception of empowerment would grow exponentially if Paralympic recognition were possible. In addition, Paralympic athletes attributed much of their empowerment to the ability to represent their nations in the pinnacle of disability athleticism. Paralympic athletes also noted the potential for more elevated competition by playing with and against able-bodied athletes. The above points establish a direct connection to Lindemann and Cherney's (2008) study examining the impact on pride for athletes and spectators alike when playing the competitive sport of wheelchair rugby, currently represented in the Paralympics. Their study fully supported the idea that competing to showcase athletic ability rather than disability with fellow disabled athletes fostered pride and increased motivation (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). On the other hand, empowerment from inclusion appears to be a factor only when it is accompanied by equitable recognition, resource distribution, and the challenging of normative ideals of athleticism; otherwise, it risks reinforcing the hierarchies that diminish empowerment (Ferez et al., 2020).

By extension, participating in the Paralympics led Paralympic-recognized athletes to feel further empowered through legitimization by mainstream society (Brittain, 2010; Howe, 2008; Peers, 2009). Paralympic athletes explained that athletes and spectators take their respective Paralympic sports more seriously, and that the Paralympic badge

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served as a token of credibility, increasing the likelihood of obtaining sponsorship while playing their sport of choice. Support for the credibility argument emerged from a study by Kirakosyan and Seabra Junior (2018), which sought to understand the social legacies that can result from Paralympic competition. They found the Paralympic stage to be a dynamic arena that shifts societal perspectives on disability. Furthermore, the study uncovered a belief in public discourse that excluded sports, such as power-chair sports, as representing inability and impracticality.

Theoretical Implications

SIT helped highlight participants' in-group and out-group experiences. Somewhat unexpectedly, the idea of inclusion was two-fold. First, the inclusion of power soccer and related sports in the Paralympics could play a significant role in helping to eliminate the medical disability lens present in society by highlighting that condition severity does not limit societal participation. The fierce competitive spirit exhibited by athletes across all adaptive sports can alter societal perceptions of disability as inferior and enable performance recognition on par with other elite athletes. Second, findings suggest that Paralympic inclusion is a path towards ending the inequality experienced within the disability community. Embarking on a concerted effort to include a wider variety of adaptive sports in the Paralympics could help disrupt perceptions of inequality among athletes in the disability community, preventing the formation of superior-versus-inferior disability groups. Since sports welcomed into the Paralympics are primarily composed of athletes with less severe disabilities, society does not have a chance to see athletes with more severe disabilities compete on such a stage. Paralympic inclusion of adaptive sports for athletes with more severe conditions enables both athletes and society at large to

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recognize the abilities that can arise from disability. The social identity connections are important to consider when creating an authentic disability sporting competition in which representation is equal, and everyone works together to evolve perceptions of disability.

The research conducted here explores the impact of Paralympic recognition on individual and group disability sport identities. At the individual level, the study has found that adaptive athletes' sporting involvement builds confidence and the belief that their lives are limitless, particularly when their athleticism is globally visible. Regarding the group aspect of disability empowerment, the research revealed that feelings of empowerment are curtailed for Paralympic-excluded adaptive athletes who feel they are not welcome in their own disability sporting environment. The sense of empowerment among adaptive athletes rises when society's views on disability support it, especially in recognizing sporting prowess.

Practical Implications

Opening up the Paralympics to include power soccer and other excluded sports has numerous valuable implications for adaptive sports, disability awareness, and disability empowerment. As documented earlier, the Paralympics tend to overrepresent individuals with less severe disabilities and exclude those with more severe disabilities, increasing marginalization issues. When sports for individuals with severe disabilities are incorporated into the Paralympic lineup, the public and others with disabilities can become better educated about the range of adaptive sports available, helping put an end to the belief that disability means a homebound life. Since adaptive sports are largely one of the only activities in which individuals with disabilities are entirely independent, gaining Paralympic inclusion helps make the lives of those with disabilities more meaningful and

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purposeful. These findings could aid in subsequent adaptive sport negotiations with the Paralympic organization or able-bodied organizations such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). The findings might also be used to support future policy changes in athletic programming, in the hope that representation can alleviate societal ignorance about disabilities. **Limitations**

Although this study helped to expand understanding surrounding disability identity and empowerment among adaptive sports athletes, it is not without several limitations. First, a few participants identified as women. Male study participants overwhelmingly outnumbered female participants (23 to 5), denying unique input from female athletes. Notably, the participation rate among women in adaptive sports is much lower. Second, the analysis failed to account for participants' geographic location, which could point to differences in disability perceptions based on a particular locale's accessibility and resources. Third, collecting ethnic data was another missed demographic opportunity, as cultures and societies worldwide differ in their interpretations of disability issues. Lastly, it is essential to keep in mind that competition for inclusion is a never-ending cycle, with continued boundaries to inclusion in competitive sporting environments like the Paralympics. Given this reality, we must remain steadfast in seeking other avenues for promoting inclusive equality for people with disabilities through redefining their rights and enacting policy changes.

Future Directions and Conclusion

Social identity theory served as a guide for analyzing interviewees' perceptions of disability identity and empowerment among adaptive athletes, focusing on Paralympic inclusion versus exclusion. Although disability empowerment for adaptive athletes had no

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bearing on Paralympic inclusion, results suggest that incorporating power soccer for individuals with more severe disability into the Paralympics can enhance disability empowerment, alter negative, ableist societal attitudes, and provide a reliable platform to promote disability ability. As evidenced by the examination of Paralympic boccia athletes from Portugal, participating in an IPC-recognized sport can reduce discrimination through education and community awareness of disability (Lourenco et al., 2024). Fighting for the inclusion of a broader range of adaptive sports, such as power soccer, in the Paralympics can make a meaningful contribution to individuals with disabilities by promoting a truly inclusive Paralympic competition. The study's findings deepen our understanding of identity and disability empowerment from the perspective of people with disabilities, particularly adaptive sport athletes. Results from this study also have the potential to provide evidence in support of including power soccer and related mechanical wheelchair sports. Future research may benefit from seeking perspectives from individuals who are recently disabled or have no adaptive sport affiliation, to further explore experiences and perceptions of disability identity and empowerment.

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Appendix A

Data Instrument # 1 for Organizational Experts

History of Fighting for Power Soccer's Inclusion in the Paralympics

Given your expertise and participation in past efforts to bring power soccer into the Paralympics, I would like to ask you a few additional questions about the sport's history in seeking approval from the International Paralympic Committee for my study's background information. Thank you for your time.

- 1) Describe the most recent attempt at bringing power soccer into the Paralympics for the 2024 games.
 - i. How did the meeting go?
 - ii. Did anything promising surface for future attempts?

- 2) What were the primary reasons behind the International Paralympic Committee's rejection of power soccer from the 2024 Paralympics?
 - i. Was there a particular reason that they stressed over all others as ultimately resulting in rejection?
 - ii. Explain.

- 3) What is the projected outlook for future attempts at power soccer's Paralympic inclusion?
 - i. Do you anticipate seeking a future attempt at inclusion?
 - ii. What steps do you think would be necessary for future success?

Data Instrument # 2 for Athletes

Interview Guide

Interviewee Name/ID _____

Date _____

Time of Interview _____

To begin interview

- Introduce self
- Aim of the interview, topics covered
- How long do you have for the interview?
- Questions?
- TURN ON RECORDER

Demographic Questions

- 1) What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary/third gender
 - d. Prefer to self-describe _____
 - e. Prefer not to say

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- 2) What is your age in years? _____
- 3) What adaptive sport(s) do you play or affiliate with? _____
- 4) How many years have you been involved in the adaptive sport(s) mentioned above? _____
- 5) What disability do you have?
 - a. Paraplegia
 - b. Quadriplegia
 - c. Neuromuscular (Muscular Dystrophy, Cerebral Palsy, etc.)
 - d. Other _____

Interview Questions

I'd like to begin by asking you a few questions about the Paralympics.

- 1) What is your familiarity with the Paralympics?

Domain 1: Role of Paralympics in shaping perceptions of disabilities (social versus medical, visibility)

- 2) What do you think is the quality of disability representation in the Paralympics with respect to showcasing all abilities?
 - i. How might the Paralympics improve in this area?
- 3) How do you think the Paralympics contribute to societal attitudes about disability?
 - i. Please expand on your response.
 - ii. How might greater inclusion of sports in the Paralympics, open to all abilities, influence societal attitudes about disability?
- 4) Regarding sport/athleticism/competition, how is your identity influenced by the perceptions of others and society as a whole?
 - i. Please expand on your response.
- 5) How can the visibility generated by the Paralympics through a greater variety of adaptive sports impact social perceptions when it comes to disabilities?
 - i. How might the visibility of a sport like power soccer, an adaptive sport played by individuals with a range of disabilities including Muscular Dystrophy, Cerebral Palsy, Quadriplegia, Paraplegia, etc., and is not recognized by the Paralympics, impact social perceptions of disability? Explain.

Domain II: Identity in playing a Paralympic recognized vs. non-recognized sport (marginalization)

Related to my last question, I'd like to ask you about sports that are recognized and not recognized by the Paralympics...

- 6) Does Paralympic inclusion of a particular adaptive sport play a role in your perceptions of sport/athleticism/competition?
 - i. Please expand on your response.

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- 1) How are societal perceptions of disability influenced when playing a sport that is part of the Paralympic stage?
 - i. For participants participating in power soccer: How does the repeated exclusion of power soccer make you feel?
 - ii. For participants participating in a Paralympic recognized sport: How does the inclusion of your sport make you feel?
- 2) What role does Paralympic inclusion/exclusion play in the self-perceptions of individuals with disabilities?
 - i. How has your self-perception been influenced by your sport's inclusion or exclusion in the Paralympics?
 - ii. In what ways might power soccer's inclusion in the Paralympics impact the identities of those with neuromuscular conditions?"

Domain III: Identity in playing an adaptive sport (empowerment)

Finally, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about your experience with adaptive sports...

- 3) In what ways has your identity evolved through competing in your respective adaptive sport?
 - i. Please expand on your response.
- 4) To what extent has playing your respective sport led to perceiving your disability as a source of empowerment?
 - i. Please expand on your response.
 - ii. How might inclusion of your adaptive sport in the Paralympics enhance the resulting disability empowerment?