

**Beyond the Podium: Investigating the Legacy of the London 2012 Paralympic Games on
Public Perception of Disability in the United Kingdom**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

“To enable Paralympic athletes to achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world” was the International Paralympic Committee’s vision statement during the London 2012 Paralympics (International Paralympic Committee [IPC], 2012, p. 7). This vision statement begins with a phrase focused on the benefits enjoyed by Paralympic athletes, then shifts the focus onto inspiring able-bodied viewers. The first theme was employed by the International Paralympic Committee in the broadcast of Paralympic events, and the second during the advertisement and opening ceremony. The Paralympic Games are organized by the International Paralympic Committee, a non-profit which hosts the event every two years in conjunction with the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. This event allows elite athletes with a variety of physical and intellectual disabilities to partake in athletic events which they would otherwise be unable to participate in at an elite level (IPC, 2012). During the London 2012 Paralympic Games, the IPC had the opportunity to host an iteration of the Paralympic Games which could be a catalyst for positive social change in the United Kingdom.

Disability rights are critically important in the United Kingdom. It is estimated that a quarter of the United Kingdom’s population experiences a disability (Kirk-Wade, 2023). Disabled Brits are subject to stigma and discrimination perpetuated by harmful stereotypes. This in turn creates unequal access to employment, healthcare, and education, which the United Kingdom’s government has failed to adequately address (UK Independent Mechanism, 2018, p. 28). These factors in turn cause increased rates of poverty and poor living conditions (p. 21). Social stigma and discrimination create, enforce, and perpetuate harmful ableist frameworks. Discrimination against athletes with disabilities is enforced by both legal frameworks and social systems.

International sporting events reach a large audience, and thus can be utilized as a powerful tool to create a social legacy within the host country. The media coverage of an athletic event gives insight into the nature of the legacy the host wants to leave behind within the host country (Misener, 2012, p. 345). The London 2012 Paralympic Games were broadcast on Channel 4 for a total of over 150 hours. This broadcast was viewed by 39.9 million people within the United Kingdom alone. An additional 2.7 million spectators attended some portion of the Paralympic Games (London 2012 Paralympic Games, 2012). These statistics indicate that the messages expressed by the broadcasting and advertising of the Paralympic Games reached nearly two thirds of the United Kingdom's population. The IPC polled British viewers following the London 2012 Paralympic Games to assess their social impact. Using this, this iteration of the Paralympic Games can be studied to evaluate the potential sporting mega-events have for improving perceptions of people with disabilities.

Some believe that the Paralympic Games are an essential tool in reducing ableist attitudes and policies, whereas others see it as a tokenization and misrepresentation of the disabled community. In response to these contrasting viewpoints, it is crucial to investigate the effectiveness of attempts to address the discrimination faced by people with disabilities. My research explores the impact of the marketing and broadcast of the London 2012 Paralympic Games on public perception of individuals with disabilities in the United Kingdom. In this thesis, I will argue that the advertisement of the London 2012 Paralympic Games perpetrated harmful tropes while the broadcast of the events featured socially responsible coverage of Paralympic athletes. As a result, the London 2012 Paralympic Games improved perceptions of disabled elite athletics but failed to be an effective social intervention mitigating broader social barriers faced by people with disabilities in the United Kingdom.

Literature Review

In the 1930s, organizations for disabled athletes began emerging in the United Kingdom within preexisting athletic communities. During this time, spinal injuries resulted in almost certain death; however, advancements in science during WWII significantly lengthened the life expectancy of spinal injury survivors, resulting in a new demographic of disabled Brits. Despite this breakthrough in medicine, paraplegic veterans were subject to extreme social stigma upon their return to the United Kingdom (Brittain, 2010, p. 8). Ludwig Guttman, Director of the Spinal Injuries Unit at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital, pioneered the idea of using sport as a means of rehabilitating veterans with spinal injuries. In addition to strengthening muscles, sport provided an avenue for paraplegic veterans to gain respect and incorporate themselves back into British society (p. 9). The day of the opening ceremony of the 1948 London Olympic Games, 16 of Dr. Guttman's patients congregated in Stoke Mandeville to demonstrate their archery skills to spectators. This became known as the first Stoke Mandeville Games (DePauw, 2012, p. 21).

Following this event, interest in disabled sport gained traction as Dr. Guttman presented his findings at international medical conferences and his patients were transferred to other hospitals (Brittain, 2010, p. 10). As a result, the Stoke Mandeville Games Wheelchair Sports Federation emerged in Britain to organize international sporting events for disabled athletes (DePauw, 2012, p. 21). The Stoke Mandeville games were once again hosted in conjunction with the Olympics following the 1960 Rome Olympic Games (Brittain, 2010, p. 12). The Games introduced additional impairment categories during the Toronto 1976 Games (p. 13). In 1988, to reflect the expanding athlete demographic, the Stoke Mandeville Games were renamed the "Paralympic Games" derived from the Latin word "para" meaning "next to" the Olympic Games (p. 18). In 1989, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) was formed as the international

governing body coordinating international disabled sporting events. From this point on, the IPC has maintained a partnership with the International Olympic Committee and the Paralympics have been held two weeks following the Games. (DePauw, 2012, p. 23).

The London 2012 Paralympic Games fell in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The United Kingdom's financial system was experiencing turmoil as its Parliament attempted to enact financial restructuring to recover its economy. Financial resources for people with disabilities underwent disproportionately large cuts when the United Kingdom altered its welfare funding. Between 2008 and 2012, disabled people lost £1,200 a year under the new benefits system compared to a loss of £300 a year for their non-disabled counterparts (Boardman, 2020, p. 209). These cuts resulted in heightened public interest in disability welfare benefits and an excessive focus on fraudulent claims for disability benefits. As a result, the media climate in regard to disabled people in the early 2010s was increasingly hostile compared to before the 2008 financial crisis (Briant et al., 2013, p. 886). The media narrative surrounding disability is integral to public perception of people with disabilities. Media is a powerful tool for creating social change at a collective level by influencing the opinion of large numbers of individuals (Happer & Philo, 2013, p. 333). The media narrative surrounding disabled people in the United Kingdom in the early 2010s characterized them as undeserving of governmental support and offered them up as a scapegoat for the United Kingdom's budget deficit (Briant et al., 2013, p. 880).

Although the London 2012 Paralympic games were widely praised for promoting inclusivity in the ableist world of elite athletics, the London 2012 Paralympic Games were subject to criticism by disability rights activists. One of the main concerns is that the physical ability of Paralympic athletes grossly and harmfully misrepresents the experiences of most

people with disabilities by portraying only disabled bodies which are at the peak of athletic ability. Additionally, the Games are thought to tokenize disabled athletes to inspire able-bodied viewers (Braye et al., 2013, p. 992). In coverage of disabled athletic events, disabled athletes are often reduced to “inspirational” storylines to inspire able-bodied people. The emphasis on creating a storyline surrounding the disability of the athletes rather than their achievement within their sport can be seen as problematic (Misener, 2012, p. 351). In Shew’s book *Against Technoableism*, she explains that disabled athletes are often the victim of something she refers to as “inspiration porn.” She writes, “inspiration porn makes disabled people into objects to inspire others; we must make ourselves into spectacles whose purpose is to motivate nondisabled people or make them feel good” (Shew, 2023, p. 43). When applied to the Paralympics, it begs the question of whether the goal of the event is truly to uplift disabled athletes, or simply to inspire able-bodied viewers.

Disabled athletes are often subject to common tropes in the media which draw unnecessary attention to their medical history and characterize them as excessively moral and strong. Disabled activists have raised concerns about how the language and imagery used by media produced for the Paralympics Games may perpetuate a sense of “othering” (Braye et al., 2013, p. 993). In her book *Against Technoableism*, Shew coins the most common tropes applied to disabled athletes as “Inspirational Overcomers” (2023, p. 42). She explains that this trope “exceptionalizes, rather than normalizes, disability as a facet of the human experience and exaggerates how different we are from nondisabled people” (p. 42). She goes on to explain that, “the standard narratives about individuals ‘overcoming’ disabilities tokenize certain types of disability while erasing others” (p. 43). The Paralympic Games highlight primarily elite athletes with limb differences or visual impairments. As a result of this phenomena, some disabled

activists have raised concerns about the Game, stating that they don't feel represented by disabled Paralympians, who do not reflect the diversity of the disabled community or the disabled lived experience (Braye et al., 2013, p. 990).

In this thesis, I will employ Disability STS framework to identify the presence of harmful tropes in the London 2012 Paralympic Games. This framework will provide a lens with which to watch the footage of the Games with understanding of historical shortcomings of advertisements and broadcast coverage of elite disabled athletes. This framework asserts that humans engage with the world through their bodies, and in the conventional sense of a "normal body," the body is not in the forefront of our minds because it is not experiencing pain or discomfort (Blume, 2014). Disability is often "medicalized," meaning that certain disabilities are seen through a medical lens when such a perspective is often unwelcome. For example, some members of the deaf community ask to be addressed as a minority rather than someone with medical impairments. Whereas most people view cochlear implants as a miracle technology with the potential to transform deaf people's lives by giving them the ability to conform to societal expectations, some deaf people choose not to use cochlear implants because they don't want to contribute to the erasure of a community with a rich language and culture (Shew, 2023). Technology is most often developed by able-bodied people to "fix" people with disabilities but can be viewed by people within a disabled community as negatively impacting their social agenda.

As a result of the lenses with which able bodied people often view disability, there are common media tropes which disabled athletes are subject to. A common term within Disability STS theory is called the "supercrip" narrative. This narrative sensationalizes the challenges disabled athletes must overcome as the focus of the story, rather than the focus being on the

achievement itself (Misener, 2012, p. 351). Disability STS challenges the conventional notion that disabled people are “broken” and views them as simply experiencing the world through different physical or mental constraints. This framework will be employed to analyze the ways athletes with disabilities are portrayed in the advertisements and broadcast of the London 2012 Paralympic Games in the United Kingdom.

Methods

I used discourse analysis to analyze Channel 4 broadcast footage of the Paralympic Games and the commercials they were marketed with between July 17, 2012, and September 9, 2012. I used the concept of media frames, which are the aspects of an event which are highlighted in the media coverage of an event (Misener, 2012, p. 348). I also focused on legacy concepts, which are ideas incorporated into an event intended to create social, political, or economic change that outlast the event itself (p. 345). Academic journal articles that synthesize opinions of British people with disabilities informed my understanding of the varying stances that disabled British people have on the Paralympic Games. The message that the IPC had intended to spread was ascertained using the advertisements and opening ceremony of the Paralympic Games. I used statistics from impact reports published by the IPC and Channel 4 to evaluate the real-life impact that these sources had. I paid particular attention to word choice, camera angles, and common motifs used in the broadcast footage and commercials.

Analysis

During the planning of the London 2012 Paralympic Games, the IPC made deliberate decisions with the aim of furthering disability rights in the United Kingdom. The narrative that the advertisements and broadcast coverage of the Paralympic Games chose to employ has an impact on public perception of the athletic event and its participants. The IPC is acutely aware of

this, and carefully crafts the Games image through deliberate branding. The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games Post-Games Report lists “promot[ing] a positive legacy from the Olympic Games for the Host Cities and Host Countries” (University of East London, 2015, p. 8) as a primary objective. This report includes a section titled “Perceptions about People with Disabilities in Society” (p. 90), which details conclusions about the social implications of the Paralympic Games. The resources dedicated to the assessment of the social outcomes of the games indicate that the IPC was aware of existing prejudices faced by disabled people in the United Kingdom and felt that challenging biases was an important outcome of the Games.

Despite the IPC’s vision for the London 2012 Paralympics to be a catalyst for positive social change, the advertising of the Games subjected Paralympic athletes to the harmful “supercrip” trope (Misener, 2012, p. 352). In the video advertisement for the London 2012 Paralympic Games, Paralympic athletes are shown training for their event overlaid with an energetic rap song. The music comes to a halt followed by depictions of soldiers falling to the ground in combat, a solemn pregnant woman in a doctor’s office, and a car overturning on the highway. The upbeat music abruptly returns along with a video of an athlete sitting in a wheelchair next to a mangled car. A high action montage of Paralympic athletes competing in their event is shown. The ad concludes with the text “Meet the Superhumans” and pans to athletes from a variety of sports lined up in a gritty stadium hallway under moody lighting, reminiscent of images of teams of superheroes viewers are familiar with from franchises such as the Fantastic Four or the Avengers (NewsPicks, 2018). The inclusion of imagery representing the ways that the athletes became disabled in the promotion of the Paralympics appeals to the idea of disabled people as “heroes” who have overcome great tragedy and hardship. This advertisement paints disabled athletes as “Inspirational Overcomers” (Shew, 2023, p. 42) who have overcome

unfathomable obstacles to succeed at their sport. It equates athletic achievement with moral value in a way we don't see with able-bodied athletes. The more physically adept a disabled person appears, the more virtuous and "heroic" we are conditioned to believe they are. This is harmful to the IPC's agenda because it implies that disabled people who have not achieved athletically are failing to "overcome" their disability. The crafting of a storyline in this commercial around the origin of their disability takes the focus away from their achievement and portrays them as an object of curiosity or pity.

The "Meet the Superhumans" tagline used in this video advertisement sensationalizes rather than uplifts Paralympic athletes. The marketing team for the London 2012 Paralympic Games launched the "Meet the Superhumans" campaign, which would continue to be a major theme in the marketing of the Paralympic Games throughout the next decade (Innes, 2022). It is clear that the intention of the tagline is to subvert stereotypes of disabled people by depicting them as "powerful," however the use of the word "Superhuman" has the paradoxical effect of being dehumanizing by depicting disabled elite athletes as being more than, and thus distinct from, humans. It also sets Paralympic athletes apart from the wider disabled community in a way that's harmful to the IPC's agenda to promote athletics among all disabled people, not just elite athletes. This campaign likely perpetuated stereotypes and contributed to an attitude of "othering" (Braye et al., 2013, p. 993). The "Meet the Superhumans" campaign missed the mark of empowering disabled athletes by instead sensationalizing them and subjecting them to the "supercrip" stereotype.

This trope continued into the Opening Ceremony, which incorporated speeches, performances, and visuals that put unnecessary pressure on Paralympic athletes to further disability rights in the United Kingdom in addition to excelling at their sport. The 2012

Paralympic Opening Ceremony featured singers, actors, and dancers with disabilities. The ceremony commenced as the United Kingdom's National Anthem was performed by a choir of deaf British singers. In the speech by the Chairman of the London Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, he declared that "London 2012 [will] be a landmark for people with disabilities everywhere." In another speech, the President of the IPC referred to the athletes as "catalysts for change and role models for an inclusive society." The words "equality" and "rights" were motifs in the final performance (Paralympic Games, 2012a). The constant attempt to promote messages that uplift disabled people may have subjected the athletes to societal pressure to push an agenda, rather than allowing them to focus on their athletics. The Opening Ceremony for the London 2012 Paralympic Games attributed moral value to the Paralympians' athletic performance by associating it with social justice.

In line with the outcomes the Paralympic Games sought to inspire, the broadcast footage of the Paralympic events evaded the application of tropes that are commonly applied to disabled athletes through equitable and professional coverage of the Games. The broadcast of the Men's 100m Finals below knee amputee category contained informative comments about assistive technology as it pertained to strategy, performance, and regulations. The commentators discussed the sport candidly and without comparison to Olympic track athletes. The Paralympians were compared to other athletes in their category of their event, but never to Paralympians in other categories. The focus remained on the athlete's performance, running career, and nationality, and the "supercrip" and "inspirational overcomer" tropes found in the advertisement of the Games were absent from the broadcast of this event. Additionally, there was no discussion of the "origin" of the athletes' disabilities (Paralympic Games, 2012b). In the coverage of the Australia vs. Canada Wheelchair Basketball Men's Final event, the commentators possessed a deep

knowledge of the sport of wheelchair basketball, and of the players and teams competing. The commentary remained relevant to the events of the game, without promoting any “inspirational” messages. The athletes were not subjected to undue comparisons to able-bodied athletes or to the sport of basketball. The role of the wheelchair was discussed as relevant to rules or gameplay but was not sensationalized. The camera remained trained on the athletes and did not sensationalize the assistive technology (Paralympic Games, 2012c). Professional discussion of information pertinent to the Paralympic events being broadcast encouraged a perception of Paralympic sports as well established and competitive, while avoiding the harmful tropes present in the advertisement of the Game or the “inspirational” messages found in the opening ceremony.

The widespread consumption of the London 2012 Paralympic Games broadcast within the United Kingdom resulted in a positive social impact in regard to British perceptions of disabled athletics. The Paralympics were able to reach an incredibly large audience, indicating that the potential for societal change was vast. In a report published by the House of Lords, it was claimed that “68% of people said that it had a favorable impact on their perceptions of disability sport” (Select Committee on Olympic and Paralympic Legacy, 2014, p. 33). This data indicates that viewers in the United Kingdom responded positively to the Paralympic Games. This iteration of the Paralympic Games was able to demonstrate the potential mass media has for improving perceptions of disability sport. Some viewers argue that the Paralympics display an unrealistic degree of athleticism which does not accurately represent the disabled community. In a 2012 study examining the opinions of British people with disabilities in regard to the London 2012 Paralympic Games, one respondent explained his concern about the Games: “I’m afraid that the focus on elite Paralympians promotes an image of disabled people which is so far from the typical experiences of a disabled person that it is damaging to the public understanding of

disability” (Braye et al., 2013, p. 988). Although realistic representation of the lives of people with disabilities currently occupies an extremely small part of media and entertainment, this shortfall cannot be pinned on the Paralympics alone. The disabled community is extremely diverse. While there is a much lower rate of sports participation among disabled people, disabled athletes encompass all levels of athleticism including the elite athletic ability possessed by Paralympians. Increasing visibility of disabled athletes and freeing them of the responsibility of representing all disabled people is necessary. Promoting coverage of a wider variety of disabled experiences is a more suitable solution to the problem of unequal representation than suspending coverage of the Paralympic Games.

Despite improving British perceptions of disabled athletics, disabled participation in sports improved only marginally, indicating a limited ability for the Paralympic franchise to promote a positive social legacy in the United Kingdom. In post-Games research, the British Paralympic Association claimed that “8 out of 10 disabled people are considering taking up sport following the Games” (Select Committee on Olympic and Paralympic Legacy, 2014, p. 32). However, evidence arose to contradict this alleged shift in athletic participation among disabled people. A survey conducted by the Sport and Recreation Alliance following the Paralympic Games found that 89% of athletic facilities saw no change in the number of disabled people joining following the 2012 Paralympics (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2012, p. 11). Former Paralympic swimmer Elizabeth Walker-Young, has been quoted as praising the Paralympics for expanding participation in elite sport among disabled people, but was disappointed that the increased participation in sports had not “trickled down” to the amateur level (Wolbring, 2012). Although the Games have achieved wide success and large viewership, they have failed to make an impact in the lives of disabled recreational athletes and those with disabilities getting into the

world of sports at a beginner level. In the months following the Paralympic Games, athletic facilities reported that only 39% had appropriate equipment to allow disabled people to participate. Furthermore, only 36% of athletic facilities had staff trained to work with people with disabilities (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2012, p. 11). A follow up study published the following year revealed that only one third of athletic facilities were equipped with accessible infrastructure (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2013, p. 60). These barriers may explain the disparity between the number of disabled people who were considering participating in athletics and the lack of influx of disabled people using athletic facilities in the United Kingdom following the London 2012 Paralympic Games. Despite this, the emergence of the opportunity for disabled athletes to compete at a world class level as a result of the Paralympics is valuable and should not be discounted.

In contrast to their efforts to expand their positive influence beyond the scope of elite athletes with disabilities, the London 2012 Paralympics failed to establish a legacy of improving public perceptions of people with disabilities. Research conducted by LOCOG and BBC Comm/Res concluded that 2 out of 3 respondents believed that the Games would lead to a “greater acceptance of disabled people” (Select Committee on Olympic and Paralympic Legacy, 2014, p. 33) Despite this expected improvement in perceptions, statistics following the Paralympic Games painted a different picture. The Select Committee on Olympic and Paralympic Legacy (2014) stated:

A hoped-for legacy of the Paralympics was the transformation of general perceptions of disability. Extensive media coverage had a powerful effect on changing general public perceptions of disabled sport. There was less clear evidence that there was a similar impact on the broader perception of people with disabilities (p. 33).

This statement exemplifies the failure of the Paralympics to cultivate real life, sustained positive change for disabled Brits. The London 2012 Paralympic Games made elite athletes with disabilities far more visible to the general British public than before the Games. This achievement does not, however, provide representation for the lived experience of the majority of disabled Brits. As a result, it can be concluded that the IPC failed to achieve their goal of improving overall perceptions of people with disabilities within the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

My research aims to understand the impact that the London 2012 Paralympic Games has had on public perception of people with disabilities. People experiencing disabilities will continue to suffer from the impacts of ableism in the workplace, education, transportation, and sports if our society fails to provide effective social interventions. A comprehensive understanding of the shortcomings of the London 2012 Paralympic Games advertisement could be used to improve marketing of the Paralympics and similar events in the future. In addition, it makes a case for the Paralympics as an effective intervention to improve perception of disabled sport among viewers. Despite this positive outcome, it sheds light on the fact that although the London 2012 Paralympics may have been effective in producing interest in athletics among disabled people, barriers to equality prevent people with disabilities from turning that interest into actual participation. The identification of the worldwide broadcast of the Paralympics as ineffective at dispelling stereotypes and improving the perceptions of people with disabilities in the United Kingdom beyond the world of sport can inform the future of disability rights advocacy. The Paralympic Games franchise has evolved since the 2012 iteration, and failures and successes in future marketing and broadcast of the Paralympics could provide more information about how the Games should be run.

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