# Challenging (platformisation) invisibilities through humour: The Paralympics, TikTok and social change?

**Renan Petersen-Wagner** (ORCID)
Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, UK

**Jan Andre Lee Ludvigsen**
Liverpool John Moores University, UK

## Abstract
The penetration of social media platforms in the cultural production and consumption circuits of sport mega-events means that organisations like the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) are afforded new and alternative channels to engage with their audiences. TikTok, one of the largest platforms, is characterised by a higher degree of playfulness and humorous content and has been used to mobilise audiences for prosocial political aims. Using TikTok's Research API access, this article relies on automatically collected metadata from all IPC posts between May 2023 and May 2024. After consolidating and manipulating the data through Python, statistical analyses were performed on SPSS to understand how certain content becomes more visible on the platform. In a second stage, videos with most virality underwent visual discourse analysis. We hold that the IPC, to challenge invisibilities, arguably one of the biggest obstacles for disability sport, engages in the circulation of humorous content with the aim of promoting inclusion and social change for persons with disabilities. While TikTok and the circulation of humorous content afford the IPC wider visibility to new audiences, it might provoke unintended consequences through further stigmatisation of disability sport as non-serious activity.

## Keywords
Cultural industries, humour, media, meme, Paralympics, platform studies, social change, sport, TikTok

**Corresponding author:**
Renan Petersen-Wagner, Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Cavendish Hall, 216, Leeds LS6 3QU, UK.
Email: r.petersen-wagner@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

## Introduction

In recent years, the emergence of new social media platforms including TikTok has transformed the way in which sport is broadcast and consumed. This article pioneers by exploring the nexus between the social media platform, TikTok, international sport mega-events, public values, and social change. In doing so, it engages with socially important questions speaking to platformisation processes (Van Dijck et al., 2018), specifically within the popular cultural industries (Poell et al., 2022) in which sport inscribes itself (Einsle et al., 2024; Lee Ludvigsen and Petersen-Wagner, 2023; Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023a; Pullen et al., 2023). As argued by Bourdieu (1996) in relation to the 'traditional' main medium of television – before the advent of social media – sport mega-events such as the Olympic Games are produced twice, which, in the current platform age, mean that they are produced and consumed multiple times; anytime and anywhere (Lee Ludvigsen and Petersen-Wagner, 2023). This intensified mediatisation and spectacularisation of mega-events, emerging from wider platformisation trends (see Duffy et al., 2019; Helmond, 2015; Van Dijck et al., 2018), pose new, important challenges for scholars who are interested in the intersection of platforms, media, and sports sociology.

As Poell (2020) highlights, research in the age of platforms give rise to challenges for scholars in terms of:

> The search engines, social networks, photo- and video-sharing services, messaging apps, operating systems, app stores, and cloud services operated by these corporations *shape the visibility and access to cultural content* (Poell, 2020: 654, emphasis added).

This is particularly true for disability sport and specifically the Paralympic Games, which, historically, have experienced forms of invisibility due to traditional media's predominant editorial logic that values able-bodied sport in general and mega-events such as the Olympic Games in particular (Cottingham and Petersen-Wagner, 2018; Golden, 2003; Goggin and Hutchins, 2017; Hardin, 2006). While social media platforms enable the Paralympic movement to reach and engage with different audiences by bypassing editorial gatekeepers, it does so within the relevant platforms' logics (Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023b) which, as Poell (2020) asserts, shape new forms of (in)visibilities.

Consequently, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), when engaging through platforms – such as TikTok – agree to make its content contingent to platform mechanisms that are governed by platforms own private commercial interests (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018). On the other hand, in a world where the United Nations (2024a) recognise that inequalities need to be reduced and people with disabilities need to be empowered (United Nations, 2024b), we then note how private and public values might become antagonistic if platform mechanics shape new forms of invisibilities to people with disabilities. These power struggles between public and private values are central to platform studies. Indeed, van Dijck (2024: 1) highlights that:

> Platformization is the prism through which we should critically examine how technological shifts that are simultaneously social, economic, cultural, and political transformations affect the global power (im) balance while deeply infiltrating private lives and public spaces […] In the epilogue to our book, we argued that governance questions should revolve around public values – values which contested nature are part and parcel of a democratic process involving various stakeholders.

Hence, it is against this societal backdrop which our work situates itself, by interrogating how different content on TikTok is used as a form of (de)stimulating public values of equality, inclusion and diversity – which are at the heart of IPC's movement (IPC, 2019). By addressing the intersections between TikTok, IPC and platformisation, this paper aims to address the limited scholarly attention dedicated to the Paralympics as a media spectacle (Pullen et al., 2022), and therefore its associated production and consumption circuits that take place in diverse platforms (Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023b). While the presence of the wider Paralympic movement on other platforms like YouTube (Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023b), Instagram (Mitchell et al., 2021, 2023; Pullen et al., 2023; Toffoletti, 2018), X (Antunovic et al., 2024; Toffoletti, 2018) and Facebook (Toffoletti, 2018) has received some academic attention, little is known about how the IPC and the Paralympic movement present themselves on the fastest growing social media platform: TikTok (Buchholz, 2022; Statista, 2023, 2024a). Beyond its increased popularity, the socio-cultural and indeed political significance of TikTok in modern societies, and the need to make (digital) sociological sense of it, is also underpinned by its status as a 'cultural force' (Boffone, 2022). Thus, this paper also aims to interrogate and add to the discussion of the platform specific phenomenon of – the either beneficial or harmful – humorous content that permeates much of its production and consumption circuit (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023).

Taken together, our findings contribute to debates in platform, disability, and sport media studies by empirically extending our understanding of wider trends of mediatisation, digitalisation and platformisation that encapsulate the popular cultural industries in which sport has firmly embedded itself within (Pullen et al., 2023; Lee Ludvigsen and Petersen-Wagner, 2023; Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023a).

## Conceptualising the Paralympics in the media: Spectacle, (in)visibility and platformisation

Professional sport as a quintessential popular cultural phenomenon has not been exempt from the current 'spectacularisation' of society as famously theorised by Debord (1999). The capitalist society of spectacle which Debord (1999) describes is not only an audio-visual experience through the different media, but a world-view – and therefore associated public values – that become materialised in media lives (see Deuze, 2023). In this spectacular society, the belief that 'what appears is good; what is good appears' (Debord, 1999: 9-10) carries important repercussions in terms of (in)visibilities as it is possible to create a negative version to Debord's one by affirming that in a society that is preoccupied with appearances 'what does not appear is bad; what is bad does not appear'.

Marshall et al. (2010: 263) described the Olympics as an 'incredibly elaborate media spectacle', and, it is against this background that the Paralympic field constitutes itself as a spectacle where also the *International Olympic Committee* (IOC) and different traditional and new media channels appear as important agents (Purdue and Howe, 2015). In terms of the former, based on Debord's (1999) assumptions, it can be argued that the mega-events organised by the IOC, such as the Summer and Winter Olympic Games, are the *most powerful and important* global spectacles – with the Tokyo 2021 Summer Games alone attracting the attention of over three billion individuals through television and over six billion engagements on the different social media profiles curated by the IOC (IOC, 2021). Hence, it is unsurprising that the Summer Olympic Games become the yardstick for measuring the '*successes*' of global mega-events – especially in a society hierarchically organised by appearance – which subsequently positions the Paralympic Games with a *lesser status* (Golden, 2003).

This *lesser status* that the Paralympic Games is assigned can be credited to the dominant editorial logic that operates in traditional media, particularly in the historically most important medium for sport: television. For television and other traditional media channels such as radio and print – magazines and newspapers – and other social media platforms operated by those traditional organisations, the dominant editorial logic of *filter-than-publish* (Poell et al., 2022) triggered the first and most common form of *discrimination* that disability sport and the Paralympic Games face when comparing it to able-body sports and their associated events: lack of visibility (Cottingham and Petersen-Wagner, 2018; Brittain, 2017; Goggin and Hutchins, 2017; Golden, 2003; Hardin, 2006).

For instance, Hardin (2006) reflecting on the 2004 Athens Summer Olympic/Paralympic events and coverage on the official USA broadcaster *NBC* show that the Paralympic Games received only 1% of the total coverage, while the major print outlets ran only 13 articles in total. These are similar figures to what Golden (2003) found when analysing the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympic/Paralympic when major USA-newspapers ran on average 427 articles on the Olympics while the Paralympics had on average just two stories. However, this situation of almost *complete invisibility* that existed over 20 years ago is not dissimilar to what Solves et al. (2019) found in relation to Spanish newspapers coverage of the 2012 London Summer Paralympic Games or with European public broadcasters' X (Twitter) profiles during the 2020 (1) Tokyo Paralympic Games (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos, 2023). For instance, when zooming in specifically on one public broadcaster (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC]), Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos (2022) found that only 1.26% of the tweets were on disability sports. From a slightly different angle, Antunovic et al. (2024) note that, when focussing specifically on X profiles devoted to Olympics/Paralympics, it is important to highlight that both NBC and CBS profiles had the Olympics on their handles, failing to acknowledge Paralympics, the amount of Paralympic Games content during the 2022 Beijing Winter Paralympic Games were higher than content on able-body sports.

This lack of visibility that disability sports in general, and the Paralympic Games in particular, receive expressed itself through other forms of *discrimination*, such as questions of credibility and legitimacy. When analysing the 2012 London Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, Lindemann and Cherney (2014) show how some forms (in)visibility had paradoxical outcomes such as when visually interpreting the sporting pictograms of both events, where some explicitly showed characteristics that are particular to disability sports (e.g. the use of wheelchair), while others did not explicitly display any reference to disability sports, and still with some where the pictograms of both events were exactly the same. While being purposively represented *equally* as the Olympic-counterpart would potentially give airs of legitimacy and credibility, it does so through an ableist perspective that equates able-body as the norm. These forms of paradoxes, as discussed by Goggin and Hutchins (2017), appeared when the Paralympic Games started to receive more traditional media attention – and therefore more visibility – carrying further unintended consequences as narratives then became focused on how credible and legitimate disability sport was as a high-level sport. These, in turn, had further unintended consequences as Paralympic athletes – or individuals with extreme talent (see Hibberd (2014) for an analysis of *Channel 4*'s Paralympic Games promotional clip) – were then ideologically uncoupled from wider disability communities who do not take part in strenuous physical activity (Purdue and Howe, 2012). This uncoupling gave rise to what Howe (2008) called the elite disable person in the figure of the supercrip and cyborg identities to which Paralympic athletes are commonly represent as in traditional media (Howe, 2011). Adding to these debates, Pullen et al. (2020) claim that while there is a degree of *normalisation* of the visibility of – some – disabled bodies in traditional media, this paradoxically occurs within an ablenationalist perspective that promotes very specific hyper-able and highly successful disabled bodies. This high visibility given to some Paralympic athletes are then reinforced by what Pullen et al. (2019) called as

the 'Hollywood Treatment' whereby backstories become central to the mediated narratives that seek to hook audiences into Paralympic-related content.

In sum, (in)visibilities, legitimacy and credibility become interrelated through forms of stigmatisation like the ones described by Butler and Bissell (2015) when analysing the 2012 London Summer Olympic/Paralympic Games. As they show, Mandeville (the Paralympic Mascot) when visible in the promotion material of the games was otherized as more prone to accidents (*being 'goofy'*), isolated, and incapable of performing some *simple* tasks which further stigmatises Paralympic sport and athletes as *lesser* than their Olympic-counterparts. These stigmatising narratives that were common in traditional media were to an extent challenged when Paralympians were given their voice through different social media platforms in which *publish-then-filter* dynamics operate (Poell et al., 2022). For instance, Toffoletti (2018) shows how Paralympic athletes have used Instagram, Facebook and X to position themselves as challenging traditional forms of representation in which women with disabilities are portrayed as incompetent and dependent. This form of empowerment shown by athletes with disabilities through their different social media platforms contribute to wider advocacy elements in their self-presentation as serious individuals contributing to broader societal challenges that are not limited to the ones faced by people with disabilities. These elements were discussed further by Mitchel et al. (2021) when focussing exclusively on Instagram, as they show how Paralympic athletes use the platform to post content that depicts them as physically competent and possessing elite sporting abilities that are *like* their Olympic-counterparts (Mitchell et al., 2023). While the *likeness* of both Olympic and Paralympic content shared on Instagram might be perceived as an *advancement* for equality, paradoxically by being created within an ableist dominant logic it does render the disability movement as irrelevant (Mitchell et al., 2023). Furthermore, as Pullen et al. (2023) demonstrate, the self-representation strategies employed by Paralympic athletes on Instagram tend to conform to heteronormativity and neoliberal ableist ideologies that suggest a degree of feminisation and sexual subjectification that is potentially impacted by the platform mechanisms that controls forms of (in)visibilities.

The mediation of the Paralympics on TikTok, however, is yet to be researched. More broadly too, whilst researchers have increasingly examined various aspects of the platformisation as occurring in and through sport; focussing on YouTube (Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023b), Instagram (Romney and Johnson, 2020) and Snapchat (Billings et al., 2017), relevant work on the platform of TikTok remains in its infancy (see Einsle et al., 2024). This, despite the fact that TikTok has 'gained prominence as the latest digital apparatus for fan engagement' (Su et al., 2020: 437) as a platform where users create and share short videos (Velasco et al., 2024). Indeed, with one billion monthly active users worldwide (Einsle et al., 2024) and as considered a digital space where 'everyone' is (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022) – most notably young audiences (Velasco et al., 2024) – it could be argued that social researchers should commit to understanding TikTok's impact further through the employment of (digital) sociological tools – reflected by Lupton's (2014) approach, as discussed later.

Within the wider social sciences, this echoes the argument of Boffone (2022) maintaining, in the US context, that TikTok now has come to represent a *cultural force* making it possible to speak of a 'TikTok culture'. Continuing, Boffone argues that the ways in which TikTok has 'manifested and commanded a shift in culture warrants scholarly inquiry' (3). This is demonstrated by the fact that TikTok has been used as a space for social and political advocacy in terms disability rights (Foster and Pettinicchio, 2023). Underlining the importance of TikTok as a digital space further, Civila and Jaramillo-Dent (2022) point out how TikTok remains important place for understandings of cultural, national and religious identities and their shaping. Yet, Van der Nagel et al. (2023) also remind us

how there is not *one* TikTok; and how a number of specific localities, niches and subcultures emerge on the platform in a globalising manner.

This discussion argues that social media platforms constitute a crucial facet in the *making of a sport mega-event* and its corresponding 'spectacle'. Essentially, *the penetration of social media platforms in the cultural production and consumption* circuits of sport mega-events means that sport governing bodies, including the IPC, are afforded new routes for engagement with their existing and potential audiences. This includes the sociologically important but under-researched platform of TikTok. TikTok, we argue, remains ready for further social research both as a cultural phenomenon, but also concerning the platform's relationship to the IPC and sporting organisations, more generally.

## Methods: A digital sociological approach to capture the traces, user and the medium

In full consistency with our earlier work, this paper also subscribes to the early tenets of digital sociology (Lupton, 2014). Digital sociology, in brief critically appreciates the importance of digital technologies upon 'the social', its relations and institutions, and their everyday manifestations (Lupton, 2014). As such, fully in line with Lupton's (2014) call for capturing the on-going evolution of new media technologies and their impact on everyday cultures, whilst using new methods that can harvest digital data, we seek to approach and embrace novel digital spaces as places in which socialisations occur. In these spaces, public values are contested, co-constructed and experienced. Particularly, this holds true for sport (see Petersen-Wagner, 2017a, 2017b), which was commonly understood as inhabiting the *real* and *concrete* world as in *opposition* to media and its delivery technologies – and currently the myriad platforms at our disposal – that inhabited the symbolic (Rowe, 2004).

Adhering to Caliandro et al. (2024) approach to digital methods for platform studies we sought to *follow the traces*, *the medium*, and *the users* by respectively analysing the transactional data that are byproduct of consumer engagement, the platform affordances and the underlying algorithmic structure, and the practices of content production that rests on reproduction logics of short mimetic content (see Kaye et al., 2022).

To do so, the first author connected to TikTok Research Application Programming Interface (API) (TikTok, 2024a) and automatically collected metadata (see TikTok, 2024b for available unit of analyses) of videos posted by the IPC on their TikTok profile between May 2023 and May 2024 (TikTok, 2024c).[1] The selection of this time period stems from our understanding that the Paralympics – or the Olympics – 'never ends', meaning that the consumption and production circuits of those mega-events that, in the past, happened only every quadrennial Olympiad, are now being reshaped by the constant availability of content across myriad platforms (Lee Ludvigsen and Petersen-Wagner, 2023; Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023b) whereby 'throwbacks' and defining moments of the past and build-ups before future Olympics usually are posted in-between Olympic editions. Furthermore, we have used CNN's (2023) article that drew attention to the IPC content creation strategy as a starting point for the sampling in our data collection. The Paralympics official profile on TikTok had just over 3.5 million followers for a total library of 508 videos. Whereas during the period between May 2023 and May 2024 – which comprises the timeframe between CNN's (2023) article and our access to the API – there were a total of 91 videos.

With further data manipulation, we created a new unit of analysis called *virality* that comprised the number of shares divided by the number of views. In the analysis' first stage, we employed SPSS (IBM, 2021) to run statistical tests to *follow the traces* left by users when engaging with the content

shared by the IPC. The unit of analyses comprises the available metadata automatically collected through TikTok Research API (absolute number of views, likes, comments, shares), plus two new relative unit of analyses (active/passive and virality). In the second stage, we identified the 20 videos with the most *virality* and therefore *followed the user* by applying visual discourse analysis (Traue et al., 2019) to uncover what the (in)visibilities are, as fostered by both content creation strategies (the IPC as *user*) and end-users' *traces*. In this unit of analysis, we were particularly concerned with what kind of content was shared by the IPC (e.g. humorous, meme-type, athletic performance, background music, original sound), and therefore ended being considered of viral quality by end-users. As Traue et al. (2019: 329) argue, a visual discourse analysis seeks to add '[…] communication technologies, infrastructures, body techniques, and visualization techniques […]' to the traditional Foucauldian (Foucault, 1969) *enoncé* analysis. This, as Traue et al. (2019: 331) argue:

> [a] more visual sociology would in fact not deal with the visual, but with *visibilities*. Visibility consists of acts and technologies of showing, or pointing out, and their effects. The study of such visibilities will allow researchers to address a number of important issues of contemporary social, political, and economic life.

The combination of the first and second stage afforded us to finally *follow the medium* and address wider questions that speak to TikTok as a platform, its affordances, structures and mechanisms and its extensive implications on public values of diversity, equality, and diversity that are at the core of IPC's mission and should be inherent to platform studies as highlighted by Van Dijck (2024). To do so, we have followed Light et al.'s (2018) walkthrough method by focussing on the everyday use aspect of TikTok that underscores how the platform affordances, structures and mechanisms might contribute to possible new (in)invisibilities.

In the following sections we unpack our results by *following the traces*, *the user*, and finally *the medium* and discuss them in relation to both platform studies – and specifically 'TikTok studies' – disability studies, and sport and media studies.

## Challenging invisibilities through humour

The IPC joined TikTok in February 2020 with a video of Italian wheelchair fencer Bebe Vio celebrating her medal in Rio 2016 and a caption that read 'Reasons to celebrate! 🎊 The @paralympics is on TikTok!'. From 2020 to June 2024 (the point of our data collection), the IPC posted another 507 times – with 91 of them being in our selected timeframe. The content shared by the IPC on TikTok has not gone unnoticed, especially during the last year when it had to defend itself against criticism to its *edgy* and *unique* strategy that *made fun* about Paralympians (CNN, 2023). As reported by CNN (2023), an IPC spokesperson claimed that this humorous strategy sought to engage and educate younger audiences about disability sport:

> 'We have *created a strong following* through edgy and unique content that allows us to *educate an audience* who might be less aware of Paralympic sport and the achievements of our athletes […] We appreciate that not everyone will like the content and sometimes we don't get it right, but we do closely monitor posts, always converse in reactions to them, and learn from all feedback. Importantly we find that the account allows us to *positively engage with younger fans* about the power of Para sport as a *tool for driving social inclusion*' (IPC Spokesperson quoted in CNN, 2023, emphasis added)

While controversial, the strategy employed by the IPC through TikTok was attracting a larger audience in comparison to other social media platforms they also operate. As aforementioned, the IPC has over 3.5 million TikTok subscribers, while on YouTube their official channel had 800,000 subscribers (Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023b), with a similar figure for their Instagram profile (Instagram, 2024). It is important to note that the IPC have curated its official profiles for over a decade on both Instagram (since 2012) and YouTube (since 2008), and the content shared on these platforms have not attracted bigger audience than it does on TikTok. It could be argued that the IPC, to an extent, is managing to become *more visible* through TikTok (see figures below), and therefore challenging the first form of discrimination that was pervasive in the editorial logic operating in traditional media channels. It therefore appears that TikTok is becoming one primary – if not *the primary* – space whereby the IPC in relatively short time have generated large audiences; as the next section unpacks.

## Following the traces

The more than 3.5 million subscribers to the IPC official TikTok profile – plus other users who are recommended their videos based on TikTok's algorithm (see Bhandari and Bimo, 2022 for a discussion about TikTok's 'for you' feature/page) – leave different traces through their engagement in the platform. As seen in Table 1, the 91 videos posted during our chosen time period attracted over 58 million views, with an average of 642,000 views. Comparing these figures to the IPC's YouTube channel whose videos averaged only 21,000 views (Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023b) it is possible to argue that TikTok has become the *main* platform for the IPC to directly connect with their audience.

Moreover, significant to the platform mechanisms (see more in the *following the Medium* section) in which liking, commenting and sharing create the sense of intimacy trough and with the algorithm (Sot, 2022) it is important to note how the cultural consumption habits are more *active* than what may be seen on YouTube (Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023b).

While 'endless' scrolling is a feature commonly associated with TikTok (Kaye et al., 2022), it could be argued, based on the traces left by users, that this is an *active scrolling* in which on average users either comment, share or like every other video they watch. While liking is the main trace left by users – after viewing – it is worth noting that the second most used form of engagement is sharing, reinforcing the notion that TikTok works through forms of replicability/memeification (Kaye et al., 2022) that encourages forms of participatory culture that rests on content spreadability (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins et al., 2013). Hence, it is important to understand – as unpacked next – how

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

|  | N | Minimum | Maximum | Sum | Mean | Std. deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| view_count | 91 | 1424 | 7,378,519 | 58,470,428 | 642,532 | 1,382,188 |
| like_count | 91 | 328 | 1,480,994 | 8,784,530 | 96,533 | 204,194 |
| comment_count | 91 | 4 | 42,338 | 216,058 | 2374 | 6701 |
| share_count | 91 | 1 | 105,672 | 558,578 | 6,138 | 16,371 |
| viral | 91 | 0 | .0499 | .7102 | .0078 | .0091 |
| active_passive | 91 | 0 | 16.98 | 42.03 | .4619 | 1.78 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 91 |  |  |  |  |  |

**Table 2.** Hashtags.

|  |  | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | paralympics | 22 | 38.6 | 38.6 | 38.6 |
|  | wheelchairbasketball | 5 | 8.8 | 8.8 | 47.4 |
|  | archery | 2 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 50.9 |
|  | boccia | 2 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 54.4 |
|  | judo | 2 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 57.9 |
|  | paraarchery | 2 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 61.4 |
|  | paraathletics | 2 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 64.9 |
|  | paracycling | 2 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 68.4 |
|  | blindfootball | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 70.2 |
|  | Brazil | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 71.9 |
|  | charva | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 73.7 |
|  | f1 | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 75.4 |
|  | formula1 | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 77.2 |
|  | goalball | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 78.9 |
|  | keepitlemons | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 80.7 |
|  | Mexico | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 82.5 |
|  | parabadminton | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 84.2 |
|  | paracanoe | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 86.0 |
|  | paraequestrian | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 87.7 |
|  | parapowerlifting | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 89.5 |
|  | paratriathlon | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 91.2 |
|  | perfect10 | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 93.0 |
|  | sportweek | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 94.7 |
|  | triathlon | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 96.5 |
|  | valentinesday | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 98.2 |
|  | worldbicycleday | 1 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 57 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |

certain content on the platform became more *viral* and are spread between users through the sharing function.

## Following the user

Between May 2023 and May 2024, the IPC had used hashtags 57 times with some sports receiving more attention than others, as can be seen in Table 2. While not all the 91 videos in our dataset contained hashtags, and while some contained up to four, it is possible to note how sports such as wheelchair basketball, para-archery, and para-athletics, that are on the top of the list, also featured heavily in the *Rising Phoenix* documentary released in 2020 on Netflix (IPC, 2021). In turn, it can be suggested that while TikTok affords visibility to the IPC, it does so by creating other invisibilities in terms of sport and disabilities shown and subsequently not shown.

While the hashtags in Table 2 were the most used – and therefore those were the most visible sports – it is in terms of *virality* that the IPC content strategy on TikTok can be considered as unique. As hinted upon in our analysis' introduction, the IPC has sought to utilise humorous content to engage with a younger audience who are the primary users in the platform (Statista, 2024b). Those contention humorous videos comprise some of the twenty most viral content produced by the IPC between May 2023 and May 2024. Other videos sought to match viral and well-known songs such

**Table 3.** Virality.

| video_description | viral | share_count |
|---|---|---|
| Shaking hands on the podium is optional. @armless archer | 0.04986893 | 4,851 |
| I'm gonna make a left 🚲 #Paralympics #ParaCycling | 0.03983384 | 105,672 |
| Gabrielzinho keeps it lemon. 🍋 🍋#charva #keepitlemon🍋 | 0.03720586 | 5,428 |
| Unexpected item in bagging area. 🛒 | 0.02899674 | 7,630 |
| NEEEOOOOOOOOWWWWWWW | 0.02553384 | 2,767 |
| JAAAA! #Paralympics #ParaPowerlifting | 0.02354157 | 19,471 |
| Paralympics is a risky business.❄️🎿⚠️🎿 | 0.02024859 | 2,139 |
| SIUUUUUU 📹🔊 andreygarbe. #Paralympics #Brazil @Andrey Garbe | 0.01863621 | 736 |
| I fell down and the ball went higher. 🏀 | 0.01840116 | 16,022 |
| Scream if you wanna throw further. | 0.01805974 | 54,460 |
| Next up to ski is Marv Murchins. | 0.01690368 | 6,200 |
| Four seasons baby can BLOCK! | 0.01644174 | 3,304 |
| Salt Bae, boccia style. 🏐 | 0.01642412 | 11,838 |
| No way past. ✖️ #WheelchairBasketball | 0.01628917 | 73,648 |
| I do this. This is what I do. | 0.01624877 | 116 |
| Here goes Kyrie! | 0.01447861 | 5,877 |
| This is why players wear knee pads. | 0.01442171 | 4,704 |
| Sliiiide to the left, sliiiide to the right. | 0.01412196 | 871 |
| Beyonce, beyorse, bay horses. 🐴 | 0.01397664 | 146 |
| STOP THAT BAAALLLLL!!! #WheelchairBasketball | 0.0115384 | 16,299 |

as 'Mr C The Slide Man – Cha-Cha Slide' or 'Beyoncé – Single Ladies (put a ring on it)' to Paralympic content. As evident in Table 3, there is no clear *preference* for a particular sport or form of disability as different sports and forms of disabilities were deemed of *viral quality* by users.

For instance, the video with the most virality in our dataset is of Matthew Stutzman (para-archery, who also featured in *Rising Phoenix*) performing in the 2015 Para-Pan-American Games with 'Barry Manilow – Copacabana' as background music, with the video then cutting to the medal ceremony in which an official tried to shake his hands after hanging the silver medal over his head. At this moment, the background music and image (faded) changes to 'Galaxy Brain Meme' to highlight the *faux pas* as Stutzman was born without arms, and as the video description highlights 'shaking hands on the podium is optional'. The second video on the list – and the one with the most shares in the database – is the one that generated the attention described by CNN (2023), with a clip of para-cyclist Darren Hicks crossing the line in the time-trial C2 event during Tokyo 2021 Paralympic Games and a background meme sound that says 'oh, left, left, left. Excuse me, I'm gonna make a left. Left' that emphasises his above-the-knee amputation to his right leg, and the fact that he pedals only with his left leg. Altogether, what the content shared by the IPC on TikTok, and particularly the 20 videos with most virality, underlines are that athletic performance is somehow sidelined – or at least overshadowed in comparison to highlight videos posted on YouTube

(Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023b) – to accommodate for platform-specific content that builds up from vernacular forms of creativity (Kaye et al., 2022) such as the ones utilising 'meme-types' of visual and audio elements.

## Following the medium

Importantly, the playfulness aspect encountered on the platform-specific content shared by the IPC on TikTok both challenge and reinforce structural forms of discrimination (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023). The self-deprecating (see also Su et al., 2023) content builds from the platform's focus on short-videos that magnify aspects of sociality (e.g. sharing), immediacy (e.g. mobile and music-centric), and playfulness (e.g. primarily vernacular – to the platform – creativity) that are inherently aligned with the way in which the platform has evolved over time (Kaye et al., 2023). The types of content that occupy central position on IPC's official profile is not random. Indeed, TikTok's platform infrastructure encourages the creation and dissemination of content that possesses viral quality to become further spreadable across users (Jenkins et al., 2013). As TikTok (2024f: nd) states in their 'using TikTok' support page 'TikTok's mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy […] That's why we use recommender systems to offer you a personalised experience. These systems suggest content based on your preferences expressed through interactions on TikTok, such as following an account or liking a post […] We recommend content based on several factors to predict how relevant and interesting content might be to a user. The three main factors are user interactions, content information, and user information […] In certain recommender systems, these predictions are also influenced by the interactions of other people on TikTok who appear to have similar interests'. This is particularly relevant to the main form of cultural usage of TikTok – the 'for you' tab – where the recommender would display a stream of content based on user interaction (e.g. what you like, share, comment, watch or skip), content information (e.g. sounds, hashtags, number of views) and end-user information (e.g. geographical location, language, device used to access the app). In terms of platform mechanics, they are designed for emphasising some end-user actions that would enhances the recommender (TikTok's algorithm) personalised predictions. For instance, when 'liking' a video that appears on either the 'for you' or 'following' versions the share button automatically changes style and a repost icon appears on the bottom left corner; while neither of those actions become visible when commenting or bookmarking a post. Moreover, aspects of immediacy are front and centre in the content shared across TikTok, as the consumption and production circuits fostered by the platform infrastructure is as much audio based as it is visual. The more central position that audio occupies in the platform infrastructure contributes not only to the vernacular creativity found on the platform – such as the use of meme audio, famous songs, and remixes – but especially by the fact that audio cannot be muted on the device as in other platforms; volume can only be lowered to mute, meaning that extra actions are needed by the user to remove the audio element.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper's basic starting point was fourfold, and collectively demonstrate the need for sociologists to theoretically and empirically examine the intersections between spectacularised mega-events, platforms' social importance and (in)visibility on relevant platforms. First, Poell (2020) drew our attention to how new platforms enable new questions concerning visibility and access to cultural content. Second, these new (in)visibilities were products of wider platformisation processes in which public and private values were pitted against the other (Van Dijck, 2024). Third, social

scientists have, in recent years, highlighted the importance of researching TikTok as a social and cultural phenomenon (Boffone, 2022) that creates a 'convergence remediating machine that inspires a constant process of social interactivity with and dialog between media objects' (Gentry, 2023: 1473). Fourth, in the pre-social media age, Bourdieu (1996: 79) saw the need for exploring the 'social construction of the entire Olympic spectacle' as he witnessed the Olympics develop into a *two-step* production; the sporting and media event. This perspective requires an extension and academics have highlighted the importance of studying the ways in which sport mega-event spectacles are impacted by advances within new media technologies and, specifically, platform-isation processes (e.g. Lee Ludvigsen and Petersen-Wagner, 2023; Toffoletti, 2018). Considering all this, few, if any, studies examine the ways in which the socio-culturally important platform, TikTok, has been embraced by sport's governing bodies and their sport mega-events, although it is well-established that the platform provides its users with 'significant visibility, allowing them to reach many unfamiliar audiences in a short period' owing to its algorithmic functions (Velasco et al., 2024: 4).

This is particularly relevant with regards to TikTok, as the algorithm is central to the cultural consumption experience, with the content being divorced from context (e.g. the creator) and users therefore having a heighted awareness of the algorithm existence (Bhandari and Bino, 2022). Hence, TikTok is centrally positioned to discussions on the intersections of private and public values by the way that algorithm selection (Van Dijck, 2024; Van Dijck et al., 2018) takes central stage in the production and consumption circuits on the platform. Those private values we speak of here, are not only limited to TikTok as a platform that monetise it through users' attention (e.g. further pushing content that has *good* engagement), but also of users who create content (e.g. IPC) and users who engage (e.g. share) with the content (e.g. followers and general audience). These private values become entangled with public values of promoting diversity and social inclusion, and transforming attitudes towards people with disabilities (IPC, 2019).

Against this background, this study has sought to examine the production of the Paralympics on TikTok – with our findings revealing that the humorous content resting on vernacular creativity that is *specific* to the platform mechanisms, dynamics, culture and infrastructure both challenges and reinforces structural forms of discrimination that are particular to disability sport.

Drawing from our empirical underpinnings – generated by adopting an approach taking into account our main aims outlined earlier speaking to the Paralympic media spectacle, its associated consumption/production circuits, and humorous content shared on TikTok – we elucidate two key arguments. First, we argue that the content shared by the IPC achieves its main goal of promoting the visibility of people with disabilities, as the humorous content that builds on meme-type cultural forms (Kaye et al., 2022; Su et al., 2020) resonates with the audience that mainly reside in the platform (Statista, 2024b). Second, the humorous self-deprecating content curated by the IPC tends to have disability at the front and centre, meaning that disabilities are visible, challenging ableist representations that tended to hide them (Brittain, 2017). The *mundane* and self-deprecating moments that comprises these spreadable short-videos show a more *humane* side of para-athletes, bridging the perceived gap between individuals with extreme talents and the wider disability community that is commonly found in the supercrip narrative (Howe, 2008, 2011). Nevertheless, we concurrently highlight that while these aspects act in consonance with the public values espoused by the IPC (2019), the humorous content also reinforces some of the traditional forms of discrimination impacting disability sport. When athletes are depicted through *funny* moments, and their performances subsequently becomes secondary; this then potentially creates a reinforcement that Paralympic sport is not 'serious' (Goggin and Hutchins, 2017), and that athletes cannot perform simply tasks without incurring in mishaps (Butler and Bissel, 2015).

Overall, by engaging with broader debates on mediatisation, digitalisation and platformisation (e.g. Lee Ludvigsen and Petersen-Wagner, 2023; Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023a, 2023b; Duffy et al., 2019; Van Dijck, 2024; Van Dijck et al., 2018; Velasco et al., 2024), this article's findings contribute to platform, disability and sports media studies. Significantly, this paper responds to the suggestion that there is a 'growing need to understand how platformisation works' (Van Dijck, 2021: 2802) and it does so through its conceptual and empirical arguments. Yet, we would paraphrase – or extend – van Dijck's line of thought here and argue that there is, undeniably, a growing need to understand how platformisation works in sport, considering the ever-evolving nature of platforms and the 'sports world'.

Lupton (2014: 189) reminds us that '[d]igital media technologies can contribute to innovative ways of conducting sociology'. Therefore, to build on, and amplify our findings derived from the case-study looking at a singular platform (and sport governing body), it remains crucial that researchers engage critically with sport's digitalised cultures, using innovative methods and diverse theories. Specifically, we argue that TikTok is – or is increasingly becoming – a key place in which the current platform-fuelled mediatisation and spectacularisation of sport is taking place. In light of the latest agreements between the platform and important national and international governing bodies, including ParalympicsGB (2024), Brazilian Paralympic Committee (TikTok, 2024e), and UEFA and the 2022 Women's Euros tournament (TikTok, 2022), and TikTok's (2023: 1, emphasis added) own statement that 'sports fandom has found a *new home* on TikTok, where fans from around the world unite to celebrate the thrill of their favourite sports, leagues, and athletes', it becomes imperative that researchers take the platform seriously. Concurrently, one important task becomes to approach the platformed manifestations of sport mega-events critically through novel, inter-disciplinary frameworks and critical methodologies.

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## ORCID iD

Renan Petersen-Wagner ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0770-6722

## Note

1. As TikTok clarifies in their documentation (TikTok, 2024d, p. nd) 'the User info API only retrieves data for an individual user, so we use online data. However, the video query API searches for the full dataset, so we use archived data instead of the current online data. New videos take up to 48 h to be added to the search engine, and statistics such as view count and follower count can take up to 10 days to update', meaning that there are possible inaccuracies in terms of view_count, share_count, comment_count, like_count.

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