

Are Paralympic athletes being sufficiently represented in today's society?

Paralympic is defined as: an international competition for people who are disabled.¹ Using the term “disabled” is very broad here, since the term may include developmental defects or mental illness; some psychological disorders or any physical injury which might hamper them to conduct their daily tasks or play any sports. Even though it's a well-known sport and hope for a lot of disabled or we can say ‘differently able’ athletes, but the question is – is it given the fair amount of representation nowadays, or not?

When athletes will get recognition by media outlets like international and national news channel, and social media apps; this will increase their popularity which will not only benefit them economically, socially, but will also have a psychological impact, increasing up their motivation towards their respective sports. Economically it will be a boon, both for the players and the hosting country because it will elevate the hosting country's image internationally. Additionally, it will augment the number of sponsors for them. Also, it is of utmost important that Paralympic athletes are represented equally as Olympic athletes. The reason representation should be equal is that a sense of equality is maintained between able and differently abled people after all - we all are humans and equal at the core. As Eleanor Roosevelt said: all humans being are born free and equal in dignity and rights.²

¹ (The-Paralympics noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation, and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com, n.d.)

² (Miah, 2021)

According to FRANCE24, there were 4,400 Paralympic athletes who participated in the latest Paralympic competition in Tokyo, in 2021.³ At first glance, it might seem enchanting that there are these many Paralympic athletes, but, however it's stated that 15% of the world's masses - have some form of dysfunction.⁴ Thus, according to these statistics and the moral believe mentioned above, begs the question that, are Paralympic athletes being sufficiently represented in contemporary society? Hence, I will be throwing light on this: are they being sufficiently represented or not while discussing its social and economic factors side by side.

First, let us consider that they are being represented sufficiently today. Focusing on the birth of the Paralympics, in 1960, first ever Paralympics was hosted in Italy; it was Rome's 9th Annual international stoke Mandeville games; which, now is called as Rome's 1960 Paralympic games. Consisting of 400 Paralympic athletes, who came from 23 different countries, they competed for 57 medals in 8 distinct sports. From that onwards, it was held after every 4 years interval, and number of countries participation and sports had been also increased; as of now, total countries that participated in Tokyo Paralympics are 160, and total sports are 22, in which 2 new sports are included: para badminton and para taekwondo.⁵ Similarly, Paralympic athletes' number was increased to 4,400 as mentioned earlier. These improvements foreshadow the increase in representation of Paralympic athletes and makes it evident that they are being represented sufficiently. Also, the prevalence and popularity of Paralympic games and its athletes, resulted in the creation of a YouTube channel called 'Paralympic games' which shows highlights and phenomenal plays. It will keep the people informed and excited for para-athletes' competitions. Perhaps the most significant achievement was by channel 4, launching a 90 second film titled as: 'Meet the superhumans' to promote para-athletes, providing viewership and sponsorship to a wider audience.⁶

Moreover, NETFLIX released a movie recently called 'Rising phoenix' on August 26, 2020, which is a documentary and conveys the story of 9 Paralympic athletes and their journeys in competition.⁷ This movie was a huge milestone, since it was released on NETFLIX which is extremely popular

³ (FRANCE24, 2021)

⁴ (Paralympics History - Evolution of the Paralympic Movement | International Paralympic Committee, 2021)

⁵ (Paralympics History - Evolution of the Paralympic Movement | International Paralympic Committee, 2021)

⁶ (Meet the Superhumans | Channel 4, 2012)

⁷ (Movie Review: Netflix's Rising Phoenix is an inspirational triumph, 2020)

and widely available; increasing the audience, since it is a streaming platform. This will cause awareness in the masses of Paralympic athletes' struggles and would aspire people to give them their due respect. According to Aaron Beacon, Paralympics games have been expanded and their international profile has ameliorated significantly, in recent years. Consequently, rights and opportunities of people related to disability across in society has been improving, as well as people's views about it.⁸ One must not forget the provenance of the article: the article is from university of St Mark and St John, and nevertheless it is published in 'international journal sport of communication'. Thus, this shows that the authors of the article are well-informed regarding Paralympics, and they have a great amount of knowledge regarding Paralympics, thus making it relevant. Economically, there had been a huge development in sponsorships for paralympic athletes, as big names like Alibaba and Visa became official partners of Paralympics.⁹ Thus, para-athletes were offered more sponsorships than ever before. As in 2010, Sainsbury was the first brand to solely partner with paralympic games.¹⁰ Moreover, international tennis Federation had taken a huge step to attract sponsorship by implementing two primary strategies: first one is the promotion of grand slam event – in this grand slam tennis tournament, it holds a wheel-chair division; in this a plethora of people are exposed to the wheelchair tennis, despite being not enthusiastic about it at first. The other idea is to arrange only wheelchair tournament to increase the publicity of events, as a result this will increase the probability of a sponsorship.¹¹

On the other side of the coin, considering the viewpoint: "Paralympic athletes are not being represented sufficiently in contemporary era". This point of view is discussed by Erin Pearson on his thesis titled: "informing future media approaches: the perspective of paralympic athletes," where he endorses the fact that the researchers had found hierarchy in para-athletes representation.¹² His thesis challenges the viewpoint of Aaron Beacon who was of the view that Paralympics games status had improved as well as people's viewpoint on disability. Although Erin Pearson argument shows a slight affirmation on the increase on Paralympics popularity, but it is

⁸ (Liam French, 2016)

⁹ (How Paralympic ads could be even more effective, 2021)

¹⁰ (Olympic TOP sponsors to also cover Paralympic Games, 2018)

¹¹ (Brian Gearity, 2013)

¹² (Pearson, 2020)

clearly against on people's perception about disability. According to him, Paralympics is dominant by physicality, sexuality, and masculinity. Even though claim on this is huge, but he justifies this by giving wide range of examples, as one of them is that most of the sports that are famous are of able-bodied and are of man, where they are displaying their masculinity. This has ushered the problem of ableism and gendered representation in Paralympics. As female athletes, athletes of less popular sports and who are "less" able had received less coverage. The hybrid of this incoherent representation and unequal media coverage of paralympic athletes has perpetuated a belief of supercrip stereotype narrative. Erin Pearson elaborates this predicament, by stating disability is framed as an individual problem that one must "overcome" to achieve success. These campaigns have used the slogan of "superheroes" for Paralympics like in "meet the superheroes in 2012" and "we are the superheroes in 2017."¹³ This might seem harmful as it inculcates the supercrip narrative in masses which is: If you had overcome the disability, you are successful. The strength of this is that it's published by university of Western Ontario, is of 2020 and deals with wide range of topics: media representation of paralympic athletes, media personal and paralympic athlete perspective on media coverage was also explored in-depth. Additionally, it is well-suited for the topic as the focus is on contemporary society. The only downside is that it is anecdotal, however, it dealt with wide range of topic. According to Jon, the media representation for them is still not enough as 15% population of the world is disabled, and there are fewer big names in Paralympics.¹⁴ This dilemma could be decreased to a huge extent, if media plays the key role of properly representing them: all the media outlets should follow the rule of giving disabled athletes the same value and respect as able-bodied athletes – they should make a bona fide attempt to maintain equilibrium when reporting either sides triumphs or defeat, accomplishments, or disasters and etc.¹⁵ According to university of Kent's project, media must, at any cost, should shun the notion of impairment - which does not equate to suffering, so that masses do not look them with pity. The provenance of the source is university of Kent's academic repository, and the project described the guideline on how to properly cover the Rio 2016 Paralympics, signed by 2 highly authoritative personalities: Sir Phillip Craven IPC President and Andrew Parson Brazilian Paralympic committee president, this signifies its validity.

¹³ (Pearson, 2020)

¹⁴ (How Paralympic ads could be even more effective, 2021)

¹⁵ (Athanasios and Doralice, 2016)

Jon states that the hard truth of para-athlete is - that they are still often ignored by sponsors even though they have Alibaba and Visa as their official partners. Above this, their viewership is compared to low than their sister event Olympics. Jon suggested that the effectiveness of ads can be increased by telling inspiring stories of para-athletes while entertaining them as well. He used Toyota 2021 ad as the prime example, which showed a paralympic swimmer Jessica long and her inspiring journey from orphanage to the Tokyo games. This ad received high ratings from the audience and was regarded as profoundly motivating.¹⁶ Laura M. Nicosia says in her book: through a distorted lens in chapter 3 that it's of paramount significance that billboards and magazine advertisements must be used to propagate their achievements and Paralympic athletes themselves to a larger audience; this won't only show their image, rather it will educate the masses about them about their position, importance, and their role in the society.¹⁷ This will increase their popularity in those towns and cities drastically. To implement this the most important thing for International Paralympic Society {IPC} to do is increase funding for the advertisement. This action will encourage sponsors to approach them more frequently, also they will be paid to advertise the products. This will be a huge economic benefit for them and probably the most significant one.

My opinion before the research was neutral as I lacked fair amount of knowledge for both sides and it would not be accordance to my rule to draw the conclusion before acquiring knowledge about them. As I went through the research, my opinion was lying towards the first perspective which was Paralympic athletes are represented equally albeit it was changed later-on, and I draw my conclusion: which was that the Paralympic athletes are not represented sufficiently today. Why I think this, is because as Athanasios mentions - Paralympic athletes are not represented equally compared to the Olympic athletes and their representation on media is mostly done on the notion of sympathy, which diminishes the acknowledgment of their actual diligence and strenuous efforts that they had put in their respective sports.¹⁸ Moreover, billboards and advertisement in social media apps are not seen for these players, which in my opinion sets error in their representation. How, I was convinced about their lack of adequate representation as this is not in equilibrium to the human technology advancement. Perhaps the most important point was - the Erin Pearson argument about supercrip narrative and predicament of gender representation in Paralympics by

¹⁶ (How Paralympic ads could be even more effective, 2021)

¹⁷ (Rebecca A. Goldstein, 2017)

¹⁸ (Athanasios and Doralice 2016)

media.¹⁹ After contemplating on the points that were set by him and evaluating them in this contemporary situation - my stance was solidified on this perspective. To further strengthen my conclusion, this thesis is of 2020, so it is credible and perfectly resonates with my topic: which focuses on “paralympic athletes’ representation in today’s society”. Thus, this became the main tipping point for shaping up my opinion.

Although the conclusion of this essay is - “Paralympic athletes are not represented sufficiently in today’s society,” but still further research is needed to verify this standpoint. As this essay lacks primary research method. To counter this, unstructured interviews could be conducted with Paralympic athletes as well as public surveys; this will provide an insight in regarding their representation as well as the public’s opinion. This will also provide an in-depth detail in this topic and would clear out any further misconceptions. Moreover, regional differences should also be looked upon as some areas might naturally have more representation in their countries while others don’t. After reflecting upon different viewpoints and evaluating them thoroughly; I concluded that Paralympic athletes are not being represented sufficiently in contemporary society, hence, work should be done both in international, national and community level to increase their representation, albeit this essay needs more research to draw a conclusion.

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¹⁹ (Pearson, 2020)

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