Disability Studies Quarterly
Spring 2001, Volume 21 No. 2
www.cds.hawaii.edu

Disability is Not so Beautiful:

A Semiotic Analysis of Advertisements

for Rehabilitation Goods

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Abstract

This study posits a semiotic investigation of the representation of the "disabled body" in advertisements for rehabilitation goods utilizing two major Canadian disability-oriented magazines. The historical context is the late 20th century Canadian/North American advertising and society. The semiology of cultural production studies provide the tools for methodological analysis. It is a media investigation that explored how advertisements as a cultural text reproduced and reinforced cultural notions of the "disabled body." It allowed this researcher to critically consider how mass culture subordinates perceived deviant groups to non-deviant groups (Rubin, Rubin and Piele, 1996).

Research Problem

Much of the literature on the presentation of disabled people has centered on their portrayal in the movies, telethons, news presentations, cartoons, art, newspapers, magazines, film and theater and literature (Woodhill, 1996). It is noted that visibly disabled persons did not appear in American advertisements (and by extension North American advertising) until the 1980s (Longmore, cited in Hahn, 1987a:561). In the main, advertising and disability has been restricted historically and predominantly through fundraising campaigns (Brolley & Anderson, 1986). The portrayal of disabled people is largely restricted to medical and rehabilitation product catalogues, disability magazines and disability organization posters and brochures.

The sense is that disability is the "invisible issue" in all forms of communication media (Ruffner, 1984:143) and that the "proliferation of `able-bodied' values and the misrepresentation of disabled people" reflects a dominant able-bodied policy that discriminates against disabled people (Barnes, 1996:56). The mass media are viewed as being guilty of portraying negative stereotypes by presenting persons with disabilities as

"pitiable victims of a tragic fate, as noteworthy only when they've done something extraordinary, and incapable of a fulfilling life" (Christians, 1998:6). They are also usually portrayed as being childlike or incompetent, needing total care, as non-productive members of society and a drain on taxpayers' money (Nelson, 1994:5). More importantly, many of the images of disability that are depicted are based in medical assumptions and unexamined views of normality (Barton, 1996:145).

Today, where the "importance and desirability of bodily perfection is endemic to western culture" (Barnes, 1996:56), the "disabled body" is regarded as being non-eligible for portrayal. Faced with the impossibility of identifying themselves as "subjects" in consumer society, disabled bodies occupy an anomalous position in the media. Their bodies are not models, because they do not lend themselves to imitation and at the same time the role models they are offered as the `chosen' are impractical as models of likeness, even a likeness constructed on the basis of self-exhibition, fashion or appearance. The empire of technologies that empower the body, the nomadism of identity, the possibility of being different and public visibility are concepts that only reinforce disabled people's feeling of exclusion from, and not belonging to contemporary society (Fontes, 1998:25).

In recent years attempts have been made to develop alternative approaches to the definition of the "disabled body" in Western society. Prevailing and still dominant orthodox definitions of disability include the medical model which views disability as a sign of sickness and focuses on individually based functional impairments (Woodhill, 1996:214). From the medical perspective people are disabled as a result of their individual physical and mental impairments and medicine attempts to cure or rehabilitate them.

By way of contrast, a materialist account of disability stresses the importance of attitudinal and environmental factors (Drake, 1996:149). From this stance one does not speak about "having a disability" in the sense that one has a particular condition, but rather the "emergence of physical differences" or "the invention of handicaps" which indicates that these conditions are the social creations of a given culture (Woodhill, 1996: 202). The materialist framework suggests that the basis of the present day status of disabled people in Western society rests in the material and ideological or cultural changes that accompanied the emergence of capitalist society (Barnes, 1996: 47). It acknowledges the influence of the central values upon which Western capitalism rests - namely individualism, competitive free enterprise, and consumerism (Barnes, 1996: 45).

First, according to the materialist framework, disability can be viewed as an economic problem because throughout the 19th and 20th century work has been organized around the twin principles of competition between workers and maximization of profit (Barton, 1996:33). Second, the rise of the institution and more specifically the medical profession became a means of controlling individual bodies and attempting to reintegrate them into the larger social body (Davis, 1995; Oliver, 1996). Last, but not least, the use of the body as an advertising tool to perpetuate and validate cultural concerns and values with bodily perfection was and is aided by the technological development of the mass media (Hahn, 1987a).

Bearing the above in mind, it is only in recent years that attention has been focused on the impact of media advertisements on the attitudes of the general public towards disabled persons (Brolley & Anderson, 1986:147). Related research on disability and advertising has shown that effective advertising was curtailed by the deliberate manipulation of negative emotions such as pity, inadvertently reinforcing the stigma of disability through wording, lengthy explanations of the disability involved, the absence of color, and not demonstrating respect for those represented in the advertisements (Brolley & Anderson, 1986; Wang, 1992).

Design of the Study

A primary consideration in the process of determining the study population was the fact that advertising images utilizing disabled individuals are few and far between in mainstream media publications. For this reason it was decided to focus the ad analysis on disability-oriented magazines that contained a wider selection of ads containing disabled individuals.

Two Canadian based publications, Abilities and Disability Today, were chosen because they both featured a similar magazine content, advertising layout, and audience composition and size. Abilities and Disability Today can be described as cross-disability, lifestyle-oriented magazines. The term "cross-disability" indicates a wide continuum of disabilities from physical impairment to mental illness. Both these magazines target not only people with disabilities, but also their families and professionals engaged in disability issues.

Following the example of Williamson (1978), the techniques of semiology are adopted to act as "tools" by which to identify the means by which signs are created in advertisements for rehabilitation goods and the meanings they can generate. A "middle range" sampling process that combined both quantitative and qualitative strategies was utilized (Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1986). A predetermined coding scheme that determined the exact definitions and boundaries of what constituted an advertisement for a rehabilitation good was developed. Following this a census of the ads for the full span of the published issues for both magazines was conducted. A secondary census then determined the range of possible ads that would lend themselves to semiotic analysis. From this a final sampling of 18 ads was created for detailed analysis.

The 18 ads thus chosen for analysis were determined according to "aesthetic complexity" which involved a consideration of the overall visual nature of the ad, for example: the number of pictorial and textual elements; the degree of sophistication of the arrangement of the pictorial and textual elements; the use of notable camera angles and other photographic effects; the artistic utilization of light and shadow, and of color, where applicable; and the graphic quality and variety of the textual elements.

The primary consideration in the ad analysis was to understand the social status of the "disabled body" as depicted in the ads. It also considered how the "disabled body" related to the able-bodied hierarchy. In this way it was made possible to highlight the recurrent themes in how the sampled ads portrayed the disabled as a group. This reading considered, among other things, what sort of dialectics are present in the ads: Is the

"disabled body" contrasted with a "non-disabled body"? Who dominates within the non-verbal communication within the frame of the ad? What might this ad be implying about the nature of relationships between the able-bodied and disabled as a group? How is the group under study depicted in interaction with other categories of persons - family members, doctors, etc.? What is the ad conveying about social status or class?

Findings

Overall, it is difficult to state whether the portrayal of the "disabled body" in the ads analyzed was positive or negative. Positive portrayals of the "disabled body" included placing it in position where there was no opportunity for an unfavorable dialectic between able-bodied and disabled. The creative use of metaphor also aided in developing a positive range of associations when linked with the "disabled body. More often, however, the strength of an affirmative portrayal was undermined by a diminishing narrative that inadvertently contradicted the positive presentation. This was the case with ads reflecting a strong medical/professional discourse.

To further elaborate, nearly all of the 18 ads sampled portrayed "sanitized" images of the "disabled body." The disability was portrayed in a way so that it did not intrude upon the viewer's aesthetic consciousness. In several cases, the models used were not obviously physically disabled, unless by virtue of being associated with the product. Even if the disability was very obvious there was still no threat to the integrity of body image because there was no great disparity between an expected "normal" body and the actual perceived reality. This was further reinforced by the fact that all of the 18 ads sampled contained underlying concepts such as youth, health, athletic prowess, personal appearance and wholeness (Livneh, 1984).

Another underlying perception was that the good promoted held the ability to project and protect the individual's image of the physical self as "whole" and "inviolate." In cases where the aid in question was visible, they reinforced the product's ability to allow the user to regain or replicate "natural" functions such as walking, standing or running with ease. These concepts were conveyed in several ways. One way was to link the product with an activity that became the central cue in relating the person and the product. For example, use was made of activities that triggered associations of athleticism and courage. They featured a "disabled body" in the process of running/completing a race and being involved in the world of motor car racing. The latter, in particular, featured a person with multiple disabilities. He is in a wheelchair and missing his left forearm, yet because he is cast in the light of a "daredevil" in the world of car racing, the disability paradoxically becomes an accessory to his portrayal.

Nearly a quarter of the ads sampled seemed to explicitly reflect a concern with the potential economic productivity of the "disabled body." The rehabilitation good advertised was placed within distinctly identifiable contexts suggestive of a work office: business suits, the back drop of a downtown "office building," and a highlighted page of a open desk planner. Here, the product was viewed primarily as the means to a productive end - emphasis was placed on personal productiveness and achievement. The "disabled body" was regarded as being non-functional in a capitalist economy: mal-functioning

bodies seemed to be considered a hindrance to the smooth operation of commercial activities.

Corbett (1991) comments that the concept of normality contains a paradox: "It engenders a fear of difference," but is also linked to the idea of individuality as a desirable commodity. In the ads the achievement of individuality was expressed in the adoption of a particular lifestyle. "Lifestyle" was defined as that which was considered daring, out of the way, or simply distinguishing oneself by means of acquiring a "status" product. This pursuit of individuality was also reflected in efforts to excel in culturally accepted and valued endeavors such as sport. True to form, a number of ads used a sports/fitness oriented theme in their presentation.

Another technique was to utilize the qualifications of an "knowledgeable authority" to certify the good (Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1986). The "expert" voice was found in two categories. The first was where a known athlete or sports person, albeit disabled, was used to confirm the product's trustworthiness. Hence, in two ads a tri-athlete, to promote a prosthetic limb, and a former race car driver, for a wheelchair, were utilized.

In other examples, the voice of authority was identified as being that of the medical professional. An ongoing narrative referred and subscribed to the seemingly omniscient medical/professional. Emphasis also seemed to be placed on controlling specific functional aspects of the body, by which process the "disabled body" could be reintegrated into the wider social body.

In a different approach, other ads utilized the technique of directly addressing the reader and encouraging him or her to "Ask [their] prosthetist today" and to "Call now to learn more about it." This omniscient professional voice presented itself as knowing what was best for the "disabled body." Its discourse was based on conceptions of what is proper and desirable behavior for the average person (Friedson, 1965:71). From the perspective of the professional the onus is thus placed on the client or patient to assume a rehabilitation "role" whereby he or she is obligated to maximize existing abilities as well as an obligation to assume as many "normal" functions as possible (Safilos-Rothschild, 1970).

Secondary observations include the fact that all the models utilized were Caucasian men and women. As this study was based on a limited sample population and was restricted in terms of logistics, this observation cannot be taken as being conclusive. It does, however, present the possibility of an ironic observation that in a study which considers the under-representation and misrepresentation of a minority group often excluded on the basis of aesthetics, the self same ads failed to be visually representative of the cross-ethnic aspects of disability.

Also notable was the fact that in a sample population of 18 ads only five featured "disabled" women. More significantly, the women were placed in positions of relative passivity. They were not presented as athletes nor as part of any particular lifestyle. Instead, they were either placed in "domestic" settings either as the "grandmother" and "proud homemaker" respectively; or as passive "objects" for the rehabilitation good

which metaphorically showed a woman "with possibilities" and a woman being given a "new way to work and play," respectively. This provides room for speculation about the perception of women with disabilities, both in terms of gender stereotyping and perceptions of their sexuality.

Limitations of the study

The results of this study are based on the semiotic analysis of a limited number of ads. This study, therefore, cannot claim to make any conclusive statements about the portrayal of the "disabled body" or to presume that this is a satisfactory representative sampling that could be applied across the board to all disability magazines. However, because the strength of semiotic analysis lies in its insistence on identifying the context in which the inferences are made, the conclusions arrived at become more useful for inferring generalizations than for applying them. The in-depth focus gives the researcher an opportunity to do a thorough analysis. It serves to provide a solid base for "inference" which can be useful in outlining the conditions under which a generalization can be expected to hold (Dey, 1993: 263).

If one were to make a generalization based in the context of this study sample, it could be suggested that in North America, not only are "disabled bodies"/consumers viewed as purchasers of services and goods, they also paradoxically become the raw material and finished products of the advertising industry (Albrecht, 1992). As potentially consuming "bodies," they are the focus of socio-cultural forces. They become "embodied" in such a way as to sell goods but they are also bodies that have been inscribed with attendant socio-cultural myths of what it means to be "disabled."

Conclusion

This study served to underline the importance of cultural institutions in determining and reinforcing aspects of what it perceives to be the "normal" body. To a greater extent, a materialist theory of disability can adequately explain the portrayal of the "disabled body" in the advertisements. The usefulness of the materialist framework in this study is such that it recognizes and explains disability as a social construction. As was noted earlier, the basis of the materialist framework is such that an economy that is production-oriented would by necessity demand that its workers be "functional" for economic purposes. Individual worth becomes determined in terms of what one can contribute to the economic system as a whole. The creation and representation of the "disabled body" becomes a reflection of the relationship between an individual and the social and physical environment around him or her.

> Are the deaf, deaf? Are blind persons really sightless? Or is it the social setting we place them in? In their social relations they communicate, they `see'...we place them in specific social relations that make them deaf (Gadacz, 1994: 5).

In view of what has been demonstrated in the overall findings as regards appearance and functionality, it may not be incorrect to state that today's rehabilitation good manufacturers are seemingly engaged in a process of duplicating functions of the body and creating products that perform, provide comfort and more importantly, please

the eye (Tiesson, 1996b). This leads one to speculate that the presentation of the disabled body is linked to the dynamics of advertising and economic profit. Conceivably, the image of "damaged goods" is transferred from products to people where the "disabled body" is viewed as being "damaged," "defective" and less "socially marketable" than the non-disabled body (Susman, 1994).

Like mainstream advertisements, the advertisements for rehabilitation goods can be viewed as being a cultural "text," that is representative of a capitalist economy and society. They act as a repository for certain beliefs and ideologies. Not unlike mainstream advertising, they also reflect a distinct commercial imagery of approved body attributes: the body beautiful, the importance of sports, and of keeping fit, all of which are perceived as being features of self-development.

Appendix

List of "aesthetically" richer ads sampled for semiotic analysis

AD #1

Active Living, 6 (5), 1997: Back cover, full page, color

Ad Caption: "A Walk in the Park"

Rehabilitation good: Kingsley Steplite Foot

AD #2

Active Living, 1997, 6 (4): pg 40, full page, color

Ad Caption: "Motion Technology. Comfort. Function. Value."

Rehabilitation good: prosthetic leg

AD #3

Active Living, 6 (3), 1997: pg 50, full page, color

Ad Caption: "The most comforting part of this picture is the TEC Liner"

Rehabilitation good: prosthetic liner

AD #4

Disability Today, 1997, 6 (2): pg 24, full page, color

Ad Caption: "For Everyday People Doing Everyday Things"

Rehabilitation good: "Stratus" prosthetic limb

AD #5

Disability Today, 1997, 6 (2): pg 47, full page, color

Ad Caption: "Stairs can become a step up to freedom"

Rehabilitation good: Stair lift

AD #6

Disability Today, 1995, 5 (4): pg 83, full page, color

Ad Caption: "Darrell Gwynn lives in the fast lane. Get out there."

Rehabilitation Good: Quickie P200 Wheelchair

AD #7

Disability Today, 1995 4 (3): pg 30, color, 1/2 page

Ad Caption: "Lyfe/Life is an open road/You have the freedom to go as far as you want."

Rehabilitation Good: Car Lift

AD #8

Disability Today, 1993, 3 (1): pg 59, half page, black and white, some color

Ad Caption: "Ready, Willing and Able to be Productive Again"

Rehabilitation good: Speaker/headphone device

AD #9

Disability Today, 1992, 1 (3): pg 29, full page, color

Ad Caption: "Adjust the foot, not the lifestyle"

Rehabilitation good: "Air-Flex" prosthetic limb

AD #10

Abilities, 1997, #32: pg 63,1/4 ad, color

Ad Caption: "The Possibilities are endless"

Rehabilitation good: Uppertone exercise machine for quadriplegics

AD #11

Abilities, 1997, #31: pg 5, full page, color

Ad Caption: "A New Way to Work and Play"

Rehabilitation good: E & J Lancer 2000 wheelchair

AD #12

Abilities, 1997, #27: insert, full page (3), color

Ad Caption: "Opening the Doors to Freedom"

Rehabilitation good: "Bladder Manager" incontinence device

AD #13

Abilities, 1995, #23: pg 76, half page, color

Ad Caption: "Experience the Freedom"

Rehabilitation good: Terra Trek wheelchair

AD #14

Abilities, 1993, #16: pg 83, full page, color

Ad Caption: "It's new. It's hot. It's like nothing else on wheels. And the car's pretty nice too."

Rehabilitation good: Action FX wheelchair

AD #15

Abilities, 1993, #15: pg 21, full page, color

Ad Caption: "Enjoy life's simple pleasures with New Jay Care Seating"

Rehabilitation Good: wheelchair cushion

AD #16

Abilities, 1993, #15: pg 77, full page, color

Ad Caption: "Ultragater, The new lift for people who demand high performance in every aspect of their lives."

Rehabilitation good: electric car lift

AD #17

Abilities, 1992, #13: pg 10, full page, color

Ad Caption: "Power Assist Redefined"

Rehabilitation good: "Booster power assist" for wheelchairs

AD #18

Abilities, 1992, #10: pg 12-13, full page (2), color

Ad Caption: "Action speaks louder than words"

Rehabilitation good: "Action" wheelchair

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