

**The Impact of Knowledge of an Athlete's Physical Disability on Spectators' Impressions of Performance and Interest in Consumption**

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**Diversity**

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(including questions)  
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According to Goggin and Newell (2010), "disability is predominantly understood as a tragedy, something that comes from the defects and lack of our bodies. Those suffering with disability according to this cultural myth need to...show courage in heroically overcoming their lot" (p. 2). The most effective way to do this is to become a supercrip, or a person with a disability who has overcome what is expected of them and has inspired others in the process (Kama, 2004). Kama (2004) and Berger (2001) present an argument that those supercrips held to the highest standards and are the greatest standard barriers are athletes with disabilities.

The supercrip label is not lost on athletes with disabilities who resent the supercrip image due to its paternalistic underpinnings (Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Hargreaves & Hardin, 2009). Recently, Cottingham, Phillips, Carroll, Drane, and Gearity (2011) noted that the supercrip image was, in fact, experienced by spectators and may influence consumption but, in reality, no research exists on if the inspiration that a disabled athlete provides is different from an athlete without a disability. Furthermore, no research exists on how the supercrip image, or observing an athlete's disability, influences other perspectives of athletes and their performance. The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of knowing an athlete has a disability on perspectives of the athletes.

In order to determine the effect of disability on spectator perspectives, a 10 minute video of a deaf NCAA basketball team (Gallaudet University) playing against a hearing NCAA basketball team (Wilkes University) was used as a means to collect data. Our hypothesis was that knowledge of the Gallaudet players' hearing impairment would be positively related to evaluations of the Gallaudet players and team (i.e., greater athleticism, teamwork, inspiration, etc.) and desire to attend a Gallaudet game.

Participants were 77 undergraduate students who attended a university not located near Wilkes or Gallaudet. None of the participants were familiar with either university. In addition participants were given a set of demographic questions and asked to complete the Sport Fan Questionnaire (SQF, Wann, 2002) to determine their fandom related to basketball. In addition, participants were provided pre-video information. Thirty six participants were not informed that the Gallaudet players were deaf while 41 were informed that the Gallaudet players were hearing impaired. Each participant was asked to answer a series of questions after watching the video. A sample item read, "How athletic do you perceive the Gallaudet players to be." This item had response options ranging from 1 (Not at all Athletic) to 8 (Highly Athletic). Subsequent items targeted impressions of the skill, teamwork, communication, and inspiration of the players, entertainment value of game, and likelihood of attending a Gallaudet game.

Two participants incorrectly answered the manipulation check item on the color of the uniform of the Gallaudet team. Thus, they were removed from the sample. The five items comprising the SFQ were combined to form a single index of college basketball fandom (Cronbach's alpha = .907). Similarly, the two items assessing perceptions of teamwork/communication (TEAMCOMM) were combined to form a single index (alpha = .831) and the two items assessed perceptions of athleticism/skill (ATHSKILL) were combined to form a single index (alpha = .900). A series of Pearson correlational analyses were used to examine the relationships between scores on the SFQ (sample-wide M = 21.12; SD = 8.78) and the dependent measures. These analyses revealed only one significant relationship: scores on the SFQ were positively and significantly correlated with a desire to attend a Gallaudet game ( $r = .299, p < .01$ ). Thus, SFQ was incorporated into the analyses of attendance desire detailed below.

The first analysis examined the hypothesis that knowledge of the Gallaudet players' hearing impairment would be positively related to evaluations of the Gallaudet players and team and desires to attend a Gallaudet game. This hypothesis was tested through a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) in which Condition (informed about

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the Gallaudet players' hearing impairment or not) served as the independent variable and perceptions of players' athleticism and skill (ATHSKILL), teamwork and communication (TEAMCOMM), inspiration, entertainment value of the contest, and desire to attend a contest served as the multiple dependent variables.

As predicted, the most positive evaluations were found among persons who were informed about the player's impairment,  $[F(5, 71) = 7.15, p < .001]$ . Follow-up univariate tests were then examined for each measure. This series of analyses found significant group differences for four of the five measures. Specifically, persons who were informed of the Gallaudet players' impairment (relative to those not provided with this information), viewed the Gallaudet players as exhibiting better communication and teamwork  $[F(1, 75) = 6.75, p < .02]$ , being more athletic and skillful  $[F(1, 75) = 6508, p < .05]$ , being more inspirational  $[F(1, 75) = 34.52, p < .001]$ , and more interested in attending a Gallaudet game  $[F(1, 75) = 7.64, p < .01]$ . Persons with and persons without knowledge of the Gallaudet players' impairment did not report a statistically significant difference in their perceptions of the entertainment of the video, although the difference was marginally significant and the means were in the expected direction  $[F(1, 75) = 3.20, p < .10]$ .

Because of the significant correlation between level of basketball fandom and desire to attend a Gallaudet game (see above), a final analysis was conducted. This analysis involved a simultaneous regression in which Condition (informed about the Gallaudet players' hearing impairment or not) and level of basketball fandom (i.e., SFQ scores) were employed as predictor variables and desire to attend was the dependent variable. The combined effect of the two predictor variables was significant,  $F(2, 74) = 9.37, p < .001$  ( $R = 0.449$ ;  $R^2 = 0.202$ ; adjusted  $R^2 = 0.180$ ). With respect to independent contributions, both level of basketball fandom ( $\beta = 0.333, p < .005$ ) and condition ( $\beta = 0.337, p < .005$ ) accounted for a significant proportion of unique variance.

The implications of this study are impactful and telling. First, this is the only study in which the influence of disability can be directly measured when examining how athletes are perceived. While the supercrip image has been explored (Cottingham et al., 2011; Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Kama, 2004), the impact of disability on consumption has never been conducted. The influence of knowledge of disability seems to be highly impactful as four of the five measures identified were significantly different when participants were informed that Gallaudet players had hearing impairments. Interestingly, spectators who knew that the Gallaudet players had hearing impairments noted they would be more likely to attend. This finding would imply that either promoters of deaf sport have simply not informed the public about their athlete's events or more likely, desire to attend has not influenced attendance.