



ADAPTIVE SPORTS AND SOCIAL REINTEGRATION: THE ROLE OF PARA ALPINE SKIING – A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to examine the role of participation in adaptive sports in the process of social reintegration among individuals with acquired physical disabilities, with a specific focus on para alpine skiing. Particular attention was given to the development of athletic identity and life satisfaction.

Methods: This qualitative study formed part of a broader sequential mixed-method investigation. Following a quantitative phase involving 129 para alpine skiers, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six purposively selected elite para alpine skiers who participated in the Sochi 2014 Winter Paralympic Games to complement and deepen the quantitative findings. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis informed by grounded theory principles, allowing for the identification of key categories and relationships within the resocialisation process.

Results: The findings indicate that participation in adaptive sports, particularly para alpine skiing, plays a central role in social reintegration after disability. Athletes reported significant improvements in life satisfaction, driven by increased independence, structured daily routines, and meaningful goal-oriented activity. The reconstruction of athletic identity emerged as a key mechanism underlying psychological adaptation, contributing to enhanced self-concept and self-efficacy. In addition, participation in adaptive sports facilitated the expansion of social networks and strengthened interpersonal relationships, supporting broader social reintegration. However, the process was influenced by contextual factors, such as financial constraints and access to sports infrastructure.

Conclusions: Adaptive sports participation represents a critical pathway for social reintegration, promoting life satisfaction and athletic identity development among individuals with disabilities. These findings highlight the importance of reducing structural barriers and ensuring equitable access to sport as part of comprehensive rehabilitation strategies.

Keywords: para alpine skiing, adaptive sport, social reintegration, life satisfaction, athletic identity

PRILAGOJEN ŠPORT IN SOCIALNA REINTEGRACIJA: VLOGA PARAALPSKEGA SMUČANJA – KVALITATIVNA ŠTUDIJA

IZVLEČEK

Namen: Namen raziskave je bil proučiti vlogo udejstvovanja v para športu pri procesu socialne reintegracije oseb s pridobljeno telesno invalidnostjo s posebnim poudarkom na paraalpskem smučanju. Posebno pozornost smo namenili oblikovanju športne identitete in zadovoljstva z življenjem.

Metode: Uporabili smo kvalitativni raziskovalni pristop, ki je bil del širše zaporedne raziskave z mešanimi metodami. Po kvantitativnem delu, v katerega je bilo vključenih 129 paraalpskih smučarjev, smo izvedli polstrukturirane intervjuje s šestimi namensko izbranimi vrhunskimi paraalpskimi smučarji, udeleženci paralimpijskih iger v Sočiju 2014, da bi dopolnili in poglobili kvantitativne ugotovitve. Podatke smo analizirali z metodo kvalitativne vsebinske analize, ki temelji na načelih utemeljene teorije, kar je omogočilo prepoznavanje ključnih kategorij in odnosov v procesu resocializacije.

Rezultati: Rezultati kažejo, da ima udejstvovanje v prilagojenem športu, zlasti v paraalpskem smučanju, pomembno vlogo pri socialni reintegraciji oseb s pridobljeno invalidnostjo. Udeleženci so poročali o izboljšanem zadovoljstvu z življenjem, večji samostojnosti, strukturiranem vsakdanu in večji usmerjenosti k ciljem. Preoblikovanje športne identitete se je izkazalo kot ključni mehanizem psihološke prilagoditve, ki prispeva k večji samozavesti in občutku lastne učinkovitosti. Šport je prav tako omogočil širjenje socialnih mrež in krepitev medosebnih odnosov, na proces pa so vplivali tudi kontekstualni dejavniki, zlasti finančne omejitve in dostopnost športne infrastrukture.

Sklepi: Udejstvovanje v prilagojenem športu je pomemben dejavnik socialne reintegracije, saj prispeva k zadovoljstvu z življenjem in razvoju športne identitete oseb z invalidnostjo. Rezultati potrjujejo potrebo po zmanjševanju strukturnih ovir in zagotavljanju enakih možnosti za vključevanje v šport kot del celostne rehabilitacije.

Ključne besede: paraalpsko smučanje, socialna reintegracija, športna identiteta, kakovost življenja

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of a physical disability represents a profound disruption of an individual's life trajectory, often requiring substantial psychological adjustment, social adaptation, and the reconfiguration of personal identity. Within this context, the concept of social reintegration has become central to understanding how individuals can re-establish meaningful roles, relationships, and participation in society following injury or the onset of disability. Contemporary research increasingly highlights the role of adaptive sports as a key facilitator of this process, given their capacity to simultaneously address the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of recovery (Martin Ginis, Ma, Latimer-Cheung, & Rimmer, 2016; Jaarsma, Dijkstra, Geertzen, & Dekker, 2014).

Participation in adaptive sports has been consistently associated with improvements in life satisfaction, enhanced self-perception, and greater levels of social participation for people with physical disabilities (Isidoro-Cabañas, Soto-Rodríguez, Morales-Rodríguez, & Pérez-Mármol, 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Beyond their rehabilitative function, adaptive sports provide structured environments that support goal-setting, achievement, and social interaction, thereby fostering autonomy, competence, and a renewed sense of purpose. In this sense, sport can be understood not only as a means of physical recovery but also as a critical context for psychological adaptation and social inclusion (Sweet, Fortier, Strachan, & Blanchard, 2012).

A particularly important dimension of this process is the development of athletic identity, which has been identified as a key psychological mechanism underlying long-term adaptation to disability (Shapiro & Martin, 2014). Through sustained engagement in sport, individuals may transition from a perception of limitation and loss toward a redefined self-concept grounded in competence, performance, and achievement. This transformation reflects broader processes of identity reconstruction, in which individuals integrate past experiences with new roles and capabilities (Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016). Importantly, the development of athletic identity is closely linked to improvements in self-efficacy, motivation, and overall life satisfaction (Martin Ginis et al., 2021).

The social dimension of adaptive sports further reinforces these processes. Participation in sports facilitates the formation of new social networks, promotes a sense of belonging, and contributes to the normalisation of life after acquired disability (Šuc, 2025). Moreover, adaptive sports environments may play a role in reducing stigma and challenging societal stereotypes associated with disabilities, thereby supporting wider processes of social inclusion and reintegration (Oldörp, Mihajlovic, & Giese, 2025). In this sense, sports can be

conceptualised as a micro-social context in which both individual and societal transformations can take place (Hammond, 2022).

Among adaptive sports, para alpine skiing is a particularly demanding and structured discipline that offers a valuable context for examining these processes. Its high-performance orientation, combined with the technical and physical demands of the sport, requires athletes to engage in intensive training, competition, and continuous self-improvement. These characteristics make para alpine skiing especially relevant for exploring the relationship between participating in adaptive sports, social reintegration, athletic identity, and life satisfaction.

Despite the growing body of research on adaptive sports, there remains a need for in-depth qualitative studies that capture the lived experiences of elite athletes with disabilities and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the processes underlying adaptation and reintegration. The present study therefore aims to explore the role of para alpine skiing in the social reintegration of individuals with acquired physical disabilities, with a particular focus on the development of athletic identity and life satisfaction.

METHODS

The present study formed part of a broader mixed-method investigation examining the role of competitive para alpine skiing in social reintegration, self-concept, athletic identity, and life satisfaction among individuals with acquired physical disabilities. The research was conducted sequentially, with a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. This article focuses primarily on the qualitative findings.

In the quantitative phase, data were collected from all 129 para alpine skiers with acquired physical disabilities who participated in the 2014 Winter Paralympic Games in Sochi. The participants represented 33 countries in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania. Data were collected using a survey covering sociodemographic information, characteristics of the disability and rehabilitation, sport participation, access to equipment and ski facilities, and the financial aspects of sport participation. Standardised instruments included the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS), an adapted Athletic Identity Scale, and the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS).

The quantitative phase was followed by a qualitative phase designed to complement and expand on the quantitative findings. Six para alpine skiers were purposively selected for the interviews. The selection aimed to include both male and female athletes and representatives of countries with larger

delegations of para alpine skiers at the Games, reflecting some of the more strongly represented nations in the sport. The final qualitative sample consisted of four men and two women from Europe and North America, all of whom had participated in the 2014 Winter Paralympic Games in Sochi.

The interviews were based on ten pre-defined guiding questions addressing life satisfaction, social reintegration, self-concept, social identity, athletic identity, rehabilitation, social relationships, access to sport infrastructure, and the financial aspects of sport participation. The interview guide was developed specifically for the qualitative phase because standardised measurements of life satisfaction, self-concept, and athletic identity had already been applied during the preceding quantitative phase. The purpose of the interviews was therefore not to re-measure these constructs, but to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' subjective experiences and of the processes underlying the quantitative findings. The complete interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

All the interviews were conducted in English with participants who were proficient in that language. The same researcher conducted all six interviews, ensuring consistency in the interviewing procedure. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the Paralympic Games venue toward the end of the Games or via online video calls within one month of the Games. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed, with particular attention paid to preserving the original meaning of the participants' statements.

The qualitative data were analysed using qualitative content analysis informed by grounded theory principles. The analytical process was further informed by the coding paradigm of Strauss and Corbin, particularly for identifying causal conditions, central phenomena, contextual and intervening conditions, and relationships between the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following Mesec (1997), the analytical procedure consisted of six stages: (1) organisation of the material, (2) identification of the coding units, (3) open coding, (4) the selection and definition of relevant concepts and categories, (5) relational coding, and (6) the formulation and integration of the final interpretation. All the transcripts were coded and analysed by the same researcher. The codes were progressively compared and grouped into broader categories, and the relationships between the identified categories were examined throughout the analytical process. The outcome of the analysis was the construction of a paradigm model that integrates causal conditions, central phenomena, contextual influences, and intervening factors into a coherent explanatory framework.

The study was approved by the Commission for Ethical Issues in Sport at the Faculty of Sport, University of Ljubljana (approval No. 1858/2013). All the

participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation.

RESULTS

The analysis reveals that the resocialisation of para alpine skiers is a dynamic and multidimensional process that unfolds in the psychological, social, and physical domains. Qualitative content analysis resulted in four main thematic categories: (1) life before disability and the disruption of identity, (2) the role of para alpine skiing in social reintegration, (3) reconstruction of self-concept and athletic identity, and (4) intervening structural and contextual factors. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' demographic characteristics, disability-related information, and sporting background, including their experience in para alpine skiing and participation in other sports.

Life Before Disability and the Disruption of Identity

Most of the participants reported a strong involvement in sport prior to the onset of their disability, indicating that physical activity had already formed an important part of their identity. For many, sport was not merely a leisure activity but an essential component of everyday life. As one participant explained, *"I had always been a recreational athlete; not being able to engage in sport would have affected me greatly"*.

The injury itself was described as a turning point marked by emotional distress, loss of identity, and a sense of rupture in the continuity of life. One participant reflected on this experience by stating, *"My life collapsed... I thought my sports career was over."* These narratives suggest that the onset of disability initiates a process of identity disruption, often accompanied by feelings of depression and uncertainty.

At the same time, participants described the early stages of adaptation as a period of self-reflection and re-evaluation of their life priorities. As one interviewee noted, *"We started to look within ourselves and think about what really matters in life"*. This process of self-discovery appears to represent an important foundation for the later stages of resocialisation.

Table 1. Demographic, disability-related, and sport-related characteristics of the interview participants

Participant	Age	sex	Age at the onset of disability	Para alpine skiing classification	Country of residence	Para alpine skiing (Years)	Participation in other sports
A	36	M	16	LW2	USA	18	Recreational
B	25	M	13	LW12-1	Slovenia	9	Recreational
C	33	M	17	LW11	Austria	9	Paracycling
D	31	F	17	LW12-1	USA	6	Wheelchair basketball
E	35	F	12	LW2	Russia	20	Recreational
F	35	M	21	LW11	USA	14	Recreational

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' demographic characteristics, disability-related information, and sporting background, including their experience in para alpine skiing and participation in other sports.

The Role of Para alpine Skiing in Social Reintegration

Engagement in para alpine skiing emerged as a central mechanism that helped participants reconstruct their identities and improve their life satisfaction. Participation in elite sports provided structure, purpose, and a renewed sense of direction. Several of the participants described their return to sport as a moment of emotional significance. One athlete expressed this by saying, *“When I started doing sport again, it felt like coming home”*.

Participants consistently reported that involvement in sport contributed to increased life satisfaction and the more meaningful organisation of daily activities. The structured nature of training and competition provided a framework for goal-setting and personal development, while also enhancing overall life satisfaction. In addition, sport enabled experiences that extended beyond the physical domain, such as travel and participation in international competitions. As one participant described, *“Competing at major events is something special—the energy among all of us athletes is incredible”*.

A key aspect of this process was the expansion and transformation of social relationships. Participation in para alpine skiing facilitated the development of new social networks, particularly with other athletes with disabilities. These relationships were often described as highly supportive and meaningful. One participant emphasised this by stating, *“We live and breathe together as a team, almost like a family... we support each other, and there are no barriers between us”*.

Forming these relationships also contributed to a shift in social identity. Participants reported that their social networks changed after their injury, with new connections emerging within the sporting environment. As one interviewee noted, *“You meet new people, while old connections slowly fade... but the true friendships remain”*. These findings indicate that sport plays a significant role in facilitating both the continuity and transformation of social identity.

Reconstruction of Self-Concept and Athletic Identity

The participants' accounts reveal that the reconstruction of self-concept is a central part of the resocialisation process. Following injury, many participants experienced a significant decline in self-esteem and a sense of loss. As one participant explained, *“Losing a part of your body is a kind of grieving... not just for the body, but for the life you had before”*.

The recovery of self-concept was closely linked to the gradual restoration of independence and physical capability. Participants described this process as transformative, particularly when they regained the ability to perform everyday tasks independently. One interviewee reflected on this turning point: *“Suddenly I became more independent... it gives you a powerful feeling that you can do things on your own”*.

Participation in sports played a crucial role in this transformation by providing opportunities for achievement and mastery. Success in sport contributed to increased confidence and reinforced a sense of competence. Over time, the participants developed a strong athletic identity, often perceiving themselves as elite athletes rather than individuals defined by disability.

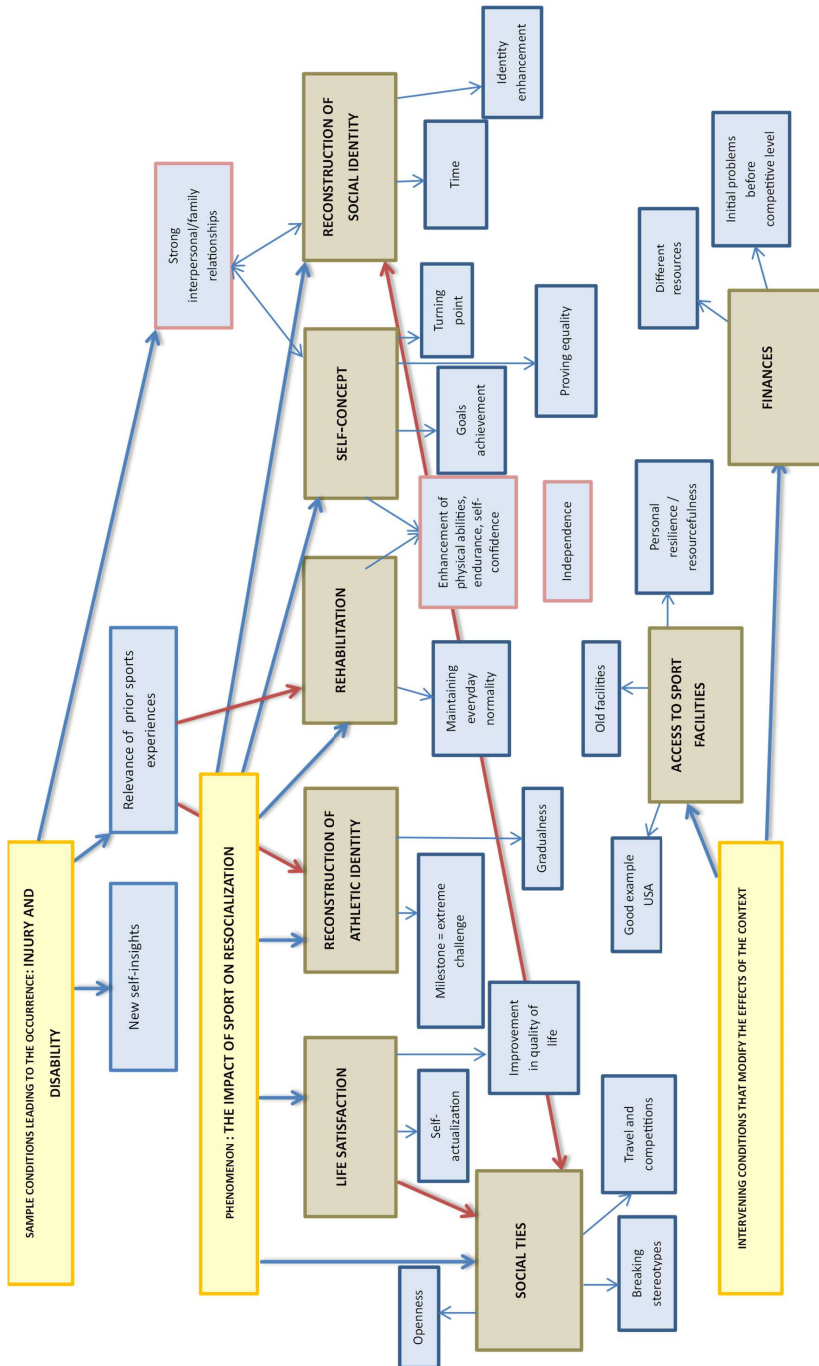
Intervening Conditions: Structural and Contextual Factors

While the benefits of participating in sports were evident for all the participants, the process of resocialisation was also shaped by structural and contextual factors. The accessibility of sports infrastructure was generally not perceived as a major barrier, although some limitations were noted in older facilities. Participants emphasised that adaptability and personal resourcefulness often compensated for these challenges.

In contrast, financial constraints emerged as a significant obstacle, particularly in the early stages of participating in sport. Participants reported difficulties related to the costs of equipment, travel, and professional support. As indicated in their narratives, financial challenges were often only overcome after entering national teams or securing sponsorships. These findings suggest that while individual motivation and resilience are critical, structural support plays a decisive role in enabling sustained engagement in adaptive sports.

Based on the qualitative analysis, a paradigm model was constructed to conceptualise the process of social reintegration, highlighting the dynamic interplay between identity reconstruction, personal agency, social relationships, and structural conditions within the context of para alpine skiing.

Figure 1: A paradigm model of the impact of sport on the social reintegration of para alpine skiers



DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings complement the results of the preceding quantitative phase, in which high levels of life satisfaction and athletic identity were observed in the broader sample of para alpine skiers. The interviews provide additional insight into how the participants understood these outcomes, particularly through increased independence, reconstructed identity, social reintegration and renewed purpose following acquired disability. Together, these findings provide a theoretically grounded understanding of how participation in adaptive sports, specifically para alpine skiing, contributes to the process of social reintegration. Rather than functioning solely as a form of physical rehabilitation, para alpine skiing emerges as a complex psychosocial environment in which individuals renegotiate identity, restore agency, and reconstruct meaning following a life-altering event (Henderson & Mashola, 2025). This interpretation is consistent with contemporary research emphasising the multi-dimensional role of adaptive sports in promoting both psychological well-being and social inclusion (Martin Ginis et al., 2016; Sweet et al., 2012; Chen et al., 2024).

A central contribution of this study is the identification of athletic identity as a key mediating mechanism in the resocialisation process. The transition from a disrupted or diminished self-concept toward a renewed identity grounded in athletic competence reflects a broader process of identity reconstruction that is commonly observed in individuals adapting to disability (Shapiro & Martin, 2014). Importantly, this transformation does not represent a simple replacement of the pre-injury identity, but a dynamic reconfiguration in which prior experiences, embodied knowledge, and newly acquired competencies are integrated into a coherent and meaningful self-concept (Kitchin & Crossin, 2018). The participants' accounts suggest that adaptive sport can provide a structured and meaningful context in which individuals can re-establish continuity in their life narratives, reaffirm a sense of purpose, and reconstruct aspects of their identity following acquired disability (Smith et al., 2016).

The restoration of personal agency is closely related to identity reconstruction and emerges as a critical dimension of social reintegration. The participants' accounts suggest that improvements in physical capability and independence are not merely functional outcomes but carry significant symbolic value, reinforcing perceptions of control, autonomy, and self-efficacy. These findings are consistent with theoretical perspectives grounded in self-determination theory, which emphasise the role of autonomy and competence in psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as well as with empirical evidence demonstrating

the positive association between sports and perceived self-efficacy among individuals with disabilities (Martin Ginis et al., 2016; Kim & Ahn, 2021). In this sense, improvements in life satisfaction should not only be interpreted as subjective outcomes but as emergent properties of regained agency and meaningful engagement in everyday life. The social environment of adaptive sports further amplifies these processes by providing a relational context in which identity and agency are continuously negotiated. The formation of new social networks within the sporting community facilitates a sense of belonging and mutual recognition, both of which are central to social reintegration (Jaarsma et al., 2014). Moreover, shared experiences of disability within these environments appear to reduce the stigma and enable more authentic forms of social interaction, thereby supporting broader processes of inclusion and normalisation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Recent evidence further reinforces this perspective by highlighting the role of adaptive sports as a mechanism for improving both the physical and mental dimensions of life satisfaction (Isidoro-Cabañas et al., 2023) and as a key driver of inclusion in contemporary disability sport systems (Oldörp et al., 2025).

However, the findings also underscore the importance of structural and contextual conditions in shaping access to and outcomes of adaptive sports participation. While the accessibility of sports infrastructure was not perceived as a primary barrier by the participants, financial constraints emerged as a significant limiting factor, particularly in the early stages of athletic development. This observation is consistent with previous research indicating that economic barriers remain one of the most persistent obstacles to participation in disability sport (Dehghansai, Lemez, Wattie, Pinder, & Baker, 2020). Such findings highlight the ongoing tension between individual agency and structural opportunity, suggesting that the benefits of adaptive sports are not distributed equally. From a theoretical standpoint, this underscores the need to situate social reintegration within a broader socio-economic framework, where institutional support, policy interventions, and resource availability play a decisive role (Musselman, Papadimitriou, & Vasilchenko, 2022). The financial barriers identified by participants should also be interpreted in relation to the specific characteristics of para alpine skiing. Previous research has identified financial costs, transportation, access to appropriate facilities, and specialised equipment as important barriers to participation in sports for people with physical disabilities (Jaarsma et al., 2014). However, the magnitude and nature of these costs may vary considerably across adaptive sports, particularly according to the need for specialised equipment, accessible facilities, travel, and individual support.

Taken together, the results support a multidimensional conceptualisation of social reintegration in which adaptive sports function as a catalyst for the interconnected processes of identity reconstruction, agency restoration, and social inclusion (Pečnikar Oblak et al., 2023; Kiuppis, 2018). Para alpine skiing, as an elite and highly demanding form of adaptive sport, appears to intensify these processes by providing a context characterised by high expectations, structured progression, and a strong symbolic value. This suggests that participation in elite sport may not only facilitate adaptation to disability but also elevate the trajectories of personal development and long-term engagement in society, ultimately contributing to improved life satisfaction (Jaarsma et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2024).

At the same time, this study contributes to the existing literature by emphasising the importance of understanding the underlying processes through which improvements in life satisfaction are achieved (Ponti et al., 2020). Rather than conceptualising life satisfaction as a static outcome, it should be understood as a dynamic and relational construct shaped by continuous interactions between individual capacities, social environments, and structural conditions (World Health Organisation, 2014; Martin Ginis et al., 2021).

This study has several limitations. The small sample size and focus on elite para alpine skiers limit the generalizability of the findings, as the participants represent a specific group with access to high-performance sport. Additionally, the use of retrospective self-reports may introduce recall bias.

Future research should include more diverse samples and different levels of sport participation to better understand the broader applicability of adaptive sports in social reintegration. Longitudinal and mixed-method approaches are recommended to further explore the dynamic processes of identity development, life satisfaction, and social inclusion over time.

CONCLUSIONS

Among the elite para alpine skiers included in this study, participation in para alpine skiing has played an important role in the process of social reintegration by supporting identity reconstruction, enhancing self-efficacy and independence, strengthening social relationships, and contributing to perceived life satisfaction. The qualitative findings complemented the preceding quantitative results by providing a deeper understanding of how participants experienced the role of sport in rehabilitation and adaptation following acquired physical disabilities.

The proposed paradigm model integrates these interconnected psychological, social, and contextual dimensions and illustrates the role of sport within the resocialisation process as experienced by the participants in this study. At the same time, access to these potential benefits was influenced by contextual factors, particularly financial demands and access to appropriate sport infrastructure. These findings highlight the importance of considering adaptive sport not only as a component of physical rehabilitation, but also as a potential means of supporting psychosocial adjustment and social reintegration following acquired physical disability.

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Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using the following ten guiding questions:

1. How satisfied are you with your life, and how do you perceive the role of para alpine skiing in your life satisfaction?
2. How has participation in para alpine skiing influenced your social reintegration following acquired disability?
3. How has para alpine skiing influenced your self-concept and the way you perceive yourself following acquired disability?
4. How has participation in para alpine skiing influenced your social identity and your sense of belonging?
5. How important to you is your identity as an athlete, and how has this identity developed through participation in para alpine skiing?
6. What role has para alpine skiing played in your rehabilitation process following acquired disability?
7. How has participation in para alpine skiing influenced your relationships with family members, friends, and other people in your social environment?
8. How accessible are appropriate sports facilities and infrastructure for para alpine skiing, and how does accessibility influence your participation in the sport?
9. What financial demands or barriers have you experienced in relation to participation in para alpine skiing?
10. In your experience, what role does para alpine skiing play in the overall process of adaptation and social reintegration following acquired disability?