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EVOLUTION OF COMMERCIALS FEATURING PARA ATHLETES: FROM FRIEND NEXT DOOR TO EQUAL SPORTS STARS

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ABSTRACT:

This article analyses how Para athletes were presented in audiovisual commercials by companies that supported the Olympic or Paralympic Games. We focused on the framing of (dis)ability in commercials available on YouTube (2008-2021). The evolution in Para athletes' presentation can be tracked in identified frames. The traditional defensive and supercrip frames have persisted, though less noticeably than in the past. Defensive framing accentuates the hard work and tough training of Paralympians. Its subframe, supercrip or cyborg framing, challenges the notion of disability and highlights the courage of Paralympians. One newly identified frame was the equality frame, when advertisements present Paralympians as equals living ordinary lives as able-bodied people. The portrayal of Paralympians in advertisements has evolved and corresponds with the companies' missions and campaigns' claims.

KEYWORDS:

athletes with a disability, commercials, framing, para athletes, sports communication, social media

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1 Introduction

In many cases, Para sport is still perceived more as a therapeutic element than a fully-fledged sport (Němcová Tejkalová, 2012). Misener et al. (2018) and Silk et al. (2019) argue that the presentation of Para athletes in the media is a way to bring the sport of athletes with a disability closer to the general public. Robust research has already been conducted on the mediatization of Para sport (see, for example, Macková & Trunečka, 2015; Martínez-Bello et al., 2023; McGillivray et al., 2021; Misener, 2013) but predominantly in connection to sports journalism. In recent years, the phenomenon of Para athletes being featured in commercials has become increasingly common. Therefore, our research focuses on this neglected topic, although some studies mapping the advertising potential of athletes with a disability were previously published (e.g., Shelton, 2017b). The current study aims to examine the portrayal of Para athletes in audiovisual commercials by companies that supported both the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and to identify any potential changes in this representation over time. For this research 30 audiovisual advertisements (all relevant advertisements published on YouTube between 2008 and 2022) of past and current sponsors and partners of International Paralympic Committee and Paralympic Games with global impact featuring Paralympians or Para athletes from 2008 till 2021 (e.g., Airbnb, Allianz, AT&T, Bridgestone, Citi, McDonald's, Otobock, Panasonic, P&G, Samsung, Sainsbury's, Toyota) were analysed through qualitative framing analysis. This method allowed us to reveal how the commercials showed and presented the particular topic or issue while using various approaches, e.g., metaphors, images, symbols or various camera angles (see, for example, Ang & Knox, 2023; Kim et al., 2017).

Before assigning the still valid joint agreement between the IPC and the IOC in 2001, which caused the rise of commercialisation of sports for Paralympians (IPC, 2022), athletes with a disability were rarely presented in the media and advertising. Němcová Tejkalová (2012) stated that athletes with more severe or more visible impairment gained less media attention than those with a less visible disability. Media representation of Para athletes in the older advertisements generally aimed more at the inclusion of the people with a disability than at their achievements to get the audience used to accepting bodies with an impairment (cf. Silk et al., 2019). That has changed. Our research shows that in more current campaigns disability has been acknowledged in all selected advertisements and has been visible. The distinction of the Paralympians and their acceptance have been intentionally targeted, with Paralympic athletes becoming the main and often the only characters of the commercials.

2 Para Athletes in the Media and Marketing

The media representation of Para athletes, especially in connection to the Paralympic Games has undergone long development (see, for example, Goggin & Newell, 2000; Howe, 2011; Macková & Turková, 2019; Martínez-Bello et al., 2023). Schantz and Gilbert (2008) identified two main types of media coverage: traditional and progressive. While traditional coverage portrays Para athletes as handicapped people whose fight with their dysfunctional body is admirable, the progressive approach focuses on the sports performance of the depicted athletes, regardless of their (dis)ability. The more recent the Paralympics have been, the more media narratives have kept the focus on the ability, rather than the disability, even though the traditional perspective is still present in many media outlets.

The media frequently publishes stories of Para athletes. According to previous research (Jackson et al., 2015; Němcová Tejkalová, 2012) athletes with a disability are often portrayed in one of two ways, either as victims or as brave people who overcome their disabilities and still do sport. Smith and Thomas (2005) even argue that Para athletes are perceived by the public more as victims than as elite athletes, which repetitively leads to tolerance if they fail to achieve some sporting success. However, athletes with a disability reject the role of the disabled person and do not want to be pitied (see, Macková & Turková, 2019; Shapiro, 1994). Therefore, in the progressive types of

media narratives, the disability is not the centre of the story, and we can witness the framing based more on their sports achievements rather than their (dis)ability (Schantz & Gilbert, 2008).

The Paralympic Games are the time when Para sports are showcased in the world news (Brittain, 2016). It is now unimaginable that when the organisers of the 1996 Summer Paralympic Games in Atlanta wanted the Games to be broadcast, they had to pay the TV networks to do so (Goggin & Newell, 2000). The number of hours of broadcasting from the Paralympic Games and the number of television viewers have been growing worldwide (IPC, 2019). According to IPC (2019), since the Summer Paralympic Games in Athens 2004, the number of viewers watching Para sport on television has increased by 127% over 12 years. The 2000 Summer Paralympic Games in Sydney marked a turning point in Paralympic media coverage: for the first time journalists could use the Paralympic News Service as they were familiar with it from the Olympic Games (Goggin & Newell, 2000), and since that time, every Paralympic Games have brought some innovation in media coverage and more equality in the representation of Para athletes in comparison to Olympic athletes, with particular attention focused on the 2012 Summer Paralympic Games in London (see, for example, Butler & Bissell, 2013; Jackson et al., 2015). The Channel 4 project during the London 2012 Paralympic Games was unique. The public service television network and its media experts wanted to enlarge the audience and so, decided to broadcast the Paralympic Games continuously and ensure that Para athletes were in the spotlight. Channel 4 promoted the sport of the disabled and presented it as an elite sport. This major international sports event was presented by several major brands in their commercials, as well as selected athletes with a disability, which also helped the audience to begin to perceive Para sport differently (Jackson-Brown, 2020).

Since the last decades of the 20th century, professional sport has become a commodity which has become (over)commercialised around the world (e.g., Nicholson et al., 2015). Paralympic sports have recently come to the forefront for companies interested in advertising. Cooperation of the International Olympic and Paralympic Committees in several areas has been very important for the development of the sport of athletes with a disability.

The IPC and the IOC signed a still valid joint agreement in 2001, which affected the presentation of Para sport (IPC, 2022). The IPC is seeking to raise public awareness of Paralympians with the aim of having the audience perceive Paralympic sport not only as a therapeutic element, but as a professional sport (Jackson et al., 2015). Some companies sponsoring the Olympics have chosen not to sponsor the Paralympics in the past, which negatively affected, for example, the 1996 Atlanta Games. This trend changed at the 1998 Nagano Paralympic Games (Ozturk & Kocak, 2004). Nowadays, most Olympic and Paralympic sponsors are the same (IPC, 2022). The media play an essential role in socialisation, which is the reason the advertisements showing Para athletes have great potential to influence the normalisation of disability by the general public.

The continuing changes have been trackable up to the present day, in both the media coverage and in the Paralympic marketing. Devlin (2017) highlights that sports marketing can be done not only directly during the mega-events but also through traditional and social media. The audiovisual commercials can be spread both ways when traditional media, e.g., television, are able to deliver promotional messages along with reporting of sporting events, while social media help to build two-way marketing relationships with the audience. The commercials present a product mostly by using a story, building a brand image or selling the product. A story in audiovisual advertising can arouse emotions and build a brand association (Drury, 2008). Sponsors, with their campaign, always want to highlight something about their own brand and products as well. The companies seek to promote Para athletes in their commercials not only due to the established contracts, but also because of corporate social responsibility and identity performance reasons. Moreover, Paralympic marketing discourse recently highlights more the sporting ability than the disability, while highlighting that there is just one sport (Haslett et al., 2020).

3 Framing the Key Message

The most important feature of the advertising campaign is to mediate the key message about the product to the audience and call to action (to buy a product or support an idea). This leads us to the necessity of framing the

message well, selecting the most important issues, emphasising them and making them salient (and at the same time excluding others, for the clarity of the intended result), as Entman (1993) described in his seminal work about media framing.

While analysing the discourse of the audiovisual sports media content, researchers can focus more on the linguistic aspects (as, e.g., Angelini & Billings, 2010; Misener, 2013), visual features (e.g., Ang & Knox, 2023; Johnson et al., 2022) or can combine their approaches as Butler and Bissell (2013) did in their work about cartoons featuring Mandeville and Wenlock, the Paralympic and Olympic mascots of the 2012 Games in London. Due to the rapid pace and short duration of commercials it is vital to catch the audience's attention, not only with properly selected words but by the various camera perspectives. In the case of Paralympic athletes, the visualisation of the athletes can determine whether the audience is left with more of a perception of ability or disability (Ang & Knox, 2023).

Previous research described several media and marketing frames connected with the portrayal of Para athletes, even though there usually not just one frame in each text is used, more often, various frames that (prevalingly) complement each other are implemented. The dominant and general frame is the other (see, for example, Butler & Bissell, 2013; Misener, 2013; Němcová Tejkalová, 2012; Silva & Howe, 2012). The term *the other* in relation to athletes with a disability means the difference as well as secondness. In the case of older media coverage or marketing campaigns, we can speak about pitying (see, Goggin & Newell, 2000; Shelton, 2017b) or defensive framing (Němcová Tejkalová, 2012) when journalistic narratives are full of compassion for the Para athletes and their brave fight with their destiny or when they defend the athletes by highlighting the enormous effort during practice and the quality of performed achievements, labelling Para sport as an "equal" sport. As Goggin and Newell (2000) described, the typical representative of Para athletes in this framework used to be a male wheelchair user.

The most recurrent category of defensive framing is the supercrip framing, which challenges the notion of disability and highlights the courage and endurance of athletes leading to success, stimulating expectations that all people with a disability can achieve this success. Para athletes are portrayed as heroes based on their ability to perform achievements that are commonly considered impossible for people with a disability (see, for example, Ashfield et al., 2017; Berger, 2008; McNamee, 2017; Shelton, 2017b). Although this type of presentation of the athletes with a disability is nowadays often criticised, it has persisted for a long time (see, Berger, 2008; McGillivray et al., 2021; Schantz & Gilbert, 2001; Silva & Howe, 2012). Shakespeare (1999) argued that people with disabilities are portrayed as the other even in the film industry. There, they are supposed to be a tool to create emotions, especially the supercrip stereotype.

Another similar frame is called cyborgs. The development of biomechanics and ergonomics has made tremendous progress, allowing many athletes who previously could only compete in wheelchairs to now compete with other standing opponents with the help of these technological developments (Howe, 2011). The media image of the most successful athletes with prostheses fits the supercrip stereotype. Paralympians in specially adjusted sports wheelchairs or athletes with prostheses are examples of the so-called cyborgification in sports (Howe & Silva, 2017). This process has helped some Para athletes to become celebrities (see, for example, Howe, 2011; Shelton, 2017b).

4 Methodology

In our research, we were inspired by the previously summarised existing body of research aimed at the media coverage and commercial presentation of athletes with a disability. Due to this fact, the study addresses two main research questions, that also allows us to compare the results with the evolution in media coverage of Para athletes:

RQ1 How are Para athletes framed in the audiovisual commercials of Olympic and Paralympic partners and sponsors?

RQ2 How has the portrayal of Para athletes in the audiovisual commercials of Olympic and Paralympic partners and sponsors evolved and varied within the observation period?

As the research method, we adopted qualitative framing analysis, which is applicable for the in-depth research of sports advertising campaigns (see, Ellis et al., 2011; Sanderson et al., 2020). It was successfully used in studies focused on the media and advertising coverage of Para athletes as well (e.g., Kim et al., 2017; Shelton, 2017a). As previously stated, we focused on both visual and verbal framing of ability and disability in the commercials.

The representation of athletes with a disability in advertising is limited, hence our research focuses on advertisements from sponsors of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, where it can be presumed that athletes and Para athletes are prominently featured. This provides a compact and comparable sample for analysis. While our study pertains to sponsors, the portrayal of Para athletes in these advertisements has undergone changes over time, while reacting to the evolving attitudes of society towards disability. Although these advertisements should be aligned with the policies of the International Paralympic Committee, which emphasise the active portrayal of Para athletes (Paralympic.org, n.d.), it is important to note that these policies have also been modified over time.

We searched for and further analysed all advertisements by these companies available on YouTube, as this platform is widely used by sports actors, media, and marketing organisations for enhanced visibility and popularity (see, for example, Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Vann, 2014; Watkins, 2018). As Zimmerman et al. (2011) argue, YouTube is effectively used by individuals and organisations within the sports field to disseminate messages to their users and direct attention to the posted content. Commercials published on YouTube were previously used as material for research focused on the portrayal of a specific type of athlete in the advertising campaigns and their influence on the public by Qutub and Basabain (2021) or Yoon and Lee (2023).

Despite sport being considered a universal language itself (Coakley, 2015), we limited our focus to English-speaking commercials. Hence, we assume that the commercials in English may potentially have a global impact and be understandable to the general public (Thomson et al., 2019). To obtain specific examples, we searched for any combination of the keywords “Paralympic”, “Olympic”, “commercial”, “campaign”, “ad” and “advertisement” in the YouTube basic search engine. We particularly looked for the commercials of current and past partners and sponsors of the International Paralympic Committee and Paralympic Games. To increase the possibility of finding what we required, we also used words that may possibly have subjective connotations, such as “handicap”, “disability”, “impairment” or the direct specification of the peoples’ adversity, e.g., “wheelchair”. Although these keywords are not ethically correct, they were commonly used for the description of Para sport and Para athletes in the past. Two researchers then manually checked the results, to determine whether the commercials fulfilled the requirements in terms of accuracy and language. Finally, on a case-by-case basis, we selected all 30 relevant audiovisual commercials (August 2008 – May 2022) of the Olympic and Paralympic partners and sponsors that were available in the period of research. The date range resulted from the selection of the commercials published on YouTube that were found on the basis of the various combinations of selected keywords and therefore we have chosen the analysed commercials (the commercial from 2008 was the oldest relevant one published on YouTube and found in our search with selected keywords).

All the analysed commercials are listed in Table 1 with links to their original YouTube storage, so they can be watched by the readers. When any spot was found on YouTube in more than one version, we selected the more complete version. Each video has been assigned a unique identification number (No.), which enables identification of the commercial later in the article.

While watching the selected commercials, we focused on the various elements incorporated into the videos with a special emphasis on capturing any possible symbolic meaning or presence of the aforementioned frames connected to the presentation of the Para athletes. We also discussed the relationship of the message in the spots with the brands’ values, ongoing campaigns and claims that were used in the time when the spots were released.

Table 1. List of Analysed Commercials, accessed on November 28, 2022

No.	Title of the commercial on YT	Partner / Sponsor	Year of the YT publication	Link
1	“Ceremony” – Coca-Cola Olympic & Special Olympics Commercial	Coca-Cola	2008	https://youtu.be/ModNZISuLro
2	VINTAGE 80'S MCDONALD'S COMMERCIAL MY BEST FRIEND W GIRL IN WHEELCHAIR	McDonald's	2009	https://youtu.be/YOQxkO34Ltg
3	McDonald's Olympics – We All Make The Games	McDonald's	2012	https://youtu.be/aDiDSTJcEyc
4	One Of The Most Inspiring Ads Ever London Paralympics	Samsung	2012	https://youtu.be/pnAx357JW78
5	Sainsburys Paralympics Forwards	Sainsbury's	2013	https://youtu.be/iUuk7o2awwM
6	A&T Paralympics Commercial featuring Heath Calhoun	AT&T	2014	https://youtu.be/MEW7FYIn02M
7	Coca-Cola – 2014 Special Olympics commercial	Coca-Cola	2014	https://youtu.be/h1HRLcQs7eM
8	Will Balley 2012 Paralympics – Sainsbury's / Channel 4	Sainsbury's	2014	https://youtu.be/UjA31LtAdnY
9	Samsung – What's your problem? Sport doesn't care (Winter Paralympics)	Samsung	2014	https://youtu.be/I8DMDjlt7dQ
10	P&G ‘Thank You Mom’ Campaign Ad: “Tough Love” (Sochi 2014 Paralympic Games)	Procter & Gamble	2016	https://youtu.be/6gs6RAmTTqY
11	Toyota Prepare For Amazing – Olympic and Paralympic Teams TV Commercial 2016	Toyota	2017	https://youtu.be/cWk3ge5nYS8
12	Toyota Ambassador - Paralympian, Dylan Alcott TV Commercial 2016	Toyota	2017	https://youtu.be/RUZ9n6idSq8
13	To the Greatness of Small Olympics	Alibaba	2018	https://youtu.be/vTn16OVkb_E
14	Coca Cola campfire commercial	Coca-Cola	2018	https://youtu.be/RDEWbV2GTFU
15	McDonald's Paralympics	McDonald's	2018	https://youtu.be/wMgonnu4J2U
16	Good Odds Toyota Super Bowl 2018 Commercial	Toyota	2018	https://youtu.be/34PVFN191ao

17	Allianz "Paralympics" - with PARALYMPIC LONG JUMPER Markus Rehm Director Luis de Maia	Allianz	2019	https://youtu.be/qxQDuAwSgnQ
18	Allianz "Paralympics" - with PARALYMPIC SWIMMER Ellen Keane Director Luis de Maia	Allianz	2019	https://youtu.be/oo8Z-xTPVuc
19	Allianz "Paralympics" - with PARALYMPIC WHEELCHAIR RACER Manuela Schär Director Luis de Maia	Allianz	2019	https://youtu.be/EGqbDqnu1sE
20	The Whole Team Made possible by Hosts Airbnb	Airbnb	2021	https://youtu.be/o8-z5CDakR0
21	Tokyo 2020 – Making it Happen	Atos	2021	https://youtu.be/ZekqS71yDHo
22	Bridgestone Proud Partner of Paralympic Games – Determination	Bridgestone	2021	https://youtu.be/ZGZzF0RbJIc
23	Bridgestone Proud Partner of Paralympic Games – Equality	Bridgestone	2021	https://youtu.be/betANfM3Twa
24	Citi Stare: Gustavo Sanchez	Citi	2021	https://youtu.be/rVWiPucktw
25	Passion for Paralympics Tokyo 2020	Ottobock	2021	https://youtu.be/Wg4gnBjE_-Y
26	Raising The Bar	Panasonic	2021	https://youtu.be/VLvu6kkut6w
27	Mediashotz – Toyota TeamGB Tokyo Olympics sponsor ad with HSR	Toyota	2021	https://youtu.be/tGvMjktQ_nE
28	Toyota Super Bowl Commercial 2021 Jessica Long Upstream	Toyota	2021	https://youtu.be/Pr3jR2keirk
29	Deloitte x Performance 2022 Toyota Big Game	Deloitte	2022	https://youtu.be/qRvlicJBwIY
30	Commercial: Brothers Extended Cut Start Your Impossible	Toyota	2022	https://youtu.be/u3pbC74bf8E

Source: own processing, 2023

5 The Original Otherness: Defensive Framing of the Presentation of Paralympians in Comparison to the Olympians

Several frames described by previously published studies about Para athletes in the media and commercials were identified in our research sample. The most common framing presented in the commercials involved highlighting the need to train hard in order to be the best, which was used to strengthen the similarity with the training hardships of the Olympians. This was necessary because the audience sometimes underestimates the amount of training Para athletes need to qualify for the Paralympic Games despite their understanding of the difficulty of the games. The defensive framing strategy is perfectly demonstrated by the 2018 Toyota commercial (No. 16). It presents the story of a little girl, Lauren Woolstencroft, who was born with shortened lower limbs and left arm and announces that her odds of becoming a gold medalist were 1 in 486,336,204. The video then shows a montage of Woolstencroft as she matures through childhood into adolescence and adulthood. We are shown images of her competing, falling and failing, but always trying hard and never giving up, while her odds of winning a gold medal become more and more favourable the harder, she works. The emotional experience has been further intensified by the touching song accompanying this artistic flight through Woolstencroft's life. Perseverance and courage have been the most valued virtues in sports since its beginning and this Para skier embodied those virtues. Her hard training was accentuated through the use of various camera shots and close-ups of her solemn face beaded with sweat, until finally she became the best in the world, a gold medalist. Her training had paid off and showed that if someone works hard enough, nothing is impossible. Furthermore, this advertisement is closely associated with Toyota's "Start Your Impossible" campaign. Initially, it appeared implausible for Lauren Woolstencroft to excel in the Paralympic Games. However, by embarking on her journey, she precisely fulfilled the company's slogan.

Procter & Gamble's advertisement (No. 10) also exemplifies the linking of claims, as it expresses gratitude to all mothers, as emphasised by the Tough Love campaign's slogan, "Thank You, Mom". The spot predominantly depicts the theme of overcoming adversity and mental resilience from childhood, crafted as a tribute to all mothers of Paralympians for their unwavering support. The ad is replete with details, commencing with a close-up of the mother's face to showcase her emotions (whether happy or worried), followed by close-ups of the wheelchair or the mother aiding her child in the wheelchair. The producers present diverse forms of disabilities and emotions. The protective framing is layered into the advertisements, hidden in protective actions such as a mother aiding her child in a wheelchair up the stairs. The narration reinforces the idea that mothers understand they cannot do everything for their children, or they will never attain independence: "You could have taken every hit. You could have turned the world upside down so that I would never feel pain." In this instance, not only the mother but also the child must exert effort to participate and excel in society. The hard practice is also the main topic of one of the commercials for Toyota (No. 12), where Australian wheelchair tennis player Dylan Alcott describes his daily routine, its difficulty, and the ability to overcome it in a supercrip manner, emphasised through the use of black and white pictures with deep dark shades.

As evidenced by the current body of research, the public tends to pity athletes with a disability when they appear in the media. Although this feeling is a common response, the producers claim that was not the main intention of the commercials. On the other hand, some spots can still evoke in the viewer a sense of pity for the Para athletes, especially in the cases of children featured in the spots (e.g., No. 10, No. 16, No. 28). In these advertisements, the viewers can always identify the children's specific disability. The individual shots show how happy the children are because of the sport, which makes the parents feel happy as well. Emotions in this case are further triggered by the music included in the commercial.

If the Olympians and Paralympians performed together, Olympians were depicted winning in the top events, but the commercials did not highlight their practice (because their hard work is taken for granted), but rather the sports events and movement in general.

In commercials featuring both Paralympians and Olympians, the images change so quickly that the average viewer often does not notice that a person with a disability (usually a wheelchair user or an amputee) is even in the shot. For example, in the McDonald's commercial (No. 3), the wheelchair volunteer sitting next to the table was barely noticeable. This style of coverage was identified in the media framing (Němcová Tejkalová, 2012). There is an effort to equalise the athletes, to show an impairment, without focusing on it as the athlete's main characteristic. An example of this is seen in the commercial for Coca-Cola (No. 1) where, in the rapidly changing shots, the Olympians and Special Olympians (people with mental impairment) participating in the medal award ceremonies are positioned on the same level. This is further supported by the accompanying voiceover: "If you've had a Coke within the last eighty years, you've had a hand in making every Olympic dream come true." In the same moment, another interpretation of some of these visualisations is also possible – that sometimes the commercials' creators may want to hide the impairment, to prevent disturbing the audience. The disability can go unnoticed, with the athletes being portrayed as just one of the crowd. In these cases, the athletes are treated like everyone else by the people around. Similar to most advertisements, this Coca-Cola commercial affirms that the conveyed message to the audience aligns with the brand's campaigns. In this case, it is the "Coke Side of Life," which the company reinforces in its advertising. The advertisement portrays athletes with intellectual impairments as a normal part of ordinary life.

Both supportive and heroic framing and the connection of nondisabled and Para athletes is used in the Sainsbury's advertisement (No. 5) which promoted the London 2012 Paralympic Games. Its name is Sainsbury's Paralympic Forwards, featuring UK elite Para athletes and, during the concluding remarks, one of the most famous soccer players of all time David Beckham says in a civil but appreciative manner: "We follow different paths in life, some more extraordinary than others." The association of celebrities and Para athletes is not unusual in the UK. Prince Harry, a fan of athletes with a disability, has been in the media promoting the home Paralympics ahead of the London Games. Additionally, celebrities can attract the attention of a wider audience, which appears in the media.

The Other Face of Otherness: Cyborg and Heroic Framing

The dominant frame in older commercials has been "the other", in terms of emphasising the otherness of Para athletes from mainstream society (see, for example, Butler & Bissell, 2013; Misener, 2013; Němcová Tejkalová, 2012; Silva & Howe, 2012) through negative stereotypes of their disability more than their ability. The more current spots present the otherness of Para athletes by using two positive stereotypes as frames: the first is cyborg framing and second is heroic framing.

As previously mentioned, another traditional, rather than progressive, presentation of the Para athletes in commercials is to create their image as cyborgs (see, Howe, 2011; Shelton, 2017b), as seen in the Allianz advertisement (No. 17) about long jumper Markus Rehm, who competes against athletes without a disability. In the commercial, he says that the biggest difference between the other champions and him is that they change shoes, and he changes his leg. Rehm thus points out that his performance is comparable to athletes without a disability and calls himself a champion, thanks to modern technologies. The commercial is followed by the powerful claim: "The world belongs to those who dare." This statement is consistent with the company's assertions, particularly with regards to its involvement in sports sponsorship.

A notable trend present in contemporary advertisements featuring Para athletes is the display of pride, self-confidence, and determination. These characteristics are consistently portrayed in such advertisements, as exemplified by Markus Rehm (No. 17), Gustavo Sanchez (No. 24), Jessica Long (No. 28), and Lauren Woolstencroft (No. 16). These athletes exude a sense of confidence in their performances, which has the potential to inspire individuals with a disability.

Some advertisements stress the exceptionality of the Paralympic athletes, stating that they are modern heroes, able to do impossible things, such as the Toyota ad with swimmer Jessica Long (No. 28). In this ad, the actor portraying Long's mother answers a ringing phone and receives news of a long-awaited adoption. She is told that

the baby girl will need to have her legs amputated and that her life won't be easy. The mother responds: "It might not be easy, but it will be amazing." The feeling of extraordinariness is amplified in the commercial by Long's swimming in the competition, being cheered by the enthusiastic crowds in the stands, the positive music supporting the heroic narrative with a happy ending. In all of Allianz's spots (No. 17, 18, 19) the audience first sees a close-up of the athletes' faces before the type of disability is revealed in the footage. The aim is apparently to show the athletes in these three commercials as normal, meaning able-bodied, not like "the other".

Accepted Otherness: Disability as Part of Life

Olympians and Paralympians are exceptional by their exceptional sporting performances as they achieve feats that are beyond the reach of the average person. However, advertisements do not only emphasise exceptionalism; they also emphasise equality with wider society by highlighting Para athletes' abilities rather than their disabilities. In addition to exceptionalism, Toyota's spot featuring Paralympic swimmer Jessica Long (No. 28) revealed the frame of equality. Toyota's Paralympic commercials emphasise that life with a disability is not easy, but it can be fulfilling, as seen in this commercial. Disability should not be understood as a barrier, meaning that Para athletes can enjoy the medals and their families and friends. The AT&T commercial (No. 6) as well as Airbnb (No. 20) or Samsung's spot (No. 9) show that even Para athletes are simply people who have someone waiting for them at home (e.g., a partner or a child) and they look forward to returning home from training camp or races. The principle of equality is presented by the Toyota commercial (No. 27) with robots helping the athletes perform their everyday duties (e.g., dog walking, laundry or shopping), no matter whether they are Olympians or Paralympians. Athletes are undoubtedly exceptional individuals, possessing a rare combination of physical prowess, mental fortitude, and huge determination. However, in their day-to-day lives, they are faced with the same responsibilities and challenges as the majority of society. Commonplace activities such as shopping, cleaning, and caring for children are part of daily routine, even for Paralympians. In several of the commercials examined for this research, the media presented extraordinary stories of the athletes. The producers focus on the greatness of the athlete, regardless of whether they are an Olympic or Paralympic athlete. This is another reason why the frame of equality appears in the commercials. An example can be seen in the No. 11 ad titled "Prepare for the amazing", where both Olympians and Paralympians are involved, and exceptionalism is emphasised for both groups. It is worth highlighting that these advertisements are produced by the sponsors of the International Olympic and Paralympic Committee or Olympic and Paralympic Games. Consequently, a comparable treatment of both cohorts of athletes can be anticipated but as it was presented in the part *The original otherness*, it was not common, particularly in the older commercials.

Equality in terms of the ability of Para athletes to fully engage in a sport is presented by Samsung's advertisements (No 4 and 9). These spots appeal to emotion, using various visually supportive means such as slow motion to elevate the tension about the result of the performance for which the athletes trained so long and hard, before the relief that comes from the successful match or fight. It shows that sport is universal, and all of the athletes have to work hard, force down pain and overcome various obstacles to be the best. It is incorporated in the central claim of the No. 4 commercial: "Sport doesn't care who you are. Everyone can take part." This statement is further supported by the fact that in this commercial both wheelchair users and athletes with other kinds of disabilities, such as visual impairment, are participating.

To sum up, the frame of "the other" is still present in the analysed commercials, it persists over time, but not with the negative connotations described in previous research (see, for example, Butler & Bissell, 2013; Misener, 2013; Silva & Howe, 2012). The otherness is prevalently understood not as a weakness but in a positive manner, as the (self-)accepted exceptionality, with all its possible obstacles which need to be overcome in the pursuit of sports achievements. Gustavo Sanchez, an amputee swimmer, claims in a commercial for the financial services company Citi (No. 24) that previously people stared at him because he has only one limb. After he won two gold Paralympic medals, he anticipates that people will stare admiringly due to his success.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

Our first research question (RQ1) focused on how the Para athletes were framed in the audiovisual advertising campaigns of past and current Olympic and Paralympic sponsors and partners. While examining brands and products that were or still are associated with the Paralympic and Olympic Games, we can conclude that the portrayal of Para athletes has evolved.

The equality frame appeared in the advertisements as athletes with a disability were portrayed as equal people, with both exceptional sports careers and common lives similar to able-bodied athletes. Regarding the Olympians, commonplace activities are typically highlighted due to the inherent distance between sports stars and celebrities and the general population. This is precisely why people are drawn to reading and watching glimpses into their everyday lives. Conversely, for Para athletes, casual activities are portrayed to underscore the reality that even individuals with a disability can successfully manage such tasks that contribute to the framing of equality. Therefore, the producers of the commercials sought to introduce the Paralympians as “equal people”, just like the Olympians. The defensive framing in the commercials is noticeable in how it accentuates the hard work and tough training of Para athletes, highlighting how they still have to prove that their success and celebrity is hard-earned. This framing was not present in the early-age commercials but has been a part of sports journalism framing since the beginning of the Paralympics’ media coverage (see, for example, Howe, 2011; Martínez-Bello et al., 2023; Smith & Thomas, 2005).

The enormous effort of Para athletes during practice is a repeated frame that appeared in the analysed commercials. Nevertheless, it is of particular interest that success from sports events is not transmitted nearly as frequently in the commercials featuring Para athletes in comparison to athletes without any disability. This leads us again to the defensive framing applied by the producers of the commercials who automatically assume that the audience understands that behind the success of nondisabled athletes there is hard training, but for the Para athletes it cannot be always valid, and for that reason it needs to be accentuated. To support the importance of the Paralympic sport, the creators of one of the Sainsbury’s advertisements used a sports celebrity as their “ambassador” in the same manner as the media sometimes do (Macková & Trunečka, 2015).

Another frame that was identified was supercrip or cyborg, which challenges the notion of disability and highlights the courage of Para athletes (e.g., Goggin & Newell, 2000; McGillivray et al., 2021; Misener, 2013; Silva & Howe, 2012). The advertisements also show that the Paralympic sport should no longer be perceived as something regretful, which is in line with Ang and Knox’s (2023) findings. The producers emphasise that being disabled and doing Paralympic sport is not easy, but both the lifestyle and the results can be worthy of admiration (see, Ashfield et al., 2017; McNamee, 2017). This phenomenon is demonstrated through the shared support of both the Olympic and Paralympic Games or the International Olympic and Paralympic Committees by prominent companies that was not automatic in the past, as Goggin and Newell’s (2000) study showed. The recognition of Para sport as a legitimate form of sport by major corporations is further evidenced through the inclusion of Para athletes in various advertisements.

The analysed advertisements mostly depicted wheelchair users or amputees, which overshadows other disabilities and grabs the audience’s attention (see, for example, Goggin & Newell, 2000; Howe, 2011). Moreover, in multiple cases the Para athletes were barely observable because of the quick cuts and less screen time given to them in contrast to the athletes without a disability. Nevertheless, the analysed commercials featured a wider range of actors in terms of types of disability, race or gender than Goggin and Newell (2000) described in their study, which can lead to a more enriching experience and a better perception of all the possible kinds of otherness for the audience.

While analysing the commercials, we observed that there is a difference in the composition of the spots and in how the Olympic and Paralympic partners and sponsors were promoted. It is worth noting that in most of the commercials the athletes are the centre of attention, there are not many advertisements showing what the companies really do. Some of the few that do are Ottobock, which makes prostheses and compensatory aids, and AT&T, who

provides 4G networks. AT&T's ad featured U.S. Para skier Heath Calhoun exhausted after a tough training session only as a plot point to illustrate how important and uplifting being connected to your loved ones can be. Other advertisements, aimed directly at the products, were placed by supermarket chain Sainsbury's and computer and information technology company Atos. Goods were also visible in the Samsung, Toyota, Coca-Cola and McDonald's commercials but they did not play a major role in the spots. The study of this phenomenon can be a subject of future research within the field of Para athletes' marketing usage. In the majority of instances, companies remained faithful to their promotional assertions, or the advertisements were consistent with the overarching themes of their marketing campaigns.

Regarding the creative methods used by the commercials' producers, very similar audiovisual effects were repeatedly applied to create the appropriate atmosphere and tension or, alternatively, heroisation. When a disability was shown, the music was slow and poignant to evoke emotions. This evocation was further enhanced by the image of children with a disability and the details of their disability. On the contrary, fast-cut shots and dynamic music appeared during training or when the athletes with a disability were already captured as focusing on the sport and not on their problems or life with a disability.

When we consider our second research question (RQ2) which asks if the portrayal of Para athletes in the audiovisual commercials of Olympic and Paralympic partners and sponsors has changed over time, we can answer that it has. One of the first commercials we analysed, McDonald's "My Best Friend" uploaded to YouTube in 2009 and originally published in the 1980s, follows a story of two young girls. One of them was in a wheelchair and together they behaved like friends of their age normally do. The connection between friendship and the Paralympic movement was the key frame that was highlighted in the commercials from that period. This goes hand in hand with the change of International Paralympic Committee's policy that today differs from the late 20th century past. IPC is now dedicated to promoting Para sport as a fully-fledged sport, a goal which has been supported by the corporate sponsors of the organisation. The Paralympic Games have seen a marked transformation, with athletes achieving increasingly rapid times and exceptional performances as they become increasingly professionalised. It is apparent that individuals with a disability are no longer participating in sport solely as a component of their rehabilitation, but as legitimate competitors in their own right.

Accordingly, the image of Para athletes in audiovisual commercials has evolved. It has moved from the picture of the ordinary friends to the semi- and later fully professional athletes who invest enormous effort into competing in their sports. Still, friendship (e.g., No. 8, No. 14, No. 20) and good relationships with nondisabled people have been displayed in the commercials as important values, although not as fundamental ones, since the focus of attention remains on the athletes themselves and their sporting efforts.

During the analysed period of time, the commercials take a step back from the presentation of Para athletes as "the other" with the negative connotations of disability, previously remarked upon by Hall (1997), Pickering (2001) or Němcová Tejkalová (2012). The otherness is shown in a positive and equal manner since the Para athletes can achieve the same success as the Olympians. For the athletes starring in the advertisements there is just one sport which unites all humans, including the others, cyborgs and superhumans. As Paralympic amputee swimmer Ellen Keane says in the Allianz commercial: "I am not missing anything. Well, maybe another medal." This statement perfectly encapsulates how the producers of the commercials want to present the Paralympic athletes.

Still, the commercials analysed were the spots promoting the partners of the International Paralympic Committee, therefore, it was natural they involved Para athletes. For further empowerment of people with a disability it is necessary to include them in more advertisements without direct connection to their impairment or ability, just as common people. This could be another step-in advertisements' development as well as an opportunity for future research. Researchers may also examine audience perceptions to understand how these advertisements impact viewers. Conducting a focus group in which respondents discuss selected commercials may shed further light on the topic. Such an approach has the potential to yield additional knowledge regarding the impact of these advertisements.

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