

Research project and overview of the research plan:

In this project we will explore the views and perceptions of Paralympic athletes themselves on how certain representations make them feel, think or react and ask how sport and disability should be better represented at the Paralympic Games in order to provide a more positive representation of disability.

The core overarching aim of our study is in line with the European Disability Strategy and its key term "self-determination", which reflects the right of disabled people to have a say in how they would like to be represented. A number of studies have highlighted concerns about media coverage and the Paralympic Games. One of the most prominent authors in this field, Ian Brittain (2012), argues that in the early days of media representation of the Paralympic Games, disabled athletes were portrayed as people to be pitied rather than celebrated for their sporting achievements.

WP1 will take a participatory approach by considering the views of disabled athletes themselves on how they wish to be represented in the media. We will try to echo the call of disability rights activists for social scientists to involve them in their research, stating that 'there is nothing about us without us', arguing that people with disabilities know what is best for them (Charlton, 1998). Giving disabled athletes a voice "may mean not only having a real researcher and a researcher's voice in the text, but also letting research participants speak for themselves" (p. 123) (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba. 2011).

Gaps in the state of the art that will be addressed by this research project:

A). Participatory research: Most of the available literature is based on descriptive content analysis of newspapers and other mass media. There is little evidence of surveys or interview-based studies aimed at collecting and analysing the opinions of the athletes themselves. Little is known about how the media representation of the Paralympic Games is perceived by disabled athletes themselves and the potential consequences this might have on their feelings, thoughts and lives. Disability scholars have for many years advocated the idea of 'nothing about us without us' (Charlton, 2000), arguing that any policy relating to the disabled community should not be decided without the direct participation of disabled people (Lurie, 2017). This project is based on the idea of 'self-determination', which reflects the right of disabled people to have a say in how they would like to be represented. Thus the first WP will be dedicated to including the voice of disabled people themselves. Finally, this study will be the first major project focusing on media, disability sport and the Paralympics in Italy, ensuring that the EU's inclusive agenda on disability is implemented in this country and preparing the ground for future projects as the country moves closer to hosting the Milan-Cortina 2026 Paralympic Games.

B). Intersectional approach: This project aims to interview a homogenous number of male and female Paralympic athletes and will include specific questions addressing intersectionality (e.g. sexism and dysablism) in order to provide a comprehensive picture of intersectional discrimination against female athletes with disabilities in different types of disadvantageous conditions.

C). Need for social impact research on disability and communication: The third aim is to co-construct a creative research-based product with the main stakeholders of this project in the form of a "Massive Open Online Course" (MOOC) accessible worldwide, to promote change and change attitudes towards disability.

Aim: This research project, through an evidence-based, 3-step approach, will provide, in a timely manner, valuable educational and training resources on the promotion of non-discriminatory, inclusive and empowering images of disability aimed at: a) media professionals/journalists; b) Paralympic athletes; c) members of the disability community.