



Vulindlela – making new pathways

17th DEFSA conference – 21|22 September 2023

The spectrum of disability representation in new media

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Abstract

More than 650 million people worldwide suffer from a disability, be it visible or invisible. As a communication designer, I began to question the design of the International Symbol of Access – in particular, how it failed to represent invisible disabilities. As my investigation deepened, I encountered the full range of disabilities represented in YouTube™ advertisements. I purposively selected three YouTube™ advertisements created for Microsoft Xbox™, Consol™, and Toyota™, and within the broader scheme of Disability Studies, investigated how disability is used as a rhetorical appeal to gain empathy and strengthen the bonds between the viewer and brand. The selected advertisements promote three very different brand identities and products, but all feature a person with a disability. The language of media is rhetorical, and when combined with Disability Studies, is useful to develop an improved understanding of how visual and verbal arguments can impact the perception and representation of people with disabilities. I investigated the appeals, symbols, stigmas, and social meanings associated with disabilities and how they can lead to negative stereotyping. My findings reveal the selected sample displays a spectrum of narratives: the use of rhetoric as an analytical framework enabled me to move beyond merely identifying negative stereotypes and to engage with a more nuanced reading of the visual arguments. Consequently, a framework comprising three main models of disability emerged in the rhetoric of the advertisements. Each model represents disability in a different manner, but all three speak to the allure of disability as a device in media advertising that is becoming increasingly popular amongst advertisers.

Keywords: Disability, disability as tokenism, disability as endorsement, disability as representation, media representation.

Introduction

The language of media is rhetorical, and when combined with Disability studies, it is useful to develop a better understanding of how visual arguments can impact perceptions of disabled people. This study investigates, within the broader scheme of Disability Studies, three YouTube™ advertisements created for Consol™, Toyota™, and Microsoft Xbox™. Each advertisement features a person with a disability while promoting three completely different products and brand identities. This paper focuses on a nuanced reading of the visual and verbal arguments constructed in the mentioned advertisements. The use of rhetoric as an analytical framework enabled me to move beyond merely identifying negative stereotypes and focus on my experience of developing a framework comprising three models of disability representation; where each model represents disability differently, but all three models speak to the appeal of disability as a device in media advertising.

Jay Timothy Dolmage (2014, p. 2), in his book, *Disability rhetoric*, claims that “bodies continue to change, as do our attitudes about them, and rhetorical entailments of these bodily transformations continue to be

negotiated". Dolmage (2014, p. 2) argues that new technologies create the perception that humans can handpick their bodies, healing and perfecting them as desired. Technologies such as text messaging, scanners, and voice recognition software were first developed for people with disabilities and were created because humans are not entirely perfect. Thus, technology has not eradicated disability but is instead a driving force of contemporary Disability Studies that, according to Dolmage (2014, p. 2), is a field that aims to develop new relations and social structures through new rhetoric. Consequently, this paper contributes to Disability Studies and Theory discourse by addressing the contribution of technology, particularly that of new advertising streams such as YouTube™, and the consequential impact of disability rhetoric and representation.

Literature review

The term 'the disabled' can have multiple meanings or models. Tobin Siebers (2011, p. 3) mentions that, according to the Medical Model, disability is defined as "an individual defect lodged in a person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person wants to achieve full capacity as a human being". However, Disability Studies focuses on "disability as a social injustice" (Siebers 2011, p. 3), steering away from the individual and any attempts to eliminate or cure the disability. Research in this field examines the stigmas, symbols, and social meanings associated with disability and how they can lead to negative stereotyping and oppression, which have different effects on the person with a disability. Disability Studies engages with disability in both a negative and positive manner. Siebers (2011, p. 4) argues that many disabled people do not wish to be cured. However, these same people may be hesitant about acquiring additional disabilities (Siebers 2011, p. 4). In addition, James Berger (in Fletcher & Primack 2017, p. 349) believes that the representation of disability produces feelings of vulnerability and mortality, forcing the abled bodied to confront the inevitability of disability. However, Siebers (2011, p. 3) views disability as a "minority identity", one that can add value in the form of diversity and claims that "the presence of disability creates a different picture of identity – one less stable than identities associated with gender, race, sexuality, nation and class".

A person cannot wake up one day and change his or her race; however, an abled-bodied person *can* wake up with a disability. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (in Smith 2011, p. 4) argues that Disability Studies can benefit from feminist theory and vice versa. Garland-Thomson (in Fletcher & Primack 2017, p. 346) claims that "tropes of disability direct stigmas to different marginalised populations", for example, depicting women as biologically inferior to men, thus, framing females as disabled compared to able-bodied males (Fletcher & Primack 2017, p. 346). Garland-Thomson (2002, p. 2) extends this view to state that "feminist issues are intricately entangled with disability"; both femininity and disability involve issues of the body, cultural and social hierarchy, discrimination, identity and inequality (Smith 2004, p. 2). Feminist-disability Theory emerged from pairing feminist principles and the social model of disability (Heiss 2011), and makes the assumption that the female body does not lead to oppression, but rather that social practices privilege able-bodied males, which marginalises females with disabilities. Disability and Gender identity are, therefore, both constructed by various internal and external forces such as desire and cultural codes; consequently, Feminist-disability Theory aims to create positive identities for that have been oppressed.

Sarah Heiss (2011) (Figure 1) explores the connection between disability and gender by analysing the Dove™ Campaign for Real Beauty. The campaign was launched in 2004, and Dove™ claimed to have developed a better understanding of females' attitudes toward their well-being and beauty. However, Heiss (2011) argues that by choosing to omit certain bodies, specifically disabled females, Dove™ in fact reinforces traditional understandings of beauty and the body because the campaign excludes the aesthetic value and experience of many women with different body types. Heiss (2011) concludes that the advertisement contributes to the idea of normalcy for females and negates the idea of the general understanding of the disabled body.



Figure 1: Ogilvy & Mather (design agency), Dove™ Campaign for Real Beauty, billboard advertisement (2004) (Olsen 2008, s.p.)

Representing people with disabilities in advertising can allow advertisers to tap into a potential market (Cox 2016, p. 14); however, the theoretical lens through which one observes disability in the twenty-first century is influential in positioning people with disabilities as a “target market segment ripe for commodification and economic exploitation” (DePoy & Gilson 2013, p. 489). Anne Christopher (2013, p. 773) claims that “advertising is pervasive”, and the presence of disability in media, even when represented in a neutral manner, can lead to attitudinal changes of the abled towards the disabled (Panol & McBride in Cox 2016, p. 14-15). Christopher (2013, p. 778) credits the repetition of slogan messages for the success of previous television advertisements. The repetition of messages in more recent media is similar to that of ‘sharing’ content on social media platforms; “sharing”, according to Tellis et al. (2019), can have a considerable impact on the number of views a particular advertisement may receive on a social media platform such as YouTube™.

YouTube™ is a social networking site that enables users to “create online communities, share information, ideas, and personal messages” and allows “brands to connect with and inform consumers worldwide” (Kujur & Singh 2018, p. 184-185). As of January 2017, advertisers were able to target specific YouTube™ users based on their Google™ search history and YouTube™ viewing behaviours (Oetting 2022). Marketers aim advertisements at people who recently searched for a particular product or service, thus increasing the chances that the viewers watch the entire advertisement or click through to the advertised brand’s website (Oetting 2022). Viewers are actively engaging with YouTube™ and do not necessarily mind watching the advertisements, as 72% of in-stream advertisements are watched to the end (Patel 2021). Benefits of YouTube™ advertising therefore include customisation capabilities, targeting, affordability, and measurability (Bauer 2023). Similar to television commercials, YouTube™ advertisements have the means to create “evoking identifications” (Blair 2007, p. 356). Unlike static imagery, videos allow the viewer to experience an entire drama. Television commercials, like YouTube™ advertisements, provide viewers with a plot, character development, crisis, and climax (Blair 2007, p. 356). Advertisers can upload longer advertisements, allowing a story to unfold, and increasing the chances of evoking strong emotions. This *emotional-focused* content, in my opinion, evokes both negative and positive emotions, ultimately affecting a consumer’s attitude towards the advertised brand, a view that is supported by Tellis et al. (2019). This led me to question the idea of disability as a rhetorical appeal to gain empathy from viewers to promote brands and their products.

The definition of rhetoric is one that has been continuously challenged. Classical rhetoric involves the audience and focuses on argumentation as a democratic form of governance (van Belle 2013, p. 10). Richard Buchanan (1989, p. 93) defines rhetoric as the “art of shaping society, changing the course of individuals and communities, and setting patterns for new actions” and views technology as a rhetorical appeal within the theory of rhetoric design. To this effect, I draw on arguments presented by Dolmage (2014, p. 2), who defines rhetoric as the study of all forms of communication, claiming that:

...rhetoricians foreground the persuasive potential of all texts and artefacts, questioning the sedimentation of meanings, recognising the constant negotiations between the author and audiences, and linking language to power.

The arguments presented by Dolmage (2014) are particularly important to this study as they address the link between Disability Studies, technology, and rhetoric. Dolmage (2014, p. 2-3) believes that “futuristic disability studies will not be about the eradication of disability, but about new social structures and relations, made possible by new rhetorics”, and emphasises the relationship between rhetoric and Disability Studies. Dolmage (2014, p. 3) suggests that Disability Studies needs rhetoric to better understand how arguments of representation can impact the experience of people with disabilities, while rhetoric needs Disability Studies to serve as a reminder to pay attention to the body.

Methodology

The broad theoretical framework of this study engages with Disability Studies and Theory, Disability and Gender, Disability and Rhetoric, and Disability and Advertising. Primary data was collected by analysing a sample of YouTube™ advertisements, whilst secondary data was collected through a literature review that draws on both hard copy and digital sources. I purposively selected advertisements promoting well-established brands whilst featuring people with disabilities. The three chosen advertisements were created by reputable design agencies and are available on a variety of platforms, including YouTube™.

Although the advertisements were purposively selected for featuring people with disabilities, Microsoft Xbox™, Consol™ and Toyota™ are promoting three very different products and brand identities. The Microsoft Xbox™ advertisement promotes the Xbox™ Adaptive Controller – a gaming device specifically created for those with disabilities or limited mobility (Xbox 2018), whereas the advertisement created for Consol™, a manufacturing company specialising in glass containers, is not targeting disabled people as such, but rather consumers in general. Toyota™, on the other hand, is promoting its shift from an “automobile to a mobility company that highlights real-life mobility stories” (Start you impossible, s.a.) in addition to promoting the partnership between Toyota™, the Olympics and Paralympics (van Zyl 2019).

The Microsoft Xbox™ Adaptive Controller advertisement, titled *We all win* (Microsoft: we all win... 2019) (Figure 2), centres on a group of children, with limited mobility, and their parents as they discuss the struggles they face as disabled video gamers when attempting to use the regular Xbox™ controller, as opposed to the benefits and practicality of the Xbox™ Adaptive Controller (Microsoft: we all win... 2019).



Figure 2: M:united/McCann (design agency), Microsoft™ Xbox We all win (Microsoft: we all win... 2019)

The second advertisement, *the best things come in glass* (2017), is a South African-produced advertisement that earned second place on SA's most liked TV ads (Grey Africa 2018). The narrative, at first, is somewhat puzzling, as it depicts the protagonist, a young girl, running around a playground with an empty Consol™ jar (Figure 3). However, the surprising reveal towards the end of the advertisement helps make sense of the girl's actions.



Figure 3: Grey (design agency), Consol™ The best things come in glass (Consol glass & Grey 2018)

The third advertisement forms part of Toyota's larger, global *Start your impossible* campaign (Figure 4) and provides a glimpse into the backstory of young South African Paralympic medalist Ntando Mahlangu, while highlighting the eight-year partnership between Toyota™, the Olympics, and Paralympics (van Zyl 2019).

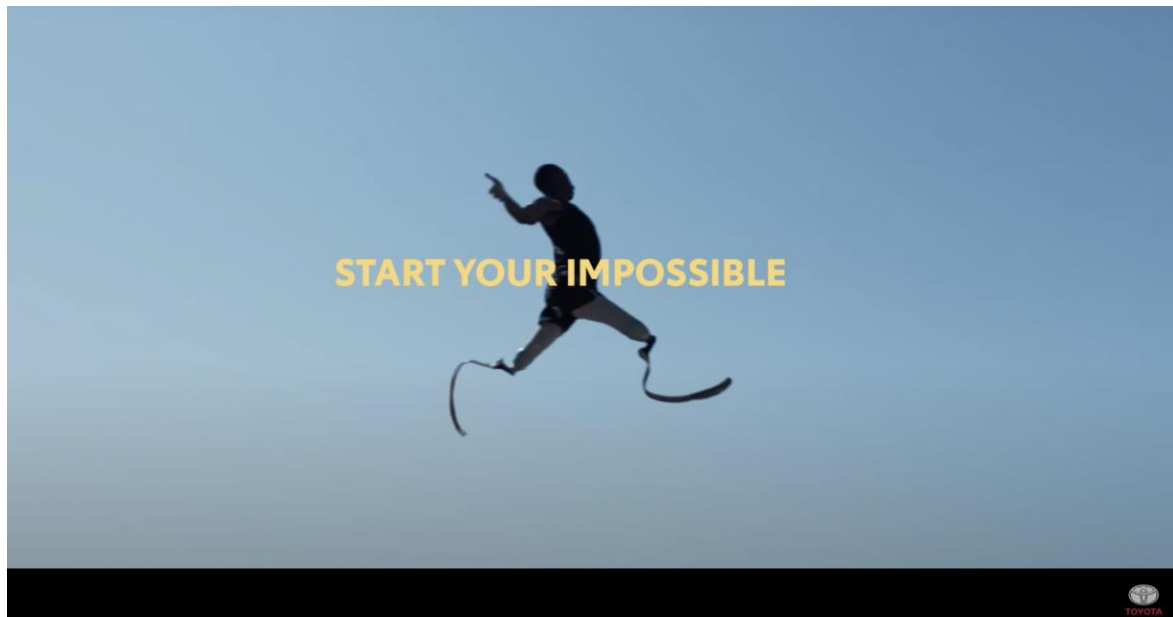


Figure 4: FCB (design agency), Toyota™ Start your impossible (van Zyl 2019)

As the three advertisements are analysed in tandem, the rhetoric approach aims to reveal the available means of persuasion at any given moment and is used in either a rational, ethical, or emotional manner (Ehse 2004, p. 165). Buchanan (1989, p. 96) defines logos as the rational appeal or “element of technical reasoning”, arguing that logos are successful in persuading an audience when “reasoning is clear and provides a likely solution to a problem”. Ethos, the ethical appeal, refers to the character, and credibility of a design; Buchanan (1989, p. 98) believes that “character can be a subtle mode of persuasion, but is extremely important for design”. The pathos or emotional appeal is a “mode of persuasive communication that serves a broader argument” and involves persuading an audience that a particular product is “emotionally desirable and valuable in their lives” (Buchanan 1989, p. 103).

Marguerite Helmers and Charles Hill (2008, p. 2) note that rhetoricians work from a variety of disciplines through an analysis of “photographs and drawings, graphs and tables [...] motion pictures [...] and visual images on the internet”. Helmers and Hill (2008, p. 5) do not reference classical figures of rhetoric such as logos, ethos and pathos, but by examining a photograph – Thomas Franklin’s *Firefighters at Ground Zero* (2001) – identify several “modes of interpretation”, including intertextuality, symbolism, time, nostalgia and gender.

Ehse (2004) argues that the objective of rhetoric is eloquence, which leads to the influence of actions. The idea of being influenced, or the possibility of influencing, implies the prospect of choice. Choice is viewed as a key idea in both design and rhetoric, as both relate to making the “appropriate selections of means to achieve a desired end” (Ehse 2004, p. 165). Petra Aczél (2013, p. 307) argues that traditional rhetoric theory has been challenged by the phenomena of new media interactivity, hypermediacy, and the rise of a “communicative culture” – a culture portrayed by permanent connectivity, participation, and publicity. New media refers to new interfaces, spaces and technology that allow for greater user engagement and user choice (Aczél 2023), suggesting that users have “on-

demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, and creative participation” (Pleios 2013, p. 8-9).

I applied various rhetorical strategies to determine each advertisement’s logos, ethos, pathos, and kairos appeal. The theoretical framework is based predominately on Disability Studies and Theory, in particular the findings of Barnes (1992) that suggest that most stereotypes and representations of disabled people in media are negative. However, the use of rhetoric as an analytical framework enabled me to move beyond merely identifying negative stereotypes and to engage with a more nuanced reading of the visual and verbal arguments constructed in the sample. Consequently, although this was not a research objective at the outset of the study, a framework comprising three main models of disability emerged in the rhetoric of the advertisements, namely disability as tokenism, disability as representation and disability as endorsement. The resulting framework speaks to the allure of disability as a device in media advertising that is becoming increasingly popular amongst advertisers.

In order to complete the rhetorical analysis, I created a framework presented as a flow diagram with two primary levels (Figure 5). The top level comprises the four main rhetorical appeals, logos, ethos, pathos (defined above) and kairos – that within the context of this study refers to the timeliness of the argument. The second level comprises the headings used for each of the rhetorical appeals. The analytical categories of product information, showcasing the product and logo, statistics, avant-garde products, weasel words – which are words commonly used in advertising to “avoid making direct statements” (Flynn 2018, s.p.) – are placed under Logos. Ethos addresses issues related to the credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability of the brand, character, and audience respectively. Pathos, the emotional appeal, addresses issues related to the portrayal of emotions, the ability of the characters to display emotions, the emotions advertisers wish to evoke, and the actual emotions experienced by the researcher when viewing the advertisement. Lastly, Kairos includes the appropriateness of the setting, structure, tone, and address issues related to the duration of the advisement. The information gathered by applying the analytical framework is not based on interviews with the respective advertising agencies or a larger audience but is instead the researcher’s own subjective response to the advertisements.

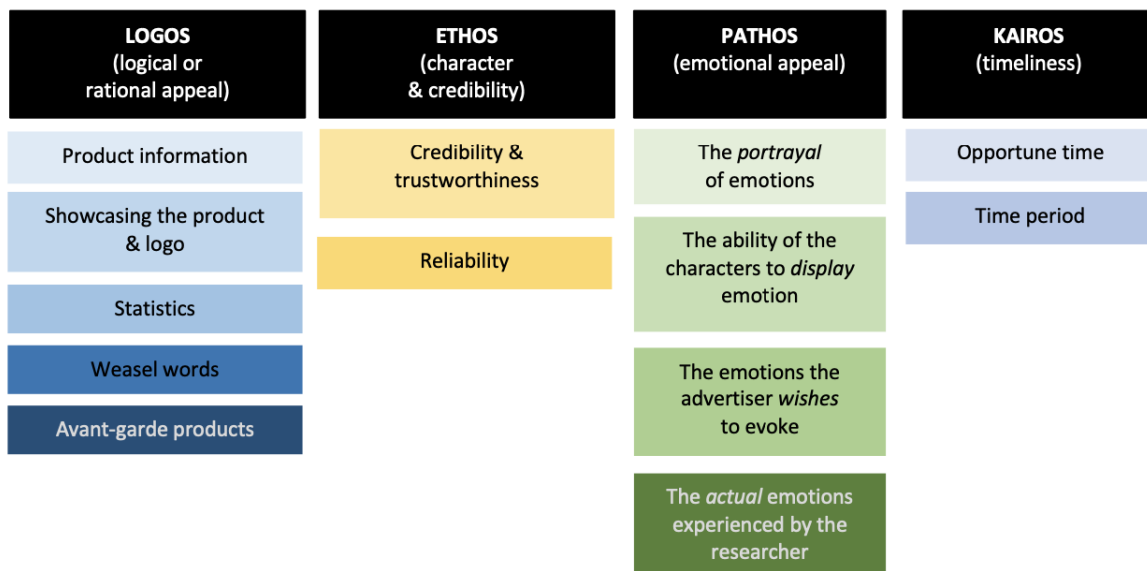


Figure 5: Analytical framework 2020 (constructed by author)

An overview of the findings

Microsoft Xbox™: We all win

The 1min 57 sec documentary-style advertisement centres around six mobility-impaired adolescent gamers and provides a platform for the individuals and their parents to discuss and compare the regular and Adaptive Xbox™ controllers. The advertisement, with the use of the word *regular*, highlights that it is accepted that most designs are created for able-bodied users, thus reinforcing the Disability Theory premise that disability is a result of the social and built environment that does not accommodate impairments (Siebers 2011). The advertisement utilises various stylistic approaches to enhance the logo's appeal, including a before-and-after narrative structure, product repetition, weasel words, and the promotion of an avant-garde product. It displays the highest logos in the sample, because it demonstrates that the Adaptive Controller provides mobility-impaired gamers with a physical product that improves their gaming capabilities, thereby allowing users with disabilities to perform as well as able-bodied gamers.

Consol™: The best things come in glass

The South African-produced Consol™ advertisement tells the story of a young girl as she happily runs around an outdoor playground with an empty Consol™ jar, collecting and *bottling up* joyful sounds in order to share the experience with her visually impaired grandmother. The highly emotive, dramatised advertisement draws on various compelling and persuasive film techniques, including a surprising twist in the story in an attempt to evoke positive emotions. The advertisement entrancingly advertises and existing, but otherwise unglamorous, physical product. Although it promotes the Consol™ jar within a narrative that gives it an appearance of an avant-garde product, the advertisement still exhibits low logos as it fails to include adequate logical product information. While high in pathos, the advertisement has a relatively low ethos appeal, since the young girl *appears* to be of good character and embodies childlike innocence, but neither the caregiver nor the grandmother provides overt testimonials to support this impression. Rather, the positive representation of the young girl relies on the negative representation of people with disabilities.

Toyota™: Start your impossible

The cinematic advertisement focuses on South African Paralympic medallist and Toyota™ ambassador Ntando Mahlangu. The advertisement narrates the mobility backstory of Mahlangu but was created to emphasise Toyota's brand identity shift and highlight their partnership with the Olympic and Paralympic Games committees.

This advertisement is not promoting a specific product, but reinforces the brand shift by continuously displaying the Toyota™ logo. The highly emotive advertisement features evocative imagery and dialogue, thus elevating the pathos appeal. The advertisement, and therefore the brand, is forcefully endorsed by Mahlangu and capitalises on his personal mobility story without directly claiming that Toyota™ has been of any assistance to the athlete.

Models of disability

Disability as tokenism

Disability as tokenism refers to the superficial inclusion and representation of the disabled in an attempt to appear inclusive and "often results in a number of setbacks for the represented culture" (Medina, in Podoshen et al. 2021, p. 132). Barnes (1992) presents various oppressive stereotypes on

which this model is based, arguing that the media portrays the disabled as pitiable, pathetic, and incapable. This model is therefore perceived as negative and continues to misrepresent people with disabilities.

The Consol™ advertisement, by including the visually impaired grandmother – seemingly physically and emotionally trapped by her disability and therefore presented as flawed and unable to engage with the community (Barnes 1992) – falls into this model. The advertisement focuses on stereotypes associated with the medical model of disability and portrays the visually impaired as a group that should be isolated. The Consol™ advertisement draws on and reinforces pre-existing negative perceptions that “disabled people’s inability to interact in normal life [is] a direct result of their physical and/or mental impairment” (Pirsl, Pirsl & Randjelovic 2012, p. 536). Thus, the Consol™ advertisement fails to depict the visually impaired or people with disabilities as a minority group that can make meaningful contributions.

Moreover, the inclusion of the disabled grandmother is introduced as a deliberate device to offset the young girl’s “goodness and sensitivity” (Barnes 1992), as well as to suggest that Consol™, a manufacturer of products that are cold and clinical, is attempting to appear to be a brand with a sense of warmth. Therefore, the character with a disability is simply included for institutional benefit (Mashburn & Papalia, in Podoshen et al. 2021, p. 132).

Disability as representation

The disability as representation model is aligned with the social model of disability that assumes that “disability is a social injustice” (Siebers 2011, p. 3). Being disabled is not the problem; instead, the world is unfairly designed to privilege able-bodied individuals. Disability as representation, therefore, aims to promote more accurate portrayals of people with disabilities, and features the disabled both positively and negatively.

The Xbox™ advertisement uses this model as it demonstrates the real-life struggles gamers with mobility impairments may face when attempting to use a device designed for able-bodied users. The advertisement acknowledges that various groups of people – in this case, people with mobility impairments, have different needs that must be met to achieve some level of equity. The protagonists are multi-dimensional, disabled individuals with a sense of identity. The mobility-impaired gamers are actively engaging in social activities, suggesting that they are part of a community and reject a negative disability stereotype.

The disability as representation model is more accurate than disability as tokenism, and does not utilise stereotypes that can be regarded as “super cripple” (Barnes 1992). Barnes (1992) uses the term ‘super cripple’ in reference to the idea that, to be viewed as successful, people with disabilities must acquire *super* qualities to compensate for their disability, suggesting that a visually impaired individual must acquire *super* hearing. Rather, disability as representation is educational and makes a “transformational effort that more fully embraces removing the barriers contributing to inequality” (Mashburn & Papalia, in Podoshen et al. 2021, p. 132). The protagonists in the Xbox™ advertisement positively identify with their disability identity, leading to an improvement in their quality of life – specifically their gaming capabilities.

Disability as endorsement

The disability as endorsement model is based on the concept of brand endorsements, specifically by individuals viewed as celebrities or inspirational figures. This model is less stable than disability as tokenism or representation because the audience’s perception of the celebrity fluctuates. This model

relies on featuring celebrities' personal and professional lives that become the embodiment of the brand, thus blurring the lines between brand and endorser.

Disability as endorsement has advantages and disadvantages. Celebrity endorsements create the perception that the advertised brand is superior because it is endorsed by an apparently credible witness (Pedhiwal 2011), allowing the featured brand to 'hide behind' the celebrity (Eragula & Jeksani 2016, p. 2172). However, brand endorsements have certain drawbacks. The audience could negatively perceive the endorser and, consequently, mistrust the brand (Eragula & Jeksani 2016, p. 2172). The success rate of the endorser's career is uncertain – Mahlangu could win gold during one race and fail to qualify for another, which would affect the perception of the advertised brand. Lastly, advertisements could be considered controversial, resulting in an unfavourable image of the endorser (Eragula & Jeksani 2016, p. 2173).

Thus, the Toyota™ advertisement capitalises on the story and endorsement of Mahlangu to highlight Toyota's identity shift and partnership with the Olympic and Paralympic committees. However, the brand is kept deliberately vague, and the narrative only indirectly suggests that Toyota™ contributes to the athlete's success, and therefore is associated with Mahlangu's achievements without directly claiming to assist the athlete. This model can either defy or enhance negative stereotypes but relies on portraying the disabled as "super cripple[s]" (Barnes 1992). Disabled celebrities are God-like and their achievements, therefore, unattainable.

Conclusion

Pirsl et al. (2012) contend that, owing to its vital role in disseminating information to a broad audience, mass media contributes to the discrimination of people with disabilities. However, my findings suggest that the representation of the disabled is not necessarily negative but rather that the sample displays a spectrum of narratives, representing disability in different ways, ranging from positive to negative representations.

Devlin and Pothier (2006) argue that the world is constructed based on able-bodied norms and one's ability to be productive and contribute, suggesting that the goal of Critical Disability Theory is to challenge this belief. This argument is important as it helped form the bases for the disability framework applied in this study. Siebers (2011) believes that it is important to recognise the value and variety of disability as this can assist in reversing the negative assumptions tied to disability, and argues that, similar to feminism and queer identity, if one positively identifies with minorities, it can lead to an improvement in the quality of life for the disabled individual. To this purpose, the proposed disability framework could be expanded from the three models discussed here and applied to a larger sample to make visible how various tropes are used in media representations.

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