



# Gendered Representations of Disability in Paralympic Media

Research Report

Gendered Representations of Disability in Paralympic Media

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## FOREWORD

This report details the findings of a research project that aimed to provide new critical insights on the diversity of Paralympic online media representation, including Paralympians' social media practices, and the role of this content in shaping inclusive disability discourses.

Led by Dr Emma Pullen at Loughborough University and funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (Project Reference: AH/T006684/1), the research aimed to:

1. Document the various forms of diverse representations and narratives used to frame the reporting of British Paralympic athletes in online mainstream news outlets before, during and after the Tokyo Paralympic Games.
2. Explore the diversity of Paralympians' self-representational practices on visual social media networking sites (Instagram and TikTok) and the various forms of content generation.
3. Document how social media users engage with, and are influenced by, Paralympic athletes' social media practices and the role this content plays in shaping inclusive and progressive cultural disability discourses.

The research focused on analysis of Paralympic representation across parts of the online media ecology using an intersectional approach that attended to the gendered, sexual, and racial diversity of online content. The findings in this report highlight important cultural shifts in Paralympic content production and representation in online media ecologies. The findings indicate greater diversity in narrative frames used in Paralympic online news reporting. Findings also revealed the importance of Paralympians' user-generated content on visual social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok in challenging disability stereotypes at the intersection of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, research with social media users who follow Paralympic content demonstrated the value of Paralympians' user-generated content in engaging with a diverse networked public sphere and its potential as a tool for disability advocacy, renewed forms of progressive and inclusive representation and gendered empowerment.

The findings in the report raise a number of important questions for a range of cross-sectorial stakeholders – including, Paralympic, media, and disability/gender organisations, policymakers and advocates – with a vested interest in maximising diverse and equitable Paralympic media for sustainable and inclusive social change. The report provides directions for future discussion and research on this issue.

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# INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, Paralympic media coverage in the United Kingdom (UK) has championed progressive disability representation and has had a positive influence on shaping wider cultural disability representation and public attitudes toward disability.<sup>1</sup>

Although previous research has demonstrated the value of Paralympic media as a vehicle for social change, it has rarely expanded on issues concerning gender inclusivity and diversity within new online mediated representations.

Issues concerning gender inclusivity and diversity in Paralympic media came to the fore in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games (which took place in the summer of 2021) which was celebrated as the first Paralympics to include the most female competitors and with the highest representation of LGBTQI+ athletes.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics was marked as the most digitally accessible Games, driving new forms of audience interaction, representational content and disability advocacy through social media platforms. The global disability campaign #WeThe15, a political movement that intends to end disability discrimination, was launched during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games in an attempt to harness the power of digital connectivity and engage with an increasingly diverse networked public sphere.

Considering this important context, and building on previous research, this project paid much-needed attention to the way disability intersects with gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity in online Paralympic media ecologies (online news and social media content) and asked critical questions concerning cultural mechanisms of inclusion, empowerment and marginalisation in Paralympic media.

# METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on three integrated datasets consisting of:

1. A qualitative media analysis of online news coverage and featured articles of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games.
2. An intersectional discourse analysis of the most popular British Paralympians' social media content.
3. Focus group research with a demographically diverse audience who engaged with Paralympic media and Paralympians' social media content.

## Online Media Analysis

A qualitative media analysis of online coverage of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games was conducted. This included news reports, commentaries and featured articles in popular lifestyle magazines. This dataset was used to conduct a systematic reading of the modes of representations and narratives used to frame the reporting of the Paralympic Games with a particular focus on visual and semiotic constructions of Paralympians. This data was collected across a 4-month period starting from 1st July 2021. A LexisNexus database search was conducted daily for relevant articles using the Key search terms – 'Paralympic(s)', 'Paralympian', 'Para athletes' and 'Tokyo'. This was complimented by a Google search using the same key terms. The inclusion criteria for this study stipulated that the articles must be published in English and discuss British Paralympians. The exclusion criteria were: any article which was not written for a mainstream British news outlet; any article which was not written in English; articles which did not mention Paralympians or Paralympics; and any satirical/spoof articles. Duplicate articles were also excluded. The dataset resulted in 109 articles and drawn from digital news platforms of broadsheets and tabloids (e.g. Guardian, BBC, Independent, Daily Mail, The Times) in addition to the popular cultural magazines such as British Vogue, GQ and Wired. Each article was analysed according to discursive theme and narrative structure. The articles were also scanned for specific Paralympians who were highlighted either in its title or content.

## Social Media Analysis

An intersectional discourse analysis of British Paralympians' social media content was conducted to examine the diversity of Paralympians' self-representational practices on visual social media networking sites (Instagram and TikTok) and the various forms of content generation. This dataset provided further insight into the way social media practices drive, challenge and intersect with the wider Paralympic media ecology (mainstream news, broadcasting etc.). A purposeful sampling criterion was used to establish the

sample size based on popularity (see p.9), which included the top 32 of Paralympians who are active content creators, have public social media accounts, are most popular on social media (highest Instagram following) and those who were featured in the online news articles (see above). The procedure and sample size were consistent with previous content analytic research. The dataset was reduced to 160 images for analysis. A coding protocol was developed based on a multimodal discourse analysis often used in analytic explorations of visual media online self-presentations. Multimodal discourse analysis identified compositional, semiotic and (critical) discursive representations enabling an intersectional reading of social media posts.

## Social Media Users

Focus group research was conducted with a diverse group of individuals (n=30) who identified as disabled and/or had experience with disability. This dataset was used to understand the ways in which social media users perceive, engage and interact with online content produced by Paralympians. The focus groups took place between December 2021 and March 2022. In order to capture a diverse range of opinions, a screener was used to purposeful sample a select a group of interviewees who are diverse in age (18+), ethnicity, gender identification, geographical location, social class, education and types of disability/impairment. The interviews took place online in order to be accessible to disabled participants, including those with visual impairments and those that were shielding from Covid-19.

## Ethics

Data collection proceeded following full ethical approval from Loughborough University and in compliance with General Data Protection Regulations. Focus group interviewees provided full informed consent to participate in the project and to process their data confidentially and anonymously. All data is archived in the Loughborough University Data Repository and publicly available (doi. org/10.17028/rd.lboro.19175261).

# KEY FINDINGS



## ONLINE NEWS MEDIA

- Media frames have moved away from the dominant and controversial 'superhuman' narrative centred on individual stories of overcoming disability, and instead encompass progressive discussions concerning disability inequality, rights-based issues, and the importance of a diverse Paralympic movement in relation to gender, race, class and LGBTQI+ representation.
- The majority of online news articles featured female Paralympians – predominantly from White racial backgrounds – but were not coded as explicitly gendered or framed within gendered language.



## SOCIAL MEDIA

- The most popular (followed) Paralympians on visual social media platforms Instagram and TikTok were female.
- There was a significant lack of racial and ethnic diversity across the sample of Paralympian bloggers.
- Paralympians' social media posts predominantly focused on promoting Paralympic sport and capitalising on commercial brand ambassadorial opportunities. Very few athletes used social media to (explicitly) engage with disability-related issues and promote/connect with disability equality movements such as #WeThe15.
- Paralympians' social media content often challenged disability gender/sexual stereotypes through highly stylised, empowering and subversive images.



## SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

- The social media site Instagram is the most popular platform on which audiences engaged with Paralympic content and interact with Paralympians.
- Audiences who identified as disabled valued the way Paralympians use Instagram to visually counter gendered/sexual stereotypes of disability.
- Audiences at the intersection of gender nonconforming and ethnically diverse identities were cognisant of the lack of diversity across British Paralympic social media content.
- Paralympians' personal stories of disability – captured through Instagram Photos, Stories and Reels – were particularly important to disabled audiences who perceived this content as relatable and empowering.

# ONLINE NEWS MEDIA ANALYSIS

## 4.1 Media analysis of online Paralympic coverage

In the 4-month period from July 1st 2021, 102 news articles about the Paralympics were identified from the database search. These were published by the BBC (33), Daily Mail (8), The Guardian (9), The Independent (29), The Telegraph (9), The Times (7), Metro (2) and Express (5) - see figure 1. Articles consisted of reports on that day's Paralympic achievements in Tokyo; logistic issues surrounding the Games (e.g., Covid-19); political issues surrounding the Games (e.g., disability rights; #WeThe15 campaign); opinion pieces; and Paralympians' backstories. An additional 7 articles were identified, published by popular lifestyle magazines (such as GQ, Vogue, Self and Harper's Bazaar), that featured UK Paralympians.

## 4.2 Discursive themes

The analysis of news articles and glossy articles about UK Paralympians aimed to find out how stories about Paralympians and disability issues are framed discursively. Besides the more neutrally written articles, we identified the following distinct frames: heavily gendered, nationalistic, supercrip/overcoming, and equality and diversity - see figure 2 and 3. These categories serve analytical purposes and do not always have clear-cut boundaries. For instance, some articles discussing progressive equality and diversity topics overlap with aspects of the superhuman discursive frame.

### Superhuman / Overcoming

The discursive theme of the 'superhuman', centred on inspirational and individual stories of overcoming disability, has been a dominant media frame in Paralympic reporting.<sup>3</sup> Although inspirational to certain audiences, this discursive frame has been criticised by many disability activists, scholars and disabled people's organisations. In the sample, 17 articles out of 102 were identified for narrating stories through a superhuman frame. These articles typically reported autobiographical accounts of Paralympians' sporting journeys and used an episodic framing device to focus on a single emotional event (for instance, how an athlete sustained their disability).

### Gendered

In the dataset 5 articles are coded as gendered. The article featuring the single male Paralympian was presented through militaristic media frames that centred on masculine compositional and narrative elements. By contrast, 4 articles featuring a popular female Paralympian were framed through heterosexual kinship narratives (e.g., discussing marriage and motherhood) and/or through aesthetically feminine images. This distinction resonates with previous academic concerns around the forms of gendered representations of disability reproduced in Paralympic media coverage with female athletes typically captured through passive, relational and/or normative female (hetero-)sexual narratives, compared with male counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

### Equality and diversity

Within the dataset 30 articles discussed progressive equality and diversity issues regarding disability rights and structural discrimination; female, Black and LGBTQI+ Paralympians; the importance of the #WeThe15 campaign for progressive social change. Examples of progressive reporting could be found in articles titled, for example: "Tokyo 2020—The Games with a record number of LGBTQ athletes" (BBC, 25-08) and "ParalympicsGB has record number of female athletes for Tokyo Games" (The Guardian, 19-08). The number of articles coded as containing themes of equality and diversity demonstrate an important cultural shift in Paralympic news reporting and engage with the Paralympics as a wider vehicle for discussion of disability inequality.



*"Increased reporting on equality and diversity issues demonstrates an important cultural shift in Paralympic media coverage. It engages with the Paralympics as a wider vehicle for discussing disability inequality."*

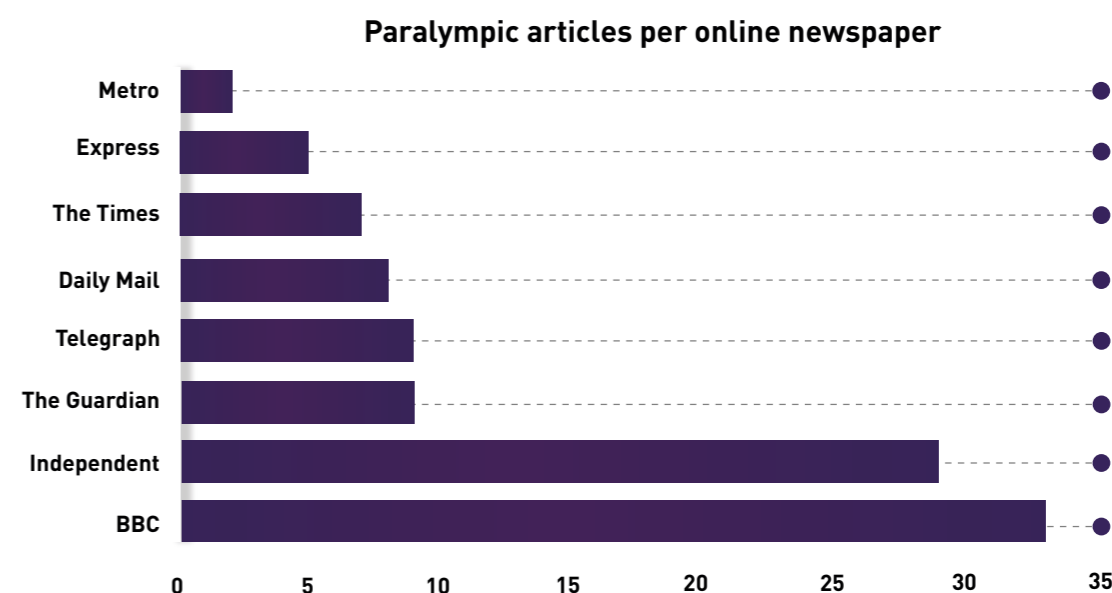


FIGURE 1

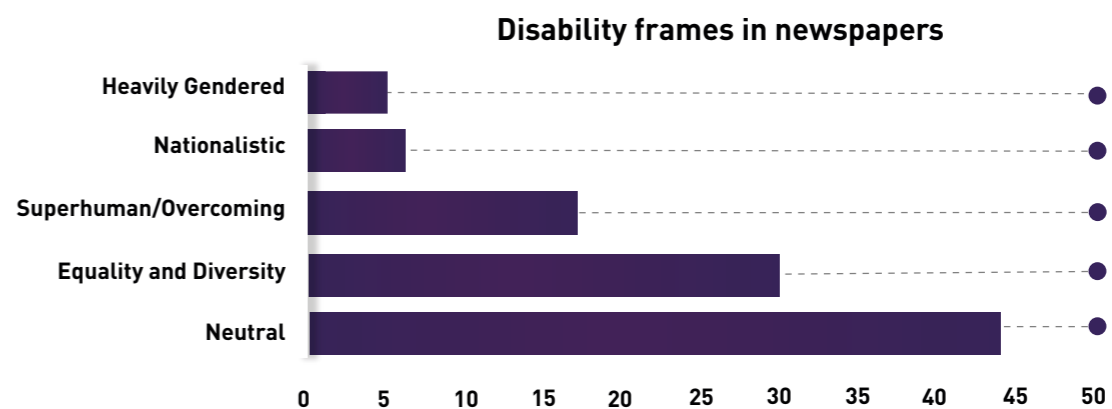


FIGURE 2

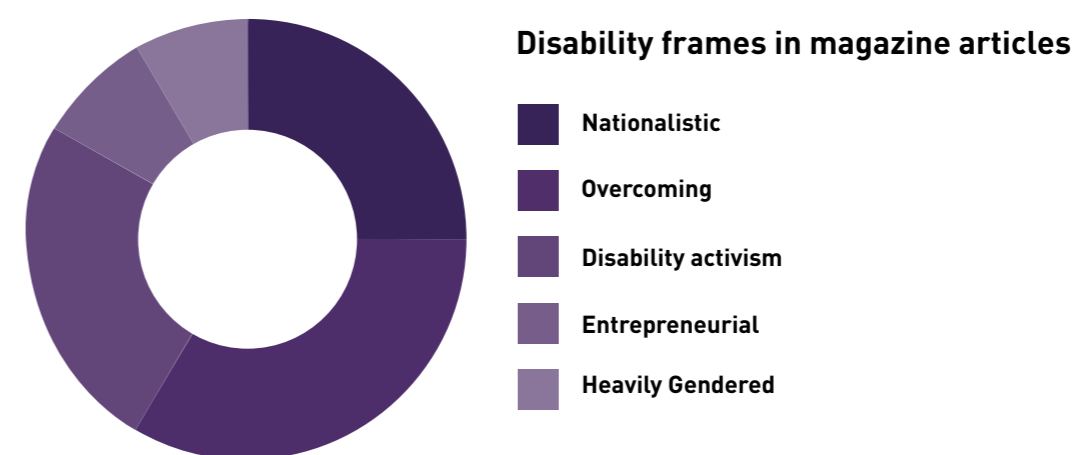


FIGURE 3

### 4.3 Paralympians in the spotlight

The news article dataset was analysed for featured Paralympians through text, photos and headers, and how frequently they were highlighted. Female Paralympians were well represented in the dataset: 70% of the top 10 featured Paralympians were women (see figure 4) and 32 (58%) of the total amount of 55 Paralympians mentioned were female – see figure 5. These percentages of female media representation are significantly higher than the percentage of women in the Paralympics GB team as a whole, which is approximately 44% (100 out of 227).<sup>5</sup> However, female Paralympians featured in news articles were predominantly from white racial backgrounds, cisgender and heterosexual presenting.

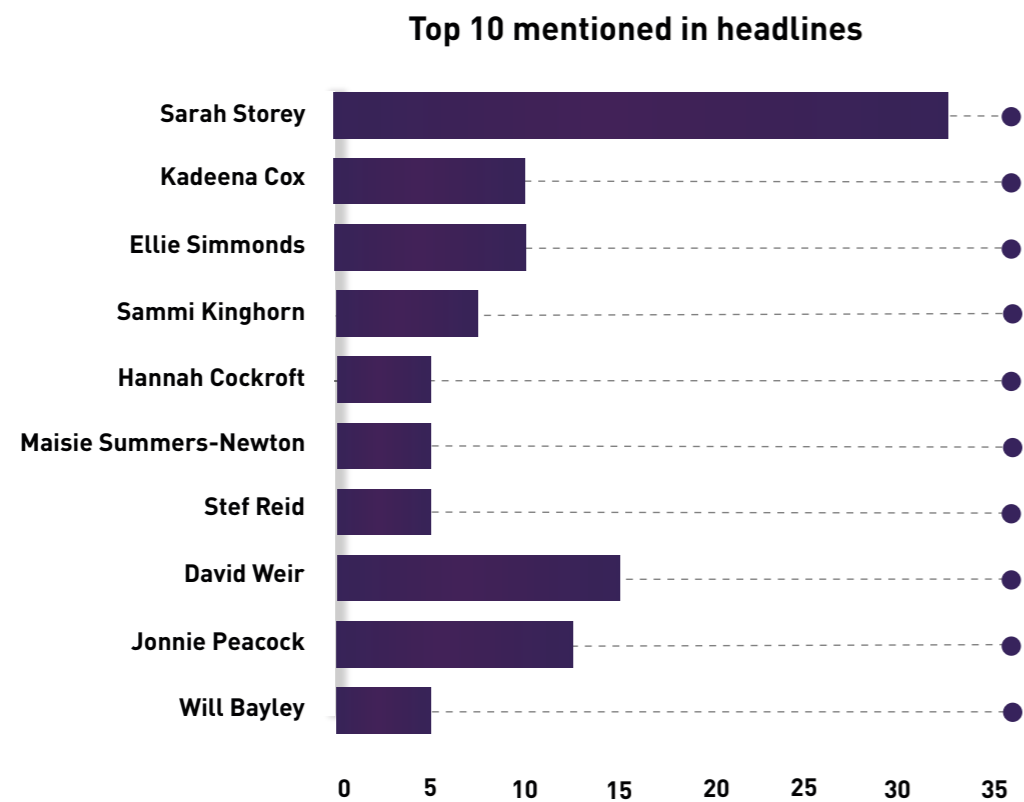


FIGURE 4

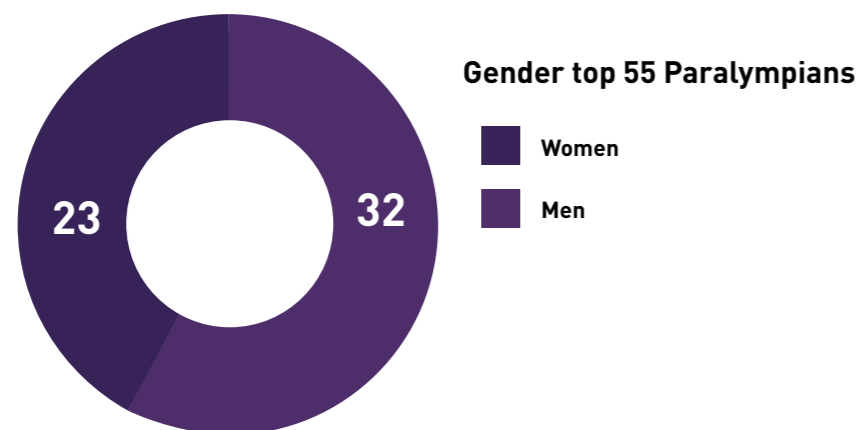


FIGURE 5

## SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

### 5.1 Intersectional analysis Paralympians' social media content

This research set out to explore the diversity of British Paralympians' self-representational practices on visual social media networking sites (Instagram and TikTok) and the various forms of content generation. Although TikTok is gaining popularity, the findings revealed that Instagram remains the most popular as a visual-based social media networking site across the sample of Paralympians and was therefore the primary analytic focus. The 32 most popular Paralympians were included in the sample (see methodology for details on sampling).

### 5.2 Diversity

The dataset demonstrates that over two-thirds of the most popular (defined as having the highest number of followers) Paralympians on Instagram are female. However, there is a distinct lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the sample – see charts in figure 6. This indicates that despite recent EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) efforts, the most successful athletes in the Paralympics GB team are from white racial backgrounds. This is markedly low compared to the GB Olympic team and national population statistics.



FIGURE 6

### 5.3 Content generation

Social media content was examined using an intersectional discourse analysis that coded content based on the dominance of discursive themes – see figure 7. These were: sporting/winning (25x); nation: medals/flags (17x); emotion: gratitude/journey/defeat (29x); promotion: sponsors/ads (55x); exposure: socialising/events (15); kinship: partner/family/pet (26x); motivational/overcoming (12x); activism/awareness (9x); and struggle: health/lockdown (8x). Some images were assigned to multiple themes.

### 5.4 Activist hashtags

The dataset indicated that a limited number of Paralympians promoted activist content on Instagram. Despite the launch of the global disability campaign #WeThe15, and the importance of social media connectivity in promoting the campaign message, few athletes engaged with the campaign’s hashtag – see figure 8.<sup>6</sup> However, the #ImpossibleToIgnore campaign launched by Paralympics GB which is similarly premised on challenging societal perceptions of disability was more often used and by a wider range of Paralympians – see figure 9.<sup>7</sup>

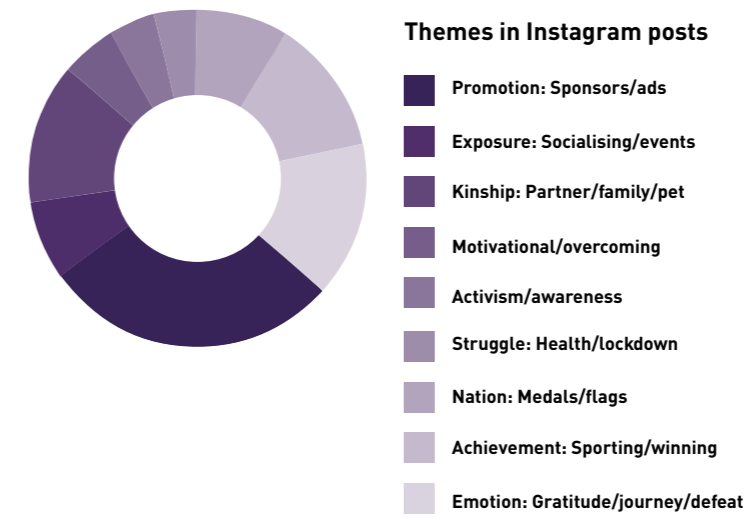


FIGURE 7

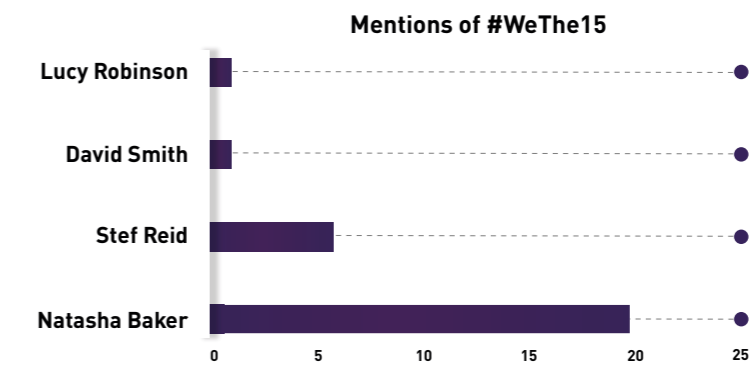


FIGURE 8

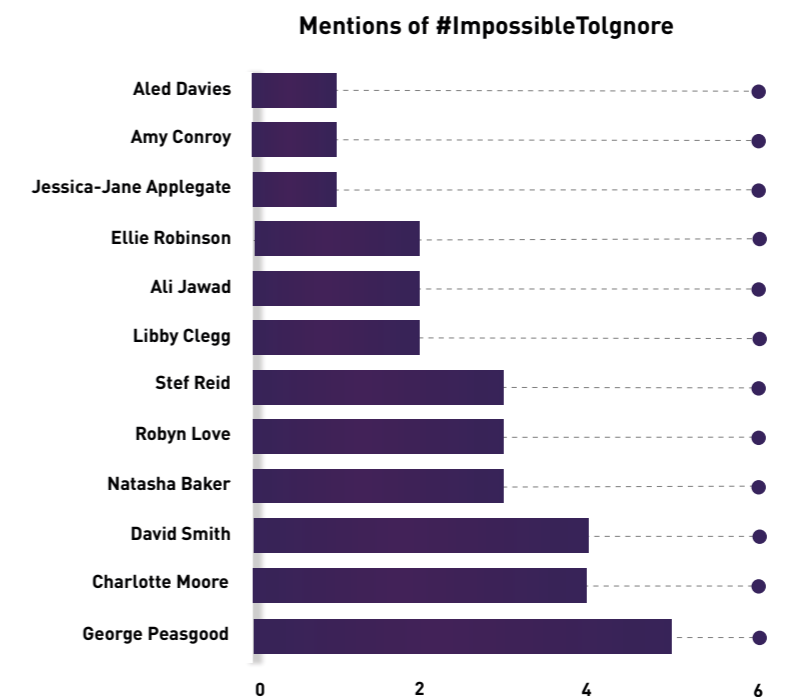


FIGURE 9

# SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

Focus group research with a diverse group of social media users who identified as disabled and/or had experience with disability was conducted to document how they engaged with, and were influenced by, Paralympians' social media content. The focus group research included questions concerning the value of Paralympians' social media content in shaping disability representation and progressive disability discourses. Focus group participants were asked questions based on which Paralympians they follow, on which platform, what kind of content they interact with, and the affective role of this content on their experiences, feelings and disabled identity.

## 6.1 Twitter and Instagram

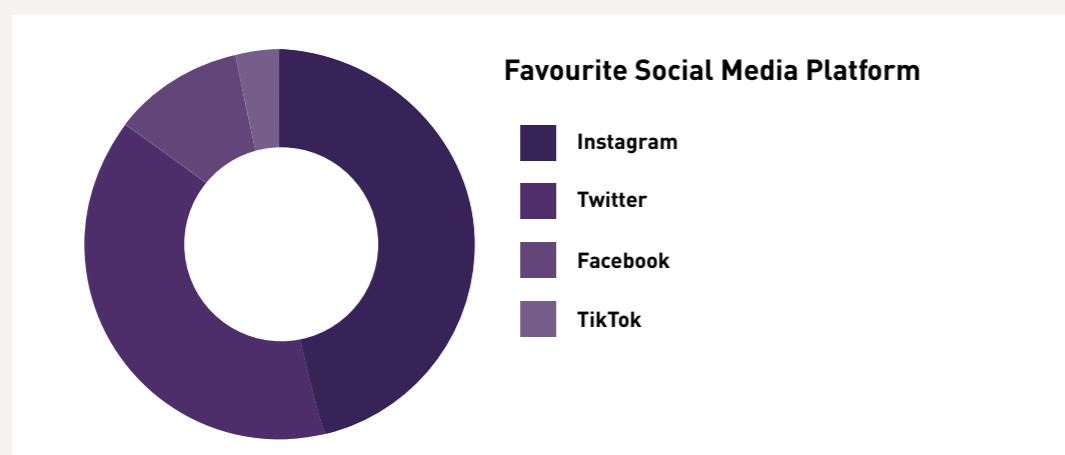


FIGURE 10

The research data indicates that Twitter and Instagram are by far the most popular social media platforms engaged with by audiences interacting with Paralympic content. The majority of focus group interviewees claimed to prefer Instagram (57%) and Twitter (48%) compared with Facebook (1%) and TikTok (0.4%) – see figure 10.

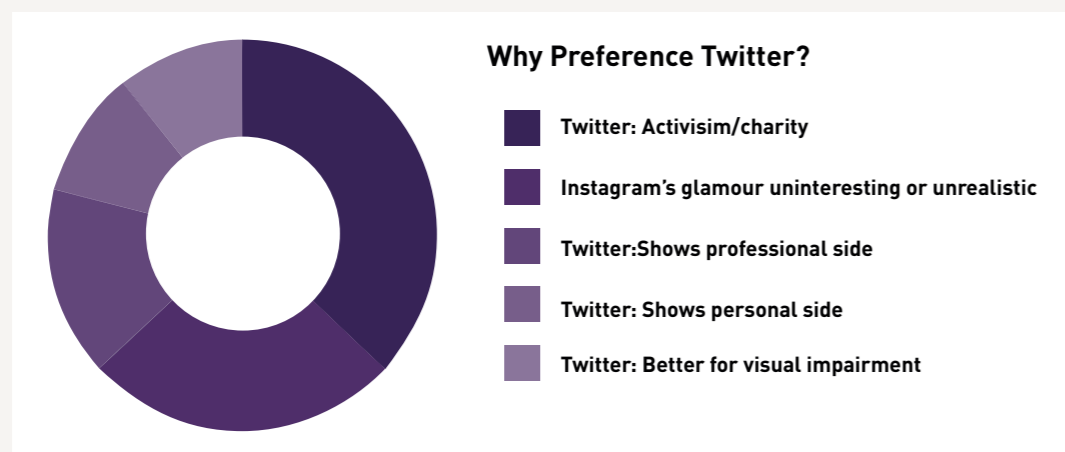


FIGURE 11

### Preference for Twitter

Focus group interviewees preferred Twitter for receiving live updates of Paralympians' sporting achievements and as a text-based platform for engaging with disability advocacy and debate. Twitter was preferred by followers with visual impairments due to its accessibility features. Besides receiving live updates of Paralympians' sporting achievements, interviewees described using Twitter to interact and engage with Paralympians' everyday life and activist content – see figure 11.

### Preference for Instagram

For the interviewees, Instagram was important for promoting progressive images of disability through its visual and video related affordances (Photos, Stories, Reels). Interviewees claimed that Instagram offered an important vehicle for visually challenging stereotypes around disability that have historically positioned disability as antithetical to normative ideas of 'beauty', 'glamour' and empowered body cultures.<sup>8</sup>

### Disability activism

Despite Paralympians' limited engagement with activist content on social media, interviewees claimed that they find it important for Paralympians to use their social media platforms to engage in some form of disability advocacy and awareness given their visibility, popularity and thus pedagogical voice as disability advocates. Interviewees suggested that was vital for supporting disabled people and extending the reach of progressive disability messages across an increasingly diverse networked public whilst remaining cognisant of the limits of social media advocacy as a driver for effective and sustainable structural change.

“Having people [Paralympians on Instagram] who assuring you how life really can be: it's important.”

“Through their everyday content” “you realise that actually, they are just living life like I'm living mine, and that's what I want to see on their social media.”

“[A Paralympian's personal content] makes that person a lot more relatable. If somebody had their Instagram full of professional sporting photos, I probably don't follow them, because you don't really feel you're getting truth, you're just getting a kind of façade”

“I love seeing [Paralympians] all glammed up and doing TV shows and got all their pictures on Instagram, but they get treated a lot better than a disabled person in general: I can't go on public transport anymore. [...] They'll get asked in advance, I'm sure, what their needs are.”

“Breaking down barriers is very important, we had these barriers against us for a long time, especially Paralympians, it's quite important for them to go out to communities and tell their stories.”

“Seeing athletes with a good following engage in public discourse: that's how people are exposed to their opinions and other ways of seeing. So, a photo is fine—but you're not going to change the world with your Instagram account.”

“I would like to see more Paralympians engage in conversations around making more privatised gyms accessible for disabled people.”



## 6.2 Popular Paralympic influencers

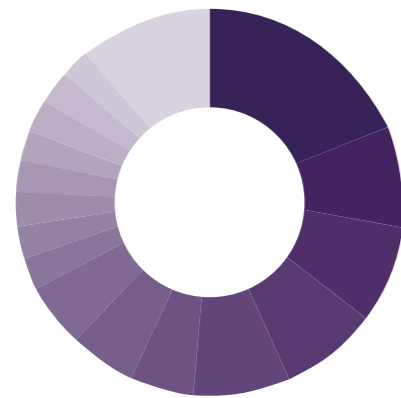


FIGURE 12

### Favourite Paralympian

■ Ellie Simmonds	■ David Smith
■ Sarah Storey	■ Ali Jawad
■ Kadeena Cox	■ Libby Clegg
■ Tanni Grey-Thompson	■ Ellie Robinson
■ Ade Adeptian	■ Maisie Summers-Newton
■ Jonnie Peacock	■ Hannah Cockroft
■ Will Bayley	■ Aled Sion Davies
■ Lauren Steadman	■ No Favourite, just Team GB
■ David Weir	

For interviewees, the most popular Paralympians – as athletes and as social media influencers – were female athletes Ellie Simmonds (mentioned seven times), Sarah Storey, Kadeena Cox and the retired Paralympian Tanni Grey-Thompson – see figure 12.



FIGURE 13

### Why are they your favourite?

- Sports achievements
- Same disability
- Motivational/comfort
- Doing Para/same sports
- Met them in real life
- Relatability (struggles)
- Activism/awareness
- Good personality
- Lives in same area
- First encounter with paralympics
- Seen on TV shows

The reasons why interviewees follow and relate to their favourite Paralympians, as shown in figure 13, can be categorised as follows:

### Sports-related

1. Paralympians' outstanding achievements
2. Participants playing (the same) Para sport

### Celebrity

1. Paralympians' appealing personality
2. Their appearance in popular broadcast television shows

### Locality

1. Having met the Paralympian in real life
2. Living in the same area in the UK

### Affect

1. Participants having the same or similar impairment (struggles)
2. Finding motivation and comfort in Paralympians' content
3. Feeling passionate about Paralympians' activism/awareness-raising

*"I follow Kadeena Cox, she has got MS like me, and one day she'll post on Twitter saying what training she did that on that day, and the next day she will be in a wheelchair, and it shows the normality of her day-to-day basis."*

*"Hannah Cockroft is my favourite Paralympian, because she is a strong female disabled person who is also an athlete, and very open and loud about discrimination that she experiences in everyday life rather than Paralympian life."*

### Diversity

Interviewees had noticed an increased presence of female Paralympians on social media in recent years although were uncertain whether their observation was biased due to algorithms suggesting content to them. Gender and diversity were important factors for interviewees as to the Paralympians they followed and engaged with. For one female follower, it was important to see strong, empowered women, who she sees modelled by Hannah Cockroft. Yet, interviewees were aware of a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in Paralympians on Instagram, and this was a strong theme for interviewees who identified as Black, multi-racial and/or from ethnic backgrounds.



*"I think that there isn't really any racial diversity in the Paralympics, I can't think of any Paralympics with the same or even a similar ethnic background as me."*



*"[I like content that shows] the human side: you're not a superhuman—yes, you've achieved good things, inspirational things, but that doesn't mean that you're not human and don't have challenges."*

### 6.3 Content engagement

Interviewees were asked about the various types of content and images they most engaged with on Instagram – see figure 14. Humanising and relatable content, such as when Paralympians publicly spoke about everyday struggles related to their impairment and issues with accessibility (trains, gyms, etc.), was particularly important for interviewees. Interviewees described how this type of content makes them feel understood and connected to others with a similar impairment type/illness – see figure 15.

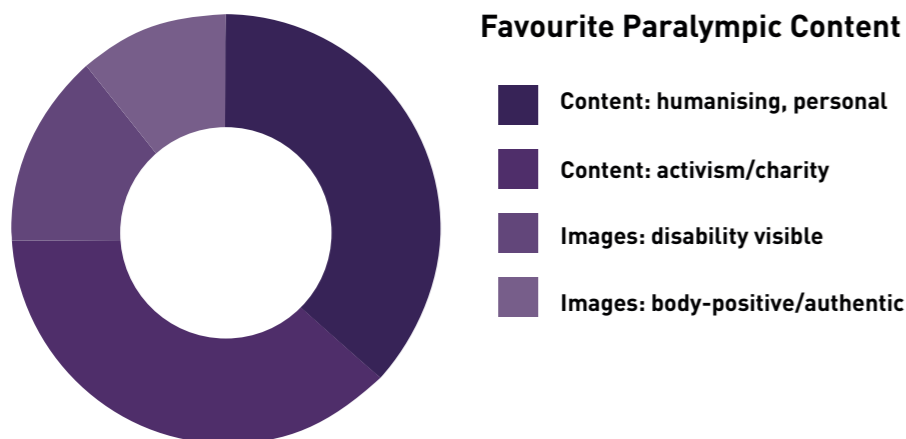


FIGURE 14

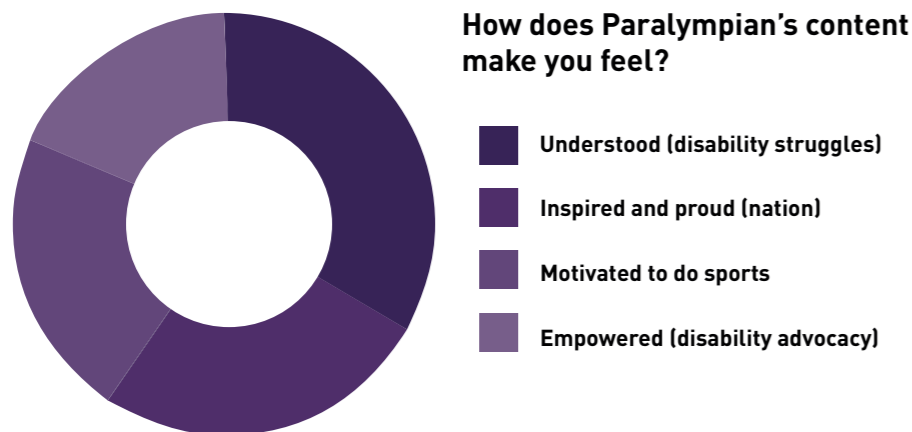


FIGURE 15



When asked how Paralympic content makes them feel, interviewees mentioned four key feelings that fall into two main categories – see figure 15:

#### Sports-related

1. Feeling inspired and proud of Paralympics GB's achievements in the Games
2. Feeling hopeful and motivated to take up sports themselves

#### Disability-related

1. Feeling understood when Paralympians open up about disability struggles
2. Feeling empowered by the way in which Paralympians advocate for disabled communities' rights and wellbeing

*"As my mum has cerebral palsy, we were most interested in the athletes who also have this condition, especially as watching them makes my mum feel much more inspired to exercise. [...] For example, she started using the rowing machine at the gym after seeing a Paralympic rower."*

*"I follow quite a few disability advocates because it helps me understand myself more. [...] I've learnt more about myself as a disabled person, I've learnt how to advocate for myself, I never used to be able to do that, [...] but also it has boosted my confidence, seeing other disabled people."*

*"I'm at university here, sometimes I'm having a really bad day and you look at their social media content and you think: 'what an amazing person'. So they can get you to think more about the way you think and the way you motivate yourself."*

*"It gives me the motivation to keep moving and battle against any shame that I have about my own disabilities."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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**1** The sample of online Paralympic news and glossy coverage around the Tokyo 2020 Games (2021) indicate a progressive shift toward narratives that include discussions centred on disability rights issues and diversity within the Paralympic movement. It is important to continue to track these narrative frames in the reporting on the Paris 2024 and Los Angeles 2028 Paralympic Games to establish the extent to which these frames are an aberration resulting from the launch of campaigns such as #WeThe15 or part of wider trends in Paralympic media reporting.



**2** The findings in the report demonstrate that, despite a shift towards more progressive narratives in online Paralympic media reporting, articles and images predominantly centred on female Paralympians from white racial backgrounds. Although articles were not explicitly gendered, there was a lack of sexual and ethnic diversity across the news sample. This poses a challenge for a range of stakeholders in terms of addressing and improving diversity through reporting practices and media cultures alongside access to grassroots Para sport and refinement of athlete recruitment campaigns (expanded on in point 3).



**3** The analysis of the 32 most popular GB Paralympians' social media practices demonstrated Instagram as a preferred platform for content generation, particularly amongst female Paralympians. Although the findings indicate that very few Paralympians engage with global disability campaign messages such as #WeThe15 through their social media, their content did do important cultural work in challenging disability stereotypes at the intersection of gender/sexuality through stylised images that promote a renewed and empowered disability body culture. Although formalised disability campaign messages are important for progressive social change, it is important for researchers and stakeholders to pay further attention to 'quiet' forms of disability advocacy that take place on social media where athletes utilised their positionality to steer discussions.



**4** The dataset demonstrates that there was a significant lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the sample of the most popular Paralympian social media influencers on Instagram, which resulted in content generation that predominantly challenged disability gender/sexual stereotypes at the intersection of white racial privilege. Previous research has highlighted the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the GB Paralympics team compared to the GB Olympics team and national figures.<sup>9</sup> Key stakeholders need to prioritise ongoing efforts that nourish a more diverse and inclusive sports culture and enhance initiatives that offer sporting opportunities to a diverse range of underrepresented groups. The data indicates that representation matters, and stakeholders can have a positive influence on driving more inclusive media visibility, especially in terms of Paralympians' social media content generation.



**5** The findings in the report demonstrate that Instagram is the most popular social media platform amongst disabled audiences through which to engage with Paralympic content and interact with Paralympians. Interviewees valued the way Paralympians use Instagram to capture aspects of their lives and visually counter gendered/sexual stereotypes of disability. Interviewees are motivated by content that captures Paralympians' personal struggles with disability and/or illness, to which interviewees could relate. They perceive Paralympians as important role models for promoting disability body positivity, adaptive fashion and advocating for disability-related issues. They were, however, cognisant of the lack of racial and ethnic diversity within Paralympics GB; a discussion that resonated most with interviewees who identified as Black, mixed race and/or from a particular ethnic group. Further research with disabled and non-disabled social media users from a diverse range of backgrounds is crucial in order to continue to develop a rich empirical evidence base on this topic that informs future scholarly research, stakeholder initiatives and strategies related to social media engagement.



**6** The focus group research highlighted that Paralympians have significant pedagogical agency and power in promoting progressive and empowering social media content that can shape public disability discourse and speak to a wide audience base. It is important to recognise that Paralympians' online visibility and voices are increasingly important in a contemporary media culture marked by the dominance of social media platforms and the affordances such platforms offer for connecting and engaging with a diverse networked public sphere. We challenge stakeholders to engage with the findings in this report to support the development of social media strategies and/or workshops designed around harnessing the power of Paralympians' online influence. Any such strategy should be developed in collaboration with Paralympians and stakeholders (sport governing bodies, disability advocacy groups etc.) and seek to place diverse and inclusive representation and messaging at the centre.

## CONCLUSION

The findings in this report build on previous research that demonstrates the importance of Paralympic media (broadcasting, TV marketing and campaigns) for driving progressive representations of disability and challenging societal attitudes toward disability. Extending this work with a specific focus on the online Paralympic media ecology – including online news, ‘glossy’ online lifestyle magazines (e.g., British Vogue, GQ, Harpers Bazaar etc.) and Paralympians’ social media content—the findings in this report document the intersectional complexities of gender, sexuality and race and the diversity of disability representation. The findings highlight the need to improve the ethnic and racial diversity in Paralympic online media content to be more representative of wider society and thus pedagogically affective as a vehicle for progressive and inclusive representations.

The findings documented here aim to provide stakeholders with key insights, challenges and potential opportunities for future research, interventions and initiatives with respect to broadening the diversity of online media Paralympic representation and harnessing the power of social media content to engage with a diverse audience through inclusive representations and messaging.

The research project marks the first scholarly intervention on this topic and therefore the findings presented here can be considered as a preliminary evidence base. Although the findings pose critical questions, challenges and opportunities for a range of stakeholders, it would be remiss not to recognise the limitations of the initial evidence base with respect to the relatively small sample size and specific analytic focus, and thus a pressing need to expand on this area of inquiry in the near future.

By way of temporary closure, the project team would like to thank all those involved in the project: interviewees, partners and project advisors—including a number of Paralympians. We welcome further discussion, collaboration and continued research on this topic.

## ENDNOTES

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## FIGURES

### Figure 01

Bar chart displaying the number of news articles about the Paralympics, per newspaper: Metro 2, Express 5, Times 7, Daily Mail 8, Telegraph 9, Guardian 9, Independent 29, BBC 33.

### Figure 02

Bar chart displaying the disability frames newspapers use, including frequency: heavily gendered 5, nationalistic 6, supercrip/overcoming 17, equality and diversity 30, neutral 44.

### Figure 03

Doughnut chart displaying the disability frames glossy magazines use, including frequency: heavily gendered 1, entrepreneurial 1, disability activism 3, overcoming 4, nationalistic 3.

### Figure 04

Bar chart showing the top 10 of Paralympians mentioned in newspaper headlines, including amount. Women: Sarah Storey 13, Kadeena Cox 4, Ellie Simmonds 4, Sammi Kinghorn 3, Hannah Cockroft 2, Maisie Summers-Newton 2, Stef Reid 2. Men: David Weir 6, Jonnie Peacock 5, Will Bayley 2.

### Figure 05

Doughnut chart showing that the 55 Paralympians highlighted in newspaper articles consist of 32 women and 23 men.

### Figure 06

Three doughnut charts showing that the top 32 Paralympian bloggers on Instagram consist of 22 women and 10 men. Of these, 18 are White and 4 have another ethnicity. 13 of them present themselves as heterosexual, 3 as LGBTQI+ and 13 bloggers' sexuality is unknown.

### Figure 07

Doughnut chart listing the themes of Paralympians' Instagram posts in order of frequency: nation, achievement, emotion, promotion, exposure, kinship, motivation, activism, struggle.

### Figure 08

Bar chart showing the mentions of the hashtag We The 15: Natasha Baker 20, Stef Reid 6, David Smith 1, Lucy Robinson 1.

### Figure 09

Bar chart showing the mentions of the hashtag Impossible to Ignore: George Peasgood 5, Charlotte Moore 4, David Smith 4, Natasha Baker 3, Robyn Love 3, Stef Reid 3, Libby Clegg 2, Ali Jawad 2, Ellie Robinson 2, Jessica-Jane Applegate 1, Amy Conroy 1, Aled Davies 1.

### Figure 10

Doughnut chart displaying interviewees' favourite social media platform to show Paralympians on, in order of size: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok.

### Figure 11

Doughnut chart displaying the reasons for interviewees to prefer Twitter, in order of size: Twitter's activism/charity content, Instagram's glamour is uninteresting or unrealistic, Twitter shows professional side, Twitter shows personal side, Twitter is better for visual impairments.

### Figure 12

Doughnut chart displaying interviewees' favourite Paralympians in order of frequency: Ellie Simmonds, Sarah Storey, Kadeena Cox, Tanni Grey-Thompson, Ade Adepitan, Jonnie Peacock, Will Bayley, Lauren Steadman, David Weir, David Smith, Ali Jawad, Libby Clegg, Ellie Robinson, Maisie Summers-Newton, Hannah Cockroft, Aled Sion Davies, No favourite/just teamGB.

### Figure 13

Doughnut chart displaying interviewees' reasons for liking certain Paralympians, in order of frequency: sports achievements, having same disability, motivation/comfort, doing Para sport/same sport, met them in real life, relatable disability struggles, for their activism, good personality, lives in same area, first encounter with Paralympics, seen on TV shows.

### Figure 14

Doughnut chart showing interviewees' favourite Paralympic content, namely humanising/personal content and activism/charity content, and favourite images, namely where disability is visible (not hidden) and images that are body-positive and authentic.

### Figure 15

Doughnut chart explaining how Paralympians' content makes interviewees feel, namely: understood (in terms of disability struggles), inspired and proud (nationalistic), motivated to do sports, and empowered (due to disability advocacy).

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