

# “I bow down in awe of them...”

## Sports awards for Paralympic athletes and Olympic athletes

**Marte Bentzen & Kristin Vindhol Evensen**

Department of Teacher Education and Outdoor Studies,  
Norwegian School of Sport Sciences  
Author contact <marteb@nih.no>

### **Abstract**

Paralympic athletes receive less media attention than Olympic athletes. Further, Olympic athletes are honoured for athletic achievements, whereas Paralympic athletes have been described as victims, suffering or heroic. Following researchers who have approached normativity and compulsory able-bodiedness in the light of hegemony and sub-hegemony, the current study explores whether sports media are sluggish when presenting athletes with disabilities, or if the picture is a more nuanced one. The context studied was the Norwegian Sports Awards (2001–2018). All introductions to the awards of the following categories were transcribed: Best male athlete, best female athlete, best Paralympian (2002–2012)/best male Paralympian and best female Paralympian (2013–2018). A six-step reflexive inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The results indicated that the introduction of elite athletes with disabilities had some prominent hallmarks. Athletes with disabilities (‘they’) are different from those living without disabilities (‘us’). Athletes with disabilities are inspiring. Achievements of athletes with disabilities are placed in the shade, while disabilities are placed to the fore. An overall hegemony shows when best male and best female athlete are introduced: Female athletes are, to a large degree, described as developing and joked about in sexual manners, whereas male athletes are world-leading. This study provides the opportunity to learn from examples that balance the recognition of elite athletes with disabilities experiencing challenges in daily living with recognition of their athletic achievements. Thus, we suggest that this study adds nuance to the previous research within this context.

*Key words:* parasports; paralympic athletes; media portrayal; crip theory; ability

Glamorous sports awards that include athletes with disabilities are common arrangements in several countries in the western world. In Britain, more than 700 members of the Sports Journalists' Association vote for their favourite athletes, and the winners are presented in a show funded by the National Lottery. In the United States, 3.9 million viewers watched the Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly in 2018. In Norway, the sports awards celebrate the previous year's athletic achievements in a live TV show. Athletes and their support networks receive prizes in categories such as *name of the year*, *coach of the year*, *best male/female athlete of the year* and *best male/female with disability athlete of the year*. 1,047,000 (20 % of population) viewers watched the Norwegian sports awards in 2016 (NRK.no, 2017a), and in recent years television ratings counted approximately 1,000,000 viewers (NRK.no, 2017b). The show provides an important representation of the achievements of elite athletes with disabilities, communicated broadly to those of the Norwegian population who are interested in sports.

Martin (2018) points out that 'the Paralympics are the largest sporting event in the world after the Olympics', yet 'they receive limited and mixed (...) media coverage' (p. 69). Even though there has been an increase in the coverage of Paralympic events between 1998 and 2012, there are still significant differences in the number of presentations regarding Olympic versus Paralympic games (Kim, Lee & Oh, 2017). This said, different countries pay different attention to Olympic and Paralympic events through media representations. The NBC sports channel in the United States broadcast four hours of Paralympic highlights during the London Paralympics in 2012. Channel 4 in the United Kingdom broadcasted 400 hours, of which 150 hours were live at prime time (Kim et al., 2017). Not only have Paralympic athletes received limited media coverage compared to Olympic athletes, but media portrayals also tend to present athletes with disabilities in a trivialised manner, describing them as victimised, suffering or heroic, and presenting their disability as being of greater interest than their athletic capabilities (Martin, 2018; Misener, McPherson, McGillivray & Legg, 2019). Hargreaves and Hardin (2009) add gender to Martin's analysis, describing how female wheelchair athletes experience the media's lack of representation and stereotyped presentation of women in sports in general, and women with disabilities in particular.

Emphasis on bodies as able or disable confirms the able body as the natural background, against which the body with disabilities appears.

Hegemonic structures are not limited to the relationship between sports and disability sports. Gender, nationalism, demography and ableism appear as hegemonic and sub-hegemonic structures that prevail in research investigating disability and athletic achievements (Rees, Robinson & Shields, 2017). Apelmo (2017) and Martin (2018) point out that male athletes with disabilities feature to a larger extent than female athletes with disabilities. Hardin and Hardin (2005) noted that 80% of the 2,141 pictures of persons in the disability sports publication 'Sports 'n' Spokes' were pictures of males. The media also tend to be eager to make the impairments of international athletes more evident in photographs than the impairments of athletes residing in the media's country of origin (Bruce, 2014). In addition, athletes with intellectual disabilities tend to be less welcome in elite sports by athletes with sensory or physical disabilities (Apelmo, 2017).

Media coverage of the Paralympic games, as well as the public and the Paralympic movement itself value some bodies more than others. Bodies with disabilities that can be compensated for by using highly technological assistive aids or prostheses are more celebrated than are bodies with invisible impairments, like neuro-muscular conditions (Howe & Silva, 2017). Thus, the body without disabilities seems hierarchically superior to the body with disabilities, male superior to female, national superior to international, physical/sensory disabilities superior to intellectual disabilities, and the cyborgified body superior to the body with invisible disabilities.

Media coverage also presents disability in a social-constructivist perspective. For example, Blauwet and Willick (2012) discuss whether Paralympics' focus on integration, equal opportunities and accessibility of built environments serves as a catalyst for disability rights. In addition, Townsend, Huntley, Cushion and Fitzgerald (2018) discuss whether disability sports maximise symbolic capital where coaches are socialised into a culture of ableism, performance focus and normativity from a medical perspective. Further, Grue (2016) claims that a supercrip-perspective, which has gained attention in disability sports, is a problematic perspective. In a supercrip-perspective, representations of athletes with disabilities enhance triumph over disability through compensatory efforts, willpower and compensative technology. This is done in an attempt to dismantle negative representations of disability, yet enhances an understanding of disability as a negative trait that should be wiped out. Thus, the supercrip perspective also has connotations

of inspirational porn, a concept describing persons with disabilities as mascots, who, when they move their bodies with disabilities, function as inspiration for those without a disability (Young, 2014; Grue, 2016; Martin, 2019)

Silva and Howe (2012) adopt a social-constructivist approach when they take the supercrip perspective into critical consideration. They provide a critical overview of how supercrip narratives describe Paralympic athletes through iconography, language and images. Cherney, Lindemann and Hardin (2016) continue the critical work on disability discourse of Blauwet and Willick (2012). They state that disability metaphors and stereotypes, public controversy and disability laws should be considered in future research that applies feminist, queer and critical race theory to studies on disability and sports. As such, hierarchies regarding gender, sex, sexual orientation, race and disability seem to be found in binary categories, while they also exist in qualitative representations through the language used. Thus, some states of being are communicated as a reflection of normality, while others are deviations from normality.

Townsend, Huntley, Cushion and Fitzgerald (2018) point out that disability sports are framed by binary, dualistic language such as ability–disability, elite sports–disability sports and empowerment–disempowerment. Such binaries are also found when the jury of the Norwegian Sports Awards announce which athletes are to win which prizes based on binary distinctions, where female is divided from male, and ability from disability, both categorically and linguistically. This can be compared to how disability linguistically diverges from ability by the negatively toned prefix *dis-*. Uri (2018) states that in linguistics, male language is what is unmarked and neutral, and thus, language expressed by and about women deviates from the preferred norm. In the world of sports, Apeldoorn (2017, p. 1) describes how sports movements are stuck in an approach where men and women are ‘two separate, homogeneous groups’, where female sports are hindered ‘by the sluggishness of the media’. We understand Apeldoorn’s description of media sluggishness as the comfort created when the media refuses to question if Paralympic athletes are beyond othering or refuses to question the comforting mirage of the supercrip striving towards normality. Apeldoorn (2017) describes how disability makes normativity of the body without disability visible and uses this as a point of departure to discuss how bodies with disabilities are useful as a contrast when media puts the body without disability in its place in the tacit background.

## Disability in a world of compulsory able-bodiedness – the crip theory approach

Critical disability scholars have investigated hegemonies and sub-hegemonies, for example: Shildrick (1994) on feminism and disability; McRuer (2006) on queerness and disability; Campbell (2008, 2012) on race and disability; Goodley (2013) on body and disability; and McGillivray, O'Donnell, McPherson and Misener (2019) on triumph over adversity and disability. Critical approaches in disability sports research are also found in Peers (2012) who provides discourse analyses of texts describing Paralympic history; in Apeldoorn (2017) who investigates intersectionality with female gender in disability sports; in Rees, Robinson and Shields (2017) who describe media portrayals of disability and sport; and in Irish, Cavallerio and McDonald (2018) who describe possibilities and pitfalls when disability, sports and social relations meet. In the following paragraphs, we continue the investigation of hegemonies and sub-hegemonies when we specifically describe compulsory able-bodiedness as developed in crip theory. Crip theory questions how and why bodies with disabilities are constructed and naturalised, how bodies with disabilities fit into cultural contexts, and further, how the assumed superiority of the able body can be challenged and changed (McRuer, 2006). Compulsory able-bodiedness is the backdrop against which the achievements of so-called athletes with disabilities stand out. Against compulsory able-bodiedness, the achievements of athletes with disabilities are highlighted in a continuum between an accreditation of fully worthy performance and accreditation of disability as a negative trait that should be overcome. When attention focuses too heavily on disability as a negative trait, athletes with disabilities are presented as representatives of a group confirming the able-bodiedness of the able-bodied other. Ahmed (2004) claims that white, heterosexual and able-bodied humans move around without friction because the world has already shaped values connected to whiteness, heterosexuality and ability. When humans resist or fail to fit into this world, a disequilibrium occurs and is acted upon by the surroundings in a spectrum that allows or disallows deviations to unfold in their very being. Thus, systems (re)produce deviations, or systems extend concepts of normality for those with differences to find their place.

The able body expresses its hegemonic status through able-bodiedness because it 'still largely masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order

of things' (McRuer, 2006, p. 1). Yet, McRuer points out that there has been a shift in our opportunities to question non-identities:

... the relatively extended period, however, during which heterosexuality and able-bodiedness were wedded but invisible (and in need of embodied, visible, pathologised and policed homosexuality and disability) eventually gave way to our own period, in which both dominant identities and nonpathological, marginal identities are more visible and even at times spectacular (2006, p. 2).

Questioning binary and hegemonic understanding of the human body could lead to a presentation of athletes with disabilities on a continuum. This continuum is created between ability when fulfilling personal potentials and disability when presented as living a continuous struggle with everyday life obstacles in the context of elite sports. Moving along such a continuum implies a tension between disability as pride and disability as striving towards ability (Haslett, Choi & Smith, 2020). When hegemonic structures are accepted as natural, undebated and unremarkable, disability stands out as deviant in a world of able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006). Such reproductions of truths are what Coakley (2008, cited in Martin, 2018) refers to as the sociological phenomenon of 'outposts in our head', meaning that people internalise hegemonic structures in ways that keep them from considering a critical perspective towards the phenomenon in question. Thus, the supercrip identity, where a person with a disability is portrayed 'as living a normal existence as a result of overcoming or defeating their disability via heroic efforts' (Martin, 2018, p. 141), makes the person appear empowering and inspirational to others through the apparent obligatory striving for the natural, undebated and unremarkable state of able-bodiedness.

If something deviates from a narrow understanding of normality, those considering themselves to be 'normal' have their identity confirmed by the deviation of the other (Ahmed, 2004, 2006; Apelmo, 2017). In Ahmed's words, such attributes are comfortable, yet comfortable in a doubtful way, 'but comfort it remains, and comfort is very hard to notice when one experiences it' (Ahmed 2004, p. 147). Elaborating on how the discomfort of one may be the comfort of another, she writes:

To be black or not white in 'the white world' is to turn back towards oneself, to become an object, which means not only being extended by the contours of the world, but being diminished as an effect of the bodily extensions of others (Ahmed, 2006, p. 139).

Where studies have approached sex, gender and sexuality as possible proud markers of identities, McRuer (2006) adds disability to the list. Addressing the unyielding resistance of accepting able-bodiedness as compulsory and undebated, McRuer (2006, p. 31) states that ‘crip theory might function – like the term “queer” itself – oppositionally and relationally but not necessarily substantively, not as a positivity but as a positionality, not as a thing, but as resistance to the norm’. Thus, for analytical and intellectual purposes, McRuer turns disabled-bodiedness upside down and makes it a positive identity.

Attending to compulsory able-bodiedness implies casting a critical gaze towards a continuous, mandatory effort towards normality. Still, because of the long traditions of binary thinking, moving towards a wider understanding of normality is not as simple as it might seem in an academic text. McRuer (2006, p. 7) describes the challenging lack of middle ground between normalcy and deviation when he cites Michael Warner (1993):

Nearly everyone wants to be normal. And who can blame them if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn't seem to be a choice at all.

To follow in the footsteps of researchers who have approached normativity and compulsory able-bodiedness in the light of hegemony and sub-hegemony, we explore whether Norwegian sports media, represented by the Norwegian Sports Awards, are *sluggish* when presenting achievements of elite athletes with disabilities, or if the picture is a more nuanced one.

## Method

### *Context*

The Norwegian Sports Award (Idrettsgallaen/The Sports Gala) is an annual TV show that retrospectively reviews and honours the past year's elite achievements in Norwegian sports. It is organised jointly by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF), with the National Lottery as the main sponsor. The first Sports Award was broadcast in Norway in 2001. During the first years of the Sports Award, different categories for nominations were used, tested and changed,

including concentration; strength, speed and leaping power; endurance; and newcomer of the year. In 2001, the Award contained no category for Paralympic athletes. In 2002, an award for the best Paralympic athlete was handed out, but this was a non-gendered award that included both female and male athletes. From the year 2007, the categories for nominations have been relatively stable: *name of the year*, *coach of the year*, *best female athlete*, *best male athlete*, *best Paralympic athlete*, *best team player of the year* and *award's prize of honour*. From 2013 on, Paralympic athletes were presented as gendered through the categories *best female Paralympic athlete* and *best male Paralympic athlete*.

### *Data collection*

The data collection included borrowing digital videos of all the Sports Awards from the National Library of Norway. The researchers reviewed all the digital videos and identified those of interest for the current study: *best Paralympic athlete* (from 2002 to 2012), and *best female Paralympic athlete* and *best male Paralympic athlete* (from 2013 to 2019). It should be noted that there was no Sports Award in 2005. Because the research question asks how achievements of Paralympic athletes are portrayed, it was also of interest to look at the portrayal of the achievements of elite athletes without disabilities. The contrast between the categories of disability and ability offers the opportunity to more clearly address the way disabilities are positioned in social spaces (Townsend et al., 2018).

Awards for best male and best female athletes were not presented until 2007, so the categories of *best female athlete* and *best male athlete* were only included from 2007 to 2019. During the data collection, both researchers watched all sections of the Sports Awards that were of interest for the current study together on video. Thereafter, a research assistant transcribed all the targeted introductions verbatim, resulting in a word document of 8297 words (30 pages, 1½ line spacing).

### *Data analysis*

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016). This method is described as a six-phase approach. It allows for a recursive and reflexive approach during these stages, going both forward and backwards in the analytic process. Phases 1 and 2 are defined as familiarization and coding (phase



1: *familiarising with the data*; phase 2: *generating initial codes*). Phases 3 to 5 include theme development, refinement and naming (phase 3: *searching for themes*; phase 4: *reviewing themes*; and phase 5: *defining and naming themes*) (Braun et al., 2016). The final phase 6 is *producing the report*, which is addressed in the Discussion section below. Both authors contributed equally to the data analysis.

To familiarise ourselves with the data, we watched all sections of relevance to the current study of the Sports Award together on video and discussed our initial perceptions. No notes were taken during this phase. Afterwards, the transcribed data were printed and we individually read through the full text thoroughly, taking notes, writing comments and initial ideas by hand, and re-reading parts of the text. During phase 2, we met and continued the process by sharing and discussing initial interpretations of the data and initial codes. Both semantic and conceptual coding were used to evaluate the content by reading accurately what was said, and by reading between the lines (Clarke & Braun, 2019). The analysis during this phase was purely inductive, and the names of the initial codes were based on the content of the raw data.

After agreeing on the initial codes, the analysis progressed to the search for meaningful patterns among the codes in phase 3. During this phase, we used pen and paper and a large whiteboard to organise the codes into lower- and higher-order themes. The themes at both levels were refined, combined, separated and discarded based on our conceptualisation of themes during this phase. The analytic work during this phase was also inductive because the themes were guided by the initial codes. However, a part of the name of one of the lower-order themes – *para-crip* – was borrowed from a concept described in previous research. The patterns of the themes were also structured using the three main results categories: 1) *best Paralympic athlete*, 2) *best female athlete* and 3) *best male athlete*.

In phase 4, a review of the total codes and lower- and higher-order themes was completed with a special focus on whether this structure yielded justice for the full range of data. This review was completed by looking more closely at examples of coded data extracts and possible quotes that could represent the different themes and reviewing whether the themes reflected the full data set (Braun et al., 2016). This process of reflecting on and discussing possible interpretations was done to counteract possible biases within the process of qualitative analysis (Patton, 2002; Watt, 2007). To elaborate on this, as stated by Braun and Clark (2019), when more than two researchers are involved in the analytic

process, ‘the coding approach is collaborative and reflexive, designed to develop a richer more nuanced reading of the data, rather than seeking a consensus on meaning’ (2019, p. 594). Whereas the first author positions herself mostly within sport psychology, the second author positions herself mostly within a social understanding of disability. Our different perspectives as researchers made the discussion about interpretation of data more rigorous. Small refinements were made during this reflexive analytic process, which was completed when we reached consensus for all themes and the overall story of the entire dataset. The quotes that were extracted during Phase 5 are displayed in the Results section to provide insight into parts of the raw data, and thereby also provide readers with the opportunity to take part in evaluating parts of the data and analysis (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001).

### *Ethical considerations*

The focus of the present study was on the longitudinal use of language in media representations of a sports award for athletes’ achievements, and not on the individuals who hand out these awards. Although individuals (e.g., politicians, present and former elite athletes) read the words when awards are handed out, it is not clear who writes them (e.g., professional scriptwriters or employees at NIF or others). To maintain the anonymity of the individuals who handed out the prizes, the results presented here do not include their names or the year of the Award. However, the TV show is public and widely broadcasted, and thus, it may be possible to identify some of the individuals from the quotes presented.

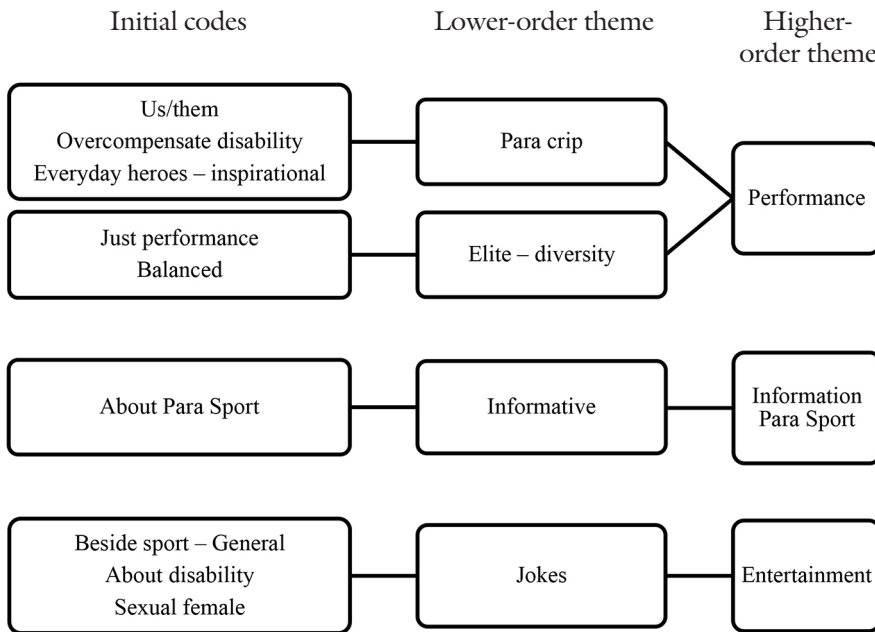
## Results

The findings of the thematic analyses will be presented in three main sections: 1) *best Paralympic athletes*, 2) *best female athletes* and 3) *best male athletes*. As this study explored media representations longitudinally, the analysis also included a perspective on potential development of themes over time. However, the analysis revealed no clear trends of emerging themes over the years, hence, the findings as presented below appear stable as the years progressed.

### Best Paralympic athletes

The results emerging from the analysis of the data of presentations for awards related to *best Paralympic athletes* pertained to three higher-order themes: *Paralympic performance*, *information about Paralympic sport* and *Paralympic entertainment* (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Results: Elite athletes with disabilities



#### Paralympic performance

The higher-order theme of *performance* was represented by two distinct lower-order themes. The first was labelled *para-crip*, and the overall finding within this theme was the emphasis on the disability rather than the athletic performance. The variation in these representations of the athletes pertaining to this lower-order theme was manifested by three different initial codes. The first initial code was *us/them*, where introductions specifically stated that the elite athletes with disabilities were someone other than elite athletes without disabilities. An example of this is found in the following quote, where the presenter says: ‘and we, who have all our limbs intact, we are and live our lives with our limitations, while they live with their possibilities’. Second, some presentations clearly described how the elite athletes with disabilities had

to overcome obstacles and everyday hassles in their lives as elite athletes caused by their disability. These were categorised using the initial code, *overcompensate disability*. The presenter says:

And this is one of the most important things I have learned from you Paralympic athletes. And it is so splendid, even if you have a trauma and lose an arm or a leg, you do sledge hockey or cross-country skiing, and it is fantastic. In this way, you overcome resistance and misfortune every single day.

Finally, the analysis indicated that being an elite athlete with a disability was truly impressive and inspiring for others in society in general, as well as for other elite athletes. These were coded *everyday heroes – inspirational*:

Presenter 1: Sport is play and fun, it is laughter and tears, it is hope and despair. But for some athletes, sport might have yet another dimension, and it is this prize we have been so lucky to hand out today.

Presenter 2: We know what it takes to reach far, to the top in sport. Thus, I am so incredibly impressed with these athletes with their starting point. They face extreme challenges, and manage to ... yes, that performance is tremendous, so I bow down in awe of them.

Presenter 1: Yes, and it is beyond doubt that what our elite athletes with disabilities achieve does not stand behind those of the achievements of the able-bodied. What they do is quite simply immensely impressive. We are truly impressed.

*Elite diversity* was the other lower-order theme pertaining to the higher-order theme of *performance* for elite athletes with disabilities. The initial codes that were aligned with this lower-order theme were *just performance* and *balanced*. Presentations at the awards that contained information about the actual athletic performances of the elite athletes with disabilities, and not a word about disability, were coded as *just performance*. For example:

Presenter 1: For one of those nominated for best Paralympic male, this year was one of the best years ever. For another, he fought his way back to the world elite level.

Presenter 2: And for the third, last year was simply another year in a row of top seasons.

Further, some of the presentations mentioned both the athletic achievements of the athletes with disabilities, and content related to their disability, yet in a more nuanced manner than in the prior examples of the codes within the lower-order theme *para-crip*. These presentations were coded using the initial code *balanced*. This quote exemplifies how two presenters introduced the award for *best Paralympic athlete* of the year:

I am thinking like you. Not on the ice, but on the field, the football field. Rock hard work and being capable of never giving up are core values in elite sport. And there are not many, if any, places where these values are more prominent than among our athletes with disabilities. In the sport I represent, the national team has impressed me and several others time and time again. And they are a flagship with us.

#### Information about Paralympic sport

The higher-order theme *information about Paralympic sport* contained data for the lower-order theme *informative*, which was a combination of all presentations that were initially coded as *about para sport*. These were presentations that contained specific information about Paralympic sport in general, Paralympic events and Paralympic athletes. This is exemplified by the following quote: ‘This year, the interest in Paralympics soared. Yes, for the first time in history, all the tickets for the Paralympics were sold out. And on average, more than four hundred thousand viewers followed the TV broadcast from Norway (NRK)’.

#### Paralympic entertainment

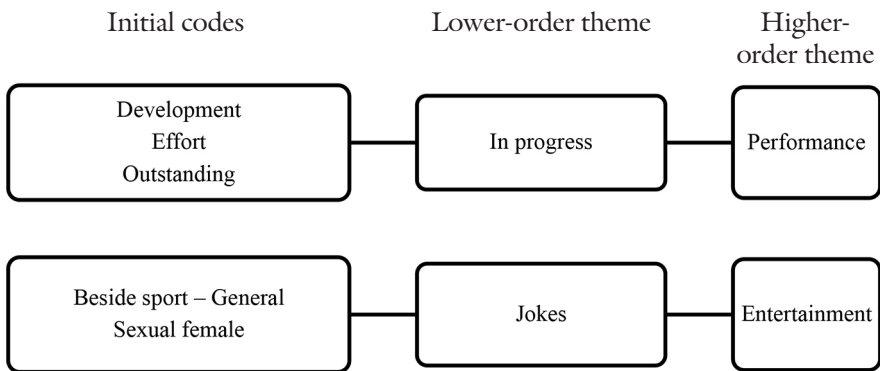
Because this is a TV show, both humour and cultural acts are part of the show, along with the prize awards. This was also apparent when analysing the introductions of the awards. Within the higher-order theme entertainment, the lower-order theme *jokes* was represented by three initial codes for presentations to elite athletes with disabilities. One presentation was coded as *beside sport – general* because the joke was not sport-related but part of the general entertainment aspect of the TV show. One joke was coded as *about disability*, where the content was related to the term *handicap* in the sport of golf. The final initial code under the joke theme was also about sport but was given its own initial code because of the frequency of such jokes in the presentations across all

the data within all three categories. This was a joke that contained sexual innuendoes relating to females or the female gender and it was thereby coded *sexual female*.

*Best female athletes*

The results of the analysis regarding *best female able-bodied athletes* are displayed in Figure 2. For this category, two higher-order themes were found, *performance* and *entertainment*.

FIGURE 2. Results: Female able-bodied elite athletes



Female performance

The higher-order theme *performance* for *best female able-bodied athletes* contained one lower-order theme *in progress*, which contained three different initial codes. The first initial code, *development*, was based on content describing the female able-bodied athlete’s performance as getting even better over time. For instance, one presenter said: ‘Norwegian female elite sport has seen tremendous development and the nominees are ...’. Similarly, the initial code, *effort*, represented presentations of the female able-bodied athletes’ performances with high and consistent effort over the last year. An example is, ‘we are very proud to present the best female athletes who have made a tremendous effort and done so around the world last year’.

Only some of the presentations regarding the best female able-bodied athletic performances were coded as *outstanding*. For example, the presenter says:

The four nominees in the category for tonight's first award have done fantastic performances in totally different arenas. But still, they have something in common. They are all champions in their respective sports, and they have given us amazing experiences all over the world. And tonight, we will honour them at their home ground.

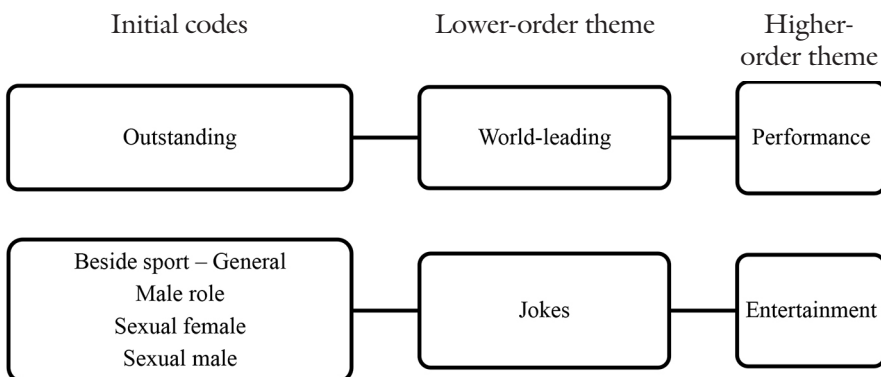
#### Female entertainment

*Entertainment* also came out as a higher-order theme for the *best female able-bodied athletes*, with the lower-order theme, *jokes*. There were two initial codes representing the jokes in this category, which were the same as two of the codes for the Paralympic athletes: *beside sport – general* and *sexual female*. Presentations that were analysed to pertain to the latter code were those that clearly adopted a sexual tone regarding females in general. For example: 'Yes, we are going to present the award in the favourite category of Tiger Woods. Yes, it is the best female athlete of the year?'

#### *Best male athletes*

Figure 3 shows the results of the analysis of presentations regarding *Best male able-bodied athletes*. Like the *best female able-bodied athletes*, this category contained two higher-order themes, *performance* and *entertainment*.

FIGURE 3. Results: Male able-bodied elite athletes



### Male performance

The higher-order theme *performance* contained the lower-order theme *world-leading*, which again was represented by the initial code *outstanding*. All presentations regarding the best male performance of the year had content and words related to the initial code *outstanding*. Words within this code included: fantastic, supreme, world's best, world champion and greatest. One short quote that expresses this well is: 'It is with greatest pleasure that we present the cream of the crop. Here are the nominees in the category best male athlete of the year.'

### Male entertainment

In the category for *best male able-bodied athletes*, the higher-order theme *entertainment* aligned with the lower-order theme *jokes*, were part of the presentations of the awards. Four initial codes represented the jokes. The first has been mentioned before, jokes that were general and not sports-related. In the second initial code jokes were coded as *male role*, for example the presenter says:

The male identity is in crisis. It is no longer enough just to be tough, men have to take care of children, cook, and they even have to be able to talk about feelings. It is not easy being a man these days. Unless you do sports. Then it is enough to be tough.

Sexual jokes about females were apparent in several presentations, and sometimes given by female presenters themselves when introducing a prize in this category, as in this quote: 'which of us is the prize?'. Finally, one joke of a sexual nature was made about a male and related to his tights tearing apart when he ran in a championship the previous year.

## Discussion

Overall, the results of the current study both echo and expand previous research findings regarding the portrayal of the achievements of elite athletes with a disability in media presentations. The discussion will be related to three main topics: *the power of language, athletic performances, and sports awards as entertainment*. In short, our results echo previous research that has identified the stereotypical portrayal of elite athletes with disabilities. This will be further discussed within the topic of



*athletic performance*. Further, our findings expand on previous research when we discuss the power of language and whether entertainment is presented differently when athletes are categorised as having or not having disabilities. The findings also extend previous research in regard to the results that reflect more nuanced presentations of the performances of elite athletes with disabilities. Thus, we claim that the results indicate that elite sport representations can also contribute to a non-dualistic approach to human existence in general, and disability in particular, where categories are acknowledged as continuums rather than as states of either-or. Researching a TV show that rewards elite athletic performances yielded rich access to data on representations of elite athletes with disabilities, and these representations became even more prominent in relation to the representations of elite able-bodied female and male athletes. As noted above, the discussion is organised around three main topics: the power of language, athletic performances and sports awards as entertainment.

### *The power of language*

Throughout the transcribed material it is apparent that disability is seen as a deviation in linguistic terms, while able-bodiedness is presented as the natural order of things. The same goes for information given about disability sports, which on some occasions are described in informative ways, while sport for the able-bodied is not. Being aware of this power of language enables a critical gaze towards how some activities are presented as the natural order of things. Thus, we found some of the same hegemonic structures in sports as in gender studies, queer studies and disability studies (Shildrick, 1994; McRuer, 2006; Campbell, 2008, 2012; Goodley, 2013); there is football and there is women's football. There are fitness runs for men and women, and there are shorter versions of the same arrangements just for women. In these arrangements, the participating women are often given the infantilising label *girl* (Lindelöf & Woube, 2019). Further, research has also pointed out prefixes, such as sexuality and *homosexuality*, men and *women* (Uri, 2018), and ability and *disability* (Fitzgerald, 2005). Language has the power to define a foreground (-man, -sexual, -able, -football) towards which the prefix (wo-, homo- dis-, girls-) defines what is different. We found this in the sports awards, where focus on what is different permeates many of the introductions of athletes with disabilities.

Further, and building on previous findings, the results from the current study conducted in the Norwegian context also clearly show that the presentations differentiate not only by using the foreground of the term *able* to contrast the difference with the prefix *dis-*. In most of the presentations, the language does not use *able* about able-bodied elite athletes, yet uses the term *elite athletes* about the elite athletes without disabilities. By using the terms *elite athletes* and *elite athletes with disabilities*, the language quite clearly says that athletes with disabilities do not belong to the *elite athletes* category. When the term elite athletes is used, it refers to able-bodied athletes. When talking about elite athletes with disabilities, this needs to be explicitly articulated. This further leads us to the term *bodies with and without disabilities*, highlighting Shakespeare's critique of the medical and social approaches to disability. Shakespeare (2006) sheds light on the idea of disability as an intrinsic factor in impairments and an extrinsic factor in the environment. Existential aspects cannot be removed by structural reorganisation alone. Thus, we endeavour to stay close to a relational understanding of disability, using person-first terminology. Throughout this paper, we as researchers differentiate between athletes with or without disabilities. We do this while at the same time finding it both dissatisfying and limiting because athletes with disabilities do also have able bodies. In this regard, we also feel trapped by the power of language when trying to convey our message. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that there are significant international differences in how, for instance, the term *elite athletes* is used and whom the term includes, regardless of variation in ability. Yet, a greater awareness regarding the power of language can be helpful when aiming to reach the goal of The Paralympic Committee Strategic Plan 2019–2022 to 'drive a cultural shift through para sport for a truly inclusive society' by 'engaging global stakeholders and audiences to help change the storyline of disability' (2019, p. 14).

### *Athletic performances—different groups, different values?*

The results indicate that the male able-bodied athletes were presented as world-leading, and the best of the best in the Norwegian sports world, 'the cream of the crop'. On the other hand, the female athletes are in progress, as in this quote: '...the progress there has been in Norway through several decades now on women and sports'. Where athletes without disabilities are seen to be world-leading and in progress, athletes

with disabilities are labelled as inspiring, heroic and different from the rest of us. The initial codes related to the theme *para-crip* expressed fascination over the fact that athletes with disabilities move their bodies when these bodies diverge from the body of the normate, for instance:

And this is one of the most important things I have learned from you Paralympic athletes. And it is so splendid, even if you have a trauma and lose an arm or a leg, you do sledge hockey or cross-country skiing, and it is fantastic.

The focus of the athletic performance seems to be secondary to what the so-called “dis-abled body” is able to do. This is communicated when the presenter claims that athletes with disabilities underestimate the significance of their performances for all athletes. The way the athletes with disabilities are spoken about as ‘you’ means that through their very being they inspire the able-bodied ‘me’, enhancing what Garland-Thompson (2017) describes as *the others*. Yet, the others are not limited to the athlete’s presence in the context of elite sports. This quote describes being an athlete with disabilities as a struggle, not only in sports but also in everyday life: ‘In this way, you overcome resistance, misfortune, every single day’. The performance of elite sports like ‘sledge hockey or cross-country skiing’ appears as a tool the athletes have at hand to defeat the tacit background of disability described as ‘resistance, misfortune, every single day’. Another excerpt tells us that Paralympians ‘win over their contestants and their own physical limitations (...)’. We also find that value-laden phrases like *most important*, *splendid*, *fantastic*, *do not understand* and *ought to know* infantilise the achievements of the athletes. These findings are in line with previous findings in research using terms as inspirational porn (Young, 2014; Grue, 2016).

As a consequence of these findings, and in line with previous research, we argue that there is a need for a critical discussion to address the binary concepts of ability–disability used to structure categories in a show like the Sports Awards. We question why an athlete labelled as having a disability cannot be labelled as able-bodied, as earlier described. Our data indicates that an athlete with a disability has never had the opportunity to win the prize of best male or best female athlete of the year in the Norwegian Sports Awards, even though they gendered categories since the year 2013. Thus, we claim that disability is a trait that is given a value so comprehensive that it removes the athletes’ opportunity to be ranked among the creme of the crop that is the able-bodied male. However,

taking an international perspective on media representations, findings indicate that this both varies between countries and from one year to another. For instance, in the UK in 2015, the Paralympic athlete Hannah Cockroft criticized the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) for having no athlete with a disability on the list of the 12 athletes that were nominated for sports personality of the year. In 2019, the list included athletes with disabilities when eleven times Paralympic champion Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, and Doddie Weir, a rugby player with motor neurone disease, were nominated (Enable Magazine, 2019). Also, for the Norwegian Sports Award 2020, the Para-World Champion in the 100-meter sprint, Salum Ageze Kashafali, was nominated for three awards: The Breakthrough of the Year, Best Male Para-athlete, and Name of the Year (Idrettsgalla, 2020).

Further, focus on disability as a trait that can be overcome rather than on the athletic achievement diminishes the performance of athletes with disabilities. When focusing on disabilities as something to overcome, while emphasising the ‘most important things I have learned from you’, reduces athletes with disabilities from athletic subjects to inspirational objects. This approach might place us as viewers directly to the outposts in our heads (Coakley, 2008, cited in Martin 2018). When we find only what we want to find, a possible discussion challenging the apparent assumption that able-bodiedness solely belongs to persons without disabilities is obstructed. Some athletes and sports organisations have challenged the binary division when entering contexts of able-bodiedness, such as the Norwegian national rowing team, which integrates athletes of all sexes, weight class and abilities, and the swimmer Noel Pedersen with visual impairment, who won the bronze-medal the 50-metre breaststroke at the Norwegian National Championship in 1994. Organisations, individuals and research might challenge dichotomies when daring to acknowledge, or at least discuss and provide more nuanced views on whether all athletic movements can be seen as able, regardless of who is moving.

Yet, being critical of a binary understanding does not mean denying that there is such a phenomenon as disability. We suggest that addressing disability can be done in presentations of elite sports without exaggerating its meaning. An example is found in the lower-order theme *elite diversity*, under the higher-order theme *performance*, where we find the *balanced* examples. These examples show how it is possible to talk about elite

diversity while both recognising performance and disability, as with this quote:

Rock hard work and being capable of never giving up are core values in elite sports. And there are not many, if any places, where these values are more prominent than among our athletes with disabilities. In the sport I represent, the national team has impressed me and several others time and time again. And they are a flagship with us.

This excerpt describes achievement, deviation and general values. ‘Rock hard work and being capable of never giving up’ are common traits in sports. These formulations are placed side by side with achievement: ‘the national team has impressed me and several others time and time again. And they are a flagship with us’, and the outspoken pinpointing of disability: ‘among our athletes with disabilities’.

### *Sports awards as entertainment: are there limits to jokes?*

As seen in the results, entertainment is one of three higher-order themes. In it we find that some groups are joked about in certain ways and some groups are not. Throughout the years of the awards, one joke about disability is related to the term *handicap* in golf. Sexual jokes are made about able-bodied men and women, yet the number and the content of the jokes are more conspicuous when they address women than when they address men. It is evident that when sexuality and disability are combined, no jokes are being made. Whether the challenge is the apparent lack of sexual jokes related to disability or the high frequency of sexual jokes related to women without disability is not discussed in this paper. What we would like to address is the noticeable absence of jokes about disability in general and whether athletes with disabilities are presented as non-sexual beings compared with women and men without disabilities.

Summing up findings from 2002 to 2019 shows us that athletes with disabilities are presented on a continuum between being characterised as victims, as heroes, as their disability and as persons fulfilling their subjective movement potential. We would like to emphasise the balanced examples, the examples that acknowledge performances, while also acknowledging disability as a phenomenon that includes subjective experiences shaped by medical hallmarks and social arrangements. In giving balanced examples, the Sports Awards might fulfil its inherent

social responsibility by challenging otherness, infantilization and crude descriptions of athletes with disabilities in ways that tend towards inspirational porn.

### *Limitations and future research*

This paper follows the path of McRuer's crip theory, an approach that unyieldingly questions how a culturally created superiority of the able body can be challenged and changed (McRuer 2006). Still, as authors, we have to admit that while we adopt a critical approach to cultural organisations that sort humans into binaries, we are stuck with dichotomies because of some of the methodological literature we have included (Townsend et al., 2018). Thus, finding a way of being able to grasp the nuances between dichotomies has claimed constant attention to challenge ourselves and our text to pay attention to what is between the extreme examples. In this, we find our work coincides with previously established themes in disability research, like the normativity of the able-body (Brittain, 2002), and being an inspiration to others (Schantz & Gilbert, 2012).

Compulsory able-bodiedness is an expansion of gender, queer and crip studies (McRuer, 2006). McRuer questions the supposed invisibility of the able body. In the same period as McRuer published his book *Crip theory: Cultural signs of Queerness and Disability*, Ahmed (2004; 2006) combined queer theory with phenomenology to demonstrate how queer emotions and queer approaches shed light on the idea of bodies being out of place. Thus, Ahmed includes subjective perspectives in a social-constructivist paradigm. Our paper stays closer to McRuer's conceptualisation of crip identities than to Ahmed's queer phenomenological approach, yet we acknowledge that able-bodied and disabled-bodied identities share traits with other hegemonic structures of difference, and that there are subjective perspectives connected to the presentations of individuals as members of a certain group. This paper is written by two authors that would most likely be described as female and able-bodied. As such, our work has been completed with an outside-in perspective on disability in the context of sport. This might be a disadvantage in a disability activism field that claims 'nothing about us without us' (Charlton, 2000). As such, future research should include the perspective of the athletes with disabilities themselves, to create a deeper

understanding of their experiences with such cultural representations as those expressed through the Sports Awards.

Moreover, we would argue that research exploring in greater depth and using richer theoretical lenses on the power of language is needed to better understand the potential of inclusive language to advocate for para athlete activism (Haslett et al, 2020; Haslett & Smith, 2019). Finally, future research should reflect our findings regarding the differences in how sport and variation in ability are turned into entertainment, and more specifically in the use of humour. We suggest future research should look more closely at whether there is a perceived vulnerability regarding humour about people with disabilities, and potentially why.

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