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Determinants of Participation and Support Mechanisms in a Paralympic Sport Training Program: Evidence from the IDRD Program in Bogotá

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Abstract (395 words)

Background: While Paralympic sport programs are increasingly recognized for their contribution to the well-being and social inclusion of people with disabilities, less attention has been given to the factors that facilitate or constrain athletes' participation within these programs. Understanding how individual motivation, support systems, and structural barriers influence engagement in sport programs is particularly relevant in under-researched contexts such as Latin America. This study aims to: a) describe the socio-demographic and sport participation profiles of athletes involved in a Paralympic sport training program in Bogotá, Colombia; b) examine the role of support systems—such as coaches, family members, and teammates—in shaping athletes' engagement in the program; and c) identify key motivations and barriers influencing sustained participation in Paralympic sport. **Methods:** A quantitative research design was used to collect data from athletes participating in the Paralympic sport training program implemented by the Instituto Distrital de Recreación y Deporte (IDRD) in Bogotá, Colombia. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire examining athletes' demographic characteristics, sport participation history, sources of support, motivations for engagement in sport, and perceived barriers to participation. Descriptive and exploratory analyses were conducted to examine patterns of participation and program-related factors. **Results:** Results indicate that athletes' engagement in the program is strongly supported by multiple social actors, particularly coaches, family members, and teammates. Coaching support emerged as a key enabling factor, with athletes reporting that encouragement and confidence expressed by coaches played an important role in sustaining their motivation. Family support also contributed significantly to continued participation. Athletes reported motivations related to improving physical well-being, enhancing appearance, and achieving sports performance goals such as winning medals. Financial constraints were identified as the primary barrier affecting participation in sport. The predominance of men among participants also suggests that access to para sport may be shaped by intersecting forms of inequality, particularly those related to gender and disability. **Conclusion:** The findings highlight the importance of supportive environments and institutional resources in facilitating sustained participation in Paralympic sport programs. Beyond individual motivation, the presence of strong social support networks and accessible program structures appear critical to athlete engagement. These results underscore the need for policies and sport programs that address not only motivational and structural factors, but also intersecting forms of inequality, particularly those

related to gender and disability, in order to expand equitable participation opportunities for people with disabilities in Colombia and similar contexts.

1. Introduction

1.1 Context of the study

An estimated 16% of the global population lives with some form of disability, representing more than 1.3 billion people worldwide (World Health Organization, 2026). This portrait underscores the urgent need to implement concrete actions that ensure the full inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in all spheres of society. Despite notable progress over recent decades, substantial disparities persist between individuals with and without disabilities in terms of social participation, access to opportunities, and quality of life (Aitchison et al., 2020; Hassett et al., 2024; Thomson et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2026). As highlighted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), “persons with disabilities continue to face barriers that prevent them from participating in social life on an equal basis with others, and their fundamental rights continue to be violated in all regions of the world” (p. 2) (UN General Assembly, 2006). In response, the CRPD explicitly calls upon States Parties to adopt appropriate measures enabling people with disabilities to participate, on an equal basis with others, in recreational, leisure, and sporting activities (p. 22) (UN General Assembly, 2006).

Adapted sport initially emerged within rehabilitation contexts, where physical activity was used as a therapeutic tool, particularly for individuals with spinal cord injuries (Burkett, 2013; Silver, 2018). Over time, competitive sport became an extension of these rehabilitation programs, gradually moving beyond medical settings into more formalized and competitive sporting environments (Bailey, 2008; Legg & Steadward, 2013; Mccann, 1996). In particular, Paralympic sport was initially developed under the leadership of health organizations and organizations of people with disabilities, rather than traditional sport institutions. As such, the Paralympic Movement was deeply rooted in a rights-based approach, advocating for inclusion, equity, and equal sporting opportunities for individuals with disabilities (Blauwet & Willick, 2012; Legg & Steadward, 2013).

Through close collaboration with the Olympic Movement, Paralympic sport progressively adopted similar training structures, competition formats, and performance standards. Today, the Paralympic Games stand as the second-largest multi-sport event in the world (Brittain, 2014; Brittain, 2016; Schantz & Gilbert, 2012). Participation has increased dramatically, from only 16 athletes at the inaugural Stoke Mandeville Games in 1948, then to 400 in the first Paralympic Games in Rome in 1960, to more than 4,000 athletes competing at the Paris 2024 Paralympic

Games (4,433 competitors (2,463 men and 1,970 women)), reflecting both the growth and institutionalization of Paralympic sport on a global scale¹.

Paralympic athletes who reach elite levels of performance—whether by winning medals or qualifying for finals at world championships or the Paralympic Games—deserve recognition not only for their athletic talent, discipline, and rigorous training, comparable to their Olympic counterparts, but also for overcoming persistent cultural, social, and structural barriers (Hästbacka et al., 2016; Mckenzie et al., 2021). These barriers often extend well beyond the sporting arena and can negatively influence both athletic development and broader social participation (Ascondo et al., 2023; Declerck et al., 2021). Indeed, qualifying for and competing in the Paralympic Games requires navigating a particularly challenging pathway, marked by limited resources, unequal access to training opportunities, and societal attitudes that continue to marginalize people with disabilities (Ballas et al., 2022; Ginis et al., 2021; Hästbacka et al., 2016).

In this context, an intersectional perspective is also valuable for understanding how barriers to disability sport may differ among athletes (Richard et al., 2023). Intersectionality describes how multiple social identities and structures of inequality, including gender, disability, class, race, and sexuality, overlap and interact to produce different experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and privilege (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Davis, 2008). Research on the intersection of gender and disability shows that disabled women can experience overlapping forms of discrimination that are not reducible to either gender or disability alone (Davaki et al., 2013). Research in sport suggests that sporting spaces may reproduce gendered, ableist, and heteronormative norms, which can affect who gains access to training, recognition, and competitive opportunities (Richard et al., 2023). Therefore, examining Paralympic pathways requires attention not only to structural and material barriers, but also to the ways in which disability intersects with gender and other social inequalities to shape participation and advancement in sport (Davaki et al., 2013; Richard et al., 2023).

1.2 Relevance of the study in LAC

Globally, participation in physical activity and sport remains unevenly distributed among persons with disabilities, reflecting broader structural inequalities related to health, education, and social inclusion. In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the prevalence of disability is comparable to global estimates, with approximately 14.7% of the population—around 85 million

¹ <https://www.paralympic.org/paris-2024/results>

people—living with some form of disability (World Bank, 2021). Despite this substantial proportion, access to organized physical activity and sport remains limited for many individuals with disabilities across the region, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts (World Bank, 2021).

Socioeconomic vulnerability further compounds these inequalities. Evidence from the World Bank indicates that households including persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected by poverty, with nearly seven out of ten such households considered at risk of falling into poverty (World Bank, 2021). These socioeconomic constraints directly influence access to sport and physical activity by limiting opportunities related to transportation, equipment, specialized coaching, and access to facilities designed or adapted for this population that provide safe sport environments. As a result, sport participation for people with disabilities in LAC often depends on targeted public policies and institutional support rather than on individual or family resources alone.

Recent outcomes from the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games illustrate notable disparities in the level of elite sport development within the LAC region. Brazil emerged as a global leader, finishing fifth in the overall medal rankings, followed by Colombia (19th), Cuba (24th), and Mexico (30th). Other countries, including Argentina (34th), Ecuador (47th), Costa Rica (49th), Chile (60th), and Peru (65th), ranked further down the standings². These results highlight considerable variation in the capacity of national systems to support high-performance Paralympic athletes.

While competitive results should not be interpreted as the only direct or comprehensive indicator of progress in physical activity and sport participation among persons with disabilities, they nonetheless provide insight into the broader level of institutional investment, infrastructure, and policy development within a given country. In this sense, Paralympic performance can be understood as one visible outcome of the social, economic, and organizational conditions that shape opportunities for persons with disabilities to engage in sport. Therefore, examining national and local sport programs remains essential to understanding how sport can contribute to inclusion, well-being, and quality of life in diverse social contexts, such as Colombia. Thus, intersectionality as mentioned previously is also another layer to consider regarding the context of LAC (Richard et al., 2023).

² <https://www.paralympic.org/paris-2024/results>

1.3 National and local context of the IDRDR program

Over the past several decades, Colombia has progressively developed a policy framework aimed at promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities through physical activity, sport, and recreation. The Ministry of Sport—formerly Coldeportes—has played a central role in integrating Paralympic sport into the national sport system, not only as a high-performance pathway but also as a mechanism for social inclusion³.

A key component of Colombia’s disability sport policy is the principle of equity between the Olympic and Paralympic sectors according to which incentives for athletes with disabilities must be equivalent to those provided to Olympic athletes at local and national levels. This includes access to supported athletic programs, incentives for medallists at national and international competitions, and long-term support for athletes identified as future leaders in sport for people with disabilities. This policy orientation reflects a rights-based approach that seeks to reduce structural inequalities within the national sport system.

Within this institutional framework, Paralympic sport in Colombia has experienced significant development over the past two decades. Initially driven by organizations representing people with disabilities, leadership has progressively expanded to include a broader range of sports entities associated with the Paralympic Movement. These include integrated Olympic federations, Paralympic sport federations, the Colombian Paralympic Committee, and specialized sport organizations for people with disabilities. A major milestone in this development was the organization of the first Para National Games in 2004, held alongside the 17th National Games. Since then, the Para National Games have been conducted every four years in parallel with the National Games, following the international Paralympic model. This event, which brings together athletes from Colombia’s political and administrative regions, has played a crucial role in strengthening the national Paralympic sport structure.

At the local level, there is an institution responsible for recreation and sport - *District Institute of Recreation and Sport* (Instituto Distrital de Recreación y Deporte; IDRDR) - which acts as the political, legal, methodological, and strategic authority guiding sport development in the city. Within this framework, Paralympic sport is identified as a core component of the institution’s

³ Political Constitution of Colombia, 1991; Law 1618, 2013. Available here: <https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=52081>

mission. The local sport organization has established a comprehensive system of support and incentives designed to ensure adequate conditions for athlete development across multiple stages of performance, from entry-level participation to high-performance sport.

Support is structured according to performance level and participation in national and international events and includes access to sport facilities, qualified coaches, multidisciplinary support teams, competition-related assistance, and financial incentives. In addition, there is a psychosocial support component aimed at addressing the specific needs of athletes facing social vulnerability, particularly those living in contexts of economic deprivation or social risk. Ultimately, this program combines athletic performance goals with broader goals of social inclusion and well-being.

1.4 Research objectives

This study pursues three complementary objectives:

1. To describe the socio-demographic, disability-related, and sport participation profiles of athletes involved in the IDR D Paralympic sport training program;
2. To examine the role of support systems in shaping athletes' engagement in the sport program;
3. To identify barriers and enabling factors affecting sustained participation in Paralympic sport.

2. Methods

2.1 Design and procedure

A quantitative method was designed for this project. Data was collected through an online survey with *Lime Survey*, which took about 20 minutes to complete. Participants provided consent before completing the survey and completed it mostly on their cellphones between October 2024 and June 2025. Completion was realized in collaboration with coaches of the different parasport teams in order to select an adequate spot to explain the project to the athletes, let them participate if they so wished, without interfering with training sessions.

2.2 Participants

The 105 participants⁴, Colombian athletes with disabilities, were aged between 14 and 59 years old. They all trained and competed in the Paralympic sector of the local sport organization (IDRD) in Bogotá, in different para-athletic disciplines. Subjects in the study participated on a voluntary basis, and they were recruited by those responsible for the organization (e.g., administrators, coaches, peers). Before the completion session, participants received an invitation letter by email or in person, describing the project. To be included in the study, participants were required to be registered in a specific sport training group run by the local sport organization (IDRD focused on performance and competition and led by a professional coach who was, in turn, supervised by experts in sport training methodology). Subjects in the study participated on a voluntary basis, and they were invited to participate through administrators, coaches, or fellow athletes.

2.3 Measures

The self-administered questionnaire in Spanish was specifically developed for the purpose of this study. Questions were developed by the research team (SR, MG, TG) based on initial reflections by the first author with his IDRD colleagues. The tool was validated with 10 athletes from the program before being released online. The instrument included open-ended questions, dichotomous yes-no questions and items assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). It assessed socio-demographic and disability

⁴ In total, IDRD program engaged XXX athletes.

characteristics, attributes of the sport program and perceived benefits of sport. An entire version (in Spanish) of the questionnaire is available (Appendix A).

2.4 Data analysis

Data collected with the online questionnaire was preprocessed and then analyzed with *IBM SPSS Statistics* (version 31; IBM Corp., 2025⁵). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were used to address the study aims.

2.5 Ethics

The study design and procedures were approved by the Université du Québec à Montréal Ethics Committee (Approval number: 2024-6258).

3. Results

3.1 Socio-demographic, disability-related, and sport participation profiles of athletes involved in the IDRD Paralympic sport training program

The first objective documents athletes' characteristics, including age, gender, type and onset of disability, sport practised, level of competition, training frequency, and previous sport experience.

Socio-demographic and disability-related profiles of athletes

The socio-demographic and disability-related characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Participants had a mean age of 28 years ($SD = 10.35$), and the majority were men (75%). Approximately half of the participants reported a congenital or genetic disability present since birth, whereas the remaining individuals acquired their disability later in life. Most participants (64.8%) had a physical disability, while the others presented visual (23%), cognitive (5.7%) or auditory (4.8%) impairments.

⁵ IBM Corp. (2025). *IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows* (Version 31.0) [Software]. <https://www.ibm.com/products/spss-statistics>

Table 1. *Socio-demographic characteristics of participants and description of handicap (N=105)*

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Age		
Youth (13-17 yo)	12	11.4
Young adult (18-25 yo)	39	37.1
Adult (25 yo +)	54	51.4
Gender		
Female	26	25.0
Male	78	75.0
Handicap type		
Physical	68	66.0
Visual	24	23.3
Cognitive	6	5.8
Auditory	5	4.9
Start of handicap		
Birth	54	52.9
Childhood and youth	27	26.5
Adulthood	21	20.6

Note. Sample size varied due to missing values.

Sport participation profiles of athletes

Table 2 summarizes the participants' athletic characteristics. The majority were engaged in para swimming, goalball and para-athletics. Overall, 41.9% of participants had been involved in their current sport for more than eight years, while 69.5% reported training five or more times per week. Competition levels ranged from regional events to world championships and Paralympic Games. Approximately half of the participants had practised a sport before joining the current program, and 38.1% began training after the age of 18.

Table 2. *Participants' athletic profile (N=105)*

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Sport		
Para Swimming	21	20.2
Goalball	13	12.5
Para Athletics	12	11.5
Wheelchair Rugby	9	8.7
Wheelchair Basketball	3	2.9
Para Table Tennis	8	7.7
Weightlifting	11	10.6
Football 5-A-Side	9	8.7
Bowling	1	1.0
Football 7-A-Side	11	10.6
Para Cycling	6	5.8
Start of current sport participation, <i>years</i>		
<1	7	6.7
1-2	12	11.4
3-4	17	16.2
5-6	10	9.5
7-8	15	14.9
>8	44	41.9
Weekly training sessions frequency		
1-2	5	4.8
3-4	27	25.7
5-6	36	34.3
7-8	12	11.4
9-10	14	13.3
>10	11	10.5
Competition level		
None	7	6.7
Regional tournaments	4	3.8

National championships	42	40.4
Authorized international championships	9	8.7
National Federation		
Parapan American Games	16	15.4
World championships	12	11.5
Paralympic Games	14	13.5
Past participation in sports		
Yes	54	51.4
No	51	48.6
Training initiation age		
<11	17	16.2
11-12	13	12.4
13-14	6	5.7
15-16	19	18.1
17-18	10	9.5
>18	40	38.1

Note: Sample size varied due to missing values.

Regarding gender, a substantial proportion of women reported 7-8 years of sport participation (42.3%), and nearly half of men reported more than 8 years of experience (46.8%). Male athletes were evenly distributed across the range of para-sports, whereas female athletes were primarily concentrated in swimming (8/26; 30.8%) and goalball (7/26; 26.9%). Most athletes competed at the national championship level, including 34.6% of women (9/26) and 40.5% of men (32/78). A greater proportion of women competed at higher-level events, including the Parapan American Games (26.9% of women vs. 11.4% of men) and the Paralympic Games (19.2% vs. 11.4%).

Perceived impacts of disability by the athletes

Participants were asked to evaluate the perceived impact of their disability. Figure 1 presents the reported experiences of prejudice and exclusion across social relationships differing in intimacy level. Overall, participants perceived greater judgment from more distant social groups

such as the community, classmates, and distant relatives, and less from closer relationships with immediate family, teachers and acquaintances.

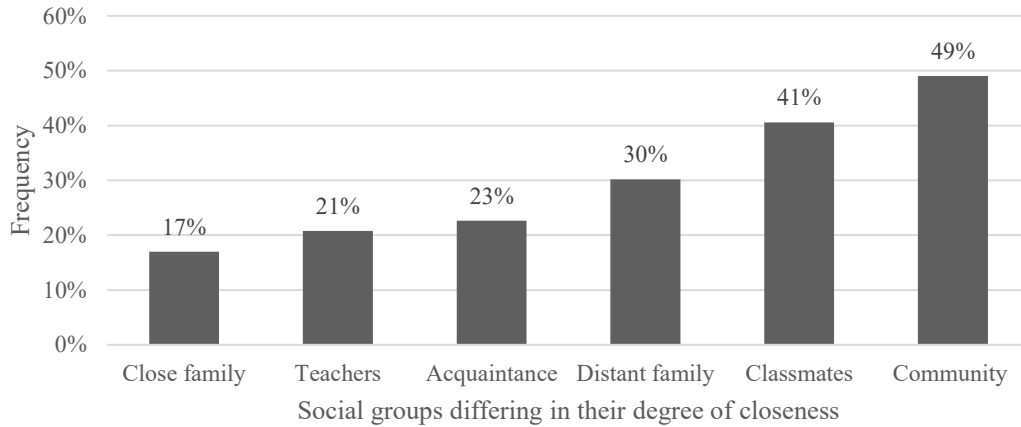


Figure 1. *Does having a disability lead to people being socially excluded or being a victim of prejudice from social groups? Perceptions of para-athletes (N=105).*

Generally, 52.8% of participants indicated that their disability negatively impacted their self-esteem. Although this perceived effect on self-esteem is significant, disability does not appear to greatly limit participation in various activities. Regarding the impact of disability on activity participation, 60.4% of respondents strongly agreed that it did not influence their sporting performance, while 53.8% strongly agreed it did not limit other aspects of their daily lives. Participants' reactions varied regarding the level of discomfort felt when others noticed their disability: 44% reported no discomfort, 29% experienced low levels of discomfort, and 26% reported strong discomfort. These results are illustrated in Figure 2.

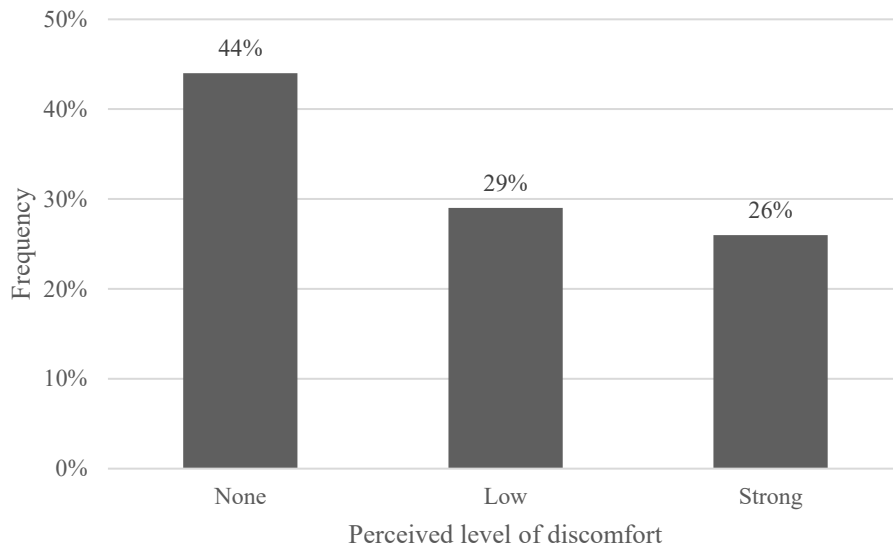


Figure 2. *Para-athletes' subjective discomfort when their disability is noticed by others.*

Depending on types of handicaps, some tendencies could be noticed. First, para-athletes with physical impairments appeared to engage in a broader range of sports, including swimming, athletics, rugby, basketball, table tennis, weightlifting, football and cycling. In contrast, para-athletes with visual impairments participated in a more limited set of sports, primarily swimming, goalball, athletics, football and bowling. Those with cognitive or auditory impairments seemed to have the most restricted participation, with swimming, athletics and cycling.

Second, for para-athletes with cognitive or auditory disabilities, the majority reported prior participation in other sports before enrolling in the current sport program, a proportion higher among athletes with cognitive (66.7%) and auditory (60.0%) disabilities compared to those with physical (48.5%) or visual (54.2%) impairments. Half of the participants with a cognitive handicap (50%) reported first engaging in sport before the age of 11 years, compared to approximately 10-20% of participants with other types of handicaps.

Third, para-athletes with cognitive impairments reported the highest levels of perceived support across several sources, including family members ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0$), coaches ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0$), school ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.83$), and acquaintances ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.83$), compared with participants with other types of impairments. In contrast, para-athletes with physical impairments generally reported lower levels of support than other participants, particularly from school ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.5$), coaches ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.96$), acquaintances ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.44$), and IDRD

officials ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.27$). Para-athletes with visual impairments reported the highest levels of support from teammates ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.66$) and IDR D officials ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.24$). In addition, an important proportion of participants with visual impairments (78.3%) reported that their disability affected their self-esteem, compared with approximately 40–50% among participants with other impairments.

Finally, participants with physical and auditory handicaps reported perceived social exclusion or prejudice from the community, respectively 70.9% and 75%. In contrast, approximately 40% of participants with visual or cognitive disabilities indicated experiencing such challenges. All participants with cognitive (6/6) or auditory (5/5) impairments reported improved self-esteem since participating in a sport, compared with 21/23 (91.3%) of participants with visual impairments and 49/57 (70.9%) of those with physical disabilities.

3.2 Support systems in shaping athletes' engagement in the IDR D Paralympic sport training program

This second objective analyzes the influence of key sources of support, including coaches, family members, and teammates, as well as athletes' motivations for participating in the program. Perceived support for sport participation varied depending on the social group. In Figure 3, the frequency distribution of Likert scale scores is presented for each source of social support with the most support provided by family members, coaches and team members. Athletes reported less support from school and acquaintances.

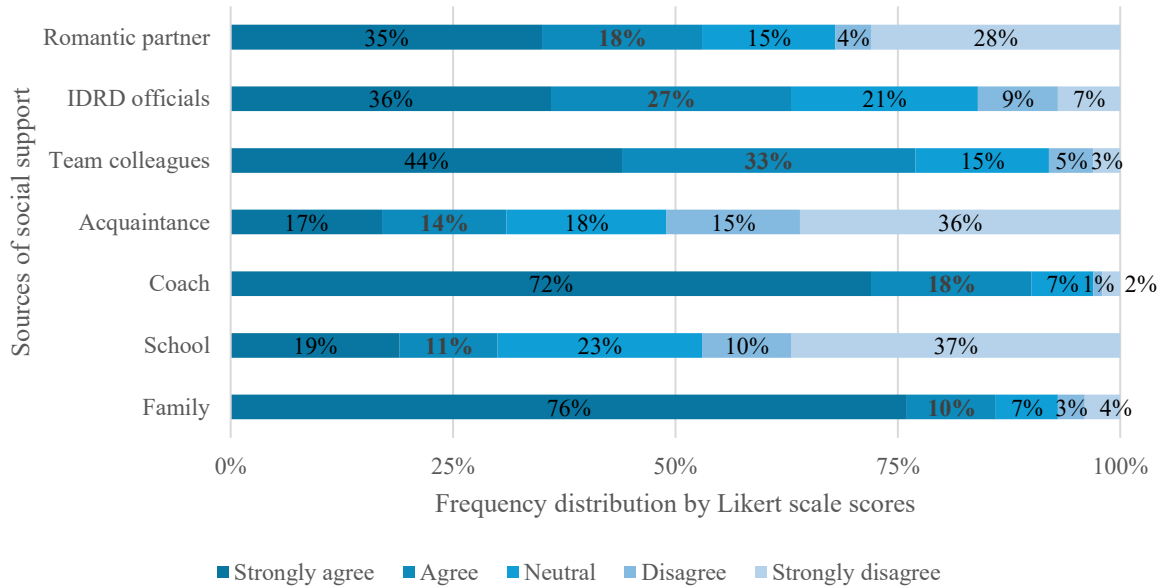


Figure 3. *Para-athletes' perceptions of support from multiple social groups related to sport involvement.*

With regard to parental support, specifically, 83% of participants reported the highest possible score for perceived support from their parents. Additionally, coaches represented a major source of support for para-athletes, as they were individuals with whom athletes spent most of their daily time. Regarding age groups, youth athletes aged 13-17 reported lower levels of perceived support from their romantic partner ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.70$) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), whereas adults aged 25 years and older reported higher levels of support ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.56$). For school-related support, youth (13-17 years) and young adults (18-25 years) reported mean scores of 2.91 ($SD = 1.51$) and 3.06 ($SD = 1.39$), respectively, compared to a lower mean score of 2.32 ($SD = 1.58$) among adults aged 25 years and older.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the frequency distribution of Likert scale responses highlights supportive attitudes and behaviors from coaches. Notably, coaches were perceived as a key motivational influence in achieving personal sport-related goals as well as conveying confidence and trust in their athletes. However, it is worth mentioning that a non-negligible proportion of

athletes strongly agreed or agreed with the statement indicating their coach treated them with pity or condescension⁶.

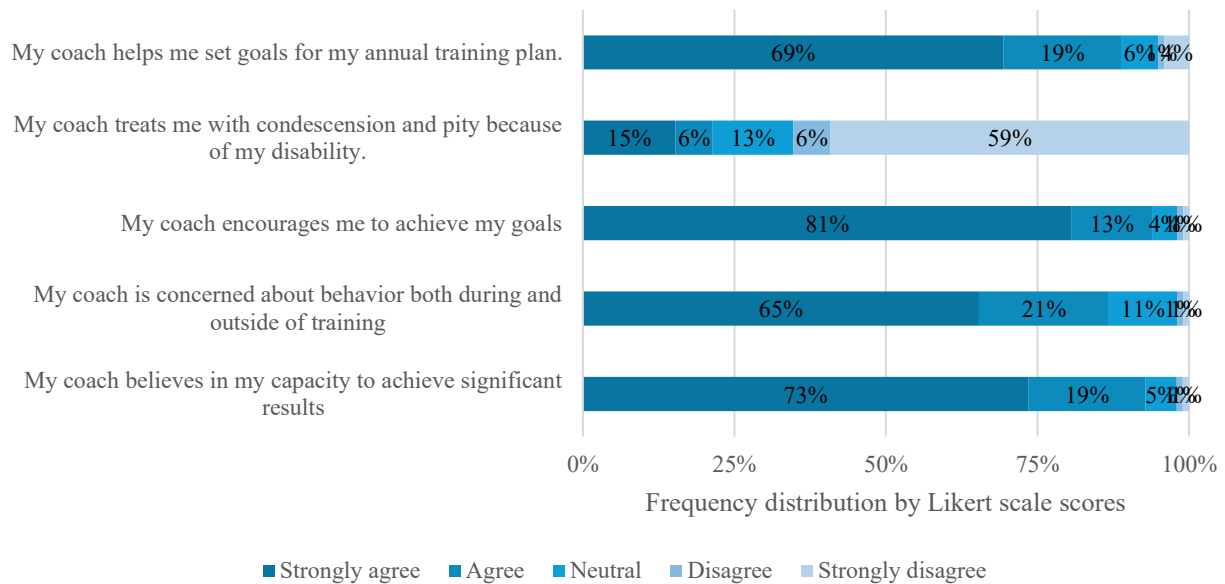


Figure 4. *Perceived coach supportive behaviors and attitudes by para-athletes.*

3.3 Barriers and enabling factors affecting sustained participation in the IDR D Paralympic sports training program

This third and last objective focuses on structural and contextual factors such as financial constraints, access to resources, and program-related support mechanisms. The participants’ responses suggest that financial constraints and insufficient technical support represented the primary barriers to engagement in the sport program. Figure 5 illustrates the frequency distribution of responses across different barrier categories.

⁶ The statement evaluating condescending or pitying treatment by coaches was negatively worded, in contrast to the preceding and subsequent items. This reversed wording may have introduced confusion among participants and affected their response for that precise item.

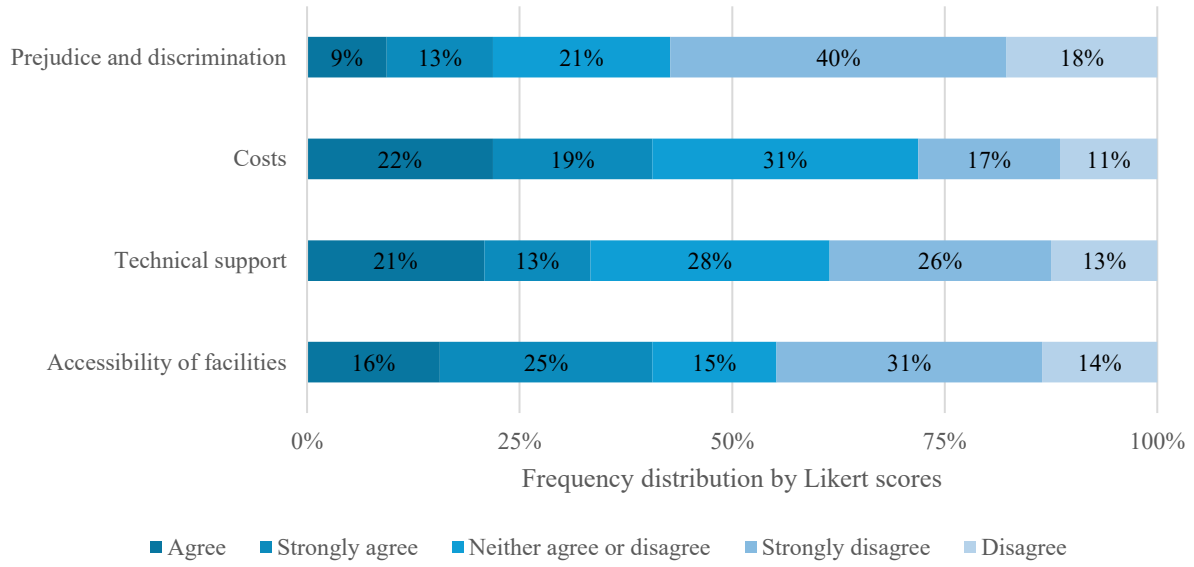


Figure 5. *Factors limiting participation in sport training programs.*

4. Discussion

4.1 Major findings

The present study aimed to better understand the determinants of participation and support mechanisms within a Paralympic sport training program implemented by the District Institute of Recreation and Sport (IDRD) in Bogotá, Colombia. Three main findings emerge from the results.

First, the socio-demographic and sport participation profiles of the athletes reveal a relatively experienced and committed group of participants. Most athletes reported several years of involvement in their sport and high training frequencies, with a large proportion training five or more times per week. Additionally, athletes were engaged across multiple competitive levels, including national championships, Parapan American Games, world championships, and even the International Paralympic Games. These findings suggest that the implementation of appropriate policies from the program administration, which provides a structured environment capable of supporting athletes across different stages of development, from entry-level participation to high-performance sport, coincided with the facilitators previously identified in the literature (Ballas et al., 2022; McKenzie et al., 2021).

Second, the results highlight the complex relationship between disability and social participation. While many athletes reported experiences of exclusion or prejudice in certain social environments (Ascondo et al., 2023; Declerck et al., 2021)—particularly within the broader community—most participants indicated that their disability did not strongly limit their sport participation or other areas of daily life. These findings suggest that sport participation may play a protective or empowering role in the lives of people with disabilities by providing opportunities for social recognition, identity construction, and personal development (Ascondo et al., 2023; Hassett et al., 2024). However, the predominance of men (75%) among participants also points to the complexity of inclusion in para sport. From an intersectional perspective, this gender imbalance suggests that access to sport may be shaped not only by disability, but also by gendered forms of discrimination and broader structural inequalities. This interpretation is supported by research on the intersection of gender and disability, which shows that disabled women may experience overlapping forms of discrimination based simultaneously on gender and disability status (Davaki et al., 2013). Therefore, the lower representation of women in the program may reflect not only individual preferences or sport trajectories, but also the cumulative effects of social, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit women's participation and advancement in disability sport. This

finding is also consistent with critical disability studies in sport, which argue that gender and disability norms intersect in ways that may reproduce ableist, heteronormative, and gendered patterns of exclusion (Richard et al., 2023).

Third, results indicate that multiple social actors contribute to athletes' engagement in the program. Coaches, family members, and teammates appear to play a central role in sustaining motivation and participation. In particular, athletes emphasized the importance of coaching support, encouragement, and trust in their abilities (Allan et al., 2020; Hammond, 2022; Townsend et al., 2022). These relational dimensions suggest that participation in Paralympic sport programs is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by the broader social environment surrounding athletes (Sakalidis et al., 2023).

4.2 Elements of discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the growing literature highlighting the importance of social and environmental determinants in shaping participation in sport among people with disabilities (Allan et al., 2020; Hammond, 2022; Sakalidis et al., 2023). Previous research has shown that barriers to participation are often linked to structural factors such as accessibility, financial constraints, and social attitudes toward disability (Hammond, 2022; McKenzie et al., 2021). In the present study, athletes reported experiences of social exclusion in several contexts, particularly within the broader community. These findings align with earlier work, demonstrating that individuals with disabilities continue to face stigma, prejudice, and social marginalization despite increasing policy commitments to inclusion (Aitchison et al., 2020; Ascondo et al., 2023; Ballas et al., 2022), with evidence suggesting that these forms of marginalization may be further intensified when gender is taken into account.

At the same time, the results suggest that participation in structured sport programs may mitigate some of these negative social experiences (Ballas et al., 2022; McKenzie et al., 2021; Townsend et al., 2022), and it is an important result for the LAC context where discrimination could be exacerbated. Athletes reported that their disability did not substantially limit their sport participation or other life domains, and many described positive perceptions of their abilities and future life prospects. This observation supports previous studies emphasizing the empowering potential of sport participation for people with disabilities (Blauwet & Willick, 2012). Through sport, individuals may develop confidence, social networks, and a sense of belonging that

counterbalance experiences of exclusion encountered in other areas of social life, as already reported previously (Allan et al., 2020; Ballas et al., 2022; Schantz & Gilbert, 2012), as well as in this study. Drawing on crip theory, this perspective highlights how sport can both reflect and reinforce dominant norms, while also offering possibilities to challenge them by increasing the visibility, recognition, and inclusion of diverse disabled bodies and identities. Although this literature is largely conceptual, it is useful for interpreting gender disparities in participation and for understanding how multiple systems of inequality may operate simultaneously in para-sport contexts (Richard et al., 2023).

Another important contribution of this study concerns the role of support systems in sustaining athletes' engagement in sport. Consistent with previous research on coach–athlete relationships in disability sport (Liu et al., 2024), the results indicate that coaches play a key role not only in athletic development but also in motivation, confidence building, and long-term commitment to sport (Hammond, 2022; Townsend et al., 2022). Similarly, family support emerged as an important enabling factor, reflecting the broader social context in which athletes' sport participation takes place.

This study recalled that financial constraints also appear to represent a significant barrier to participation (Elipe-Lorenzo et al., 2025). Economic barriers are frequently identified in studies examining sport participation among people with disabilities, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts where access to specialized equipment, transportation, and training resources may be limited. In the LAC region, where households including people with disabilities are disproportionately exposed to poverty (World Bank, 2021), these structural barriers may significantly shape opportunities for sustained participation in sport.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the importance of adopting a multidimensional perspective when examining participation in Paralympic sport programs. In this sense, the IDRDR sport program proposed an interesting model to inspire other sport organizations in Global South or from LAC contexts. Participation is influenced not only by individual motivation or physical ability but also by a complex interplay of social support, institutional structures, and broader socioeconomic conditions.

4.3 Limitations and strengths

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the data rely on self-reported responses collected through a questionnaire, which may introduce social desirability bias. It is possible that participants may have tended to report more positive experiences or perceptions of the program. Second, the voluntary nature of participation may have produced a selection bias, as athletes who chose to complete the survey may have been those most engaged in the program. Third, the relatively long questionnaire may have influenced response patterns or completion rates that could explain variations in total number for each answer (see Tables 1 and 2).

Despite these limitations, the study also presents several strengths. One of its main contributions lies in capturing the subjective experiences of Paralympic athletes participating in a structured sport program in a LAC context, an area that remains underrepresented in the literature (Contreras Jofré et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2022; Kirakosyan, 2021). The study also provides insight into community-based and developmental sport programs rather than focusing exclusively on elite sport performance pathways. Finally, the research offers a multidimensional perspective by examining not only sport participation but also the broader social and relational factors that shape athletes' experiences, which we think is crucial, considering the role of sport for development in disabled athletes (Graeff et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion

This study examined the determinants of participation and support mechanisms within a Paralympic sport training program implemented by the local sport organization (IDRD) in Bogotá, Colombia. The results highlight the importance of structured sport environments that combine athletic development with strong social support networks. Coaches, family members, and teammates play a central role in sustaining athletes' engagement, while financial constraints remain an important barrier to participation. The predominance of men among participants also suggests that gender may shape access to and progression within Paralympic sport, highlighting the need for an intersectional approach that considers how disability, gender and other social axes of inequality interact to produce unequal participation opportunities.

Beyond sport performance, the findings suggest that participation in Paralympic sport programs can contribute to broader processes of empowerment and social participation for people with disabilities. Even when individuals experience social exclusion in certain contexts, sport participation may provide opportunities for identity construction, recognition, and personal development.

In the context of LAC, where structural inequalities and socioeconomic vulnerabilities continue to shape access to sport, programs such as the one referenced in this study play an important role in expanding participation opportunities for people with disabilities. Strengthening these programs through supportive policies, accessible infrastructures, and sustained institutional investment may, therefore, represent an important pathway toward greater inclusion and well-being.

Future research could further explore how different program characteristics—such as coaching approaches, training environments, or institutional support mechanisms—shape long-term participation and developmental outcomes for Paralympic athletes. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to help better understand how sport participation influences life trajectories for people with disabilities over time.

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Author Contributions

SR, MG and TG designed the study and protocol. MJ, NV and TG performed data analysis. All authors commented on all steps of the project, revised and contributed to the final version of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX A – INCUESTA (Survey in Spanish)

Beneficios de un programa de entrenamiento deportivo paralímpico en la participación de los atletas (IDRD - Colombia)

Introducción

Descripción proyecto + objetivo

Formulario de consentimiento

1. Perfil del participante

1.1 Edad cronológica (Hasta que cumplea)

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

...

1.2 Tipo de discapacidad Física

- Visual
- Cognitiva
- Limitación auditiva

1.3 Desde cuándo tiene esta discapacidad

1.4 Género

- Masculino
- Femenino
- Otro
- NS/NR

1.5 Hace cuanto practica el deporte actual

- Menos de 1 año
- 1-2 años
- 3-4 años
- 5-6 años
- 7-8 años
- + de 8 años

1.6 Deportes que practicas

-para natación

-gol bol

-Atletismo

-rugby cila de ruedas

-balón cesto

-tenis de mesa

-Pesas

-Futbol 5

-otro: _____

1.7 Cuantas veces por semana entrena o practica el deporte actual

- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 7-8
- 9-10
- + de 10

1.7 ¿Ha practicado otros deportes en el pasado? Si es así, ¿cuáles?

1.8 Edad de inicio de entrenamiento

- Antes de los 11 años
- 11-12 años
- 13-14 años
- 15-16 años
- 17-18 años
- + de 18 años

1.9 Nivel competitivo (Marcar solamente el máximo nivel en que ha competido)

- No he competido aún
- Torneos regionales
- Campeonatos nacionales
- Campeonatos internacionales autorizados por la federación local respectiva
- Juegos Parapanamericanos
- Campeonatos mundiales
- Juegos Paralímpicos
-

1.10 ¿Cuánto tiempo le dedicas en la semana a las siguientes actividades? Marca con una X la opción escogida.

	0-2	2-4	4-6	6-8	8-10
	Horas	Horas	Horas	Horas	Horas

a. Entrenando					
b. Paseando en la calle					
c. Jugando en el computador					
d. Leyendo					
e. Viendo televisión					
f. Estudiando en una institución					
g. Estudiando en casa					
h. Haciendo nada					

2. Percepción del deporte para el participante

2.1 ¿Qué tan importante es para ti la participación en el grupo de deporte?

- Muy importante
- Es importante
- Poco importante
- Nada importante
- No sabe no responde

2.2 ¿Qué te motiva a participar en deporte?

Por favor califique de 1 a 5 todas las opciones de respuesta en donde 1 es el valor mínimo de influencia y 5 el máximo valor.

a. Mejorar la salud	1	2	3	4	5
b. Sentir la emoción de la competencia sin importar los resultados	1	2	3	4	5
c. Compartir con los amigos	1	2	3	4	5
d. Ganar medallas	1	2	3	4	5
e. Obtener los incentivos económicos que otorga el IDR o el gobierno nacional	1	2	3	4	5
f. En tu casa quieren que tú participes	1	2	3	4	5
g. Viajar y conocer ciudades y gente	1	2	3	4	5
h. Te ves o te sientes mejor físicamente	1	2	3	4	5

i. Te sientes mejor emocionalmente	1	2	3	4	5
j. Te sientes incluido socialmente	1	2	3	4	5

3 Relaciones interpersonales

Por favor marca con una x la opción que más te parezca conveniente.

3.1 Debido a tu discapacidad, alguna vez experimentaste trato excluyente, condescendiente o lastimero por parte de:

	SI	NO	NR	
a. Familia cercana (Padres, hermanos)				
b. Familia extensiva (Tíos, tías, primos, primas, abuelos)				
c. Compañeros del colegio				
d. Profesores del colegio				
e. Amigos y conocidos del barrio				
f. Comunidad en general				

3.2 ¿Consideras que tu discapacidad ha sido una limitante para relacionarte con:

	SI	NO	NR
g. Familia cercana (Padres, hermanos)			
h. Familia extensiva (Tíos, tías, primos, primas, abuelos)			
i. Compañeros del colegio			
j. Profesores del colegio			
k. Amigos y conocidos del barrio			
l. Comunidad en general			

3.3 ¿Alguna vez te sentiste afectado (a) en tu autoestima por tener una discapacidad?

- Si

- No
- NR

3.4 Desde que practicas deporte consideras que ha mejorado el trato de:

	SI	NO	NR
m. Familia cercana (Padres, hermanos)			
n. Familia extensiva (Tíos, tías, primos, primas, abuelos)			
o. Compañeros del colegio			
p. Profesores del colegio			
q. Amigos y conocidos del barrio			
r. Comunidad en general			

4 Percepción de la amistad y conexión con la comunidad

4.1 ¿Consideras que en tu vida futura seguirás practicando deporte?

- Definitivamente lo haré
- Probablemente lo haré
- Quizás si Quizás no
- Probablemente no lo haré
- Definitivamente no lo haré

4.2 ¿A tus padres les gusta que practiques deporte?

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Les es indiferente
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

4.3 Desde que practicas deporte crees que eres más ordenado (a) y disciplinado (a)

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo

- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Completamente en desacuerdo

4.4 ¿Desde qué practicas deporte tienes mayor número de amigos (as)?

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Completamente en desacuerdo

4.5 ¿Sientes que desde que te involucraste en el deporte has logrado superar de mejor manera los retos de la vida académica y personal?

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Completamente en desacuerdo

4.6 ¿Cuál de las siguientes opciones ha sido el apoyo más importante para llegar hasta este nivel de entrenamiento?

Por favor califique de 1 a 5 todas las opciones de respuesta en donde 1 es el valor mínimo de influencia y 5 el máximo valor.

a. Familia	1	2	3	4	5
b. Colegio	1	2	3	4	5
c. Entrenador	1	2	3	4	5
d. Amigos del barrio	1	2	3	4	5
e. Compañeros de entrenamiento	1	2	3	4	5
f. Funcionarios del IDR	1	2	3	4	5
g. Pareja	1	2	3	4	5

4.7 Los amigos (as) con los (las) que compartes la mayor parte del tiempo que no entrenan son:

- Del barrio

- Otros compañeros del equipo
- De otra parte
- Del colegio - no deportistas
- No tengo muchos amigos

4.8 Consideras que tu participación en el deporte te ayuda a:

a. Fortalecer tu autoestima	1	2	3	4	5
b. Mejorar la comunicación con tus amigos	1	2	3	4	5
c. Descargar el estrés físico y emocional	1	2	3	4	5
d. Poner tu cuerpo en forma	1	2	3	4	5
e. Conocer a otras personas	1	2	3	4	5
f. Alejarte de los vicios	1	2	3	4	5

4.9 ¿Consideras que a futuro cuando finalice tu actividad deportiva seguirás en contacto con tus compañeros actuales?

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Completamente en desacuerdo

4.10 ¿Consideras que podrías tener como pareja afectiva a una persona con alguna discapacidad?

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Completamente en desacuerdo

5 Régimen de vida

5.1 ¿Consideras que la actividad física y el deporte te ayudan a evitar el consumo de licor, tabaco y drogas?

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- No existe relación
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

5.2 La gente que conoces y que practica deporte no consume licor, tabaco ni drogas

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

5.3 ¿Consideras que desde que estás involucrado (a) en el deporte?

- Mejoró tu desempeño académico
- No has notado cambios significativos en tu desempeño académico
- Ha empeorado tu desempeño académico

5.4 ¿Conoces muy bien los beneficios que le generan la actividad física y el deporte?

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

5.5 ¿Consideras que tu participación en el deporte te ha ayudado a afrontar de mejor manera los retos de otras áreas de la vida?

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo

- Totalmente en desacuerdo

5.6 Consideras que la participación de personas con discapacidad en el deporte ayuda a:

Por favor califique de 1 a 5 todas las opciones de respuesta en donde 1 es el valor mínimo de influencia y 5 el máximo valor.

a. Alejarse de vicios	1	2	3	4	5
b. Bienestar psicológico	1	2	3	4	5
c. Bienestar físico	1	2	3	4	5
d. Reconocimiento social	1	2	3	4	5
e. Fortalecer la autoestima	1	2	3	4	5
f.	1	2	3	4	5

5.7 Consideras que desde que practicas deporte:

	SI	NO	NR
a. Tengo más amigos			
b. Ha mejorado mi autoestima			
c. Me relaciono mejor con la gente			
d. En mi familia.....			
e.			
f.			

6. Confianza y autopercepción

6.1 Me siento muy bien con mi apariencia física

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

6.2 Mi discapacidad no me impide desempeñarme bien en el deporte.

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

6.3 Considero que en el futuro tendré una buena vida.

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

6.4 Mi discapacidad no me impide desempeñarme bien en los diferentes campos de la vida.

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

6.5 Me molesta que la gente en la calle note mi discapacidad

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

6.6 ¿Qué es lo que más te gusta de tu experiencia en la práctica de tu deporte?

7 Relación con el entrenador

7.1 El entrenador cree en mi capacidad para lograr resultados importantes.

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

7.2 El entrenador se preocupa por mi comportamiento dentro y fuera de los espacios de entrenamientos

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

7.3 El entrenador me alienta para que yo logre los objetivos fijados

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

7.4 ¿El entrenador me da un trato condescendiente y lastimero porque tengo discapacidad?

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

7.6 El entrenador me ayuda a establecer los objetivos de mi plan de entrenamiento anual.

- Completamente de acuerdo
- Parcialmente de acuerdo
- Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo
- Parcialmente en desacuerdo
- Totalmente en desacuerdo

8. Desafíos y aspiraciones 8.1 ¿Cuáles son los principales desafíos que enfrenta al practicar deporte? (Marque todos los que apliquen)

Por favor califique de 1 a 5 todas las opciones de respuesta en donde 1 es el valor mínimo de influencia y 5 el máximo valor.

a. Accesibilidad de instalaciones	1	2	3	4	5
b. Falta de apoyo técnico	1	2	3	4	5
c. Costos económicos	1	2	3	4	5
d. Prejuicios o discriminación	1	2	3	4	5
e. Otros (especificar)	1	2	3	4	5

8.2 Cuáles son sus metas futuras en el ámbito deportivo?

8.3 Qué cree que se podría hacer a nivel comunitario o gubernamental para fomentar la participación de personas con discapacidad en el deporte?

8.4 Hay algo más que le gustaría añadir sobre su experiencia en el deporte como persona con discapacidad?

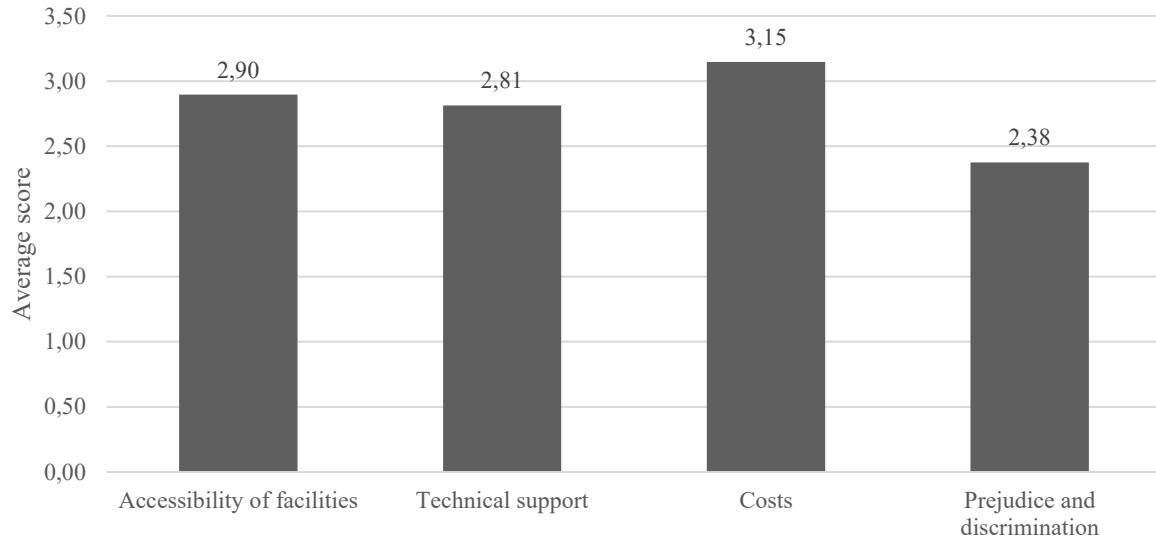
9. Contacto del participante:

Nombre: _____

Correo electrónico: _____

Teléfono: _____

APPENDIX B – SUPPLEMENTARY RESULTS



Note. Vertical axis represents scores on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

Figure 6. *Average scores by type of barriers to participation in sport training programs.*