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# Athletes' Perspectives of the Classification System in Para Alpine Skiing for Those With Visual Impairment

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This study explored the classification experiences and views of Para Alpine skiers with visual impairment. Data from 11 interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to generate three themes: Suitability—The skiers questioned the suitability of the visual measurements, testing environment, and the information they received regarding classification; Exclusivity—Skiers felt certain aspects of the system remain exclusive due to the restrictions of sport classes and lack of the athlete voice; and (Dis)trust—Skiers felt distrust in those implementing the system and in other athletes due to intentional misrepresentation. Speculation surrounding this resulted in the skiers' feeling doubt in their own classification. While there is not a “one size fits all” approach to classification, understanding skiers' experiences can be a vital first step and will help to guide future research into the evolution of this sport's classification.

**Keywords:** Para sport, vision, intentional misrepresentation, ableism

Classification exists in disability sport to “increase fairness” and encourage participation (Ravensbergen et al., 2016, p. 1). Given the diversity of impairment,

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classifying athletes into similar groupings aims to reduce the impact of an individual's impairment on the sporting outcome (Ravensbergen et al., 2016; Tweedy & Vanlandewijck, 2011). In visually impaired (VI) sports, the classification code states that an athlete must have an eligible impairment to compete (IPC, 2015). Following this, at international level, the minimum impairment criteria (MIC) must be satisfied. An athlete with VI must have one or both of the following: (a) visual acuity (VA)  $<1.0$  logMAR (poorer than 20/200) and/or (b) visual field (VF) restricted to  $<20^\circ$  radius (IPC, 2015). There are three VI sports classes at international level, B1, B2, and B3, with B1 indicating the most severe visual impairment ([www.paralympic.org/classification-code](http://www.paralympic.org/classification-code)). This is across all International Paralympic Committee (IPC) -sanctioned sports. Additional sports classes, which may be labeled as B4 and B5, can exist at national level in some countries and are governed by national federations. Athletes in these additional classes cannot compete at Paralympic level as they do not meet the MIC, but this enables access for those with mild/moderate visual impairment to compete at a grassroots/national level and provides an opportunity for those with mild but degenerative conditions to transition into VI sport.

In 2011, the IPC, the governing body of Para sport worldwide suggested guidelines for the development of all the classification systems in Paralympic sport (Tweedy & Vanlandewijck, 2011). VI sport classification received limited attention until a review in 2016 (Ravensbergen et al., 2016) helped to develop the joint guidance issued by the International Blind Sport Federation and IPC in 2018; however, no substantive VI-specific changes have yet been implemented in the Paralympic system. Within VI sport, the athlete's functional ability to perform in sport has yet to be considered. Currently, VA and VF are the medical criteria adopted in VI classification. A Delphi study in 2016 reported that 95% of panelists (made up of athletes, coaches, classifiers, sports administrators, and scientists) agreed that these two visual functions are insufficient for VI classification (Ravensbergen et al., 2016). This study suggested that further visual functions such as contrast sensitivity, dynamic VA, and light sensitivity should be investigated. However, these suggestions were not specific to any sport, and neither were the relationships between different etiologies and severity of VI or their impact on performance addressed. Investigation of a sport-specific system of classification for VI has begun in some VI sports including Judo (Krabben et al., 2018, 2021), swimming (Souto et al., 2017), and football (Runswick et al., 2021). Para rifle shooting is the first VI sport to have adopted a new classification system and introduced two changes: (a) Contrast sensitivity is considered along with VA, and (b) the MIC has been modified specific to the needs of the sport (Allen et al., 2020).

This study will focus on the Winter Paralympic sport of alpine skiing, which is a high-intensity sport requiring skiers to traverse slopes at rapid speeds over challenging environments (Ferguson, 2010). All VI skiers (B1 to B3) have a guide and communicate through wireless audio connection with the guide providing information regarding direction and upcoming terrain. Athletes within this sport compete together irrespective of their sport class, and the athlete's time to complete the course is adjusted according to their sport class via a factoring system (WPAS, 2020). While there has been some recent research investigating the adequacy of current vision measures within alpine skiing, the expansion of the MIC, and the visual functions affecting skiing performance and categorization of athletes based

on VI (Stalin et al., 2021; Stalin & Dalton, 2021, 2023), this study will take an athlete perspective. Despite the increasing popularity of Para sport, only a few studies have focused exclusively on athletes' perceptions and experiences of classification (Allen et al., 2020, 2021; Powis & Macbeth, 2020; Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020). A significant knowledge gap exists regarding the athletes' opinions of the current classification system in VI sport, but as suggested by Howe and Kitchin (2017), those with disabilities should have an input into a system that dictates their categorization. To bridge this gap, this study investigated athletes' views of classification in alpine VI skiing. We sought to (a) investigate the skier's understanding and involvement in the classification process, (b) examine the skier's experience and perceptions of the current VI classification system, and (c) probe the skier's perception of the suitability of the current classification criteria (including MIC and sport class).

## Theoretical Underpinnings

In this paper, we draw on the work of Carol Thomas (2007) and her social-relational model of disability. The social imposition of restrictions acting on people with impairment and the socially engendered undermining of psychoemotional well-being coalesces through impairment effects. In VI Paralympic classification, the establishment of MIC is based on medical perspectives, yet the process of classification itself is a social one, whereby restrictions of VI athletes' activity are imposed by nondisabled classifiers acting as experts. As a result, inequitable power dynamics are formed. However, not all restrictions on VI athletes are socially imposed. Thomas posited that impairment effects referred to restrictions on activity imposed on people as a direct consequence of having an impairment (such as an athlete's sensitivity to glare in bright conditions), as well as restrictions on people with impairments as a result of other people's disabling actions (such as a lack of communication between an expert classifier and a VI athlete). Within the social-relational framework, we draw on the concepts of ableism, which is the cultural imperialism valuing nondisabled as the corporeal standard (Silva & Howe, 2019), and disablism, which is discrimination toward, or othering of people with disabilities. When these concepts are combined, they create social-environmental barriers through the classification process for VI skiers that can undermine their psychoemotional well-being and identities as athletes. In other words, we can use this model to question whether the implementation of the classification process and its attempt to create a "level playing field" unnecessarily exacerbate inequitable power relationships and heighten scrutiny on athletes' integrity rather than merely assessing their functional ability. Thus, examining the experiences of VI skiers will unveil the dynamics of ableism and disablism within the classification process.

## Methods

### Research Approach

In this qualitative study, our research was grounded on the philosophical underpinnings of relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), molding our understanding of the nature of reality and the ways in which

knowledge is constructed. Relativist ontology considers that multiple and subjective realities exist rather than one fixed or true experience, and constructionist epistemology explores the multiple ways to understand this reality (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These philosophical frameworks shape the foundations of the approach to this study, in how we understand and interpret the diverse and subjective realities the athletes encounter in their lived experience of classification (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers recognize their own perspectives and the potential impact of their individual beliefs and convictions on the research process. This research team is comprised of clinical eyecare researchers with experience of VI and an author who has prior experience in disability sport research. None of the researchers identify as having a disability; nevertheless, the first author has an immediate family member with VI.

## Participant Recruitment

The study received ethical approval from the University (University name removed for anonymity) Biomedical Sciences ethics filter committee and complied with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki. Athletes were recruited through the IPC and National snow sport federations. Names were also obtained from an online list of World Para Alpine skiers from years 2019–20 to 2021–22, and athletes were approached via email and publicly available online profiles. Athletes interested in taking part contacted the researcher, and a video call was set up. A consent form was completed via email, and oral consent was obtained at the start of each conversation.

Recruitment for this study was worldwide. While the preferred language was English, the study team communicated to prospective participants that there was opportunity for conducting interviews in German or French, if preferred. We conducted one interview in German, with the help of an experienced interpreter colleague who was familiar with the subject area, and the questions were translated into the interviewee's native language and shared with the participant ahead of time.

## Participants

This study completed interviews with 11 elite alpine skiers (five females and six males) across nine different nationalities. Interviews took place between July 2021 and June 2022. The alpine skiers had a variety of etiologies of VI. Athletes reported that they were in the following VI categories: B1,  $n = 1$ ; B2,  $n = 3$ ; and B3,  $n = 7$ . The average age of the skiers was 30 years, range 18–57 years, and average years competing was 4.5 years, range 1–12 years. Further demographic information was captured but is not reported here to protect the identity of the participants.

## Data Collection

This study consisted of semistructured interviews with elite alpine skiers with VI. The researchers consulted with an athlete who has experience in Para alpine skiing to develop this study and shared with them the semistructured questions which were adjusted based on the feedback received. Initial demographic questions including years competing in alpine skiing, age, gender, eye conditions, and effect on eyesight and sports class were included at the beginning of the conversations.

These interviews were conducted through videoconferencing (i.e., Zoom, Zoom Video Communications, Inc.), audio recorded with permission of the participant, and transcribed following completion. The interviews lasted between 25 and 40 min, with an average time of 32 min. Examples of the questions asked to skiers included “Do you feel you currently have good understanding of classification?” “Based on your experience how do you feel about the process?” “Do you believe the current criteria is suitable?” and “Do you trust the system?”

## Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic approach to qualitative data analysis was used, identifying key themes and shared patterns in the information collected. This methodological approach provides flexibility and reflexivity in the researchers’ roles in the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Recorded audio allowed the team to refer to the original reports to identify the key themes (Noble & Smith, 2015) and immerse themselves in the data, linking and grouping codes to produce overall key themes. Guided by Braun and Clarke’s six phases of thematic analysis (2006, 2021), the researchers familiarized themselves with the data set, actively engaging through the annotations of initial ideas. Following this, a rigorous and systematic coding process was undertaken to build the foundations for theme development and interpretation of the themes exploring the underlying meanings and implications. The first researcher discussed the suitability of the codes and themes with the research team (Nowell et al., 2017). Participants were given pseudonyms, randomly selected from a list of common names, when quotations are given in the results.

## Quality of Data

In qualitative research, ensuring trustworthiness is essential to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To achieve this, the researchers employed a range of strategies and techniques that enhanced the rigor and reliability. Credibility was addressed through frequent peer-debriefing sessions between the researcher conducting the interviews and the researcher team, collaborating on ideas and interpretation of the data (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, the researchers engaged in reflexivity challenging their own potential biases that may influence the interpretation of the data. Detailed descriptions of participants and data ensure validity and authenticity of the interpretations by providing direct quotes from the athletes (Shenton, 2004), supported by quotes and extracts from a diverse range of participants.

# Results

## Suitability

### *Measurement of Visual Functions*

Grouping athletes into classes can be a challenging task due to the diversity of VI that exists. Gareth appreciated the complexity of classifying these differing conditions stating, “*it is so difficult [to classify], because everybody is different.*”

(Ahead of Print)

The differing nature of VI is not considerations within the current classification system, despite the skiers' view that this can influence performance. However, the skiers did not overlook the complexity of this, appreciating that it will not be "*a one [size] fit all solution*" (Jordan). Instead, as another athlete stated, "*it is going to take a lot of advancements*" (Erin). To compensate for these differences, the inclusion of visual function measures beyond VA and VF was proposed during the interviews. Grace stated, "*I just don't think that only looking at visual acuity and visual field is what is working for skiing,*" and Charlie suggested the current measures "*[don't] take into account other characteristics of eyesight.*" Additionally, the skiers questioned whether the visual measures of VA and VF are representative of their sport. From their understanding, one skier stated, "*[The visual measurement] seems unrelated to how you would use your vision skiing*" (Aoife) and queried whether further investigation into measures would result in a system of increased relevance to alpine skiing.

Possible additional visual functions including light (a.k.a. glare) sensitivity ( $n=8$ ), contrast sensitivity testing ( $n=1$ ), and dynamic vision ( $n=2$ ) were suggested by the skiers. When describing their VI, light sensitivity was an issue identified for many in everyday life, intensified by the bright and reflective surfaces of skiing slopes and outdoor lighting conditions. Charlie explained that due to a "*high sensitivity towards light,*" they experience challenges while skiing. This was echoed by other skiers, explaining the demands of trying to adapt to the dynamic brightness conditions, with those most susceptible to light thought to be at a disadvantage.

Contrast sensitivity was also mentioned by the skiers, with one stating they felt this measure may link to the vision utilized while skiing, "*I would like them to include . . . contrast for the actual environment that they're in*" (Charlie). Measuring vision while in motion was also proposed due to the very high speeds of alpine skiers over the challenging terrain while tracking their guide and marker posts. Grace went further and questioned the effect of different eye conditions on each of the skiing disciplines that compose the Paralympic program: "*In an event like slalom you're very close to your guide like [those with] tunnel vision would have much more of a disadvantage.*" The concept of comparing visual functions between the disciplines and their relatability to one another was not solely noted with Charlie finding it "*strange*" how they compare someone "*who's lacking a lot of their visual field, their central vision, mixed with someone who can't see so clearly in a different way.*"

### **Testing Procedures**

The testing procedures used to measure vision within classification have been described as "*relatively straight forward*" (Aoife) and "*quick*" (Grace). The current measures of VA consist of the tumbling E chart or the Berkeley Rudimentary Vision Chart depending on the athlete's level of vision. These measures are consistent throughout all athletes within the Paralympic system which was noted as a benefit. Jason stated, "*it's a good system because . . . for everyone [it] is the same,*" and another stated, "*the people who can see it can easily identify it, indicate it, you don't have to speak a particular language*" (Charlie).

However, despite the strength of the simplicity of these procedures, some skiers suggest the tests are "*arbitrary*" (Grace, Aoife) and nonrepresentative of their sporting environment. Aoife stated, "*you know what the tests they are doing*

*so the letter Es are measuring the vision but [not] too sure why.*" Rachel describes the competitive environment as *"the snow is always different . . . it's never the same"* and not related the clinical conditions of the classification testing, *"[they] do the tests that determine your vision . . . in a room with consistent lighting, it . . . doesn't simulate that quite as well."* Jordan described this *"controlled environment"* as *"not comparable to the outside realities [of skiing]."* While the visual classification system consists of a medical assessment, the physical classification system involves an observational session of the athlete performing in the sport. However, this is not undertaken in alpine skiing or indeed in any VI sports. Skiers stated that the inclusion of a physical assessment may address the issues of the nonrepresentative testing environment. Aoife described their view on this possible improvement by *"going out and doing it on a mountain."*

### **Interactions With the Classifiers**

The skiers received information and instruction regarding the classification process from a variety of sources including the IPC, World Para Alpine Skiing, other athletes, and their coaching teams. Erin stated that although they did not receive a lot of information, *"once you've been to one classification, you kind of know what's coming,"* which portrays their familiarity with the process. The impact of where the skier receives their information can influence their expectations and *"how they're approaching classification"* (Grace). Rachel describes their experience of receiving an unpredicted outcome from the testing: *"Everyone—my coaches, me, the doctors, our team and everything, they were expecting a B2 result . . . we got a B3 result . . . it was a little strange."*

As well as the influence from external sources, the interaction with the classifier(s) appears to impact the skiers' experience. Although some appreciated the classifier is *"looking for [athletes] trying to con them"* (Aoife), others felt the classifiers *"didn't believe [them] that [they] couldn't see that well"* (Jordan) and were *"trying to make [them] guess the answers"* (Rachel). The origins of these frustrations and misunderstandings seem to stem from inadequate communication on the part of the classifier and a limited grasp by the athlete of the classifier's responsibilities. Skiers also expressed the paucity of information and explanation received during the testing process, with one stating, *"they're [were] not really talk[ing] to me, they were just doing [the tests] and not really explaining anything"* (Gareth), and others stating that their role is to *"just sit . . . and do the test"* (Emma) and that as the athletes, they *"didn't ask anything"* (Jason). Athletes concluded their scarcity of knowledge was due to limited information and communication with the classifier during testing, with responsibility of addressing these misconceptions requiring the involvement of both parties.

The role of the classifier was questioned as some skiers reported receiving comments that were not relevant to the measures being taken and felt the classifiers were giving unsolicited advice. Although the classifiers are vision experts, this was not always positively received: *"I remember him saying, you could have stronger lenses . . . then discussing this with my own optometrist. And him saying that's not true"* (Charlie). Another stated there were told *"maybe in the future, you won't be able to see and all these things, and [that's] difficult for me,"* with the classifier's questioning them, *"do you want to have children?"* (Jason). These skiers felt the



classifiers were delving into areas that were beyond their jurisdiction and unrelated to their role.

## Exclusivity

### **Restriction of Sports Classes**

The skiers challenged the structure and constraints of the sports classes as certain athletes with VI are prevented from competing at international level. Although the focus of this study is on elite alpine skiers who are eligible to compete, the skiers acknowledged those who are confronted with these restrictions. Grace describes the system as *“only inclusive for a certain population”* and believes *“B4s could very much be a part of the sport.”* The category of B4 includes those with VI that do not meet the MIC and are therefore not eligible for Paralympic competition. Aoife recounted their experience of skiing alongside a fellow skier who falls into the B4 category stating it is *“a ridiculous set up”* as *“one authority considers him blind; the other authority doesn’t consider him blind enough.”* Grace appreciates the *“difficult”* circumstances of these skiers who may have *“lived their whole life with a visual impairment to then be told that they’re not disabled enough to be in disability sports.”* The possibility of expanding the sport’s classes by reducing the MIC to allow more athletes with VI to compete has been proposed as *“there is no good reason for them not to ski in a B4 or B5 classification, obviously you know with associated handicaps or factors”* (Aoife). Many agree with the expansion of the sports classes, provided allowances are established to ensure a suitable extension to the classification system. Conversely, some were concerned that the inclusion of more athletes would reduce fairness.

The skiers also alluded to the structural and organizational issues inherent in the existing sports classes. The sports classes consist of B1, B2, and B3, which have been described as *“a strength . . . that it does split up [the athletes]”* (Aoife), although not all agree that three levels are adequate. Since B1 skiers ski with blackout eyeshades, Aoife summarized the system stating that *“you can either be one of two levels of vision, or blind, it just seems a little restricted.”* Subdividing the existing three sports classes within the existing structure has been suggested as a solution to limit the range of VI with a class, but the views on where the boundaries of such sport classes should exist vary greatly. Charlie stated within B3, there *“[is] a really big difference”* between the range of VF defects, and Rachel within the B2 category highlighted the diversity within their sports class stating that *“[there are those in the] B2 class who are like really almost blind and others that can do things like I can also do.”* The range of visual impairments could result in *“inherent unfairness”* as those on the lower end (less impaired) may have an advantage over those at the higher end (more impaired) of the sport class. A suggestion of a further B2 skier in this study was the inclusion of additional sports classes to ensure sufficient categories for the range of VI that exists.

### **Voice of the Athlete**

The alpine skiers have expressed the necessity of the athlete’s involvement in the refinement of the classification system. Despite this, they feel the value of their

voice is not currently recognized. Grace described their sacrifice and perseverance as *“that’s what you do when it’s a Paralympic year and that’s your job,”* and Charlie stated, *“all of us are ski racers, so it’s our job.”* Due to the significance of the classification process on their livelihood, skiers feel they should have the opportunity to share their viewpoints. Emma describes the advantage of sharing their perspective with the expert personnel involved in the testing process and design of the system: *“I think for sure that the doctors have [to] hear the things from . . . athletes and from the skiers so that they can better understand.”* Charlie suggested an *“open forum”* to allow athletes to discuss their concerns and *“let people get their emotions out there.”* Skiers have expressed their discontentment with the lack of input from those with an impairment in the decision-making process. Grace stated, *“[they] think it’s strange that the IPC is a movement for disabled people, but we are kind of excluded from the classification process, and on making the classification process better.”* Charlie suggested consulting with the athletes during the development of the system by *“integrating athletes with disabilities into some of these decision-making processes”* promoting the inclusion of skiers in the system.

Although the skiers stated they want an input, they understand the limitations of their knowledge. Grace recognized the need for a system to provide *“an even playing field”* for athletes but *“can’t come up with a way [in my head] to do that.”* The expert’s involvement in the system has been appreciated, with Erin stating that *“there’s a reason they have got these people, these ophthalmologists and experts doing it,”* and valuing the complexity of structuring the system and the expertise required. Charlie stated, *“a doctor has to decide this,”* when questioned on the issues raised. The athletes suggest the integration of their voice with the experience of the experts would aid in the development of the system.

### **Excluded From the System**

The skiers alluded to the practical issues that have resulted in them feeling excluded from the system. Many expressed their frustrations with the limited opportunities to be classified for alpine skiing and the difficulties of traveling to the testing sites. Almost every skier encountered a significant journey to get to the site of classification, some involving international travel. Charlie described their experience stating that *“[I had to travel] in the middle of a global pandemic to get classified.”* Some skiers raised the possibility of increasing the availability of classification closer to their location but realize the limits may be due to the lack of professional personnel. Oliver described the organization required to attend their most recent classification: *“I had to travel almost four hours. Okay. Ask some somebody to bring me there. Yeah. It’s not easy,”* and also stating *“it is always far,”* experiencing this inconvenience on multiple occasions.

The burden of paperwork was a further issue raised due to the need *“to jump through [hoops], like to justify yourself as a disabled person”* (Grace). The alpine skiers expressed the difficulties they faced in the completion of the paperwork and the stressful situation of obtaining all the necessary information. One stated this felt *“like an administrative burden”* (Charlie). Another described their experience: *“[I] was having difficulty, I was cold calling doctors”* (Aoife). Despite the difficulties encountered, the value of having to attend classification was noted

as a further check of the skier's eligibility. Those whose vision is stable were most dissatisfied with the repeated measurements and information required.

## **(Dis)trust**

### **(Dis)trust in the System**

Although the current system is not faultless, and development is essential to *"make it a bit fairer (Erin),"* skiers expressed their faith in the system, with Erin stating *"If I didn't have faith in it then I wouldn't be racing."* Aoife believes it is *"fundamentally . . . giving reasonably equal opportunity for athletes to compete against each other with different levels of vision."* This trust is also extended to the classifiers as they *"know their job,"* and if an issue was to occur, *"you have the opportunity to . . . protest"* (Aoife). However, some stated the lack of ability to appeal or protest the decisions made by the IPC has made the process feel like a *"closed-door policy as opposed to an open door one"* (Grace). Rachel described the *"argument"* they experienced when protesting their sport class, describing the emotional impact of being deemed noneligible when they were previously B3, and this almost resulted in them not competing in Paralympic competition. However, they were reclassified and subsequently received a B3 result. This experience was echoed by a further skier who experienced the same misclassification, and both remain unaware of why this occurred despite *"their non-changing"* (Charlie) vision and ocular condition. Skiers reported the lack of clarity from the IPC, which has led to their distrust in the system. The concept of *"transparency"* was discussed within the testing procedures, recording of measurements, and the allocation of sport classes, as these processes are not fully evident to the skiers.

### **(Dis)trust in Other Athletes**

Some of the skiers are more concerned with the actions of their fellow competitors: *"It's not about the classifiers or the people who carry out the tests . . . it's the athletes who take the tests who trick the system"* (Jordan). The skiers are aware of the rumors and speculation surrounding the *"controversial"* (Grace) topic of intentional misrepresentation (IM). Although many stated they are not aware of any individuals who deliberately underperform in the testing process to receive a better classification, they are convinced that IM remains an issue in the system. The *"subjective nature"* (Aoife) of the tests has left skiers questioning whether other athletes take advantage. Gareth imagined *"that other people just say I cannot see it . . . I would say it is really easy to fake,"* and Grace stated that within their *"visual category, [I] can't say I really know anyone who has, but I definitely see it as being possible."* A similar interaction with another skier was documented as when questioned, they believed it easy to falsify the test results although confirmed the speculation was based on their own view of the testing rather than evidence to back up their assertion: *"there's issues of maybe people being in the wrong categories. And I feel like it could be . . . easy to maybe fake I've never really met anyone that strikes me as oh, maybe they've maybe they faked it?"* (Rachel).

The suspicion of IM is amplified by the circulation of these rumors between athletes: *"it's fairly easy to cheat, especially as a blind or visually impaired athlete,*

and people know that people talk about that" (Grace). Athletes talk among themselves, "telling . . . stories" (Jack) and recounted the information based on "what [they're] told." Doubts also arise when the skiers compared their visual impairment to others within their sports class, despite the fact they are most aware of the individuality of visual impairment. Jason described their viewpoint on a fellow athlete as "she has her guide; she lives alone and can go really fast at the gate. I have doubts. Like, is she really B1?—I don't know." The idea of IM has resulted in many questioning their competitors and forming judgment of other's experiences.

However, not all believe in the "mythological stories of Para athletes" (Aoife) playing the system. Some "can't imagine the athletes going in" (Charlie) and trying to trick the system due to the risk to their sporting career if caught. The skiers are aware of the consequence involves "lose[ing] your license," and the risk of this penalization is not worth the threat to their career. The focus of the system should be on the athlete and not IM. One skier described the frustrations they feel surrounding this topic as they are "worried about intentional misrepresentation," but attention should be on "how it's [the system is] being structured and rather than how classification is working towards the [athletes] advantage or disadvantage" (Grace). Some believe the focus on IM distracts from the competitive nature of the athlete. The skiers want to be "thinking about the sport itself and how to be faster" (Emma), rather than have the idea that others are trying to play the system.

### ***Distrust in Themselves***

The speculation surrounding IM has resulted in athletes questioning their place within the Paralympic system. Some described the doubts they feel within themselves. Charlie stated they felt "Like actually I shouldn't be a Paralympian and then I shouldn't be in the classes" following misclassification and felt the system portrayed them "as a cheater and stuff and . . . [they were] trying to do things that weren't [their] own opportunities." Those on the margins of eligibility have the experienced greatest uncertainty as this skier stated, "I feel nervous as if my eyesight suddenly got better, or that after eight to 10 times having been classified that something is going to change in my non-changing visual acuity." This feeling of doubt is not only in recently newly classified athletes but also in those who have been classified multiple times. This uncertainty has also resulted in the skiers not questioning aspects of the testing process for fear of this being interpreted by the classifiers as an attempt to "play" the system. Following numerous repeated VF measures, Erin stated, "again you can't turn round and go you're not doing it anymore because they'll think you're playing them."

The identity of the skier is incorporated into their sport class, and to many, classification is not just a pathway into the sporting world but corresponds with their level of impairment. Jason describes the impact of progressing to another sport class. "I don't want to be a B2 skier because that would mean that my vision is getting worse . . . on the other hand, I would like to be a B2 skier because I want to be really competitive." A shift in their classification outcome would signal the deterioration of their eye condition and, while it would provide a competitive advantage by adjusting their time accordingly, it can have an emotional impact on the skier.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of alpine skiers with a VI on the classification system. Literature within this field has primarily focused on the development of the evidence-based procedures in classification, but comparatively fewer studies have considered the athlete's lived experience of both the system and how their VI interacts. Despite this, the importance of the athlete's voice is becoming increasingly recognized as a vital element in establishing a successful system across all Para sports (Allen et al., 2020; Howe & Kitchin, 2017; Powis & Macbeth, 2019). In this discussion, we will further explore the skier's view of classification in relation to our sociological framework to help understand and honor the lived experiences of the athletes (Smith & Perrier, 2014). While these athletes agreed the need for the MIC and that the implementation of a classification system is necessary for the establishment of a level playing field, central to the issues created through this process is an environment characterized as having narrow and exclusive testing procedures, poor communication between classifiers and athletes, and distrust in both the system, between athletes and within athletes themselves.

Individuals with disabilities face barriers in sport participation (Brittain, et al., 2020; Kitchin et al., 2024). While the advancement of Paralympic sport has mitigated some, many barriers still exist (Purdue & Howe, 2015). The skiers in our study recounted the physiosocial restrictions that left them feeling alienated and excluded from the classification process. Frustrations and dissatisfaction of the system can arise from misunderstandings and lack of communication between the athlete and those involved in implementing the system, due to the creation of athlete assumptions based on personal biases of previous experience and limited information. The ultimate outcome from classification is the allocation of a sports class, following the classifier's assessment of the athlete's functional ability (IPC, 2015). However, a sport class not only determines an athlete's place within the sport, but it also shapes an athlete's identity (Powis & Macbeth, 2020), and the allocation of such, whether the athlete feels this is correct or incorrect depending on their knowledge of their own vision impairment, can impact both their confidence in competition and approach to classification in the future (Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020). Communication between the classifier and athlete is therefore vital in constructing the athlete's understanding of the testing procedures and the explanation of the outcome received. Many of the skiers' felt communication was inadequate and subsequently interpreted the classifier's actions as a lack of respect toward them. Not solely isolated to VI sport, Molik et al. (2017) identified communication concerns during their investigation into the classification of wheelchair basketball athletes. This study highlighted the fact that a key aspect of the classifier's role is to communicate with athletes regarding their results, and athletes expected to receive an explanation of how the outcome was achieved. In the cases where this has not been given, the athletes developed a more negative view of the system. Insufficient communication, therefore, serves as a significant barrier to an athlete's understanding of classification, and a failure to communicate effectively with the athletes could devalue the athlete's role and maintain disparities in power between the classifiers and the athletes, enforcing inequality (Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020) and reinforcing disablism. Within this medicalized classification process, it is therefore imperative to maintain a commitment to

inclusivity and ensure athletes are not inadvertently left out of the system, thereby preventing any potential interpretation of ableism. Respondents reported that disablist practices were consequently observed within the classification process by the classifiers, who, at times, reduce the athlete's agency within this situation due to deliberately refraining to provide clear information or explanation about the process. Ensuring athletes are informed prior to classification rests within the classifiers and the sporting federations to uphold the athlete's dignity and rights within the process (Van Dornik & Spencer, 2020).

While some skiers admitted that their reluctance to question classifiers during testing led to limited knowledge, others felt they sought clarification but received unsatisfactory responses or explanation. Some of the skiers did not want to pursue further explanation from the classifier in fear that this would be misinterpreted as an attempt to cheat or deliberately misrepresent themselves and felt pressured in their responses during the testing process, deliberating how this would affect the accuracy of the result produced. Whether deliberate or not, some views on the classification process reveal elements of disablist practices; that, in effect, is a socially engineered undermining of a disabled individual's psychoemotional well-being and reinforcing a medical approach to disability. Throughout Peer's involvement in classification and those of the other athletes portrayed in her report, many experienced doubt and discomfort during the classification process but persevered to achieve access to elite sporting. In this study, we see similarities with Peers's (2012) findings as VI athletes were observed, assessed, and categorized without being fully informed on the process. The classification system if permitted to be conducted in this way undervalues athletes. This requires those in positions of policy to rethink a practice that reinforces discrimination in the name of a level playing field. Resistance to the system is more likely if the athletes feel they are unfairly treated during the process, and there are insufficient explanations of the testing process. A re-evaluation of how athletes are treated through the process may enhance and address these circumstances, ensuring explanations and more considerate approach to the eventual result given the gravity to the athlete's sporting career should be pursued.

Within Para sport, societal restrictions remain, and there are reduced opportunities for persons with disabilities to access sport due to the limited support and funding offered to Para athletes. This extends to a grassroots level, ultimately impacting the sustainability of Para sport (Patatas et al., 2018), and reflecting Thomas's (2007) notions of social and environmental barriers manifest as structural disablism, the skiers described the physical barriers that hinder the accessibility of classification. These barriers are a socially imposed restriction preventing athletes from accessing classification opportunities. A classification result must be obtained before attending competition, and the majority of athletes in this study stated that in order to obtain their classification within the designated time frame, they had to travel internationally due to the lack of facilities close to them. Further opportunities nationally could reduce financial and personal time cost, with Lawson et al. (2022) suggesting domestic classification would also be advantageous to the classifiers as would provide further opportunities for training to enhance their expertise. Given what the gateway classification provides to elite sport, this again is an environmental barrier that needs to be addressed by policymakers.

A further socioenvironmental barrier was the athlete's strain of obtaining access to medical professionals and ensuring accurate fulfillment of the paperwork required to present at classification in the first place. This practice was overly complex and taxing on the skiers. This aligns with previous literature which investigated athletes' views following the implementation of a new sport-specific classification system in Para shooting (Allen et al., 2020). The completion of documentation was not identified as an initial concern in implementing the new system but became apparent to the researchers during the interviews as athletes described the stress associated with having medical forms completed. In addition to this documentary barrier faced by the athletes, the skiers also experienced mental strain in justifying their impairment. Social-relational approaches also consider the psychoemotional well-being of the athlete, emphasizing the importance on the athlete's mental and emotional considerations (Smith & Perrier, 2014). Lawson et al. (2022) considered the emotional impact of the added pressure in Para sport to know more of their condition than would be required in everyday life. Classification can be a benefit to athletes as they can learn more of their condition (Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020), but the context of each athlete should be appreciated. Rachel's comments above about the "strangeness" of her shift from B2 to B3 show the athlete does not face the decisions alone; however, the impact of a revised classification result lingers with the individual over time. While this may mean a change in their elite sport identity, the individual's other identities—and how impairment effects impact those—outside this space may reel from this realization. Given the gravity of the decision of sport class, consideration should be given to how this message is delivered to the athlete and how the athlete is supported postinformation. Upon receiving their classification results, individuals may experience heightened emotions, as the feedback may diverge from their initial expectations.

Doubt about classification was exacerbated by the belief that other skiers are taking advantage of the system, questioning its the overall integrity. IM has also been identified by athletes across different Para sports (Allen et al., 2020; Molik et al., 2017; Powis & Macbeth, 2019), and further studies have reported that this issue should be addressed in the development of any new sport-specific system (Mann & Ravenbergen, 2018). Despite the skiers stating that they do not cheat, many believe the system is subjective and suspect that fellow competitors are deliberately underperforming during the visual examination for a better outcome. The hype surrounding this area of classification has directly impacted the skiers, as many expressed fear and anxiety, heightened by the severe consequences in misrepresenting their impairment. The focus on creating a system of minimizing the impact of IM is recognized as important in promoting the fairness and robustness of the system, but this should not take away from competition, and the key focus should remain on the skiing performance. The assumption by the IPC is that IM is endemic, despite the majority of elite para skiers who were involved with our study claiming that they knew of no one carrying it out. This discrepancy reflects the concept of disablism, illustrating how a prejudice against individuals with disabilities can lead to the internalization of feelings like guilt or inadequacy, questioning their self-worth and position within competition.

In the athletes' view, the exclusivity of the system was also revealed in the foundational eligibility criteria for competition. As described in this study, many

interpreted the current MIC as too selective. Indeed, recent research in alpine skiing has found that the current MIC is not reflective of the level of vision that affects skiing performance. Stalin and Dalton (2021) recommend that alpine skiing should have a cutoff VA  $\geq 0.6$  logMAR (20/80) or  $\leq 59\%$  of VF. Therefore, there is a potential pool of VI skiers excluded as determined ineligible to compete by the current MIC. An ongoing debate centers around the balance between creating a system that is robust and fair while simultaneously ensuring inclusivity (Howe & Jones, 2006). While this study highlights the importance of the athlete's involvement as a mechanism to reduce ableist tendencies in the implementation of a classification system, we recognize the need for evidence-based studies that ensure the most adequate functional assessment of the athlete's ability to perform in the sport and to address the subjectiveness of the tests (Mann & Ravensbergen, 2018).

Although this study focuses solely on the views of the athletes on classification, the researchers appreciate that the experiences of other stakeholders may differ. Interviewers with coaches, classifiers, and other stakeholders would provide a further perspective on the classification system. A Delphi study conducted in 2016 (Ravensbergen et al., 2016) began to investigate this, but this could be further developed. Within this study, athletes across the three international sport classes were interviewed. While there was a smaller proportion of participants within the B1 ( $n = 1$ ) and B2 ( $n = 3$ ) categories compared with B3 ( $n = 7$ ), this is consistent with the distribution of VI categorization in the list of World Para Alpine skiers (2021/2022), where only 8% of 52 athletes have a B1 classification. This study was international, and while language might have been a barrier to participation, the researchers took steps to ensure this study was accessible by offering to conduct the interviews and providing materials and communication in languages other than English.

## Conclusions

This study acknowledges the lack of input from Para athletes in the VI sports classification system and is the first of its kind to investigate the experiences of alpine skiers with VI. Through a social-relational lens, we have demonstrated how classification erects barriers and uses disablist practices to achieve a level playing field. While there should not be a "one size fits all" approach to classification, understanding the skier's experiences can assist all those involved in the management of skiing's classification system to revise what can be seen as an oppressive system. Starting this revision with a co-design of the classification process with current athletes having a voice in its design and implementation would be an ambitious approach but one that would create a more supportive climate for athletes to enter into. Future research is required to address evidence-based measures of the most appropriate visual measurements and criteria for alpine skiing, while this study offers practical recommendations that could be implemented into the system. Ensuring athletes receive clear information and explanations throughout the entire classification process, including preassessment, assessment, and postassessment support, involves the commitment of all stakeholders involved in the athlete's classification journey within alpine skiing and



across all VI sports. The athlete's perspective holds significant value and therefore should be considered in the shaping of the classification system in alpine skiing in the future.

With such a complex and interrelated set of issues, it falls on the IPC and international sporting organizations to explore avenues to address them. For instance, while the IPC Handbook (IPC, 2015) lays out clear publicly available procedures for investigating cases of IM, the discourse of the athletes in this research fear that they are being assumed to be cheating, while simultaneously assuming other athletes are doing it and even questioning each classification decision they do not agree with as evidence of IM occurring. A recommendation for the IPC would be to review the discourse on this and revise their approach to messaging and reporting of IM.

Indeed, the specter of IM provides a useful example of how discourse can impact the psychoemotional well-being of elite Para athletes. None of these athletes had committed IM, and they were unaware of any others that had committed IM, yet they assumed many other athletes were using IM for advantage. On this basis of the evidence from these athletes at the elite end of Para skiing, IM is a psychological barrier casting fear and doubt throughout the system, heightening levels of distrust and, at the extreme, encouraging disablism by sowing doubts in VI classification process. Policymakers should be keen to ensure that the IM debate is framed in a way to not cause psychological impacts on those who are innocent and committed to competing fairly.

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