



Review

The Influence of Role Models on the Engagement of People with Disabilities in Sport: A Scoping Review

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Abstract: Role models can motivate and promote engagement in activities of interest. This study sought to investigate how para-athletes can serve as role models for people with disabilities. Twenty-one studies were included in a scoping review to examine existing evidence relating to role models within parasport. A thematic analysis of available evidence identified five key themes. *Persons identified as role models* showed para-athletes, coaching staff with disabilities and other people (e.g. family members) were cited as potential role models to people with disabilities. *Para-athlete role models as inspirational* showed that role models could be important for entry into and maintained engagement in sport. *Role models as social support* associated with the theory of social learning (emotional, and structural support). *Being a role model* examines the desire of para-athletes to motivate and promote adapted sport. Finally, *the impact of the 'Supercrip' narrative* is examined in relation to parasport role models. We conclude that para-athletes may be highly relevant role models for people with disabilities and may encourage engagement in sport.

Keywords: motivation; inspiration; disability; parasport; Paralympic Games

Introduction

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory argues that people have the capacity for observational learning (Bandura, 1986, 1999). In other words, people can learn new behaviours and knowledge vicariously by observing the actions and consequences of others (modelling). The process of observing and then enacting behaviours is reliant on reinforcement effects from such behaviours, observing a person benefit or otherwise from a specific behaviour will determine the likelihood of that behaviour being enacted by the observer (Bandura, 1999). Bandura discusses this in relation to the concept of self-efficacy - a persons' belief in their own capabilities to achieve a desired goal. A key aspect of self-efficacy is vicarious experience - observing other people succeed and believing one might also succeed in the same action. According to Guan and So (2016), self-efficacy is enhanced by the identification of the individual with their group, or with the person being observed. This identification with the group or person, is a person's sense of who they are based on their group memberships or social categories (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Thus, both social persuasion and vicarious experience, which leverage self-efficacy (Bandura, 1999), are directly related to identification with the group. These processes of social learning are fundamental to understanding why some people are able to influence the behaviour of others, and thus, might be considered as role models.

Lockwood and Kunda (1997) argue anyone who has made a remarkable achievement, who stands out in their own domain of interest, can be considered a role model and use this influence to motivate others. This is reliant on two factors: first, that the achievement of the model is attainable and not impossible; second, that the target person must feel that they belong to the same group as their role model or share something in common, otherwise referred to as self-relevance. The role model illustrates the attainments that one can hope to achieve, encourages and motivates someone to strive for this, now, more palpable success, points out specific goals to be pursued along the way and increases the individuals' self-efficacy (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

Role models are important to consider when examining engagement in sport. Mutter and Pawlowski (2014b) demonstrate that professional sportspersons can increase demand for sport and have a significant motivational effect on individuals already engaged in sport. Ronkainen, et al. (2019) confirm that sports role models can increase motivation, knowledge and awareness around sport. However, it has been indicated that the availability and relevance of the role models to the observer, as well as their similarity to the role models are important predictors of the motivational effect (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014b). This is well versed within the psychological literature (Bandura, 1999; Guan & So, 2016).

Whilst research surrounding role models in sport is abundant, literature examining the impact of sports role models on people with disabilities is less prevalent (Coates & Vickerman, 2016). This is an important area of study for two reasons. First, research has shown that people with disabilities experience significant social barriers to access and engage with sport and physical activity (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Second, availability of potential sports role models for people with disabilities is increasing, particularly given the recent shift in media agencies providing extensive coverage of the Paralympic Games (Rees et al., 2019).

Social inclusion of people with disabilities

The social inclusion of people with disabilities demands social changes at different levels, derived from particular socio-cultural conformations in addition to the actions of the people with disabilities themselves (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Winnick & Porretta, 2017). This process also takes place through empowerment actions to provide opportunities for social participation (Pensgaard & Sørensen, 2002). The effectiveness of this process is closely associated with changes in paradigms, stereotypes and prejudices (Goffman, 1964), which is achieved through formal education, alongside realistic and non-sensationalist media dissemination. Socio-cultural phenomena such as sport have been shown to be effective in modifying or reinforcing moral values (Purdue & Howe, 2012).

The Paralympic Games are the largest global sporting event for athletes with disabilities and play an important role in the social recognition of people with disabilities, legitimizing them as efficient and capable, demystifying disability and challenging notions of fragility and passivity (Brittain, 2016). Sport provides the para-athlete with the role of protagonists in a show with considerable potential for social impact (Pullen et al., 2019). The athlete (Paralympic or Olympic) can become a multiplier of great achievements, promoter of health and well-being and, inevitably, an ideal to be followed (Purdue & Howe, 2012). For instance, British children with disabilities, who were interviewed after the 2012 Paralympic Games, reported they recognized para-athletes as successful people with potential to inspire (Coates & Vickerman, 2016). Thus, the Paralympic Games has the potential to promote role models, with potential to motivate future generations of athletes with disabilities (Coates & Vickerman, 2016).

Literature suggests that adolescents of both genders usually choose well-known, professional male athletes as role models (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008; Bricheno &

Thornton, 2007; May, 2009). They cite the performance, results, skills and talent of such athletes as reasons (Bromnick & Swallow, 1999; Fleming et al., 2005). However, literature also shows that the behaviours of these sportspersons outside of the sports arena – such as being a good citizen, being hardworking, ethical and having a positive outlook - contribute to their motivational effect (Guest & Cox, 2009; May, 2009; Ronkainen et al., 2019).

Sports role models have been shown to influence and contribute to an increase in memberships in associations, clubs and in sports teams (Frawley & Cush, 2011; Frick & Wicker, 2016); increase engagement in amateur soccer (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014a); promote participation in training sessions and competitions for amateur athletes (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014b).

Therefore, there is reasonable evidence that professional athletes act as role models and positively influence the entry and engagement in sports from people without disabilities. However, little is known the impact of role models on the sport uptake of people with disabilities. The aim of this scoping review is to investigate how role models may influence people with disabilities' engagement in sport.

Materials and Methods

A scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018) was undertaken to identify and collate findings from relevant existing research relating to role models for people with disabilities in sport. The results are reported in accordance with Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) extension for scoping review (Tricco et al., 2018).

Eligibility criteria

We adopted the following definitions to the terms “people with disabilities”, “role models”, and “sport”. ‘People with disabilities’ refer to those with impairments, activity limitations and/or participation restrictions in relation to daily functioning (WHO, 2001). ‘Role model’ refers to a person who serves as an example to be followed or imitated. This can be categorized into positive and negative, in which the first illustrates a desired ideal, while the second, something to be avoided, a warning of error and defeat (Lockwood et al., 2002). Sport is defined as an activity guided by rules, of a competitive and institutionalized character, which involves intense physical effort and complex motor skills (Suits, 2018). Specifically, ‘adapted sports’ refers to activities designed for or practiced by athletes with disabilities (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). Paralympic sports are the sports played at the Winter and Summer Paralympic Games, organized by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Only studies published in English, as original articles in peer-reviewed publications were included in this review (Bondas & Hall, 2007). Studies had to address the triad of subjects: role model, sports, and people with disabilities, to include people with physical, intellectual, hearing and/or visual impairment.

Search sources

We searched the following databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Pubmed, with no date limit. Additional records were added after manual finds. The keywords used in the search were: role model, inspiration, hero, motivation, exercise, sport, physical activity, sports for people with disabilities, disabled persons, para-athlete, paralympic, disabled, and handicap (the key search terms were altered to reflect each database; see supplementary material 1 for full list of search terms). Additionally, relevant studies of interest found in the

references section of the included articles were extracted for screening. The final search was conducted in December 2023.

Screening strategy

Search and data extraction forms were created and were pilot tested by the first and fourth author and refined before each selection phase in order to ensure consistent screening. Screening phases comprised, first, searching relevant titles, following, the abstracts and then, the full manuscripts. The two authors independently examined the studies for eligibility, and disagreements on inclusion were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Selection of studies

The initial literature search generated 2,534 citations, involving sports for people with disabilities (physical, intellectual, hearing and/or visual) and role models. After duplicates were removed, a total of 1,492 potential articles were identified for further analysis.

After reading the titles and abstracts, 112 publications were selected for full-text reading. Of those 91 articles were excluded through absence of role modelling, insufficient details about role modelling, no full text found and language other than English. Finally, a total of 21 studies were included in this review (see supplementary material 2 for list of included studies).

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Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart for study inclusion.

Once screening was completed, data was extracted from the included studies by the first author, using a data extraction form. Data extracted from each study related to the participants, intervention design, evaluation methods and outcomes. Data extraction was checked by the fourth author.

Results and Discussion

Through thematic analysis of the findings from the included studies, regarding how role models may influence the involvement of people with disabilities in sports, five key themes were identified. These were: persons identified as role models, inspiration, social support, being a role model, and negative criticism of parasport role models.

Persons identified as role models

Our scoping review showed that athletes with disabilities were the most cited role models (Berger, 2008; Cardoso et al., 2020; Coates & Vickerman, 2016; Kavanagh, 2012; Kerstin et al., 2006; Kirakosyan, 2021; Krops et al., 2019; Larocca et al., 2020; Levins et al., 2004; Qi et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2020; Ruddell & Shinew, 2006; Sales & Misener, 2021; Souza & Brittain, 2022; Wadey & Day, 2018). Coaching staff with disabilities (Anderson et al., 2008) and other people, such as family members (Anderson et al., 2008; Li et al., 2006; McLoughlin et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2020; Sollerhed & Hedov, 2021) were also mentioned as role models.

This aligns with the literature which indicates role model selection is based upon the relatability of the model to the individual, and that frequently athletes are selected as role models (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014b, 2014a). Professional athletes can be classified as distant role models (Gibson, 2003, 2004) or symbolic (Bandura, 1986), which means that there is no direct interaction with the individuals they influence. This characteristic differentiates them from social support agents (e.g. family members) (D'Eloia & Sibthorp, 2014), and from mentors. Professional athletes, in general, can be role models as long as they have visibility, are present in the media or at events, and exercise some positive influence on the observers (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014b, 2014a). Such an influence perceived by the observer is based on their ability to replicate the model's behaviour (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

While professional athletes without disabilities regularly act as role models for people without disabilities, the same rarely happens for those with disabilities and it could be explained by the fact that, although increasing, there is still scarce positive exposure of para-athletes within the media (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014b, 2014a) (this is explored further in the final theme). Although there has been an increase in athletic representation in the past 30 years, the media still portrays Paralympic athletes as poor victims of their disabilities or as 'supercrips' (Maika, 2014). When the representation of the Paralympic athlete is focused on their sport achievements and not on their disability, it can shift the balance, creating a positive impact on spectators with disabilities perceptions, both on those already physically active but also on those who are not (Purdue & Howe, 2012).

However, critical analysis of media portrayal of the Paralympic Games in the United Kingdom has suggested that narratives surrounding the portrayal of para-athletes as 'super' only serves to distance and disconnect athletes from the lives and perceived lives, of many (non-athlete) people with disabilities (Silva & Howe, 2012). Thus, the way in which the media represent athletes with disabilities will influence the potential for para-athletes to be perceived as role models. Accordingly, most participants of the included studies in this review who reported to have athletes with disabilities as role models, had regular and direct contact with them (Anderson et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 2020; Ruddell & Shiness, 2006). Thus, in the case of adapted sports, the item "visibility in the media" proposed by Mutter and Pawlowski (2014b, 2014a) contradicts the fact that the media represents disability as a challenge to be overcome.

Members of coaching staff who have a disability were also cited as role models (Anderson et al., 2008). These people are coaches to the person with disability and share the same impairments as their observers, an important factor for them to exercise this role (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014b, 2014a). Coaching staff as role models did not influence the entry of participants in the sport, but they were important facilitators of engagement for those who already participated (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014a). Similarly, family members (Anderson et al., 2008) and other people from the community (Ruddell & Shiness, 2006) may have an inspirational and supporting role for people with disabilities to practice a sport. Indeed, Forber-Pratt (2012) argues that the "the role model him or herself must have some desire to be a role model, or to be invested in inspiring others." (p. 213). Her suggestion is that anyone who wants to improve the outlook of others can be a model of inspiration.

Para-athlete role models as 'inspirational'

Inspiration was addressed by 16 of the 21 studies (Berger, 2008; Cardoso et al., 2020; Coates & Vickerman, 2016; Kavanagh, 2012; Kerstin et al., 2006; Kirakosyan, 2021; Krops et al., 2019; Larocca et al., 2020; Levins et al., 2004; Qi et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2020; Ruddell & Shiness, 2006; Sales & Misener, 2021; Souza & Brittain, 2022; Wadey & Day,

2018; Wynnyk & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2013). Inspiration here was characterized as guiding someone towards something that is better, to see better possibilities and also involves motivation to express or manifest what was recently seen (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, 2004). In their study, Berger (2008) states that study participants were exposed to role models at a young age, who inspired them to excel at several aspects of life. Coates and Vickerman (2016), asked children with disabilities about their impressions on the accomplishments of Paralympic athletes and collected statements such as: “they’re very inspirational, just how they don’t let anything stop them” (p. 346) and “I like to watch what the athletes are doing because it gives me an idea of what I can do, what I’d want to do.” (p. 347). Similarly, children with physical disabilities identified with para-athletes and felt motivated after workshops on the Paralympic Games: “They really inspired me. I really hope I can do it like them. Though I knew it’s a dream for me, I will try to practice when given the chance” (Qi et al., 2021, p. 7). Early exposure to relevant individuals who act as role models can also be a source of inspiration. For example, one of Levins et al’s (2004, p. 504) participants says, “I was exposed to [...] some athletes who had come in to do some demonstrations, and it... had sort of opened my eyes a fair bit to the possibilities”. This demonstrates how access to and visibility of relevant individuals might highlight potential for future engagement in sport. Building on this topic it is worth noting that:

The opportunity to see someone with a similar disability manage a physical activity that previously was thought impossible provides concrete proof and a conception of the possibilities. It promotes attitudes such as ‘if s/he can, so can I’. This attitude conveys hope that it is indeed possible to live a good life despite a spinal cord injury. (Kerstin et al., 2006, p. 484)

Role models proved to be important for the entry and permanence of people with disabilities in a sport, at the most diverse levels, inspiring a number of successful future para-athletes. For instance, Kavanagh (2012) discusses the British wheelchair tennis athlete, Lucy Shuker, medalist at the Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro 2016 and London 2012, who says: “When I was in hospital [after spinal cord injury] I met someone who played tennis so I was like, I’ll give it a go” (Kavanagh, 2012, p. 72). Another example of success is Forber-Pratt (2012), a researcher and former wheelchair racing athlete, 2011 world champion in the 200 meters and owner of two bronze medals at the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games. She reports the athlete Jean Driscoll, who won the Boston Marathon women's wheelchair division eight times, inspired her to become a wheelchair runner and to develop her own dreams. Thus, we can see that the presence of a role model in the trajectory of athletes with disabilities may have contributed to leverage their careers in sport.

Although disabled athletes were represented as inspirational role models within the reviewed literature, we acknowledge the problematic nature of this, whereby the representation of disabled, and specifically para-athletes, has been referred to as ‘inspiration porn’ (Grue, 2016). This term refers to the “representation of disability as a desirable but undesired characteristic, usually by showing impairment as a visually or symbolically distinct biophysical deficit in one person, a deficit that can and must be overcome through the display of physical prowess” (Grue, 2016, p. 847). This issue is addressed more within our final theme, the impact of the ‘Supercrip’ narrative.

Role models as social support

Among the selected studies, eight of them explored the concept of role models as social support (Anderson et al., 2008; D’Eloia & Sibthorp, 2014; Li et al., 2006; McLoughlin et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2020; Ruddell & Shinew, 2006; Sales & Misener, 2021; Sollerhed & Hedov, 2021). Social support is an important part of the process of socialization into sports (Spreitzer & Snyder, 1976), which is attached to learning process through acquisition of

attitudes and behaviours (Bandura & Kupers, 1964; Dorsch et al., 2021; Kenyon & McPherson, 1974). The socialization agents offer a variety of stimuli and reinforcements, such as welfare resources, emotional support and assistance (Heaney & Israel, 2002; Rosenfeld et al., 1989; Scarapicchia et al., 2017; Shumaker & Brownell, 1984).

Based on Bandura's social cognitive theory, role models have been deemed to be someone who can share identity and experience (D'Eloia & Sibthorp, 2014). This theory states that the learning process is most efficient when it occurs in the presence of other people with similar characteristics to be observed and imitated. Therefore, young people with disabilities could be role models for other young people with disabilities, not only in sports, but also in their acceptance process, sense of belonging and in learning new skills (D'Eloia & Sibthorp, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2011).

Socialization agents, or social supports, are sometimes viewed as role models. Anderson et al. (2008) found family members to be a source of inspiration. For example, one participant states "because she (sister) has always been there supporting me and my grandmother because she always cheers me on and makes me feel like she's just proud of me" (p. 194). While these family members do not have a disability, they share relevance with the participant through their shared histories and lives (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Or the opposite: the athlete with disability wants to be a role model for their family (Roberts et al., 2020). According to these authors inspiration comes from a desire to achieve personal or individual success, however, this is often not associated with family role models. Rather, where family are perceived to instil self-enhancement, this is through a process of self-reflection and a desire to achieve the expectations associated with group (family) identity and expectations. Active parents and siblings can help their children to engage in physical activities. Their behaviour motivates and conveys the value of physical activity and an active lifestyle (Sollerhed & Hedov, 2021).

Ruddell and Shinew (2006) also deal with social support in their study with women with physical disabilities and present social support agents as inspirational role models: "This lady was an aerobics instructor, she was in a wheelchair, she had a lower disability but she would come to the hospital and we would do aerobics. She to this day is probably my role model, I loved everything about her, I wanted to be her" (p. 432). The authors point out that social agents have the role of introducing people with disabilities to adapted sports:

Janna also described other athletes with disabilities as being extremely important. An athlete recruited her while they worked for the same organization. In the 1996 Paralympics she saw her co-worker and the other women on the team play wheelchair basketball. Now Janna introduces other people with disabilities into the sport. Sarah recently met two women with disabilities who never knew of the sport but were interested in starting a team. In these cases, Janna and Patty were instrumental in introducing others to wheelchair basketball... She believes that if athletes spread out and try to be better role models for people with disabilities then this may help the recruiting process. (p. 435)

Being a role model

According to the literature, to be a role model, a person must share their experiences and achievements with others (Kerstin et al., 2006; Lockwood et al., 2002; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Being a role model was addressed in five studies, in which the authors referred to those individuals who considered themselves to be a role model (Kavanagh, 2012; Kerstin et al., 2006; Roberts et al., 2020; Ruddell & Shinew, 2006; Wadey & Day, 2018).

Kavanagh (2012) tells the life story of the paralympic athlete Lucy Shuker, showing how the athlete dealt with the acquired disability and became an important figure in the adapted sport of Great Britain. The author concludes her work with:

[...] Although the life story or narrative is individual and unique there will be transferable elements from this account to those who have received a similar injury and may provide hope and inspiration to others who are living with disability or have experienced spinal cord injury. By highlighting the achievements of one athlete this narrative may help to undo the negative stereotypes around disability. In Lucy's words: 'If someone can use my story and gain benefit from it then it is worth telling'. (p. 74)

Reports like these are in line with Lockwood et al. (2002) idea of a model of inspiration, which brings personal stories that show the path to success and making a persons' achievements more tangible. Kerstin et al. (2006) emphasize the satisfaction of some of their participants in playing the role models of inspiration, sharing experiences, knowledge and attitudes with their peers. One of the participants in their study comments on his role as a model of inspiration: "[...] it feels as though you're doing an important job (as a role model), because that's how it was for me" (p. 485).

Here we begin to see the cyclic nature of role modelling: where successful individuals have previously been inspired and motivated by others, they themselves become a source of inspiration for future generations. Elliot (2007) discusses this in relation to the recruitment of people with disabilities into sport: "They wanted to use their experiences of sport to 'recruit' other Aboriginal people with disabilities into sport. They also wanted to use their 'gift' to continue the cycle and help people with disabilities become more visible" (Elliott, 2007, p. 57). From another perspective, a wheelchair basketball athlete said that she was introduced to the sport by the physiotherapist, but she believes that it would have been better if an athlete with a disability had this function (Ruddell & Shinew, 2006). The included articles indicated that some para-athletes are aware of the challenges associated with entry to sport for people with disabilities and reflect on how others inspired their own success. They were keen to use their success as a tool to motivate others to achieve their goals.

The impact of the 'Supercrip' narrative

The included articles indicated that role models associated with para-sport are often portrayed in such a way that their disability (and overcoming barriers associated with disability) overshadows their sporting prowess (Silva & Howe, 2012, p. 175). The 'supercrip' narrative refers to a stereotyped representation of people with disabilities who have successfully overcome their impairments to achieve success beyond the expectations of others with disabilities. Disabled athletes are often portrayed as superhuman, or superheroes, where much of the focus is on overcoming the odds, rather than on their sporting excellence (Duncan, 2001; Forber-Pratt, 2012; Pullen et al., 2019). In this sense, disability is portrayed as a tragedy to be overcome. This 'supercrip' narrative raises unrealistic expectations about what people with disabilities might achieve (Berger, 2008) ignoring the social, economic and political barriers which often prevent people with disabilities from accessing opportunities. It purveys a falsehood that disability can be simply overcome (Schalk, 2016; Souza & Brittain, 2022). Ableism is a set of beliefs, processes and practices that devalues or negatively differentiates people with disabilities, which does not correspond to the normative social standard of body and performance. From this point of view, disability is seen as something that should be cured or even eliminated in order to reach a socially acceptable ability norm (Campbell, 2009). Supercrip's representation reinforces that people with disabilities must overcome their disabilities and that those who succeed are hierarchically superior to those who cannot (Souza & Brittain, 2022). Edenia, a Brazilian swimming para-athlete said: "In elite Paralympic sport, we overcome the inappropriate attitudes, not our impairments" (Kirakosyan, 2021, p. 6).

Hence, we observed that there is a fine line between an honest analysis of inspiring achievements and the stereotype of the supercrip (Cottingham, 2015), but not all success stories are stereotypes (Silva & Howe, 2012). Berger (2008), in his study with wheelchair basketball athletes, showed that the athletes in the study were seen in two different ways by other people with disabilities: encouraging (role models) and discouraging. The author points out that athletes transmit an erroneous idea to people with disabilities who are not athletes, raising expectations for people with disabilities and implying that there is no need for social reforms for the inclusion of people with disabilities (supercrip).

[...] Bleile and Ripp [athletes participating in the study] said they have received more criticism from the nonathletes than the athletes, who dismissed them as supercrips or supercrip wannabes. "They didn't want to have anything to do with me," Bleile said, "because they felt like I was trying to pretend that I wasn't disabled, that I was better than them because I played sports". (p. 664)

Despite the criticism, Berger (2008) explains that the athletes interviewed were not engaged in disability rights advocacy. Rather, they preferred to be recognized for their achievements and not reduced to a stereotype (supercrip), which could delegitimize them as representatives of all people with disabilities (Souza & Brittain, 2022). In contrast to this, the Paralympic athlete Forber-Pratt (2012) states the opposite; that for them, there is a desire to be recognised as an advocate for people with disabilities rather than just an athlete:

For me it is not about being recognized solely for my athletic accomplishments, rather; it is to be recognized for my citizenship and ability to be a role model to others - from all walks of life. I have not overcome my disability; it is very much a central and core part of my identity along with being a woman, a person of color, and being an adoptee. (p. 185)

What is clear from this literature is that there is a tension in how para-sport role models are perceived, how they would like to be perceived and the purposes they fulfil for people with disabilities. During the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, the global movement WeThe15 was launched, spearheaded by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and International Disability Alliance (IDA). WeThe15's main objective is to change attitudes, create more opportunities, improve mobility and accessibility for persons with disabilities. They are already changing stigmas and criticising how people with disabilities are portrayed in the media as not being superheroes, "special" or poor people in need of healing (WeThe15). It is evident that further investigation is needed to better understand the role of para-athletes in motivating others with disabilities to engage in sport. While this scoping review aimed to explore studies from a wide range of disabilities, all of the included studies focused mostly on physical disability, only three studies with Down syndrome participants were found (Barr & Shields, 2011; Li et al., 2006; Sollerhed & Hedov, 2021). Thus, we cannot transpose these findings to groups with other impairments. Nevertheless, this study has brought together literature relating to sport role models for people with disabilities, highlighting some of the complex issues relating to the role para-athletes might play in motivating engagement in disability sport.

Conclusions

This review found that athletes with disability are the most commonly cited role model for people with a disability. This was unsurprising given the increase in media coverage of the Paralympic Games, heightening the visibility of these individuals in the public domain. The literature suggested having a sports role model who also had a disability was an important incentive for young people with disabilities to join adapted sports, as well as to increase the likelihood they would continue engaging in sport. Members of coaching staff who have disabilities were also mentioned as role models, proving to be important for the

permanence of people with disabilities who were already engaged in sport. Even so, many authors still associate the role model with a figure of social support. Support agents are important to improve self-efficacy (Bandura, 1999; Guan & So, 2016), but their role tends to facilitate group identity and self-enhancement for social rather than personal purposes, as opposed to role models, who encourage personal enhancement and success.

This study highlights the importance of a positive representation of athletes with disabilities in the media, whilst remaining mindful of supercrip and inspiration porn representations. It is fundamental that the para-athletes' achievements are not presented as impossible acts; contrarily, they must be depicted and celebrated as real achievements that can be achievable if social, economic and other barriers are addressed. Thus, media representation of disability should not be viewed as the only motivator. Instead, strategies to address the social and economic inequalities experienced by people with disabilities also need to be developed. Nevertheless, this study has demonstrated the potentially important role of para-athletes in raising desire for opportunities to engage in sport for people with disabilities as well as increasing motivation to uptake those opportunities.

Perspectives

Future research may seek to better understand the impacts of the presence of role models in the lives of people with disabilities, what qualities and traits are necessary to foster motivation and lead to more engagement in sport for people with disabilities. Further, research should investigate how media portrayal of para-sport and para-athletes impacts on perceptions toward sport, as well as any effect on real opportunity for people with disabilities to engage in sport.

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Appendix 1. Search strategy

The search strings for the each of the databases used in this scoping review are presented below:

WEB OF SCIENCE (n = 567)

#1 TI=(("role model*" OR "inspir*" OR "hero" OR "motivat*") AND ("Exercise" OR "sport*" OR "physical activit*") AND ("Sports for Persons with Disabilities" OR "Disabled Persons" OR "Para-Athletes" OR "paralymp*" OR "disab*" OR "handicap*"))

#2 AB=(("role model*" OR "inspir*" OR "hero" OR "motivat*") AND ("Exercise" OR "sport*" OR "physical activit*") AND ("Sports for Persons with Disabilities" OR "Disabled Persons" OR "Para-Athletes" OR "paralymp*" OR "disab*" OR "handicap*"))

#3 AK=(("role model*" OR "inspir*" OR "hero" OR "motivat*") AND ("Exercise" OR "sport*" OR "physical activit*") AND ("Sports for Persons with Disabilities" OR "Disabled Persons" OR "Para-Athletes" OR "paralymp*" OR "disab*" OR "handicap*"))

#4 #1 OR #2 OR #3

SCOPUS (n = 1,317)

TITLE-ABS-KEY (("role model*" OR "inspir*" OR "hero" OR "motivat*") AND ("Exercise" OR "sport*" OR "physical activit*") AND ("Sports for Persons with Disabilities" OR "Disabled Persons" OR "Para-Athletes" OR "paralymp*" OR "disab*" OR "handicap*")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar"))

PUBMED (n = 368)

(("role model*" [Title/Abstract] OR "inspir*" [Title/Abstract] OR "hero" [Title/Abstract] OR "motivat*" [Title/Abstract]) AND ("Exercise" [Title/Abstract] OR "sport*" [Title/Abstract] OR "physical activit*" [Title/Abstract]) AND ("Sports for Persons with Disabilities" [Title/Abstract] OR "Disabled Persons" [Title/Abstract] OR "Para-Athletes" [Title/Abstract] OR "paralymp*" [Title/Abstract] OR "disab*" [Title/Abstract] OR "handicap*" [Title/Abstract])) AND (english [Filter])

Appendix 2

Appendix 2. List of included studies and characteristics

Study - Country*	Purpose	Participants	Design	Outcomes
Anderson et al., 2008 - USA ²	To examine whether organized sport provides more social support mechanisms for girls with physical disabilities and what are the benefits related to social support.	Girls aged 10 to 18, with only one physical disability (n=22)	Semi-structured face-to-face interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants in organized sport experienced high and varied levels of social support: access to models, perceptions of similarity with others, benefits from activities (physical fitness and fun) and positive reactions (incentive and goal development); • Participants in non-organized sports also received some social support, often limited to their disability, not the role of an athlete.
Barr & Shields, 2011 - Australia ²	To explore the barriers and facilitators to physical activity for children with Down syndrome living in Victoria, Australia	Parents of children with Down syndrome (n=18)	In-depth interviews (by telephone or face-to-face)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study highlight the importance of supporting and educating families to encourage the participation of their child with Down syndrome in physical activity, the need to participate in an active lifestyle from an early age and the effect that common characteristics associated with Down syndrome can have on maintaining an active lifestyle. • Although many of the factors influencing a child with Down syndrome's physical activity levels are similar to children with other disabilities and those with typical development, there are also several determinants which are unique and specific to children with Down syndrome.
Berger, 2008 - USA ¹⁴	To problematize the criticism of the supercrip and defend for a more subtle view of the athlete with dedicated or competitive disability, who sees these athletes as offering empowerment experience (dominant view in disability studies) and empowering experience (subordinate view) for people with disabilities.	Elite wheelchair athletes, non-elite athletes and staff involved with the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater basketball program (n=13)	Narrative interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social fissures between elite athletes and other athletes, tensions between exclusive and inclusive aspects of sport and between separatist and integrationist strategies of the use of sport for progressive social changes and personal empowerment.

Study - Country*	Purpose	Participants	Design	Outcomes
Cardoso et al., 2020 - Brazil ¹	To describe the reasons for the entry of Paralympic athletes in high performance sport in Brazil	Paralympic athletes from Brazilian Team of Athletics and Swimming (n=20)	Face-to-face semi-structured interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The main reasons why the athletes begin in Paralympic sport are: the opportunity to practice access, the pleasure in the sports practice, inspiration in Paralympic idols, and rehabilitation.
Coates & Vickerman, 2016 - UK ¹	To explore the perceptions of children with disabilities about the Paralympic Games and adapted sports, to understand what impact this event has (if any) on attitudes related to participation in sport.	Children aged 11 to 16, with physical disabilities (n=8)	Semi-structured face-to-face interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paralympic Games were inspiring for children with disabilities, improving their self-perceptions.
D'Eloia & Sibthorp, 2014 - USA ²	To examine relationships between 5 hypothetical camping mechanisms (challenging experiences, informal social interactions, meaningful roles, learning experiences, and modeling peer roles) in environmental camping and non-camping contexts for young people with and without disabilities; test and empirically evaluate the merits of the proposed program model.	Young participants of summer camp, without disabilities and with physical disabilities; 12-17 years (n=204)	Questionnaires	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Campers with and without disabilities realized that camp was more conducive to challenging experiences, informal social interactions, meaningful roles, learning experiences and role modeling for peers than non-camp environments.
Kavanagh, 2012 - UK ¹³	To describe how the British para-athlete Lucy Shuker's personal journey to sports success after a motorcycle accident in 2001 left her paralyzed from the chest down led her to national and international success in wheelchair tennis.	UK wheelchair tennis athlete: Lucy Shuker, 30 (spinal cord injury)	Narrative interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acquiring a disability or living with a disability does not have to be a tragedy, but it can improve life and lead to positive affirmations.

Study - Country*	Purpose	Participants	Design	Outcomes
Kerstin et al., 2006 - Sweden ¹³	To identify factors that can promote participation in physical activity among people with spinal cord injury.	Physical activity program participants; 21-61 years; spinal cord injury (n=16)	Semi-structured face-to-face or telephone interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factors promoting physical activity: cognitive and behavioral strategies, environmental support solutions, motivation after injury and new references.
Kirakosyan, 2021 - USA ¹⁴	To explore para-athletes multiple identities shaped within and outside sport and how they negotiated those self-representations.	Brazilian Paralympic athletes (n=41)	Semi-structured face-to-face or telephone interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brazilian para-athletes negotiated their multiple identities in different settings and the tensions they experienced in their social interactions; • They saw themselves as actively attempting to break down barriers and stereotypes, change society's attitudes, and create opportunities for themselves and others; • Representing Brazil in Rio 2016 intensified their sense of national identity and unity with other para-athletes and the public.
Krops et al., 2019 - The Netherlands ¹	To explore the target population's ideas about a community intervention to stimulate physical activity in people with physical disabilities.	Over 18 years old, physically active, with physical disability or chronic disease that impairs movement (n=21)	Semi-structured face-to-face interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervention to stimulate physical activity in people with physical disabilities that are difficult to access must be individualized, include personal support and marketing to improve the image of physical activity for people with physical disabilities.

Study - Country*	Purpose	Participants	Design	Outcomes
Larocca et al., 2020 - Canada ¹	To examine and understand the physical activity motivational messaging needs and preferences of youth with disabilities.	Canadian youth who live with a physical disability (n=60)	Three open-ended questions survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations wishing to promote physical activity for youth with disability should consider developing motivational messages that are reliable, inclusive and accessible, eliciting feelings of happiness or hope; • Those messages should highlight success stories and emphasize that disability does not limit physical activities; • Organizations should be wary of messages that evoke feelings of sadness, jealousy and negativity, or reinforce physical limitations.
Levins et al., 2004 - Canada ¹	To provide a detailed description of the restrictions and factors that facilitate participation in physical activity, based on the perspectives and experiences of individuals with spinal cord injury.	People with spinal cord injury (paraplegia), older than 18 years, with at least 1-year post-rehabilitation, physically active or not (n=8)	Semi-structured face-to-face interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual influences: period of loss of “capable identity” and subsequent redefinition of the self, in which participation in physical activity can be a vehicle or a result; • Social influences: environmental and attitudinal barriers.
Li et al., 2006 - Hong Kong ²	To investigate the successful experiences of people with Down syndrome to provide insights into the potential of people with intellectual disabilities	Stevie Award for Outstanding Persons with Down Syndrome recipients and their parents (n=10)	Face-to-face interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The important factors that contribute to the participants’ achievements in life: positive personality of and role modeling by their parents.

Study - Country*	Purpose	Participants	Design	Outcomes
Qi et al., 2021 - China ¹	To explore the beliefs of Chinese children with physical disabilities engaging in sports and physical activity and the impact of the Paralympic Games on their beliefs.	Children with physical disabilities (n=5)	Semi-structured face-to-face interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops about the Paralympic Games and physical activity had a positive outcome on sports and physical activity engagement attitude change in children with physical disabilities; • Barriers: lack of support from family and physical education teachers, unsafe environments, and negative attitudes of peers without disabilities.
Roberts et al., 2020 - UK ¹²³	To explore the experiences of military veterans in preparation for, during, and post the 2016 Invictus Games.	UK team athletes who competed at the 2016 Invictus Games; 24-51 years (n=15)	Semi-structured face-to-face or videoconference interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sources of motivation: a range of veteran specific motives for getting involved with and continuing participation with the Invictus Games; • Team and culture stressors: attitudes and behaviors of a sports team within the context of the Invictus Games; • Impact of the games: positive and negative consequences of being involved with the Games.
Ruddell & Shinew, 2006 - USA ¹²³	Examine the socialization process of women with physical disabilities in elite wheelchair basketball.	2003 North American Women's Wheelchair Basketball Team; 20-38 years (n=11)	Semi-structured face-to-face interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple agents can be influencers in the socialization process; • Colleagues with disabilities are often considered to be important socializing agents; • Agents and agencies coexist in socializing roles; • Many of the women indicated the lack of knowledge of their social agents about sport and the ramifications that this had in their lives.
Sales & Misener, 2021 - Canada ¹²	To explore how para swimmers and parents of para swimmers reflect on their or their child's sport development experiences, especially the barriers, constraints, and/or challenges.	Current or former competitive para swimmer (physical disability) and parent of a current or former competitive para swimmer (n=12)	Semi-structured face-to-face or telephone interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of knowledgeable instructors and one-on-one or individualized instruction was most appropriate for people with disabilities; • Classification is a key point in athlete development, but is also ripe with power imbalances and mystery for the participants; • The opportunity to train, compete, and connect with other para-athletes help enhance the development experience.

Study - Country*	Purpose	Participants	Design	Outcomes
Sollerhed & Hedov, 2021 - Sweden ²	To investigate physical activity patterns in children and adolescents with Down syndrome, as well as their parents' and siblings' physical activity patterns.	Families with children with Down syndrome (n=310)	Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physically active parents have active children.
Souza & Brittain, 2022 - Brazil ¹⁴	To explore the perceptions of disability rights activists and people in Paralympic sport managerial positions about the legacies of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games.	Disability rights activists and people in Paralympic sport managerial positions; with or without disabilities (n=24)	Semi-structured face-to-face interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paralympic Games are inspiring for people with and without disabilities; • The hero narrative can be problematic but some participants argued that the same happens with athletes without disabilities and it can have some positive potential.
Wadey & Day, 2018 - UK ¹³⁴	To examine the barriers, facilitators and benefits of leisure time physical activity among people with an amputation in England	People with lower limb amputations and who participate in various types of sports, exercise and hobbies (n=22).	Focus groups, observations and informal-unstructured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Themes identified: personal wellbeing, social wellbeing, physical wellbeing, inspiration, self-presentation, experience of LTPA, knowledge of LTPA, environment, organisational functioning, and miscellaneous; • Building stronger liaisons between sectors would help patients with an amputation experience a smoother transition from hospital-based to community-based leisure time physical activity; • This transition is often currently impeded by a community that is underdeveloped to support leisure time physical activity, including inappropriate sport and fitness equipment for people with a disability.

Study - Country*	Purpose	Participants	Design	Outcomes
Wynnyk & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2013 - Canada ¹	To contribute to the knowledge base of children's specialized sport experiences for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of how these settings can contribute to meaningful sport and physical activity experiences for children with disabilities	Children from a junior competitive sledge hockey team, who have physical disability or multiple developmental delays affecting cognitive or autism (n=10)	Instrumental case study: observations and field notes; semi-structured interviews, photographs, and reflective notes; document analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Themes identified: coach feedback, parental involvement, skill and belonging, and (dis)ability sport; • Interactions with significant others contributed extensively to the participant's perceptions of competence and motivation to participate, as did the sport's competitive nature.

*Country of the first author's affiliated institution; 1 Inspiration; 2 Social support; 3 Being a role model; 4 Negative criticism



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