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Article

Disability Narratives in Sports Communication: Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games' Best Practices and Implications

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Abstract

The Paralympic Games have become a relevant social and communication tool for the enhancement of global awareness and understanding of disability. The increasing visibility of this kind of global sports event, as well as the efforts of public authorities to make their host cities more accessible, evidence a relevant shift to new urban barrier-free experiences and discourses concerning disability. This research is guided by an exploratory case study approach to assess the disability representation and narratives within the context of the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games. The examination of some innovative communication strategies fostering the visibility of disability reveals a series of effective practices implemented in Japan. The focus on the personification of para-athletes, the celebration of public events to experience first-hand para-sports disciplines, as well as the engagement of school children and young people in para-sports initiatives are predominant in the communication efforts of Tokyo 2020 in the pre-games period.

Keywords

disability; Paralympic Games; media; sports communication; Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games; Japan

Issue

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1. Introduction

Fair representation of disability, avoiding the temptation of generalizing health conditions, simplistic discourses and stereotyped iconography is far from common in media (Bruce, 2014; Silva & Howe, 2012; Vázquez-Barrio et al., 2021). Prevailing values of youth, physical beauty, and virility related to the aspirational personal appearance are not easily reconcilable with a range of health conditions, leading to marginalization and social exclusion of people with disabilities from public life (DePauw, 1997; Ellis, 2009; Lord et al., 2014). The portrayal of people with disabilities as “the objects of pity, charity and professional intervention and leeches on the ever-

receding systems of welfare, health and social care” is still a common practice in media narratives and cultural reproduction (Goodley et al., 2019, p. 983).

The Paralympic Games are a relevant social and communication tool for drawing global attention toward the need for greater awareness and understanding of disability (Bush et al., 2013; Pullen & Silk, 2020; Purdue & Howe, 2012). The increasing visibility of the event through its global media coverage, as well as the efforts of public authorities to make their host cities accessible and inclusive places led by technological innovation and connectivity, evidence a relevant shift toward new urban experiences and discourses (Andranovich & Burbank, 2011; Essex & Chalkley, 1999; Grix & Brannagan,

2016; Kassens-Noor & Fukushige, 2016). McPherson et al. (2016) highlight the particularly important role of organizing committees and government stakeholders in setting global standards of media visibility and the representation of disability, of showcasing accessibility and promoting meaningful narratives about disability. Even though the understanding of disability and the social perception of people with disability cannot be dramatically improved by the impact of a single global event, the contribution of the Paralympic movement to the change in attitudes towards disability is noteworthy (Beckett, 2014; Ribeiro et al., 2020). Furthermore, the hosting of global para-sports events provides greater employment opportunities for those with disabilities in their cities and countries (International Paralympic Committee, 2019a). A significant impact on the visibility of achievements and challenges faced by people with disabilities in the media and on digital platforms is also acknowledged (McGillivray et al., 2021).

After the first Paralympic Games held in Japan in 1964, Tokyo will again host the global Paralympic event aimed at fostering a better understanding of disability and normalizing an effective accessibility in Japan through a barrier-free environment and a barrier-free mindset of the Games (Lavier, personal communication, August 1, 2019; Tokyo 2020, n.d.-a). Citizen engagement strategy plays a key role in making the Tokyo 2020 Games an inclusive and sustainable event with a long-lasting legacy on community empowerment and commitment of younger generations with critical social issues (Kolotouchkina, 2018).

This article aims to (1) better understand the framework of the representation and visibility of disability in the context of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, (2) identify best communication practices in the pre-games period, and (3) provide further insight into the research of the complexities of the para-sports communication.

The structure of this article comprises four main sections. The next section outlines the disability context in Japan. Then, Section 3 analyzes the prevailing narratives and representation of the Paralympic Games and para-athletes, reviewing the evolution of media coverage, media models, and main stereotypes linked to the global para-sports event. After presenting the research method and materials in Section 4, some remarkable practices focused on fostering the visibility and normalization of disability from Tokyo 2020 Paralympics are discussed in Section 5, identifying their social impact and implication on the further research agenda.

2. Disability in Japan

The visibility and active participation in social life of people with disability is still scarce in Japanese society. Poor planning resulting in a high number of physical barriers on urban space and overcrowding on public transport, the high density and the ageing of the population, as

well as social discrimination, pose many obstacles for the effective exercise of citizenship rights of people with disabilities in Japan (Stevens, 2007). Even though the employment of people with disabilities in Japan is slightly increasing under the law obliging companies and government organizations to hire workers with impairment to a level of up to 2.5 percent of total staff (“More jobs for disabled people,” 2018; Mori & Sakamoto, 2018), segregation persists through a separate world of special schools, professional workshops, and social welfare companies for their education and employment (Heyer, 2000, 2015).

Hayashi and Okuhira (2001) argue that in traditional Japanese society physical and financial support from family and siblings was considered a norm for people with disabilities. The dependence on parents and segregation from society was also common with many spending their lives either isolated and hidden by their shamed families (Stibbe, 2004) or confined for life in residential institutions under harsh conditions and, in some cases, systematic violation of human rights (Hayashi & Okuhira, 2001).

The emergence of the disability rights movement in Japan in the 1970s initiated a gradual change in social norms, policies and perception of disability, fostering changes in education, the welfare system, and independent living of people with disabilities. Heyer (2000, 2015) argues that disability policy and legislation in Japan have strong roots in the welfare model focused on ensuring sophisticated institutions for people with disabilities. While the assertion of special needs of people with disabilities allows the development of well-equipped welfare and rehabilitation facilities, the challenge of their full integration into society is still critical in Japan.

The invisibility, under-representation and persisting stereotypes of people with disabilities in Japanese media were revealed by Shinichi Saito and Ishiyama (2005) who found that, while five percent of the population in Japan has a disability, only 1.7 percent of popular TV-drama characters feature any disability on screen. Among these marginalized exceptions is the *Beautiful Life* serial drama, featuring an attractive, well-spoken and well-educated young female protagonist in a wheelchair. Notwithstanding her physical impairment, the idealized character and her love story with an able-bodied man fall short of reflecting critical aspects of daily life and hardships of people with disabilities in urban Japan (Stevens, 2007). Stibbe (2004) argues that television dramas in Japan featuring disabled female characters persistently represent disability based on the medical model and reinforce social stereotypes and discriminating prejudice of women with disabilities as powerless and passive victims of circumstance. While disabled characters are still marginal and often stigmatized in TV serial dramas, Valentine (2001) highlights their impact on raising the social profile of a traditionally invisible and unmentioned minority in Japanese society.

Although many challenges still remain to be addressed, the 2013 Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, the ratification of

the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the revision of the Act on Employment Promotion of Persons with Disabilities in 2014 became significant milestones in Japanese legislation. Furthermore, some recent news from the political and social sphere in Japan evidence encouraging progress. In the 2019 elections to Japan's Upper House, two lawmakers with severe disabilities won their seats representing the opposition party Reiwa Shinsengum. One of them is an ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) patient who, using a wheelchair equipped with an artificial respirator, can only communicate through computer assistive technology (Nogi, 2019; Tomoyo, 2019). The first talent agency for people with disabilities was established in Tokyo in 2019 featuring around 30 registered profiles of models and artists with different health conditions for advertising and entertainment productions (Yukari, 2019).

In parallel with the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics organization, a series of cultural performances staged by artists with impairments and members of the LGBT community are held to reinforce the visibility, diversity, and inclusivity challenge of the games (Tokyo 2020, n.d.-b). On the same date when the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics were originally scheduled before the Covid-19 pandemic, a virtual fashion show "Amputee Venus" with the participation of Paralympic female athletes took place in Tokyo. The show was streamed live on YouTube, featuring the latest fashion trends and prosthetic legs of the models ("Amputee fashion show," 2020). Such new kind of media narratives in Japan about people with disabilities and their social engagement was also identified by Shek-Noble (2020), who highlights, in particular, the attention of media to the critical issues of their employment and the enabling role of robot technologies in this field.

3. Media Representation of the Paralympic Games and Para-Athletes

DePauw (1997) argues that historically sport and athletic performance were considered the domain of an enhanced physical condition, masculinity, and a beautiful able body. Women, people of color, and people with disability were excluded from this context as not fitting in these traditional and generally accepted views. Although some significant advances have occurred recently, mostly on account of the International Paralympic Movement, the heritage of that marginality, social exclusion, vulnerability, and stigma still exerts a strong influence on the visibility and the representation of disability in the media (Beckett, 2006; Bush et al., 2013; Goffman, 1963; Goodley et al., 2019; Solves et al., 2018; Sutherland, 1997; Tsatsou, 2020). Ellis (2009, p. 25) argues that "the media has an integral role in both reflecting and reinforcing social disablement and imagining people with disability as a vulnerable group."

Since the first Paralympic Games took place in Rome in 1960, the 60-year history of this global para-sports

event evidences its ever-increasing social impact on the visibility and understanding of disability as well as confirms a steady growth in the global number of para-athletes and Paralympic disciplines (Bailey, 2008; International Paralympic Committee, n.d.-a; Martin & Vitali, 2014). The globalization of the Paralympic movement is closely linked to the increasing broadcasting coverage of the event and the dizzying spread of new digital media and social networking sites featuring live and deferred competitions (Bernstein, 2000; Creedon, 2014; Whannel, 2013).

From the first daily television coverage of the 1976 Toronto Games that reached over 600,000 viewers in Canada, there has since been an estimated cumulative audience of 1,85 billion people during Athens 2004, and 3,8 billion in Beijing 2008 and London 2012. The role of digital media is also remarkable: from 120,000 daily hits on the website of the Atlanta 1996 Games, to webcasts to over 100 countries, reaching over 300 million hits during the Sydney 2000 Games and engaging one billion people in digital media activities during the Rio 2016 Paralympics (International Paralympic Committee, n.d.-b).

While media coverage and global audiences of the Paralympic Games experience constant growth, there are many challenges facing the communication of disability in sports. The role of Public Service Media and their commitment to ensuring diversity and promoting cultural citizenship through the coverage of underrepresented sports and athletes with disabilities is particularly significant in this regard (Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021). The disparity between the global media spectacle of the ephemeral Paralympic event and the tough daily experience of disabled athletes is highlighted by Bush et al. (2013, p. 644), who stress the need to "create a new discourse from a coalition of voices that reimagine citizenship, human rights, democracy and well-being for those (athletes) with impairments." The objective representation of Paralympic sports and para-athletes, avoiding stigma (Goffman, 1963) remains critical for the normalization of visibility and fair representation of disability in media (DePauw, 1997; Kolotouchkina et al., 2021; Silva & Howe, 2012). Critical intersections of disability with ablenationalism (Bruce, 2014; Campbell, 2009; Snyder & Mitchell, 2015), gender (Gerschick, 2000; McPherson et al., 2016; McRuer, 2006; Pullen & Silk, 2020), and assistive technologies (Berger, 2008; Clogston, 1990; Quinlan & Bates, 2009) underpin simplistic and discriminating stereotypes that distort the image of athletes with disabilities and hinder the visibility of their sports achievements (Bruce, 2009; Carter & Williams, 2012; De Léséleuc et al., 2010).

The origin of the Paralympic Movement at Stoke Mandeville Hospital as a rehabilitation therapy for spinal cord injuries of World War II veterans conditioned the prevailing medical model of disability representation (Brown & Smith, 1989; Cologon & Thomas, 2014) with an excessive attention to physical impairment and personal

tragedies of para-athletes in the media coverage of the Paralympic Games until the beginning the 21st century (Berger, 2008; Goggin & Newell, 2000). Spinal cord injury was the only disability included in the first five editions of the Paralympic Games of Rome 1960, Tokyo 1964, Tel Aviv 1968, and Heidelberg 1972. From the 1976 Paralympic Games in Örnsköldsvik and Toronto blind and amputee athletes were also admitted. Finally, in 1980 athletes with cerebral palsy joined the competition at Arnhem Games. Notwithstanding the extensive current range of Paralympic sports, accounting for 22 summer and 6 winter disciplines, the global visibility of these disciplines is uneven during the Games celebration, with a predominant media focus on the technologically enhanced disabled athletes and socially accepted disabled bodies (Bush et al., 2013). The use of sophisticated prosthetics such as fiber carbon blades and racing wheelchairs has become a key element of the superhuman or supercrip representation (Clogston, 1990) of Paralympic athletes, enhancing their exceptional abilities and extraordinary results (Berger, 2008; Pullen et al., 2020).

London 2012 Paralympics signaled a significant change in media coverage and visibility of disability before, during, and after the Games, gathering the attention of scholars to the impact of the event and its key narratives moving away from para-sport as therapy to elite-level competition (Bush et al., 2013; Hodges et al., 2014; Pullen et al., 2019). The role of the UK television broadcaster Channel 4 was particularly acknowledged for the content quantity and quality of the event, fostering a social change in the framing of disability in the UK (Pullen et al., 2019). The adverts launched by Channel 4 for the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Games released a new powerful narrative, depicting feats and personal everyday experiences of elite para-athletes (McGillivray et al., 2021), engaging the audience with backstories of Paralympians in their everyday life. In parallel, the number of employees with disabilities at Channel 4 both on and off-screen was also increased.

Some remarkable practices have been identified recently in different countries in cultural discourses and media narratives of Paralympic Games and athletes with disabilities. Although those practices are still far from common, their contribution to normalizing social perception of disability and fostering full inclusion while challenging stereotypes and negative attitudes deserves special attention. The release of the Spanish movie *Champions*, featuring a team of basketball players with different kinds of disability, became one of the most seen Spanish movies of all time with over 3 million viewers. One of its lead actors, Jesus Vidal, was awarded the Best Newcomer actor at the National Movie Awards in 2019 and shortly after became one of the hosts of a popular variety talk show at the La Sexta Spanish broadcaster. In the UK, the award-winning producer Nikki Fox, born with muscular dystrophy, became in 2014 the first BBC disability correspondent, covering a wide range of news on disability and social inclusivity. A former Paralympic

wheelchair basketball player Ade Adepitan is a popular face on British television, presenting Paralympic events on British Channel 4 and other programs focused on people with impairments. Furthermore, global attention was drawn toward the Paralympic Games in August 2020 by the *Rising Phoenix* documentary, launched on the Netflix platform in 190 countries which depicts personal stories of nine Paralympic athletes from different countries within the historical context of the Paralympic Games and their remaining future challenges.

4. Materials and Method

The main research goals are aimed at identifying communication tools and best practices put in place by the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games in order to create a truly inclusive and accessible global para-sports event. The research is guided by the exploratory case study approach, structured as an empirical inquiry focused on the in-depth analysis of a specific contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin, 2009). Research data were gathered through the review of Tokyo 2020 Paralympic documents, an extensive literature review, as well as monitoring of digital platforms in the pre-game period. In addition, four in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts in the Paralympic movement and Paralympic broadcasting were conducted to gather insights from the perspective of news-makers and communication experts involved in the communication of the Paralympic Games. Personal meetings and online interviews were held by the authors with: Tristan Lavier, Manager of International Communications Section, Tokyo Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games; Masashi Nonaka, Vice President, Weber Shandwick Japan; Kazutake Hiramatsu, Managing Director of Corporate Communications Division, Dentsu; and Yolanda García, Sports Editor-in-Chief of the Spanish National Broadcasting Services, RTVE.

The identification of innovative practices in the visibility of disability, specific tools, and narratives was guided by four issues addressed in extant research in the field of Paralympic studies:

- The role of national broadcasters in the Paralympics' coverage and narratives (Kolotouchkina et al., 2021; McGillivray et al., 2021; Pullen et al., 2019);
- The impact of assistive and enabling technologies on the visibility of para-athletes and Paralympics (Quinlan & Bates, 2009; Silva & Howe, 2012);
- Citizen engagement and participation research (Kolotouchkina, 2018; Misener & Mason, 2006);
- Cultural legacy of the global sports events (Bush et al., 2013; García, 2012; Grix & Brannagan, 2016).

Key research findings outline a series of remarkable initiatives focused on raising the awareness and further understanding of disability in Japan through disruptive

communication narratives, citizen engagement actions, and the use of advanced assistive technologies in the context of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. In particular, this article illustrates some innovative communication narratives of disability representation, as well as reviews a series of educational and engagement initiatives focused on school children and young people in Japan in the pre-game period of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. The study aims to contribute to further academic discussion and effective practice of fostering a fair representation of disability and effective inclusion of people with disabilities in public life.

5. Best Practices of Visibility and Representation of Disability From the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics

The guiding vision of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games identifies ‘achieving personal best,’ ‘unity in diversity,’ and ‘connecting to tomorrow’ as three key strategic pillars aimed at ensuring an inclusive nature of the event. 4,350 athletes from 165 countries are expected to join the competitions (Tokyo 2020, n.d.-a).

While the exceptional conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the postponement of the global Paralympic event, some initial impact on the disability context has been already observed in Japan. Over 70 companies have become Paralympic partners and supporters of the Games, evidencing the commitment of the international and Japanese business sector to the global para-sports event. In 2019, Haneda Airport was recognized as the World’s Best Airport for its universal design facilities and services for people with disabilities and the elderly. For the Games celebration, all transport hubs should be 100 percent accessible (International Paralympic Committee, 2019b). Internet of Things solutions are also expected to play a key role in Tokyo 2020, enabling smart maintenance of public transport accessibility and facilitating energy-saving measures targeted at making the Olympic village a zero-emission hydrogen-powered smart district (Hallett, 2020).

The examination of some of the innovative communication strategies fostering visibility, inclusiveness, and normalization of disability representation already implemented in Japan in anticipation of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, reveals a series of meaningful actors and tools of this strategic approach.

5.1. NHK Coverage and Innovative Paralympic Narratives

The role of the National Broadcasting Services NHK, the primary national broadcaster in Japan and a key global news channel in Japan and Asia, with 250 million viewers in 140 countries (Snow, 2019), is particularly remarkable in the pre-game period of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. The first aspect to highlight is the expected worldwide coverage of the event by NHK. Tokyo 2020 will, live, show 21 disciplines from 19 sports, the largest

broadcast live in the history of the Paralympics. Sports Editor-in-Chief of the Spanish National Broadcasting Services RTVE, argues that the availability of live-action in a wide variety of sports from the host city is essential to enhance the global visibility of the Paralympics event and to engage the event’s global audience (García, personal communication, November 14, 2019). Furthermore, the coverage of the 2020 Paralympic news and events at the NHK will be conducted by three presenters with disabilities. These news anchors have different kinds of impairment (hearing disability, cerebral palsy, and limb disability) and have been involved in the competitions at the 2018 PyeongChang Paralympic Winter Games, the 2019 London World Para Swimming Championship, and the 2019 Dubai World Para Athletics Championship (International Paralympic Committee, 2019c).

The prominent role of the national Japanese broadcaster NHK in the normalization and mediation of disability also takes on particular importance on account of its innovative approach to the Paralympic narratives. From 2017, NHK has launched a series *Animation x Paralympic: Who is your Hero?* introducing Japanese anonymous and famous para-athletes of 11 Paralympic sports categories with the anime-style narratives. The episodes also feature popular anime characters from the most famous Japanese series (*KochiKame*, *Baby Steps*, *Yowamushi Pedal*, *Hotaru’s Way*, *Mashirohi* and *Dear Boys*) placed in the context of different Paralympic sports. Each episode is developed with a particular manga style by famous Japanese artists Kouji Seo, Masahito Kagawa, Wakasa, Yoichi Takahashi, Eisaku Kubonouchi, Hiroki Yagami, and Masayoshi Ozaki, as well as featuring music by famous pop singers Sakura Fujiwara, Lisa, Daichi Miura, and rock band Okamoto, all of which contribute to the high-quality production and high visibility rates of the series in Japan (International Paralympic Committee, 2018).

The combination in the narrative of popular fictional characters with real para-athletes (the most famous Japanese Paralympic tennis champion and former world number one Shingo Kunieda and para-cyclist Shota Kawamoto) provides an entertaining and first-hand inspirational experience of the challenges and peculiarities of each para-sports discipline. While, for a long time, disability representation in the manga genre was biased and stigmatized, the contribution of prominent manga artists with disabilities such as Yamamoto Osamu and Kobayashi Yoshinori addressing issues of discrimination against people with disabilities in their manga books, signals a potential to influence the perception of disability among manga readers (Gottlieb, 2001). The value of the manga and anime genres in raising awareness and understanding about disability is particularly remarkable due to the fluid and relational nature of the characters and their strong connection with fandom through:

The blurred boundaries between media on the screen, whether packaged, broadcast, theatrically released or streamed on the Internet, and the

emergent potential of character-related businesses and activities later, from lucrative licensing deals with pachinko manufacturers to non-commercial fan uses as cosplay. (Condry, 2009, p. 143)

Furthermore, manga and anime are indisputable icons of Cool Japan's global cultural influence, highly popular with young people both at home and abroad (McGray, 2009; Snow, 2013).

5.2. Citizen Engagement in Paralympic Projects

Citizen engagement in sports global events is a critical factor in maximizing the network of local supporters, building shared experiences, and fostering creative communication action at the collective and individual level (Garcia, 2012; Girginova, 2017). A wide range of different options to get involved in the celebration of the sports event always emerges for local communities (Misener & Mason, 2006). Citizen participation in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics is an important issue as the initial public support to the celebration of the second Olympic Games in the city was very low (Kietlinski, 2011; Kolotouchkina, 2018; Shimizu, 2014). In this regard, some specific targets of communication and engagement strategies put in place by Tokyo 2020 become particularly relevant. The focus on families, school children and young people is predominant in communication actions and engagement initiatives in the pre-games Paralympic narratives.

Educational programs focused on the history of the Olympic movement and aimed at spreading the Olympic values as an inspiration for younger generations is a common practice from the Olympic host cities. These programs usually include sports activities and cultural events with Olympic athletes, as well as specific access to a wide range of Olympic knowledge and educational resources (Ribeiro et al., 2020). Educational pillars of the Paralympic movement play a significant role as facilitators of understanding and first-hand personal experience of disability, in particular for children and young people. Beckett (2014) argues that non-disabled children "enact cultural schemas that both sustain their privileged position as non-disabled people and the subordinate position of disabled people" (p. 871).

Three years ahead of the Games, the education project YoiDon! aimed at fostering Olympic knowledge among Japanese school children was launched by Tokyo 2020. Through a designed thematic collection of textbooks on Olympic and Paralympic studies, and a digital platform featuring a wide range of Olympic and Paralympic content, school children were given access to the extensive collection of resources, stories and data. Moreover, since the designation of Tokyo as the host city of the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Japanese elite athletes and para-athletes make regular visits to schools all over Japan to share their personal experiences and encourage younger generations to take an active part in the Olympic and Paralympic movement

(Hiramatsu, personal communication, August 11, 2017; Nonaka, personal communication, July 8, 2017).

The Olympic and Paralympic mascot selection process became another relevant milestone in school children engagement in the Olympic experience. The most charming characters of the 2020 Tokyo Games, Miraitowa and Someity, were selected by children from over 14,000 schools in Japan through classroom debates and a collective voting process on the winners of the open design competition. Children with visual impairment were provided specific 3D models of each mascot to facilitate their touch and feel assessment (Lavier, personal communication, July 27, 2017). The mascot selection and voting process had a strong impact on the personal attachment and interest of school children towards the Olympic and Paralympic movement, making them active supporters and ambassadors of the mascots who went on to spread their enthusiasm and engagement within their families and groups of friends (Kolotouchkina, 2018).

Fostering school children's knowledge and active engagement in the Paralympic movement, the Agitos Foundation of the International Paralympic Committee, will present its first winners of the *I'm POSSIBLE* award at the Closing Ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. The award is a global recognition of the outstanding achievement in inclusivity made by schools in Japan and overseas, that follows a specific inclusive teaching program developed by the Agitos Foundation. The educational program is aimed at promoting social inclusion and knowledge of the Paralympic Movement through a wide range of educational tools, digital resources, and teaching methodologies. The final purpose of the program is to influence perceptions about people with disabilities and to educate new generations with inspiration in Paralympic values (Agitos Foundation, 2019).

Moreover, events regularly take place in the Greater Tokyo area to provide families and children with a direct and entertaining encounter with the general knowledge and direct experience of different para-sports categories. These events are usually jointly hosted by the Tokyo organizing committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games as well as by Tokyo Metropolitan Government (Tokyo 2020, 2019a). The event program comprises trials of Paralympic sports such as wheelchair basketball, wheelchair marathon, badminton and triathlon—joined by elite para-athletes who explain the rules of each specific para-sports category and the equipment required. Another remarkable feature of the events is the active participation of Japanese celebrities with or without disability who contribute their personal support and visibility in mass media and social networking sites to the Paralympic movement.

5.3. Assistive and Enabling Technologies

The dizzying pace of continuous advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) is changing

the daily routines and civic life of people with disabilities. The flexible and adaptive nature of digital and assistive technologies levels the playing field across key social, economic, and civic domains, enabling people with disabilities to fully enjoy their fundamental citizenship rights and their independence (Samant Raja, 2016). Bennet and Segerberg (2013) identify a new logic of connective action in the digitally mediated social context. Emerging urban practices around the globe addressing the digital divide and social exclusion (Mervyn et al., 2014), as well as fostering an effective engagement and empowerment of people with disabilities in public life through ICTs, evidence the essential role of cities to lead a major paradigm shift in the inclusive digital placemaking (Bartolome Muñoz de Luna & Kolotouchkina, 2020). Inspired by the remarkable technological prowess of the previous Tokyo 1964 Games, the 2020 edition will deploy a state-of-the-art innovation in spatial information systems, new generation robots, advanced video analytics, and ultra-high-definition television (Kassens-Noor & Fukushima, 2016).

Among the assistive technologies implemented by Tokyo 2020, Human Support Robots will gain a particular role in providing support for wheelchair users through offering delivery of goods and guidance to seats at the sports venues. Miraitowa and Someity, the Olympic and Paralympic mascots will also have their robot versions, able to greet visitors and athletes, shake hands, and interact through a variety of facial expressions. This mascot-robot experience is particularly aimed at children and their families. The T-HR3 Humanoid Robot will assume the role of transmitting sounds and images of the competitions from the Games locations to other partner robots, providing an in-situ sports immersive virtual reality experience. Two other robot categories T-TR1 and Field Support Robot will be in charge of, respectively, facilitating virtual representation of the games for people who are not able to attend the venue, and to retrieve athletic equipment thrown by athletes or staff through the competition fields. Robots will have also the role of being multilingual guides and security and accessibility assistants (Hallett, 2020; Tokyo 2020, 2019b).

Furthermore, Tokyo 2020 published an Accessibility Handbook to be used by staff attending visitors and participants of the Games (Tokyo 2020, 2018). The book provides a detailed description of all potential accessibility needs, identifying specific behaviour and attention protocol expected from the staff to facilitate accessibility for people with a disability or a health condition requiring some kind of support.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this exploratory and interpretive case study methodology on the generalizability of the results. Thus, the conclusions should be considered suggestive. Furthermore, the research has been conducted in the pre-game period of

the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. These Games are expected to set a new standard in the visibility of the Paralympic Movement, therefore this research will be further developed to assess media visibility of disability as well as best practices of accessibility and inclusion of Tokyo 2020 Paralympics.

In order to normalize the social perception of disability, fostering inclusion and full accessibility of people with impairment, the World Health Organization (2011) recommends increasing public awareness and understanding about disability, confronting negative perceptions and prejudices, and representing disability fairly. Paralympic global sports events have a strong potential to become social catalysts in their host cities and countries, promoting the understanding of the complexities of disability, breaking perception barriers and fostering the social inclusion of people with disabilities into public life.

Notwithstanding many remaining challenges underpinned by traditional social distance with disability in Japan (Heyer, 2000, 2015; Stevens, 2007), the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games have triggered some remarkable progress towards a barrier-free mindset. In particular, the engagement of younger generations through educational and entertainment initiatives, social events, and fun group activities focused on the practice of Paralympic sports and the discovery of para-athletes, have provided children and young people with a new first-hand inspirational experience of disability, free of prejudice and stigma. Opposite to the usual representation of disability as a lack of something, failure, or deviance (Goodley et al., 2019), the depiction of para-athletes as manga and anime iconic main characters in the *Animation x Paralympic: Who is your Hero?* series has offered a fresh and disruptive perspective, understanding disability as involving personal identity, empowerment, and community. This kind of personal involvement and critical engagement of children and young people in the experience of disability and its cultural schemas is particularly significant as a transformative impact on the social perception of people with disability (Beckett, 2014).

Furthermore, the engagement of the Paralympic athletes in public meetings and events, as well as the advertising support they receive from the Games' official sponsors contribute to making Paralympic athletes abandon their usual anonymity to raise the awareness of their achievements in para-sports disciplines. This personification and public visibility of the Paralympic athletes is essential for attracting fans and sponsors, and for broadening the social relevance of the para-sports.

The review of some innovative practices that emerged in the pre-game period of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics sheds light on new inspirational narratives of disability representation and highlights the importance of assistive technologies in facilitating truly inclusive and accessible environments. The interconnection of Paralympic discourses and narratives of Tokyo 2020 with a broader cultural and social context is particularly

significant as a signal of a paradigm shift away from the traditional invisibility and isolation of people with disabilities in Japan.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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