



# Framing Gender and Disability: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Photographs from the 2008 Paralympic Games

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## BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

**BACKGROUND:** DePauw's (1997) theoretical construct of sport and how we view the body focuses on three socially constructed ideals of physicality, masculinity, and sexuality. Those who do not fit into these ideals are marginalized when it comes to sport participation and media coverage.

The media's construction of knowledge about sport informs us of their perception as to who and what is valued. Although the media may represent dominant ideas and norms in society, they can also challenge and change discourse related to those who are marginalized, disempowered, and oppressed in sport. When photographs are constructed and printed they are framed in ideological ways. Who is shown, who is not, and how they are shown present an important message to the consumer. Newspapers continue to play a significant role in the transmission of ideas and images.

Sport has been aligned with the male sporting body, and the ideal sport body is also viewed as a strong able body, not a body with a disability or impairment (DePauw, 1997; Hardin et al., 2002). Anyone who does not fit the ideal sport-body description is marginalized or treated as "other" in sport. Female athletes and athletes with disabilities have been left on the outside, marginalized by these constructs in which they do not fit.

**PURPOSE:** This study focuses on cultural narratives (photographs) from 12 newspapers in five countries during the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing to determine the seriousness of athlete representation as reflected in both the amount and type of photographic representation.

## METHODS

Photographic coverage from 12 newspapers in five countries (China, Italy, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States) was collected during the 15 days of Paralympic competition, resulting in a total of 152 photographs. The photographs were analyzed on 21 variables in which two independent coders coded 20% of photographs with an inter-rater reliability coefficient of 85%. Upon discussion the coders reached consensus on 100% of the data. Data were subjected to statistical cross-tabulation analyses via SPSS 18.0.

## CONCLUSION

We concluded that there was a virtual absence of Paralympians in all of the newspapers we examined during the 2008 Paralympic Games. Additionally, more males than females were featured as competent athletes, and male athletes in wheelchair sports were given more coverage than other disability classifications. The lack of media coverage contributes to the invisibility of athletes in that athletes with disabilities are not valued for their athletic competence and that disability sport is not perceived as legitimate sport. The lack of media coverage also contributes to multiple forms of discrimination for female athletes with disabilities related to gender, ability, and sexuality.

This is the first study to explore the cross-continental connections of newspaper photographs of the Paralympic Games. Results suggest that the media have yet to challenge or change the discourse and inequalities associated with Paralympic athletes. Longitudinal research on this topic will enable tracking the changes over time in hopes that media coverage will improve in both quantity and quality. It is equally important that scholars disseminate this research and conduct more extensive research involving new media. In the words of Judith Lorber (2006), "Bodies not seen reinforce the idea that only certain bodies matter."

## RESULTS

### Amount of Coverage: Newspapers, gender, athleticism, disability, theme

Newspaper	Women	Men	Mixed
The Washington Post (USA)	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)	0 (0%)
Los Angeles Times (USA)	2 (1.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Star Tribune (USA)	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)	0 (0%)
USA Today (USA)	3 (2.0%)	2 (1.3%)	0 (0%)
New Zealand Herald (New Zealand)	6 (4.0%)	4 (2.6%)	0 (0%)
The Press (New Zealand)	9 (6.0%)	3 (2.0%)	0 (0%)
China Daily (China)	9 (6.0%)	18 (11.8%)	0 (0%)
Shanghai Daily (China)	6 (4.0%)	9 (6.0%)	0 (0%)
Corriere della Sera (Italy)	1 (0.7%)	7 (4.6%)	0 (0%)
Il Giornale (Italy)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Die Burger (South Africa)	12 (7.9%)	30 (19.7%)	2 (1.3%)
The Citizen (South Africa)	14 (9.2%)	13 (8.5%)	0 (0%)
Totals	62 (41.0%)	88 (58.0%)	2 (1.3%)

- South African papers published the most photographs (38%)
- United States had the most newspapers analyzed (4) and the least number of photographs (6%)
- China (host country) had the highest number of athletes competing (334; 199 male, 135 female)
- Fifty eight percent of the photographs were of male athletes, 41% were of female athletes and 1% were mixed gender
- New Zealand newspapers portrayed twice as many women as men
- Though U.S. coverage was poor, males and females were portrayed equally.

### In Uniform, On the Court, In Action



Lora Webster of the United States blocks the ball during a sitting volleyball match against China at the Paralympic Games in Beijing yesterday. — Elizabeth Datzel

- Females in uniform 92% compared to 97% for males
- Females on the court 60% compared to 77% for males
- Females in action 40% of the time compared to 53% for males
- Female and male athletes were shown in action only 46% of the time, not highlighting their athletic abilities

### Visibility of Disability



HISTORIC REAR: Khabib Gultali will make history when she carries the South African flag in triathletes' opening ceremony for the Paralympic Games in Beijing after carrying out the same feat for the Olympic quad last month. Picture: Keith Mager

- Hidden 61%
- Wheelchair 46%
- Amputees 28%

### Theme



- Athleticism 45%
- Triumph 38%
- Sympathy 4%