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## **Destigmatisation through social sharing of emotions and empowerment:**

### **The case of disabled athletes and consumers of disability sports**

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## **Destigmatisation through social sharing of emotions and empowerment:**

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#### **Abstract**

This study examines the role of emotions and empowerment in the destigmatisation of disability. We draw on 12 in-depth interviews with professional disabled athletes and a netnography study of 221 YouTube comments from consumers of disability sport advertising. The findings show that both athletes and consumers share their own emotions or report on their perception of others' emotions to mutually empower themselves and each other, which reduces stigma related to disability. By integrating the literatures on stigma, emotions and empowerment, we reveal how consumers of advertising contribute to the destigmatisation of others' devalued social identities. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings related to advertising and inclusion are discussed.

**Keywords:** stigma identity management; disability; advertising; social media; emotions; social sharing of emotions

## **1. Introduction**

Many individuals possess social identities that carry stigma. Having a stigmatised identity has been associated with a range of negative outcomes, such as poorer health, lower psychological well-being and discrimination (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013; Stangl et al., 2019). Previous research has examined how individuals engage in strategies to reduce the stigma related to their devalued attributes (Richard & Hennekam, 2021). Further, scholars have shown that advertisements can reinforce or reduce the stigma related to behaviours such as sex work (Sanders, 2018) and have the ability to empower minority consumers (Tsai, 2011). Scholars have called for more research on the potential of advertising consumption to aid in the destigmatisation of a tainted social identity (Ho & O'Donohoe, 2014). Research shows that the stigma associated with certain social identities, such as disability, tend to elicit unpleasant emotional responses such as pity and sadness, accentuating the sense of 'otherness' (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Silva & Howe, 2012). However, could viewing advertisements and sharing emotions trigger feelings of self- and other-empowerment that lead to the destigmatisation of disability? This study aims to shed light on the destigmatisation process that occurs through social sharing of emotions between disabled athletes and consumers who view advertising related to this social stigma. Specifically, we focus on disabled athletes and consumers of social media content related to the Paralympics. Although previous studies have explored the motivations for disability sport consumption (Cottingham et al., 2014) as well as the way in which disabled individuals attempt to decrease the stigma related to their disability (Richard & Hennekam, 2021), we do not know how consumers and disabled individuals mutually and interactively empower each other through social sharing of emotions, thus serving to destigmatise disability. This is an important gap, as empowerment has been argued to be an iterative process influenced by the social context in which one evolves (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). However, the mutually co-creative nature of empowerment and the interactive nature

of emotion sharing necessitate the simultaneous study of the perspectives of both disabled individuals and consumers of disability sport advertising.

Further, little is known about the role marketing communications play in the destigmatisation of stigmatised populations, despite work advocating for the potential importance of such communications in enhancing equality, diversity and inclusion (Bartsch et al., 2018). The present study draws on 12 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with disabled athletes as well as a netnography of social media comments of individuals consuming (watching and commenting on) a disability sport advertisement (the ‘Yes I Can’ ad provided for the 2016 Paralympic Games) in order to reveal the interrelated nature of empowerment and its destigmatising effects. We formulate the following research questions:

1. What impact do consumers of disability sport advertisements have on the destigmatisation of disability?
2. What role does social sharing of emotions play in the empowerment of both disabled athletes and consumers of disability sport?

We make two contributions. First, we contribute to the stigma identity management literature by revealing how *others*—in our case, consumers of disability sport advertising—contribute to the destigmatisation of disabled athletes through feelings of empowerment and social sharing of emotions on social media platforms. The role of consumers in the process of destigmatisation is not well-understood but holds potentially important implications for the field of marketing and consumption in light of increasing calls for equality, diversity and inclusion.

Second, we add to the growing body of literature on the role of emotions in the process of destigmatisation. Our study finds that the consumption of advertising content can evoke social and self-transcendent emotions that viewers can then share with others via social media. Similarly, disabled athletes share their emotions and their perception of the emotions others

experience during a sports event. The sharing of emotions (one's own or others') creates a sense of connectedness that has an empowering effect on both the consumers and the disabled athletes, ultimately leading to the destigmatisation of disability in the context of sports. Thus, we show that feelings of empowerment and, consequently, destigmatisation can result from the interpersonal process of social sharing of emotions.

Our paper is structured as follows: We present our theoretical anchoring, provide an overview of the relevant literature and outline our methodology. Then, we present our conceptual model based on analysis of the narratives from our in-depth interviews and netnographic data. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, in which we outline our theoretical and practical contributions along with limitations and ideas for further research.

## **2. Theoretical anchoring**

To inform our study, we integrate the literature streams on emotions, stigma identity management and empowerment. These three bodies of literature, outlined below, are rarely studied concomitantly; however, they were all relevant to the interpretation of our findings.

### **2.1 *Emotions***

Emotions have traditionally been conceptualised as intrapersonal processes. However, over time research has firmly established the inherently social and interpersonal nature of emotions, as individuals express their emotions to elicit reactions from others through a process of social sharing (Rimé et al., 1998). Social sharing of emotions can be defined as an interpersonal process in which individuals who experience an emotional event engage with others to discuss this event and their reactions to it (Rimé et al., 1991). Multiple studies have shown that individuals have a strong tendency to share their emotions with others after an emotional experience (Rimé, 2009, Rimé et al., 2020). Approximately 80% to 95% of

emotional experiences are shared with others, regardless of whether the experience is positive or negative (Rimé et al., 1991). However, the stronger the emotions that are experienced, the higher the likelihood that the individual will share them with others (Luminet et al., 2000). It is important to note that ‘others’ can refer to people one has never met or does not know (Rimé et al., 1991). Further, the self-reported reasons why individuals engage in the social sharing of emotions have been identified (Rimé, 2007). Examples include venting, obtaining support, eliciting advice or clarification, arousing empathy, bonding and receiving attention from others. As exposure to the social sharing of an emotion is in itself an emotion-eliciting event, the receiver is, in turn, likely to share that experience with still other people, a phenomenon called ‘secondary social sharing of emotions’ (Christophe & Rimé, 1997). Once again, the stronger the emotions, the higher the likelihood that they will be shared (Rimé et al., 2020).

Self-transcendent emotions can be defined as a classification of human emotions that orient our personal selves outwards, such as towards other peoples’ needs (Fredrickson, 2013; Stellar et al., 2017; Van Cappellen & Rimé, 2014). Emotions that are considered self-transcending include awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), elevation (Haidt, 2003), gratitude (Ma et al., 2017), compassion (Goetz et al., 2010) and admiration (Onu et al., 2016). Scholars have argued that these emotions boost a sense of connection with others (Stellar et al., 2017; Van Cappellen & Rimé, 2014), are associated with prosocial behavioural tendencies (Stellar et al., 2017) and provide a greater sense of identification with others (Pizarro et al., 2021).

Social media enables the social sharing of emotions (Liu et al., 2021), which can result in negative emotional experiences (e.g., in response to provocation or ‘trolling’ practices; Buckels et al., 2014), and positive experiences (e.g., inspiration; Dale et al., 2020). Research has found that social media can be a source of self-transcendent emotional experiences (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019) such as elevation, gratitude, awe and kindness (Dale et al.,



2020; Oliver et al., 2018). Further, self-transcendent emotions such as empathic closeness, feeling moved and elevation have been identified in viewers' responses to disability sport advertising (Bartsch et al., 2018). This perspective is an interesting alternative to the traditional 'supercrip' narrative used for promoting disability sport (i.e., the notion that disabled athletes have superhuman abilities), which has been found to create emotional responses that increase a sense of disconnection and otherness (Kearney et al., 2019; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Silva & Howe, 2012).

### **2.3 *Stigma identity management***

Stigma is most often defined as a deeply discrediting attribute that reduces an individual 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Individuals are often stigmatised when they are associated with a social identity that is devalued in a particular context, including the workplace (Crocker et al., 1998). A consequence of stigmatisation in the context of work is that individuals might suffer negative repercussions such as discrimination, status loss, and stereotyping (Jones & King, 2014; Luu, 2019). As such, individuals who hold a stigmatised identity will draw from a range of identity management tactics that serve to construct a more positive self-concept. Most previous research on the management of stigmatised identities has focused on the outcomes of having a stigmatised identity as well as on the different tactics individuals use to reduce their stigma (Beudaert et al., 2016; Clair et al., 2005; Ragins, 2008; Roberts, 2005). However, the role that others, such as co-workers or consumers, play in destigmatisation is less understood (Liu & Kozinets, 2021). The present study thus builds on previous work by examining the way in which consumers of disability advertisement contribute to the destigmatisation of disabled athletes. In the context of our study, we define destigmatisation as an interactive process in

which a stigmatizing attribute is challenged or redefined through a process of social sharing of emotions.

#### **2.4 Empowerment**

Empowerment focuses on overcoming inequalities through individuals' strengths and the resources needed to accomplish positive change (Zimmerman, 2000). It is therefore central to improving people's lives. We define empowerment as an iterative process in which people who lack power set personally meaningful goals towards increasing power, take actions towards these goals and observe and reflect on the impact of these actions, drawing on their evolving self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence related to the goal (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). With regard to disability, empowerment has been argued to consist of reducing social barriers, changing perceptions of disability and stimulating political action (Barnes, 2014). Feelings of empowerment have been linked to a range of positive outcomes for individuals such as greater levels of self-confidence (Comeig Ramírez et al., 2016) and well-being (González-Velázquez et al., 2020).

Empowerment is often positioned as an iterative process that is dynamically constructed in interaction with others (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). In the present study, we examine how empowerment is co-constructed by disabled athletes and consumers of disability sport through the social sharing of emotions.

### **3. Methods**

This study investigates how the experiences of disabled athletes and consumers of disability sport advertising interactively lead to mutual empowerment and destigmatisation of disability through social sharing of emotions. Because we are interested in the subjective experiences of both disabled athletes and disability sport consumers, we adopt a constructivist approach. We

report on two studies. Study 1 consists of 12 in-depth interviews with disabled athletes. Study 2 is a netnographic study of YouTube comments on a disability sport video ad for the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio. Our mixed-methods approach enabled us to capture the narratives of both athletes and consumers and reveal the interrelated and co-constructed ways in which individuals make sense of the world around them.

Our desire to explore this research context stems from personal and familial experiences of disabilities and previous exchanges with the disability sport organisations involved in the study. This also helped us avoid passive and unconscious power-relational treatment, which has previously been found in the discourse of non-disabled researchers investigating disability groups (Stone & Priestley, 1996).

### ***3.1 Study context***

This study focuses on a disability sport advertisement. Sport activities are argued to be highly experiential for both participants and spectators (Helleu, 2012) and tend to be a positive experience for both the players and the viewers (United Nations, n.d.). Further, research shows that sport activities are rich in symbolic meaning and carry identity and social implications (Shipway et al., 2016; Tsiotsou et al., 2016; Wu & Liang, 2011), making this a suitable context to study empowerment and destigmatisation.

### ***3.2 Sample***

For Study 1, we targeted athletes with physical and medical conditions, such as individuals with limb prostheses and transplant recipients, who participate in sport competitions. We contacted several disability sport organisations at international, national and local levels, asking them to identify athletes whom they believed would be willing to participate in the research. These organisations were enthusiastic about facilitating the research process and

contacted athletes on behalf of the research team. The informants, who were located in France, England, Germany and Brazil, were interviewed in person, via videoconference or over the phone in English, French or Portuguese. We conducted 12 semi-structured interviews (5 women and 7 men) with athletes from France (7), Brazil (2), Germany (2) and the United Kingdom (1), most of whom had participated in Paralympic or World Transplant Games, with others having participated in sport events at the national or local level.

### **3.3 Procedures**

We explained the aim of Study 1 to the interviewees, stressed the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation and had all participants sign a consent form. Four interviews were conducted face-to-face/over videoconference and eight by telephone, depending on the preference and geographical location of the interviewees. Although telephone interviews might be less rich in visual cues, they have the advantage of making people feel relaxed, making it easier to disclose sensitive information (Block & Erskine 2012; Novick, 2008). Further, the interviewers were mindful to ensure that their understanding of what had been said aligned with the interviewee's intention. In addition, because we were personally concerned with the topic of disability and shared our personal accounts, we built trust and created a safe space in which interviewees could develop their narratives, providing rich data (Irvine et al., 2013). The interviews were carried out between February and June 2018. They lasted between 45 and 139 minutes and were recorded with the help of a digital voice recorder.

The purpose of the interviews was to capture narratives of the personal experiences and emotions associated with participating in disability sport activities as well as the athletes' perceptions of how their engagement in these activities resonates with viewers. The interviewees were asked to introduce themselves and tell their personal life story. We then

asked several probing questions to gain more insights into participants' various social identities, the meaning of both their disability and sport activities in their lives, the feedback they received and/or cherished from observers regarding their investment in sport and their potential social role in the community. We aimed for a reflexive interview process, in which the questions were adapted according to what had already been said.

The goal of Study 2 was to shed light on the impact of consumers of disability advertising on the stigma of disabled individuals. To do so, we conducted a netnographic study on the YouTube users who liked, shared and commented on the 'Yes I Can' ad for the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. We chose the community created by 'Self Confidence Motivation' on the 'Yes I Can' ad because it is one of the most recent and most viewed advertisements relating to disability sport: it has over 9 million views in the Channel 4 community<sup>i</sup> and 700,000 views in the YouTube community and is noteworthy for the richness of the viewers' posts (Kozinets, 2002). The International Paralympic Committee adopted the 'supercrip' narrative in the conception of the advertising for the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, where Paralympic athletes were represented as having superhuman qualities. This approach was a follow-up to the 'Meet the Superhumans' campaign, which was used to promote the 2012 London Paralympics. The ad shows people with various backgrounds and disabilities, including Paralympic athletes, performing many activities (e.g., playing instruments, competing in sport, doing ordinary tasks). The emphasis of the ad is on the individuals' outstanding performance in these activities, referring to them as 'superhumans'. The ad integrates an upbeat and motivating soundtrack, Sammy Davis Jr.'s 'Yes I Can'. We used web-scraping software to extract 221 YouTube comments on this ad available in July 2018. YouTube allows users to interact with each other through posting, liking, disliking, sharing and commenting on videos. These discussions are public and accompanied by social processes, such as the exchange of ideas and emotions towards the videos, the comments and

the participants, which can develop a sense of community. For these reasons, other studies have also chosen YouTube as a field for studying online communities (Cronin & Cocker, 2019).

### **3.4 Data analysis**

For Study 1, all interviews were transcribed in the original language, with subsequent standard back-and-forth translation by two individuals native in both languages (Brislin, 1986). The researchers worked individually and collectively in a lengthy process of coding for each of the athletes' narratives and across the whole corpus, comparing interviews and discussing emerging themes and links with theoretical perspectives (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). This process included listening to the audio recordings, reading transcriptions multiple times, reflecting, and creating and revising codes and tables of themes that represented meaningful and emotional experiences to the athletes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Spiggle, 1994). This process was undertaken with the help of NVivo software. Our experience with different theoretical and methodological approaches, as well as our familiarity with a wide range of sport and disability experiences, helped ensure alternative and complementary readings of the narrative data (Figueiredo et al., 2017).

For Study 2, we position social media advertising as a semiotic resource with which viewers can co-create emotional experiences with personal and social meanings (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006; Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Scott, 1994) by choosing, viewing, liking, commenting on and sharing videos. Netnography takes an in-depth, fundamentally human approach to consumer research and relies on an anthropological perspective when analysing consumer experiences relating to symbolism and identity (Kozinets, 2018). Thus, similar to traditional forms of ethnographic research, data generated by online communities can enable us to capture viewers' narratives. Netnographic narratives express emotional

reflexivity (Holmes, 2015) through participants' reflections and comments on their experiences. With this in mind, and again working individually and collectively to read and reflect on the posts, we identified experiential themes in the viewers' comments that represented meanings with personal and social outcomes. Two of the authors coded the corpus, and they discussed these codes with the other two authors until consensus was reached. We coded language of feelings (e.g., 'I feel that...', 'I love...'), explicit terms that express emotions (e.g., 'anger', 'sadness') and images that express emotions, including metaphors and figures of speech. Indeed, Kharuhayothin and Kerrane's (2018) research indicates that emotions can be captured through exclamations and images such as '*Oh God, no...*' or '*it was like some kind of prison...*', as well as directly through adjectives and nouns. In the case of our interviews, numerous adjectives ('*happy*', '*pleased*'), nouns ('*pride*', '*pleasure*', '*pain*') and images ('*head-spinning*', '*eye-opening*') were used to narrate emotions.

### **3.5 Reflexivity**

We acknowledge our own role as researchers throughout the research process because our backgrounds, values, beliefs and biases may have influenced all stages of the study. Indeed, as we are the primary 'instrument' of our data collection and analysis, some reflexive practices are in order. Scholars have stressed the need for reflexive practices when studying disability sport (Townsend & Cushion, 2021). First, we reflect on our reasons for the study, which were not linked to personal motivations but arose from increased media focus on disability sport that caught our attention and made us curious. Second, we openly share and reflect on our own backgrounds: all researchers self-identify as European women, three of whom either are disabled themselves or have family with a disability. Third, the research team kept a research diary throughout the study (King & Brooks, 2018). This diary consisted of observational

notes, methodological notes and theoretical notes composed each time an interview was conducted. The methodological note reflected on how the interview went, for example, whether the interviewee was talkative or whether a lot of probing was needed. The theoretical note consisted of initial ideas, concepts and explanations of what the research team had found so far and was used during the data analysis.

#### **4. Findings**

The narratives from the disabled athletes and the disability sport consumers reveal that it is through the social sharing of emotions that they interactively empower themselves and each other. We integrate the bodies of literature on emotions, empowerment and stigma identity management as we develop our conceptual model. Our model highlights how disabled athletes and consumers of disability sport advertisements mutually engage with one another. The disabled athletes' experience of others' emotions and the consumers' experience of their own emotions were shared, leading to feelings of empowerment, which in turn result in the destigmatisation of disability in the context of sport (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

##### ***4.1 Perceptions of others' emotions: disabled athletes***

The disabled athletes reported on a range of individual, social and self-transcendent emotions in their narratives. They frequently mentioned joy, happiness, pride and feelings of belonging to the valued social group of disabled athletes. The athletes revealed these emotions in the context of their experiences of others' emotional responses to their game. The realisation of



the others' (viewers' and other athletes') emotional experiences elicited feelings of empowerment for themselves and others.

***Joy and happiness to be the inspiration:*** The athletes reported experiencing joy and happiness when they realised that other individuals, disabled or not, found hope and inspiration by viewing their game. The athletes were aware of the impact their accomplishments could make on others: *'I think they're surprised at what I can give. They couldn't imagine that I could do that sort of thing'* (Sara). One participant shared that she experienced happiness in anticipation that her game would elicit interest in disability sports and inspire others to be *'excited and also ... encouraged to do something themselves ... seeing that, like, Paralympic athletes, you know, they overcome something, they haven't given up and therefore [are] inspiring others also to not give up and make something out of whatever happened to them'* (Anette). This was cited as a source of satisfaction: *'They'd never seen it before, and then they comment, they think "Oh yeah, it's slow, it's like not that fast-paced", but then they realise how fast-paced it is and how much action there is, they ... are really impressed, they like it: "Oh yeah, like it's so much cooler than regular basketball"'* (Anette). In a similar vein, another interviewee recalled, *'Just like people see me as an example, I see other people as examples too, that overcome themselves, that try their best to do their best, so, let's see, it's an exchange of information and experiences that people have, and all of this is a good, positive side ... it's a mutual admiration'* (Alexandre).

***Pride to legitimise and validate one's athletic identity:*** Surpassing sport targets and winning competitions led to shared feelings of pride in individual and collective achievements, which is a social emotion that enhanced self-confidence. This positive emotion is experienced as a result of the achievements themselves and is strengthened by the achievements' symbolic value as a triumph over a negative sense of self. This is evident for Bastien: *'Each time I improve my time, each time ..., it gives me back my confidence, my self-confidence'*. Physical

limitations associated with a disability heightened the emotional reward of victory by affirming a positive sense of self and also functioned as a way to feel validated as a sports person: *'He [my opponent] was completely tired at the end of the match.... I felt a bit pleased with myself when I told them I've had a transplant'* (Didier). Sport victories carry a feeling of heroism (Neil et al., 2011) which is multiplied in the case of disability, such that Diane even compares it to reaching *'the Holy Grail'*. However, not everyone experienced their sport victories as heroic, but reported on the fact they were *'just like others'*, again with the aim to be perceived as a legitimate athlete. As one interviewee explained, *'I see myself as someone "normal". When I look at my performances, I constantly want to improve them, like everyone'* (Alain). Relatedly, another interviewee said, *'At the end of a game, the commentator says things like, "How brave they are..." and we look at each other and we feel like saying, "Yeah, well no, actually, we're just doing sports, don't think we're super brave or something, we're just doing sports, that's all!"'* (Albert). While they recognised the need for adaptations in the sport they play, they emphasised their similarities with non-disabled athletes: *'Depending on one's disability and depending on the sport, you need to make some adaptations. But once that's done, we're normal sportspeople'* (Manon).

***Feelings of belonging for social bonding:*** Apart from joy, happiness and pride, the disability sport events also imbued a strong sense of belonging to a valued social group as disabled athletes. They explained that by expressing these emotions, they felt closer to others, leading to social bonding. Several athletes presented those sport events as opportunities for camaraderie with fellow disabled athletes: *'We are happy to meet up at the Games. It's a social venue and a sporty challenge but totally fair play and it's really nice'* (Alexandre). Similarly, one interviewee noted, *'We all share something, have something in common [being transplanted], which leads to some complicity. We build close relationships very rapidly'* (Alain).

## 4.2 *Emotions of consumers of disability sports*

A range of social, individual and self-transcendent emotions emerged from viewer comments on the 'Yes I Can' ad for the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio, such as gratitude, admiration, inspiration, hope, pride and sadness.

***Gratitude to signal feelings of closeness:*** Gratitude is a self-transcendent emotion, which implies that its expression is aimed outwards. This emotion was widely shared with others to spread the positive feeling it gave them: *'The ad gives you a great feeling I loved it and have played it so many times and sent it on to many people'* (Person 3). Commenting and sharing are social acts which not only make people feel good but also are a way to signal their feelings of closeness to other disabled individuals: *'I have spina bifida too!!, but I was lucky enough not to be in a wheel chair. Makes me feel kind of more blessed (no offence intended off-course)'* (Person 4).

***Admiration and inspiration to show sympathy and support:*** Viewing the ad had a motivating effect, through feelings of admiration and inspiration, two other self-transcending emotions in the narratives portrayed. The social goal of sharing these emotions is to show sympathy and support for disabled athletes. In their comments, consumers expressed their respect and awe: *'Wonderful. Kinda makes you never want to say "can't" ever again'* (Person 5). Further, they found the ad to be inspiring, evoking emotions of enthusiasm and hope: *'Yes, I can! Thank you very much for the beautiful lessons of life!'* (Person 7). This led to self-reflection and enhanced the belief that anything is possible: *'Wow! Amazing Talent from those who choose to believe "Yes I Can" thank you to The Superhumans for all your inspiration'* (Person 6).

***Pride and sadness to vent:*** Some comments described the viewers' personal stories, serving as a way for them to vent: *'I am typing this with my nose. I was born without limbs,*

*and I'm home alone so noone can help me! Haha, but as you can see, YES I CAN* (Person 8). Such comments signalled pride in their personal achievements despite challenging circumstances, often in a light-hearted and humorous way. In addition to pride in sharing one's personal stories, we also identified negative emotions, such as sadness, as consumers shared their personal situations: *'My relative has a disability and im about to cry i need a call him'* (Person 18) and *'Having a son (now deceased) who suffered from a disability, this was often said to him especially in high school and college'* (Person 10).

#### **4.3. Empowerment: an interactive co-construction through sharing emotions**

Disabled athletes' engagement with sport has led them to experience joy, pride and a new sense of belonging, which has empowered them, enhanced their sense of self-worth and enabled them to feel close to others. *'She [a fellow disabled athlete] comes back, often she wins the tournament, that can happen, eh. Well...it already happened to me ... and I compare it with being really close to death and being born again, and we have a will that is head-spinning'* (Diane). Further, the athletes also aimed to inspire and motivate other disabled individuals to participate in sport: *'I'd be pleased to see that a disabled person says, "Ah yes, it's possible to do this, why wouldn't I try it?" I'd like it when a person comes and tries'* (Alain).

The emotions the consumers experienced as they were watching and reflecting on the ad also had an empowering effect on themselves—who they felt they are and can be. Many comments expressed determination to motivate others as well as themselves: *'The body is able if the spirit is willing! Viva humanity !!'* (Person 11). Viewers often use bold print for emphasis, such as *'This shows that we can **beat the impossible** in any form or state we are in. Yes we can do anything if you believe in it'* (Person 12). They reflected on the ad's inspiring nature, which extends beyond sports to all areas of life: *'I keep coming back to this video, it's*

*so incredibly inspiring. I always think of this video just for life, not just sports. It goes for everything'* (Person 55). Comments facilitated motivation sharing and empowerment: *'With this video, we have to change the statement "sky is the limit" to "**Mind is the limit**"'* (Person 13). However, as they shared their emotions, opinions and stories, they also contributed to the empowerment of the disabled athletes in the ad through their expressions of admiration, respect and hope. Thus, we observed a mutual interactive pattern in which the consumption of the advertisement had an empowering effect on the viewers as well as the disabled athletes.

#### **4.5. Destigmatisation**

We can observe that the consumers of disability sports and disabled athletes not only express their emotions for themselves but also do so to elicit a reaction from others. More specifically, the viewers of the ad expressed gratitude and remarked on the inspirational and motivational nature of the ad. By showing their support and sympathy for the disabled athletes, they indirectly strengthened and reinforced the visibility and positive image of disabled athletes as a social group. Similarly, the disabled athletes reported on the empowering effect of the emotions of others in response to their game: others' emotions validated them as legitimate sports people, and they were pleased to inspire and motivate others by being a role model.

**Disabled athletes:** The participants reflected on the destigmatising effect of disability sport on disability as an attribute. First, they highlighted the increasing visibility: *'Every time we organized an event, we tried to contact the press to tell them, "Well, the club is going to organize a competition at such and such a level, in such and such a discipline". So, there was an article in the newspaper.... And we realized that every time we wrote an article in the newspaper, we got contacted afterwards and people said to us, "We didn't know that it existed"'* (Michelle). Further, they aspired to change the negative attitudes and preconceived notions about disability. As the following interviewee explained, *'It's telling*

*people, well look, we're transplanted, but ... we can still do things.... We can do sports, we can do things even after. It's forgetting that he has the transplant. That's what it's all about* (Bastien). Another interviewee mentioned, *'I am a normal person; do I have restrictions? Yes, but I am a normal person'* (Ricardo). The disabled athletes involved in this study reported on a change in the perception of disability: *'There is this image of disabled people who are completely helpless and stay home. However, that image has evolved in the past 10–15 years. The mentality is changing, as non-disabled people are increasingly involved and engaged with disability'* (Adrien).

**Consumers:** Watching the ad indeed changed consumers' perception of and attitude towards disability, as their comments showed that they saw individual human beings, without mentioning or emphasizing the disability. One person wrote, *'NOT EVERY disabled person can do these things either. These are just amazing people... PEOPLE... why highlight the disability?'* (Person 33). Similarly, another consumer reported, *'This is not about disability this is about CRAZY talent'* (Person 34). Rather than seeing and focusing on the disability, the viewers emphasised the way they are similar to the disabled athletes they watched. The word 'our' was used, demonstrating a sense of inclusivity: *'Very proud of our Paralympics. Thank you always'* (Person 35). In a similar vein, viewers' comments reflect social and societal concerns: *'BEST advert EVER! Love it love it love it, finally some brilliant work is being done on behalf of **our** challenged citizens and Paralympic super humans. Thanks BBC4 for this ray of light of positivity and hope'* (Person 14). Commenters mentioned elements of shared humanity (Pohling & Diessner, 2016), advocating for normative and humanitarian values (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) around inclusion and appealing to moral values by encouraging positive portrayals of disability sport. Through their comments, they spread these humanitarian and social values (Ji et al., 2019), thus contributing to the destigmatisation of disability.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings from our in-depth interviews and a netnographic study reveal that disability sport athletes and consumers of disability sport advertising interactively empower themselves and each other through the social sharing of their own and other's emotions, leading to the destigmatisation of disability.

Our findings suggest that watching and commenting on a disability sport ad can elicit a range of individual, social and self-transcendent emotions, such as gratitude, pride, admiration and inspiration. As the consumers shared their emotions and personal stories in the form of comments on YouTube, they expressed support and sympathy and showed feelings of closeness with the athletes. By sharing their emotions, the commenters felt inspired and motivated, enhancing feelings of empowerment and agency. This is in line with previous research showing that social media viewers are moved by portrayals of triumph over obstacles and exceptional successes (Dale et al., 2020; Uetake & Yang, 2020). In comparison, the disabled athletes reported on their perceptions of the emotions of others in response to their game and how this triggers joy/happiness, pride and feelings of belonging. Their achievements not only enhanced their self-confidence but also gave them a new, positive social identity to draw on. The positive comments on YouTube, although not directly addressed to them, reinforced these emotions. Consumers' feelings of pride, gratitude and admiration for the athletes in the ad are self-transcendent emotions. Self-transcendent emotions are outward-focused social emotions elicited in response to recognition of others' achievements (Dale et al., 2020; Ji & Raney, 2020; Shiota et al., 2014). Indeed, previous research has shown that social media can be a source of self-transcendent emotional experiences (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019). Whereas the 'supercrip' narrative often used for promoting disability sport has been found to lead to feelings of otherness (Kearney, 2019;

Silva & Howe, 2012), the emotions experienced by the consumers did the exact opposite: they highlighted viewers' similarities to and shared humanity with the disabled athletes, decreasing the stigma related to disability in the context of sports.

### **5.1. *Theoretical contributions***

We make two theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on stigma and emotions by showing how consumers indirectly contribute to the destigmatisation of disability through the social sharing of emotions, even if they are not personally affected by this stigmatising attribute. More specifically, we build on the existing body of literature on stigma identity management that describes the strategies individuals use to decrease their own stigma. Our studies highlight the role that others—in our case, consumers of disability sport—play in the destigmatisation process. While previous research has shown that media that elicits empathy can have a destigmatising effect (Batson et al., 2002; Oliver et al., 2018), we show that the emotions consumers express and share through their comments on social media (e.g., YouTube) can have this effect as well.

Second, we contribute to the emotions literature by highlighting the role of emotions in the process of empowerment. More specifically, we reveal the co-constructive and interactive manner in which empowerment occurs. Consumers of media content and the individuals depicted in the ad indirectly empower themselves and each other in a mutual manner. It is through joy, pride, inspiration, admiration, feelings of belonging, gratitude and pride that both groups feel empowered. While most studies have focused on empathy and have shown that empathetic closeness is most strongly related to destigmatisation (Bartsch et al., 2018; Oliver, 2013), we extend this line of research by identifying several emotions that create connections between viewers and the individuals depicted in an advertisement that



change the perceptions of and attitudes towards disability. Each group contributes to its own sense of empowerment and co-creates empowerment for the other group.

### **5.2. *Managerial implications***

Our research has implications for social marketing managers who use advertising as a means of changing public opinion about stigmatised groups. The findings show that it is through sharing individual, social and self-transcendent emotions, similar concerns, objectives or personal experiences that consumers can contribute to the reduction in stigma of an attribute such as disability. Whereas most research on advertising focuses on whether an ad elicits positive or negative emotions, our study reveals that the emotions themselves are less important than the social sharing of emotions. Thus, the success of an ad in this context should be evaluated on the basis of its ability to establish emotional bridges. We suggest the use of ad narratives that focus on goals such as empowerment, self-realisation and belongingness.

### **5.3. *Limitations and suggestions for further research***

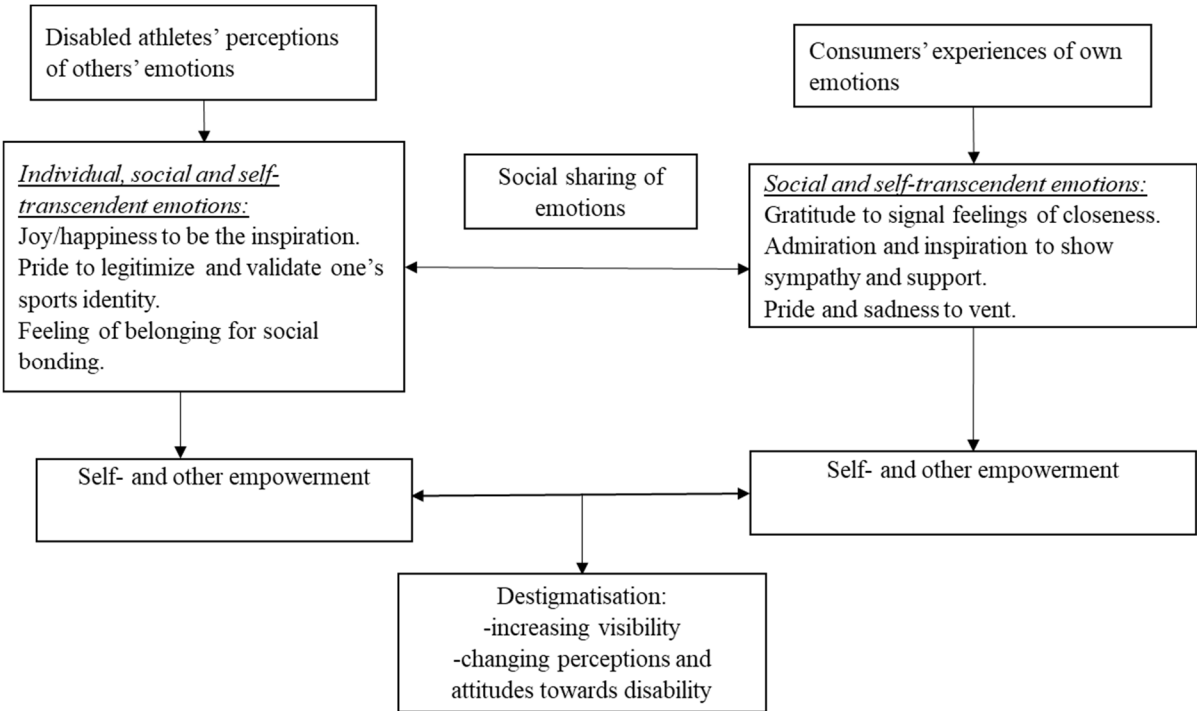
Through our studies, we point to the role of social sharing of emotions in the process of empowerment and reveal the interactive and co-constructed nature in which the process of destigmatisation of disability occurs in the context of sport. Several limitations and suggestions for future research can be formulated.

First, although our findings suggest that viewers' perceptions of and attitudes towards disability might have changed after watching the ad, we do not know whether these changes last over time. Consequently, future research could take a longitudinal perspective to examine whether the destigmatisation is long-lasting or short-lived.

Second, we answer a call for more research on several types of disabilities (Bartsch et al., 2018) by including a range of visible and invisible conditions in our study. However, whether the findings hold true for other stigmas related to ethnicity, age or sexual orientation, for example, needs to be studied. Further, the qualitative nature of our study does not allow for generalisations. Although we interviewed athletes who have been involved in a variety of disability sport events at international, national and local levels, they do not necessarily represent the overall disability sport population. In addition, as our sample included individuals from France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Brazil, we acknowledge that cultural differences, such as variations in legislation and perceptions regarding disability, may have impacted the findings. While no noteworthy cultural differences emerged from the findings, more research is needed to explore potential variations.

Finally, we focused on the ‘Yes I Can’ ad for the 2016 Paralympic Games. This is a highly emotional ad, and its features, including the music, have influenced consumers’ perceptions and emotions. It would therefore be interesting to study whether other media content and types also have destigmatising effects. More insight on aspects that foster feelings of closeness and empowerment, leading to a reduction in stigma, would allow marketing communications to play a more proactive role in creating a more equal and inclusive world.

**Figure 1: Conceptual model of destigmatisation through social sharing of emotions and empowerment.**



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<sup>i</sup> The comments for the ‘Yes I Can’ ad were disabled on the original YouTube post by BBC Four, which is why we opted to study the post by the Self Confidence Motivation community.