

Article

WeThe15, Leveraging Sport to Advance Disability Rights and Sustainable Development

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Abstract: #WeThe15 launched at the Tokyo Paralympic Games. It aims to mobilize global partners to level the playing field for the 15% of the global population living with disabilities. This paper examines how current policy, human rights and development objectives seek this inclusive change. It explores how sport and the media, both popular components of culture globally, are vehicles for impacting positive change for individuals and society. Researchers conducted analyses of mainstream media coverage across the US, UK, Latin America, and the Caribbean (LAC) of the 2016 Summer Paralympics. This was taken as a proxy to popular culture or public perception of disability. Results found considerable use of inspiration porn and non-inclusive language across media outlets. The US media led in raising awareness and promoting a cultural shift. Focus groups in Latin America examined athletes' use of their platforms to identify and overcome barriers and promote disability rights. Athletes reported access barriers to sport across infrastructure, culture, school, environment, and sport itself. They are willing to use their voice to advance inclusion. While work is needed, para-sport has potential in the policy context and culturally significant media platforms to promote human rights and sustainable development for all people with disabilities.

Keywords: WeThe15; disability; sport; para-sport; media; human rights; culture; sustainable development



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1. Introduction

1.1. Study Context and Objectives

WeThe15 is a movement to advance the human rights of 15% of the global population with disabilities [1]. The campaign launched in 2021 with a sectoral launch at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Conference of State Parties in New York [2] and a public launch at the Paralympic Games opening ceremony in Tokyo [3]. Despite technically sharing equal rights since 1948 [4], people with disabilities experience inequality, marginalization, and discrimination worldwide [5]. WeThe15 is a movement conceived by the para-sports sector to use the power of sport to for a more equitable world. Its objectives are in line with human rights and sustainable development objectives.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 set out the specific needs for this population to realize their human rights [6]. Building on a bedrock of human rights, the Sustainable Development Goals (2015) called for no one to be left behind, starting with the most vulnerable [7]. Sport is referenced across the human rights and development agendas, with international sports policies since 2015 calling for action to level the playing field [8–11]. Despite these solid foundations, progress has been slow [5] and requires cultural change.

Cultural beliefs and norms have excluded persons with disabilities throughout history. WeThe15 wants to accelerate progress by bringing diverse actors and agendas together to amplify policy agendas and cultural acceptance of disability. Culture is dynamic and changeable, with cultural shifts reflected in public policies. While public policy is aspirational, pop culture reflects societal values, attitudes, and beliefs [12].

The media plays a critical role in changing perception and shaping pop culture [12]. Sport is a powerful element of pop culture and cultural evolution [13] that has been used to promote civil rights [14]. News and media corporations are not external observers and reporters of events but socio-politically embedded institutions actively participating in social processes [15]. This makes them critical participants in the formation of culture. Thus, how people with disabilities are portrayed in mainstream media is very relevant and significantly impacts culture. In this regard, culture, sport, and media can contribute to societal change, and WeThe15 is a timely movement to drive change in line with multiple global policies, sectoral and pop culture objectives.

The objectives of this study include:

1. Describe the normative backdrop to WeThe15 and the campaign drivers and purpose.
2. Analyze media coverage of the 2016 Summer Paralympics as a proxy to popular culture or public perception of disability.
3. Examine the potential of para-sport and para-athletes to identify and overcome barriers to disability inclusion and promote disability rights.
4. Identify how WeThe15 can intentionally leverage sport to advance the rights of people with disabilities in line with sustainable development objectives.

The paper has six sections. Section 1 sets out the objectives and methods for this study. Section 2 presents WeThe15, its stakeholders, and a literature review relating to the underpinning policy context. Section 3 examines the impact of sport on disability rights. Section 4 presents the results of the empirical work that analyzed the Paralympics and Paralympian platform and media coverage to see how they impact perceptions of disability and disability rights. Section 5 discusses and connects the earlier sections before moving towards Section 6, conclusions and recommendations, ultimately presenting five asks to advance sustainable development and human rights through para-sport.

1.2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a pragmatic research design to address its research objectives. WeThe15 addresses real-life social issues with a specific goal in mind, leveraging sport to advance disability inclusion. This paper reflects the authors' position and not the official position of International Paralympic Committee. We chose research methods to effectively contextualize the movement and elements on media and athlete perspectives to understand the situation and propose solutions. The pragmatic approach allows for selecting a range of research methods, both quantitative and qualitative, for enabling the researchers to address the research problem effectively from different angles. This mixed-method study draws conclusions from the diverse research activities and outputs to formulate answers to its research questions and study objectives.

1.2.1. Hypothesis and Research Questions

WeThe15's primary hypothesis is that by mobilizing multiple actors and agendas of global interest connected with sport, we can change culture towards greater awareness, understanding of, and provision for persons with disability.

The research questions addressed in this study are:

Are the current international normative frameworks across sport, human rights, and sustainable development a good foundation for disability inclusion?

Do para-athletes identify as advocates for disability inclusion?

Does the media report on disability in a manner that advances or stifles understanding and attitudes around disability?

Can sport impact disability rights and sustainable development objectives?

1.2.2. WeThe15 Descriptive Research and Literature Review

Firstly, the authors provide a descriptive account of WeThe15, its target population group, namely, people with disabilities and key stakeholders involved in the formulation and steering of the campaign. A literature review follows to address critical areas of relevance to the research objectives. Initially exploring the concept of disability, the section then examines the policy and normative context, especially in sport, human rights, and sustainable development. The literature review then elaborates on the impact of sport on disability rights.

1.2.3. Empirical Research across Media and Athletes

The empirical research analyzed the role of the media and para-athletes on two levels: (a) mainstream media coverage of the Paralympics and (b) the athlete's use of their platforms for identifying and overcoming barriers and actively promoting disability inclusion and disability rights.

(a) Mainstream Media Sampling

Research was conducted in 2021. For the first experiment, mainstream media coverage, we generated a sample of news articles published online in popular news websites from three regions: the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Sampling involved delimited our sources to the 5 most popular news sites in each region by unique visitors, excluding news aggregators such as Google News. For this, we used statistics retrieved from Statista as outlined in Appendix A. (Figures A1–A3).

For each source, we pre-selected articles from their archives that:

1. Were published between 6 August 2016 and 18 October 2016;
2. Covered the 2016 Summer Paralympics.

Finally, we randomly selected 6 articles from the pre-selected ones for our research sample, summing 30 articles per region and 90 in total.

Data extrapolation and Coding framework.

We developed a coding framework to analyze media content based on deductive themes. It is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Coding Framework for Analyzing Media Content on Disability.

(a) Ableism	A form of social prejudice that suggests people with disabilities are inferior to their “able-bodied” counterparts.
(b) Appropriate message	It aligns with a human rights approach and the social model of disability.
(c) Cultural shift	Refers to changes in the way people approach adaptive sports
(d) Emphasis on the body	Focus excessively or repeatedly on an athlete's body, thus putting disability in the body.
(e) Inspiration porn	The portrayal of people as inspirational solely because of their disability.
(f) Non-inclusive language	Use of problematic or discriminatory language.
(g) Awareness-raising	References the barriers affecting people with disabilities

Analysis

Data exploration involved running word frequency queries on all articles and articles from each region. We examined the 100 most frequent words used in the selected media outlets to obtain some general insights. We then coded each outlet according to the above themes.

(b) The Athlete's Platform Role: The Athlete Listening Experiment

Our second part of the empirical work involved probing insight on athlete's use of their platforms to advocate for change. Acknowledging that athletes use their platform differently, we developed a listening framework to classify their level of engagement with

advocacy work. The framework, in Table 2 below, builds on the work of Bichieri (2016) and consists of three classification levels.

Table 2. Athlete Platform Rights Advocacy Classification.

The trendsetters	The most engaged and well-informed athletes that are actively pursuing to put their entire platform at the service of inclusion.
The followers	Not as engaged as trendsetters because they do not have the time or the resources but are still interested and participate when they can.
The base	Know a bit about the social and human rights model of disability but are not engaged because they just do not care or identify as advocates.

Focus Groups

Twenty-four athletes participated in focus groups in 4 Latin American countries: Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru. Athletes were recruited through the National Paralympic Committees in respective countries. A detailed information sheet about the nature, purpose, and intended research outputs was issued to all prospective candidates. Informed consent was obtained from all participants to report on their inputs. It was agreed that reporting would be anonymous. Parental assent was also obtained in the case of minors. Participation was entirely voluntary and could be withdrawn at any stage without consequence. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the TUFTS University approved the protocol.

We probed athletes with disabilities about the role of sport in their lives, their thoughts and experiences of barriers they face, and their willingness to put their platforms in service of advancing disability rights. Table 3 categorizes the participants by age, gender, and level of participation in sport. The field guide for the interviews is in Appendix B.

Table 3. Focus groups for the athlete listening experiment.

	12–18 yrs.	19–29 yrs.
Amateurs	4 men	3 men
	2 women	2 women
Paralympians	5 men	4 men
	2 women	2 women

Limitations

There are three limitations to this study. Firstly, while WeThe15 includes 5 major international organizations offering sports opportunities and major events for people with disability, the media study was based on one mega sporting event, namely the 2016 Paralympic games. Secondly, the athlete listening study again involved only Paralympic athletes at amateur and Paralympian levels. Future studies should expand the type of events covered to represent all areas of disabilities and event types and should include athletes from across the disability sport landscape. In addition, this study focused its empirical work on Latin America; future studies need to cover all geographical regions.

2. WeThe15 Descriptive Research and Literature Review

2.1. WeThe15

In 2019 the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) launched a Strategic Plan with a new vision to make an inclusive world through para-sports [16]. While inferred earlier in IPC's history, this vision has never been as explicit in the organizational architecture [16]. IPC is a high-performance sports organization with a growing global footprint. As the world's third most attended sports event, the Paralympic Games have a unique power to accelerate a cultural shift and celebrate the diverse identity of persons with disabilities [6,17]. It now seeks to “use its global position and influence, together with its events and activities,

to challenge the stigma attached to disability, empower social transformation and make for a more inclusive society for all” [16] (p. 15).

Consistent with SDG 17 on Partnership, IPC recognized that achieving the change in its new vision involved bringing diverse stakeholders together, marrying them. The wedding calls for a complex web of organizations across sport and human rights organizations [18] to unite for a common purpose. They must set aside their differences and build on their shared pursuit of an inclusive world. Thus, this wedding aims to enhance the contribution of sport for persons with disabilities to the goals of human rights. WeThe15 was born.

WeThe15 is a global human rights movement for the 15% or 1.2 billion persons with disabilities. Spearheaded by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and International Disability Alliance (IDA), WeThe15 represents the biggest coalition of international organizations from the worlds of sport, human rights, policy, business, arts, and entertainment. They will work with governments, businesses, and the public over the next decade to initiate change for the world’s largest marginalized group.

Harnessing sport’s ability to engage global audiences and create positive change [1], the IPC, Special Olympics, Invictus Games Foundation, the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (Deaflympics), and Virtus teamed up for the first time in history. Appendix C describes the core purpose and activity of each organization. They will use their international sports events and athletes to raise awareness and understanding of the issues facing persons with disabilities around the globe.

WeThe15 aligns with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as they connect with disability rights and sport. Thus, joining founders and sports organizations are a growing consortium of stakeholders, including UN Human Rights, UNESCO, the UN SDG Action Campaign, the European Commission, The Valuable 500, Global Citizen, Global Disability Innovation Hub, the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), International Disability and Development Consortium, C-Talent, Global Goals Advisory, ATscale—the Global Partnership for Assistive Technology, Zero Project, and the Global Alliance of Assistive Technology Organizations (GAATO), UNESCO Chair MTU.

2.2. Disability, Disability Rights Sustainable Development, and Sport

Perspectives on disability change over time. WeThe15 accepts disability as an evolving concept that extends beyond the person’s body to the “attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” [6] (preamble (e)). Those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments face barriers preventing them from being included in society. Reducing societal barriers and enabling human rights requires system changes, universal design, and reasonable accommodations [19].

CRPD is a roadmap, a political statement of will, and a technical map with principles and processes for implementing the rights [6]. It calls on us to confront exclusive environments, change attitudes, and accept diversity as part of mainstream culture. Everybody gains when people with a disability are fully integrated in society. CRPD calls for a range of concepts or tools for example universal design and reasonable accommodations. Universal design involves designing products, procedures, and environments from scratch to be usable by the broadest spectrum of people [20]. Developing products and services to universal design standards is cost-effective though not always possible.

The lack of this approach historically makes accessibility measures and reasonable accommodations necessary. Reasonable accommodations refer to everything that can alter the existing world to make it accessible for all persons with disabilities without totally redesigning. It is like retrofitting inclusion; examples include ramps, lifts, audio software, easy read and sign language interpreters. These change from context to context, so “reasonable” is open for interpretation and differs depending on conditions and available resources.

Sport is explicitly mentioned in a human rights context in Article 30 of the CRPD, about participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport. Rights-holders and duty

bearers need to work together to advance human rights. This puts a responsibility on many agencies, including sporting bodies, cultural organizations, and media outlets, to support realizing human rights and social development aspired to in CRPD.

Beyond CRPD, other human rights instruments within and beyond the UN System also address the rights of people with disabilities. The right to inclusion in sport is enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women [21], the Convention on the Rights of the Child [22], the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [6], and the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights [23]. Many regional human rights instruments in Africa, Asia, and the Americas similarly address the rights of those living with disabilities in sport, analysis of which was conducted by the UNESCO Chair MTU [24].

Since 2006, CRPD has made an impact, but much more work is needed. Analysis of state reports to CRPD on sport were analyzed and identified a significant scope to increase and improve reporting on disability inclusion in and through sport [25]. Research shows that reporting to human rights bodies is often a tiny snapshot of what happens in a country that we cannot say reflects the experience of the population living with disability [25].

In 2021, the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that discrimination and barriers to participation remain widespread [5] and that concerted action from state and non-state actors is needed to address the challenge. In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched as a core driver of Agenda 2030, Transforming our World. The SDGs were built on a bedrock of human rights [7] and have reinvigorated the human rights agenda. The SDGs advocate “no-one left behind” putting a significant impetus on disability inclusion given known inequity the world over.

Sport is not explicitly referenced as a goal or target, it is included in paragraph 37 of the declaration, which gives it equal significance and importance as an individual goal or target:

Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognize the growing contribution of sport to the realization of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives. [7] (p. 13)

With calls for accelerated action on the SDGs, the juxtaposition of WeThe15 with the SDG decade of action, the time is right for coordinated progress through this global campaign.

Agenda 2030 has had a cascading impact across the sport policy landscape and arguably the most significant opportunity in our generation to impact positive change and shift the dial on inclusion towards universality. Since 2015, and the emergence of the SDGs, all international sports related policy instruments have sought to advance disability inclusion and disability rights in and through sport.

In 2017, UNESCO convened the world’s sports Ministers and Senior Officials in Kazan [26] to produce the Kazan Action Plan (KAP). It triggered unprecedented momentum across the sports world at the intersection of human rights and sustainable development [27]. KAP is a unified, international reference for orienting policymakers, especially public sport authorities and the sport movement [8]. A core objective is to advance inclusion in sport and maximize its contribution to sustainable development.

The World Health Organization in 2018 launched the Global Action Plan on Physical Activity (GAPPA) [9]. It also seeks to advance sustainable development through physical activity and sport. It calls for investment where most needed, including for people living with disability. The WHO 2020 Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour, for the first time, included global guidelines for adults, adolescents, and children living with disabilities [28]. The guidelines sought to bridge gaps in inequality experienced by people with disabilities. Alongside the guidelines, 10 target areas for action are presented to advance inclusive practice in physical activity and sedentary behavior for people living with disability [29].

The UN is a loud voice for the power of sport in advancing disability inclusion. In the post-COVID-19 context, they have called for continued investment in disability inclusion in sport, flagging that any reduction in funding would be a “retrograde” move [30].

3. The Role and Impact of Sports on Human Rights and Disability Rights

Human rights describe the rights and freedoms we all share by virtue of being human. While sport is a broad construct that encompasses physical activity, physical education, play, traditional sports, and games [8]. The ability to participate in sport is a fundamental right and freedom and we can access other rights through our participation in sport. Sport is part of what makes us human. Where described as parallel, para, adapted, adaptive it remains sport.

3.1. *Impact of Sports on Individuals with Disabilities*

Sport plays a powerful role in people’s lives, affecting their sense of self and place in the community [31]. It is where character is formed, connections are made, and skills are developed. It is recognized as an essential tool for preventive health and health maintenance [31,32]. At a societal level, sport inspires, athletes hold a high status in society, and it offers a transcultural sense of awe every new generation wants to imitate. For persons with disabilities, the impact can have a particular significance.

3.2. *Health and Well-Being*

Right to health. Sport can have a positive impact on the health of persons with disabilities. The Global Action Plan on Physical Activity underscores the socio-economic benefits of sports and physical activity [9]. Sport has a valuable role to play in the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases and related risk factors and positively impacts mental health, quality of life, and well-being [9] (p. 12). Physical activity is crucial for the physical and psychosocial health and development of children and youth with disabilities [33].

3.3. *Income and Employment*

Right to employment. Persons with disabilities might look to sport as a career opportunity. At the elite level, para-athletes get paid by their governments to train and represent their countries only if they are in countries with public policies to structure the system and budgets that facilitate it [34]. This is not the same across the sport for persons with disabilities landscape. Many countries do have equal prize money for Olympians and Paralympians that win medals [35], but they do not have equal salaries or opportunities globally due to commercial factors. The increasing popularity of the Paralympic Games increases private and public interest and investment [36–38].

Beyond the elite sport level, the employment of persons with disabilities in sport presents a positive role model for the engagement of persons with disabilities in sport. Persons with disabilities must be facilitated to access pathways to employment and income generation in sport. This must include access to and through the education and training system where those with disabilities can access the qualifications and competencies necessary to enter the workforce [39].

3.4. *Full Development of Human Potential and Empowerment*

Right to development, independence, and empowerment. Environmental, attitudinal, and social barriers are now understood to be at the core of disability; however, it is also true that people with disabilities can use sport to self-actualize and empower. This is especially true for people who acquire disability and need to re-learn how to navigate the environment in their changed bodies. Invictus games successfully use sport to this end [40].

The widely accepted physical and psychological benefits of exercise and physical activity make sports a powerful tool in self-empowerment and self-actualization processes [31,33]. Individuals who lost capabilities or function have used sport to “support the

improvement of physical conditions, resulting in the process of the gradual transformation of how they perceive themselves and their own bodies" [41] (p. 74).

3.5. Impact of Sports for Persons with Disabilities on Societies

Sport has played an active role in politics, society, and diplomacy throughout history. In terms of its scope to advance the disability rights agenda, sport has recently begun to demand, achieve, and quantify its impact. This firmly positions sport at the core of rights and development agenda. Below are three areas sport has impacted, including infrastructure, attitudes, and business.

Infrastructure. Hosting a major sports event can have a transformative impact on the infrastructure of cities. Beyond new sporting facilities, city transport infrastructures are upgraded as sports organizations demand compliance with international accessibility standards [42]. Enforcing these guidelines involves massive investment and building local capacity to apply these norms. This knowledge and capacity remain long after the games pass, delivering better access for persons with disabilities.

The city of Guadalajara is a good example. It hosted the 2011 Parapan American Games that served as a regional qualifier for the London 2012 Paralympics. Hector Figueroa, Director of Inclusion and People with Disabilities of Guadalajara, Jalisco said [43]:

"Guadalajara ... gain[ed] awareness on what inclusion and accessibility really means. Before we didn't have accessible stadiums ... ramps ... inclusive traffic lights ... commerce interested in including clients with disabilities ... sign language ... now we do. This is all because we had programs and public policy to promote these changes ... we created the municipal secretariat for inclusion of people with disabilities we ... work with civil society to make sure Guadalajara is inclusive for all."

Ahead of the Beijing 2008 Paralympics, the Chinese government introduced new laws on accessible buildings, and spent RMB one billion making 14,000 facilities fully accessible. This equates to the sum of the previous 25 years' investment [44]. The Paralympic 2014 Sochi Winter Games triggered the Russian government to invest in barrier-free infrastructure [45], while the Japanese government introduced a new Universal Design Action Plan due to staging Tokyo 2020 [46].

Attitude: The best available data on the impact of para-sports on attitudes is from the London 2012 Paralympic Games. Ticket numbers sold and TV viewing figures worldwide were unprecedented for sport for persons with disability events [47].

The London Games organizers conducted a qualitative study to measure the changes in attitudes towards disabilities [48]. They found the public was more at ease in their interaction with disability, making people with disabilities more visible and included. The Games inspired people with disabilities to be a little more emboldened, no longer willing to be ignored or to be treated as second class. The effect is described as a subtle but genuine and significant step towards wider acceptance of disability. Respondents felt that positive attitudinal changes around disability need continued work to sustain the effect, e.g., more disability sport on TV, more disability prevalence across the media, and less caution when talking about disability.

Business: Specifically, we are looking at business transformation due to sponsoring the Paralympic Games. Just as cities hosting games need to demonstrate their commitment to inclusion, companies that sponsor para-sports need to walk the talk of inclusion. As significant sponsors illustrate their commitment to inclusion, other companies look on; research is required on any sustainable impact on key sponsors and trickle-down effect on other businesses and the disability inclusion agenda.

Paralympic sponsors BP and Channel 4 report their belief that sport can help advance the inclusion agenda; they acknowledge inequality and a desire to be at the forefront of leading change [49]. In 2020, Channel 4 set out commitments such as doubling its workforce disability target from 6 to 12% by 2023 and achieving 9% on-screen representation by 2023. Beyond the value proposition for Channel 4 of being the broadcaster of choice for persons

with disability, they have set measurable indicators that can be used to hold them to account. They report being committed to large scale collaborative partnerships to drive change.

Across Paralympics, Special Olympics, Virtus, Invictus Games, Deaflympics, and far beyond the TV screen, the podium, the opening and closing ceremonies, the dignitaries, the legacy and legacy plans, sport impacts at grassroots levels. The words of Eleanor Roosevelt remind us of where impact needs to reach for human rights to be realized by all:

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; . . . Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.” [50]

4. Results

This section presents the results of the empirical work that examined the role of the media and para-athletes on two levels: (a) mainstream media coverage of the Paralympics and (b) the athlete’s use of their platforms for identifying and overcoming barriers and actively promoting disability inclusion and disability rights.

4.1. Media Listening Experiment Results

Data querying revealed that the 10 most frequent words in the all-region count were: *Paralympics, gold, sports, team, medals, world, athletes, time, Olympics, and wheelchair*. The frequency of *wheelchair* signals that wheelchair sports had dominant coverage.

When examining each region, we found some particularities. US media outlets see *able* appears among the 50 most frequent words, signaling either non-inclusive language or ableism. *Compete* and *competition* are much more frequent in the US outlets than in other regions.

In the UK query, we also found *able* listed; however, it was less frequent and barely made it to the top 100. *Swimming* was the most mentioned sport in the chosen UK outlets. *Access* appears among the 15 most frequent words in the LAC query, which signals attention to accessibility and barriers. *Disability* is more common in LAC outlets. We also found the word *lost* among LAC’s most frequent, meaning various references to the loss of limbs. Finally, we found four frequent words directly linked with inspiration porn in the LAC 100: *inspired, inspiration, suffered, and overcoming*. This signals that inspiration porn is more frequent in the LAC outlets.

Word clouds for each region word frequency query can be found in Appendix A (Figures A4–A6).

The tables below show the results of data coding. Table 4 shows us the number of references that were coded into each theme. Table 5 shows what percentage of each region’s outlets included one or more references coded in a particular theme, so, for example, 17% of LAC outlets contained some non-inclusive language.

Table 4. References coded by node and by region.

Nodes	LAC	UK	US	Total
Ableism	0	2	2	4
Appropriate message	3	11	8	22
Cultural shift	0	1	5	6
Emphasis on the body	1	2	4	7
Inspiration Porn	22	9	15	46
Non-inclusive language	6	5	8	19
Raising awareness	0	3	8	11

Table 5. Percentage of outlets with some coding by node and by region.

Nodes	LAC	UK	US	All Regions
Ableism	0%	7%	7%	4%
Appropriate message	10%	30%	27%	22%
Cultural shift	0%	3%	13%	6%
Emphasis on the body	3%	7%	13%	8%
Inspiration Porn	37%	23%	33%	31%
Non-inclusive language	17%	13%	23%	18%
Raising awareness	0%	10%	17%	9%

The LAC region had the most instances of inspiration porn with 22 passages coded. The US followed with 15 passages and the UK had the lowest frequency of inspiration porn with nine passages coded. We can also see that 31% of all articles had some inspiration porn. Around one third of LAC and US outlets contained inspiration porn, but its appearance was more intensive in the LAC outlets. Some examples of what was coded as inspiration porn are:

“Ibrahim Hamadtou, the table-tennis player that touched the world (. . .) through his story he inspires the world to overcome lives’ obstacles.” (RPP, 2016)

“For (kids) to see, ‘They’re in wheelchairs and they can do this. Or, they don’t have a leg and they do this, then I guess I can, too,’” (NBC, 2016)

Non-inclusive language was found in 18% of all outlets; it was more prevalent in the US with almost a quarter of articles containing references to non-inclusive language. Almost all consisted of the use of “able-bodied”. The US also had the most instances of emphasis on the body; thus, positioning disability in the athletes’ body.

Appropriate messages appeared in 30% of UK outlets and 27% of US outlets; however only 10% of LAC news reviewed contained passages coded to this theme. Only 8% of all articles raised awareness on the social barriers affecting people with disabilities, and only 6% talked about a cultural shift.

4.2. Athlete Listening Results

The focus groups reveal that adaptive sport can be a professional or recreational activity with great potential for change and personal and social transformation. To approach this transformation, it was necessary first to understand the life of para-athletes before sports. The research found that this consisted of sedentary lifestyles, social isolation (reducing interactions to the family circle), low self-esteem, and the negative image (uselessness, rejection) built around disability.

Alongside this, they reported different barriers they face to access sports: infrastructure barriers (limited accessibility and mobility), cultural barriers (aligned to the lack of the society’s empathy and understanding of disability), study barriers (the balance between academic life and training among school-age athletes), and sports barriers (including the scarce attendance to certain sports events, the costs involved, and other barriers related to endo-discrimination dynamics among athletes with different types of disability).

When asked about using their platform to influence social change, most answered they perform this implicitly, meaning they can just show that they live normal lives and achieve through sports.

A Paralympian said:

“I don’t influence anything purposely, I just do my thing, live my life looking for my own objectives; there will always be other people trying to imitate us, use us as an image, as inspiration. But I don’t believe that because I feel as equal as anyone else. We all have difficulties, we all have limitations, we all have problems.”

Other, more proactive opinions said, “Sometimes they don’t include us as much so we need to find a way to be included. (. . .) we have the goal of making them stop thinking

we are worthless (. . .) we don't want pity, we want people to see we are able to achieve many things."

Respondents were primarily "followers" as opposed to "trendsetters" or "base" (see Table 2). Followers are interested in advocating for rights and access and do so as and when they can.

5. Discussion

Sport is recognized in policy and pop culture as a valuable tool for realizing and advancing human rights and development objectives pertaining to persons with disability. Despite the plethora of rights, policy, and development instruments calling for greater equality and mainstreaming of disability as a policy priority, persons with disabilities continue to be marginalized and stigmatized in societies across the globe. Multiple barriers continue to thwart opportunities to engage in physical activity and sports, which has implications on perceptions of disability in society. Human and financial resources are not being invested at the level needed to overcome barriers to inclusive and disability-specific sport. All this has implications for the health and social inclusion of persons with disabilities [5]. This impacts the individual, family, and community levels negatively, and urgent action is needed to rectify the situation.

Rhetoric must end around human rights, disability inclusion, and the development agenda calls for no one to be left behind. It is time to accelerate and hold accountable those who have a responsibility to meet obligations. States are primarily responsible and should lead legislative and regulatory actions to end discrimination. Beyond states, we all have a role in realizing human rights and sustainable development objectives [7]. It is within the purview of States to hold to account other actors in the State, including the private sector, sport, education, and the media. In providing opportunities for inclusive and disability-specific sport, both called for in CRPD, a host of public and private stakeholders across different societal sectors need to step up to the mark.

The human rights and sport sectors are unfamiliar and could leverage each other more to advance human rights. Agencies with responsibility for monitoring human rights and development obligations internationally, regionally, and at national levels should take stock of WeThe15 and their partners' ask in maximizing the power of the sports sector to deliver change for persons with disability. KAP follow up actions have called for human rights committees to call for information on inclusive sport [25]. Reporting templates and advocacy tools have been developed to support state and non-state actors to effectively report on sport and human rights and Sustainable Development Goals [51]. Data gaps and finance committed to same must be fulfilled.

So, can sports for persons with disabilities move the needle of a society's stigma towards this population? We do not have baseline data on people's attitudes towards people with disabilities or a fully conceptualized model of how changes in attitudes influence various socio-economic outcomes. Attempting to measure the impact of a sports event on knowledge, practice, and attitudes would require rigorous pre and post research over time [52]. While pilot studies, as in the London example, exist, we lack global data in this area.

News and media corporations are key participants in social and cultural change [15]. Thus, the manner in which people with disabilities are portrayed in mainstream media impacts culture. The media listening analysis results offer a general view of how media corporations report on para-sports in the three chosen regions. Inspiration porn and non-inclusive language remain too prevalent. The LAC region was the worst offender, with the US not so far behind, although the US were the top performers at raising awareness and promoting a cultural shift. The UK outlets had the fewest instances of inspiration porn and non-inclusive language; however, they still incurred undesired storytelling.

The mainstream media in these regions has begun more inclusive coverage of para-sports, but there is still a distance to walk. Further analyses covering other regions is necessary to have a global perspective on media coverage of para-sports. The research on

para-athlete listening confirmed that sports can transform lives with athletes reporting a process of self-acknowledgement, self-awareness, and acceptance. Sport was a catalyst to gaining confidence and developing greater social skills. Some athletes are willing advocates on disability inclusion, reporting on infrastructural, cultural, school-related, physical, and sport-related barriers. Although athletes did not explicitly mention CRPD or human rights, athletes do see themselves as objects of exclusion and are willing and actively trying to change this. Of course, they will need the knowledge and the right tools to be successful.

Moving forward, sustaining the marriage of the disability rights, development, and sport for persons with disability movement needs:

- i. Research: The samples we used in both our listening experiments were limited to a few regions. We need a global baseline to understand where culture is in each corner of the world and how engaged athletes are and are willing to be with proper education and communication tools. Mainstream media coverage of adaptive sport serves as a proxy of where society is in terms of cultural inclusion. On the athletes' platforms side, their engagement will indicate their confidence to be active and informed advocates of their human rights. Our research was limited to the Paralympic movement, and this needs to expand across all para-sport organizations.

- ii. Coordination: The disability rights and adaptive sports movements should establish lines of communication and structures for overseeing a coordinated effort to improve the coverage of para-sport globally and empower and support athletes' efforts to use their platforms to help change attitudes about disability and promote inclusion. A structure to organize, understand, and give more visibility together with the power of all para-sport games, movements, and athletes will make this evolution much more efficient.

- iii. Data and accountability: Human rights and sustainable development mechanisms need to hold the sport to account and vice-versa. The para-sport sector needs more data and human rights treaties, and SDGs require data to evidence progress. Investment by States in data is needed to evidence the cultural shift called for in human rights treaties and across Sustainable Development Goals. The human rights sector and sustainable development sector can call on states to evidence their advancement in and through sport for people with disabilities. We need disaggregated data by disability type to evidence "no-one is left behind" as cultures evolve.

- iv. Capacity Building: Realizing the rights of people with disabilities in and through sport is a mainstream agenda. Policy acknowledges it is time to phase out the retrofitting of inclusion and ramp up universal design. Imagine if every architect, urban planner, product developer, engineer, coach, physical education teacher, sports development officer, marketer or media employee understood and implemented their human rights duties in relation to disability. Imagine if more people with disabilities could access employment in sport. Such education, training, and rights are catered for in CRPD, 15 years on they are not in place.

- v. Partnership (SDG17): Advancing disability rights in and through sport requires the buy-in of many stakeholders across and beyond the para-sport movements. Advancing disability inclusion is central to advancing societies; it benefits everyone. WeThe15 is a powerful vehicle for cultural change, human rights, and sustainable development led by the para-sport movements and is challenging everyone to join the journey. Together with para-sport games and athletes, media can be leveraged to amplify messages, change the narrative, and impact cultural change.

6. Conclusions

As the momentum at the policy level moves forward, collaboration at all levels across UN Agencies, States, Civil Society, international sporting bodies, such as Paralympics, Virtus, Special Olympics, Invictus, the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (Deaflympics), and Media has been mobilized. Concerted efforts across all sectors can co-create inclusive environments that will enable full and effective participation of those living with disability to participate in physical activity and sport [16]. WeThe15 is well-

timed and well-placed to be a change vehicle. It has garnered the support of the people and the policymakers to turn the world purple for disability inclusion.

Para-sports impacts the advancement of rights for persons with disabilities at the individual and society levels. That impact could be heightened if Paralympians were more comfortable with and able to use their platforms to advance those rights. Their achievements, media visibility, and life experiences make them well-suited to do so. However, their reticence to be used as inspiration porn can hold them back. As the media moves away from this approach, the dangers of being characterized that way will lessen. The disability rights movement believes athletes with disabilities can hasten improvements in the media. Media in turn can be a major player in advancing cultural change, supporting the realization of human rights and sustainable development outlined in policy and normative instruments.

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Appendix A

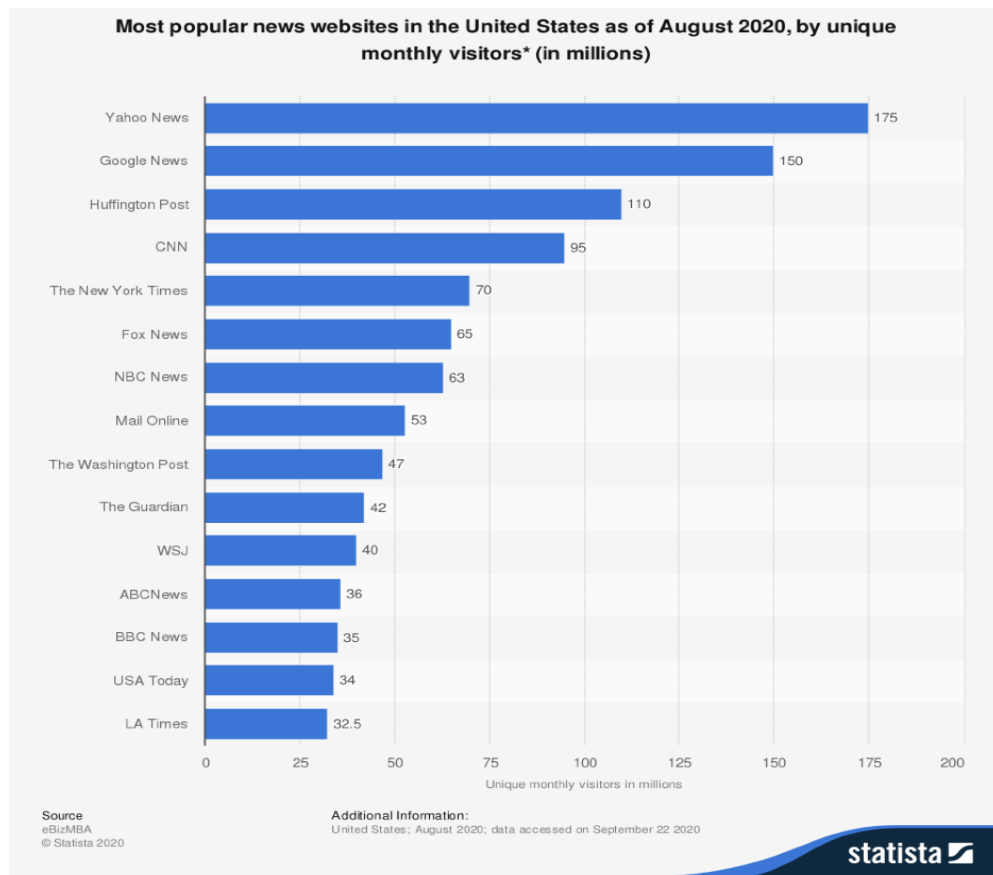


Figure A1. Most popular news websites in the US region, 2020.

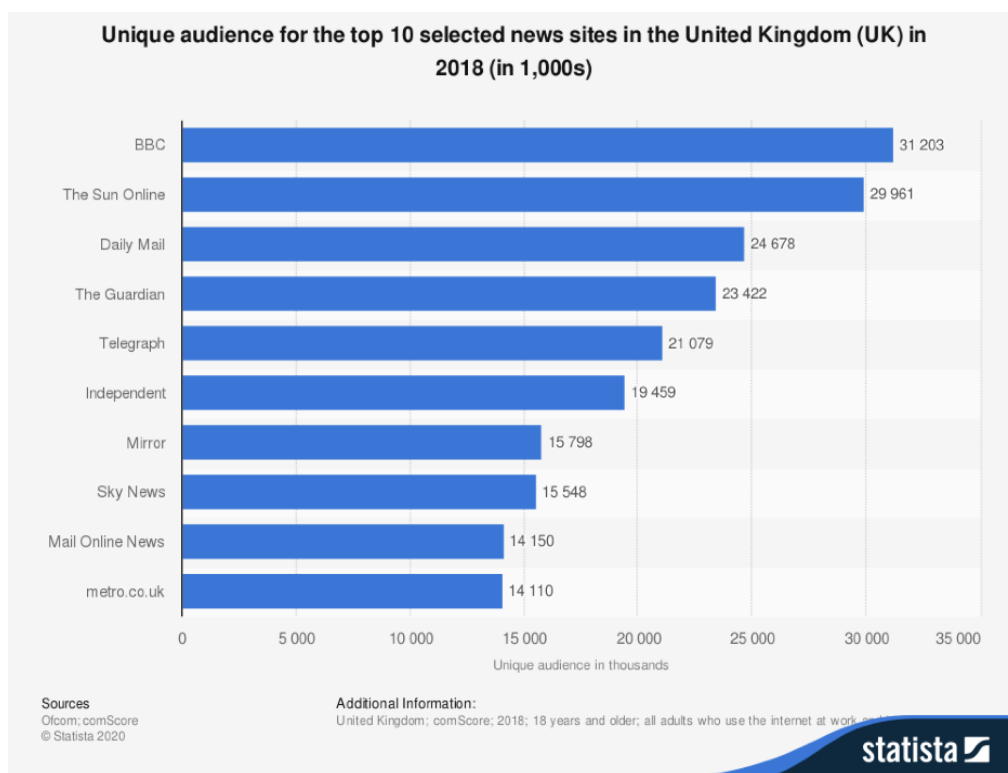


Figure A2. Most popular news websites in the UK region, 2018.

(en miles)

Figure A3. Most popular news websites in the LAC region, 2018.

Figure A4. Most frequent words in articles from the US region.

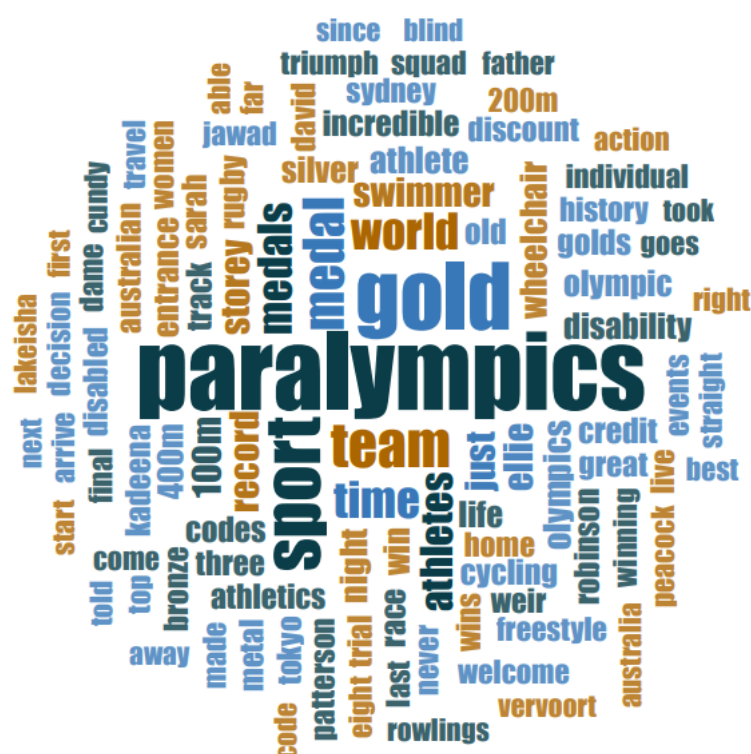


Figure A5. Most frequent words in articles from the UK region.



Figure A6. Most frequent words in articles from the LAC region.

Appendix B

Table A1. Focus Group Conversation Guide.

Greeting and Presentation of Participants 5 min	<p>Presentation and acknowledgement of attendance to the participants. Likewise, the moderator will emphasize on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The objective of the focus group: to talk about the meaning of sport in their lives. - The confidentiality of the information and its exclusive use for research purposes. - All responses will be kept anonymous. - Remind the participants that they will not be able to reveal their classmates answers with other people. - The importance of everyone participating. - The importance of being respectful of other's opinions. - All participants can express themselves freely. - The importance of their own opinion on the topics discussed. - The moderator will give the word to the participants and will be able to regulate the time of the interventions. <p>Presentation dynamics of the attendees: Now I would like to hear from you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name • Nationality • Hobbies • Ask attendees to share a typical word from their country (that they find funny), for example, how do you usually call your friends? In Colombia some call them parce.
General Approach to Sport 15 min	<p>Objective: Identify what they like the most and if sport is one of these topics.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you like to do the most? <p>Why? What does that experience convey to you? Moderator: at this point it is important for the moderator to inquire if sport is a primary activity of interest. Use the inverted pyramid technique (from general to specific) to focus on sports.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What attracts you the most about sports? <p>What does that experience make you feel?</p>
The role of Sports 15 min	<p>Objective: To clarify the role of sport in the lives of the participants.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What sports do you like? <p>What is your favorite sport? Why did they choose it? What do you like about it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where do you train? <p>Encouragement topics: if general questions do not produce answers, try: school, in the neighborhood, in a league.</p>
Obstacles and Support Networks in Sport 25 min	<p>Objective: To inquire about the obstacles that participants have encountered in their relationship with sports.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did others react when you showed them your interest in sports? - From your experience: Do you feel that you have had any barrier or obstacle in the practice of sports? Which? <p>Stimulus themes: if the general questions do not produce answers, try barrier related topics: physical barriers (spaces), attitudinal barriers (of oneself or of others). How have you dealt with these kinds of situations? What should be done to avoid them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What has facilitated your ability to play sports? <p>Encouragement topics: if the general questions do not produce answers, try: your own merit or someone else's, friends or family, institutions, or programs. Who has supported you? Why do you remember them?</p>
My Personal History and Sport 35 min	<p>Objective: Recognize how sports plays a role in personal transformation in the participants. Exercises # 1 Jam Board "Sports and I" The participants must write a paragraph-long short story whose main theme is "Sport in my life." Then, two stories will be shared to encourage dialogue between the participants.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think of this story? - Do you feel that sport has changed your life perception? <p>What other effects can sports have in people's lives? Encouragement topics: if the general questions do not produce answers, try with self-confidence, opportunities, the development of skills in other fields, the change in attitudes of other people towards the participant. Do you feel that sport has changed your perception of yourself? Do you feel that the perception others have of you has changed? Oral survey: as closure and summary Their participation is appreciated, it is said that it was very productive, and they are asked to think for 1 min, as a way to conclude, the answers to the following questions: How has sport changed your lives? Why are sports important for people with physical disabilities?</p>

Appendix C

International organizations in the sport for persons with disability system.

The International Paralympic Committee, IPC is the global governing body for the Paralympic Movement with a vision to make for a more inclusive world through para-sport. Its mission is to lead the Paralympic Movement, oversee the delivery of the Paralympic Games, and support its members to enable para-athletes to achieve sporting excellence [53].

Virtus, World Intellectual Impairment Sport, provides opportunities for high-performance sport participation for people with intellectual disability. Virtus is a member of IPC, and Virtus athletes can compete in swimming, athletics, and table tennis at the Paralympic Games [54].

Special Olympics aims to use sport as a tool to tackle the inactivity, stigma, isolation, and injustice that people with intellectual disabilities face. Its work goes beyond sport to drive social change, enabling the full social participation of people with intellectual disabilities. Compared to the IPC, the Special Olympics' focus is primarily on participation in 30-plus sports, not competition [55].

The Invictus Games Foundation was established following the successful Invictus Games 2014, a sport event for wounded, injured, and sick Servicemen and women, both serving and veterans. The Foundation owns the Invictus Games brand and selects Host Cities for the games. It ensures that the Invictus Games adhere to high standards and is responsible for sport and competition management, rules and categorizations, and branding [40].

The International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (ICSD) is the main governing body responsible for the Deaflympics and other World Deaf Championships. Founded in 1924, the ICSD is approaching a century of inviting deaf and hard of hearing elite athletes from all over the world to compete in sport and develop comradeship between their countries [56].

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