Article

Insider Perspectives on the Sustainability of the Malaysian and Singaporean Paralympic Movements

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Abstract: The paper reports on in-depth qualitative interviews with six participants involved in the Paralympic movement: One past and three present Para-athletes as well as high-ranking administrative representatives from both National Paralympic Committees of Malaysia and Singapore. These insiders share experiences and opinions on the local movements, media, and measures for future developments in the South East Asian region. Findings suggest that the Para-movements in Malaysia and Singapore are promoting the sustainability of the movement through funding opportunities and educational campaigns. Moreover, links between the persons with disabilities (PWD) community and the business landscape are increasing the inclusive culture in these societies. However, improvements can be made to promote further sustainability: more interaction between the Para-athletes and Paralympic Committees; higher remuneration for Paralympic gold medal winners in Singapore; greater media representation of Para-sports; and more visibility of PWD in public spaces.

Keywords: National Paralympic Committees of Malaysia and Singapore; Paralympian; people with disabilities; sustainability

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1. Introduction

The Paralympics is one of the most important international sporting events today. Cottingham et al. (2015) point out that in 2012, there were around 5 million downloads on social media sites, and about 100 television channels covering the event [1]. According to the International Paralympic Committee's website [2], there were 4328 athletes from 159 countries at the 2016 Paralympics. That Paralympic Games attracted 2.15 million spectators making Rio 2016 the second biggest Games in terms of paying ticket holders after London 2012 [2]. The Paralympics' social agenda is to improve "attitudes and awareness of disability sport by shifting spectators' expectations from seeing only the disability to watching sporting excellence" [2]. Substantial athlete and spectator participation, as well as widespread and effective coverage of the Paralympics, is essential if this aim is to be met.

Policies to deal with disablism and discrimination against persons with disabilities (PWD) have been implemented in Malaysia and Singapore. In Malaysia, the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 was put in place to address the discrimination towards individuals with disabilities. The Act recognizes "that persons with disabilities are entitled to equal opportunity and protection and assistance in all circumstances" [3]. In Singapore, in December 2012, the state signed the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Since this official support, PWD have become more visible in recent years. However, despite these policies, there are still issues with disablism, as Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong admitted: "In retrospect, we are always too slow. I think we have to continue to move. It's not easy because it's not just money. There's also the trained people and the social attitudes which have to shift" [4] (p. 137). The same seems to be true for Malaysia. Ang and Yeo stated that: "Disabled persons in Malaysia are deprived of

rights due to public apathy and prejudice, as well as failure of society and the authority to provide the necessary resources and infrastructure for them to function independently” [5].

The paper takes a Social Model of Disability approach and reports on in-depth qualitative interviews with six participants involved in the Malaysian and Singaporean Paralympic movements to find out about their opinions on the development of attitudes towards PWD through the Paralympic movement. These insiders talk about the media and policies in the South East Asian region.

1.1. Problems for the Paralympic Movement

This paper makes a distinction between the Social and the Medical Models of Disability. The Medical Model of Disability perceives PWD as a physical problem. Individuals are viewed as imperfect [6] and requiring assistance [7]. This view creates stigma towards PWD. Negative cultural norms are reinforced by the medical model, and further fostered by societal forces [8]. In contrast, the Social Model of Disability approaches disability as a social construct. Prejudice, institutional discrimination, and inaccessible infrastructure are problems for PWD, which lead to social exclusion and stereotyping [8]. Proponents of the Social Model of Disability seek to fight “underlying disablist values” [9] and to remove environmental barriers. Paralympics activists hope to use the sport to improve attitudes and break down social barriers by shifting spectators’ expectations from seeing only the disability to watching sporting excellence [9].

Despite the growth in popularity of the Paralympics in the last decade, Purdue [10] and Smith [11] argue that the Paralympics are still marginalized as they are marketed at a level incomparable to the Olympics. In this case, the Paralympics may have unintended consequences. Hardeep and McCarthy [12] report findings from a survey after the London 2012 Paralympics. More than half (58%) of PWD said that they had not noticed any change in people’s attitudes towards them; 22% stated that attitudes had become more discriminatory. One reason for this is reported to be the increasing gap between the Paralympians and the general community of PWD [13] as technically enabled Paralympians do not appear representative of the majority group. It is probable that the public awe and respect given to these post-humans cannot really transfer to the everyday lives of ordinary PWD [14], far removed from these advances in biotechnology. For example, access to the Flex-Foot Cheetah, which is a prosthetic human foot replacement used by athletes is limited, as one single robotic limb costs approximately US\$ 18,000. A focus on athletes using these might produce an “achievement syndrome” [15] which distorts reality as it presents how PWD have succeeded beyond imagining. Paralympians might render the general community of PWD as challenged by their disabilities in comparison [16]. This unintended consequence has been referred to as the Paralympic Paradox [17].

Brooke [18] reports how, in the local press, Singaporean Paralympic swimmer Theresa Goh publicly states that the Olympics overshadow the Paralympics considerably: “I would still say that the general public thinks Paralympians are not as good or on par with able-bodied athletes”. Similarly, a paper analyzing the sporting experiences of para-athletes in Malaysia was published by Wilson and Khoo in 2013 [19]. A total of 123 Malaysian athlete participants (95 males and 28 females) of the Far East and South Pacific Games for the Disabled (FESPIC Games), the precursor to the Asian Para Games, were asked to complete a questionnaire. Then, as a follow-up, and to provide in-depth data, focus group discussions with 14 para-athletes with disabilities were conducted. The findings from this sequential design demonstrated that elite athletes’ primary reasons for participation in sport were achievement/challenge, and competency/skill development. However, PWD also reported that facilities, equipment, and funding were problems to contend with on a daily basis. Additionally, the athletes stated that the government and public displayed negative attitudes towards PWD. Wilson and Khoo [19] concluded that there was disablism in Malaysia, and that even with some structural changes to improve accessibility in major cities, public and government, opinions had not instrumentally changed. The authors stated that by suggesting that to improve experiences, there was a need to have more

effective recruitment of Paralympians, and that local and national programs for elite sport development should be improved. The study from Wilson and Khoo dates back to 2013 but is the latest eliciting Malaysian elite athletes' views and experiences [19]. Therefore, a contemporary study of improvements in this country is much needed. Moreover, thus far, no similar studies to find out about Singaporean Paralympians' experiences and opinions have been conducted. These facts are important motivations for this study.

1.2. Media and the Paralympics

Hargreaves and Hardin [20] demonstrate that, according to Paralympians, the media is "partially responsible" for the lack of interest in the Paralympics. Athletes in Wilson and Khoo's research on Malaysian elite athlete with disabilities also convey this message [19]. One states: "I would like athletes with disabilities being appreciated in the same way as normal athletes" and "this sport does not get enough support from Malaysian citizens and the media". Cheong et al. [21] report that from 623 articles and 541 photographs of the Paralympics, from 11 different countries, including Malaysia and Singapore, only a small percentage (7.3%), were on the newspapers' front pages. Brooke [18], in the only research paper to explore the Singaporean media's representation of the local Paralympic movement, also confirms that the coverage of the event is significantly less than the Olympics coverage. In Singapore, there were only two hours of coverage of the Rio Paralympics per day compared to 12 hours of the Olympics. Furthermore, research demonstrates how othering is clearly present in the media coverage of Paralympians in Malaysia [19] and Singapore [18]. Brooke [18] points out how the PWD community tends to be framed by the Singaporean media at two poles: incapable or super-able. This confirms the results of several research projects [22–24]. It is also confirmed in Wilson and Khoo's research in Malaysia in which only 33% of athletes reported that television or the media had encouraged them to join and continue in sport [19]. Moreover, in a very recent study, Goggin [25] writes that the media stereotypes of disability reinforce the incapable narrative. The current study sought to extend these findings by investigating what Paralympian insiders themselves think about the media coverage of the Paralympics in Malaysia and Singapore. In particular, we question local Paralympians if they tend to be presented as either passive and needing to overcome challenge, or in terms of excessive achievement; we also ask what effective media coverage would be.

2. Materials and Methods

Ethical approval from the National University of Singapore and the University of Malaya was given for the study. Stakeholders in the Malaysian and Singaporean Paralympic landscape were interviewed asynchronously through email and synchronously, face-to-face. These nations are of particular importance as they are active members of the ASEAN Para Sports Federation which organizes the ASEAN Para Games. Both countries have supported disability sports in the region by providing sports equipment. Malaysia also took over as host of the 2009 ASEAN Para Games when Laos could not. The six insiders interviewed comprised two high ranking representatives, one from the Paralympic Committee of Malaysia (PCM) and another from the Singaporean National Paralympic Committee (SNPC). Participants also included one past Malaysian Para-athlete who had competed in a few Paralympics, and one government-funded Malaysian athlete qualified and training to compete in the next Paralympics. The other two Paralympic athletes were from Singapore: both have represented their country once in the Paralympics. Purposive sampling [26] was used to identify these interviewees. The criteria for Paralympian interviewees were the following: (a) they must have represented Malaysia or Singapore in the Paralympics or qualified for a forthcoming Paralympics, and (b) been an athlete for a continuous period of at least four years. The National Paralympic Committee representatives were also recruited purposefully to provide views of the governments' aims and developments in relation to the global Paralympic movement as an advocacy body. These representative hold high decision-making positions in these committees.

Although the number of research participants (four athletes and two official representatives) may appear relatively low, it is important to recognize that Singapore fielded only 13 and Malaysia 16 athletes in Rio 2016 Paralympics, and only a very small number of executive administrators work in the PCM and SNPC. Further, no in-depth interviews with high-ranking representatives of the PCM or the SNPC have yet been reported in academic research. Moreover, this is the first research paper that portrays experiences and opinions from Paralympic athletes from Malaysia and Singapore. One paper [19], from 2013, focused on elite athletes in Malaysia but these were competing in FESPIC Games. This lack of coverage of significant insider Paralympic voices gives great value to this study.

Consent to use the data for publication was given by each participant and their anonymity is ensured throughout the research paper to help to facilitate honest responses. In-depth interviews with Singaporean and Malaysian participants were held separately by the first and second authors. However, for both the general interview guide approach was employed [27]. When using this approach, it is important to ensure that the same questions are asked to each interviewee to help to standardize the data [27]. Participants were asked to provide their experiences and opinions of the sustainability of the Paralympic movements in Malaysia and Singapore, particularly regarding how the movement can empower PWD, help to break down social barriers, and contribute to the growth and strength of the global Paralympic movement. The following questions were asked to all participants: How does the Paralympic Council of Malaysia / Singaporean Paralympics Council contribute to the growth and strength of the Paralympic movement through its activities? What are attitudes in Malaysia/Singapore like towards Paralympians? How and to what extent do the Paralympics raise awareness of and help to break down social barriers and discrimination? How and to what extent do the Paralympics empower athletes? What does the Paralympic Council intend to do in the future to facilitate the Paralympic Values? Responses from interviews were then followed up with further questions and probes to elicit more details. This simultaneously provided a space for participants' freedom of expression. The interviewing strategy was found effective by both interviewers, as expansion of points as well as reiteration for clarity could be sought, if required.

The in-depth interviews produced a rich corpus of over 30,000 words. Participants from Singapore were first interviewed. The unstructured data from those interviews were then subject to thematic content analysis [28] and grouped into meaning units under five main themes: Four key trusts; Growth in public attention; Culture of inclusivity; Issues with remuneration; The public role of the Paralympian. Next, the second author interviewed participants from Malaysia, asking the same questions. Following collaborative discussions, refinements to coding and theme categorizing were made. For example, the initial code Four key trusts was found to be irrelevant in relation to the data from the Malaysian cohort. However, both sets of cohorts discussed how the movement had evolved in the last 40 years. Therefore, the code Developments in the Paralympic movement since the late 1980s was used to replace Four key trusts. The trustworthiness of the data [29] was further assured through two means. Member checks and analyst triangulation were conducted [29]. Thus, participants verified the accuracy of the transcripts; and an independent researcher familiar with qualitative research analysis was asked to match extracts from the data with the five themes. High agreement with the primary researchers was met, ensuring the accuracy of the coding.

3. Results

3.1. *Developments in the Paralympic Movement since the Late 1980s*

The senior Malaysian Paralympian referred to the minimal infrastructure available for athletes in the 1980s. He discussed the lack of sustainability of the movement with the difficulties trying to balance work and training during the 1980s. No salary was offered to competitors and in order to work and compete at the same time, he had to "fight fight fight." The Malaysian Paralympic representative also referred to the undeveloped infrastructure that was used for PWD competitions in those days in South East Asian

countries. For example, at the 1986 FESPIC Games in Solo, Indonesia, athletes used the main tarmac road of the town for wheelchair racing, not a racetrack. He reported that the competition track was incomplete at the time: “what they did, they go like 100-m, 200-m then turn and come back.” To travel to Solo, athletes did not fly from Jakarta but rode a bus for 18 hours arriving at the venue for the Games, just before the opening ceremony.

Today, according to another Malaysian Paralympian, the situation has developed considerably and Para-athletes’ careers are much more sustainable. Malaysian Paralympians receive the same incentives and rewards as their able-bodied counterparts. This is a relatively new policy in Malaysia, but as then Malaysian Youth and Sports Minister Khairy Jamaluddin states, “Our Paralympians’ achievements and sacrifices must be honoured the same as other athletes.” Athletes train full time with a monthly allowance (RM 5000/US\$ 1200) from the Malaysian National Sports Council and have free medical treatment for injury. In Singapore also, according to interviewees, policies are in place today to provide funding to professional athletes to enable them to focus on training. Sport Singapore has a High-Performance Planning (HPP) team solely focused on systematically managing athlete development. Training and competition are orchestrated over four-year Olympic cycles to maximize peak performance for podium success. Athletes with disabilities in centralized training receive the same allowances as able-bodied athletes. Allowances function, according to a Singaporean Para-athlete, to provide both “financial and programmatic support to prepare athletes to excel at the Major Games.” One Singaporean Paralympian stated that this kind of policy is a “good example of supporting equal rights to financial support for all full-time athletes.” Moreover, according to this Singaporean Paralympian, allowances of this ilk develop relationships between Olympians and Paralympians because of the equality in funding. The Singaporean committee representative stated that “interactions are happening much more frequently, and support definitely has improved.”

3.2. Growth in Public Attention

One of the Malaysian Paralympians stated that a “turning point” for the public recognition of the Paralympics in Malaysia was in 2016, when the Paralympic team won three gold medals: “The outside community opened their eyes ... They realise that Malaysia has a good Paralympic squad that can compete in the world”. The interviewee argued that before the gold medal in Rio, despite competing in every Paralympic Games from 1988, there was not a great deal of “exposure to the public.” One of the Singaporean Paralympians also referred to the success of Singapore in 2008 in Beijing (one gold, one silver, and two bronze medals) and how “awareness of disabilities took a quantum leap in Singapore.” Little attention was really paid to athletes with disabilities prior to winning a gold medal. Moreover, the other Singaporean Paralympian interviewee reported how the holding of the 2015 ASEAN Para Games in Singapore had conveyed to other countries in the region, as well as visitors to Singapore from around the world, that Singapore is a “caring and inclusive” society. Malaysia also hosted the Games in 2001, 2009, and 2017, communicating the same message that the countries seek to make sustainable their infrastructures for PWD.

One Singaporean Paralympian further recounted that the public used to assume she was “playing sports as a form of therapy.” In contrast, since the 2015 ASEAN Para Games, people now ask, “when the next competition will be”. This shows that the focus on sport as a therapy is no longer the most significant meaning to the public, a clear enhancement, and perhaps a reflection of the increase in publicity the Paralympic movement has garnered. This Singaporean Paralympian also went on to positively explain how awareness-raising activities at school and local council sport levels has impacted the movement. Activities such as engaging the general public in a “sports try-out” with PWD has proven to increase support. The Singaporean Paralympian concluded “The hope is this quality grows and does not erode with time in our campaign-focused society”. However, despite this positivity regarding public attention of the Paralympics, all interviewees were tentative about the

significance of change. A Singaporean interviewee stated that public awareness of the communities needs to increase:

“In Singapore, statistics covering disabilities are not readily available, but my feeling and that of my people with disabilities peers, is that the public awareness of disability-related matters, vis-à-vis social barriers and discrimination have improved, although not as much as desired.”

Moreover, one of the Malaysian interviewees reported that the Paralympic development in Malaysia is merely “slowly improving” as the public becomes more aware of the event.

3.3. Culture of Inclusivity

According to the SNPC representative, there has also been an increase in corporate engagement in the movement. He referred to a “CEO dialogue to get top corporate leaders talking about disability sport”. Additionally, the PCM representative spoke about “a lot of companies [. . .] such as the National Electricity Board, coming forward to adopt sports” by funding sports associations. The President of the PCM Megat Shahriman, who is himself a businessman, has also given “some of his own money to help some of the associations, like the goalball association”, according to the interviewee. Megat, the President, is also the Chairman of the Selangor Boccia Association, and donates to this sport also. Because of sponsorship like this, the organization can exist. Moreover, in Malaysia, KDU University College has recently offered an allowance for the PCM so that competitive athletes may study and train rather than needing to seek employment, or money from elsewhere, to cover university fees.

In contrast, one caveat brought up by the Malaysian interviewees was that with the development of corporate sponsorships and the government investment of the Paralympics, the organization is increasingly “like a business.” Consequently, the PCM meetings, are often accompanied with press conferences to publicize the event. Moreover, with the increasing participation of corporations, there is a rising level of fees for Paralympians to pay so that they can compete. The PCM representative stated: “if you want to take part in Paralympics, you need to get a license.” This was not the case in the past. The PCM representative was also critical of committee members not doing enough. He stated, “only a few of them [are] working very hard”. Moreover, according to one Singaporean Paralympian, there is still much to do in public spheres such as the social and business landscape: “My hope is that the inclusive culture happening in sports will spill over to the social and business landscape”. This was also emphasized by the other Singaporean Paralympian who noted that PWD do still experience difficulties regarding city infrastructure. This athlete went on to argue that businesses should more proactively encourage universal design to “level the playing field” so that “everyone can enjoy the same rights to employment.”

3.4. Issues with Remuneration

According to a Singaporean Paralympian, the advocacy role of the movement might be hindered by the difference in pay-out between Olympian and Paralympian medal winners. Joseph Schooling’s gold medal at the Olympics offered him a S\$1,000,000 prize (US\$ 737,000). In contrast, Yip Pin Xiu received S\$200,000 (\$US147,000) for her Paralympic gold. Paralympic silver and bronze medal winners are also paid significantly less. One interviewee stated that this discrepancy sends the “wrong message” that it is “easier to win a medal at the Paralympics than at the Olympics”. Having equal remuneration would “definitely correct the misconceptions”. Joseph Schooling himself has spoken out for the Paralympians about this. He is cited as saying to a Straits Times journalist: “They [Paralympians] sacrificed just as much, if not more. What they accomplished was phenomenal” [30]. This issue over prize money for medals is causing ongoing debate in Singapore. One of the Malaysian participants referred to the prize money for gold medals for Paralympians today in Malaysia. In Rio 2016 Paralympics, Malaysia won

three gold medals. These winners received the same RM 1 million (US\$ 240,000) reward as an Olympian. They may also be given a house and land as well as opportunities for sponsorship. The veteran Paralympian stated that he received no remuneration from his wins in earlier Paralympics. However, he now receives a lifelong pension after the policy changes.

3.5. *The Public Role of the Paralympian*

All interviewees stated that the Paralympics inspires by showcasing the “human spirit”, inspiring all athletes, both with and without disability, and that the Paralympics are a way to go beyond stereotyping PWD and developing the sustainability of the movement. The Malaysian and Singaporean publics’ appreciation of Paralympians has grown over the last few decades, and accordingly, as the SNPC representative stated, these athletes have “increasingly become role models and an inspiration to Singaporeans.” Moreover, as the SNPC representative emphasized: “Many individuals with disabilities have regained their confidence and belief in themselves. Sport has enabled them to achieve and experience things that many thought was not possible because of their disability.”

The Malaysian and Singaporean Paralympians have “observed the change in attitude of the public in showing respect” since the business and social landscape have developed their interests in PWD. Several stated that the public’s awareness about the Paralympic movement should continue to be raised: “This momentum should continue and be augmented. It is not just about promoting Paralympians or Para-athletes, in time the ripple effects will yield a society of caring, capable of naturally supporting and inclusiveness of all”.

All participants agreed that by giving talks and being advocates for various social causes, Paralympians have been instrumental in helping to reduce social barriers for PWD. The SNPC representative stated that “As role models and through the lives they lead, our Paralympic athletes champion greater inclusion and acceptance in their everyday lives”. In the same way, a Singaporean Paralympian stated:

“Being a sportsperson, regardless of non-Para or Para-athletes, it is not just about performing well in the field of play only, it is also about how you perform off the field of play. The public role of any athlete is to be exemplary. Many look towards their sports hero as a role model therefore the role to inspire and for others to emulate is very important. The athletes with disabilities have therefore qualities that they must and can easily be demonstrated. Like resilience, perseverance and the ‘if I fall, I get up and try again’ narrative.”

However, one of the Singaporean Paralympians referred to challenges of dealing with the “supercrip” stereotyping as inspiration. He stated: “The media needs to avoid the supercrip narrative like the plague. Such stories only “tug at the heartstrings and do nothing else.” Similarly, Paralympic participants were concerned with the way that the media presents athletes with disabilities in the ASEAN region. In general, Paralympic participants from this study shared that, for the movement to become more sustainable, stories about how these PWD embrace their difficulties and “aspire to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives”, without moving into extremities about heroics or being burdens, should be more commonplace in the media.

4. Discussion

4.1. *Developments in the Paralympic Movement since the Late 1980s*

In 1989, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) was founded. The Paralympics have been held in the Olympic host city since 1988. This link to the Olympic Movement increased the interest and participation of nations in the Paralympics. Until 1996, Asia was represented by 20 or fewer competing nations for each Summer Paralympics [31]. It was only really after Barcelona in 1988 that a strong growth in the Paralympics was clearly seen globally, but in Asia, it was not really until Beijing in 2008 that the number of competing

nations for each Summer Paralympics increased significantly [31]. Forty nations in Asia competed in Beijing and it has remained around the same number ever since [31].

Today in Malaysia and Singapore, there have been strong developments in the Paralympic systems with schemes offered to provide equal opportunity for Para and able-bodied athletes. The same sums of money, and the same types of support such as post athletic career programming are offered [32]. Moreover, increasing contact between Olympians and Paralympians through these funding systems should help to boost the image and the self-esteem of the latter as well as of the general PWD population. Wolbring [33] demonstrates that a person with a physical disability can find self-esteem development through sport: “how disabled people perceive their bodies and their functions, their social reality, affects what they will do to their body, which in turn influences their self-perception, their self-identity and their goals.” Lundberg, Bennett and Smith [34] also present the advantages of adaptive sports in the quality of life of people with physical disabilities. This participation can not only lead to positive psycho-social effects, but also challenge social stereotypes. Additionally, with more exposure, the public should become increasingly aware of the existent inequalities between Olympians and Paralympians regarding remuneration for medals in Singapore and speak out against it. These changes in policy over time can be seen to represent a growth in the sustainability of the movement in the two countries and should lead to further changes in the future.

4.2. Growth in Public Attention

In their 2020 study, Cheong et al. [21] report that the top three countries from seven with the highest total number of articles and photographs of the Paralympics in Rio 2016 were Japan, the United Kingdom, and Malaysia. Malaysia had an average number of articles as well as photographs per day that ranged from 2.69 to 7.31. Previously, Cheong et al. [35] found that eight Malaysian newspapers averaged from 0.24 to 2.86 photographs per day of the 2012 Paralympics. The authors conclude, “the average number of articles and photographs has increased to levels not previously witnessed” [35]. In addition, Cheong et al. report that Malaysia’s *The Star* had an average number of two or more articles or photographs per day, a significant increase from London 2012 during which only one article and one photograph was published each day [21]. These findings are very positive and add to the general agreement from this study’s participants that publicity is improving. Wilson and Khoo [19] and Wong and Wong [4] point out that the awareness of PWD has grown in the last two decades in Asia with medal wins and mega-event organization.

Cheong et al. [21] argue that the Paralympics can help to promote attitudes towards PWD. Through movements such as the Paralympics, long-held conventional disablist assumptions of PWD are being changed. This is certainly corroborated by the evidence from this research. These positive findings also align with research about the Malaysian Paralympic movement from Wilson and Khoo [19] who found that sport was an effective tool for social integration in this region. However, the media representation also requires substantial change both quantitatively and qualitatively to promote Para-sport. Paralympic participants from this study were adamant that this lack of coverage has a great influence over the way that society perceives PWD, promoting disablist values, corroborating extensive past research [4,18,20,23,24,35]. Moreover, Paralympian participants in this research brought up the importance of the media’s role in ensuring that hyperbolic portrayals of Paralympian successes be avoided. By presenting PWD as supercrips, respect for the PWD community might be diminished. Zhang and Haller [24], Van Hilvoorde and Landeweerd [14] and Silva and Howe [15] all report that the supercrips narrative demeans PWD. To shift away from framing PWD as supercrips, participants in this study reported that more interviews with Paralympians should be conducted and narratives about their daily training regimes produced. Furthermore, these reports in the media should showcase the everyday difficulties faced by PWD to help to humanize them. This also aligns with Wilson and Khoo’s study on athletes with disabilities who concluded that there should be more awareness of the challenges PWD face [19].

4.3. Culture of Inclusivity

Both the PCM and the SNPC are reported to be increasingly working in the public sector, particularly with businesses, promoting employment opportunities for PWD. More companies have been seen to open their doors to employees with disabilities in recent years with incentives from the governments in Malaysia and Singapore. For example, in the 2016 Singapore budget, it is stated that “many persons with disabilities also want the opportunity to contribute through work—we should support them” [32]. Incentives for employers to hire PWD are a positive step forward in making the PWD community more visible in these societies. The Malaysian government has set a 1% quota for PWD to be employed in the public sector and employers can get financial support for hiring PWD. Miethlich and Šlahor [36] argue that the employment of PWD is an important notion of Corporate Social Responsibility strategy. Sustainable business initiatives should be developed, and these could impact business sales as new customers are acquired while deepening loyalty with current clients as the company’s reputation for social inclusion develops [36]. From the interviewees’ experiences, it seems that although the business and social landscape are becoming more inclusive, there are still some measures to be taken to fully develop Corporate Social Responsibility strategies that are sustainable in Malaysia and Singapore and this is promoting disablist values. Miethlich and Šlahor [36] report that PWD have lower career prospects and that finding employment is a challenge. They also comment that this is a common problem globally. Nonetheless, it is reported that PWD can enhance a company’s strengths significantly regarding its image, inclusivity culture and work ethic [36]. In addition to the need to develop the employment sector for PWD to promote further sustainability, another issue emerging from this study is the need for more visibility of PWD in public spaces.

The sustainability of the Paralympic movement is increasing through funding opportunities and educational campaigns in Malaysia and Singapore. It seems that there is commitment to the movement, but it is limited in comparison to nations such as China, the UK, and the US. More fervent support would help to develop South East Asia’s disability rights advocacy movement. Moreover, according to Beacom and Brittain [37], there are resource-poor regions and nations who do not openly tolerate and support equality for people with physical disabilities. Only 20% of nations in the Olympics field Paralympic athletes [37]. This lack of outreach to the Paralympics is promoting disablist values. Therefore, there is a need to increase the numbers of Paralympic teams competing. For this to happen, it is essential that government and business increase funding and educational campaigns across these nations. These improvements would make the Paralympic movement more sustainable on a global level.

4.4. Issues with Remuneration

With only a small number of athletes in the Paralympic squads of Malaysia and Singapore (19 and 13 athletes, respectively, participated in the Rio 2016 Paralympics), it is important that policies are in place leading to optimum sustainability. Malaysia and other nations, such as the United States, pay Paralympians and Olympians equally for medal performances. In Singapore, this is not the case. As Brittain [8] argues, the Paralympic Movement is given an inferior capacity to the Olympic Movement through issues like remuneration. Aimee Mullins, a USA Paralympic medalist, calls this the “less than” narrative:

“There is indeed a ‘less than’ association with the Paralympics. It’s why I always say that I’m an Olympian and dare anyone implicitly to say that I’m not, because to do so would only be to ‘qualify’ my athletic achievements rather than acknowledge them in the same pantheon as that of an Olympic achievement” [38].

The more money a government spends to reward, train and send a larger team, the greater the will and opportunity for success [39]. More Para-athletes might look to sport as a career if the monetary gain were more substantial. With the low monetary award for the gold medal compared to their Olympic counterparts, the message might be that

Singaporean Paralympians are valued less. According to the Social Model of Disability, this policy represents underlying disablist values. Therefore, it would be beneficial to the sustainability of the movement if equal remuneration between the Olympics and Paralympics were offered in Singapore as it is now done in Malaysia.

4.5. The Public Role of the Paralympian

As Jones [40] points out, an “ability to rebound from failures” develops qualities of mental toughness. PWD can be inspired to overcome stigma by seeing the narratives of Para-athletes and this might lead to empowerment [41]. However, although it is sound to present narratives of resilience and perseverance, there is a need to disrupt narratives of incapacity or neediness. The supercrip narrative of PWD overcoming all odds to achieve success can have negative effects. According to Silva and Howe [15], the “supercrip implies a stereotyping process that requires an individual to fight against his/her impairment in order to overcome it and achieve unlikely success”. Silva and Howe [15] discuss how supercrip narratives tend to do the opposite of their intent. They represent a society’s low or very high expectations of PWD [15]. The Rio 2016 Paralympics trailer, “We’re the Superhumans” (2016) is one example. Elite Paralympians are framed as doers of heroic deeds overcoming personal tragedy and no longer burdensome. This may have negative socializing consequences for the larger community. Kama [13] posits:

“Successful disabled people are put on a pedestal for their demonstrated ability to triumph. This triumph is used to validate the disabled individual and to alter societal perceptions. Consequently, the wish to see disabled who ‘have done it’ is particularly intense while the pitiful disabled reinforce an inferior positionality and exclusion”.

If the supercrip narrative is too present in publicity, the general PWD community may be compared to the Paralympians producing a continual underlying pressure to perform extraordinarily. The views from interviewees correspond with research in this field concluding that the media still need to improve their presentation of Paralympic athletes by avoiding extreme poles of representation [18,19]. According to the Social Model of Disability, by focusing on extremes rather than presenting the everyday lives of PWD, the media are promoting disablist values.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, our research suggests that the sustainability of the Para-movement is increasing through funding opportunities and educational campaigns in Malaysia and Singapore. Moreover, the links between PWD and the business sector are developing. Therefore, an inclusive culture in these societies is growing. However, despite these developments, the Paralympic Committees could interact more with Para-athletes to build a more homogenous culture, fees to compete are increasing and government and businesses could be more proactive in facilitating change so that PWD are more visible in public spaces. In addition, if Olympic and Paralympic gold medal winners in Singapore received equal remuneration, the movement’s credibility would be enhanced. Finally, although there has been a development in this area, the media representation needs to be increased both quantitatively and qualitatively to promote Para-sport.

Malaysia and Singapore have been active participants in the Paralympics for three decades. The relationship between the local and global movement, at the “glocal” level, can provide a pertinent picture of how the goals of the transnational entity are being transmitted and the policies implemented [42]. Moreover, qualitative research of this nature helps to provide experiences and opinions at the ground level. The roles of these athletes and Paralympic administrative representatives in conveying the message of equal opportunity is a lived everyday experience. One Singaporean Paralympian concluded, “I have a part to play in making this marriage between people with and without disabilities. That is, I have a duty to be more forthright and share my thoughts, feedbacks and contribute”.

The awareness of the role that the Paralympic movement plays as a catalyst for social change is clearly present amongst participants in this study from Malaysia and

Singapore. At the individual level, it is the athlete who simultaneously creates and carries the aspirations of a community across space and time. PWD merit equal treatment and this is of paramount importance if positive attitudes are to develop further in these societies and the movement is to be sustainable. It can therefore be surmised that the Paralympic movements in Malaysia and Singapore are helping to “forge a path . . . and spread the message of respect and equal opportunity for all individuals” (SNPC representative). However, some obstacles have been identified. Policy makers, the corporate sector, and the media might take note of these.

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