

**Missing in Action?
Images of Disability in Sports Illustrated for Kids**

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Abstract

This study examines photographic images of children with discernible disabilities in a popular children's sports magazine, Sports Illustrated for Kids (SIK). Specifically, this study looks at the number and types of images of disability presented in SIK over a three-year period, from July 1996 (just before the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta, Ga.) to June 1999. The objective of this study is to assess how the magazine presents disability to its young, impressionable readers. Because SIK has a high circulation among readers who are especially susceptible to the power of photographs, it is important to study the images of disability transmitted in its pages. These images could be significant in the formation of disabled and non-disabled children's attitudes toward disability.

A group of junior high youths bumped into a blind woman as they exited a movie theater after a screening of "Dumb and Dumber", a top-rated movie that debuted in the mid-1990s. "Bet she's stupid," said one of the girls in the group, referring to the woman, a writer named Kathi Wolfe. When Wolfe pressed the girl about why she made a judgment on intelligence based only on Wolfe's disability, the girl replied, "In the movie, the blind kid's dumb" (Wolfe, 1996, p. 32). The movie includes a blind character - a child who is portrayed as stupid and gullible.

While the behavior of that group of young teenagers may testify to the poor treatment of people with disabilities, perhaps it is a stronger indicator of the media's power to influence the ideas of youngsters about minority groups, including the disabled. "Dumb and Dumber" is not the only movie during recent years with "kid appeal" that has included negative images of disability. Consider the popular movie "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," a Disney cartoon released in the mid 1990s, featuring a disfigured, lonely man who was both monster and superhero, but not attractive or socially-skilled.

"Hunchback" and "Dumb and Dumber" are two media images that transmit false generalizations about people with disabilities to children. These stereotypes stigmatize the 50 million disabled adults in the United States (Sutton, 1998). Further, these stereotypes involve perceptions of children about children.

Contrary to media depictions, most children with disabilities can participate in sports (Carlson, 1991). Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, more sophisticated technology and the continued growth of the disabled population have made

participation in sports easier and more popular than ever (Fost, 1998). Children in growing numbers are participating in sports, so much so, that one wheelchair manufacturer, Cannondale, markets its lightweight wheelchairs in bicycle shops. Bill Teel, a spokesperson for Cannondale, said, "Younger kids in wheelchairs don't want to be Jim Knaub (a five-time wheelchair winner of the Boston Marathon). They aspire to be Michael Jordan" (Fost, 1998, p. 56). Several states have initiated popular adapted sports programs, and thousands of young disabled athletes have participated in "Challenger" softball leagues across the United States (Therrien, 1992).

What types of media depictions are afforded children with disabilities? The influence of media on children's perceptions of self and others makes these types of questions important, especially in a legal environment that mandates inclusion of children in the educational mainstream. Public schools in the United States have made strides in integrating children with disabilities into the curriculum - including in physical education - since the passage of integration legislation during the 1970s and 1980s. Media images of children with disabilities are important not only for the self-concept of disabled children, but for the perception and acceptance of these children by their non-disabled peers in classrooms and playgrounds.

Media Images of Disability

Despite the continuing progress in technology, legal rights and sports participation of individuals with disabilities, perceptions of the disabled remain stagnant and tired stereotypes endure (Day, 2000). More than half of Americans admit they feel embarrassed, and nearly half are fearful, around people with disabilities (Wolfe, 1996). People with disabilities are stigmatized because their bodies do not reflect the "norm" (Shapiro, 1993; Taub, Blinde & Greer, 1999). Murphy (1995) said, "The greatest impediment to a person's taking full part in his society is not his physical flaws, but rather the tissue of myths, fears and misunderstandings that society attaches to them" (p. 140).

People with disabilities are generally absent from the media leaving the impression that they are not a part of mainstream society (Nelson, 1996). When they do appear, disabled people are often cast in predictable stereotypes: as victims, heroes, evil and warped villains, burdens on family and friends, or accident survivors who would be better off dead (Nelson, 1996; Day, 2000). The embittered blind veteran in "Scent of a Woman" and the competitive supervisor who walks with a cane on the popular television series "ER" are emblematic (Wolfe, 1996).

The "super cripp" and the "bitter cripp" have perhaps been the most examined of media stereotypes of the disabled (Harris, 1999). Publishers love "super cripp" stories - those that frame individuals with disabilities as "overcoming" their handicap. The "super cripp" stereotype, while a moving one to non-disabled Americans, is resented by many disabled people who are simply trying to lead normal lives (Shapiro, 1993).

Non-coverage or stereotypical coverage of athletes with disabilities also permeates sports media. For instance, coverage of the Paralympic Games has historically been sparse and accomplished Paralympic athletes are not offered the same types of lucrative endorsements as their non-disabled counterparts (Sutton, 1998). Sports events for disabled athletes are usually covered as features, not sports (Shapiro, 1993). When athletes with disabilities do break into mainstream sports pages, it is either in a story of the "super cripp" mold or a story involving controversy over the disabled athlete. Perhaps

the biggest disability-related sports stories of the past few years involved the fight by professional golfer Casey Martin to use a golf cart during PGA tournaments. Martin has a rare circulatory disorder and progressive bone loss. Golfers and sports columnists bitterly fought Martin's effort to participate in tournaments with accommodation. Martin was eventually forced to sue under the Americans with Disabilities Act (Leland, 1998).

There have been bright spots in the media's depiction of athletes with disabilities. Jean Driscoll, a two-time silver medalist in Paralympic wheelchair events and a seven-time winner in the wheelchair division of the Boston Marathon, landed an advertising contract with Ocean Spray Cranberries Inc. several years ago (Sutton, 1998). Advertising has, in fact, been the catalyst for more positive images of disability across the media (Shapiro, 1993). One writer on disability issues points to the number of television ads in the early 1990s that use characters in wheelchairs "shown as normal people doing things that normal people do" (Nelson, 1996, p. 125). Inclusive advertising has been demonstrated as effective with consumers, and mega-advertisers like Coke, Levi's, Kmart, McDonald's, IBM and others have included disabled characters in print and television ads (Shapiro, 1993; Fost, 1998; Bainbridge, 1997). One ad, by department store chain Target, used a photo of a girl with Down's Syndrome in a 1990 ad insert. The company received 2,000 thank-you letters. One woman called a Target executive 30 minutes after the circular hit her doorstep thanking him for having a kid with Down syndrome in the ad. She claimed the ad was very important to her daughter's self image (Shapiro, 1993).

Some experts claim that using people with disabilities in advertising can be a "political minefield" because advertisers may be criticized for the way they use people with disabilities. For instance, Nike's use of paraplegic marathon athletes in an advertising campaign was criticized for implying that people with disabilities have to overcome their disabilities in super-human ways (the "super cripp" syndrome) in order to be accepted (Bainbridge, 1997).

Overall, however, positive images in advertising have been followed with improvements in media depictions of individuals with disabilities (Nelson, 1996). "Many current portrayals convey inspiration, not limitation" (Burnett & Paul, 1996, p. 49). Television shows like "Life Goes On," a 1980s drama that featured a teenager with Down syndrome, and movies like "Children of a Lesser God," starring deaf actress Marlee Matlin, are signs that images are improving (Day, 2000).

Children and Images of Disability

Even while more positive mediated images of people with disabilities have broken through during the past several years, stereotypical depictions are part of media aimed at the most impressionable audiences: children. Children with disabilities rarely see themselves in popular movies and juvenile literature perpetuates myths and stereotypes about the disabled (Mellen, 1989; Sanfran, 1998). Children's images of disability are dominated in the public mind by "wide-eyed children asking for money" in telethons (Nelson, 1996).

Children notice and learn from such depictions. Research demonstrates that children as young as preschool age can hold a functionally related preference for a non-disabled person over someone with a physical disability, and they interact differently in social situations as a result (Cohen, 1994). Media images may contribute to this

preference as they fit into an overall social learning environment for children (Essa, 1999). According to social learning theory, which asserts that children learn and then model social behaviors through observation, children acquire attitudes and behaviors such as sex roles, racial bias and societal customs and prejudices about disability from models around them (Essa, 1999).

Photographs can be strong influences on social learning (Dorr, 1986; Sulzby, 1985). The power of photographs can positively counteract negative stereotypes children encounter about people with disabilities, as noted in a study by Monson & Shurtleff (1979) that documented improvements in children's attitudes toward disabled people through the use of visuals. Positive media campaigns have been effective for audiences beyond school age as in an advertising campaign that produced a significant difference in attitudes of adults toward persons with disabilities (Smith & Ogley, 1981).

While many visual images that children encounter come from television, they also come from periodicals used by many teachers. More than half of the teachers in a 1989 survey said that they use magazines to teach (Markes, 1991). The number and circulation of children's publications has grown throughout the 1980s and 1990s, more than doubling over the past two decades (Markes, 1991).

Despite the growth and potential influence of children's periodicals, little research has been published on children's magazines (Markes, 1991; Lester-Roushazmir & Raman, 2000). One study of periodicals (Markes, 1991) looked at diversity images in children's periodicals, but did not address disability. To accomplish their objective researchers polled periodical editors and analyzed magazine content. But just one sport periodical for children, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, was included in Markes' research. In the study, SIK editors share an "unwritten policy" on diversity, to "present kids from varied cultural, racial and economic backgrounds in our text and illustrations, and to do so with sensitivity and balance" (Markes, 1991, p. 24). Overall, SIK scored well against other children's magazines for representation of minority groups, however, Markes points out numerous stereotypical depictions of minority groups in the magazine's advertising and editorial illustrations.

Sports Illustrated for Kids has also been the subject of two major studies on gender images. Duncan & Sayaovong (1990) and later Cuneen & Sidwell (1998) studied photographic depictions in SIK articles and advertisements coding each photo for gender inclusion and depiction as presented by camera angle, action and dominance of the photograph on the page. Both found inequities in the number and type of images presented of boys and girls. Their research is part of a handful of studies that examine gender in children's periodicals, but it did not address other diversity issues such as disability.

This study examines photographic images of children with discernible disabilities in *Sports Illustrated for Kids* (SIK). SIK reaches out to a large audience claiming a circulation of about 1 million children. It is carried in thousands of school and public libraries across the United States. This study looked at the number and types of images of disability presented in SIK over a three-year period, from July 1996 (just before the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta, Ga.) to June 1999. The objective of this study was to assess how the magazine presented disability to its young, impressionable readers. Because SIK has a high circulation among readers who are especially susceptible to the power of photographs, it is important to study images of disability in its pages. These

images could influence the formation of disabled and non-disabled children's attitudes toward disability.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. Does SIK include photographic depictions of children with disabilities in its pages? Are they included in advertisements, editorial pages, or both?
2. What percentage of SIK advertising and editorial photographs include characters with disability? Does the number of photographs encourage children to see their peers with disabilities as part of mainstream culture?
3. In photographs that include people with disabilities, how are those characters portrayed? Are they presented in a stereotypical manner or does the magazine present images in such a way that might encourage non-disabled children to see their peers more realistically and disabled children to see themselves more positively? Do the portrayals encourage, or discourage, inclusion of children with disabilities in sport?

Method

Content analysis, a method that involves the quantifying of elements within a text, was used to answer the research questions. Through content analysis relationships of the most salient clusters of images and information are gauged to accurately represent the dominant messages (Entman, 1993). Commonly defined as an objective, systematic, and quantitative discovery of message content, content analysis has also been determined as an effective way to examine media images of minority or historically oppressed groups (Hocking & Stacks, 1998; Dominick & Wimmer, 1991).

Data Collection

Sports Illustrated for Kids was the sampling unit for this study. Photos in 36 issues of the magazine, from July 1996 to June 1999, were examined. Artistic models (computer-generated figures such as drawing of athletes, graphic representations, and Claymation figures) were not coded.

A recording instrument, using categories from the work of Cuneen & Sidwell (1998) and Duncan & Sayaovong (1990) and adapted for use with images of disability, was generated to analyze the SIK photographs. The categorical variables used included: (a) photo domination (dominant or non-dominant, in relation to the page); (b) gender of the subject (male or female); (c) photo angle (straight, down, or up); (d) motion in photo (passive or active); (e) prominence of the disabled character (prominent or supporting); (f) type of sport (individual or team); (g) category of sport (neutral, aesthetic, high risk, or strength); and (h) leadership (owner, official, or coach). For obvious reasons, only discernible disabilities could be coded. Unless a disability such as visual or hearing impairment was pointed out in the photo or caption, researchers could not discern the disability.

A critical component of content analysis is to ensure that coding is reliable so that the data reflect consistency in the interpretation and application of the coding schemes and not the biases and/or interpretations of coders. Two of the four researchers involved with this study were trained to serve as coders of the SIK photos. Holsti's reliability formula was used to assess coder reliability (Hocking & Stacks, 1998). Two inter-coder

reliability tests and one intra-coder reliability test were conducted. Inter-coder reliability was established by comparing coding sheets on identical data completed by different coders. The first inter-coder reliability test took place before beginning data collection and resulted in a reliability score of 92.8 %. The second inter-coder reliability test took place at the median point of the study and resulted in a reliability score of 92.5%. In other words, both coders coded the data sample data exactly the same over 92% of the time at the beginning and median of the study. Intra-coder reliability, established by comparing coding sheets on identical data completed by the same coder 24 hours apart, was tested at the beginning of the study and resulted in a reliability rating of 96.3%.

Findings and Discussion

The first research question for this study asked if SIK includes photographic images of children with disabilities. The findings indicate that SIK is severely deficient in this area. Persons with disability were absent from the photographs used in the editorial articles and advertisements in SIK. In the 36 selected issues, a total of 7,092 photographs were coded. Advertising photographs accounted for 1,527 of the total number, and editorial photos totaled 5,565. There were no advertising images of persons with disability and only 24 editorial photographs of people with disabilities. Of the 36 covers coded, no photographs of people with disability were included. Table 1 summarizes these results.

Table 1

Photographs in Sports Illustrated for Kids

Type of Photo	Advertising	Editorial	Cover
Total Photos	1527	5565	36
Disability Photos	0	24	0
Percentage of Total	0.00	0.40	0.00

Photographs coded from 36 issues of Sports Illustrated for Kids, from July 1996 to June 1999.

The complete absence of persons with disability in advertising photographs seems to contradict the findings of Shapiro (1993) who noted that inclusive advertising has often been a catalyst for positive images of disability across the media. While advertisers like Coke, McDonalds, Levis, Nike, and others have included disabled characters in other magazine ads, none of these ads found their way into the selected issues of SIK, even though all of these companies advertise in the children's magazine.

The second research question asked what percentage of advertising and textual photos included persons with a disability and if the photographs encouraged children to see their peers with disabilities as part of mainstream culture. Only 24 photos of persons with a disability were discovered in the 36 issues that spanned three years. This represents a paltry 0.3% of the total 7092 photos coded and 0.4% of the 5565 of the total editorial photos coded. These percentages are embarrassing and

illustrate the exclusion of persons with disability in sport media. Sports Illustrated for Kids claims to have an unwritten policy on diversity to "present kids from varied cultural, racial and economic backgrounds" in their magazine (Markes, 1991). Clearly, SIK has forgotten children with disabilities in its unwritten policy. Instead of encouraging children to see their peers with disabilities as a part of the mainstream culture, SIK has participated in the exclusion of persons with disability.

The third research question asked how characters with disability were portrayed. Are persons with disabilities presented in a stereotypical manner or are they presented in such a way that might encourage non-disabled children to see their peers more realistically and children with disabilities see themselves more positively? Table 2 lists the type and number of photos in which persons with disabilities appeared in the magazine.

Table Two

Type of Photos in Sports Illustrated for Kids

Type	Number	Percentage
Team	4/24	16%
Individual	20/24	84%
Aesthetic	0/24	0%
Strength	5/24	21%
High Risk	0/24	0%
Neutral	19/24	79%
Leadership	0/24	0%

Photographs coded from 36 issues of Sports Illustrated for Kids, from July 1996 to June 1999.

Most photographs pictured persons with disabilities by themselves or with other disabled characters. For example, every athlete pictured in a wheelchair was the photo's solitary subject or was with other wheelchair sports participants. Only two photos in three years pictured a person with disabilities participating with non-disabled peers and both photos were of a feature about a young quadriplegic boy who plays football and wrestles with his non-disabled peers. If not for this one feature, there would have been no photos integrating children with disabilities with non-disabled children. This type of photo representation seems to reinforce the notion that persons with disability should be segregated instead of integrated.

There were no photos of disabled characters in leadership positions. For example, none of photos pictured persons with disabilities serving as coaches, assistant coaches, umpires, referees, or officials. Only one photo featured a person in a leadership position and that was of a non-disabled coach speaking with a boy with amputated arms and legs playing football. This exclusion certainly does not promote a positive image of disabled athletes.

Children with disabilities are not pictured in certain types of sports and are

disproportionately represented in others. For example, 79% of the persons with disability were pictured in neutral sports such as wheelchair racing, swimming, and wheelchair basketball. No athletes were pictured in high-risk sports like rock climbing or white water rafting. Only 21% were pictured in strength sports such as wrestling and football and there were no pictures of persons with disability in aesthetic sports like ice-skating or gymnastics.

The message about whether or not children with disabilities can or do participate with others in sport was also clearly a negative one. An overwhelming number of the photos (84%) were of athletes participating in individual sports, not in team ventures. Thus, children with disabilities are not depicted as "team players." Again, segregation, not integration, is promoted.

The skewed representation of disabled athletes in SIK sharply contrasts the way non-disabled athletes in the magazine are portrayed. It implies that athletes with disabilities are more different than alike their non-disabled counterparts.

Discussion

This exploratory study exposes the overt exclusion of images that include disability in Sports Illustrated for Kids. At least two major changes are imperative. The first is more visibility for people with disabilities through more photos. The presence of only 24 photos with disability images in a pool of more than 7,000 photos is appalling, especially when one considers the circulation of this magazine, the percent of children who live with disabilities, and the power of images on children's perceptions of disability. SIK should consider its audience - children who read the magazine in school libraries or classrooms where inclusion is reality. To simply get its inclusionary depictions over the one percent mark, SIK would have to triple its number of photos with disability images. SIK should also consider encouraging advertisers to use images of disability. Positive images of disability in advertising has yielded positive results for many advertisers.

The second change that should occur is more realistic, positive images in photos. Because of the paltry number of photos available for analysis, it is difficult to draw generalizations about themes or make specific suggestions for change in photographic content. However, it is clear that athletes with disabilities are depicted as segregated and more suited to individual than team sports. These images contradict the goals of integrated education and imply that segregated participation is natural. SIK should consider the ways in which its photos of sports participants with disabilities contribute to more inclusionary, positive images for children.

Research Recommendations

Research on images of disability in children's sport literature, and children's periodicals in general, is in its infancy. This body of research has tremendous potential for growth and for affecting positive change.

There are several possibilities for research that spring from this study. One is the assessment of the attitudes and self-efficacy of children with disabilities as affected by children's periodicals such as SIK. How do children with disabilities perceive the lack of and types of images they encounter in magazines? How do they perceive their athletic potential as a result? Clearly, the voices of children with disabilities are important when one considers media images of disabilities in their literature.

There is also room for much more exploration of the ways disability is framed in children's periodicals and in other sport media aimed at children. This study examined the number and types of photographic images found in just one children's sport periodical. Analysis of photographic images in other periodicals would build on this study adding to understanding of what children see in magazines that line the shelves of their libraries and classrooms. Further, text analyses are important considering that teachers use children's magazines in the classroom for educational purposes. What are children learning about disability in the material they read and discuss in the learning environment?

It would also be enlightening to evaluate how teachers use children's periodicals in the inclusion classroom, and how they perceive stereotypes (of disability and other minorities) in the media they use. These types of studies could give educators a better understanding about how to use children's literature in education and how to "counter balance" misleading media depictions with positive reality.

Clearly, this study is just one piece of a picture that must be broadened if we are to understand media affects on children's perceptions of disability. Because the media can be a strong influence, this type of research is imperative if children are to receive strong, unified messages about the importance and utility of inclusion and equal opportunities for both disabled and non-disabled individuals.

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We wish to acknowledge two additional authors: Susan Lynn & Kristi Walsdorf, both from Florida State University.