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"It's a Story of Another World": Perceptions of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games Among Japanese Athletes With Psychiatric Impairments

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This study explored how athletes with psychiatric impairment in Japan perceived the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. Data from 15 interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis; consequently, three themes were generated: (1) The Paralympics: "A Story of Another World"—the participants viewed the Paralympics only as a movement and not directly related to them; (2) "Do I Really Have to Work That Hard?"—"supercrip" representations through the Paralympics led to the disempowerment and disablement of people with psychiatric impairment, exacerbating their symptoms; (3) "A Futsal That Really Isn't Very Good"—the privileged status of the Paralympics presents only a facet of disability sport, which has resulted in other sports for people with psychiatric impairment, such as football, not being properly valued. This study adds to the literature regarding the legacy of the Paralympics and emphasizes moving beyond using the Paralympics as a vehicle for a more inclusive world.

Keywords: social football, supercrip, reflexive thematic analysis

The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games have come to a close, despite strong opposition from the public due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and corruption scandals (IPSOS, 2021; The Asashi Shimbun, 2021). The 2020 Paralympic Games bid followed a similar rhetoric of many host cities

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(e.g., London 2012, Rio 2016) whereby "the Games" would be used as a platform to improve inclusion to sport and wider society among disabled communities, under the vision of the current International Paralympic Committee (IPC) "to make for an inclusive world through para sport" (Brittain, 2022; IPC, 2023, p. 2). To establish whether this promise was fulfilled, reflective and respectful studies among various disabled groups in Japan are required.

Through this paper, we present the perspective of Japanese athletes (those participating in football) with psychiatric impairments (PsI) regarding their perceptions of the 2020 Paralympic Games. The rationale for this focus is that first, it is currently unclear how the Games are perceived by athletes with impairments that are not represented in the Games, such as those with PsI. Second, people with PsI are among the most in need of potential empowerment through sports in Japan. This is because they have the shortest history of acknowledgement of their impairment, least developed rights and laws relating to work and so on (Emoto, 2010; Onishi, 2018), and experience significant stigma (Tamura et al., 2025) even though they account for more than half of the disabled population in Japan (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare [MHLW], 2024).

Therefore, their perceptions of a potential pathway to experience empowerment is of utmost importance to establish if the Paralympics can be a tool for empowerment among people with PsI in Japan, while the Paralympic "legacy" of the Tokyo 2020 Games is, arguably, still present. Indeed, to empower disabled communities was, and some argue is, an important purpose of the Paralympic Games.

Background and Objectives

Paralympics and the Empowerment of People With Disability

The Paralympic Games (henceforth referred to as "The Games") were created by Sir Ludwig Guttman in 1948 as a way to promote rehabilitation through sport, and empower soldiers with spinal cord injury, who sustained the injury in World War II (Brittain, 2016). Nearly 80 years after the first Games, the Games are still associated with empowerment of people with disabilities (PwD) (Howe & Parker, 2014; Peers, 2009; Purdue & Howe, 2012a, 2012b). However, some questions have been raised regarding whether the Games are in fact empowering PwD. For example, even Paralympians, who are positioned at the center of the Paralympic Movement, have been stereotyped as "tragic and passive disabled" (Peers, 2009, p. 658) in its history, and subjected to trivialization and marginalization, rather than being active, equitable social participants. Also, with the development of technology, the gap of availability and affordability of advanced sporting equipment, such as prosthetics and sports chairs, has become more pronounced (Brittain, 2019). That is, "developing countries" are being placed at a disadvantage as they do not have the resources to invest in advanced technologies and share these compared with countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States (Richard et al., 2021). This raises the question whether the Games empower all, or empowers those with the most resources (Purdue & Howe, 2012a).

Also, the current vision of the IPC is "to make for an inclusive world through para sport" and the IPC stated under this vision that "Para sport empowers people, changes attitudes toward disability and creates greater opportunities for

the world's 1.2 billion persons with disabilities" (IPC, 2023, p. 2), which is a manifestation of the IPC's intention to empower not only Paralympians, but also PwD in society. However, this has also been brought into question. Using the Games as an "empowerment pathway," the most common process of empowerment for PwD is Paralympians as role models empowering other PwD (Berger, 2008). However, Paralympians, who are not "disabled" by access and resources in the same way as the general disabled population (e.g., lack of access to gyms, lacking finances for necessary equipment, no transportation to attend sports clubs etc.,) may not be the "empowerment pathway" role models the IPC intended as they are not relatable to this wider societal group (Purdue & Howe, 2012b). Nor may PwD want to be a Paralympian but instead want to take part in equitable physical activity they enjoy (Hall et al., 2023). In addition, research has shown that PwD who have impairments that are not typically represented in the Games (e.g., D/deafness, psychiatric) are also less likely to feel empowered or inspired by the Games, again due to a lack of relatability and representation (Akimoto & Sawae, 2022).

In this way, the discussion on the Games and the empowerment of PwD has mainly focused on two stakeholders; Paralympians who are top athletes as "producers" of the Paralympic movement, and PwD in general as supposed "consumers" of the movement (Akimoto & Sawae, 2022, pp. A1–A2). Akimoto (2022), however, stated that in addition to these two stakeholders, it is also necessary to consider the impact on *non-Paralympic athletes* who do not qualify for the Games but compete in other competitions (e.g., Deaflympic athletes). Akimoto further pointed out that an excessive focus on the Games alone, among the many disability sports competitions in existence, (a) belittles these other events as secondary to the Games (e.g., Special Olympics, Deaflympics) and (b) leaves nonelite disabled athletes unconsulted regarding inclusion nor represented in wider disability sport narratives. Thus, the impact of the Games on the (dis)empowerment of such non-Paralympic athletes is still not fully explored. Therefore, this study explored how non-Paralympic athletes in Japan perceived the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. To this end, it is necessary to clarify some concepts, terminology, and context before examining the above.

First, the concept of *empowerment* is used frequently to discuss the Paralympics, and we have done so in this paper, but rarely is a definition provided. This may be because "[e]mpowerment can be seen as a highly subjective and wide-ranging concept" (Purdue & Howe, 2012a, p. 908). For the purpose of our research, and our focus on how Japanese with PsI may (or may not) be empowered through the Paralympics, we aligned with Silva and Howe (2012)'s definition:

> Empowerment signifies the increasing control individuals have over their own lives, to live the type of life chosen and valued, according to practical reasonableness and in respect for the basic principles of human dignity. Empowerment, the act of creating or acquiring power, implies not only freedom to live without others' interference, but also positive freedoms, in the sense people have real valuable choices to make, are aware of them, and possess the resources for their realization. (p. 177)

We further aligned to this definition as it provided enough flexibility to be applied to different contexts and avoid the pitfall of using an ethnocentric

(specifically Globally Western, Northern, English-language based) lens to explore disability in a unique socio-political-cultural climate (Richardson et al., 2023a). As noted previously, the experience of Japanese with PsI may be very difficult due to stigma and exclusion, as well as employment and human rights regarding psychiatric illness in Japan being in their infancy (Tamura et al., 2025). The idea of empowerment in this paper must therefore be considered within the societal norms and narratives of psychiatric illness in Japan.

Building from this cultural lens, the perception and language of disability in Japan should be briefly mentioned and contextualized, as an ontological base. Of note, the language used herein may be deemed as disempowering or oppressive to disabled communities from the perspective of English-language speakers who have preference over "disabled person" (U.K. social model language) or "person with a disability" (U.S. social model language), but such distinctions are not present in Japan (Richardson et al., 2023a). For example, in Japanese, "impairment," "disability," and "handicap" are often represented by one word, *shogai*. Thus, the language nuances of, for example, U.K. medical and social models (person with a disability vs. disabled person) are lost in translation and are unhelpful in Japanese culture. In addition, barrier, obstacle, difficulty, and disorder are also referred to by the word *shogai* (Taishukan, 2011). Therefore, any disability work in Japan must be situated within the structure and language of that country, rather than ethnocentrically dominant disability model language. Our intent is not to disempower disabled communities (indeed, we write from an intention of affirmation, respect, and empowerment), but, it is necessary to highlight cultural and language differences that are essential to acknowledge if one seeks to do socially just work in different countries.

Hence, in order to situate and contextualize the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games within Japan and determine who the non-Paralympic athletes can be, we will briefly overview the history of disability (sport) in Japan.

People With Disability in Japan

Historically, people in Japan believed disability as a karma, a kind of curse or punishment due to religious reasons (Stevens, 2013). Although most of the superstitions toward (people with) disability have been eliminated and attitudes have begun to improve, some discriminatory attitudes still remain in people's minds. For example, regarding PsI, the main focus of this study, while acknowledging mental illness as a medical phenomena and, for many, curable, the general population of Japan reported feeling uncomfortable being with people with schizophrenia and did not believe them to be capable of working and having a family (Kasahara-Kiritani et al., 2018). Also, a systematic review (Ran et al., 2021) reported that people in Japan stigmatized mental illness more than other Pacific-Rim countries. Hence, there is still latent discrimination against PwD even today in Japan.

According to MHLW (2024), there are an estimated 11.6 million PwD in Japan. The following three types of people are considered PwD and therefore as eligible to receive *shōgaisha techō* (disability handbook) through the local and national sysmtems: those with physical impairment (PhI), intellectual impairment (InI), and PsI (Stevens, 2013). PhI can be roughly divided into four subcategories, mobility, visual, hearing (and speech), and visceral (internal organ) impairment. Among these four,

mobility impairment—which tends to be confused with PhI—refers to the impairment of upper limb, lower limb, or trunk function, or the condition of having a functional impairment of movement (e.g., missing upper limb, cerebral palsy), thus persons with prosthetic hands or feet or those in wheelchairs are included in this category (Asagai, 2020). With regard to PsI, this consists of a number of psychiatric disorders, such as schizophrenia and mood disorders, as well as developmental disorders, and so on, that are identified as having long-term limitations in daily or social life (National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry, n.d.; National Rehabilitation Center for Persons with Disabilities, n.d.).

Therefore, PsI, as well as hearing and visceral impairment under PhI, are not included in Paralympic eligibility[1] and the largest population are PsI (hearing [and speech] impairment: 0.3–0.5 million, visceral impairment: 1.3–1.6 million, PsI: 6.1 million [rough estimate by the first author based on MHLW (2024)]). In this way, PsI accounts for more than half of the disabled populations in Japan; however, they are arguably not as well understood by society as PhI and InI, and are more stigmatized. This is because social support for PsI has historically lagged behind that of PhI and InI, and in fact, the *shōgaisha techō* covered PhI around 1949, and InI around 1973, while PsI was only included around 1995 (Takahata, 2021; Stevens, 2013). Another reason is the problem of mass and social media regarding PsI. For example, there have been instances of news reporting that an individual accused of a crime had their medical records—such as having visited or been hospitalized by a psychiatric hospital—shared despite these facts being irrelevant to the case (Takahashi & Nakanishi, 2013; Tanaka, 2004). The inclusion or acknowledgement of psychiatric illness is very short and still carries stigma, but there are examples of inclusive programs trying to address this such as sports for PsI.

Disability Sport in Japan

The first officially held national and international disability sport event in Japan was the 1964 Tokyo Paralympics, and this event formed the foundation of disability sports in Japan (Frost, 2012). It was argued that "acceptance of disability and official provision for special care and rehabilitation was immense in Japan as a result of the Games in Tokyo" (Bailey, 2008, p. 29), thus achieving the desired Paralympic legacy. Also, as its disability sporting legacy, the National Sports Festival for People with a Disability, which originated in 1965, continues annually, to this day, as the largest sports event for PwD in Japan (JPSA, 2024b). Generally, many people in Japan still have a positive image toward the Tokyo 1964 Games (especially the Olympics). While Japan's prestige was declining after its defeat in World War II, the first Summer Olympic (and Paralympic) Games held in Asia in 1964 are remembered as having restored pride to the Japanese people and brought them into the company of Western powers (Frost, 2012; Yuan, 2013).

The 1998 Nagano Games, Japan's second Paralympic Games and the first Winter Games to be held outside of Europe, attracted a great deal of attention not only in Japan but also in Asia (Brittain, 2016). The Nagano Games are said to have motivated PwD to participate in sports and triggered a change in the attitudes of nondisabled people toward PwD (Ogura, 2015). Most importantly, the Nagano Games changed the way the Japanese public viewed disability sports, which until then was often viewed as rehabilitation, and began to see them as competitive sports

(Fujita, 2020; Ogura, 2015). Indeed, a survey by Fujita (2013) confirmed that newspaper articles related to the Games tended to appear in the social pages before the Nagano Games—not the sports pages—whereas after the Nagano Games, the number of articles in the sports pages increased. Thus, there is a trend in Japan where the Games have functioned as a positive turning point of disability sport in each era.

When the decision was announced in 2013 that Tokyo would host the 2020 Games, there was generally a positive reaction and an increased focus on not only the Olympics but also the Paralympics, as Yuriko Koike, the governor of Tokyo, stated "I believe putting weight on hosting a successful Paralympics is more important than a successful Olympics" (Kyodo News, 2017). There was investment in the Tokyo Paralympics as the number of Japanese competitors, 254, was the largest ever in Japan's history (134 for London 2012 and 132 for Rio 2016; JPSA, 2024a). Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai or Japan Broadcasting Corporation, the official public broadcaster of Japan, also played an important role in sharing the Games with Japanese society by broadcasting 590 hr during the Games, the longest broadcast in Japan's history (Watanabe et al., 2022). In this way, there were positive initial indicators that the Tokyo 2020 Games would leave a positive legacy as previous events had done regarding the inclusion of disabled communities in Japan (Legg, 2022). However, some reported that the Games exposed the deep-rooted discrimination against PwD in everyday life by nondisabled people in Japan (Brittain, 2022). Indeed, according to a survey conducted by the Nippon Foundation before (July 2019, $n = 5{,}216$) and after (September 2021, $n = 5{,}216$) the Tokyo 2020 Games, 95.9% of respondents answered "There is prejudice and discrimination against social minorities in Japanese society" before the Games and 85.9% after the Games (Nippon Foundation, 2019, 2021). Similarly, those who answered "I have prejudice or discrimination against social minorities" accounted for 69.8% before the Games and 64.7% after the Games. These figures show the continued presence of strong discriminatory attitudes toward PwD and minorities in Japan, and perhaps the Tokyo 2020 Games did not have a sufficient effect on eliminating such discriminatory attitudes toward those with PsI, particularly as this group experiences most social stigma as outlined previously.

Sport for People With PsI in Japan

While the Paralympics itself may not have impacted PsI, a legacy of previous Japanese Paralympics partly has. The National Sports Festival for People with a Disability, which originated in 1965 after the 1964 Games, was initially only open to participants with PhI. However, people with InI were included over time and finally, people with PsI were also officially included in this event in 2008 (Hibino, 2021; Onishi, 2018, 2021), although some critical problems remain due to its short history, such as the fact that there are significantly fewer competitions where people with PsI are qualified to compete (number of competitions in most recent iteration: PhI = 9; InI = 10; PsI = 2; JPSA, 2024b).

The above highlights there is still substantial work that needs to be done to best support people with PsI, and, despite the Paralympics positioning itself as a pathway where "Para sport empowers … 1.2 billion persons with disabilities" to make the world more inclusive (IPC, 2023), PsI in Japan have been left behind.

As we move forward in our efforts to better support PsI in Japan through sport, we must capture their testimonies and perceptions of disability sport, and their perceptions of the Paralympics as a potential tool for empowerment.

People with PsI can benefit socially, psychologically, and physically through sport (Okamura, 2017; Soya & Soya, 2018), and in Japan, the most popular sport for this group is football. Football played by people with PsI is known as *Social Football* (SF) (derived from the Italian *calciosociale*, which stands for *social football*; Inoue, 2018) in Japan and those who receive continuous treatment at a medical institution for a PsI are eligible to compete (JFA, n.d.; JIFF, n.d.). SF is a sport played by the same basic rules as futsal. Leagues and championship games are organized and operated by a nonprofit organization, the Japan Social Football Association, the first governing body of sports for PsI in Japan (Inoue, 2018). SF is currently gaining momentum, with several world (and international) championships having been held in the past since 2016 (Tanaka et al., 2020).

However, SF and its athletes are not well publicized and the impact of the Games on the (dis)empowerment of such non-Paralympic athletes is not fully explored. Therefore, how (dis)empowered are they by viewing the Games?

Method

The following protocol of this study was approved by the research ethics committee of University of Tsukuba, Japan.

Paradigmatic Assumptions and Researcher Reflexivity

The work was underpinned by assumptions based on ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism. From an ontological perspective, we understood reality or "truth" to be shaped by an individual's (including the researchers) experiences, background, perceptions, and identity (Ryba & Wright, 2010) and that this reality will shift and change as an individual gains more life experiences and is exposed to others. Our reality is therefore multiple, fluid, ever changing, and contextual rather than a static or singular "truth" (Cluley et al., 2020). Thus, we acknowledged that each participant (and researcher) would have a different reality with regard to perceptions of the Paralympics and that these different realities provided insight regarding the sociocultural narratives, social norms, and discourses participants were exposed to that informed findings (Blodgett et al., 2015).

Complementing our relativist perspective, our understanding of how knowledge was constructed was based on constructionism. Constructionism holds that knowledge is subjective and socially, culturally situated (Gergen, 2001), and what we can "know" about our area of study (e.g., Japanese perceptions of Paralympics) is constrained within the limits of its context and the beliefs of both the researchers and the participants involved in the research. That is, we coproduce knowledge throughout interactions, interviews, and interpreting data through our perspectives and assumptions. We thus engaged in reflexivity throughout the process.

The first author is a man of Japanese heritage. He was born and grew up in Japan, however, has an English wife who has strongly influenced his views and allowed him a degree of criticality regarding cultural norms of Japan, the United

Kingdom, and the literature that has been produced from those respective countries regarding disability. He has been involved in disability sports for 14 years having first come across adapted sport as a university student. In his work, he has always focused on understanding the lived experience of PwD by listening to their actual voices and was supported and inspired to do so by his mentor. As he started conducting research based on the narratives of people and athletes with disability (Akimoto, 2022; Akimoto & Sawae, 2022), he began to have doubts toward the Paralympics and possibly this critical perspective has partially shaped the theme of this research. He has published several papers on the Games in the past and is eager to be part of a platform that amplifies voices of communities that are underrepresented, such as those with PsI.

The second author is also a man of Japanese heritage. He got a PhD degree at a university in the United States, and he has published numerous papers regarding PsI so that he is also capable of critical examination of Japanese culture and disability sport. He has studied community inclusion of people with PsI for about 10 years. Before that, he had worked in adapted sport organizations. He also has friends who work at disabled people organizations and who engage in disability rights advocacy. He therefore sees disability as person first and leisure as a human right. He is an advocate of inclusive physical education among disabled pupils and seeks ways to include more disabled populations in sport.

The third author is a woman of Scottish heritage and has worked as a qualitative researcher focusing on inclusive physical activity within disabled communities for a decade. She is drawn to viewing disability through social relational and affirmation lenses (typically Western lenses of disability) to enhance participation in recreation and lifestyle activity among disabled communities. While she is a fan of the Games as a sports fan and views it as a sporting spectacle akin to other elite sporting events, she is deeply critical of the Games as a pathway for wider participation. As a team, they are united in their pursuit of serving PwD through excellent scholarship.

The above three authors are well acquainted with each other, having jointly published on disability inclusion in the past (Richardson et al., 2023a, 2023b). We explore how our positionalities, experiences, and assumptions shaped the interpretation of the data in the "Data Analysis" section.

Participants and Recruitment

The participants of the study were selected from former or current SF national team players, as well as players and team staff members of a team that had won second place at the national tournament in the past. We interviewed team staff members because we thought we could obtain enriched data about participant empowerment as many staff members know participants in and outside of the football field. This is because sports for people with PsI in Japan have very close ties with psychiatric care (Onishi, 2018, 2021; Takahata, 2013) and many teams in SF are based in hospitals and clinics (Inoue & Tanaka, 2012). Thus, we included (a) a staff member whose background was a mental health social worker and the founder of the team, (b) an occupational therapist that was a football coach for the team, (c) head coach who has been leading the team for many years, as well as (d) the team's public relations staff who provide information about the team on a daily basis.

The first author asked the members to cooperate in an online interview after establishing a rapport with players of the team by attending several practices. All the participants provided written informed consent. Consequently, a total of 15 participants participated in the study (mean age: 38.4 years [*SD*: 8.1]), of whom 11 were athletes (including those who also served as staff members) and four were full-time staff members (see Table 1). Eleven athletes had the following impairments or disorders: schizophrenia ($n = 4$), mood disorders ($n = 4$), obsessive-compulsive disorder ($n = 1$), developmental disorder ($n = 1$), and panic disorder ($n = 1$). None of the four full-time staff members had any impairments or disorders at the time of interview. Also, the participants volunteered to participate and were not paid any fees or compensation for participation in this study.

Interview

Interviews were conducted in Japanese by the first author. The interviews took place in October and November 2021, immediately after the closing of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. We utilized the Zoom™ Video Communication Platform, and the conversations were recorded using the application's built-in functions. For the interviews, due to the limited previous research related to this study (Akimoto, 2022), participants were asked to talk about their impressions and thoughts on the Games in a relatively unstructured manner. The interviews lasted an average of 53.4 min with a total of 800.8 min for all participants.

Data Analysis

A researcher is always "situated in various ways, and ... reads data through the lenses of their particular social, cultural, historical, disciplinary, political, and ideological positionings" (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 339). Therefore, this (or any qualitative) study must reflexively assume that the author(s), and the participants have certain assumptions and perceptions regarding the subject under exploration (in this case the Paralympic Games) based on their individual experiences, cultural narratives they have been exposed to, and ongoing interactions with other people and the subject as time progresses. This carries forward to the analysis stage of a research project where it "can never be conducted in a theoretical vacuum; researchers always make assumptions about what data represent" (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 337). To reflect the presence of assumptions from authors and participants, after the audio data were transcribed verbatim, a type of qualitative research method that actively utilizes the subjectivities of the interviewees and analysts as a resource was selected: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2019, 2021a, 2022).

Aligning to the reflective nature of RTA, as well as researchers' experiences, perceptions, and assumptions regarding an area of research, their contributions shape how data are analyzed and interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2022). We did RTA and generated themes inductively through the following contributions of the team. The first author conducted the interviews in Japanese and developed trust and rapport with the participants by volunteering and embedding himself in the culture of the football club. He transcribed and translated the interviews from Japanese into English; as noted, he speaks English fluently as he has an English partner. The first

Table 1 Details of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Player/Staff	Disability handbook	Type of disorder	Years of involvement in social football
Taro	M	20s	Player	Unanswered	Schizophrenia	5
Hiroshi	M	40s	Head coach	No	None	7
Naoki	M	20s	Coach and occupational therapist	No	None	1
Takumi	M	30s	Player	Yes	Panic disorder	4
Akira	M	30s	Player	Yes	Schizophrenia	4
Kenta	M	50s	Manager and mental health social worker	No	None	13
Junpei	M	30s	Player	Yes	Schizophrenia	3
Mai	F	40s	Player	Yes	Mood disorder	12
Takahiro	M	40s	Player	Yes	Mood disorder	3
Kaito	M	40s	Player	Yes	Obsessive compulsive disorder	5
Shota	M	30s	Player	Yes	Mood disorder	5
Kenji	M	40s	Player	Yes	Developmental disorder	7
Tetsuya	M	40s	Public relations	No	None	5
Yuichiro	M	30s	Player	Yes	Schizophrenia	6
Takeshi	M	40s	Player	No	Mood disorder	6

Note. Information is as of the time of the interview.

and second author led the data analysis, but the third author provided some training on how to use RTA as she had more experience using this technique. We had previously published articles critiquing the lack of culturally appropriate approaches to inclusive disability sport and physical activity beyond Western and Northern contexts (Richardson et al., 2023a; 2023b), which gave us grounding and guidance regarding how to account for our assumptions and positions of the Paralympics, disability, and other important components of the study. Furthermore, we had learned and gained experience about how "best" we could work together while respecting time differences, cultural work expectations and pressures, different languages, approaches to research, and sociocultural upbringings.

In practice, the third author acted as a critical friend to the "final" themes rather than play an active role in their creation. Noting that there is a lack of work regarding Japanese perceptions on disability with regard to the Paralympics, and often research conducted by non-Japanese authors, we wanted to address this issue by ensuring Japanese authors led, and were the main influencers of, the research analysis. The third author was available if her colleagues had a question about RTA, but her main role was to question "taken for granted" Japanese perceptions that could be further developed to situate Japanese Paralympic perceptions within wider global narratives. She also assisted with the overall narrative of the article as a native English-speaker, as well as help adjust initial drafts from a more Japanese writing style to a writing style that aligns to English language-based journals.

Also, we initially decided to conduct a relatively semantic level analysis in order to represent the perceptions of Japanese with PsI as (a) this is an under-researched community and their perceptions must first be presented as accurately as possible to their testimonies and (b) the translation of Japanese to English may have left deeper meanings "lost in translation," thus to keep analysis at a surface level again lent to ensuring that the experiences of this group were presented as authentically as possible. However, we did add latent interpretation once themes were established to situate the themes within wider literature (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and more deeply explore cultural, social influences we deemed important to share with global audiences.

Rigor and Data Quality

Aligning to our relativist approach to truth and reality, we engaged in a relativist approach to research rigor and data quality. This approach encourages researchers to consider their work with regard to purpose, methods, analysis, assumptions, nuance, integrity, context, and as something individual that should be judged through appropriate, congruent standards rather than universal criteria (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Thus, researchers choose which standards of quality and rigor their work should be judged by (Smith & McGannon, 2018). We have discussed previously the reflexivity we engaged in, which is a standard of rigor, and also the utilage of the second and third authors as critical friends challenging the first author on content, methods, and interpretations of data. We also wish readers to judge our work by two more standards. First, in this work, due to this population being little represented in academia, we wished to achieve a substantive contribution to knowledge (Richardson, 2000). We hoped to provide new knowledge about perceptions of the Paralympics from Japanese with PsI such that this can be part

of the wider global, cultural study of the Paralympics as a whole. We also focused on the congruence of our work with regard to how the work held together in terms of paradigm, purpose, and methods. We did this by ensuring our assumptions aligned to our methods, that the participants could share their perspectives in their first language and with someone they knew, and that the data were supported by appropriate and meaningful theoretical and conceptual ideas. Of note, the quality of data could also be assured through the first author conducting the interviews in Japanese before translation to English.

Analysis

In qualitative research, context is the key, thus testimonies provided in the study also include details of how the participants were situated in Japanese society. This context adds further strength to the necessity of reflexivity and context in RTA, and provides some clues regarding why participants thought the way they did about the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. The story below is an example of what some Japanese with PsI experience when they disclose their diagnosis.

In 2019, when Kaito (Depression, Mood Disorder) was a school employee, he started working at a new school and was told the following by a school official; "When I first started working at the school [in 2019], I was asked, 'I heard that you have a psychiatric impairment. Do you ever get violent or anything like that? Are you going to be ok? Do you ever do anything violent to students?.'" This testimony demonstrates that in Japan, there is still a strong prejudice and stigma regarding people with PsI as if they are violent, which could be due to tone set by mass media regarding coverage of criminal activity or newsworthy events as mentioned earlier (Takahashi & Nakanishi, 2013; Tanaka, 2004). Therefore, it may be difficult for this group to express strong opinions about a subject for fear of being perceived as "violent" or leaning toward violence. Japanese with PsI also still carry an internalized shame regarding their diagnosis as Mai stated when she was interviewed by a newspaper reporter, "I said that I wanted the world to know [about PsI], but I also asked the reporter not to put my face or name in the newspaper ... I know I'm being very unfair ... [but] there are a lot of people like me." These statements indicate the perceptions and experiences of PsI in Japan and may be the basis for why the following results regarding the Games were formed.

With the context in mind, we generated three themes as a result of the analysis. The summaries are presented in Table 2.

The Paralympics: "A Story of Another World"

While participants generally acknowledged that they felt slightly empowered by the Games, they viewed the Games as a movement that is not directly related to them. The testimonies that show that participants felt slightly empowered by The Games included the following: "I was moved to see how hard they worked" (Akira) and "I was very encouraged to see that people with disability can do so much" (Junpei). Also, others mentioned "The Paralympic Games have helped to accelerate the acceptance of people with disability, including social football, and psychiatric impairment" (Takeshi). These indicated that some participants felt

Table 2 Summary of Themes

Theme	Summary
The Paralympics: "A Story of Another World"	While participants felt slightly empowered by the Paralympics, they viewed the Paralympics only as a movement that is not directly related to them as their impairment was not represented through the Paralympics.
"Do I Really Have to Work That Hard?"	The Paralympics conveyed certain values and standards such as hard work and extreme effort as a virtue that participants with psychiatric impairments felt pressured to emulate. This "supercrip" pressure negatively impacted the participants as they felt inferior to this standard and was suggested to worsen their conditions.
"A Futsal That Really Isn't Very Good"	The privileged status of the Paralympics presents only a facet of disability sport, which has resulted in other sports for people with psychiatric impairment, such as social football, not being properly valued.

empowered by the Games and perceived a potential increase in understanding toward the Japanese community of PwD as a whole.

However, such opinions were not representative of the majority of participants. Rather, most of the participants perceived they had not benefited or been influenced by the Games as they said; "To be honest, I never really felt that our team became like this or I became like that because of the Paralympics" (Hiroshi), or "It is hard to see in concrete terms that this part [of the Paralympics] was good [for us]" (Kenta). A reason why they did not perceive being positively impacted by the Games may have been a lack of resonance regarding their impairment and the impairments represented by the Paralympians. According to Kenji, "I think it is possible to convey the idea that a person can do various things despite his or her physical impairment. However, it is difficult to convey a message with regard to invisible impairments." Also, Mai said "people with mobility impairments and blind soccer [players] get better understood [via the Paralympic Games]," while Kenta stated, "understanding psychiatric disabilities cannot be improved by hosting the Paralympic Games." Participants alluded that more visible impairments such as mobility impairment or blindness were represented through the Games which PsI were not. According to Naoki,

> The impairments of the Paralympic athletes are easy to see physically . . . I think that psychiatric impairment is very different from those of Paralympians in that they are difficult to see visually. So, even if the understanding of the Paralympics increases, it will only be for those whose impairments are visible, and not so much for those with psychiatric impairment, because they are not so easily identified.

Consequently, many of the participants seemed uncomfortable with the fact that the Games represents only some types of impairments—mainly physical and visible, yet promotes itself as an empowering event for all impairments. In this

regard, Takeshi stated "It's a bit bothersome for me to see people who categorize all people with impairments in the same meaning and saying, 'let's make the Tokyo 2020 successful.'" This was expanded by Tetsuya who viewed the Games as something completely different from his own experience, "Basically, it [the Paralympics] has nothing to do with it. It's a story of another world." In this way, the participants perceived a great difference between themselves and Paralympians.

Perhaps there may be a desire behind these statements that they simply do not want to be grouped together with people with other kinds of impairments since PwD do not always wish to be associated with other impairment groups for a variety of complex reasons (Brittain, 2004; Deal, 2003). As mentioned earlier, the Tokyo 2020 Games attracted a great deal of attention, with the largest number of Japanese Paralympians competing in the Games in its history (JPSA, 2024a) and the official public broadcaster of Japan (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai), provided the longest broadcast in Japan's history (Watanabe et al., 2022). On the other hand, there is still a strong stigma against mental illness in Japan (Ran et al., 2021), and Mai was in fact afraid that attention would be drawn to her (disability) through newspapers. Hence, the participants might have sensed a stark contrast between the Paralympians, who received a glowing attention through the Tokyo 2020 Games, and the participants, who feared such attention from the public.

Also, when it comes to the Paralympic movement, certain forms of physicality are considered more acceptable (e.g., aesthetically pleasing, closer to corporeal norms) than others, therefore those who are more "acceptable" are positioned at the upper layer of the impairment hierarchy (Purdue & Howe, 2013). While those who do not fit into such an idea of "normalcy", or those with invisible impairments, are placed at lower layers, such as those with cerebral palsy, visual impairments (Howe, 2011), and perhaps those with PsI since their impairments are invisible. Thus, it is natural that participants do not necessarily want to identify themselves with Paralympians, as there is a (aesthetic and hierarchical) difference between them and Paralympians, and they see the Paralympics as "a story of another world."

"Do I Really Have to Work That Hard?"

Rather than being inspired or empowered by the Games, some participants perceived the Games had the opposite effect, making them feel inferior. Kenji stated,

> There are people who have an inferior feeling about not being able to work hard, while Paralympians and other people with disabilities on TV are working hard. But I can't work hard, so I feel a difference there, and it hurts me.

What Kenji implied is that because Paralympians who work hard are represented as the norm of what athletes with disability should be, the participants are suffering from the gap between the norm and themselves. These representations of PwD that work hard and achieve sporting excellence as the disability norm (to achieve one must simply put in enough effort) is termed *supercrip* (Berger, 2008; Howe, 2011; Silva & Howe, 2012). Berger (2008) described this as "Supercrips are those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible"

(p. 648). Previous iterations of the Games have used this narrative to advertise the Games (e.g., McGillivray et al., 2021; Pate, 2023; Silva & Howe, 2012). Similarly in Japan, media have used the supercrip narrative to present Paralympians (Endo, 2018; Fujita, 2020; Ogura, 2022; Shek-Noble, 2022; Van der Veere, 2020; Yoshii, 2018). Though some argue that the supercrip (or a similar representation, *inspiration porn*) representation has been decreasing in recent years in Japan (e.g., Legg, 2022; Watanabe & Nakamura, 2022) and that this is a more favorable representation compared with the stigma people with impairments experience in Japan (Shek-Noble, 2020), participants in this study remained highly aware and critical of the supercrip representations that appeared in Paralympic coverage, and felt inferior due to those representations.

While participation in sport has been found to enhance the well-being of people with PsI (Carless & Douglas, 2008; Soundy et al., 2015), the degree of competitiveness (that is level of elitism and pressure to perform) must be considered as athletes with PsI can experience stress and worsened symptoms triggered by such pressure (Glowacki et al., 2019; Yarita, 2016). This means that if we stand on the position of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990), or indeed the social relational model with regard to psychoemotional disablism caused by disabling narratives forced on PsI (Reeve, 2015), then the valuing of "hard work" to achieve greatness derived from supercrip representation can be detrimental. Indeed, Hiroshi advised "I can only say, 'well, let's work reasonably hard,' without motivating us too much." Also, Yuichiro stated "I think some Paralympians are determined or do things hard to the point of exhausting themselves, but since I got this impairment, I could explode if I did so." The Paralympics, the pinnacle of disability sport yet socially presented as "a norm" for what athletes with disability can achieve, may pressure athletes with PsI to work excessively—and may become "the norm" that employment or government agencies use to assess capacity for work (Schalk, 2016). In response to this, Takahiro expressed his dissatisfaction with Paralympic comparisons as follows:

> I think there are naturally opinions such as, "No, I'm not able to work that hard," "Do I really have to work that hard*?*," "I don't have the energy to work that hard and just living everyday life is all I can do" . . . So, there are not only those people shining like that. There are many people who can't work hard.

"A Futsal That Really Isn't Very Good"

This theme expands the Games as a comparative standard among disabled communities to also be the comparative standard for disability sports. Participants viewed that this comparison had a detrimental effect on perceptions of SF and SF athletes.

According to the participants, the quality of SF is difficult to convey to wider society. For example, Taro stated, "If a player with psychiatric impairment played futsal, people look at him or her as if he or she is no different from a normal person." As a result, SF is looked at as "a futsal that really isn't very good . . . It's not interesting as a sport . . . they don't know what's great about it. It's more interesting to watch the able-bodied ones, because they are at a higher level" (Hiroshi). Takeshi likewise stated:

> You'd think "how is it possible to play like this while you can't see?" in blind soccer. Or maybe wheelchair (sports) might also make you feel something because it looks totally different. But that kind of fun is not in social football.

Most of the participants were aware that they were not perceived by audiences as athletes with impairments due to the homogeneity of their appearance compared to futsal players without PsI. In this regard, with respect to the difference between Paralympians, whose excellence is more easily manifested in the sports scene and wider media, and SF players, whose excellence is hidden by an invisible impairment, Hiroshi stated the following:

> [PsI] is really an invisible one. You can't tell by looks. They are all the same, just like regular people. In that sense, [SF] doesn't interest people at all. There is no point in appealing to the general public. Unless people watch the games on the premise that everyone has such a complicated background, it will be nothing more than a futsal match in which the players aren't very good .... They all have arms and legs, they are not in wheelchairs, they can run normally.

Common to all these accounts is the implication that the competition must be Paralympic-like in order to be legitimately perceived, as evidenced by the participants' frequent comparisons to the sports played by people with visible impairments. While each disability sport can be impactful and credible at different levels and for different purposes, the Games holds a privileged position in disability sport (Howe & Silva, 2018; Purdue & Howe, 2012a, 2012b). It is evident from the perspectives of Japanese with PsI that the Games conditions wider society to evaluate and judge the quality of disability sport based on Paralympic examples of elite sport and visible impairments. In response to this situation, the participants proposed that Japanese society needed to capture and promote personal stories of athletes that were contrary to negative stories of criminality or supercrip narratives that placed inappropriate standards of performance upon PsI. Kenji stated "[when you showcase SF,] it needs to be explained what the athletes are like outside of the games ... the story has to come together." Also, Hiroshi stated "there is a need to tell the background of how the athlete got to this point, like a life history, in a more detailed way [compared to the ones from Paralympics]." The reason the participants believed that their disability should be actively represented is that unless how their impairment affected performance is indicated, it does not convey how outstanding and resilient SF players are. Kenji stated,

> I think it is important to understand them and their backgrounds. I am sure that you will be touched and find it interesting if you get to know their background. "To tell you the truth, he has a developmental disorder. He was like this when he was practicing, and he would run away whenever something went wrong. But he found this kind of opportunity and motivation on his own and started working very hard and giving good advice to the team [members]." If you don't say something like that, people won't even look at you.

On the other hand, a participant also mentioned that some Paralympians were not willing to talk about personal stories. Hiroshi stated,

> On the contrary, the Paralympians would say, "I'm just a regular athlete, nothing else, although my legs don't work. I don't want to be one of those poor athletes that bring tears to your eyes. I want you to treat me as an athlete." I feel there's a huge disconnect with that.

As participants mentioned, many Paralympians advocate for representation based on sporting excellence rather than focus on a personal interest story. This may be because the impairments that Paralympians have are often relatively evident (e.g., athletes with wheelchairs, prosthetics, eyeshades, amputated limbs, etc.), and are not confused with nondisabled athletes (Akimoto, 2022), thus there is an expectation of a "becoming disabled story" (Peers, 2009). Furthermore, in some countries, the Games has become more associated with an elite sporting event and thus athletes expect equitable treatment with nondisabled athletes (such as focus on performance rather than personal story) (Pack et al., 2017). On the other hand, the current perception of PsI in Japan may require those personal interest stories as participants that perceived they were "futsal players who aren't very good," the personal interest story as an alternative to criminal or stigmatized in Japanese society is a valuable resource for self-identification.

Discussion

The study addressed gaps in the literature regarding perceptions among non-Paralympic athletes in Japan, and whether the Paralympics inspires or empowers all PwD in host countries, as it states (IPC, 2023). Regarding the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic bid, the Games were proposed as a platform to improve inclusion to sport and wider society among Japanese society (Brittain, 2022). Among Japanese with PsI that take part in SF, this was not deemed effective for their impairment. Thus, a first conclusion is that Japanese with PsI perceived the Games as "a Story of Another World." That is; while acknowledging the social value of the Games to a certain extent for some disabled communities, they fundamentally saw the Games as a movement that had nothing to do with them. The reason why the participants considered the Paralympics as "a story of another world" may not simply be because the Paralympians possess and represent different impairments, but could also be because of the difference in visuality of impairments that they and the Paralympians have and the hierarchical structure that results from this difference (Deal, 2003; Howe, 2011; Purdue & Howe, 2012a, 2013). Historically, disability (sport) has been socially invisible, and the Paralympics contributed to making it (hyper) visible (DePauw, 1997; Peers, 2009). However, while Paralympics made the disabilities promoted by the Paralympics socially visible, they left the disabilities that are not visually recognizable or aesthetically pleasing behind in society, resulting in a definitive hierarchy between them (Howe, 2011; Purdue & Howe, 2013). Therefore, rather than empowered as intended, and stated by the IPC, Japanese participants felt disempowered by the Games in the following ways.

First, the study revealed that during and following Paralympics, the *supercrip* representation (Berger, 2008; Howe, 2011; Silva & Howe, 2012) of disability sport and disabled athletes was deemed the "norm" Japanese society would compare all disabled people to; this was perceived to disempower and disable people with PsI.

The embedding and comparison of supercrip as a standard narrative and norm following a country hosting the Games is common (Silva & Howe, 2012). Indeed, there is evidence from the Athens, Beijing, London, Rio, and Tokyo Games that supercrip becomes a normative disability narrative among wider society (Pate, 2023). Uniquely, Japanese participants highlighted they felt disempowered due to supercrip expectations and normalcy of excessive workload to achieve excellence, as implementing such stress on the body and mind can be a key trigger of psychiatric ill health relapses, and places unfair expectations upon PsI with regard to work.

Japanese society values hard work and dedication to the collective (Miller & Kanazawa, 2000), thus positioning individuals as not playing their part can enhance social stigma and ostracism from society. With few cultural narratives to draw from, and the continued stigma of mental ill health of PsI that exists in Japan (Takahashi & Nakanishi, 2013), supercrip may be a dangerous narrative that government or employment law enforces upon Japanese with PsI.

Implications for Future Policy and Practice

The three themes generated through this study have one thing in common: the adverse effects of the Paralympics' privileged position in disability sports. That is, if there is an alternative movement developed with specific focus on and with people with PsI, this may counter the supercrip representation that currently disables them, and subsequently, they would not feel like "Do I Really Have to Work That Hard?" Also, if such an alternative movement exists, it will provide society with a way to evaluate athletes with PsI specifically, so that they will be less likely to evaluate SF as "A Futsal That Really Isn't Very Good." As a result, even if people with PsI view The Games as "A Story of Another World," it will be a relatively smaller issue since there is a specific movement that is a story for their world and empowers them.

However, in Japan, the Games currently holds an overwhelming recognition rate among disability sports (recognition of event names in Japan in 2021; Fujita, 2023: Paralympics, 96.5%; Special Olympics, 3.6%; Deaflympics, 4.6%). In addition, the Paralympics—though recognized—are not well understood. Indeed, a study found that only 0.5% of the Japanese general public had a correct understanding of Paralympic Games eligibility (disability types) (Sato, 2015). Thus, it is necessary to steadily raise awareness of disability sports other than the Games while educating the public that the Games are only one form of disability sports. However, looking at the actions of (local) governments to date in Japan, policies and measures are being taken that are quite the opposite of this. As an example, for the Tokyo 2020 Games, Paralympic education has been provided at all public kindergartens, elementary schools, junior high schools, senior high schools, and special-needs education schools in Tokyo since 2016 (Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education, 2016b, 2022), but no such educational program has been developed for the Tokyo 2025 Deaflympics even though this Game will mark the 100th anniversary of its founding.

Although not on the same scale as before the Tokyo Games, Paralympic education still continues in Tokyo. Thus, including even some of the content related to the Deaflympics and SF in these educations may help to transform the attitudes of the next generations and help them understand the many facets of disability (sports). For example, prior to the Tokyo Paralympics, there were

examples of Paralympians visiting schools in Tokyo and students experiencing sport with Paralympians (Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education, 2016a, 2017) and a similar initiative could be undertaken by inviting Deaflympic and SF athletes. In such cases, Paralympians would need special equipment such as prosthetics, wheelchairs, or blind football balls, while athletes from Deaflympics and SF would not need such devices so there is even a higher feasibility to provide such education to each school.

In any case, as there is no incentive for the Games themselves to break out of their privileged status, it may be necessary for local and national governments to take the lead in seeking solutions to contribute to raising awareness about PwD and their sports, which are not represented in the Games.

Limitations

Although findings of this study were informative, some limitations should be acknowledged. The participants' psychiatric diagnoses were based on their self-report. We did not employ diagnostic screening to avoid the psychological distress associated with rediagnosis by medical personnel, in light of the situation in Japan where PsI still functions as a strong stigma (Yoshii, 2009). Therefore, in the future, it may be necessary to consider a method to perform diagnostic screening for better credibility for the study while avoiding psychological distress. Another limitation is the subject characteristics. As we focused on elite-level athletes in SF, our sample did not include SF players at the recreational level. As the recreational-level players may not care about hardworking and high performance as much, they may have different perceptions toward Paralympics. Thus, the results may not be generalized into recreational level SF players.

Conclusions

This study offered insight on how athletes with psychiatric impairments (PsI) perceive being (dis)empowered by the Paralympics. Consequently, it was suggested that the Games can exacerbate the symptoms of people and athletes with PsI through supercrip representation. We should also be concerned about the fact that the Games have become the standard of disability sport, and thus, there are no alternatives provided to serve wider disability communities in Japan.

The majority of problems Japanese with PsI discussed related to the Paralympic Games and Paralympians having a privileged position in society. If other disability sports events come into prominence in the future, they may offer different representational practices from the Games, and we may see events that do not disable and disempower people with PsI. Therefore, it is imperative to consider how to promote events other than the Games in order to solve the above problems while the Games themselves do not have the incentive to do so.

Notes

1. Impaired Muscle Power, Impaired Passive Range of Movement, Limb Deficiency, Leg Length Difference, Short Stature, Hypertonia, Ataxia, and Athetosis are eligible impairments and

generally described as PhI (IPC, n.d.), but, herein, we use the term "mobility impairment" in order to make the description consistent with the Japanese disability system.

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