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(IJEPC)**www.ijeipc.com**THE IMPACT OF DISABLED ATHLETES' PARTICIPATION IN
SPORTS ACTIVITIES ON THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AND
SOCIAL INTEGRATION: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE
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DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1061024**Abstract:**

This systematic literature review (SLR) examines the impact of sports participation on the mental health and social integration of athletes with disabilities. Although extensive research highlights the physical benefits of sports, the psychological and social effects, particularly for disabled individuals, remain underexplored. This review addresses this gap by synthesising findings from studies published between 2013 and 2023, focusing on how sports contribute to mental well-being and social inclusion for disabled athletes. The review process involved a comprehensive search across PubMed, Scopus, SPORTDiscus, and PsycINFO using keywords such as “disabled athletes,” “sports participation,” “mental health,” and “social integration.” Studies included focused on disabled individuals engaged in organised sports, assessing outcomes related to psychological well-being, social support, and community involvement. Quality assessment tools, including PRISMA and CASP, were employed to ensure methodological rigour. Findings indicate that sports participation significantly improves mental health for disabled athletes, fostering increased self-esteem, reduced anxiety, and enhanced resilience. Social integration benefits are equally notable, with sports providing opportunities for social interaction, reducing stigma, and promoting inclusivity. However, the review also highlights barriers to participation, such as limited accessibility, societal stigma, and financial constraints. The review underscores the importance of inclusive sports programs and policy

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interventions that enhance access and support for athletes with disabilities. Future research should focus on the long-term effects of sports participation and explore diverse sporting experiences across different types of disabilities. These findings have implications for policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders who aim to leverage sports as a means of enhancing the quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

Keywords:

Disabled Athletes, Sports Participation, Mental Health, Social Integration, Inclusivity in Sports

Introduction

Participation in sports has been widely recognised for its numerous physical, psychological, and social benefits (Penedo & Dahn, 2005; Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). These benefits extend beyond general health and fitness, impacting mental well-being, cognitive function, and social connectivity. For individuals with disabilities, sports participation provides additional avenues to improve mental health, foster social integration, and challenge societal stereotypes surrounding disability. Engaging in sports can be particularly transformative for disabled athletes, offering them a means to enhance self-esteem, build resilience, and establish supportive networks that contribute to a sense of belonging and identity (Martin Ginis et al., 2021; Wheeler et al., 2022).

Although interest in the impact of sports on individuals with disabilities has increased, research has primarily focused on the physical aspects, often overlooking the psychological and social dimensions (Smith & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2019; Brittain, 2021). Understanding the influence of sports participation on mental health and social integration is crucial for developing inclusive programs that cater to the unique needs of disabled athletes. This systematic literature review (SLR) aims to synthesise and analyse existing research on the effects of sports participation on the mental health and social integration of athletes with disabilities. By exploring these aspects, this review aims to address a critical gap in understanding the holistic benefits of sports for individuals with disabilities and offer recommendations for future research and practice.

Significance of Mental Health and Social Integration for Disabled Athletes

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of overall well-being, and it is essential to recognise the unique mental health challenges faced by disabled individuals. Studies indicate that disabled individuals are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, compared to the general population (McGarty et al., 2019; Lloyd et al., 2020). Sports can play a significant role in mitigating these challenges by providing opportunities for physical activity, goal setting, and the experience of accomplishment, which are known to improve mental health outcomes (Jaarsma et al., 2016).

Social integration, which refers to the extent to which individuals are involved in their communities and form meaningful social connections, is another critical aspect for people with disabilities. Research has shown that disabled individuals often experience social isolation due to societal stigma and physical barriers (Goodwin, Johnston, & Munday, 2021; Silva & Howe, 2021). Participation in sports provides an opportunity for individuals with disabilities to interact with others, foster friendships, and engage in teamwork, all of which contribute to

greater social integration (Cottingham et al., 2019). Furthermore, sports provide a platform for disabled individuals to challenge misconceptions about their abilities, thereby promoting inclusivity and acceptance within the broader community (Shapiro et al., 2018).

The Need for a Systematic Literature Review on This Topic

Despite the recognised benefits of sports for disabled individuals, there is a limited synthesis of research specifically addressing the dual impact of sports participation on mental health and social integration among disabled athletes. This SLR aims to address this gap by systematically analysing recent studies on the topic, highlighting the psychological and social benefits of sports, and identifying factors that enhance or hinder these outcomes. Given the growing emphasis on inclusivity in sports, there is a need for evidence-based insights that can inform policy, program development, and interventions aimed at supporting athletes with disabilities (Rimmer & Marques, 2018).

This systematic literature review (SLR) seeks to explore two key research questions aimed at understanding the dual impacts of sports participation on disabled athletes:

RQ1 What is the impact of sports participation on the mental health of disabled athletes?

This question investigates how engagement in sports activities on the psychological well-being of athletes with disabilities. Key areas of focus include improvements in self-esteem, reductions in symptoms of depression and anxiety, and overall mental health enhancement. Additionally, it aims to explore the role of sports in promoting resilience, stress management, and life satisfaction among disabled individuals.

RQ2 How does sports participation influence the social integration of disabled athletes?

This question examines the role of sports in promoting social connectedness, community involvement, and interpersonal relationships among individuals with disabilities. It aims to determine how participation in team and individual sports helps reduce social isolation, challenge societal stigmas, and foster inclusion within broader social and sporting contexts.

Methodology

Search Strategy

A comprehensive and systematic search strategy was employed to retrieve relevant articles for this review. The literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, SPORTDiscus, and PsycINFO, which are recognised as robust repositories of scholarly literature in the fields of health, sports science, and psychology. To ensure a wide coverage of studies, the following keywords were utilised: “disabled athletes,” “sports participation,” “mental health,” “social integration,” “psychological well-being,” “community involvement,” and “social support.” Boolean operators (AND, OR) and truncations were used to refine and expand the search as needed.

The search was limited to studies published in English from 2013 to 2023. This time frame was chosen to focus on recent research developments in the field, ensuring that the most current and relevant studies were included. Gray literature, such as dissertations and conference proceedings, was excluded to maintain the academic rigor of the review.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure that only relevant and high-quality studies were included in the review, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	1. Population: Studies that focused on disabled athletes, defined as individuals with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities who participated in organised sports or structured physical activities. 2. Mental Health Outcomes: Studies that assessed mental health outcomes, such as psychological well-being, reductions in anxiety and depression, improvements in self-esteem, or overall mental health enhancement. 3. Social Integration Outcomes: Studies that examined aspects of social integration, including social support, community involvement, the development of social connections, and reductions in social isolation. 4. Study Designs: Research employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches was considered, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of both subjective experiences and measurable outcomes related to sports participation.
Exclusion Criteria	1. Studies that did not specifically focus on disabled athletes or those that included non-disabled populations without separate analysis for the disabled subgroup. 2. Articles published in languages other than English were excluded due to language constraints. 3. Studies that focused solely on physical health outcomes—without addressing mental health or social integration—were also excluded, as they did not align with the research objectives. 4. Studies that did not include primary data (e.g., reviews or meta-analyses) were excluded to ensure the analysis was based on original research findings.

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

The selected studies underwent a rigorous process of data extraction and quality assessment to ensure consistency, transparency, and reliability in the findings.

Data Extraction Process

A standardised data extraction form was developed to capture relevant information from each study. This form included fields for:

1. Study design (e.g., randomised controlled trials, cohort studies, qualitative research).
2. Sample characteristics (e.g., type of disability, age group, type of sports activity).
3. Key findings related to mental health and social integration outcomes.
4. Contextual factors that may have influenced the results (e.g., accessibility of sports facilities, type of sports programs).
5. Study limitations that could impact the generalizability of findings.

This structured approach allowed for a detailed comparison across studies and facilitated the synthesis of evidence.

Quality Assessment Tools

To ensure that only high-quality studies were included, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) checklist was employed. The PRISMA checklist evaluates the methodological rigour of studies, focusing on transparency in reporting, the comprehensiveness of the literature search, and the clarity of inclusion/exclusion criteria. Additionally, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tools were utilised to evaluate the quality of both qualitative and quantitative research. The CASP tools help evaluate the reliability of study results by considering factors such as the appropriateness of the study design, the robustness of data collection methods, and the potential for bias. Studies were rated as high, moderate, or low quality based on these tools, and only studies rated as high or moderate were included in the final synthesis. Any discrepancies between reviewers regarding the quality rating were resolved through discussion, ensuring that all included studies met the required standard of methodological rigour.

Data Synthesis

Data from the included studies were synthesised using a thematic analysis approach for qualitative findings and a descriptive synthesis for quantitative results. This mixed-method approach allowed for a holistic understanding of the impact of sports participation on disabled athletes' mental health and social integration. For qualitative studies, key themes related to psychological empowerment, identity formation, and social belonging were identified. For quantitative studies, relevant effect sizes, confidence intervals, and statistical significance were noted, allowing for a comparative analysis of the magnitude of effects across different contexts. Where possible, a meta-analysis was performed to quantify the overall impact of sports participation on mental health and social integration. This quantitative synthesis provided a more precise estimate of the positive effects observed in individual studies.

Results

Mental Health Outcomes

A considerable body of literature consistently demonstrates that sports participation exerts a positive impact on the mental health of disabled athletes, contributing to improved emotional well-being and reduced psychological distress. For instance, Lindqvist et al. (2018) found that disabled veterans who regularly participated in adaptive sports experienced significant reductions in symptoms of depression and anxiety. The structured, goal-oriented nature of sports activities provided these veterans with a sense of purpose and achievement, which in turn alleviated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health challenges. This aligns with the findings of Jaarsma et al. (2016), who reported that sports participation enhances self-esteem and overall psychological well-being in individuals with physical disabilities. By engaging in physical activities, these individuals experienced an increased sense of control and autonomy over their lives, which contributed to a more positive self-perception.

Further supporting these findings, Martin Ginis et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis on the mental health benefits of sports participation among individuals with disabilities. The study concluded that engagement in sports was associated with improved mood, reduced stress levels, and enhanced resilience against mental health disorders. The analysis emphasised that sports participation helped disabled individuals build coping mechanisms for stress and adversity, which are crucial for mental health maintenance. Brittain (2021) also explored the

subjective experiences of disabled athletes through qualitative research, highlighting that participation in sports provided them with a sense of empowerment. Many participants described feeling a renewed sense of purpose and belonging as a result of their involvement in sports, which in turn fostered an improved self-concept and increased self-efficacy.

Recent studies further elucidate the mechanisms through which sports participation enhances mental health among disabled athletes. A study by Pedersen et al. (2021) examined how participation in team sports fosters a sense of community and camaraderie, which serves as a buffer against loneliness and isolation. Similarly, Anderson and Pease (2022) found that regular involvement in adapted sports programs reduced the incidence of depressive symptoms among adolescents with intellectual disabilities. The authors attributed these benefits to the supportive social networks and structured environments provided by sports programs, which helped mitigate the social and emotional challenges commonly faced by individuals with disabilities.

Social Integration

The literature reveals that sports participation plays a pivotal role in facilitating social integration among people with disabilities. Through engagement in sports, individuals with disabilities are provided with opportunities to socialise, form friendships, and become active members of their communities. Smith et al. (2019) reported that disabled athletes who participated in team sports expressed a heightened sense of social connectedness compared to those involved in individual sports. The team-based environment fosters mutual support, collaboration, and collective identity, all of which contribute to stronger social bonds and a more robust sense of community. This finding is corroborated by Wong et al. (2020), who emphasised that team sports facilitate social inclusion by providing a shared space where disabled individuals can interact with both peers and able-bodied athletes.

The inclusive nature of sports settings enables athletes with disabilities to develop essential social skills, which are transferable to other areas of life. Martin (2020) noted that sports participation helped individuals with disabilities build communication and teamwork skills, which facilitated their social integration beyond the sports environment. The research highlighted that sports participation provided disabled individuals with opportunities to engage with others in a non-competitive, supportive setting, which helped to challenge societal perceptions of disability. Shapiro et al. (2018) investigated the impact of integrated sports programs, in which able-bodied athletes and athletes with disabilities participate together. Their study found that able-bodied athletes who interacted with peers with disabilities developed more positive attitudes towards disability, which contributed to a more inclusive sports culture.

Moreover, sports participation has been shown to reduce the stigma associated with disability by showcasing the abilities and strengths of disabled individuals. A study by Laferriere et al. (2021) emphasised that sports competitions featuring disabled athletes serve as a platform for raising public awareness about disability, challenging stereotypes, and fostering societal acceptance. In the context of adapted sports, Reinders et al. (2022) found that both spectators and participants reported a heightened sense of empathy and understanding towards individuals with disabilities, which contributed to a more inclusive community.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite the numerous benefits associated with sports participation, disabled athletes often encounter various barriers that limit their access to sports programs and hinder their ability to

fully experience these benefits. One of the primary challenges identified across multiple studies is the lack of accessible facilities and adapted sports equipment. Silva and Howe (2021) highlighted that the limited availability of adapted sports infrastructure restricts the participation of individuals with disabilities, particularly in rural areas where resources are scarce. This lack of accessibility not only limits opportunities for physical activity but also exacerbates feelings of exclusion and isolation. Societal stigma and misconceptions about disability further compound these challenges. For instance, Henley and French (2022) found that disabled individuals often face negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviours from able-bodied individuals, which deter them from participating in sports. The study emphasised the need for public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives to combat these stigmas and promote a more inclusive sports environment.

Financial constraints also pose a significant barrier to sports participation for disabled athletes. The costs associated with specialised equipment, training, and travel can be prohibitive, particularly for those who require adaptive sports programs. According to a report by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC, 2021), many disabled individuals are unable to afford the expenses associated with sports participation, which limits their access to the mental health and social integration benefits of sports. The report underscores the importance of government and organisational support to provide subsidies, grants, and funding for adaptive sports programs.

Discussion

This systematic review underscores the substantial positive impact of sports participation on the mental health and social integration of disabled athletes. The benefits of sports for disabled individuals are consistent with those of the general population, but they are particularly significant due to the unique challenges faced by disabled individuals. The mental health benefits, such as reduced anxiety and depression and improved self-esteem, align with findings from general physical activity research (Warburton & Bredin, 2017). However, sports participation offers additional advantages by providing disabled individuals with a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging. Social integration through sports is equally transformative, as it enables individuals with disabilities to forge social connections, reduce isolation, and challenge societal stereotypes. The inclusive environment of sports not only fosters interpersonal relationships but also promotes acceptance and understanding of disability among able-bodied individuals. These findings align with the social model of disability, which emphasises that disability is largely a product of societal barriers rather than individual impairments (Oliver, 1996). By participating in sports, disabled athletes demonstrate their capabilities, thereby challenging these barriers and fostering a more inclusive society.

However, there are gaps in the literature that future research should address to enhance our understanding of the impact of sports on individuals with disabilities. One notable gap is the limited exploration of how different types of sports (e.g., individual vs. team sports, competitive vs. recreational) differentially impact mental health and social outcomes. While team sports are generally associated with greater social integration, individual sports may offer unique mental health benefits by allowing athletes to focus on personal goals and achievements. Further research is needed to explore these nuances and determine which types of sports are most beneficial for different populations of athletes with disabilities. Additionally, most of the studies reviewed are cross-sectional, limiting the ability to draw conclusions about the long-term effects of sports participation on mental health and social integration.

Longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into how sustained participation in sports influences well-being over time. Furthermore, there is a need for more research on underrepresented groups within the disabled community, such as individuals with intellectual disabilities, to ensure that the findings are generalizable across diverse populations.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this review have significant implications for the development of inclusive sports programs and policies that promote mental health and social integration for individuals with disabilities. Policymakers, sports organisations, and community stakeholders should prioritise the establishment of accessible sports facilities and the provision of adaptive equipment to ensure that individuals with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in sports. Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives should be implemented to combat societal stigma and promote inclusivity within sports environments. Financial support is also essential to making sports participation more accessible to individuals with disabilities. Government agencies, non-profit organizations, and corporate sponsors should consider providing grants, subsidies, and funding for adaptive sports programs. By reducing financial barriers, these stakeholders can help individuals with disabilities access the mental health and social benefits of sports, ultimately contributing to their overall quality of life.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review provides strong evidence that sports participation significantly enhances the mental health and social integration of athletes with disabilities. Through engagement in sports, disabled individuals experience reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, improved self-esteem, and a greater sense of social connectedness. Sports provide a unique platform for individuals with disabilities to challenge societal stereotypes, promote inclusivity, and establish supportive social networks. However, there are challenges and barriers that limit access to these benefits, including issues of accessibility, stigma, and financial constraints. Future research should aim to address these barriers and investigate the long-term effects of sports participation on individuals with disabilities. Additionally, more research is needed on the impact of different types of sports and the experiences of underrepresented groups within the disabled community. By addressing these gaps, researchers and practitioners can further our understanding of how sports can be leveraged as a tool for promoting well-being and social inclusion among people with disabilities.

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