

## Physical Disability and Physical Activity Involvement Portrayal in the Media

Kannon Henry <sup>a</sup>, Rebecca Marsh <sup>a</sup>, Benjamin Seifert <sup>a</sup>, Katrina Taylor <sup>a</sup>, Colin G. Pennington <sup>b,\*</sup>



<sup>a</sup> Department of Sport Science, School of Kinesiology, Tarleton State University, Stephenville, Texas, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Health and Human Performance, York College, The City University of New York, Jamaica, Queens, New York, USA

\*Corresponding Author E-mail: [cpennington@tarleton.edu](mailto:cpennington@tarleton.edu)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34256/ijpefs2234>

Received: 17-07-2022; Revised: 18-09-2022; Accepted: 23-09-2022; Published: 27-09-2022

**Abstract:** Disability media studies articulates the formation of a new field of study, based in the rich traditions of media, cultural, and disability. Television, film, current periodicals, and other mass media are a part of our everyday lives. Attitudes regarding a variety of issues can be affected by these media, not the least of which are attitudes toward disabilities. Media is a significant part of contemporary society and culture and is subsequently crucial to our understanding of disability. The representation of disability in the media in the last ten years is pretty much the same as it has always been: clichéd, stereotyped, and archetypal. Media representation of and for the disabled has been recharged in recent years with the expansion of new media worldwide. Interactive digital communications [such as the Internet, new varieties of voice and text telephones, social media, and digital broadcasting] have created a need to explore the constructs of media and the media relationship with disability. To explore this topic, we asked the same questions posed by scholars, how exactly does the media interact with disability and vice versa? Does the media adequately reflect the lives of people with disabilities?

**Keywords:** Amputation, Paralympics, CTE, Social Media, Vision Impairment, Cyberbullying, Representation

### About the Authors



**Colin G. Pennington (PhD)** is an Assistant Professor of Kinesiology at Tarleton State University where he works with Exercise and Sport Study majors, and carries out research on physical education teacher effectiveness and other pedagogical and

health-related applications of the kinesiology sub-disciplines. His interests and research focus on teacher socialization, physical education teacher training, character development programs within physical education and sport, and health and wellness.

### 1. The Paralympic Games: An Introduction

Media plays a large role in how society views elite athletes who participate in sports who also have a disability. Through the use of television, social media,

and newspaper articles, perceptions and attitudes can be greatly affected. To be a part of the Paralympic Games, one must meet the impairment eligibility which can include physical or intellectual disability. Within the Paralympic Games, male elite athletes who also have a disability are shown in the media and gain more coverage than female elite athletes with disabilities [1-6]. Also, another article states, "when the Paralympic Games began, the majority of athletes were injured male soldiers and wheelchair sports...who tend to be young, high-risk-taking men" [6]. This could potentially [hopefully] change within coming years due to the change of societal attitudes towards gender equality. Additionally, the media tends to cover able-bodied elite athletes over ones that have a disability or use the term "supercrip" to describe the athletes that have a disability. On the contrary though, the media coverage for the Paralympic Games is growing significantly [7]. Over 20 million more viewers from the games in 2004 to 2016 [7]. While media coverage is still needing to improve, there has been a shift in attitudes towards broadcasting time for the Paralympic Games and the amount of coverage the media covers.

## 2. Amputation and the Media

One physical disability that is affected by the media is amputation disabilities. These disabilities can be congenital or acquired, but both can be positively or negatively affected by the media. With media being a large aspect of today's society, it plays a large role in how the world views people with amputations. Mainstream media has three approaches to represent this disability, which is using "supercrrips", viewing them as disadvantaged, or even viewing them as ill victims. Media has on occasion portrayed individuals with amputations to be feared and villain-like such as Hook from Peter Pan [8]. Because of this, others may view individuals with amputations in a negative way or associate them with evil and fear. Viewing amputees with the "supercrip" ideology is a better perspective, but individuals react to the concept of "supercrip" both positively and negatively. When watching the Paralympic Games, some individuals may be in awe of Paralympic Participants' capabilities despite their disabilities, or some may view it as unrealistic goals and feel insecure about their own abilities [8]. The latter two types of individuals are more stereotypical and negative for people with amputations and cause them to feel insecure or helpless with their disability. Through research, there have been findings that using hashtags when posting to Instagram, a social media platform, creates communities within the hashtag name and everyone that uses it in their posts. Therefore, people with amputations create communities with individuals that have similarities of having an amputation. This use of social media can create communities for people to have if they need others that understand their difficulties that they face, but also bring awareness and normalize the physical disability of amputation. Three resources which elaborate on how physical activity and inclusion can be improved with individuals with amputation are [9-11].

## 3. Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy and the Media

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) is a disease of the brain found mostly in people who have repetitive head impacts. Athletes such as boxers, football players, and hockey numbers are higher because these sports are all involving high contact [12]. Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy affects the brain by causing memory loss, confusion, impaired judgement, aggression, and many other harmful things. With CTE becoming more popular in sports, the media has begun to show more attention to this disease – a

major movie was even released recently discussing the National Football League (NFL) and the link of concussions to CTE starring movie star Will Smith (see *Concussion*, 2015). Sport talk shows have discussed how CTE can affect retired players and have made the youth more cautious about contact sports. Because of the rise of CTE in the media the NFL started to try to make the game safer by changing the rules of the game, making the gear worn more protective by doing this the numbers of CTE victims and players with concussions started to gradually decrease.

## 4. Vision Impairment and the Media

The definition for blindness is the state of condition of being unable to see because of injury, disease, or a congenital condition. Trischa Zorn, who was born blind, is one of the most decorated Paralympians of all time. Trischa has won 55 medals throughout her swimming career and is one of the most popular for her success [13]. Because of Trischa's impact on the sports world and her marketability, there has been a positive effect in the media. When the media covers Trischa's story in an inspiring way - because of what she has overcome to become so accomplished – the world of adapted sport is brought to the attention of individuals like her. Swimming fans across the world know about Trischa, but even people who may not be interested in sports can be inspired by her. A resource which elaborates on how physical activity and inclusion can be improved with individuals with vision impairment is [14].

## 5. Social Media

People living with disabilities can use their social media platform to bring awareness to their particular disabilities and their own personal issues that they deal with. There are instances of individuals with disability using Twitter for positive outreach and exchanges. One individual, Mac, has been partially deaf since the age of three. Mac has a following of thousands of people on Twitter, and uses his kind ways to bring happiness to people – thus promoting positive and a positive image of deafness and disability in general. Another example of is of a blind film critic, Tommy Edison. Edison uses social media to educate viewers about blindness. Some of the topics Edison shows is how to use an ATM or how to cross the street [15]. Because of what Edison and my Mac are doing, social media can be helpful when used to promote inclusion, acceptance, education, and compassion. A

resource which elaborates on how physical activity and inclusion can be improved with individuals with deafness is [11].

## 6. Cyberbullying

Technology has grown tremendously within the last decade and the use of social media to connect with others has become very common. Cyberbullying can be anonymous, can be a continuous attack since it is on the web for all to see, limits contact between bully and victim, and can create major insecurities for the victim [16]. People of a higher vulnerability are at a greater risk of cyberbullying than the general population. Specifically, people that have Intellectual Disorder or Autism Spectrum Disorder/Asperger Syndrome are more vulnerable because they have potentially limited communication and social skills. Because of the potentially limited skills, they can have difficulties analyzing social interactions and not fully comprehending the information being put online [16]. While people with Asperger Disorder and Intellectual Disability are less likely to engage in frequent, robust social interactions, they are still cyberbullied, the biggest way being receiving verbal calls or exclusion from social opportunities. The topic of cyberbullying is a growing subject to be researched and have data on, but people with disabilities are a popular target. A resource which elaborates on how physical activity and inclusion can be improved with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder is [17].

Most recently with COVID-19 the online world has grown to an everyday need across the board for education within all age groups. Scholar, Manganello detailed the experiences of educating using online platforms – for instance, playing online video games where individuals could interact with others [18]. As such, participants have developed additional social and conversation skills [18]. There are many unexpected pros and cons to this new adaptation on online learning. In today's generation it supports young individuals' interest in learning skills and hobbies they most commonly would not in a regular household or class setting. With every rise, there is a fall in which children have a hard time balancing both screen time and everyday life. Manganello expressed the more time participants gets on screens, the harder it is for them to regulate getting off of screens, leading to more behavior issues [18]. This can add to the stress already present in the home during an already difficult time [18]. It can be more difficult with a child with a disability, such as seeing the lack of social distancing,

eye strain, aggravation with one outlet but not the others. Many families have had opportunities for telehealth therapies making them easier to access or learning opportunities that would not have been previously available, while others have children who have regressed due to a lack of services provided while remote learning [18]. However, with COVID and the new adaptation of extended screen time there is still a need to conduct research that explores the nuances of screen time and media use for youth with a range of diagnoses and disabilities, such as anxiety, epilepsy, and vision or hearing loss. A resource which elaborates on how physical activity and inclusion can be improved with individuals with epilepsy is [19].

## 7. Representation

When considering the realities of life with a disability, the public commonly misses key components of everyday life, when they observe disability exclusively through a screen [social media, television, movies, etcetera]. A disability perspective is about decentering the physically and cognitively "normal" character, the "normal" viewer, the "normal" producer, and so on; this has profound consequences for the study of media texts, industrial practices, social relations, media policies, modes of reception, and the design of technologies and spaces [20]. The term "disability" is commonly associated with a medical impairment. A disability can also be the environment that we have established as a common figure or way of life. Disability is relevant to whatever interests us as scholars. It will not be central to everything, but like race, class, and gender, it will never be far away: ideas about disability and able-bodiedness routinely and often invisibly inform characterization and narrative, assumptions about audiences, aesthetics, policies, technologies, and so on.

It is important that all groups of people be represented in the media and that individuals be able to recognize themselves in the media. Media is growing, now there is more than just newspaper; TV coverage and social media reach a greater audience than has ever been reached before. People with disabilities are not always accurately portrayed in the media. Accurate and positive representations of people with disabilities is important not only for the disabled community, but for the able-bodied community to better understand the life of peoples with disabilities. In Self-representations on social media. Reproducing and challenging discourses on disability, there is a call for a social media platform that allows people with

disabilities to speak out about their own personal experiences. Most of the time when disabilities are addressed on a social media platform, it is by an able-bodied person [21]. While there are good intentions, the message would come across more accurately by a person who has a disability. These posts about disability awareness posted by able bodied people are mostly interacted with by people with disabilities [21]. These posts offered a safe place for individuals to share their experiences. The comment section also offers support for this community; this is a tool that is special to social media and allows these people to make connections. Posts about disabilities where individuals can share their background are great because they raise awareness, break stereotypes, and start discussion [21].

Accurate representations of people with disabilities are pushing to shift digital culture into changing expectations on what is considered normal [22]. Representing people with disabilities in the media causes a disturbance in society, disabilities are not considered normal; when it is hidden, people do not have to think or confront the idea [22]. People with disabilities should be represented in an accurate, positive manner in order to educate and raise awareness to people who are not affected. For society to recognize disabilities as normal, people with disabilities should share their story and experiences. Giving this community a voice and accurate representation, will change the societal expectation of normal.

## 8. Discussion and Conclusion

There can be hope for change. Social media offers for participation from all groups of people and allows these people to interact and learn from each other. With the evolution of technology, there have been websites specifically designed for people with disability to interact [23]. These social media networks are not as widespread as other social media networks but are very beneficial because they allow the individuals to make connections and friendships while reinforcing social constructs such as sharing life experiences, empathy and reciprocity [23]. The dilemma is most people with intellectual disability do not have access to the internet, it was found that only 6% of people with intellectual disability use the internet regularly. The large network of social media offers opportunities for the younger generation with disability greater opportunities for inclusion [23]. Often, the natural instinct when seeing someone with a

disability is to look or turn away. Society has the narrative that disabilities are not normal. With recent campaigns to raise awareness to disabilities, the "boundary" of normal is being pushed.

Additionally, there is a need for educational institutions to consider social media-enriched learning environments. By default, designers and developers of virtual learning environments tend to design for learners without disabilities. The consequences for learners with disabilities are enormous. The challenges that learners with disabilities face when interacting with learning systems is present and stronger than ever [24]. With the change we have faced in online education, the rise of cyber and media disability is increasingly growing every day.

## References

- [1] E. Ellcessor, B. Kirkpatrick, (2017) *Disability media studies*, New York University Press, New York.
- [2] T. R. Elliott, E. K. Byrd, (1982) *Media and disability*, *Rehabilitation literature*, 43 (11-12) 348-355.
- [3] K. Ellis, G. Goggin, *Disability Media Participation: Opportunities, Obstacles and Politics*, *Media International Australia*, 154 (1) (2015). [\[DOI\]](#)
- [4] P. Darke, *The Changing Face of Representation of Disability in Media*, *Disabling Barriers-Enabling environments*, 12 (2004) 100-105.
- [5] G. Goggin, G. Newell, C. Newell, (2003) *Digital Disability: The Social Construction of Disability in New Media*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- [6] L. Rees, P. Robinson, N. Shields, *Media portrayal of elite athletes with disability - a systematic review*, *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 41 (4) (2019) 374-381. [\[DOI\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- [7] O. Kolotouchkina, C. Llorente-Barroso, M. L. García-Guardia, J. Pavón, *Disability, Sport, and Television: Media Visibility and Representation of Paralympic Games in News Programs*, *Sustainability*, 13 (1) (2021) 256. [\[DOI\]](#)
- [8] F. R. Mitchell, S. Santarossa, I. L. Ramawickrama, E. F. Rankin, J. A. Yaciuk, E. R. McMahon, P. M. van Wyk, *An evaluation of social media images portrayal of disability discourse: #amputeefitness*, *European Journal*

- of Adapted Physical Activity, 12 (2) (2019) 1–15. [DOI]
- [9] P. Jackson, C. G. Pennington, Kickball for Students with an Amputation, *Curriculum and Teaching Methodology*, 4 (2021) 50–54. [DOI]
- [10] C. Kelly, C. G. Pennington, Lower-Limb Amputees in Olympic Weightlifting, *International Journal of Physical Education, Fitness and Sports*, 10 (2) (2021) 64–68. [DOI]
- [11] C. G. Pennington, J. Costine, M. Dunbar, R. Jennings, (2021) Deafness and Hard of Hearing: Adapting Sport and Physical Activity, 9th International Conference on Sport Sciences Research and Technology Support.
- [12] R. Patrick, (2016) Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), Cure PSP Unlocking the Secrets of Brain Disease. <https://www.psp.org/iwanttolearn/prime-of-life-brain-disease/cte/>
- [13] K. Price, (2020) Swimmer Trischa Zorn's Paralympic legacy goes beyond her staggering 55-medal haul, United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee, United States. <https://www.teamusa.org/News/2020/October/26/Swimmer-Trischa-Zorns-Paralympic-Legacy-Goes-Beyond-Her-Staggering-Medal-Haul>
- [14] C. G. Pennington, L. W. Pennington, Enhancing Physical Education for Students with Vision Impairment and Preventing Retinal Detachment, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 91 (3) (2020a) 53-54. [DOI]
- [15] T. Edison, (2015) How Social Media is Promoting Disability Awareness, The Chicago Lighthouse, United States. <https://chicagolighthouse.org/sandys-view/social-media-disability-awareness/>
- [16] O. B. Iglesias, L. E. G. Sánchez, M. Á. A. Rodríguez, Do young people with Asperger syndrome or intellectual disability use social media and are they cyberbullied or cyberbullies in the same way as their peers?, *Psicothema*, 31 (1) (2019) 30–37. [DOI]
- [17] V. Gordon, C. G. Pennington, Tips for Including Individuals with Autism in Physical Education, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 93 (1) (2022) 58-60. [DOI]
- [18] J. A. Manganello, Media use for children with disabilities in the United States during COVID-19, *Journal of Children and Media*, 15 (2021) 29-32. [DOI]
- [19] C. G. Pennington, L. W. Pennington, Inclusive Physical Activity and Physical Education for Students with Epilepsy, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*. 91 (2) (2020b) 52-53. [DOI]
- [20] E. Ellcessor, B. Kirkpatrick, Studying Disability for a Better Cinema and Media Studies, *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 58 (4) (2019) 139-144. [DOI]
- [21] C. Cocq, K. Ljuslinder, Self-representations on social media, Reproducing and challenging discourses on disability, *Alter*, 14 (2) (2020) 71-84. [DOI]
- [22] T. Basselin, Imagining Anew: Positive Representations of Disability in Recent Media, *Journal of Disability and Religion*, 24 (4) (2020) 445-452. [DOI]
- [23] P. Jones, R. Forrester-Jones, Valuing e-inclusion: Social media and the social networks of adolescents with intellectual disability, *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, (2018). [DOI] [PubMed]
- [24] C. G. Pennington, K. Sentell, J. Pennington, C. Bevins, C. Grudza, N. Perez, T. Mathews, (2021) How Prosthesis Enables the Inclusion of Amputees in Physical Activity and Sport, 9th International Conference on Sport Sciences Research and Technology Support.

### Acknowledgements

None

### Funding Information

No funding was provided for this study.

### Ethics Approval

Not Required

### Conflict of interest

No conflicts were reported by the authors.

### Does this article screened for similarity?

Yes

### About the License

© The Author(s) 2022. The text of this article is open access and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License