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# Marketing the Acceptably Athletic Image: Wheelchair Athletes, Sport-Related Advertising and Capitalist Hegemony

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## Abstract

People with disabilities have historically been excluded in the realms of sport - where they fail to meet standards of the "ideal sporting body" - and in advertising, where they also fail to meet an ideal-body standard. This research explores the attitudes of athletes with disabilities toward sport, advertising, and their exclusion from mainstream culture. Through interviews with 10 wheelchair basketball players, the author explores how deeply hegemonic ideals inform and influence the beliefs and values of participants. The author also explores the sensitivity of the participants to images of disability in advertising. Findings support the earlier literature regarding the attitudes of people with disabilities toward advertising: participants said they generally ignore advertising because it does not reflect the reality of their lives, but are acutely sensitive to positive images of disability in ads. This study also supports the assertion by scholars that people with disabilities - even those who have begun to reject their oppression - still internalize the "able-bodied ideal" inherent in capitalist hegemony.

Keywords: wheelchair athletics, advertising, image

A 30 second advertisement aired on U.S. television opens with two young men playing an aggressive game of one-on-one basketball at an outdoor park. They dodge and dribble in an evenly matched contest. Close-up shots on the athletes reveal that one of the players is wearing a prosthetic leg.

The ad cuts to a gentleman munching on Doritos corn chips. "Yes, my friend, you are bold," says the man, with a British accent. "But are you daring?"

The ad cuts back to the court where one player pulls up for a jump shot. The camera focuses on the ball headed for the basket. Out of the corner of the scene comes the other player's prosthetic leg - used to block the ball from making the basket. Cheers rise as the innovative player, his prosthetic leg resting on the basketball, gets a handshake from the Doritos pitchman. He has passed the Doritos test: He is "bold and daring" (Haller &

Ralph 2002).

Perhaps the ad itself is also evidence of the Doritos theme, by virtue of its own "bold and daring" depiction of what it means to be athletic. Sport has long been socially constructed as an activity exclusively for the able-bodied. Disability sport is not viewed as a legitimate sport but as something less (DePauw & Gavron 1995). Most sports fans and able-bodied athletes can not imagine seeing an obviously disabled athlete on a medal platform at an elite sporting event, on equal footing with able-bodied athletes (DePauw 1997; Schantz & Gilbert 2001).

DePauw (1997) and others have argued that social attitudes toward sport and the physical body are important reflectors of overall social values, norms and standards in the culture. Understanding the centrality of the body in relation to sport lends itself to understanding sport as a site for the reproduction of social inequality. Mobility impairment - interpreted as dependency - is in sharp contrast to hegemonic Americana, the premiere value of independence and individualism (Haller 2000). Those deemed members of less "bodily fit" groups (people with disabilities) have been marginalized in sport and in overall social status (Ibid; Schell & Rodriguez 2001).

In a capitalist, consumer-driven culture, members of groups without "acceptable" bodily status have also historically been excluded from advertising images, which by their nature focus on the "perfect" body. Their exclusion from the world of advertising - a powerful cultural force in collective cultural understanding of what is "normal" and even desirable - perpetuates societal discrimination and seems "to comprise an almost indestructible hegemony" (Hahn 1987, p. 566).

The 2002 Doritos ad, however, is evidence that there may be cracks (albeit tiny) where the able-bodied, hegemonic culture of sport meets consumerism. Perhaps the ad is not an aberration so much as it is an outgrowth of the realization that participation in sports for the disabled "exploded" in the 1990s (Hoffer 1995).

The 1996 Paralympics in Atlanta included more than 3,000 elite disabled athletes from 103 countries (Schantz & Gilbert 2001). A number of organizations in the United States, including Disabled Sports USA, Wheelchair Sports USA, and the National Disability Sports Alliance, support competitive disabled athletes. Another stride for athletes with disabilities came in 2002, when the ESPY Awards added that category to its roster of annual honors for athletes. Visually impaired climber Erik Weihenmayer won the first ESPY award for a disabled athlete. As Sports Illustrated writer Richard Hoffer wrote in 1995, "Really, the distinction between wheelchair racers and the Olympians is fading at these high levels" (p. 65).

A handful of marketers have recognized such by signing elite disabled athletes to marketing deals. The most notable example is Ocean Spray Cranberries Inc., which signed wheelchair racer Jean Driscoll to a multi-level promotion deal. The company agreed to sponsor Driscoll in all of her sport events and Driscoll appeared in some of the company's advertising (Sutton 1998).

Even sports marketing behemoth Nike has run a handful of advertisements that feature athletes with disabilities. One example is a 1989 television spot featuring world champion wheelchair racer Craig Blanchette. While Nike claimed that Blanchette's status as a disabled athlete was not central to the

ad, the profitability from disabled athletes and consumers was likely a strong motivation, analysts said (Haller & Ralph 2001).

More recently, however, Nike's advertising resembles themes more friendly to capitalist hegemony in regard to disability and sport. A 2000 magazine advertisement for Nike's "Air Dri-Goat" shoe read, in part:

> How can a trail running shoe with an outer sole designed like a goat's hoof help me avoid compressing my spinal cord into a Slinky on the side of some unsuspecting conifer, therefore rendering me a drooling, misshapen non-extreme-trail-running husk of my former self, forced to roam in a motorized wheelchair with my name embossed on one of those cute little license plates...(Crip, 2000)

Nike's message is reflective of the sport media practice of marginalizing, excluding and sometimes ridiculing people who, sans the "perfect body," would dare call themselves athletes. In his seminal work about disability and advertising, Hahn (1987) argues that these kinds of images debilitate people with disabilities, rationalizing their exploitation and devalued status. Besides experiencing discrimination from others, people with disabilities internalize their low status when they see their invisibility in the media's cultural messages (Iwakuma 1997; Haller 2000; Smart 2001).

However, athletes with disabilities may be "less susceptible" to those feelings of low self esteem, less willing to be exploited, and more demanding of visibility than other people with disabilities. Researchers have found that people with disabilities who partake in sport have a more positive outlook than those who do not (Thomas & Katz 2001). They are often motivated by the challenge, excitement and opportunity to test their skills offered through competitive sport (Brasile & Hedrick 1991). Scholars also believe that disabled athletes use sport as a way to reject their roles as social outcasts (Schell & Rodriguez 2001).

Hahn (1987) holds out hope that people with disabilities might somehow reject the vise grip of capitalist hegemony perpetuated in advertising images. Since his research was published, few studies have looked at the attitudes of people with disabilities in relation to advertising, and none have explored the issue with disabled people who have already begun to reject hegemonic messages by participating in sport. But, as Makas wrote, "disabled people themselves need to be involved in identifying attitudes and standards, and in defining social interactions for study" (1988, p. 59). This research explores attitudes about advertising and media use through in-depth interviews with 10 wheelchair athletes, in hopes of identifying attitudes, standards, and social interactions for further study.

## Literature Review

### Disabled Athletes in the Media

Several studies have examined the overall presence of athletes with disabilities in the mass media, and found their images lacking in both quantity and quality (Hardin, Hardin, Lynn & Walsdorf 2000; Hardin & Lynn 2002; Schantz & Gilbert 2001;

Golden 2002).

Studies of disabled sport coverage have revealed that elite disabled athletes have less chance of being covered on the sports pages than do able-bodied bowlers or billiard players. Golden's study of coverage of the 2002 Paralympics found that most U.S. newspapers virtually ignored the competition. This finding is in line with earlier studies of Paralympic coverage (Schantz & Gilbert 2001). The same is true for niche sports coverage meant for a segmented audience or for other groups traditionally locked out by male hegemony. Hardin et al. (2000) found less than a half-dozen depictions of disability-related sport in three years (1996-1999) of Sports Illustrated for Kids, the only nationally circulated sports magazine for children. Hardin and Lynn (2002) coded more than 4,000 photo images in four women's sport magazines during 1999 and 2000, and found less than 25 images of disability-related sport.

Although media exposure of disabled athletes has increased over the years, their marginalized role as objects of pity or as "supercrips" has not changed - perhaps more a reflection of society's continuing fear of people with disabilities than callous disregard (Schantz & Gilbert 2001). An example used by Schell and Rodriguez (2001) is that of CBS network coverage of the 2000 Paralympic Games. A segment on athlete Hope Lewellen concentrated more on her perceived ability to "overcome her disability" than on her status as an athlete. DePauw (1997) points to the 1997 "World's Fastest Man" competition on CBS, which included seven events. The network aired all events except one: a race between amputees.

Golden's 2002 study of reporters at the Winter Olympics and Paralympics in Salt Lake City found that many sports reporters do not view disabled sports as "real" competition, but instead as a pitiful event. One American sports reporter said of the Paralympics, "[I]t's a bone they throw to them to make them feel better. It's not a real competition, and I for one, don't see why I should have to cover it" (Golden 2002, p. 13).

DePauw (1997) argues that the marginalization and exclusion of disabled athletes by society (and, hence, media) is a function of capitalist hegemony. Sport, like life in U.S. culture, has been socially constructed as an able-bodied activity with accompanying strict (but less rigid) boundaries in regard to gender and sexuality. The thought of anything otherwise is difficult to comprehend, if not anathema, for most people (DePauw 1997). The closest to the "ideal" competitor among disabled athletes have been males who use wheelchairs. They are a contradiction: male (acceptable), disabled (not acceptable), and have been allowed participation on the edges of the field. DePauw (1997) argues that this is because the wheelchair can be viewed as a substitute for the lower-body function, while the athlete's upper body offers an acceptable, perhaps even "athletic-looking" physique.

## Advertising and People with Disabilities

Although few studies have examined disability in advertising from a consumer point-of-view, a number of have documented trends in the use of disabled models in advertising. Major advertisers such as Apple, Levi's, Nissan, and Target began using the occasional disabled model in ads as early as the 1980s (Haller &

Ralph 2002; Farnall 2000). Their motives: a desire to represent diversity and to make profits from people with disabilities as consumers (Ibid.). Since the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed in 1990, advertisers have begun to recognize people with disabilities (and their caretakers and families) as a significant market (Stephens & Bergman 1995). Disability rights started as a political movement, but trickled down to marketing and advertising (Goerne 1992).

Researchers believe the images that have appeared in advertising during recent years have been mostly positive (Shapiro 1993; Haller & Ralph 2002). Advertisements have presented people with disabilities as capable of acting independently, as being sexually functional and as interacting with non-disabled people (Shapiro 1993). Advertising that uses disabled models can elicit positive overall consumer response (Ibid.; Shapiro 1993).

A well-known example of positive response involves the use of a child with Down's Syndrome in a Target circular during the early 1990s. A Target vice president claimed the circular got more positive feedback than any other ad campaign by the retail chain, and that sales of certain products increased because of the ads (Haller & Ralph 2002; Goerne 1992).

Researchers have also documented the scant overall number of disabled images in advertising. Shapiro (1993) and Hahn (1987) both point to advertising's need to use an "ideal body" - one that reminds consumers of their need to correct their own bodily imperfections - as a reason that models with disabilities are used in such a small percentage of ads. When they are used, only those with "pretty" disabilities, such as attractive models who are deaf or who use a wheelchair, appear (Haller & Ralph 2002). Haller and Ralph argue that these kinds of images leave out many disabilities that may be less camera-friendly. Wheelchair users are at the top of the media hierarchy of disability. Sports-minded wheelchair users are an important visual category used by advertisers (Haller & Ralph 2000; Haller 2000; Schantz & Gilbert 2001).

Hahn (1987) ties the lack of disability images in advertising to capitalist hegemony. Capitalists, fueled by the drive for expanded markets and higher profits, have been responsible for promulgating a set of perfectionist physical standards for consumers and workers. Advertising has historically been the means to communicate these standards (Ibid.). Thus, people with disabilities (who lack the capitalist-ideal body) have been excluded or marginalized in advertising, and thus, society (Ibid.)

People with disabilities have also been generally excluded from advertising research. According to research by Burnett and Paul (1996), the reason is that advertisers generally ignore people with disabilities as a viable consumer group. Businesses often see the disabled as a source of "concern and expense" instead of as a potential source of revenue (Burnett & Paul 1996). But "for the intelligent marketer, pursuing the disabled consumer is a win-win proposition" (p. 47). In many ways, the attitudes and values of people with disabilities are more similar than different from the able-bodied (Weinberg 1988).

The study by Burnett and Paul (1996) is virtually the only study published during the 1990s that examines the media and

advertising habits of people with disabilities. They surveyed hundreds of disabled and non-disabled consumers about their media needs and habits. They found some differences. For instance, mobility-impaired people tended to prefer television to reading more than their non-disabled counterparts. Important to this study, they found that mobility-disabled consumers had negative attitudes toward advertising. "[F]eelings of alienation and of being ignored by an uncaring society are a possible explanation. As most advertising is targeted at the non-disabled, we can understand why the mobility-disabled may resent advertising and consequently find it useless" (Burnett & Paul 1996, p. 50).

## Rationale and Method

### Rationale for this Study

Research has documented the media's propensity to ignore or stereotype athletes with disabilities. Other studies have noted the same pattern for people with disabilities in advertising. At least two scholars have analyzed these patterns in light of capitalist hegemony - the triumph of market forces over society's ethical or moral obligations for inclusion (Hahn 1987; DePauw 1997). DePauw and Hahn both argue that the hegemonic wall responsible for exclusion and oppression of people with disabilities is not indestructible. Instead, both urge people with disabilities to resist and ultimately reject the "narcissistic standards of the dominant majority" (Hahn 1987, p. 567).

It might be argued that athletes with disabilities demonstrate their resistance to capitalist hegemony by daring to enter a realm so strongly defined by the able-bodied ideal. This research seeks to further explore the ideas of Hahn (1987), DePauw (1997) and others, by exploring the attitudes of competitive wheelchair athletes toward advertising and sport media in light of capitalist hegemony. First, it explores the appeal and effectiveness of advertising to these athletes. It also explores the levels to which these athletes have internalized or rejected their marginalization by advertisers and the media. By doing so, this research will augment understanding of the relationship between people with disabilities, the media, and advertising. Current literature is mostly content-based, providing analysis of media or advertising, without input from the subjects/objects (people with disabilities) of such research.

### Method

The participants in the qualitative interviews used for this study were 10 male wheelchair basketball players. Two of the players were black and eight were white. The participants' ages ranged from 16 to 45 years. The players came from a variety of educational levels and socio-economic backgrounds. Although all of the participants played informally together in a university setting, the participants did not play competitively on the same team, but on several different elite teams from around the United States. Participants' playing experience ranged from one to 20 years. Most of the players were also involved in other sports, such as kayaking or tennis.

The only selection criteria for this study were the active participation on an organized, competitive wheelchair basketball

team, and willingness to participate in the study. Participants signed a consent form before they were interviewed.

The interviews, which ranged in length from 45 minutes to about 90 minutes, used McCracken's "auto drive" technique (1988) to record perceptions of participants regarding sport media and advertising. Participants were given a small amount of money to purchase their favorite print sport media to bring to the interview. The magazines or newspapers were then used as stimuli for the interview. Participants were asked to react to what they saw and read as they paged through their print media during the interview. During the interview, participants were also handed a recent issue of Sports n Spokes, a niche magazine dedicated to coverage of disability sport. The magazine, not available on newsstands, was also used as an "auto drive" prompt during the interview to allow participants to talk further about disability sport, the media, and advertising.

Each interview began with a "grand tour" question (Crabtree & Miller 1992) inviting participants to talk at length about the media they brought as they paged through it. The dialogue was allowed to flow freely, with researchers referring to an interview protocol only to guarantee that all issues were covered. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Three researchers independently examined interview transcripts for instances of language, descriptions, uses of text and units of information. Using a variation of the constant comparison method, researchers worked separately using the data sets to construct themes, then together to construct a final list of themes. In order for a theme to be included in the findings, all three researchers had to agree on the inclusion of a theme. No themes were included in the findings unless supported in a majority of the interview transcripts.

## Findings

The findings of this research are summarized into four themes that emerged during interviews with wheelchair athletes: a) they are avid consumers of sport media, for the purposes of socialization and legitimization of themselves as athletes; b) they express a hope and expectation that, with their advocacy, mainstream parameters for what is "acceptably athletic" in sport media will be widened; c) they are acutely sensitive to disability issues in advertising; and d) they are acutely aware of and sensitive to "market needs" and interests, but they are not monolithic in a belief that advertisers should be more inclusive.

### Consumption and Use of Sport Media

The wheelchair athletes in this study expressed an avid interest in mainstream sport media. Most of the athletes described themselves as active consumers of sport fare on television and in print media, using it as a socialization tool and as a way to legitimize themselves as athletes.

Most of the athletes mentioned "keeping up" with sport news as a reason they consume sport media. Keeping current on sports is important for their friendships and water-cooler conversations at work. Said one participant, a 19-year-old college student:

> I read tons of magazines, on the Internet constantly, trying to find out what's going on with basketball, just to talk to my friends about sports. The topic of sports, whether it be negative or positive, is a great way to communicate and meet people ...So, it's really a great building block for friendship (Vinny, April 28, 2001 interview).

Participants also indicated that they use sport media to legitimize themselves as athletes by seeking and using information meant for able-bodied sports participants. For instance, Ed, 41, stopped at an article about sports drinks as he flipped through a magazine:

> I see sports drinks everywhere, and I always wonder if that's going to help or not. Sometimes, when they talk about the struggles players have been through - how they work mentally - how they get up for their games - that kind of thing interests me. [Media] don't do anything about wheelchair sports, so it's not direct (May 1, 2001 interview).

Wheelchair athletes also reported looking for sport role models in mainstream media, another way to legitimize themselves as athletes. They reported studying their favorite players in game situations, in interviews and in other media features, to learn about "moves" and techniques. A 42-year-old player talked at length about learning strategies for teamwork and strategy from a story he recently read about a professional basketball game, while another player said he likes to read about Dennis Rodman to get rebounding tips.

Another player, a 21-year-old athlete, talked about imitating Michael Jordan:

> [H]alf the stuff that he was doing with his hands, like the lay-ups and stuff, I can basically do about half of that stuff...except for dunking...And how he plays defense, man-to-man and all that stuff like that - and how he guards his players - so basically I've gotten all my defensive stuff from him (Khari, April 29, 2001 interview).

In contrast, none of the players mentioned doing the same thing when they looked at disability sport publications such as Sports n Spokes.

## Expanding the Parameters of "Acceptably Athletic"

While wheelchair athletes in this study reported using the media to seek able-bodied sport role models, at the same time they expressed hope that their own athletic accomplishments, in time, would be accepted as legitimate by the wider culture. Their comments ran along a spectrum from disappointment to anger at their exclusion by the sport industry and sport media. Vinny, 19, said he understands the reasoning behind his exclusion, but does not agree with it:

> I guess they feel that no one will read their magazines, unless they use able-bodied, superstar athletes, like Kobe Bryant or Michael Jordan or Tracy Magready, when in reality,

> we're all athletes. Just because I don't make a $50 million salary, doesn't make me any less of an athlete than Kobe Bryant (April 28, 2001 interview).

Jeff, 46, was an active able-bodied athlete until 1985, when a car accident forced him to begin using a wheelchair. He considers himself an advocate for disability sports, calling his local paper to report sports scores for disabled sport events. Sports editors often rebuff him, and that makes him angry.

> You know, that's so stupid! We're athletes...One thing people don't realize probably is that there are - what - 53 million disabled people out there. We're probably the largest single group in the country. You've got to think about that, and people don't (April 16, 2001 interview).

The participants also expressed regret for what they see as a misconception about disabled sports - that all such sports are along the lines of the Special Olympics (an annual event for people with disabilities that stresses participation, not competition). One interviewee, Dug, said,

> it disappoints me if they have that misconception. You know, I have friends that are wheelchair tennis players that I guarantee - in their wheelchair - will beat 85% of the able-bodied people that play weekly. They're that good" (June 7, 2001 interview).

Most of the athletes interviewed said they don't want "token coverage" - coverage that focuses on the disability with a "pitiful soul" tone (Reggie, May 21, 2001 interview). Said Andrew, a 21-year-old who has used a wheelchair since age five:

> You could have an article about somebody in a wheelchair - somebody who plays basketball, and you don't have to focus on the fact that they play wheelchair basketball. Focus on the fact that they scored 21 points per game, had 10 rebounds and the fact that he had a triple-double (April 17, 2001 interview).

Participants also expressed the belief that disabled athletes themselves are at least partly to blame for their exclusion from the mainstream sport ideal because they do not try hard enough to make their sports appealing to the mainstream. Dug, 42, was most adamant: "It's not their [media's] job to further our cause. It's our job to make the game interesting enough and appealing enough to warrant that type of coverage" (June 7, 2001 interview). They also had suggestions for making the game "interesting enough." One participant, a 28-year-old player, said getting the "NBA perspective" and "close-ups of wheelchairs crashing together" would be exciting for viewers. "Just put it on the Sabbath Day. Every Sunday put some wheelchair sports on TV" (Jason, May 1, 2001 interview).

## Sensitivity to Disability Issues and Images in Ads

Participants reported that while they ignore most advertising, they are highly sensitive to positive, integrated

images of disability in ads. Most said they pay little attention to advertising in general, because it does not address the reality of their lives. When they do pay attention to advertising, it is because the ad fits a niche interest. For instance, 29-year-old Matt owns a kayak. While he ignores most advertising, he said he pays attention to ads with kayaks in them, because he is interested in kayaking equipment (April 24, 2001 interview).

Reggie summarized the way most participants said they felt about advertising:

> Maybe it's because there's not as many people like me in those ads. Now, if I was thumbing and I saw a black man in a wheelchair, that's going to be one of the first things I look at...Or maybe just a person in a wheelchair in an ad. But I don't see many people like me in the ads, so that's probably why they don't catch my attention (May 21, 2001 interview).

Reggie went on to describe ads that do catch his attention: those that include people with disabilities or are especially designed to appeal to people with disabilities. All of the ads he and other participants found appealing were in Sports n Spokes. Participants said the advertisements - for everything from sport wheelchairs and hand cycles to accessible automobiles - were useful or interesting.

One in particular, a two-page spread by Volkswagen, elicited a number of comments from participants. The ad contained a large wheelchair-user symbol, reconfigured for a more athletic look. The ad was especially appealing to David, a teenager who began using a chair and participating in wheelchair athletics two years earlier. He said he had begun collecting Volkswagen memorabilia (April 24, 2001 interview).

Another participant said that while seeing a wheelchair symbol is usually a turn-off for him, the Volkswagen ad is still appealing, because it rejects the standard symbol for disability and instead reconfigures it:

> The symbol is modified to be a more active symbol, so I noticed the difference, and it's not your standard, straight up-and-down wheelchair symbol that you see on the handicapped parking placards. And the arms are up - it's in motion, for being a still shot. I also like it because Volkswagen has been relatively aggressive, of late, in being supportive of issues of disability...So, that's meaningful to me, both in terms of the ad being interesting and its appearance, and me being appreciative of Volkswagen (Dug, June 7, 2001 interview).

Participants said they noticed any integration of disability into an ad, even if the integration might be considered incidental. Dug said he likes it better when disability is not the focal point of an ad:

> Now it will be nice when we reach a point in our society - and you know that advertising is right on that front edge of what describes our society - when they reach a point to

> where my expectation isn't that the use of the wheelchair was an intentional thing...I like that now you see some Wal-Mart commercials...I know they intentionally put someone in a wheelchair in the background, but the person was not the main focal point. They were just part of the tapestry of society (June 7, 2001 interview).

Advertisers and Inclusiveness

Most of the athletes interviewed expressed the wish that advertisers (and sport media in general) would include disability images. Advertising and media content would be more appealing to people with disabilities, but it would also serve a greater social function. Ed, who has used a wheelchair for eight years, said:

> It would be nice, you know, for the general public to see them. I think that sometimes when you start seeing things in the mainstream - if they're ads or whatnot - it makes you more open....If you ran [an ad] with a guy playing wheelchair basketball...people would get the idea. You know - disabilities, wheelchair sports. You know they'd start to connect. But right now, that's not the public image of people in wheelchairs (May 1, 2001 interview).

But Ed, like all other athletes interviewed, was acutely sensitive to "market needs" and interests. Participants said they were aware of the link between their inclusion in ads or sport media content, and their "market value." They differed in their beliefs about their own market worth and the responsibility of advertisers (and the media) to be inclusive.

Some interviewees expressed an acceptance of themselves as not valuable to advertisers and media producers. For instance, Dug blamed athletes with disabilities for their own invisibility because they were not aggressive enough in attracting a market. Ed said he did not believe media producers had an obligation until there was a higher public demand for it. Matt, 29, who described himself as a "strong" believer in "letting the market drive it," said:

> If it's not going to sell, it's not going to be there, and the people who are interested and how are involved in disabled sports is such a small percentage - there's just no point in it....I guess what I'm really saying is "No, I don't think there's a place for it to make money." (April 24, 2001 interview).

Other participants seemed to be more optimistic about the potential appeal of disability sports, and they questioned why advertisers did not see them as valuable. Jeff, as he flipped through Sports n Spokes, said, "You know, there's still a lot of [disabled] people that wear shoes. So why is there not any Nike advertising in here?" (April 16, 2001 interview).

Andrew, 21, speculated on the kinds of disability-sensitive ads he thought would appeal to mass-market readers in a magazine like SI:

> You could have a Nike ad showing somebody in a wheelchair

just doing something - and you don't have to have any print - just the Nike swoosh and a picture of somebody in a wheelchair doing something, like shooting a basketball. That says so much right there! (April 17, 2001).

## Discussion and Conclusions

### General Conclusions

The findings of this study support many ideas put forth in earlier literature. DePauw (1997) has argued that what is considered "legitimate sport" should expand beyond the realm of the able-bodied. The wheelchair athletes interviewed expressed a strong desire to be recognized and valued for their sporting accomplishments. They did not see their own bodies as weak and frail, but instead saw themselves as able competitors. Schell and Rodriguez (2001) have argued that athletes with disabilities use sport to reject their roles as social outcasts. These athletes also used sport media as tools for socialization and acceptance by peers. "I've got a reputation to uphold," said Jeff, about his ability to talk sports with his friends and colleagues at work (April 16, 2001 interview).

Burnett and Paul (1996) wrote that many people with disabilities ignore advertising because it is not reflective of their lives and interests. The athletes interviewed for this study expressed the same sentiment. However, as Burnett and Paul (1996) predicted, the athletes were also acutely receptive to advertising or marketing that included disability. David collects VW memorabilia, for instance, and Dug said he goes out of his way to eat at Burger King instead of McDonalds, because he believes Burger King has been more supportive of disabled athletes (June 7, 2001 interview).

Interview participants are also sensitive to any inclusion of disability in an advertisement. They see their inclusion in advertising - in any form - as an important indicator of their social status. Something as simple as a wheelchair symbol or a wheelchair user in a photo background is sufficient. Goerne (1992) writes that such inclusion sends a powerful message: that disabled people are not segregated outsiders, but consumers and participants.

### The Sporting Body, Advertising and Capitalist hegemony

Although the athletes interviewed overtly discussed their ideas in relation to sport media and advertising, their comments about seeking able-bodied role models and their discussion of their worth in a capitalist media system are perhaps most useful, in light of discussions by Hahn (1987) and DePauw (1997). The findings of this study are perhaps reflective of Smart's (2001) assertion that people with disabilities internalize and use cultural values as a cornerstone in their sense of self. The ability to completely reject negative perceptions of the able-bodied culture may almost be an "indestructible hegemony" (Hahn 1987, p. 566; Iwakuma 1997).

DePauw (1997) has written about capitalist boundaries on the definition of sport in American culture. Sport has been defined as able-bodied and male. The wheelchair users in this study are a paradox: they meet one requirement (male), but not the other (able-bodied). It might be construed that by entering sport,

these athletes have rejected its hegemonic definition, daring to enter even though they know they are not the ideal. During the interviews, they often claimed their status as "athletes" when discussing their desire to be included in sport coverage or sport advertising.

However, most of the athletes interviewed said a primary reason they seek out mainstream (able-bodied) sports media is for the purpose of finding role models. One athlete watches Dennis Rodman for rebounding, another seeks out Michael Jordan. Still others study articles and photos about able-bodied basketball games seeking clues to becoming stronger athletes. None mentioned disabled sport role models, although potential role models (albeit, far fewer) could be found between the covers of Sports n Spokes or through other niche media aimed at disabled athletes. Thus, it is difficult to assert that these athletes have completely rejected the hegemonic definition for sport. They seem to cling to the able-bodied ideal. They are less willing to create and embrace an alternative (and equally valid) sport culture, as much as they somehow want to be accepted into the hegemonic ideal. If they learn to play like an able-bodied athlete, perhaps they will be accepted.

Another indicator that the capitalist hegemony surrounding sport and disability has not been completely rejected by these athletes may also be in their willingness to accept "market forces" as a valid reason for their exclusion from media and from advertising. While these athletes initially expressed hope that they might be included both as athletes and as consumers, they seemed to collectively recognize that "profits need to be made, and we're not profitable."

Some of the participants, like Dug and Ed, believed disabled athletes (and people with disabilities in general) have no right to demand inclusion. Instead, inclusion is either something that can not be controlled ("the market" must decide), or it can be controlled if people with disabilities would just work harder. "The A-B [able-bodied] community is guilty of not doing stuff. We're just as guilty because we're not trying to do anything!" (Jeff, April 16, 2001 interview).

Other participants were anxious to frame disability as a diversity or ethical issue for media producers and advertisers - one that would bring rewards for inclusion. If media producers and marketers would just "do the right thing," the profits would come. It is interesting to note that most participants who advocated a stronger stance for inclusion were the younger participants, ranging in ages from 15 to 28. Older participants in the study, such as Dug, 42, or Ed, 41, seemed to have given up on the idea that their interest in sport and their sporting activities might be of value in a market-driven system.

## Conclusions, Need for Further Research

Hahn (1987) and DePauw (1997) point out the ways a market-driven system of media and marketing serve capitalist hegemony to the detriment of people with disabilities. As DePauw argues and this study illustrates, athletes with disabilities are excluded by the "able-bodied ideal" inherent in a capitalist definition of sport. Even people with disabilities who have ignored societal assumptions about their abilities to participate in sport

internalize these attitudes. Instead of seeking role models in their niche media, the athletes interviewed in this study put effort into integrating themselves (via their media use) as much into mainstream sport culture as possible. They have also rationalized and accepted their exclusion from sport media and from advertising, although it is clear that at least some of the participants imagine it could be different if they worked hard enough or if someone would "take a chance" on disabled athletes by framing them the same way as able-bodied athletes.

Thus, this study seems to indicate that the "almost indestructible hegemony" surrounding what is acceptable in relation to "acceptable and appropriate personal appearance" in sport and in advertising (Hahn 1987, p. 566) is surviving the rise in disability sport participation in the United States. As long as people with disabilities strive for the "able-bodied ideal" instead of embracing their own body-ideal, they will not challenge the socially constructed values that have locked them out of what is acceptable to the "narcissistic standards of the dominant majority" (Hahn 1987, p. 566).

The findings of this research do offer some glimmer of hope. For instance, the younger athletes in this study seemed more willing to demand recognition as athletes and consumers. While one could argue that this might be nothing more than youthful idealism that has not yet been tarnished by experience, there is also opportunity for empowerment. Further research needs to be conducted with this group, and with the thousands of adolescent wheelchair athletes who play in leagues all over the United States. The key to Hahn's hope for rejection of the hegemonic body ideal could lie partly with empowerment of these younger athletes, who are exploring their places in the world of sport.

The findings of this limited study should also spark interest for marketers and advertisers. These disabled athletes demonstrated an acute awareness and reception to inclusive advertising images. The participants indicated a strong positive response to ads that recognized people with disabilities, even if that recognition was marginal. It seems that marketers could integrate disability into mainstream advertising in a number of creative ways, reaching consumers who are aware and appreciative of such images.

This study, because of its scope and methods, can offer only ideas for further exploration, not firm conclusions. It can, however, provide a beginning for other researchers who are interested in the emerging disability sport population or in advertising and the disabled. It is imperative that scholars continue to explore ways in which people with disabilities may find ways to break the hegemonic bonds that keep them on the outside of mainstream culture.

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