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## Article

# The Perceived Impacts of the Rio 2016 Paralympics on the Lives of Disabled Brazilians

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**Abstract:** The Paralympic movement leaders, sporting mega-event organizers, and para-athletes in Brazil and elsewhere made frequent claims about the potential of the Paralympics to raise disability rights awareness and generate change in society's perceptions of disabled people. However, how disabled people themselves view the Paralympics and their outcomes is insufficiently explored in the media and academic literature. This article has a two-fold purpose: first, to explore the views and perceptions of disabled Brazilians regarding the societal change claims made about the Rio 2016 Paralympics; and second, to problematize these claims of lasting societal change through the lens of critical disability theory. The online qualitative survey conducted a year after the Rio mega-event explored the following issues: a) attitudes of broader society towards disabled people; b) disability sport as a tool for social inclusion and equality; c) para-athletes' visibility and the broader challenges; d) images of disabled people in the Paralympic coverage; and e) outcome of media's attention for disabled people in general. The main argument is that realizing the Paralympic legacy promises is more complex than the Paralympic movement leaders and the event organizers acknowledge and that the social change legacies are the responsibility of the larger community long after the Games are over.

**Keywords:** Rio 2016 paralympics; online qualitative survey; social inclusion; critical disability theory; Brazil

## 1. Introduction

In August 2016, a few weeks ahead of the Rio 2016 Paralympics, Sir Philip Craven, the then-President of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), wrote in the *UN Chronicle* about the potential for social change that the Paralympic Games hold:

Para athletes are ambassadors of change. Their performances inspire and excite the world and redefine for many people what is humanly possible. No other event can empower individuals through social inclusion and societal opportunity like the Paralympic Games. Likewise, no other event can change the views of so many millions of people or stimulate Governments to create investment programmes or pass new legislation that will benefit many generations of individuals with impairments. This is why, in my view, the Paralympic Games are the world's number one sporting event for social inclusion, helping to promote the rights of persons with disabilities. [1]

There are many similar claims made by the Paralympic movement leaders, politicians, and Paralympic athletes in Brazil and around the world about the potential of this sporting mega-event to raise awareness about the abilities of disabled people and promote their social inclusion [2, 3]. While a growing body of Paralympic research covered different aspects of the Games and sport, it has given little attention to how the Paralympic Games are received by disabled people and the potential implications they bring for disability politics and disability rights.

Informed by the critical disability theory [4, 5], this article has a two-fold purpose: first, to explore the views and perceptions of disabled Brazilians of the claims made about the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games and of the resulting societal change; and second, to problematize the broad claims of lasting societal change and social inclusion made by the Paralympic Games organizers and public figures on behalf of disabled people through the lens of critical disability theory. The survey with this group was conducted almost a year after the sporting mega-event, exploring the following issues:

- in what ways the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games affected the perceptions of a broader population in Brazil about disabled people;
- whether or not disability sport is a tool for social inclusion and equality in society and why;
- how well Paralympic athletes bring visibility to the issues disabled people face outside of sport;
- what kinds of images of disabled people the media constructed in the coverage of the Paralympic competitions;
- whether or not the media's attention towards the sporting performances of some Paralympic athletes was beneficial for disabled people generally and why.

Because disabled people are not a homogenous group with the same opinions or universal experiences of discrimination and deprivation of their rights [6], their statements on these topics varied across the spectrum from optimistic to skeptical. The perceptions of this group were gauged after conducting an anonymous online survey in Portuguese, in the period between July 15 and September 30, 2017. Nineteen participants from across Brazil of different ages, socioeconomic positions, and disabilities answered the anonymous online survey questions. Subsequently, I analyzed and translated their answers into English.

The paper's argument is organized into three parts. First, I reviewed the available academic and non-academic literature that discussed the intersection of the Paralympic Games and sport and the Paralympic movement and disability rights movements to frame the significance and impact of the Rio 2016 Paralympics on the lives of disabled people. Second, I explain the rationale behind a qualitative approach to online surveys and contextualize the details of this survey's design and sample. Subsequently, I proceed with the discussion of the survey themes identified in the participants' responses and their analysis in light of the relevant literature. The analysis pointed to the participants' lack of expectations of the Rio Paralympics' positive impact on society regarding disability issues and the social inclusion of disabled people beyond sport. Therefore, I argue that first, realizing those Paralympic legacy promises is much more complex than the IPC and the organizing bodies admit; and second, for the social change legacies to become a reality, we need to understand disability as a socially created barrier, with the responsibility of the larger community to pursue empowerment and substantive equality of disabled people long after the Games are over.

## **2. Theoretical and Contextual Background: Disabled People and Paralympic Sport**

How disabled people view the diverse aspects of the Paralympic Games relates to a range of issues, claims, and expectations outlined both within and outside the academic literature. In this section, I summarize and discuss broad themes in the literature on the nature of Paralympic sport; the expectations of lasting change in the hosting nation; the Paralympic movement and advancement of the disability rights agenda; and media portrayal of the Paralympic Games, sports, and para-athletes. Framed by the critical disability theory, this discussion lays the foundation for the analysis of the survey responses later. The goal of critical disability theory is the pursuit of empowerment and substantive equality rooted in the lived experiences of disabled people that frames the issues of disability as questions of power, "who and what gets valued, and who and what gets marginalized." [4, p.12] Critical disability studies scholars and some activists prefer using the term "disabled people" rather than "people with disabilities" to encompass the significance of disability in the construction of their identities [5]. Therefore, throughout this article, I use "disabled people" when referring to individuals with physical or sensory, developmental, and intellectual impairments and other chronic diseases and conditions.

The available empirical research has rarely focused on how disabled people perceive the Paralympic Games and whether and how the Paralympics contribute to the empowerment of disabled people [8, 9]. This study aims to contribute to this discussion by offering a critical analysis of the perceptions of the 2016 Paralympic legacy for disabled people.

### **2.1. The Nature of Para-Sport**

The available research on para-sport points to several instances of a disconnect between the sporting realities and the actual experiences of disability lived by ordinary people. First, the systems of athlete eligibility and classification that simultaneously include and exclude individuals with certain impairments and degrees of severity in disability sports [6, 7] point to unequal representation

and acknowledgment. Special Olympics programs, Deaf sports, and Paralympic sports organizations rely on often able-bodied experts to classify eligible disabled populations into designated categories [7]. Furthermore, individuals with high support needs or complex impairments may feel a disconnection between themselves and Paralympians because of the disparate daily life experiences and the perceived expectation by the general population that all disabled people can perform like Paralympians [10, 11].

Second, failing to acknowledge the structural barriers that prevent some disabled people from being active in society and engaging in sport may reinforce the ableist perspectives of disability within society [12]. In critical disability theory, “ableism” is a system of beliefs, processes, and practices that produce a specific idea of self and the body considered perfect and fully human. Based on this accepted standard, “disablism” encompasses assumptions and practices that promote unequal treatment of those who have actual or presumed disabilities [12]. Therefore, such perspectives run completely contradictory to the legacy aspirations for the Paralympics outlined in the beginning by Sir Philip Craven.

Finally, there has been a recent shift in the language and the aims set out by the IPC that moved away from an explicit focus on rehabilitation and disability toward an emphasis on sport [10]. Consequently, narratives relating to the Paralympic Games have increasingly focused on sporting excellence. The likely implications of such a shift can be a lesser focus on raising awareness of disability issues and the potential isolation of some groups in the wider community of athletes that the Paralympic movement claims to represent [6]. Furthermore, scholars argued that downplaying disability confounds the claim that Paralympic sport can improve attitudes towards disabled people within society and provide opportunities for them, thus questioning the representativeness of the Paralympic Games and their philosophy for the social inclusion of disabled people beyond sport [13].

## 2.2. Paralympic Games and Expectations of Lasting Change

Leaders of the international organizations and the IPC, the hosting nations’ public officials, and the organizing committees have proclaimed lasting positive changes brought by the Paralympic Games that include enhancing the involvement of disabled people in sport, raising disability awareness, fostering positive attitudes, and creating more accessible infrastructure for host venues [14]. However, disability rights activists remained skeptical as studies lack supporting evidence for such claims, and the existing scholarship on the subject is mixed. Several scholars undertook an analysis of the Paralympic legacy to address the lack of attention to the area of legacy overall and more specifically concerning disability sport [15-18]. Others argued for the potential of the Paralympics and para-sport events to create positive change, among them awareness and attitudinal changes, increased sport participation, accessible infrastructure, and media visibility, and outlined the conditions for those changes to occur [10, 15, 16]. Because a wide range of areas and stakeholders are impacted differently and because event-related changes can be mistaken for non-event-related ones, it is challenging to identify sporting event legacies in their entirety [19]. Moreover, it’s important to note that one of the fundamental elements of a definition of legacy is time: while the legacy may gain and lose power over time, it should last longer than the event and its directly initiated impacts [19].

A recent study on the legacies of the Rio 2016 Paralympics found that the Games helped enhance the visibility of disabled people who were rarely seen in the media and public spaces before the Games and that such visibility, in turn, helped challenge negative stereotypes and stigmas associated with disability [15]. In fact, the study participants themselves admitted that for a change in perception to have a concrete positive impact on the lives of disabled people, it would take time [15] and I would add constructive engagement of the media, policymakers, disability rights movement, Paralympic movement, and other stakeholders.

It’s widely accepted that the media serves an essential role in shaping the perceptions and opinions of its audience and beyond. Yet, the Brazilian media’s coverage of the Rio 2016 Paralympics has failed to engage with larger issues that are crucial for disabled people’s economic and social well-being or to offer a more informed discussion about the marginal position of disability sport and help shape viewing habits of disabled and non-disabled population concerning disability sports [18]. Therefore, expecting a Paralympic mega-event to deliver a lasting positive change without an apparent long-term vision and commitment of key stakeholders seems unrealistic.



Despite the lack of strong empirical evidence, there is ongoing rhetoric from the mega-event organizers about increased sport participation [17, 20]. Indeed, the organizers of the London 2012 Games created high expectations of sport participation legacies, but in reality, sport participation had dropped, especially among the poor and working-class population groups [20]. A study of the impact of the Paralympics on young disabled people found that viewing Paralympic sports or having Paralympians as role models would not likely result in increased engagement in sports activity [16]. Instead, the scholars argued that an increased sports engagement among disabled children in the wake of the Paralympic Games would take place only when coupled with improved opportunities to engage in sports [16]. It seems that in both cases with the London 2012 and the Rio 2016 Games, sport participation legacies did not materialize. Despite the promises of increased sport participation among disabled Brazilians before the Rio Paralympics, persisting barriers to sport participation, among them, inadequate and insufficient sporting infrastructure, insufficient sports funding, lack of adequately trained professionals, accessibility, and logistical issues, lead to reduced opportunities [21].

While the para-sport events were often used by policymakers to indicate meaningful avenues to social inclusion and social change, these decision-makers needed to pursue continuing investment, material policy change, and evidence of adding to public value beyond the life cycle of the Games to achieve that social change [22]. Also, various contextual factors during and after the Paralympics may influence the potential for transformative social change for disabled people, as happened with the 2012 London Paralympics which had negative media coverage of disabled people and reduced disposable income because of austerity measures [10].

Nonetheless, the potential of the Paralympics to create a lasting change has often been questioned by scholars. For example, the London 2012 Paralympics study examining the impact of the Paralympics on sport participation conducted by Hodges and his colleagues found that engaging with disability sport had little to do with how disabled people identified personally with disability and shared direct experience of disability [23]. Also, urging physically inactive disabled people to become involved in sports is a rather difficult and long-term process, and expecting that the Paralympic Games is going to solve it on its own is less realistic [11]. Moreover, if the associated transport and social support required to get involved in sport are not in place, then the sport participation opportunity is removed [22]. Another study that drew on the views of disability rights advocates concluded that,

The Paralympics is a segregated event for disabled people claiming to lead the way in terms of breaking down barriers and creating opportunities for disabled people right across all aspects of society. How this is meant to take place and the exact details of this expected change are generally held within the belief that if non-disabled people change their attitudes towards disabled people then everything will become inclusive. [13, p.29]

Indeed, research carried out by the Australian Paralympic Committee found that “it is only spectators’ attitudes toward the actual athletes and not the disabled population as a whole that are changed.” [10, p.515] In other words, the claim that the awe-inspiring Paralympic performances would inevitably move the broader society to become more inclusive of disabled people has no evidence.

Outside academia, one of the heads of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) claimed that the Paralympic Games serve as an opportunity to change the way societies worldwide view disabled people, talk about their rights, and improve social inclusion [24]. The UN Secretary-General also considered the Paralympic sport and Paralympic movement as crucial in promoting and implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [25]. Furthermore, the IPC framed the Paralympic Games as “the world’s number one sporting event for driving social inclusion. Sustainable cities and communities have become one of the key legacies of hosting the Paralympic Games. Like the sporting action, accessibility makes a real and long-lasting impact on people’s lives.” [26]

Similarly, the former President of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee and then-IPC Vice-President, Andrew Parsons, believed that witnessing the Paralympic Games could change the limiting perceptions of the younger generation who will be the country’s future decision-makers [27]. One Brazilian lawmaker, a wheelchair user herself, also believed that the Paralympic Games forced a cultural change [28]. However, there is no robust evidence to support these claims.

Some Paralympians and disability rights advocates beyond the confines of sport are critical of the link between the Paralympic Games and social inclusion. For example, a long-time disability rights advocate from Rio de Janeiro, Teresa Costa d'Amaral, was skeptical of the Rio Paralympics bringing any positive long-term change: "Whatever glory the Paralympics might bring to athletes, that attention won't trickle down to the day-to-day lives of Brazil's disabled population" [29] and "If we want to build a legacy for people with disabilities, we don't need the Paralympics, we need a sustained public policy." [30] Speaking in the name of Brazilian Paralympians, Fernando Fernandes, Para-Canoeing World Champion, also opposed the view that the Paralympics is about anything except sporting excellence: "We are the sporting elite. People should be watching because it's amazing, not because we overcame obstacles. The athletes can't stand that anymore." [31]

In sum, there is no conclusive evidence that the Paralympic Games bring lasting positive change to disabled people. Therefore, scholars and disability rights advocates challenge the broad claims made by the leaders of the international organizations, the IPC, and organizing committee members.

### *2.3. Paralympic Movement and Advancement of the Disability Rights Agenda*

Even though the Paralympic movement, like the Olympic movement, seeks to be an elite sports organization focusing on sporting excellence, it is still a movement based on a common identity and culture [32]. The Paralympic movement has often been criticized for being "paternalistic" and "reproduc[ing] disabled people as 'tragic' to reproduce itself in the image of a selfless, nurturing institution, which may be an unintended consequence." [7, p.75]. Therefore, some scholars see the Paralympic movement at odds with the disability rights movement for the following reasons: on the one hand, in the Paralympic context, disability is inserted in the "fine-tuning of diagnostic classifications seeking to extend their power across all bodies" [33, p.49], which is at the heart of the "medical model." The medical view of disability categorizes people based on their medical conditions, as individuals with physical (and other) "problems" that need to be treated rather than revisiting social processes [34]. Its goal is to "normalize" disabled people to mitigate the stigma assigned to disability through various disempowering techniques [33]. The medical model is deeply ingrained in language, cultural ideas, legislation, and professional practice, as well as media representations. Therefore, disability sport, with its fundamental emphasis on the body and classifications, reproduces the medical view of disability, which the disability rights activists had fought for decades to reject [35].

On the other hand, the disability rights movement advances the social model. Those who ascribe to the social model of disability view the attitudinal and environmental factors in society as disabling, preventing disabled people from living a full life. However, some scholars and activists have challenged the basic premise of the social model, the impairment/disability distinction [36]. Impairment is not just biological, it is socially created and is intertwined with disability that is both social and relational [36]. The adoption of the social model by disability rights advocates contrasted with the medical origins of the Paralympic Games in rehabilitation hospitals, which helps explain the ambivalent relationship between the Paralympic movement and the disability rights movement [37]. This may be the reason why disabled activists have been critical of the Paralympic movement for becoming the accepted voice for disability equality and thus weakening the latter's ontological foundations [8].

While the Paralympic movement has an agenda of seeking to raise awareness about disabled people and contributing to equality beyond sport, disabled activists see the Paralympics as a hindrance to equality because of the misrepresentation of disabled people and their lives, sending an inaccurate message about disability and thus reinforcing negative stereotypes [8]. For instance, disabled activists in South Korea in 1988 and China in 2008 strongly resisted any connection between their Paralympic Games and equality for disabled people [38]. Likewise, two disabled Brazilian journalists expressed an openly confrontational stance towards the Paralympic Games in Rio. For example, a blind journalist Lucas de Abreu Maia argued that the Paralympics in fact promotes discrimination and inequality and essentially insults disabled people by supporting the inspirational storylines of "overcoming":

As they are structured, the Paralympics is an exclusive event, [aiming] to squeeze the rest of the Olympic Games' possible profit and, in return, give a sensation of empathy to viewers without disabilities who see stories of overcoming on television. ... The movement for the rights of people

with disabilities can be summarized as the effort to integrate us into society—at school, work, and leisure. [We are] different in our needs, but equal in talent. But, instead of creating conditions for us to compete on an equal footing, the Paralympics bring the finish line closer, so that we can reach it easily, without external competition. Of course, physical diversity must be celebrated. But this celebration must take place at the same stage; not when the main event lights have already gone out. ... The Paralympics is a discriminatory event because it ignores all the most interesting aspects of an individual's personality and history to reduce him to his physical limitations. It is a sign of the lack of visibility of people with disabilities that an event made to exclude, rather than integrate, is still considered progress. [39]

Another Brazilian journalist, a wheelchair user, Andrei Bastos, expressed a similar sentiment:

The Paralympics, in my view, is a mistake. It should not be separated from the Games for people without disabilities, as this already represents an exclusion. Disabled athletes could be included in different categories, that is, they would not compete directly with others, but would still be in the same competition. Then there would be inclusion. There has not been much progress in this sense throughout history. Since Rome, in 1960, when the Paralympics started, it has remained discriminatory. [40]

There are more voices of disabled people in the Brazilian and international media that were skeptical of the alignment between the Paralympic movement and the disability rights movement. In the Paralympic context, disability appears “as a lavish prosthetic enhancement campaign... [where] some disabled bodies find a degree of acceptance and ornate support while further marginalising bodies that are not so easily integrated.” [33, p.51]. In other words, disabled people argued that as they are currently set, the Paralympic Games defy one of the core values of the Paralympic movement, that of equality and inclusion [41, 42]. Moreover, research showed that when compared to the Olympics, the Paralympic Games as an event were indeed given a lower priority [43, 44]. The fact that the Rio 2016 Organizing Committee introduced major budget cuts to the Paralympic venues, workforce, and transport (and that funding was diverted to boost the Olympics) and the delays in distributing travel grants to Paralympic athletes made many disabled people feel as “an afterthought.” [41]

#### *2.4. Media Portrayal of the Paralympic Games, Sport, and Athletes*

Scholars, athletes, and disability rights advocates agree about the media's importance in improving the perceptions and attitudes toward disability and the capacity of disabled people to be competent in various sports activities and beyond. While some studies emphasized the potential of the Paralympics to transform societal perceptions of disabled athletes and disability sport through adequate media portrayal, other studies have shown that Paralympic coverage often relies on common stereotypes of disabled and non-disabled sporting bodies that oppress rather than empower disabled people [43].

Despite the multiple efforts to highlight the equal coverage accorded to the Paralympians in the media, the representation of disabled elite athletes has been cast as fundamentally inferior to that of their Olympic peers [45]. The research found that far fewer resources were allocated to the Paralympic media coverage in comparison to the Olympics: the number of accredited Paralympic media journalists was 2,500 vs. 20,000 accredited Olympic ones in the 2012 London Games [46]. Moreover, journalists repeatedly attributed lesser importance to the Paralympics and denied it was a real or true competition [46]. Therefore, the lesser media visibility of the Paralympics and para-athletes coverage continues to support the hegemony of the able-bodied, emphasizing the ideal sporting body image [47].

As important as visibility is for the Paralympics, if the visibility is not based on the right type of coverage, it can lead to problems [48]. The majority of the journalists who cover the Paralympic Games are non-disabled men and may often unwittingly present hegemonic discourses surrounding “normal” and “deviant” bodies to their audiences [43]. Those discourses generate a hierarchy of desirable disabled bodies, among them those that perform in wheelchair rugby, tennis, or swimming at the top, and others such as boccia, the least desirable [43]. Moreover, the media narrative of overcoming that emphasized how Paralympic athletes were successful despite their disability, sometimes placed in the context of triumph over tragedy, means that the media continued to build on the emotional ethos surrounding the Paralympic human interest instead of the athletic

achievements and sporting excellence [44]. Such practices need to change if the Paralympics are to strengthen their potential role as a transformative social force that can empower disabled people [43].

Previous research also found qualitative and quantitative disparities in the coverage of disabled and non-disabled male and female athletes. Quantitatively, female para-athletes had less media coverage than their male counterparts in sports media [49, 50]. For example, the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London had disproportionate British print media coverage: for every article about women's sports, there were 20 about men's sports, and for every photograph featuring women and women's sports there were 25 portraying men [50].

While it remains unclear if the Paralympics can positively influence societal perceptions and attitudes toward disability, the amount and quality of media coverage have important implications for the ethos of the Paralympic movement [47, 51]. The public's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors are shaped by a larger culture beyond the sporting realm, which changes gradually over time [52]. Meanwhile, the media could play an important role in shifting the perceptions and attitudes toward disability by reframing the discourse and bringing more visibility to their issues and successes, thus contributing to positive change.

In sum, the discussion of the theoretical and empirical insights across different bodies of literature aimed to accomplish the following purposes. First, it shared the results of other studies closely related to the one undertaken here, thereby relating this analysis to the ongoing dialogue and debates in disability studies and disability sport literature. Second, it examines the intersection of the Paralympics, disability sport, agendas of the disability rights movement and the Paralympic movement, and the media portrayal, thus providing a framework in which to situate this study's aims and analyze the findings.

### 3. Materials and Methods

For this study, I chose to conduct online surveys for their low cost and barriers, convenience, and suitability to collect responses from disabled people from across Brazil. Online surveys became convenient and accessible as more people gained access to the Internet through personal computers and mobile devices than in the past. According to official statistics, 149 million Brazilians, or around 70% of the entire population had access to the Internet in 2022, 62% of them only via their mobile phones [53]. Although the changing technological landscape made the Internet more accessible for a greater number of disabled individuals on their mobile phones, tablets, and computers, there is no recent consistent data on the Internet access of disabled Brazilians.

Online surveys have become increasingly prevalent in research studies with young people, particularly those among marginalized and stigmatized populations, as they allow access to communities that tend to have less visibility in offline contexts [47]. Several researchers have emphasized the benefits of online surveys compared to the traditional ones: lower cost, convenience, and flexibility, considering question types and formats, response categories, layout, fonts, and visual aspects), speedy responses, and post-survey data availability to the researcher [54-57]. Online survey respondents are more likely to respond to sensitive open-ended questions, compared to phone or face-to-face surveys. Moreover, online surveys may be particularly beneficial when engaging in research with marginalized populations whose access to offline research may be limited by the barriers and stigma they experience [53]. More specifically, the anonymity of online surveys may also be appealing to stigmatized groups who might be more willing to participate online [53].

Another critical advantage of web-based surveys is the use of online platforms (e.g., Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey) that collect, record, and organize data for subsequent analysis by the researcher. However, online surveys often struggle with the problem of representativeness and their results can hardly be generalized beyond the Internet population. The exclusion of people without Internet access is one of the main threats to the validity of Web surveys [57].

Qualitative surveys with open-ended questions fit for explorative research, as is the case with this study. An advantage of open-ended questions is the fact that people can provide the information they want to provide without being forced to answer within a particular option. In open-ended questions, respondents can elaborate on their answers, which results in more in-depth interviewing. On the other hand, open-ended questions require more effort from respondents (they cannot rely on the information provided in answer categories), which results in higher item non-response, more people abandoning the survey, and higher unit non-response. Also, it can require a lot of effort on



the researcher's part to recode the open answers into a format that can be used for making analyses, especially in large datasets which can be very time-consuming [57].

However, there are some significant weaknesses to online surveys, among them: perception of e-mail invitations to online survey participation as junk mail; sample selection and implementation, considering variations in the respondents' online experience and technological skills; impersonal nature; privacy-related concerns, and low response rates [55]. Moreover, survey response rates in recent years have declined drastically, partly due to the over-surveying of the population [57]. To encourage more responses, researchers should guarantee respondent anonymity and give enough information about the survey (such as the subject and purpose of the survey, the sponsoring institution, etc.) when survey respondents are contacted [57].

In sum, it's important to consider that every feature of survey design can impact the participation prospects of disabled individuals. The researchers who conduct social surveys are encouraged to consider the barriers to the inclusion of disabled people in surveys which is a low-cost effort. From a technical perspective, the text box is the easiest to implement and works on all browsers and devices. The standard text field approach is easiest for respondents but makes it harder to resolve ambiguous or insufficient responses [58].

### 3.1. Rio Paralympics Online Survey

These survey questions were inspired by and adapted from a study by British researchers Stuart Braye, Kevin Dixon, and Tom Gibbons who examined the disabled activists' perceptions of the London 2012 Paralympic Games [8]. Following the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board's approval, I translated the survey questions into Portuguese and uploaded them to the Virginia Tech Qualtrics platform (<https://viriniatech.qualtrics.com>). I pre-tested the survey for clarity and simplicity to improve respondent comprehension and accessibility (for those who may use assistive technology) with friends with visual, hearing, and intellectual impairments.

Sample. I reached out to 21 disabled people's organizations nationwide by e-mail and over the phone with a request to forward the survey invitation with an explanatory note about the survey aims and a URL and a QR code to a web-based survey to the groups they serve. I also placed a call for survey participation on three Facebook groups with disabled members across Brazil. The survey was available online during the period July 15-September 30, 2017. Because the survey participation was anonymous, no incentives have been offered to the respondents, so that individuals with privacy concerns or who are socially marginalized could feel more comfortable using their mobile devices rather than shared computers.

The final sample consisted of 19 survey participants. Among them, six participants were in the 18-25 age group, 12 participants were in the 26-49 age group, and one participant was in the 50-65 age group. Eleven of the participants were male and eight were female. In terms of impairments, 16 respondents had physical impairments, two – visual, and one – hearing impairment. Sixteen participants lived with their impairments for over 10 years, one – for 6-10 years, and two – for 2-5 years.

Survey structure. The survey was organized into two blocks: 1) five thematic questions with a text box beneath each where the respondents could type their answers without word or character limitations; and 2) five personal questions in the format of radio buttons (age, gender, impairment, etc.), to help contextualize their answers. Thematic questions inquired about the respondents' views on:

- how well Paralympic athletes highlighted the issues disabled people face outside of sport;
- the image of disabled people that the media constructed through the coverage of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games;
- whether or not a high degree of publicity that some Paralympic athletes receive for their sporting performance is good for disabled people generally and why;
- in what ways have the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games affected the general population's perceptions of disabled people;
- whether or not disability sport is a tool for social inclusion and equality in society and why.

Data analysis. I compiled and analyzed the data from 19 surveys after downloading the Qualtrics report, grouped by each question. An initial reading of all the responses helped me gain a general idea of the respondents' perspectives. Subsequently, I undertook a more detailed analysis through a coding process using emerging codes that arose from the responses. I organized the codes and the

relevant responses into a large table, which helped generate themes for analysis discussed in the next section in more detail.

#### 4. Survey Themes and Their Discussion

The analysis of the survey answers helped identify four broad themes and connections between them. Below, I share the survey responses and discuss them in light of the theoretical insights discussed above.

##### 4.1. *Perceptions of the Paralympic Games, athletes, and the implications of their visibility*

The respondents expressed mostly positive perceptions of Paralympic athletes and the Paralympics, believing that this visibility was important to motivate disabled people and to get some idea of the difficulties they face in their daily lives. Their statements can be grouped into two sub-themes: the significance of the visibility of the Paralympics and Paralympians for disabled people in general and how relatable the athletes and their stories were to the respondents. The following statements illustrate how helpful their visibility was in raising awareness about disabled people and the challenges they face in Brazil:

Many of them [para-athletes] became examples for society, changing many people's understanding and prejudice.

Although they [para-athletes] became a showcase, [which] often does not reflect the reality of many, it is good for bringing visibility.

Although the Paralympic Games do not portray our difficulties, their visibility awakens the media's interest to criticize the difficulties faced daily by people with disabilities.

[The Paralympics] can motivate other people with disabilities, as they show that having a disability is not a sign of failure or incapacity.

[In the media] people will hear about individuals with disabilities, but I disagree that they will really see all the difficulties we deal with.

The statements below reflect how relatable the para-athletes and their stories are to the respondents:

I have never seen myself included in this example of an athlete since I am neither an athlete nor a hero.

[The example of the para-athletes] is one form to demonstrate the day-to-day life of people with disabilities. We are often forgotten by society.

The fact that they are good athletes reinforces the hero stereotype. What we, disabled people, need outside of sport is equal opportunities.

We are talking about athletes who have high-level requirements to be competitive, and it has nothing to do with our daily lives, where the difficulties are quite different.

[Para-athletes] show the willpower of every disabled person. We are not pitiful, we are equal to others... We can do everything.

It's fundamental to have references for success, especially for children. Daniel Dias [Paralympic swimmer, 14-time champion] is an example of a hero who incentivizes children in a wheelchair to dream about future success.

As these responses show, while some respondents did find the athletes inspirational and heroic, others couldn't relate to those stereotypes and their perceived challenges in sport. However, the misconceptions about disability and misguided representation of the Paralympic athletes are evident in the superhero portrayal. As Silva and Howe argued, society's low expectations towards disabled athletes result in the distorted tendency to either "undervalue" or "overvalue" their achievements [59]. The respondents may have been bothered by the "super" or "incredible" representations of para-athletes as such labels seem to place the responsibility for success on the individuals themselves, without considering other favorable or unfavorable factors that shaped those accomplishments [59].

Overall, these statements seem to point to certain disillusionment towards Paralympic athletes and suggest that the participants saw them as too far removed from what they consider to be "typical"

disabled people [8, p.990]. In other words, while “enhanced supercrips” are celebrated as symbols of success in contemporary society, it further marginalizes their “less able” disabled kin [33]. These views may reflect the perceived elite nature of the Paralympic Games and the tension between the aims and focus of the IPC with its stronger emphasis on sport and weaker focus on disability rights and social inclusion, as argued in numerous studies discussed above. As a result, the respondents questioned the impact of the Paralympic Games and their philosophy on the social inclusion of disabled people beyond sport, similar to the abovementioned studies (e.g., [13]).

#### *4.2. Perceptions of Sport as an Instrument for Social Inclusion*

The survey responses highlighted the positive aspects of sport for disabled people, from physical and mental well-being to opportunities for socialization and motivation in life. Most of the respondents were also mindful that sport is one of the tools for social inclusion, acknowledging other possibilities for social inclusion.

Through sport, people with disabilities become more social, breaking their own barriers and prejudices.

In addition to doing something instead of useless thoughts, sport raises self-esteem and profoundly improves your quality of life.

Through sport, many are motivated to do something in life.

Sport is one of the possible paths to inclusion because it works with the [individual's] potential and opens opportunities for socializing.

After the Paralympics, many disabled people were encouraged to seek sporting associations and start practicing, and many became interested in competitive sports.

Sport is a great inclusion tool. But it cannot be seen as the only one; we must have other possibilities as well.

I don't believe in inclusion and equality as the [Olympic and Paralympic] Games don't happen together.

Some respondents also pointed to the visibility that sport brings to them and helps change society's perceptions.

I agree that sport, in general, is a tool for inclusion, as culture and other leisure activities are. Paralympic sport brings greater visibility to people with disabilities, which is always good. Yeah, it reminds society that we exist.

Sport promotes interaction between people with disabilities and shows those without disabilities that these people with disabilities can perform tasks and activities.

[The publicity around para-athletes] is very important for the image of para-sports as they break the taboo that people with disabilities lack the capacity to develop and evolve in every way.

Taken together, these views consider social inclusion as a combination of participation, access, and recognition of autonomy, capacity, and accomplishments of disabled people [60]. Considering this concept of social inclusion, without the recognition of everyone as equally valued individuals and changing the very institutions and value systems that marginalize disabled people, the process of social inclusion can hardly advance. From a critical perspective, the emphasis on accommodations will not necessarily result in a meaningful integration of differences as including the bodies with levels of already integrable disability into normative frameworks already suited to a narrow range of abilities, will not significantly disrupt the existing environment [33].

A study of the barriers to sport participation faced by disabled individuals in England revealed that psychological barriers were the hardest to overcome [61]. The internal beliefs and perceptions of disabled people themselves and the attitudes of non-disabled individuals were the most significant barriers to sport participation, ranking ahead of physical and logistical hurdles [61].

#### *4.3. Perceptions of the Media Coverage of the Rio Paralympic Games*

The respondents were critical of the Rio Paralympics media coverage, particularly on TV. They highlighted the media's responsibility to inform and educate society and expressed their

dissatisfaction with the coverage volume, evident biases, and stereotypes when covering the Paralympic Games, their comparison to the Olympics, and participating athletes:

The media in general brings information to society that helps break the attitudinal barriers. But on the other hand, it reinforces the stigma of “overcoming.” We are people like others, we overcome obstacles like all citizens. Disability doesn't make us better or worse.

[The Rio 2016 media coverage was] far less what it could have been. I’m talking about cable TV; the open TV was a disappointment. They did a lot of advertising and did nothing. I was present at the Olympic Park [the sports complex in Rio de Janeiro built to host the 2016 Olympic and the Paralympic Games] on both days when we had a record public attendance, surpassing the Olympics, but the media said almost nothing about it. Regrettable.

The coverage greatly reinforces the disability, the suffering, the lack of something. They reduce people to their disability.

The media coverage was small and always treated athletes as heroes, not as high-performance athletes that they are. They did not give the visibility that the Games deserved. It [the coverage] did not represent me!

There was a huge discrepancy in the coverage of the Olympics and Paralympics. And when the media refers to disability, it does so with exaggerated sensationalism, treating us like heroes.

Respondents were also critical of the media’s contribution to promoting a positive image of disabled people in Brazilian society, noting how slow and gradual the process of breaking negative disability stereotypes is:

If, on the one hand, disabled people gain a lot of visibility during the [Paralympic] Games, in most cases, this exposure was done in a sensationalist way to catch attention. They are shown as superheroes in a very unreal way, disconnected from reality.

I believe it brought a certain positive message, but it also strengthened ableism, placing disabled people as heroes. When in fact we are ordinary people who only need society to respect the accessibility laws so that we can have access to what everyone is entitled to.

As for giving greater visibility to the difficulties of people with disabilities, I believe the media coverage did it, but not enough to change reality and minimize barriers. It brings a feeling of solidarity, of admiration, however, they do little to bring change.

The BPC [Brazilian Paralympic Committee], in partnership with Globo, launched a campaign using two famous actors [non-disabled, whose images were edited to make them look physically disabled] when we had athletes who were more attractive than those actors. Many have come to see us as capable people, but a large part [of the population] still has a pitying outlook, applauding our achievements while being “thrilled” to see that we can use a computer.

Several available studies on the media’s portrayal of the Rio Paralympics and para-athletes found that the coverage focused more on the athletes’ inspirational life stories and narratives of overcoming, rather than promoting greater visibility of the human diversity and realities of disabled people and therefore contributing to a more aware audience and sporting culture [62-66]. Consequently, the visibility of Paralympic sports and athletes in the Brazilian media had little impact on the broader disability issues in Brazil. Instead, the media coverage stated the benefits that sport brought to the lives of para-athletes and extended sport’s transformational power to the broader disabled population without any evidence [64].

Existing research indicates that the media’s misguided portrayal of disability has changed little over the past decades. Generally, Paralympic athletes have been portrayed in a way that did not emphasize their athletic abilities or performance but instead stressed disability as a primary characteristic of their social identities [47, 67, 68]. This in turn leads to referring to these athletes and disabled people as the whole either as “unfortunate,” “pitiful,” or “victims” on the one extreme, or “brave,” “superhero,” or “supercrip” on the other, which has been mentioned by the respondents. Sensationalized reporting on disability sports may, at first, have some spectacular aspects to it and attract an audience, but to achieve a lasting change and the effective inclusion of disabled people in the public sphere and removal of stereotypes and stigma, there needs to be consistent media visibility of topics of disability [68].



Also, based on the recent examples of the London 2012, Rio 2016, and PyeongChang 2018 Paralympics, studies conducted in different countries suggested that the broadcast and print media gave secondary importance to the Paralympic Games coverage, thus pointing to a “lesser” status of disability sport [46, 48, 62, 65], which the respondents also noted when comparing the coverage to the one during the Olympics. On the one hand, the media’s weaker interest in and consequently smaller coverage of the Paralympics may be attributed to the commercial logic and the perceptions of little interest and appeal to the general public, or a feeling that the Paralympic Games were not a “real” or “legitimate” competition [44].

In sum, it appears that the Paralympics did not serve as the catalyst Brazil needed to bring about long-lasting change through adequate media coverage. Marginalization and trivialization of Paralympic sport by the mainstream media have negative and disempowering implications for disabled individuals as they internalize such narratives in an environment with insufficient representations and often inadequate portrayals [69].

#### *4.4.Perceptions of Change in Society’s Attitudes after the Rio Paralympics*

Participants’ responses about the changes in society’s attitudes as a result of Brazil hosting the Paralympics were divided. Half of the respondents recognized some positive changes in people’s attitudes towards them after the Rio Games, while the other half noted no changes. Most of the respondents who indicated not seeing significant changes in how people treated them after the Paralympics didn’t elaborate in their responses. Those who did, pointed to either insufficient media interest in their group or that mere visibility would not necessarily impact social attitudes:

[Rio Paralympics] helped a lot to change the population’s perception of the importance of investing more in Brazilian Paralympic sport.

Yes, there was a change because the public had the opportunity to experience the image of people with disabilities without going through the model of charity or piety. This changes the perception and presents disability as a human characteristic.

I think it [the perception] changed mainly for the people who watched the [Paralympic] Games in the arenas, especially the children. Children, in a genuine way, notice the potential of para-athletes more than the difficulties.

After the Paralympics, the treatment returned to how it was before. For example, I play table tennis, which is a Paralympic sport, and I’m in search of corporate sponsorship. However, I saw no interest on the part of the companies. Very few players get sponsorships for the sport they play.

I haven’t noticed any change in attitudes.

Nothing changed. Despite visibility, very little is done.

I think [the attitudes] haven’t changed because the Games haven’t been publicized as they should have been.

After the Paralympics, I think people look at us the same way as before.

As mentioned above, the findings in the available literature are unclear as to whether the Paralympics positively influence societal perceptions and attitudes toward disability. For instance, two studies carried out after the London Paralympics found that the Games had a positive impact on societal attitudes towards disability by challenging the public’s attitudes to disabled people, motivating them to seek more para-sport coverage and interact with disabled people, become interested in the backgrounds of Paralympic athletes, including how they deal with their disability, among other changes [67, 70]. Similarly, a study on the British media’s coverage of the Rio 2016 Paralympics found improved media representations compared to previous mega-events and suggested that for the period of the event, para-sport enabled a dialogue on matters outside sport, which could serve as an opportunity for disability rights activists to advance it in the future [71]. Moreover, a survey conducted by the Kyodo News agency after the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics found that while 70% of the 763 respondents believed the Games had a positive impact on society’s understanding of disability, many felt the positive changes would not last long beyond the end of the event [72].

On the other hand, several studies contested the benefits of the Paralympics. For instance, a study of the implications of the Brazilian media’s portrayal of the Rio Paralympics showed that the event and

its coverage missed the opportunity to shape the balanced media coverage and strengthen the Paralympic movement agenda [64]. Another study of the 2012 Paralympics found that the Games did not encourage societal comprehension of broader disability issues beyond the general awareness acquired after watching or reading about the competitions [52]. After the Tokyo Paralympics, many advocates say Japan, the only nation to host the Paralympics twice, has still been lagging behind other major countries in addressing the workplace inclusion of disabled adults, educational inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, and enforcing anti-discrimination legislation, and other challenges [73].

In conclusion, as the survey responses and research show, public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors will require a long time to change. Scholars question the extent to which events like the Paralympics can alter people's attitudes and the impact they will have beyond those who are already positively inclined towards disabled people in society [14]. Therefore, we shouldn't expect that the Paralympic Games alone and the media's approach to their coverage would change people's perceptions of disability issues and disabled people overnight [15, 23, 43]. While the Paralympics can increase the visibility of disabled people in the media and public spaces during and shortly after the event, there needs to be continuous dialogue in the larger community and sustained actions to make Paralympic promises a reality.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has a two-fold purpose: first, to explore the views and perceptions of disabled Brazilians of the societal change claims made about the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games; and second, to problematize these broad claims of lasting societal change and social inclusion through the lens of critical disability theory. Drawing on the discussion of the survey responses, I argue that fulfilling the Paralympic legacy promises set forth by the IPC, politicians, and the event organizing committees is much more complex and long-term than these actors acknowledge. Furthermore, for these social change legacies to become a reality, we need to understand disability as a socially created barrier, with the responsibility of the larger community to pursue empowerment and substantive equality of disabled people long after the Games are over.

The participants' views of the Paralympic Games and Paralympians seem to demonstrate that while most respondents thought that the visibility brought by the event and the participating athletes was positive, they didn't express expectations of a positive influence on society regarding disability issues. Also, while some respondents did find the athletes inspirational and heroic, others didn't see them as role models to look up to and couldn't relate to their stories and perceived challenges.

Consequently, they believed in the potential of Paralympic sport as a vehicle for disability equality but questioned the impact of the Paralympics and their philosophy on social inclusion of disabled people beyond sport. Although they acknowledged sport's numerous benefits, they were also mindful of other possibilities for social inclusion beyond sport. One of the most important elements of social inclusion for the respondents was the recognition of disabled people as equals, without which the process of social inclusion would hardly advance.

The respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the representations and often inadequate portrayals of the Paralympic Games and para-athletes in the media. Their comments reflect the lack of engagement of the media coverage with broader disability issues to change the perceptions and attitudes towards disability, or at least to empower disabled people to get involved in sports.

The participants' responses about the changes in society's attitudes almost a year after Brazil hosted the Paralympics were divided. The most significant points of criticism were an insufficient media interest in this population and the presumed relation between media visibility and its impact on social attitudes.

This study aims to contribute to disability literature in the following ways. First, because research investigating the views and perceptions of disabled people of the broader societal impact of the Paralympics is limited, the present analysis helps fill this gap. Second, my analysis contributes to a broader discussion about disability and social exclusion issues by examining the intersection of disability sport, sporting mega-events, media coverage, and social attitudes. I hope to stimulate a research debate on disability sport and disability studies about how the perceptions of disabled people can be included in the Paralympic and other event legacy planning and implementation to address inequality in society at large.

This study had a delimited scope in terms of a specific period, data collection instrument, and targeted group of participants. Besides this scope delimitation, the limitation of a small sample size could have impacted the study's findings. Future studies could engage with larger samples and further examine the validity of the findings. Also, future research may compare the views and perceptions of disabled and non-disabled people concerning the Paralympics, participating athletes, and the resulting change. Similar comparative and longitudinal studies can be conducted in several countries to better understand the broader societal impact the Paralympics create, as actively advocated by Paralympic movement leaders, politicians, and Paralympic athletes.

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