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Showcasing strengths on a world-class stage: Paralympics and the transformation of attitudes toward intellectual and developmental disability

Kelly Carr

University of Windsor, carrk@uwindsor.ca

Sean Horton

Department of Kinesiology, University of Windsor, Windsor, ON

Patricia Weir

University of Windsor

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Showcasing strengths on a world-class stage: Paralympics and the transformation of attitudes toward intellectual and developmental disability

Media portrayals of people with disability have historically subscribed to a deficits-based image, where people with impairment are viewed as having a ‘problem’ that requires ‘fixing’. As a result, these common media portrayals of individuals with impairment have the potential to (re)produce negative attitudes toward disability. Since media representations are often the main source of ‘contact’ between people with disability and typically developing individuals, such portrayals have been identified as a primary means for shaping attitudes towards disability. Thus, reframing media to expose viewers to people with disability showcasing their strengths has emerged as a strategy for improving disability-related attitudes. One form of strengths-based media content identified to support positive attitudes toward people with impairment is disability sport. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of viewing Paralympic media coverage on explicit attitudes toward people with disability.

University students (N = 135) were randomly assigned to one of three participant groups where they viewed 12 days of either (1) Paralympic, (2) Olympic, or (3) no media coverage. All participants completed the Attitudes to Disability Scale pre- and post-intervention. Results indicated no difference in attitude change between the participant groups following intervention completion. Findings from this study support previous work that has questioned the ability of the Paralympic Games to create widespread alterations to the perception of disability, or produced mixed results regarding the efficacy of the Games to change attitudes toward disability.