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► To cite this version:

Yann Beldame, H  l  ne Joncheray, Valentine Duquesne, R  mi Richard. “They Don’t Really Care about my Results, they Prefer Selling my Life Story.” Inspirational Paralympians and Sponsorship. *Communication & Sport*, 2023, pp.216747952311585. 10.1177/21674795231158542 . hal-04021966

HAL Id: hal-04021966

<https://hal.science/hal-04021966v1>

Submitted on 12 Dec 2024

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“They Don’t Really Care about my Results, they Prefer Selling my Life Story.” Inspirational Paralympians and Sponsorship

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Abstract

This article intends to analyze the links that Paralympic athletes and their staff members establish between the Paralympic athletes’ self-presentation as cyborgs or supercrips and their access to sponsors. Based on an interview survey of 15 Paralympic athletes and 42 members of their staffs, we will show that not all Paralympic athletes can be associated with inspirational cyborg or supercrip figures. Indeed, according to the Paralympic athletes and staff members interviewed, some discriminating criteria prevail for sponsors in their attribution of sponsorship contracts. Some Paralympic athletes report numerous situations in which they are perceived and presented in a miserabilist perspective of pity remote from any sponsorship perspective. We will then analyze the ableist dimension of the intelligibility frameworks through which Paralympic athletes claim to be recognized by sponsors. Finally, we will show how this type of recognizability continues to exclude and invisibilize Paralympic athletes who are the least inspiring for non-disabled people. Therefore, it appears that there are inequalities between Paralympic athletes in their access to sponsors according to the inspiration they arouse in non-disabled people.

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Keywords

paralympic athletes, miserabilism and populism, cyborg and supercrip, inspiration porn, sponsorship

Introduction

In France, sponsorship¹ is one of the possible sources of funding available to Paralympic athletes. However, the amounts allocated by sponsors can vary widely depending on the Paralympic athletes. Some fundings are one-off and target part of the Paralympic athlete's equipment, while others assist the Paralympic athletes over several months or even several years, by financing their entire sports preparation. In addition, methods of access to sponsors can be varied. In France, since 2014, access to sponsors for Paralympic athletes has been available, for example, through the "Performance Pact", a mechanism carried by the Ministry of Sports that aims to encourage and facilitate financial support from companies to Olympic and Paralympic athletes. One year after its launching, 19.4% of athletes benefiting from this scheme were Paralympic athletes ([Ministère de la Ville, de la Jeunesse et des Sports, December 21, 2015](#)). However, not all sponsorship contracts between Paralympic athletes and companies go through the Performance Pact. Some companies create direct partnerships with sports federations. These federations continue to play a prominent role in awarding sponsorship contracts to Paralympic athletes. But Paralympic athletes can also obtain financing directly from companies, i.e. without the intermediation or assistance of the state and federations.

This article will present the various criteria that, according to the Paralympic athletes and staff members interviewed, prevail for sponsors in Paralympic athletes' access to sponsorship contracts. According to them, sporting performance is a central criterion for a Paralympic athlete to be financed by a sponsor, while they insist on the existence of other facilitating elements that are just as decisive. [Brittain \(2016\)](#) explains that representations about Paralympic athletes can have a major influence on the success or failure of marketing programs that might be undertaken by Paralympic Movement officials to raise funds. By extension, and following this line of reasoning, we can wonder whether the ways in which Paralympic athletes are portrayed have any influence on and importance in their funding by sponsors.

Theoretical Framework

Miserabilism and Populism in Representations of Paralympic Athletes

When referring to or presenting Paralympic athletes, it is possible to identify two main registers of representation in the media ([Cherney et al., 2015](#); [Brooke, 2019](#)). The first one can be designated as miserabilist because it presents Paralympic athletes only through their shortcomings, while showing pity and compassion for them. Many researchers ([Hardin & Hardin, 2004](#); [Silva & Howe, 2012](#); [Hodges et al., 2015](#); [Wolbring & Litke, 2012](#)) have shown that for at least the last 20 years this first register

has tended to be replaced by a second register that can be identified as populism, which tends to aestheticize the deficient bodies and life paths of Paralympic athletes, while considering them as some kind of superheroes. This article will demonstrate how miserabilism continues to be mobilized when it involves some Paralympic athletes' access to sponsors. When describing a Paralympic athlete's access to sponsors, the Paralympic athletes and staff members interviewed mobilize one or the other of these two registers of discourse according to their perception of the Paralympic athlete's disability but also the discipline they practice. The conceptual distinction between miserabilism and populism that is central to our study has not yet been used to analyze the representations of Paralympic athletes. These notions were first formalized in 1989 by the sociologists Grignon and Passeron in their book *Le savant et le populaire* to designate the two major interpretative biases that social scientists should avoid when they study the working class. According to them, miserabilism considers popular culture only through the classification schemes of the dominant culture, perceiving "*all differences as so many shortcomings, all otherness as so many lesser beings*" (1989, p. 44). In so doing, miserabilism fails to understand the meaning that members of the working class give to what they do, and the specificity and richness of popular culture. As for populism, it is considered as a "*paradoxical form of class contempt towards the dominated*" (1989, p. 11), in that it values working-class culture for the sake of rehabilitation, forgetting to describe the relations of domination which make it a dominated culture. This article will present the analyses from interviews with Paralympic and staff members showing that these two forms of ethnocentrism, namely miserabilism and populism, extracted from their original field of application to the working class, can also apply when considering the practices of Paralympic athletes and in particular their sponsoring.

Paralympic Miserabilism and Disabilities

At first glance, it might seem paradoxical to refer to miserabilism regarding Paralympic athletes. Indeed, the Paralympic Games are precisely the event that allows disabled people to demonstrate to the world that they are involved in high performance sport. However, Pappous et al. (2011) noted that many of the photographs published by the media during the Athens Paralympic Games represented Paralympic athletes in very passive poses while those used during the Olympic Games depicted Olympians in very active poses. However, the portrayal of Paralympic athletes in passive poses only reinforces the miserabilist vision that presents disabled people as weak and inactive individuals (Pappous et al., 2011).

Howe (2011) showed, however, that representations of Paralympic athletes in motionless poses are absent when it comes to Paralympic athletes with disabilities that involve the use of mobility technologies (chairs, prosthetics). After underlining the centrality of classification in Paralympic sport, he explained that classification is not politically or culturally neutral, but the product of a history that has favored athletes who rely on mobility technologies. Howe (2011) added that athletes who use these

mobility technologies are considered cyborg athletes representing the cutting edge of parasport. He explained that these Paralympic athletes are valued more than those who do not use these technologies. In this regard [Howe \(2011\)](#) pointed out that the further a Paralympic athlete's body is from the cyborg ideal, the more likely it is that a tragic rather than heroic vision of this athlete will develop. Based on Howe's reflections, we will ask ourselves whether Paralympic athletes who are furthest from the cyborg figure are also those most exposed to miserabilist representations. In order to answer this question, we need to define the symmetrical attitude of populism. As we will see, populism also proceeds from ableism ([Goodley, 2014](#)), but it consists in celebrating the heroism or even superhuman dimension of Paralympic athletes.

Cyborgs and Supercrips: two Populist Figures of Paralympic Athletes

Referring to [Charles \(1998\)](#), Howe explained that the excitement about cyborgs is based on a "*technocentric ideology*" ([Howe, 2011](#): p.875). However, he pointed out that the enhanced image reserved for Paralympic athletes identified as cyborgs can be problematic for disabled people who do not fit in this category. He added that the Paralympic Games risk becoming a technology show rather than a sport show, leaving behind athletes whose bodies are not suitable for their use and/or those who cannot access these performance enhancing technologies. Furthermore, [Purdue and Howe \(2013\)](#) stated that in some parasports that require advanced technology, such as wheelchair soccer, players do not meet the criteria for cyborg due to the "severity" of their disability. [Wolbring and Litke \(2012\)](#) also questioned the enthusiasm for these "cool" technologies: "*But what will this do to the self-consciousness, the self-esteem of disabled people who cannot have these 'cool' devices whether for monetary reasons or because no 'cool' device exists for their 'disability'?*" According to these authors ([Howe, 2011](#); [Wolbring & Litke, 2012](#)), technology empowers some disabled athletes while leaving the status of others at best unchanged and at worst a bit more liminal. Paralympic athletes perceived as cyborgs would thus be spared from a miserabilist media representation but the exaltation about their superhuman abilities would expose them more to a populist representation of their practice.

Concerning the media, [Pappous et al. \(2011\)](#) had already noted that, in the reporting of the Paralympic Games, there was an overrepresentation of athletes in wheelchairs and/or with prostheses and an underrepresentation of athletes with less technologized impairments. Other studies ([Brittain, 2016](#); [DePauw, 1997](#); [Thomas & Smith, 2003](#); [Hardin & Hardin, 2004](#); [McGillivray et al., 2021](#)) underline that the media staging of Paralympic athletes' bodies that invisibilizes impairments is often part of supercrip athlete narratives, i.e., narratives that present Paralympic athletes who are able to overcome their disability and achieve a feat that is seen as heroic by non-disabled people. Admittedly, a distinction must be made between the figure of the cyborg Paralympic athlete and that of the supercrip Paralympic athlete, since in cyborgs it is their superhuman dimension ([Howe, 2011](#)) that is celebrated, whereas in supercrip

athletes it is rather the heroic and successful use of their disabled bodies. However, in the same way as the media focus on cyborg Paralympic athletes, the focus on supercrip Paralympic athletes corresponds to a populist vision of disability because it extrapolates and aestheticizes the moral and physical capacities of Paralympic athletes. It is then often the theme of resilience through sport that is put forward, around a narrative that tells and glorifies the extraordinary heroic qualities of a Paralympic athlete as well as their very special feats beyond and in spite of their disability (Hodges et al., 2015). Numerous authors (Silva & Howe, 2012; Hodges et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2022; Wolbring, 2018) have uncovered the interpretive biases presented by such populist media storytelling. Drawing on examples from two European Paralympic awareness campaigns broadcast by mainstream media, Silva and Howe (2012) showed that by portraying Paralympic athletes as “great” or “incredible,” the responsibility for their success seems to lie exclusively with their individuality, without considering all the other factors that impact their success. Moreover, they explained that by conveying the idea that everything is possible thanks to individual effort and merit, social injustice and inequality of opportunity between the non-disabled people and the disabled people are invisibilized and ignored. Finally, Berger (2008), Silva and Howe (2012) pointed out that presenting Paralympic athletes as extraordinary human beings risks spreading the idea that only “great” people can succeed in parasport. They argued that such a message would undermine the potential for more diverse and realistic images of Paralympic athletes to motivate disabled people to participate in parasport.

For their part, Silva and Howe (2012) showed that social expectations towards disabled people are so low that any action on their part may elicit praise from non-disabled people. They state that what is deemed impossible for disabled people in sport is often based on distorted assumptions and is not a realistic assessment of disabled people’s abilities. This idea of “low expectations” discussed by Silva and Howe (2012) is actually not unlike what activist Stella Young (2012) called “*inspiration porn*.”

Inspiration porn: between populism and miserabilism

Stella Young (Young, 2012) referred to “*inspiration porn*” as the tendency of non-disabled people to be inspired by disabled people, based on their lesser deeds and actions considered exceptional given a disability situation that is itself supposedly tragic. This posture exceptionalizes and reifies those it claims to represent and takes the form of countless stories and images that can circulate, for example, on the Internet and in the print or audiovisual media. Martin (2019) reminded us that *inspiration porn* is particularly applicable to the field of parasport, and proposed a five-component model to facilitate its analysis (Martin, 2022). This model criticizes the erroneous idea of a supposedly tragic experience of disability. Indeed, Martin reaffirms the disability paradox that the assessment by disabled people of their quality of life is higher than the assessment by non-disabled people. Martin’s model of *inspiration porn* (2022) also invites the identification of the myth, among non-disabled people, that living with a disability necessarily requires enormous courage. Finally, another component of

Martin's model refers to the unwarranted praise that disabled people receive from non-disabled people. Based on Martin's model, we propose viewing inspiration porn as both a form of miserabilism and a form of populism. Indeed, while we see inspiration porn as a form of populism, because it means being inspired and enthusiastic about quite ordinary activities, we think it is fair to say that it also adopts a miserabilist logic, since it presupposes above all that the lives of these people are tedious, tragic and necessarily more miserable than those of non-disabled people. Thus, using the distinction between miserablism and populism will allow us to articulate the concepts of cyborg, supercrip and porn inspiration to highlight their complementarities and differences and to shed new light on Paralympic athletes' access to sponsors.

Visibility, Recognizability and Access to Sponsors

Finally, it is important to point out that in the scientific literature, the issues of the cyborg figure or the supercrip Paralympic athlete, inspiring non-disabled people, have not been analyzed directly in the close relationship they may have with sponsorship. As we have just seen, these figures are often treated from the perspective of the visibility of Paralympic athletes in the media, with a focus on the negative effects that these narratives of cyborg or supercrip Paralympic athletes may have on disabled people as a whole (Hodges et al., 2015).

While some authors such as Brittain (2016) suggested that there is a connection between supercrip narratives and sponsorship, it is always from the general perspective of funding the Paralympic Games. McGillivray, O'Donnell, McPherson, and Misener (2021), meanwhile, pointed out that supercrip discourse has become central to the business and marketing sector. Finally, Burton et al. (2021) analyzed how the Paralympic Games and Paralympic athletes have been portrayed by sponsors on social networks. However, to our knowledge, no study has yet been conducted on the importance and role of cyborg, supercrip, and/or inspiration porn discourses in Paralympic athletes' access to sponsorship. This is what we intend to do here by analyzing the way some Paralympic athletes or staff members establish links between obtaining sponsorships by Paralympic athletes and their presentation of themselves (Goffman, 1959) as cyborgs or inspirational supercrips. We will show that these discourses inform us about the intelligibility frameworks through which Paralympic athletes are recognized; this will lead us to question the recognizability (Butler, 2009) of Paralympic athletes. Indeed, if we consider, with Judith Butler, that the act of recognizing comes second in relation to what is recognizable, then we must shift the problem of recognition to that of recognizability. Now, the recognizable Paralympic athletes are precisely the cyborgs and supercrips that inspire non-disabled people and a fortiori sponsors. We will show that some Paralympic athletes are more willing than others to appear as cyborgs and supercrips, and are therefore more likely to be visible in the media and consequently sponsored, thereby creating inequalities in access to sponsors. We will see that some Paralympic athletes do not fit into the recognition frameworks and are exposed at best to a visibility that feeds condescending charitable attitudes, and at worst to a lasting

invisibility that excludes them from all sources of funding. In the last part, we will therefore question the ableist perception schemes that make the recognition of certain Paralympic athletes possible or impossible.

Methodology

The investigation presented here is part of a larger research project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) and entitled "PARAPERF: *Optimizing Paralympic Performance: From Identification to Medal Winning*". The objective of the PARAPERF project is to understand the specific issues of top-level Paralympic performance according to the performance trajectories, the sports equipment and the environment of Paralympic athletes. The methodology of this research has been approved by the ANR scientific committee.

This interview survey was conducted with French Paralympic athletes ($n = 15$) who were identified by their sports federation to compete for qualification at the Tokyo Games, and with actors ($n = 42$) who make up the staffs of these athletes (sports directors, coaches, physical and mental trainers, doctors, sports assistants, guides, family members). This work allowed us to cross-reference the views of all these actors on the various elements of the sports preparation of the 15 Paralympic athletes. The Paralympic athletes interviewed practiced table tennis, archery, shooting, fencing, athletics, cycling, swimming, wheelchair rugby, blind soccer, weightlifting or boccia. The sampling criterion for these configurations was the search for a maximum variation (Patton, 2002) concerning the discipline practiced, the type of disability of the athletes, their gender and their age.

A total of 57 semi-structured interviews, averaging 2 hours in length, were conducted by the first and third authors of the article between September 01, 2020 and July 31, 2021. Due to the health crisis related to Covid 19, most interviews were conducted via the Zoom video conferencing platform. With the informed consent of the participants, we recorded and then fully transcribed the interviews. In accordance with our commitments, the interviews were analyzed and we guarantee the anonymity of the participants in the presentation of the results.

The transcripts were then subjected to a theme analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2013) conducted in three stages. After an initial coding phase, a second phase of code re-organization was undertaken to identify major themes and sub-themes. Finally, a third stage of interpretation of these themes was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At all stages of the research, the team of four sociologists met to ensure the scientific rigor of the qualitative methodology used (Tracy, 2010). For this article, we will exclusively present the themes related to the financing of Paralympic performance, in particular the financing by sponsors.

Results and Discussion

Performance Level: An Important but Unnecessary Determinant for Obtaining Sponsors

Before presenting the analysis of the comments of the Paralympic athletes and staff members underlining the importance of their public image in accessing sponsors, it is important to specify that the Paralympic athletes interviewed all agreed that sports performance was an important condition for them to obtain sponsorship contracts. For example, Fredric (cyclist) explained that the objective is *“to achieve results at the [Paralympic] Games, and then to find other sponsors to be able to manage a little more”* because *“with results, it is easier to find sponsors.”* But if the Paralympic athletes interviewed affirmed that sporting performance facilitates access to sponsorship contracts, they also constantly indicated that the link between sponsors and sporting performance is not systematic and that other logics, some of them extra-sporting, must be considered. According to Stephan (swimmer), independently of sports performance, other criteria, more related to *“communication”* and self-image on *“social networks”*, would preside over obtaining sponsors.

Self-Image, Media, Social Networks and Paralympic Sponsorship

Other Paralympic athletes interviewed established a link between their media exposure and access to sponsors. Sebastian (wheelchair rugby) specified that it is essential to communicate with the media for the *“visibility”* of his discipline and because this media exposure can help him *“win one or two sponsors.”* John (athlete) made the same observation: *“I think that it is the media that highlight an athlete and, as a result, the sponsors follow”*. Stephan (swimmer) added: *“I’m lucky to be able to manage well on social networks to be more attractive than someone who doesn’t master [...] today, if you have more followers than others, although you may have done less stuff [in sports] than them, you can steal their place.”* That is why Stephan believes that Paralympic athletes today must *“learn to speak, communicate”* and *“be present on social networks”* because *“you need to perform, but you also need to sell yourself properly.”* He then took the example of a young Paralympic athlete who has never won a medal but who receives *“10 times more”* money from sponsors than another older multi-medal winning Paralympic athlete, simply because, according to him, *“in terms of communication, he is huge.”* It is interesting to note that for Stephan it is not the media (television, written press) that are held responsible for the image of Paralympic athletes, but the Paralympic athletes themselves.

Also, as we will now show, if some Paralympic athletes have become the creators and promoters of their own image on social networks, they do not seek to propose an image of themselves that would oppose the populist ones of supercrip or cyborg. On the contrary, they contribute to producing these images that continue to inspire sponsors. In his previous comments, Stephan suggested that companies are looking for an *“image”*

beyond sports results. We must now ask ourselves what this image is exactly; or to put it another way, in what way do Paralympic athletes think they have to sell themselves to be sponsored? This part will also be an opportunity to show that the self-image Stephan talked about and is very “*selling*” to sponsors has something to do with the figure of the supercrip presented above.

Miserabilism and Populism Through the Lens of Paralympic Sponsorship

John (athlete) stated that there are two categories of Paralympic athletes that are valued by sponsors. He specified that Paralympic athletes belonging to one or the other category are potentially more likely to be sponsored.

“I think there are two categories [...] In general, they are amputees who look (very) non-disabled [...] And even if it's a prosthesis, there is a little technology, it's beautiful, bionic. People can identify with these people. And then there is the one who is athletic, but who inspires some pity, a double amputee, a little guy. In this case, it will be more a sponsorship of the type, you know, we have to help him, because he is courageous.” (John)

The first category John alluded to, when mentioning “*amputees who look non-disabled*” and the “*bionic*” dimension of their prosthesis, refers to the figure of the “*cyborg*” athlete (Silva and Howe, 2012) and could be categorized as a populist representation.

The second category referred to by John, on the contrary, depicts a compassionate and devaluing image of Paralympic athletes. The latter are described only through the “*pity*” they are supposed to inspire. Here, we recognize what we called above a miserabilist representation of Paralympic athletes. As for the “*courage*” that would necessarily characterize these Paralympic athletes and justify a financial compensation, we can assimilate it to the supposedly exceptional, inspirational will of Paralympic athletes and to the rhetoric of inspiration porn (Martin, 2019; 2022). John’s comments have allowed us to identify some of the main attributes of Paralympic athletes that can inspire sponsors. Let us now look in more detail at how these taxonomies may be distinctive and how they may be perceived by Paralympic athletes.

Uninspiring Paralympic Athletes and Sponsors. Some of the Paralympic athletes interviewed reported numerous situations in which they were perceived and presented in a pitying, miserabilist perspective. Judith (markswoman) mentioned a press article that emphasized the most dramatic aspects of her life rather than her sporting career: “*I'm not a big fan of press articles [...] I have to be careful with journalists who like to tell stories [...], but I don't want them to change my story. My story is the way it is, I don't want them to change it to be more dramatic.*” In a similar approach, Bill, a member of the national weightlifting staff, insisted that the media should also show Paralympic athletes who are “*happy with their disability*” instead of offering miserabilist portraits that present them as necessarily unhappy. Roland, a member of the personal staff

(swimming), gave an account of the way Paralympic athletes are considered: *“Today, if you are disabled, well, congratulations, well, wow, you know.”* “Wow” expresses the tenderness and compassion that non-disabled people sometimes show towards certain Paralympic athletes. This attitude is reminiscent of the always catastrophic perceptions by non-disabled people of disabled people who appear to them as sources of inspiration (Young, 2012).

The interviews we conducted revealed that some disciplines are more exposed than others to miserabilism, in particular those like boccia where in certain categories the players have deficiencies affecting all four limbs that require the use of an electric wheelchair. Emily (member of the national boccia staff) explained: *“Boccia represents what you don’t necessarily want to see. I’m a little straightforward but that’s reality.”* In other words, what Emily meant is that the interest for a discipline is linked to *“what we want to see.”* But what would be pleasing to the eye would decline with the degree of disability of the practitioners. Howe (2011) has already shown that cerebral palsy athletes generally receive very little media coverage. The miserabilist view of boccia players, focusing on their physical disabilities, appears to be combined here with a strong disinterest in the discipline practiced. According to Ellen (boccia), the lack of interest for this type of discipline seems to extend to the sponsors who would finance them less, if at all. Ellen explained for example that she had prepared a file for a sponsorship contract which had been validated by the federation but which, finally, did not succeed with the company: *“It’s true that people, for boccia, it’s unfortunate but they don’t give a damn [...] every time I ask small companies, well either they don’t have the money or they are not interested in the sport [...] And when we contact big companies, it’s the same. Well, they are more interested in other sports. It’s true, that it’s, swimming, track-and-field... It’s a pity, it’s always more or less the same sports.”* The example of boccia is particularly interesting because it shows that not all Paralympic athletes are equally inspiring. Therefore, the concept of inspiration porn (Young, 2012) can no longer be applied in the same way to Paralympic athletes with significant disabilities whose sport is considered uninspiring. The case of boccia seems to suggest that the logic of inspiration porn is based on practices that non-disabled people themselves know/perform. Thus, it seems that if a practice, whether ordinary or sporting, is foreign to non-disabled people, it cannot constitute a credible medium of identification in their eyes, and is therefore uninspiring or unworthy of interest to them. It is interesting to note in this regard that, in her previous comment, Ellen presented *“swimming”* and *“track-and-field”* as disciplines that are more likely to be sponsored. However, these parasports have their equivalent among non-disabled people. Moreover, they convey an image of intense and heroic physical effort that requires sacrifice and surpassing oneself and fits the figure of the inspiring supercrip. As such, these parasports benefit from an identification potential for non-disabled people (Purdue & Howe, 2013; Depauw, 1997). Boccia, which requires ramps and an almost static wheelchair, cannot benefit from this identification. This sport is far removed from the high energy

expenditure disciplines with which Paralympic supercrip athletes are often associated (Silva and Howe, 2012).

Being and Knowing How to be an Inspiring Paralympic Athlete to Find a Sponsor. It is important to specify at this point that, in their presentation of themselves, the Paralympic athletes concerned by the supercrip image totally reject the miserabilist vision that pityingly puts them in an inferior category of unaccomplished athletes. Instead, they emphasize the high level of competition they face, the athletic excellence required in competition, and the intense and constant work they must do to achieve their athletic goals. For example, in the following comment, Julian (table tennis) wanted to appear above all as a hard-working high-level athlete who has worked hard, rather than as a “nice” “disabled” person who does “a little bit of sport.”

“If you want to get there, you do have to work, you know [...] we are far from leisure sport now. Now it’s really competitive, you have to perform well in all areas and physically too [...] Yeah, it’s no longer ‘yeah, they’re disabled, they’re nice, they do a little bit of sport... It’s... the high level.” (Julian).

In the course of the survey, other Paralympic athletes and staff members interviewed confirmed the existence of such representations. They reported that certain disability situations prevail in accessing sponsorship contracts. Bill, a member of the national weightlifting staff, explained that Paralympic athletes with certain types of disabilities are more valued and publicized than others and therefore have a better chance of accessing sponsors: *“In terms of media coverage of athletes, not all disabled athletes have the same media potential, solely because of their disability [...]. Most sponsorship contracts are offered first to tibial amputees, to amputees in general.”* Stephan (swimmer) also insisted on the “marketing” interest of some Paralympic athletes. He explained that a company sponsors him because *“he is someone [speaking of himself, Stephan] with a disability [...] who is preparing for the Paralympics and who has a story.”* Stephan concluded: *“They sell my story [...] I do conferences for them and [...] I don’t talk much about sport, I talk a lot about my story [...] In fact, they don’t really care about my results, it’s really the sacrifice I make every day that seems to interest them more.”* It is obvious here how sport is put in the background to the benefit of disability which, according to the logic of inspiration porn (Martin, 2019), becomes the only element of interest for sponsors. This Paralympic athlete insisted on the distinction between the “athlete” and “ [his] story”. Yet the term “story” is associated here with what he has “been through” and “how [he] deals with it every day.” In other words, it is used as a euphemism for the term disability. According to Stephan, it is therefore more the daily “sacrifice” and his “story” related to his disability, and not his sports practice itself, that interest and inspire the company that sponsors him. What pleases the sponsors and what they intend to sell is that Stephan can live with disabilities that he overcomes “every day” in order to achieve his sporting, professional and social goals.

The narrative of the story that the sponsors wish to sell fits in this case that of inspiration porn (Cottingham et al., 2015; Haller & Jeffrey, 2016; Martin, 2019). By explaining that it is “*the sacrifice*” he “*makes every day that they seem to be more interested in,*” Stephan suggested that he knows precisely what he needs to stage, in terms of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), to curry favor with sponsors. This figure of the inspirational Paralympic athlete can be seen here as one of the expressions, or one of the possible variations, of the populist perceptions of Paralympic athletes. It insists on the heroic overcoming of the Paralympic athlete (populism) with regard to their incapacities in daily life.

The previous examples have shown that the rationales that are put forward in accessing sponsors focus attention on the disability. Performance in a sporting activity in spite of the disability is supposed to inspire admiration (populism) among the sponsors. The sponsors’ money would therefore not reward the labor in their sports practice but their supposed “resilience” with regard to a disability necessarily perceived as tragic and unfortunate. This raises the question of the “*social significance of the money*” (Zelizer, 2005) paid by the sponsors. For Paralympic athletes, the question is whether sponsors give them financial support out of admiration for their athletic experience despite their disability, or whether sponsor funding rewards the everyday efforts they put in their quest for medals. The meaning given to the sponsorship money would thus reveal the frameworks through which Paralympic athletes are recognized.

Sponsorship and Recognizability of Paralympic Athletes

Consequently, our reflection conducted on the link between sponsors and the representations of Paralympic athletes leads us to question the recognizability (Butler, 2009) of Paralympic athletes. We have indeed observed in the preceding narratives that some Paralympic athletes criticize the normative frameworks through which they are recognized (by the media and by companies), because these frameworks exclude the least inspiring among them from access to sponsors. Furthermore, as noted earlier, these frameworks of perception would continue to give primacy to their experiences of disability when they are eager instead to be recognized for their athletic performance and the effort they put into preparing for it. For example, Patricia (table tennis) said that she would like to be recognized by her “*results rather than by [...] something else* [“*something else*” here refers to her disability]. With similar logic, Julian (table tennis) distinguished between “*notoriety*”, which he does not seek, and “*recognition*” of all his efforts, which he does want. Bill, a member of the national weightlifting staff, also said that “*the image that parasports send back*” is far from the “*professional aspect of the activity*” and that it is similar to a “*circus*” show, whereas the work and involvement of Paralympic athletes should be recognized. Steeve, a member of the national wheelchair rugby staff, would like the discipline he coaches to be recognized like any other non-disabled sport, regardless of disability: “*The objective is to reach the same level... to become a sport. Not a disability sport, not a parasport [...] but to become a sport like*

any other. To be at the same level as the others, so that we can benefit from the same things.” He rejected the miserabilist look that is given to Paralympic athletes and would like sponsors to recognize Paralympic athletes like any other high-level athletes and stop perceiving them as “*little disabled people*.” He said: “[sponsors] *don’t really understand the interest they would have in helping us, except for the fact that they say to themselves: ‘Well, it’s very good we helped little disabled people, they will be happy...’*” So that disability can no longer be used as a distinctive sign of identification or as an acceptable criterion in the awarding of sponsorship contracts, Steeve plead for disability to be recognized as the norm: “*Tomorrow [...] if I break my leg [...] if I walk around on crutches, what do I do? [...] we are all disabled people on probation... So why not consider disability as the norm?*” Steeve’s remark here is part of what Silva and Howe call the “*politics of difference*” (Silva and Howe, 2018: p. 406) that could be driven by national and international sports bodies and that would recognize not just parasports that are inspiring to non-disabled people, but all parasports on the basis of the single sports experience.

Conclusion

After presenting the links established by Paralympic athletes and staff members between obtaining sponsors and the figures of the cyborg or supercrip Paralympic athlete (Howe, 2011; McGillivray et al., 2021; Purdue & Howe, 2013), we have shown that not all Paralympic athletes can be associated with these inspiring populist figures. Indeed, it appears that some Paralympic athletes have impairments that do not fit the populist and ableist expectations met by cyborg and supercrip Paralympic athletes, on the other hand. We have thus observed that there are inequalities between Paralympic athletes in accessing sponsors according to the inspiration they arouse in non-disabled people. We have also analyzed the ableist dimension (Goodley, 2014) of the recognizability of Paralympic athletes by showing that the intelligibility frameworks through which these athletes are recognized by sponsors continue to emphasize disability as the central element from which their sporting experience and the inspiration it arouses are appreciated. However, we would like to mention two limitations to our survey which are probably also new avenues to explore in future work. On the one hand, we worked on the basis of statements made by actors in the Paralympic world about the supposed links between miserabilist or populist representations and Paralympic athletes’ access to sponsors. Consequently, we have never been able to confront these statements with an objective verification and measurement of these links. Therefore, it seems important in future studies to also include the people in charge of sponsoring Paralympic athletes. Furthermore, our data did not allow us to reflect on the gendered dimension of the representations of Paralympic athletes, nor on its importance in the attribution of sponsors. Several authors (Brooke, 2019; Richard & Andrieu, 2019; Toffoletti, 2018; Weaving & Samson, 2018) have already shown that cyborg and supercrip athletes are essentially heteronormative and ableist figures. Therefore, we will conclude our article by mentioning the scientific interest that could be provided by analyses that would

confront and articulate our own results with a gendered perspective of the Paralympic world. In this sense, it would be interesting to orient new investigations towards an intersectional perspective (Richard et al., 2023) in order to analyze the way gender and disability are articulated in the process of access to sponsorships for Paralympic athletes.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by a State grant, managed by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) under the program “Investissement d’Avenir” ANR-19-STHP-0005.

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Note

1. Throughout this article, we will refer to the exclusively private sources of funding (private for-profit companies) that Paralympic athletes can receive to support their Paralympic preparation.

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