Factors influencing the strategic frame-building of para-athletes in Japan from the public relations perspective

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Framing is used for strategic communication as a rhetorical tool by including and excluding certain elements to generate effective media messages to gain particular social attitudes. The frame-building process is affected by external and internal factors. Para-sports promoters have been struggling with the depiction of para-athletes, because the public seems to perceive messages about people with disabilities as unattractive or socially inappropriate. Public relations professionals involved in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics may very well face similar and other challenges, such as public censorship on the topic of disabilities, in Japan. This study investigates the external and internal factors that influenced the strategic frame-building process of para-athletes and sports at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics to achieve the objective of promoting an inclusive Japanese society. As this research was explorative, in-depth interviews were conducted according to the hierarchy of influences on media content with public relations practitioners engaged in this event. The findings suggest that multiple endogenous and exogenous factors, including the social circumstances and the COVID-19 pandemic, are likely to have influenced the public relations efforts supporting the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. The findings further contribute to exploring questions regarding the strategic frame-building process and a new direction of the strategic frames of its promotion for future research.

1. Introduction

The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games aim to showcase para-sports to foster a more inclusive society for people with disabilities. One of the values of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) that they follow is 'equality' as 'through sport, para-athletes challenge stereotypes and transform attitudes, helping to increase inclusion by breaking down social barriers and discrimination towards people with an impairment [sic]' (IPC 2019, 11). The public relations (PR) Bureau of the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (TOCOG) has approached news outlets to promote this vision (TOCOG 2015). However, according to the results of the 2017 survey of media coverage on the Paralympic Games, a majority of those surveyed answered that the

Paralympics are not well understood in Japanese society (Tsurushima and Saito 2018).

The vision of the Paralympics is often incorporated into the national policies (Karageorgos and Higgs 2018). As Japan is facing serious concerns regarding rapid ageing and a very low birth rate, these games are an opportunity to raise awareness about and realise a fully inclusive society, where everyone—regardless of age, sex, disabilities and so forth—can be engaged, leading to population and labour force sustainability in Japan (Cabinet Office 2015; Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2016, 2019). The TOCOG is working towards increasing the media exposure of disability sports to establish inclusivity in the games by issuing appeals to the media to promote its vision of social equity (TOCOG 2016; IPC 2019).

Japan has historically had a socially oppressive environment, where people feel uncomfortable discussing people with disabilities because they are uncertain about public expectations and afraid of public backlash, lawsuits, and word hunting, called *kotobagari* in Japanese, which refers to a witch hunt of words and expressions that offend activists (Stevens 2013). This public censorship could have led to the self-censorship of the Japanese media, where silence or euphemism is preferred, and fundamental problems are rarely discussed (Stevens 2013). The promoters of para-sports have experienced difficulty depicting para-athletes because the public perceives messages about athletes with disabilities as unattractive and/or socially inappropriate (Cottingham and Petersen-Wagner 2018). Disability rights groups, advocates and communities have reacted negatively towards the providers of content on athletes with disabilities because of the significant symbolic and political character of the Paralympics (Goggin and Hutchins 2017). While the media landscape in Japan has recently changed because of the increased and constant presence of para-sports on Japanese TV and newspapers since 2018 (Yamasaki and Ishii 2019; Nihon Monitor 2020), the question that remains is if the abovementioned social atmosphere remains and, if so, how it affects the creation of PR content for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games.

Framing can be utilised as a strategic rhetorical tool by communicators to lead recipients to a certain standpoint or understanding (Cottingham and Petersen-Wagner 2018; Allen 2016). The frames are created and become apparent in media content during the process of frame-building affected by varied external factors, such as stakeholders who attempt to publicise their perspectives on an issue designated for media exposure, and internal factors, such as news values that affect the evaluation and decision about whether an event is worth publicising and conventions (Lecheler and de Vreese 2019). For the abovementioned facts, the current research investigated what and how external and internal factors have the potential to influence the strategic frame-building process of the PR practitioners vis-à-vis the depiction and framing of the athletes of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games to achieve the objective of promoting an inclusive Japanese society.

Figure 1

The Hierarchy of Influences Model Uses Five Levels of Analysis
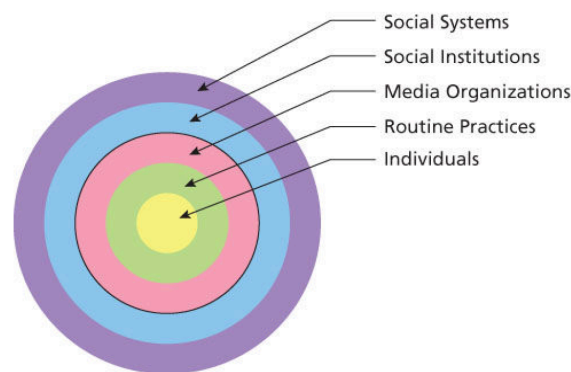
Note. The innermost layer indicates the micro level of analysis, and the outermost layer represents the macro level. From *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective* (3rd ed., p. 9), by P. Shoemaker and R. Stephen, 2014, Routledge. Copyright 2014 by the Taylor & Francis Group. Reprinted with permission.

To answer this question in the larger context of the frame-building process concerning para-athletes in Japan, semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with PR practitioners involved in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games

from the angle of each level of the *hierarchy of influences* model, consisting of the individual level, routine level, organisational level, social institution level and social system level (Figure 1; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Solves et al. (2019) analysed the factors influencing the frame-building process of the Paralympic Games' media coverage from the perspective of journalists. They revealed that internal factors—such as the routines and values of journalists, information gathering issues due to the degree of access limitations to athletes with disabilities in the Olympic Village and mixed zones, travelling time between venues, media production processes, organisational pressures and attitudes of editors and managers towards para-sports—and external factors—such as the economic situation of the hosting country—affected journalists' frame-building process of the Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Paralympic Games' media coverage in Spain. However, no scholars have examined the factors influencing the frame-building process of athletes with disabilities from the PR perspective of the Paralympics until now. Therefore, this research is explorative.

2.   Theoretical background

2.1.   Strategic framing

In conducting strategic communication, organisations experience multiple challenges, including silence due to the fear of addressing opinions in public and persuading unmotivated recipients to process messages (Stevens 2013; Allen 2016). Strategic framing results in recipients having a particular perspective by making specific elements of a message salient, generating objects for their attention, and activating particular schemas to prompt a favourable understanding designated by communicators (Hallahan 2008). It is 'conceptually [connects] the underlying psychological processes that people use to examine information, to make judgements, and to draw inferences about the world around them' (Hallahan 1999, 206). Using the analogy of a window or portrait border, Hallahan (1999, 207) defined framing as a context 'drawn around information that delimits the subject matter and, thus, focuses attention on key elements within'. Framing facilitates the active sense-making process of the target public and enables it to process information quickly (Hallahan 1999; 2008).

2.2. *Multiple-perspective factors influencing the frame-building process*

The frame-building process can be understood as a continuum of internal and external factors that influence content (Lecheler and de Vreese 2019). The *hierarchy of influences* model proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (2014) describes five levels of factors affecting media content: individual (attributes and qualities of the individual communicator), routine (patterns of individual operations), organisational (individual communication and routines structured through organisational policy and occupational roles), social institutions (relationships between social institutions, such as stakeholders that influence media content) and social systems (external contexts, such as ideology and culture; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). The elements categorised by the first three levels are endogenous; those referencing social institutions and systemic environments are exogenous. The frame-building process is in an ongoing conflict between internal and external factors. The greater the significance of internal factors the weaker the effect of the social system and social institutions on content. The more dominant the external factors the weaker the influence of the organisational-, routine- and individual-level variables on content (de Vreese 2005). Although it is difficult to set clear boundaries between the levels, the analysis of respective levels enables us to easily measure and interpret phenomena. The interconnections between the levels may be revealed and may exert substantive impact on the content (Shoemaker and Reese 2014).

This model encompasses the factors influencing content production and frame-building from the macro perspective of society as a whole to the micro or individual level. Scheufele (1999) asserted that five factors potentially influence frame-building by journalists. These include social norms and values, organisational pressure and constraints, pressure of interest groups, media workers' routines and their ideological and/or political orientation. The current research explored the factors that affect each of the five levels to elucidate their influence on the development of strategic frames by PR professionals.

2.2.1. Social systems

The level of social system is located at the most exterior ring of the model, and it impacts the content in relation to the entire social framework. Shoemaker and Reese (2014, 64) view this level as 'the structure of relationships among people and the institutions they create'. The institutions represent the structural manifestations of political, economic and cultural subsystems, such as the government, financial institutions, religious establishments and mass communication agencies. This macro level also includes ideology or 'a symbolic mechanism that serves as a cohesive and integrating force in society' (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 70). It influences media content in the form of 'pressure to support the status quo' with the mandate 'to support the interests of those in power in society' (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 8). Conversely, media content affects ideology. Media institutions continue to create 'a cohesive ideology as a unifying force, a set of common-sense values and norms that reproduce and legitimate the social system structure' based on which the subsystems act in their own domain (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 81). Becker (1984, 69) defined ideology as 'an integrated set of frames of reference through which each of us sees the world and to which all of us adjust our actions and it influences us on the individual level'. This influence may be observed in Japan's socially oppressive environment that supresses public discussions about people with disabilities. It may also be noted in the current social circumstances of the pandemic wherein media content induced certain behaviours, such as defamation of people infected with COVID-19 because of their stigmatisation in media reports (Yoshioka and Maeda 2020).

Citing the social and media environment in Japan and 'disabilities' as a specific example, the investigation of the influence of social systems will demonstrate whether PR practitioners permit public censorship and eventual self-censorship to influence the strategic frame-building process. This may also identify PR professionals' fear of public backlash due to their uncertainty about public expectations and reactions.

2.2.2. *Social institutions*

Stakeholders may exert a powerful and dominant effect on frame-building in some situations (Lecheler and de Vreese 2019). Stakeholders, such as political elites or non-governmental organisations, denote one of the external factors influencing media organisations and 'communicate their stance on issues through the media to influence legislation and public opinions and behaviours' (de Vreese 2003; Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 111). The foundation plan of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games (the Tokyo 2020 Games; TOCOG 2015) encompasses an organisational structure that requires advisory meetings attended by supreme advisers (e.g. the prime minister of Japan), special advisers (e.g. the chair of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly) and advisers (e.g. representatives from various quarters). The government of Japan, Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC), Japanese Paralympic Committee (JPC) and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) work with the TOCOG 'to enhance information sharing and find solutions in areas that require cooperation of relevant organisations' (TOCOG 2015, 159). The strong political influence on the Tokyo 2020 Games was reportedly detectable in meetings on the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Games with International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach: all attendees from Japan were reportedly politicians or former politicians (Takiguchi 2020). Currently, the Paralympics function as an opening or a catalyst 'for dissent and debate over contentious issues of disability, welfare, work, and citizenship in the host nation' in media (Goggin and Hutchins 2017, 232). The media shares an indivisible relationship with other institutions or stakeholders interested in the Paralympics, because the audience for the Paralympics comprises not only abled-bodied people but also people with disabilities 'whose lives are tied to diverse disability communities and a range of rights agendas' (Goggin and Hutchins 2017, 219). Within the strategic communications activities of the TOCOG, it ties closely with the IOC, IPC, International Federations, National Olympic Committees, National Paralympic Committees and other key international stakeholders; the

communications departments of the JOC, JPC and National Federations; the TMG; the Government of Japan; the Japan Sport Council; marketing partners and other key national stakeholders to encourage participation in the Games and promote the values of the Games (TOCOG 2015). The content of the communications enhances customer experience and enable Olympic and Paralympic brands to make partners' products and services more recognisable than and differentiate from those of their competitors (Ferrand, Chappelet, and Séguin 2012; TOCOG 2015). Therefore, broad-based stakeholders are interested in the media content on the Paralympics, and institutional level factors may influence PR content related to the Paralympics.

2.2.3. Organisational level

The factors of analysis on this level include organisational roles, structures, processes, and policies. Organisational roles shape the functions, which are generally revealed in the titles of personnel within the institution and their attitudes towards their jobs and social issues. Organisational structure determines administrative efficiency, power flow, exchange of information and other institutional aspects. For instance, policy decisions are transmitted down the hierarchy in a vertically organised structure, and scant information is exchanged between people at the top and bottom. Directives are transmitted from a small number of people to others to whom similar authority is accorded in organised groups that are horizontally structured. Such organisational types may impose increased administrative burden on employees, such as coordinating and planning teams of media workers that would, in turn, lead to decreased resources for information gathering and content creation, including reduced availability of time (Shoemaker and Reese 2014).

Organisational processes denote 'how the work of the organisation is accomplished, given its structure' (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 153). Organisations are directed towards certain goals and policies. Organisational policies are conveyed from top executives to subordinate workers in various ways that are formal and informal and exist in written and unwritten forms. Policies, such as guidelines determining media content, are conveyed and applied to the

subordinate workers by their superiors on behalf of their organisation and are then internalised by employees in the process of their socialisation to the norms of the organisations. For example, journalists experience and observe the types of stories executed by their organisation in their day-to-day activities, and these observations function as unwritten policies on content. Most organisations prioritise the economic objective of making profit. This central goal underlies all subsequent objectives, including the creation of high-quality content, working for public interest and acquiring professional recognition. Organisations can satisfy these secondary goals if their economic goals are achieved. The more the importance of profitability for organisations, the less media workers think about the efficacy of their professional autonomy and values. Policies instituted by top executives may override professional and individual autonomies and routines. Content, such as stories, that are newsworthy can satisfy economic and business goals and increase the value of advertising space (Shoemaker and Reese 2014).

In relation to the frame-building process of journalists for the Paralympic Games, internal key stakeholders' attitudes may shape significant media-organisational decisions. These frames were reflected by the attitudes of internal key stakeholders, including editors and managers 'who did not believe that the Paralympic Games were a genuine or competitive athletic event nor that it merited comparable treatment to the Olympic Games' (Solves et al. 2019, 744). These negative attitudes may shape important organisational decisions, such as the number of journalists assigned to cover the Paralympic Games and the allocation of space for related content. Journalists adapt their stories to the available space and the stances adopted by key stakeholders, such as editors and managers (Solves et al. 2019). An analysis of this level highlights who controls the creation of content, what organisational policies and goals influence the content, and the contexts in which routine practices are implemented (Shoemaker and Reese 2014).

2.2.4. *Routine level*

As a routine practice, media workers systematically gather and process information to create content (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Media content may be

influenced by 'the ways media workers do their jobs, what they think about them, and what rules the organisation imposes on them' (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 164). Routine practices are primarily unwritten and function as consuetude and guides for media workers (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Routines originate out of the needs of media workers and organisations that 'must efficiently deliver, within time and space limitations, a product that is acceptable to the consumer' (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 168). As an aspect of routine practice, framing may be apprehended as a means to promote audience understanding by connecting seemingly disconnected facts and as an outcome influenced in part by the structured nature of media work (Shoemaker and Cohen 2006).

An integral part of the routine practice of PR is obtaining information from the internal and external environment through the accomplishment of environmental scanning and attaining a thorough understanding of organisational stakeholders (Gregory 2004). Access to information is a prerequisite for the communication strategy of content creation (Shoemaker and Reese 2014; Gregory 2004). The framing and shaping of content are influenced by the media's relationships with information sources, how information and to what extent can be attained. Governments' control of information may have a significant impact on the access to them and eventually how content is presented (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). In the context of routine practices followed by journalists vis-à-vis the Paralympics, Solves et al. (2019) asserted that journalists had limited access to para-athletes in the London Paralympics, and thus, restricted interaction led to decrease in content related to the life stories of para-athletes and resulted in reduced exposure.

Frames that are well-suited to professional criteria and news value, such as prominence and human interest, are often selected (Brüggemann 2014; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). News value and related factors assist media workers to evaluate and predict content and topics deemed newsworthy for their audiences, thus reducing workload (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). When these properties are applied to the selection of stories, similar types of stories and frames tend to be produced repeatedly (Tewksbury and Riles 2018). Such routines have been revealed in previous studies conducted on French, German and Spanish

newspaper articles on the Paralympics (Schantz and Gilbert 2001; Solves et al. 2019).

2.2.5. *Individual level*

Individual media workers' frame-building is influenced by factors, such as interventionism, power distance, market orientation, opinions and values regarding a topic. The degree and character of frame-building at an individual level can be determined by these factors. Brüggemann (2014, 63) elucidated that frame-building is 'on a continuum between passively passing on interpretations provided by other actors (frame sending) and providing the audience with the journalist's individual interpretations of a situation (frame setting)'. Interventionism denotes the extent of the discretional power of media workers and the degree to which their interpretation affects the selection and production of frames. Media workers with an interventionist stance tend to actively reframe and set the frames of other actors (e.g. political elites; Brüggemann 2014; Bartholomé, Lecheler, and de Vreese 2015). Power distance implies how media workers locate their positions within the opinions articulated by internal and external stakeholders, such as audiences, politicians and the media organisations. If the opinions of audiences, politicians and newsrooms differ from each other, the media workers may deem it safer to conceal their interpretations and offer balanced reports that consider the interpretations of all stakeholders, so the communicators can align to a neutral position (Brüggemann 2014). The market orientation of individual media workers regulates the extent to which they follow commercial or public interests. Content production is increasingly integrated into marketing schema in the broader contexts of individual media workers, and this tendency may be noted in the increasing inclusion of entertainment content in news programmes. If the opinions and values of the communicators are strongly associated with a certain topic, for example, 'deeper rooted opinions about fighting climate change', they tend to purse to set frames rather than to merely disseminate the frames established by their information resources, such as political actors (Brüggemann 2014, 71). Further, values shared with co-workers

'shape the context in which events are viewed and the selection of the aspects of each event that will become the news' (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, 228).

3. Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted with PR professionals (n = 3) from different organisations engaged in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, prior to the opening of the Tokyo 2020 Games. In-depth interviews were semi-structured as this method was deemed appropriate for explorative research and for gathering information and knowledge, such as details that research participants were unwilling to express (Johnson and Rowlands 2012). Each interview lasted for approximately 2.5 hours. The number of interviewees was minimal for three reasons (Gilgun 2014). First, the population engaged in the PR of para-sports organisations in Japan is small and limited to 37 national organisations or associations of para-sports, including the TOCOG (The Nippon Foundation Paralympic Support Center 2020). Second, it is generally difficult to obtain a large sample size due to the complexity, depth, breadth and time-consuming nature of in-depth interviews (Wiid and Diggines 2009; Gilgun 2014). Third, the target group tends to avoid participation in such interviews owing to the uncertainty associated with the potential impact on its privacy, affiliations and stakeholders through the disclosure of sensitive information. The interviews and data analysis were conducted by reference to Bartholomé et al. (2015).

3.1. Interviews

The semi-structured interview questions and protocols were formulated in terms of the features of the five levels of influences discussed above. Questions at the level of social systems were structured around the influence exerted on the media content by the social situation seen from the political, economic and cultural perspectives; the ideology and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. On the level of social institutions, questions concerning the influence of external stakeholders of the Paralympics, such as the government of Japan, JOC, JPC and the TMG, were put forth. Enquiries on the level of media organisations involved the influence of organisational policies, structures, processes and quantitative and

qualitative goals. With respect to routine practices, questions were asked to ascertain the influence of daily routines, news values, and constraints to create content (e.g. time to prepare, space limitation) in terms of routine practices. At the individual level, questions were designed to probe the effects of the values and attitudes of individual media workers towards content creation related to athletes with disabilities and the Paralympics. The questions were sent to the interviewees via email before the interviews and the respondents were asked to answer them in writing. The emails clearly stated the purpose of this research, including its background and theoretical framework, because the term *framing* is an arcane and technical term, and in the field of PR, professionals possibly understand its meaning differently from the academic definition. Then, the interviews were conducted with an interview protocol to fill in any details that the written answers failed to clarify.

3.2. Sample

The interviewees were selected based on the following main two criteria: (1) their organisations were engaged in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games and (2) they were responsible for creating PR content regarding para-sports. The respondents were selected using this criterion because they were assumed to be individuals in the innermost layer of the hierarchy of influences on the strategic frame-building process for para-athletes in Japan. Thus, they were assumed to be affected not only by every layer but also by the interplay of multiple layers of its hierarchy, which, in turn, enabled the understanding of the process from multiple perspectives. The respondents were selected via introduction and snowball sampling. Following the interview, the first respondent referred a second target audience for the study on the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games' PR.

3.3. Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed so that the content could be understood in-depth and thoroughly analysed. The stepwise thematic analysis, proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was conducted to examine the transcribed interviews. This method enabled the systematic analysis through identifying

themes and patterned responses. The analysis was performed using the MAXQDA 2018 software (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019). A strictly inductive analysis was not selected because of the explorative nature of this investigation; instead, the analysis identified similarities between interviewees' responses and drew a demarcation based on the respective levels of the predetermined theoretical framework, i.e. the individual level, routine level, organisational level, social institution level and social system level.

During the first phase of analysis, initial coding sorted the features of interests defined by the theoretical framework to the respective levels (e.g. when an interviewee explained the organisational characteristics of OCOGs, this was categorised to organisational level.). The second phase identified patterns and common characteristics in the pool of initial codes (e.g. many initial codes indicated the time-limited characteristics of OCOGs; this was categorised under a potential theme.). In this phase, the link between the themes was examined as well. The third phase reviewed whether the themes should be unified, expanded, divided or discarded. The final phase thoroughly defined the themes based on the sections of the interview transcript that were classified and presented in the findings section. Any information that could reveal participants' identities (e.g. position, organisation name, demographic data and excerpts of their statements) was anonymised and excluded from this research to comply with the consent agreement to protect interviewees' privacy and prevent any impact on their affiliations and stakeholders due to the disclosure of sensitive information.

4. Findings

The findings were organised according to individual levels designated by Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) factors under the five levels that affect media content, which were assigned as external and internal factors.

4.1. External factors

Social attitudes towards media content on people and athletes with disabilities. According to the interviewees, content criticism and treating people with disabilities in an amusing way were regarded as taboo in the past. This

tendency has led the public to believe that topics related to people with disabilities should be taken seriously and has contributed to the social perception that people with disabilities *special*. However, a new claim has emerged because of the social trend towards normalisation that people with disabilities should be treated akin to people without disabilities. Meanwhile, the past claim that people with disabilities are special and need exceptional care remains. Thus, mentions of people with disabilities should not be limited to merely serious and sad stories or accounts depicting them in a positive light; instead, content should also present them with humour and include the entertainment factor, thus covering various viewpoints.

Contemporary social circumstances. The interviewees indicated that Paralympics PR professionals initially monitor news coverage and websites and reflect the social situation in the material they disseminate and tend to design and publish content appropriate to the prevailing social context. This process is not affected by the uncertainty regarding public expectations and reactions, because the interviewees think it only right that public expectations and reactions remain wide-ranging. In the context of the current pandemic, PR content is adapted to the social effects of COVID-19 and stay-at-home mandates. Some interviewees cited an example of PR offerings: suggestions for reports on creative physical activities that athletes can perform at home and the video messages from Thailand's national boccia team to encourage the city of its pre-game camp in Japan to overcome the challenges of COVID-19. Furthermore, the current pandemic has been making the societal importance of the Paralympics values more defined and clearer, because the essential social value of the games has come to the forefront following the change of lifestyle resulting from the pandemic. PR professionals have paid increasing attention to this social situation. As an indicative example, an interviewee mentioned that society was realising the importance of face-to-face communication and developed a deeper understanding that minorities had experienced additional burdens during the pandemic, and the Paralympics represent these values. Accordingly, rebuilding a communication strategy is necessary while considering public opinions of the games, which change constantly depending on the social situation.

4.2. Internal factors

Time-limited existence of OCOGs. Some of the interviewees stressed that the Organising Committees of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (OCOGs) are time-limited entities instituted exclusively for the duration of a particular edition of the Olympic and Paralympic Games and are subsequently disbanded. The primary mission of the TOCOG is, therefore, to ensure the successful and smooth execution of the Tokyo 2020 Games. This prioritises tasks that are directly related to (a) the hosting of the games, such as PR activities for filling venues with spectators during the games and creating an atmosphere fit for the games, which is strongly related to the success of sponsorship and (b) completing operations as per predetermined dates, such as organising media accreditation applications, making an administration manual, creating a national team members list and producing press contents. The short-term operations are dealt preferentially. Although PR practitioners desire to spend more time and effort on the promotion of the social understanding of the values of diversity and inclusive society, they must prioritise and assign their resources to the short-term operations.

Scarcity of financial and information resources for the Paralympics PR. The interviewees mentioned that, although the Paralympics have already been held in Japan a few times, it may be said that explicit knowledge of PR has not been sufficiently accumulated from past Paralympic Games, such as internal PR administration manuals or systematic information about para-sports records. Another example from the interview is that not all Japanese para-sports associations have a person solely responsible for PR. This makes it challenging for PR professionals to gather the information necessary for producing content. This is due to the lack of funding for and the voluntary administration of para-sports associations. In terms of the financial situation, against the backdrop of the heavy criticism in Japan over the ballooning costs for the Tokyo 2020 Games, negative public opinion is surrounding the need for money to be spent on socially important issues instead of the games. The COVID-19 pandemic has further propelled this social trend, which might have led to cutting the budget for necessary resources, such as PR human resources for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics.

Extra workload in gathering and releasing information. The interviewees indicated that compared to PR for the Olympics, PR professionals need to dedicate extra time and effort for different types of disabilities (e.g. extremities, vision, auditory and intelligence). In terms of content, they need meticulous consideration and assiduity towards handling personal information, such as the impairments confronted by participants. Depending on the types and degree of their disabilities, the difficulty of gathering information via PR and its restrictions vary. Interviewing athletes with intellectual impairments and releasing information are potentially more challenging than when working with athletes in other disability categories. Appropriate questions for them are simple—not complicated or abstract. Questions are often answered in cooperation with athletes' families before interviews.

News values and factors not predetermined: responsive stances to ongoing social situation. According to the interviewees, PR professionals place values on the information they desire to promote. Such values can be determined based on the feedback acquired through the monitoring and scanning of prevailing social principles, social perception and social values according to which the information is tailored. News values and factors are not predetermined; they originate from ongoing social circumstances. Creating content does not begin with deciding on a topic or an angle, but assessing the social situation and making decisions about the content. PR professionals are responsive and their content is adjusted to the current social environment. The current social situation of COVID-19 is an example that influenced the PR content of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics (refer to *contemporary social circumstances*).

Media diversity as an important value, wide range of authorial autonomy and one angle in one piece of content. The interviewees suggested that the diversity of content, opinions, expressions, subject areas (e.g. technology, social welfare and athletic performance) and other features represents an important professional value for them. The autonomy of authors is a significant factor in the achievement of this media diversity. When creating content, it is common that the content itself is made at the discretion of the author after the PR department coordinates the types of basic messages, media, purposes, targets and interfaces

between organisations and targets. The creation process is not strictly controlled. Instead, the intention of the author is respected while checks of human rights and privacy etc. are done prior to publication. However, according to the interviewees, only a single angle or viewpoint is usually expressed through a piece of media content. It is not feasible to articulate several viewpoints and contradictory standpoints in a singular report. For example, it is difficult to add an entertaining aspect to a story about a person overcoming a difficult past and about the challenges posed by disabilities. Moreover, there is no universally applicable content or angle (the word 'angle' used by the interviewees closely approximates the concept 'frames' but they are not synonymous).

Criteria for the measurement of the effects of PR activities targeted at the Paralympics. The further improvement and modification of PR activities require the implementation of the plan-do-check-act cycle to measure and assess the effectiveness of the PR activities targeted at building effective frames for the permeation of Paralympism. According to the interviewees, commonly used measurements and evaluations may be used to achieve such assessments of the PR efforts: the evaluation of the extent of media exposure, the number of accesses and views of relevant webpages and the implementation of sentiment analysis on news coverage. However, it can be challenging for PR professionals to measure the effectiveness of their activities designed to widely disseminate a particular social attitude and behaviour towards the Paralympics and athletes with disabilities.

5. *Discussion*

This study examined the external and internal factors affecting the development of the strategic framing of the PR of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games vis-à-vis the depiction and framing of para-athletes to promote an inclusive Japanese society. The findings should be carefully interpreted and discussed considering the limited number of interviewees.

The analysis suggested that the intersection between external and internal factors and social attitudes towards media content on people with and without disabilities may influence the frame-building process. This was illustrated by

interviewees' responses that indicated two ambivalent perceptions of people with disabilities, i.e. they are treated as special people as well as similar to able-bodied people. As an external factor, this public attitude may have influenced an internal factor—the values of the PR practitioners of para-sports in organisations promoting the Paralympics and its ideals. The current ambivalent public perceptions may lead to the high value placed on media diversity (e.g. diversity of content, topics, opinions and groups) by PR practitioners because they are likely to think that media content should include this diverging trend in attitudes and PR efforts tend to evince discrete viewpoints and frames across the media landscape (McQuail 1992). This characteristic may be specific to the PR pertaining to the Paralympics, because societal diversity is the one of the most important values established by the Paralympics and this quality should also be represented in the diversity presented in the media (Hoffmann‑Riem 1987). Conversely, while journalists and PR practitioners generally share similar news values according to Sallot, Steinfatt, and Salwen (1998), one of their differences involves the higher value para-sports' PR practitioners place on 'fairness to different views' in comparison with general PR practitioners and journalists. Questions then arise about how much the attitudes of the Paralympics PR differ with regard to media diversity to those evinced by the PR practitioners of other industries and journalists, and how this divergence affects the frame-building and types of frames or content. Further, the analysis related to media diversity indicated that PR professionals believe that discrete standpoints towards disabilities should be displayed individually through different pieces of content; however, they tend to apply a single frame to each piece of content. This idea is similar to the notions of external diversity, i.e. media diversity in whole media system, and internal diversity, i.e. media diversity in every media organisation (McQuail 1992). Von Sikorski and Schierl (2012) revealed that the consumption of a news article containing two frames of contradicting valences, i.e. the athletic performance frame (APF) of positive valence and the dependency and personal tragedy frame of negative valence, led to a less positive evaluation of athletes with disabilities in comparison with a news item that only included the APF. Considering these studies, it should be further examined how the consumption of multiple identical

frames included respectively in different pieces of content influences public attitudes towards athletes with disabilities and affects the permeation of Paralympism.

According to this analysis, para-sports PR practitioners are not likely to be influenced by the public or self-censorship that traditionally prevailed in Japanese society because they believe that the wide variety of public expectations and reactions are normal. Future research should probe how social perception and media presentations of athletes with disabilities will change and correlate to each other. This is important for people with disabilities because the media has positioned athletes with disabilities 'as representatives of communities and audiences who may—or may not—identify with the sporting performances on display or feel they are relevant to their experience and situation' (Goggin and Hutchins 2017, 219).

Media content, the angles expressed in its content, and the news factors seem to be developed after scanning the prevailing social circumstances. The analysis revealed that content creation is not based on decisions about a frame or an angle; rather, the initial step entails an assessment of the prevailing social circumstances before making decisions about content for media reporting. This means that news factors are not predetermined; they emerge from the assessment of contemporary trends and current social contexts. Thus, PR professionals may adapt the angles and standpoints to suit contemporary trends in the current social context. They may design and publish frames appropriate to the prevailing social context. This suggests that social trends might be the most important news factor for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics' PR. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of this. It appears to have made society realise the importance of some of the values of the Paralympics, such as social diversity, which, in turn, would become a criterion to select frames. Another point in question is, although the content, according to the interviewees, is not self-censored, this stance to the social circumstances indicates that content may be influenced by public opinions because media workers are likely to reflect them in the content. Even if self-censorship does not occur currently, it arises if the social climate surrounding the PR practitioners changes (Hayes 2007). Internal variables, such as the OCOGs'

intrinsic character and the time-limited existence of organisations, might prioritise directly associated short-term duties to guarantee the successful and smooth execution of the Tokyo 2020 Games. This illustrates that PR resources may be preferentially assigned to tasks achieving these objectives, rather than PR activities that promote an inclusive society. The limited resources allocated to the content of para-sports are the common constraints in both PR and journalistic production (Solves et al. 2019).

Another internal factor, the scarcity of financial resource, possibly persuades PR professionals to refrain from acquiring the necessary resources to improve the quality of their content, which may influence their strategic frames. It appears likely that the allocation of fewer budget to Paralympics PR may lead to the allocation of fewer resources (e.g. human resource) to the promotion of an inclusive society. The extra work required in accessing to and publishing information on para-athletes may cause a constraint in developing strategic frames.

Furthermore, this analysis revealed that the criteria used to measure the effects of the PR activities to prevail the idea of the Paralympics are not well-developed. The development of its measurement criteria and tools may lead to a more effective strategic communication and framing, which is essential from the practical and scientific standpoints. If the positive effects of strategic-framing para-athletes are confirmed, this can contribute to greater media exposure of para-sports embodying diversity and inclusive society, as such content might receive less priority in praxis due to the limited time frame of the OCOGs. Therefore, research on the strategic-framing of para-sports and para-athletes that has a positive impact on attitudes and behaviours towards individuals with disabilities is required.

The results of the interviews suggest that PR professionals command a high degree of individual autonomy, which may prevent the undue influence of power and commercial interests. Therefore, future research should focus more sharply on this relationship.

6. Conclusion

This study is the first of its kind to focus on frame-building process from the perspective of PR practitioners (not journalists) of para-sports. It contributes to the identification of factors and problems affecting the strategic frame-building process to achieve the promotion of an inclusive society and create awareness of Paralympism. PR professionals of para-sports can use the results to facilitate the production of PR content for the public to better understand individuals and athletes with disabilities.

PR efforts are responsive to the social situation and understand that gauging external perceptions is necessary before producing content. The strong tendency of the responsive stance of para-sports' PR practitioners towards the social situation might be one of their clearest differentiating factors from journalists; this comparison is desired in future research. On the level of social institutions, the influence of external stakeholders has not been revealed in this research. Future research should clear this point. Furthermore, this research sheds light on a new direction for the development of strategic framing, i.e. frames including entertaining elements, to achieve this purpose.

This qualitative investigation indicated the factors that can potentially influence the frame-building process; however, it cannot indicate the actual impact or extent of the effect of these factors on the frame-building process because of the lack of representativeness, which future research initiatives should quantitatively clarify. To further create awareness about the Paralympics amongst the public, media content must cover various viewpoints and incorporate the desired entertainment elements, which often include abled-body content within strategic frames. The impact of entertaining reports about athletes with disabilities and Paralympism on the public awareness of the topic should be investigated statistically in the future, including its moderators and mediators. For the statistical analysis, appropriate theories and definitions must be devised to develop measurement tools capable of assessing the impact of PR activities and frames, including entertaining elements, on social attitudes towards athletes with disabilities and people with disabilities and the understanding of Paralympism. Moreover, this research does not clarify how external stakeholders, such as

sponsors and the Japanese government, influence the content and framing of TOCOG PR. The intentions of external stakeholders might influence the content and frames generated by Paralympics PR professionals, if they have a stake and a business interest in the TOCOG. Future research on this matter is required, for example, through in-depth interviews with sponsors or officials of the Japanese government. Research on the permeation of Paralympism and promotion of an inclusive society has become increasingly important, especially because of the social transformation triggered by the pandemic.

Disclosure Statement

Notes on Contributors

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Data Availability Statement

The study participants did not consent to the public sharing of their data due to the nature of this study. Hence, the supporting data are not available.

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