The choice of models with disability in advertising

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Introduction

The media plays an important role in communicating information to the public, usually on aspects that the audience possesses limited knowledge or experience about (Randjelovic et al., 2012). Happer and Philo (2013) have examined how, following the introduction of digital media, the public has further been fed with disjointed and often inconsistent information. Within the public sphere, organisations and policy makers have continued editing and re-interpreting the mass of information that is ever more available, whilst the audience is making sense of the world around them in ways that legitimizes information which might not be necessarily true. Happer and Philo (2013) thus emphasise the importance of analysing the content portrayed by the media, in particular what is being told and what is not. Hence, what is presented by the media may not only empower actions in order to facilitate change at a collective level, but it may also shape the attitudes of the public for a much bigger social change (Briant, Watson and Philo, 2011). This is not to say that media is always false, however this industry has been critiqued for the implicit ways in which information has been disseminated to the public. McClimens (2013) justifies this issue in the advertising industry, which aims to approximate physical perfection of the human species. This is typically achieved by promising the viewer with a particular look if a certain product is bought. Naturally, just like any other good lie, this promise is generally perceived as achievable.

The representation of people with disability in the media

The representation of disability in the mainstream media has continued to enforce the negative prevailing stereotypes associated with disability (Abbas et al., 2004). As a matter of fact, "disability has been deeply misrepresented and often used to symbolically represent 'criminality, tragedy, pity, fear, charity and ridicule'" (Abbas et al., 2004, p.1). Other flawed representations have framed disability as inspirational, innocent and sweet or as a curiosity that is feared or stared at. Disabled activist and scholar Paul Hunt adds on to this list and explains that people with disabilities are projected in the media variously as "pathetic, an atmosphere, a super cripple, his/her own enemy, a burden, non-sexual and unable to participate in daily life" (as cited in Barnes, 1991, p. 46-47). Shakespeare (1999) debates that "the use of disability as

character trait, plot device, or as atmosphere is a lazy short-cut" (p. 165). Randjelovic et al. (2012) argue that disability is often used in art as a metaphor to depict situations of tragedy or malevolence rather than to illustrate the human element of diversity.

Barnes (1991) explains that these stereotypical assumptions are characterized by our culture and refer back to earlier myths and beliefs that surrounded people with disabilities. Yet, these assumptions still persist nowadays as the media continues to communicate them in books, films, newspapers and advertisements (Cunningham, 2016). The main problem is that writers and producers, who are usually non-disabled individuals, are in control of the media industry and use disability as a hook to draw the attention of the audience. Yet the audience's view is only one-dimensional, as the characters are shown through their impairment and not valued as individuals (Norden, 1994 and Shakespeare, 1999). Until very recently, people with disability had little or no say on how they are represented by the media (Barnes, 1991).

Barnes (1991) adds how the advertising industry may discriminate against people with disability by being excluded or even ignored completely by mainstream advertisers, ultimately hiding disability from the general public. There are, however, developments that buck this trend. In a particular UK program on Channel 4 called 'Meet the SuperHumans', the marketing officer announced that the channel was willing to give one million pounds of commercial airtime to the brand that best features disability in their new advertising campaign. The winning brand would then be represented during the Paralympics opening ceremony and then eight weeks of continuous airtime. Channel 4 received about a hundred entries for the competition, eventually shortlisted to the following companies, Amazon, Barclays, Dove, H&M, Mars, Lloyd's Bank, Lynx and Purdey's (Kiefer, 2016). The aim behind this campaign was to research people's attitudes towards the advertiser and hence people's thoughts about disability. McCabe (2016) explains that only a small number of brands feature people with disability in their advertisements, and yet we're still in a situation where brands have to be offered money to represent people with disability in their own adverts. To the general public, this initiative may appear to be empowering towards the disability community, however in my opinion, the title of the programme is a stereotype in itself. The term 'SuperHumans' continues to reinforce the stereotype that people with disability are exceptional beings that despite all odds conquer their

disability. This is particularly evident in elite Paralympian athletes (Cunningham, 2016). Yet the aim of this campaign contradicts itself when it pays brands to feature people with disability. This also resonates with the charity model, which once again 'victimizes' people with disability. So why are people with disability being excluded in advertisements, when their presence can attract a wider audience? Whitley (2018) critiques the advertising industry by stating that when people with disabilities are excluded, one is also restricting potential consumers, which ultimately does not make business sense. Bogdan (2012) explains how, towards the nineteenth century, merchandise such as medicines, wheelchairs and other forms of aids or prosthesis were becoming increasingly marketed in the United States. These products were purposefully thought to target a wider range of customers and not just people with disabilities. Still, the products advertised were all medically based which once again accentuate the concept that the lives of people with disability mostly revolves around medical care (Aichner and Shaltoni, 2017).

Apart from the lack of people with disability in mainstream adverts, another issue – highlighted by Barnes (1991) – is the way people with disabilities are depicted in adverts aimed at raising funds. Some advertising agencies, particularly charity advertisers, present a misleading view of people with disability to raise money. People with disability are still being depicted as objects of pity and how society's contribution is imperative if they are to lead an independent or suitable lifestyle (Barnett and Hummond, 1999). Other charitable organizations focus on the image of bravery or heroism, thus perpetuating the impression that people with disabilities are objects of charity (Hevey, 1993, 2006).

A more recent change in charity adverts is the emphasis on the notion of 'abilities than disabilities'. While this development may appear to be a step forwards towards better representation of people with disabilities, Barnes (1991) argues otherwise. Here, the attributes of the able-bodied individuals are still accentuated, whilst conveniently overlooking the impairments, which form part of the identity and status of people with disabilities and disability culture. Shakespeare (1994) contends that society still focuses on the individual with disability rather than the disabling society that we live in. The 'able-bodied' person that society depicts does not depend on charity, and hence this incorrect focus should only be comprehended as a clever

marketing exercise by charity organisations to suppress the fact that they too form part of this disabling process (Barnes, 1991).

Haller and Lingling (2013) argue that, despite the negativity of the stereotypes that surround people with disability, they should not be avoided in the media. As absurd as this may seem, Wilde (2007) explains that avoiding stereotypes in the media may lead to less characters with disabilities and therefore less media narratives. Wilde concludes that:

> "Disabled characters should float freely between stereotypes and multiple roles, interwoven on all narrative roles, just as non-disabled people do. Our place within media narratives should be everywhere, affording us the same range of stereotypes as non-disabled people, as angels, heroes, villains, and so on (Wilde, 2010, p.40)".

Brown (2018) counteracts Wilde's (2010) argument, and claims that by continuing to expose the world to unrealistic experiences of individuals, the dominant discourse that surrounds people with disability will never be challenged. As a matter of fact, people with disability and their organizations have long been advocating for the presence of diverse and complex characters with disability. Yet there are still very few non-stigmatizing narratives to counteract the negative stereotypes (Haller and Lingling, 2013; Gilman, 2013). Longmore (2003) adds that a diverse workforce in the media would not only reflect the true general make up of our society, but it would also create more compelling and richer productions, attracting a wider audience as a result.

Stadler (2006) states that one has to consider three aspects when analyzing the relationship between disability and media: media content, media technology and media policies. The former involves how people with disability are represented and the stereotypes being used. Media technology addresses the issues of access and the cultural and social values that come about as a result of technology. Media policy includes the language, content and programming used. All three aspects deliver discourses on disability, which ultimately shape the way in which disability is perceived by society (Cunningham, 2016). It is therefore impractical not to consider the history behind the language used about disability in order to understand the utilization of language in the media. Language is very influential in framing attitudes

and socially constructed perceptions of disability. Longmore (2003) argues that language is so powerful that if discriminatory discourse is used, whether verbally transmitted or inconsiderate stereotyping, it may easily marginalize and exclude individuals on a social and personal level. As J.K. Rowling's character Albus Dumbledore rightly says in *Harry Potter and the Deadly Hollows*: "Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic. Capable of both inflicting injury, and remedying it" (Rowling, 2007, p.708).

Adverts featuring people with disability

For this essay, I will be referring to a number of adverts produced by two different brands: Mars, the manufacturer of Maltesers chocolates; and Apple, a technological company that has till now designed and developed a number of electronic devices. In both cases, three different adverts from each brand will be analyzed and the content and form will eventually be discussed from a disability studies perspective.

Mars Inc. adverts

Maltesers took an unprecedented leap with their advertising campaign 'Look on the light side' which featured actors with disability. The company released three adverts in September 2016, after winning the competition, which Channel 4 announced for the opening of the Paralympic games on the 7th September 2016 (Pepper, 2016). In the first advertisement, Samantha Renke, a bubbly young woman jokes with two friends about running over the bride's foot with her wheelchair at a wedding, and leaving with the best man's number. The second advert also involves a person with disability joking with her friends about an intimidating sexual mishap due to her involuntary spasms, which turns into a pleasure act for her boyfriend. The third advert features a Deaf person whose hearing aid gets swallowed by her boyfriend's dog. All three adverts proved to be the most successful in depicting awkward moments with a sense of humour (hence the pun in 'Look at the light side'). The brand in turn was awarded with one million pounds of airtime for coming up with a creative way of featuring people with disability. Despite being praised for attempting to normalize disability, there have been many complains even from people with disability (Lauder,

2018). The adverts have garnered complains because they appear to be focusing more on the actor with disability rather than the other characteristics which the actor may possess. Emily Davidson (2018), a 23-year-old fashion blogger who is visually impaired, argues that she wishes to see more actors with disability in adverts. Nonetheless, just by focusing the advert on the impairment or the person with disability, we would not be normalizing this phenomenon. Davidson (2018) adds that although her disability is part of her own identity, it is not the only thing about her, and so these other aspects should be showcased in adverts too. In all three Maltesers adverts, the person with disability is the main focus and easily pinpointed from the start. Pepper (2016), another blogger with disability, agrees with Davidson (2018) stating that one can spot the wheelchair or the hearing aid immediately. However, the author also claims that two of the adverts specifically target one of the misconceptions about sexuality and people with disability. Despite Launder's (2018) statement stating that with adverts society's perception about people with disability might change, Renke (2016) still feels that disability is still surrounded with stigma. Renke (2016, para. 4) received many comments following her participation in the first advert described, most of which were all hate speech targeting her disability, such as "That midget freak on the advert is putting me off ever eating chocolate!" Launder (2018, para. 19) concludes, that although this is a start, most adverts are still "very singular and one-dimensional" and should also represent other aspects of our society such as gender and ethnicity amongst others. This is especially valid since all three adverts feature women with disabilities.

The UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and Committees of Advertising Practice, received more than a hundred and fifty-one complains for the three Maltesers adverts, claiming that one of the adverts is highly sexual and offensive to people with disability (Oakes, 2017; ASA, 2017). We are not aware about the percentage of complaints coming from people with and without disability, however the ASA did not uphold these complaints, stating that the women's conversation was playful and carefree. With reference to the sexual act in the second advert, the ASA commented that this should not cause any serious offence to the general public and the main aim was to champion diversity and not ridicule it. The ASA also concluded that in view of the sexual content in the second advert, this particular advert was restricted to viewing after nine in the evening (ASA, 2017). On the other hand, the

vice president of Mars claimed that the Maltesers adverts were only aimed at breaking barriers and claimed that the company is committed to continue working on promoting diversity in their marketing agenda. Unsurprisingly, these adverts were followed by a huge success in the business, with an 8.1% of sales growth whilst the campaign was airing (Oakes, 2017).

Pepper (2016) argues that ultimately this is about selling chocolate. The blogger claims that although she applauds the actors with disability, who exist after all, she is concerned that the advertising industry is part of the consumerist agenda which, by employing a few individuals with disability, will certainly not challenge the negative attitudes or remove the barriers. In this regard, one may notice how, in the second advert, the curiousness of the accompanying friends continues to highlight the fact that the general public is always curious about how people with disability engage in sexual acts. In the hearing aid advert, Pepper (2016) mentions how the advert tends to trivialise the need of the hearing aid to that of the chocolate. Whilst I do not quite see how the company can trivialise the hearing aid compared to the Maltesers, at least Mars did keep their promise up till now in committing to diversity. In January 2017, the company unveiled its new billboard (featured on bus-stop shelters) written in braille, with the tactile dots made of Maltesers-like models (Kiefer, 2017). Moreover there are two more adverts, which Maltesers launched in April 2018. These adverts target mainly gender and sexual identity, but feature no people with disabilities. So, whilst I do agree with Pepper's (2016) view that the small representation of people with disability will not change the world's view, I also feel that this small step is still significant. Let other people be curious, why not? Curiosity may be essential in subverting the dominant perceptions of normalcy (Ray, 2013). Ultimately, we still have to keep in mind that these adverts are never user-led and actors with disability have no control or ownership over them. This means that what is viewed may still not be totally correct (Pepper, 2016).

Apple Inc. adverts

Apple is known for creating breakthrough devices, which have continued to define their markets years later (Aquino, 2016). Yet over the past few years, Apple has been trying to create a diverse array of tools for people with disabilities to enjoy the use of their

electronic device with ease. It is the current chief executive officer's mantra to create devices that enhance people's lives. Timothy Cook, who took on the company following Steve Jobs's passing, has claimed repeatedly that the company sees accessibility as a basic human right, which is why their products are intended for everyone (Aquino, 2016).

Apple launched its first advert featuring a person with disability in October 2016, to unveil the first line of the new MacBook Pro notebooks (Larson, 2016). Sady Paulson, a 29-year-old woman with cerebral palsy, is a passionate filmmaker and was offered the opportunity to feature in Apple's advert using her MacBook Pro (Diaz, 2016). The advert opens with the scene of Sady getting ready in the morning. She looks in the mirror as someone brushes her hair and dresses her. Once ready, Sady moves onto her computer, a Mac, and from this time onwards she is featured on her own. Through the automated voice over, Sady opens the advert by narrating, "People think that having a disability is a barrier. But that's not the way I see it". Shifting her head from side to side, Sady is shown pushing two large circular buttons attached to her head support to execute the desired commands on her device. The advert goes on to feature other shots of people with different disabilities making use of other Apple products. We see a blind man making use of image recognition on his iPhone to take a photo of his son, and a woman doing a workout in her wheelchair whilst using her Apple Watch as a tracker. But the scene reverses back to Sady at her computer who has been editing the shots this whole time. Sady is a professional digital cinematographer by profession, yet she claims that "people are a little bit unsure of my disability, and then they understand what I can do" (Larson, 2016, para.9). What we are not informed from the advert, however, is that Sady also edited the same advert herself (Paulson, 2018 and Larson, 2016). This is a very promising move from the Apple business.

The Global Accessibility Awareness Day (GAAD) aims at promoting an accessible and inclusive design for everyone to use, irrelevant of the disability (GAAD, 2018). It was during the 2017 GAAD, that Apple launched its campaign titled "Designed for everyone" and further released a number of adverts featuring people with disability making use of their products. The video profiles were of people from different walks of life, such as a PR manager and drummer of a band, a software engineer, a soccer player, a radio producer and a band director, all experiencing different disabilities ranging from

hearing, visual, speech and mobility impairments (Beer, 2017). One particular clip features Andrea Dalzell, a nursing student with spina bifida. On a side note, Andrea had formerly also contested for Ms Wheelchair America, a contest based on advocacy and achievement which aims to choose a spokesperson and representative for people with disabilities in America (MWA, 2018). Andrea's advert, titled 'Designed for Andrea' opens with Andrea stating, "I have a huge responsibility to be out in the wild". The image of Andrea then appears pushing her wheelchair with the words 'Roll With The Punches' appearing on screen. She is wearing sportswear and initiating her tracker on her Apple Watch preparing for her workout. She is then shown to meet her instructor who provides her with high intensity activities and continuously motivates her with verbal prompts to push harder. Andrea leaves the gym after she finishes her workout and is seen wheeling her wheelchair aggressively as she overtakes a non-disabled runner on her way home. During this part, Andrea states:

> There's some other little girl who's out there, who doesn't see a teacher, who doesn't see her doctors, like her. How is she supposed to feel accepted if she doesn't see someone like her? I have to do my part here.

Andrea metaphorically refers to the outside world as the 'wild'. She denotes that there is a small number of people with disability that participate in the social environment, which ultimately does not encourage other people with disabilities to go 'out in the wild'. Andrea appears fierce, speaks with a strong voice and wheels her wheelchair forcefully. The music and the words integrated in the advert also appear purposefully chosen to instigate the right emotional response from the viewer. This message portrayed by this advert appears to instigate the heroic stereotype that surrounds athletes or role models with disabilities (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). This is quite fitting for an electronic device, which is typically used in sport activities. In this case, we do not know the level of control Andrea had on the script or the running of the advert. However, Andrea did claim that she wanted to be viewed as strong and fierce and admits that the whole process of filming was not staged and "what you see is literally my life" (United Spinal Association, 2017, para. 10). So, this advert may instead represent an alternative disability discourse by turning people with disability into role models whilst deconstructing the negative image of pity or '*miskin*' (Cauchi, 2017).

Later that same year, Apple released another advert for the Apple Watch titled 'Dear Apple', this time featuring many people with and without any disability. The advert portrays actual Apple Watch owners from around the globe reading a letter they wrote to the company and thanking Apple or company owner Tim Cook for the product that has enhanced, and in some cases saved, their life (Diaz, 2017). The ad features a father of a diabetic daughter, a Russian swimmer with an amputation, a blind Asian marathon runner, a 99 year-old woman who is a traveller, a male ballet dancer, a rugby player with multisystem failure, a typical office worker, and a woman who underwent a knee surgery amongst others. Apple confirmed that these people were real and that these were their real experiences. While it appears positive that this advert features people with disability along with non-disabled individuals, once again we can appreciate how the advert plays with the mind with the moving soundtrack and heart-rending narratives that tend to make us all emotional. This naturally plays a big role in how we look at the product being advertised (Ehrenkranz, 2017). We are not aware of what instigated Apple to take a different stance in all three adverts. However, as Longmore (2003) states, diversity ultimately attracts a wider audience.

Unfortunately there appeared to be no comments from people with disability that discussed Apple's adverts and, for some reason, comments in Apple's YouTube channel were disabled for all three adverts. Nonetheless, I cannot avoid mentioning how the hierarchy of disabilities also exists within the industry of advertisements. Verdonschot et al. (2009) mention that there is a notable degree of attitudinal discrimination when comparing between people with intellectual disability and other disabilities. Apple and Maltesers adverts only featured a variety of people with physical, visual or hearing impairment in their adverts, but there was no reference to people with intellectual disability. Apple also portrays this exclusion in their applications and new features; such as voice-over which utters what one cannot see, BeMyEyes an application that connects with a sighted volunteer who can assist the person with what he/she cannot see, Live Listen which fine tunes with hearing aids for better hearing and SwitchControl which allows one to connect switches, joystick or devices to better control the screen. Moreover Apple's operating system supports Braille in at least 25 different languages and has also included a built-in Braille keyboard (Aquino, 2016) Apple emphasised on the importance of building an inclusive world, which is filled with barrier-free opportunities yet only focused on physical,

visual or hearing impairments. I am not trying to undermine the benefits that people with disabilities have achieved through these innovative inventions, but these devices are known to be some of the most expensive in the market and this questions how truly accessible Apple is. The persons featured in Apple's adverts all appeared successful in their employment or had a prominent job. But does this apply to all disabled people, especially people with intellectual disability? Verdonschot et al., (2009) state that people with intellectual disability are still at the lowest level of the hierarchy especially when it comes to employment, making it highly unlikely for people with intellectual disability to afford Apple's electronic devices. Thus, if there is a low demand from this group, there might be very little complaints, consequently no motivation for the company to update or recreate a more suitable technological device and possibly no models to advertise the product.

Culture and the media

Culture is not easily defined, yet in 1932, Arnold defined culture in idealist terminologies as being something that we should all strive for. Originating from the farming industry, agriculture meant to tend to animals or crops. However, Arnold's culture metaphorically signified to culture the mind, with the aim of achieving social improvement (Arnold, 1932). Hence for Arnold, culture is a study of perfection, a study that is stirred by moral and social passion towards goodness and thus to make things better then they are. Being a pursuit towards total perfection, culture is a means of improving ourselves on matters that concern us. Nevertheless, Arnold argued that culture was not to differentiate the elite from the masses, but to share humanity and thus assume the "sheer desire to see things as they are" (Arnold, 1910, p. 6). This other view of culture represents the love, benevolence and the desire to decrease human misery in order to leave the world better than how we found it. This has to be a collective movement. Arnold criticized the system, which he believed was running on marketable success, rather than on our own values. This idea of developing a perfection of the mind and spirit therefore collides with the mechanical and superficial civilization that surrounds us. The interaction with the human family has instead been replaced by the individualistic idea of every person to themselves (Francis, 1996).

Riddell and Watson (2003) explain that disability studies was initially more focused on economic oppression than on cultural practices. However, disability is culturally constructed through the relationship that exists between the mode of production and the core values of society. Individualism, which is encouraged by capitalism, coupled with the medicalization and rehabilitation processes triggered an overwhelming change in how people with disabilities became to be perceived and treated by society. Society in turn, has become increasingly obsessed with the 'healthy' body, such that the politically accepted body is now considered to be lean, strong and physically fit, all the terms that people with disability are not associated with. On the other hand, it is also through the development of the stereotypical characterisations of people with disability that have affected the emergence of Disability Arts and Culture movement, which together questioned the rights of people with disability and raised their political power of their images and narratives (Barnes & Mercer 2010).

Conclusion

In today's culture, the 'sweetness' that Arnold calls for can be acknowledged in the adverts discussed above as the initiative of involving people with disability in the media. Yet, the 'light' resonates with the idea that people with disability are still represented in accordance to Hunt's stereotypes or else eliminated altogether. Additionally, people with disability are barely given the opportunity to control the way their representation is portrayed in the media. It is arguable whether this lack of control applies only to people with disabilities after all (Ellis and Goggin, 2015). So in reality, disability issues do not just apply to people with disabilities, their caregivers or their families, but to everyone (Barnes, 2010). Reflection about disability studies is therefore a reflection about humanity in general and consequently if disability is part of humanity, it can affect anybody. Thus, by accepting this phenomenon, any culture that affects people with disability, affects the community in general. As Siebers (2010, p.3) claims, the acceptance of models with disability in the media "enriches and complicates notions of the aesthetic, while the rejection of disability limits definition of artistic ideas and objects".

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