

Learnings from the Pandemic's Impact on Para-Sport: An Analysis on Parasport Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Greater Study: TheEchoProject.org

Project Echo is a qualitative, longitudinal study that aims to utilize online research methods, including forums and virtual discussions, to examine the after-effects of major parasport events on sport participation and accessibility for persons with disability. The Project Echo website provides parasport participants with the means to share their experiences and perspectives involving access, inclusion, and opportunity with researchers, stakeholders and decision-makers. By collecting the data from the website and understanding the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, Project Echo plans to identify the changes that need to happen to fulfil the legacies promised by host cities of major parasport games in Canada and the UK.

Introduction

The pandemic has impacted para-sport participants by emphasizing social isolation, exacerbation of disablement, increased creativity (Kamyuka, Carlin, McPherson & Misener, 2020), emphasis on the digital divide (Patatas & Winckler, 2022), career uncertainty, and training quality (Jesus, Bhattacharjya, Papadimitriou, Bogdanova, Bentley & Arango-Lasprilla, Kamalakannan, 2021). To further understand and learn from the impacts of the pandemic, exploring the lived experiences of para-sport participants can help researchers, policy-makers, and sports facilitators contribute to para-sport development. This poster aims to examine the lived experiences of parasport participants and the implications on parasport development during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Methods

Sample

38 excerpts from 11 participants from the larger data set were coded into this theme. 6% were casual/non-sport participants, 34% were recreational and 60% were elite sports participants. 93.8% identified as a person with a disability.

Data Collection

Quotes were collected from online forums on the study website and through live, virtual discussions facilitated by Project Echo researchers.

Data Analysis

All forum posts and discussion transcriptions from the larger data set were thematically coded and 6 themes were found: (1) Legacy; (2) COVID-19; (3) Inclusion; (4) Accessibility; (5) Media; and (6) Participation. This poster explores the theme of COVID-19 and the preliminary findings on the pandemic's impact on the para-sport experience.

Results

Five subthemes were identified under the COVID-19 theme: (1) Safety; (2) Accessibility; (3) Participation in Physical Activity; (4) Future of Events; and (5) Mental Health.

1. Safety

- Technology eased limitations by transitioning in-person interactions to online
 - One participant used social media to keep in contact with their physiotherapist and social contacts.
- There is a need to prioritize accessibility, athlete voice, and well-being when designing safety measures
 - At the Tokyo Games, a participant expressed a "lack of conversation around the ethics" and that "people didn't feel there was space to stop and talk about, should we be going [to the Games], should we not be going?".

"Sport inequities always exist, but I think COVID magnified them at the [Tokyo Paralympic] Game."

- Participant on COVID-19's Impact at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games

2. Accessibility

- Transitioning online removed physical barriers but emphasized that some virtual platforms were not accessible
 - One participant shared, "Skype doesn't offer live captioning...where is inclusion amongst these tools? Businesses need to adopt a user-led process or a universal design process"
- The pandemic brought accessibility issues to the foreground
 - A participant believed para-sport has been affected more severely than able-bodied sport as it made staying active "even more challenging" and that finding "outdoor spaces which are appropriate was difficult".

"The dining hall [at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games] was interesting because not everyone is able to put gloves on their hands. And so trying to really make sure as we come up with COVID measures that they are accessible and there are a lot of different options for people."

- Participant on COVID-19's Impact on Safety and Accessibility in Para-Sport

3. Participation in Physical Activity

- Opportunities for sports participation
 - Safety protocols limited opportunities to qualify for upcoming games, train for competitions, and stay physically active
 - Delay of para-sport games had mixed opinions. One participant shared, "While [the delay of Games] was a disappointment...for many athletes, I'm sure many were relieved. How were they supposed to train, stay safe and healthy when many gyms and training sites around the world have been shut down?"

- As return-to-play commenced, some protocols failed to account for people with disabilities, emphasizing accessibility barriers, lack of inclusion, and underserved populations.
- Team cohesion
 - During the Tokyo Games, team cohesion strengthened as athletes shared the same experiences of "[battling] with COVID and the interruptions to training, not being able to travel, [and] struggling to qualify".

"The impact of COVID-19 has it challenges for people with disabilities by not being able to keep physically active. However for me personally, it has forced me to innovate for creative solutions."

- Participant on COVID-19's Impact on Mental Health and Participation

4. The Future of Sporting Events

- Implementation of permanent safety protocols
 - One participant expressed that maintaining safety protocols is a possibility at large-scale games post-pandemic as COVID safeguards raised awareness of the importance of physical and mental health of athletes
- The pandemic as an opportunity to address accessibility barriers and work towards optimizing inclusion in para-sport development
 - One participant shared, "Many are saying that sport...will look very different when the pandemic is over, from less focus on competition to more skills-based at an earlier age to more direct outreach to underserved populations that can help expose new participants to sport and help grow the sector".

5. Mental Health

- Uncertainty of games influenced athlete motivation.
 - One participant shared "I think that was probably one of the hardest experiences for me was to train for [the Tokyo Games] through a pandemic, with the uncertainty [of] whether or not I would even be eligible"
- Athlete identity
 - Participants that could not train and had a strong athlete identity may have struggled with self-complexity
 - A participant shared "From training about 4 times, to be told you can't...was extremely hard to take mentally. As restrictions started to ease...it only allowed me to get back in the pool leisurely"
- Resilience
 - Many participants displayed increased dedication and mental strength when training for uncertain games, finding alternatives to para-sport participation, and maintaining social bonds

Discussion

The pandemic brought conversations around accessibility and inclusion in sport to the forefront. Some safety measures implemented in communities, recreational facilities, and major games were not designed with people with disabilities in mind. Participants expressed the need for an athlete-centred approach where para-athletes are included in decisions regarding return-to-play protocols, safety measures, and facilitation of major games. Technology was both an enabler and a barrier as some online platforms were not fully accessible to participants. Amidst the pandemic, participants recognized the resilience and mental strength they demonstrated when adapting to the closure of sporting facilities and training under uncertain circumstances. Through adapting to the changing environment of the pandemic as elite athletes, para-sport teams built stronger team cohesion despite limited face-to-face interactions.

Conclusion

The pandemic has magnified existing inequities in non-sport, recreational sport, and elite sport environments. Policy-makers and sport facilitators should utilize the pandemic as an opportunity to address and solve existing issues faced by para-sport participants by including participants in decision-making processes. Further research should be done to create inclusive and athlete-centred decision-making structures or models for sport facilitators to utilize when planning major events and creating sporting protocols.

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