

Not an Inspiration Just for Existing: How Advertising Uses Physical Disabilities as Inspiration:  
A Categorization and Model

Summer Shelton

University of Florida

## DISABILITIES AS INSPIRATION IN ADVERTISING

## Abstract

Inspiration porn, supercrip, the pity-heroism trap, the bionic man or woman: these terms have all been used in the recent discussion of the usage of physical disabilities as inspiration in advertising to non-disabled consumers. While being viewed as inspirational may not appear to be a negative portrayal, these bionic and heroic representations have been identified as inaccurate and problematic by members of the disabled community, contributing to the stigmatization and erroneous understandings of physical disabilities. This study presents a categorization of the various ways disabilities are discussed in research and are used as inspiration in advertising. Viewed through the lens of cultivation theory, a theoretical model is proposed, revealing how advertising's use of bionic and heroic imagery of disabilities elicits feelings of inspiration on the part of the non-disabled consumer as well as expectations for individuals with disabilities to be inspiring in reality. Recommendations for future research analyzing advertising's use of disabilities as inspiration are also provided.

*Keywords:* disabilities studies, advertising, inspiration, representation

*Models of disabilities are necessary to ensure the efficient and effective care and service of persons with disabilities and provide insight into the prejudices, perceptions and attitudes surrounding disabilities (Enwereji, 2015).*

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### Not an Inspiration Just for Existing: How Advertising Uses Physical Disabilities as Inspiration: A Categorization and Model

Inspiration porn, supercrip, the pity and heroism trap, the bionic man or woman: these terms have all been used in recent discussions of the narratives surrounding disability representation research. While disabilities research of the past typically focused on analyzing representations of the physically disabled through either the social model of disability— viewing disabilities as a result or creation of societal organization (Oliver, 2013)— or the medical model of disabilities— viewing disabilities as an intrinsic, physical and medical condition of an individual (International Classification of Impairments, 1980)— these aforementioned media representations of persons with disabilities have recently surfaced as a representation appearing frequently in popular media. Receiving much scrutiny for their consistent use of persons with disabilities as a form of inspiration to non-disabled consumers, these representations certainly warrant attention and discussion. The purpose of this paper is to understand and categorize the ways advertising uses physical disabilities as a form of inspiration while additionally determining how advertising's portrayal of physical disabilities through the use of bionic and heroic imagery fosters these feelings of inspiration on the part of the non-disabled consumer.

While this bionic or superhuman representation might not appear to be a negative portrayal, many believing it is certainly positive that disabilities are represented in popular media at all, a number of consumers with disabilities have spoken out against these representations, criticizing them for their inaccurate, almost patronizing and tokenistic representation (Young, 2014). The aforementioned social and medical models of disabilities have been used to define impairment and have additionally been used to aid in creating strategies to understand and meet the needs of those with disabilities (Oliver, 2013; International Classification of Impairments, 1980). While the social model of disability does view disabilities as a social creation, this model

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does not account for how the representations of disabilities in the media, advertising specifically in this study, contribute to media consumers' unrealistic perceptions and expectations of people with physical disabilities, particularly in the elicitation of feelings such as inspiration.

Ultimately, this study proposes that these bionic and heroic representations of disabilities in the media cultivate feelings of inspiration as well as expectations in non-disabled consumers' minds for disabled persons to always be shown in this inspiring way or to be inspiring in reality. As has been suggested in studies of the representation of members of the LGBTQ community (McRuer, 1997), it is proposed that this focus on a single narrative, such as disabled persons being portrayed and presented as inspirational, forces this singular narrative on all persons with disabilities, limiting accurate understandings of multiple or changing identities of persons with disabilities in reality. Because of the lack of representation of disabilities in advertising, this singular inspirational narrative views physical disabilities wholly, not addressing or analyzing one type of physical disability but rather viewing physical disabilities as any physical health deterrent to functional capacity (Nosek, et al., 2004).

While the majority of academic research includes collected data, there exists a portion of academic research that provides contributions to the community through models or typologies without data, aiding in gaining understanding and furthering research in a given field (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Puntoni, Schroeder & Ritson, 2010; Riddle, 2014). This study falls within this percentage by proposing a categorization and theoretical model without collected data which will further the study of disability representations in the media by helping to understand the way the bionic and heroic representations of individuals with disabilities actually further aid in stigmatizing disabilities rather than accurately representing those with disabilities by creating non-disabled consumer expectations of those with disabilities to be inspirational. By constantly

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showing images of those with disabilities overcoming, enduring, working harder or being more capable despite their disability, advertisers are creating unrealistic expectations of consumers for those with disabilities to be seen as more capable and viewing disabilities as inspirational rather than presenting the accurate portrayals those with disabilities crave.

By uncovering how inspirational media representations of physically disabled persons affects consumer perceptions of disabilities, media industries will be made aware that they are not actually normalizing disabilities in the media but may actually be stigmatizing them more. By speaking out against what might be perceived as a positive portrayal that is actually an inaccurate one that those with disabilities abhor, this study will provide another voice to the members of the disabled community to ensure that this group of consumers is more accurately portrayed in the media. Furthermore, as the largest American minority group (Langtree, 2016), the disabled community is surely a group whose representation in popular media must be studied to ensure organizations are not isolating or offending a large portion of their audience.

It is proposed that this inspirational imagery should be used sparingly, if at all, in advertising as these constant depictions of disabled high achievers possess the capacity to further disable the disabled community. To combat these non-disabled consumer feelings and expectations of inspiration that arise, it is proposed that advertisements should instead depict or focus on the capabilities and talents of people with disabilities, showing disabled people having qualities which are admired by all, thus ideally creating an emotional connection to those with disabilities rather than an unrealistic expectation of them. This more accurate portrayal could stem from respecting the views of people with disabilities and consulting with them to provide more authentic and credible portrayals.

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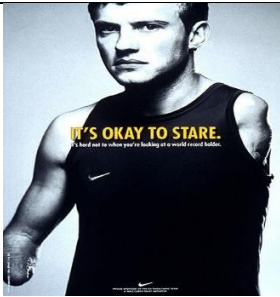
For this paper, the inspirational representation problem of persons with disabilities in advertising is analyzed through the lens of cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). While cultivation theory was originally created to analyze the effects of long-term television viewership on consumer's perceptions of reality, particularly surrounding violence (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), more recent testing of cultivation theory explores media's impacts on consumer perceptions of a myriad of various social and ethnic groups and issues. Some of the more recent literature surrounding cultivation theory research focuses on how exposure to various media impact consumer perceptions, attitudes or intentions toward materialistic values (Gurel-Atay, Kahle & Ring, 2011), alcohol consumption (Russell, Russell & Grube, 2009), smoking intentions (Yang, et al., 2015) and celebrity values (Gurel-Atay & Kahle, 2014). Perhaps more pertinent to the focus of this paper, cultivation theory research has additionally focused on how media representations of various ethnic and minority groups including the LGBTQ community (Hefner, et al., 2015), African Americans (Bailey, 2006), and women (Zhang, Dixon & Conrad, 2010) impact out-group consumer perceptions of members of these groups.

While some research has analyzed the portrayals of disabilities in the advertisements, particularly in regards to disabled persons being used as inspiration porn (Grue, 2016), this research has generally attempted to define these forms of inspiration separately, never wholly organizing the ways persons with disabilities are used as inspiration in the media or advertising specifically. This research seeks to identify and define the various portrayals of persons with disabilities in advertising in which disabilities are used in an inspirational way. From this research, disability scholars will be able to more accurately understand and identify the media portrayals of persons with disabilities and determine why disabilities are used in this

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inspirational way, additionally working to learn of more accurate ways to portray disabilities in the media.

To aid in discussing the ways physical disabilities are used as inspiration in advertising, a categorization of these uses was developed. For this discussion, the term advertising is quite broad, encompassing digital, mobile, print, broadcast, guerilla, outdoor as well as public service announcements or advertisements. The four ways in which physical disabilities have been used as inspiration as well as the relevant literature surrounding these representations are discussed below. These portrayals were determined and selected based on the scrutiny received from the disabled community, as found in various blogs (Amaral, 2016; Rakowitz, 2016) or discussed in published research, explored below. Generally, in the disabilities and disabilities research community, all of the subsequent portrayals are viewed in a negative light. This categorization of the ways in which physical disabilities are used as inspiration in advertising, to the knowledge of the researcher, does not yet exist in current literature and will aid in understanding the subsequent model provided which aims to explain how the imagery used in these advertisements create consumer feelings and expectations of inspiration.

Advertising's Portrayal of Disability	Definition	Example
<p><b>Inspiration Porn</b></p>	<p>Portrays disability as a disadvantage that is able to be overcome; used as a stimulant for non-disabled consumers or observers; objectification of disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people</p>	 <p>Media portraying persons with disabilities in a physically or emotionally inspiring way; overcoming obstacles or going the distance despite their disability.</p>

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<p><b>Supercrip</b></p>	<p>Portrays disability as debilitating in one area but made up for by success and ability in other areas.</p>	 <p>Media portraying persons with disabilities as incapable in areas involving their disability but extremely capable in another area.</p>
<p><b>Bionic/Superhuman</b></p>	<p>Portrays disability as something to be overcome with the addition of technology or prosthesis.</p>	 <p>Media portraying persons with disabilities as more capable or superhuman because of technology or prosthesis.</p>
<p><b>Pity-Heroism Trap or Tragedy-Charity</b></p>	<p>Portrays disability as a pitiable problem or misfortune that non-disabled persons may help solve and those with disabilities as a victim of circumstance that must be helped.</p>	 <p>Media portraying persons with disabilities in a tragic way. Consumers are able to help or “save” the disabled by their own actions.</p>

Figure 1. Categorization of Physical Disabilities used as Inspiration in Advertising

### Physical Disabilities as Inspiration in Advertising

#### Inaccurate portrayals of disabilities in advertising

The inaccurate and undesirable portrayals of disabilities in advertising have been discussed at length by various researchers, being found to depict persons with disabilities as



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charitable or found to evoke negative emotions, like pity or guilt on the part of the viewer (Parashar & Devanathan, 2006). As was mentioned briefly above and will be discussed in greater depth below, these inaccurate portrayals of disabilities in advertising have been criticized for their portrayal of persons with disabilities, on the flip side of these pitiable or charitable portrayals, for their stigmatization of disabilities and persons with disabilities as a superhuman or supercrip (Englandkennedy, 2008). This supercrip portrayal depicts persons with disabilities as pitiable until they are able to overcome some type of obstacle to then achieve some feat that would not be anticipated or expected of a person with a disability (Englandkennedy, 2008).

Researchers have suggested methods to improve the inaccurate portrayals of disabilities in advertising including integration of persons with disabilities in advertisements interacting with persons without disabilities and have additionally suggested that persons with disabilities not be portrayed as objects of pity or as supercrips, one of the categorizations of portrayals provided above (Parashar & Devanathan, 2006). While the inaccurate portrayals of disabilities in advertising have been addressed and studied at length, of the research done and suggestions provided on more accurate portrayals of disabilities in advertising, a small amount of literature exists exploring specifically these inspirational portrayals of disabilities that have been categorized above.

### **Inspiration and Inspirational Portrayals of Disabilities in Advertising**

As a somewhat recent subject of scientific research for a variety of academic fields, the literature on inspiration appears to be somewhat lacking in media studies particularly. Researchers attribute the lack of movement in inspirational studies to a lack of consistency in definition, measurement, and constructs of inspiration (Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick & Maruskin, 2014). The definition of inspiration used in this study is drawn from research on the

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psychology of inspiration which devised its definition of inspiration from a compilation of previous research on the elicitors of inspiration. Inspiration in this research is characterized and defined by its epistemic transcendence, or the gaining of awareness of better possibilities—categorized as partial identification and cognitive empathy in the proposed model— it's evocation, the responsibility for inspiration does not come from oneself – categorized as extension in the proposed model—and it's approach motivation, feeling compelled to act upon the feelings of inspiration and materialize them— categorized as approach motivation in the proposed model (Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick & Maruskin, 2014). This definition aids in determining and communicating how consumers may become inspired by the portrayals of disabilities in advertising, which will be discussed in-depth in the model presented below.

As aforementioned, very little academic research exists in analyzing inspiration in advertising and even fewer studies exist examining the ways in which disabilities are used as inspiration in advertising. The literature that does exist examining the usage of disabilities as inspiration calls for a revamping of the way inspiration is defined in disabilities studies, despite the outcries of members of the disabled community to not be portrayed in this inspiring way at all (Chrisman, 2011). Others studying disabilities as inspirational additionally found that consumers viewing those with disabilities, particularly in sport, found it appropriate to describe and view disabled participants as inspirational, calling for a greater use of inspiration in marketing to generate support for a given event, despite findings that players with disabilities desired not to be viewed in this way (Cottingham, 2015). This study challenges these notions, proposing that this inspirational imagery be used sparingly, if at all, in order to reach consumers with disabilities as well as to discontinue this clearly undesired and stigmatizing portrayal of disabilities.

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### **Categorization of Disability Portrayals in Advertising**

#### **Inspiration Porn**

Researchers have defined inspiration porn as the representation of a disability as a disadvantage that is able to be overcome, used as a stimulant for consumers or observers (Grue, 2016). First presented by disability-rights activist Stella Young (2014), inspiration porn is further defined as the objectification of disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people.

Additionally, recent literature analyzing the use of disabled persons as inspiration porn views this issue through the lens of its construction of disability as empowering and its linkage to the medical model of disabilities (Grue, 2016). While media representations of disabilities have certainly been viewed through this medical model of disability lens, since these representations appear in popular media, it appears imperative that this problem also be viewed through the cultural lens of the social model of disabilities to fully understand the cultural aspects of these representations. Furthermore, members of the disabilities community call for an examination of this usage of themselves and others with disabilities as inspiration porn in the media because, as the title of this paper eludes, they do not believe persons with disabilities should be considered inspirational simply for existing (Hitselberger, 2015)

While the aforementioned literature on inspiration porn sought to define and provide evidence of the prevalence of inspiration porn in the media, other researchers have called for a reworking of the term inspiration as it relates to disabilities (Chrisman, 2011). While Chrisman (2011) believed inspirational media narratives may evoke consumer emotions of pity and fear, rather than the desired inspirational feelings, she also proposed that certain disabilities, particularly emotional and psychiatric disabilities, might benefit from these inspirational narratives. This provides evidence and backing to the proposed cautious or sparing usage of this inspirational framing of disabilities in the media.

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### **Supercrip**

Another common reference when researching disabilities usage as inspiration in advertising is that of a person with disabilities as a supercrip. The supercrip image, described briefly above, often used inspirationally, has been defined as portraying a courageous or heroic super-achiever who is pitied rather than respected until proving they are capable of overcoming some sort of, typically physical, but also mental, obstacle that would not be expected possible of a person with a disability (Shapiro, 1993). Portraying persons with physical disabilities in this way and using this imagery as inspirational to non-disabled consumers, as the other categorizations discussed here also do, is problematic as this imagery may create unrealistic non-disabled consumer expectations for those with disabilities to be able to achieve heroic or courageous feats in real life.

Other research involving the term supercrip in the discussion of disabilities included studying persons with disabilities as inspirational in regards to the Paralympics, citing the advertisements and marketing surrounding these events as often highly focused on the disabilities of the competitors rather than their actual abilities (Butler & Bissell, 2015). These types of highly publicized events surrounding disabilities may be a large source of the inaccurate and patronizingly inspirational media messages regarding disabilities where images such as the supercrip are able to thrive.

### **Bionic or Superhuman**

Research on bionic representations of persons with disabilities have focused on more positive information such as how technologies aid in mobilizing persons with disabilities by the addition of some form of mobility technology or prosthesis (Craelius, 2002). However, research analyzing these bionic representations in the media posited that these bionic representations are in fact problematic for persons with disabilities (Panesar & Wolbring, 2014). Consistently being

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portrayed in a positive way, these often inaccurate portrayals of bionic technologies and capabilities, as well as the disabled consumers using them, ultimately leads to disabled consumer disappointment when the technologies are not as user-friendly or as easily accessible as advertised (Panesar & Wolbring, 2014). These may additionally aid in consumers without disabilities building unrealistic expectations of the technologies as well as the persons with disabilities using the technologies (Panesar & Wolbring, 2014).

Other researchers analyzing the bionic representations of disabilities in the media discussed how bodies of individuals with disabilities are frequently compared to those of individuals without disabilities, who are assumed to function normally (Quinlan & Bates, 2009). This comparison disempowers persons with disabilities because their bodies realistically cannot perform as those bodies identified as functioning normally do. This research then suggests that technology, prostheses or these bionic formed bodies and representations are created as an answer to disability, despite their inaccuracies (Quinlan & Bates, 2009).

### **Pity-Heroism Trap | Tragedy-Charity**

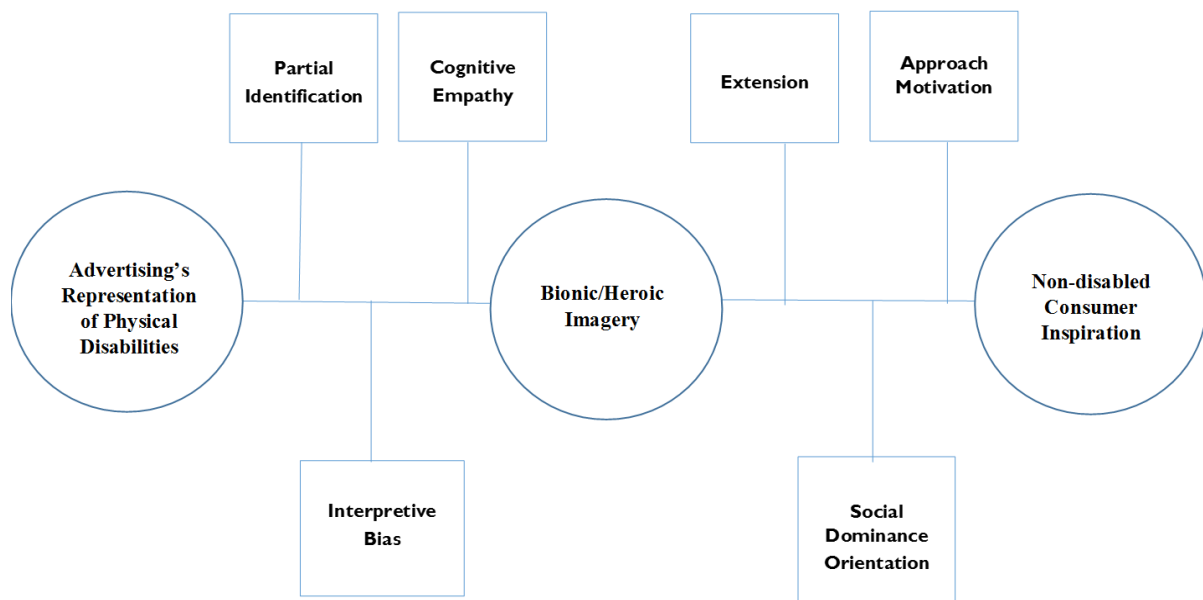
The pity-heroism trap and the tragedy-charity view of disabilities are discussed together in this study as they were found to be quite closely related in discussions of these inspirational portrayals of disabilities, particularly in discussions amongst the disabilities community. Several researchers assert that the media typically depict people with disabilities according to these common stereotypes such as either pitiable or as a hero (Penas, 2007; Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992). Others view the pity heroism trap as portraying persons with physical disabilities as objects of pity and persons without disabilities as the hero who is able to save them from their plight by donating time or money to a given cause (Millett-Gallant & Howie, 2016). For this discussion, the pity-heroism trap is defined as a biased representation of a disabled person as a

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tragedy needing protection, therefore viewing persons without disabilities as the heroes able to save them (Millett-Gallant & Howie, 2016).

In a similar vein, the tragedy-charity representation of disabilities, also used to explain disability portrayal and perception issues, views persons with disabilities as victims of circumstance who are to be pitied (Enwereji, 2015). Through the attachment of hardships, devastation, despair or pitiable circumstances, popular media further stigmatize disabilities, rather than working to contextualize them (Holton, 2013). The inspirational model of disabilities presented below, is proposed to situate under the social model of disabilities, particularly beneath the cultural aspect of the social model, and seeks to better understand the way the bionic and heroic imagery categorized above fosters or elicits non-disabled consumer inspiration.

### The Inspirational Model of Disabilities



*Figure 2. Model for how advertising's bionic and heroic imagery elicits inspiration in non-disabled consumers*

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### **Advertising's Representation of Physical Disabilities**

Examined briefly above in the discussion of the inaccurate portrayals of disabilities in advertising, advertisements portrayals of disabilities have been studied by various researchers but have typically focused on media channel specific advertising such as television advertisements (Farnall & Lyons, 2012) or magazine advertisements (Parashar & Devanathan, 2006). For discussion in this research and model, advertisements are all encompassing, not focusing on a specific channel of message, brand or category of products. While athletic apparel and equipment advertisements were considered as a focus of this research and model, several examples and discussions of other brands and product categories were found while researching that diverted sole focus away from this product category. Additionally, as disabilities are still not adequately represented in advertising (Lyons & Farnall, 2010), opening the research up to a variety of brand categories and advertisements provided a greater sample of advertisements for analysis in the creation of the categorization and model.

Advertisements portraying disabilities provide consumers with information on disabilities and may aid in representing how persons with disabilities fit into society (Lyons & Farnall, 2010). Therefore, if consistently portrayed in this undesired, inspirational way, members of society may begin to view disabilities and persons with disabilities from this inspirational perspective. As the independent variable in this model, advertising's portrayals of disabilities are ultimately what are proposed as creating these non-disabled consumer feelings of inspiration, particularly elicited by the bionic or heroic imagery used in advertising disabilities.

Each of the moderators introduced in the model above and discussed below are either positives or negatives proposed as contributing to the elicitation of inspiration among non-disabled consumers. Furthermore, in the model proposed, the moderators listed in the top section

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of the model are proposed as the elicitors of inspiration while those provided in the bottom section of the model, would hinder non-disabled consumer feelings of inspiration. This model was developed from the perspective of the non-disabled consumer, attempting to understand and explain how the use of this bionic and heroic imagery of disabilities creates non-disabled consumer feelings of inspiration as well as expectations for disabilities to always be shown in this inspirational way.

### **Partial Identification**

Partial identification, a concept introduced by Sigmund Freud, posits that a person is able to temporarily identify with another person based on the perception of a common quality (Kaplan, 1990). This common quality is typically derived from a physically perceptible property (Kaplan, 1990). As a visual indicator is typically how the perception of even the ability to partially identify with another is derived (Kaplan, 1990), this research posits that by having a physical disability, non-disabled consumers may already be less likely to attempt to partially identify with a disabled model in an advertisement because of the visually different or lacking indicators of similarity. With the addition of a bionic or heroic element, the advertisement may further differentiate the model with a disability from the non-disabled consumer. To increase the likelihood that a non-disabled consumer will attempt to partially identify with the disabled model featured in the advertisement, creators of the advertisement might aim to portray persons with disabilities interacting with non-disabled persons, potentially creating the visual indicator needed to allow the non-disabled consumer to partially identify with the disabled model.

Various researchers in media studies have analyzed identification with characters in varying facets of media and popular culture, finding that consumer's identification with a character in a given medium impacted consumer attitudes and beliefs regarding some facet of the



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character's identity (Appiah, 2001). These facets, including visual identifiers such as racial or ethnic identification (Appiah, 2001) or body weight and image (David, et al., 2002), add to the evidence supporting the strength of identification on non-disabled consumer beliefs regarding physical disabilities and attitudes and feelings of inspiration elicited from an advertisement.

**Proposition 1a:** *Non-disabled consumers are less likely to partially identify with a disabled model, shown alone, in an advertisement.*

To test this proposition of partial identification, an advertisement featuring one or more disabled models can be shown to non-disabled consumers reporting on a 5 point Likert-scale the non-disabled consumers perceived similarity to the model(s), identification with the model(s), belief advertisement is intended for them, and overall attitude toward the advertisement.

**Proposition 1b:** *Non-disabled consumers are more likely to partially identify with a disabled model when shown with non-disabled individuals.*

In a similar vein, to test this proposition of partial identification, an advertisement featuring one or more disabled models interacting in some capacity with non-disabled models can be shown to non-disabled consumers reporting on a 5 point Likert-scale the non-disabled consumers' perceived similarity to the model(s), identification with the model(s), belief advertisement is intended for them, and overall attitude toward the advertisement.

### **Cognitive Empathy**

In a similar vein to partial identification but taken a step further than simply finding a visual trait or characteristic to identify with another through, cognitive empathy is the process of identifying with how another person feels and attempting to understand what they may be feeling or thinking, also often referred to as perspective taking (Ekman & Friesen, 1976). A construct of state empathy, a perception of another's state activating a consumer's vicarious experience of another's state, ultimately preceding persuasive outcomes (Shen, 2010), cognitive empathy

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allows the consumer to place themselves psychologically in the model's circumstances, sharing the appraisals and situational themes of the environment (Lazarus, 1991). By portraying disabilities as this bionic or heroic ability rather than a physical disability, it is proposed that advertisers are further stigmatizing disabilities by pushing non-disabled consumers away from the potential to cognitively empathize with the model with a disability.

While the bionic or heroic imagery portrayed in the advertisement may not be a generalizable or easily relatable environmental situation to the non-disabled consumer, it may be a desired environmental or situational state, allowing the non-disabled consumer to cognitively empathize with the model with a disability, ultimately leading to non-disabled consumer feelings of inspiration. Similar studies of empathy analyzed empathy's ability to elicit feelings such as guilt and found that messages such as advertisements and imagery focusing on the health of others, had a substantial and direct effect on the elicitation of feelings such as guilt (Lindsey, Yun & Hill, 2007). A similar elicitation of inspiration by way of this bionic and heroic imagery is proposed in this research as well.

**Proposition 2:** *Consumers reporting higher levels of cognitive empathy toward the disabled model in the advertisement will report higher levels of inspiration elicited from the advertisement.*

To test the relationship between cognitive empathy and the likelihood of non-disabled consumers to be inspired, the Empathy Quotient (EQ) scale, specifically created to measure empathy in adults (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004), will be used to determine respondent's ability to instinctively understand and envision the disabled model's emotions (Muncer & Ling, 2006). Subsequently, a Likert scale would be used to test how inspirational non-disabled consumers find a given advertisement, analyzing the elements reported as eliciting feelings of inspiration.

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### **Interpretative Bias**

Interpretive bias, or the tendency to interpret ambiguous information as negative or less positively, has been studied in the elicitation of such emotions as stress, depression and anxiety (Salemink, van de Hout & Kindt, 2007), as well as disgust (Whitton, Grisham, Henry & Palada, 2013). Researchers have determined that this type of negatively biased processing of ambiguous information can be induced through training, even when a positive interpretation of the information is available (Amin, Foa & Coles, 1998). While advertisements have often been critiqued for not providing consumers with all relevant information, or generally being deceptive in nature (Hsieh, Hsu & Fang, 2010), they have additionally been found to be quite persuasive in the development of attitudes and perceptions of others and reality, as is theorized in cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). These inaccurate portrayals of disabilities in advertising are proposed as providing consumers with an ambiguous image of disabilities. Advertisements typically or solely portraying disabilities in these bionic or heroic ways, by not providing an accurate view of disabilities or even acknowledging the presence of a disability but instead portraying disabilities in this superhuman way, is proposed as leading consumers away from a state of inspiration and perhaps toward one of social dominance, as is proposed and discussed more in-depth below.

**Proposition 3:** *Inspiration levels of non-disabled consumers will be minimized as more ambiguous information about the disability is provided in the advertisement.*

In order to test the correlation between interpretive bias and levels of inspiration, participants would be shown advertisements clearly addressing the disability of the model in the advertisement, subsequently measuring the non-disabled participants' levels of inspiration using the eight-item Inspiration Scale (IS) (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Latterly, participants would be

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shown more ambiguous advertisements, not clearly addressing the disability of the model in the advertisement, additionally using the Inspiration Scale to measure levels of inspiration.

### **Bionic/Heroic Imagery of Disabilities in Advertising**

The bionic and heroic imagery of disabilities in advertising is proposed as serving as the mediator of advertising's ability to elicit feelings of inspiration on the part of non-disabled consumers. These representations were discussed above in the categorization of the ways disabilities are used as inspiration in advertising and are referred to in the model and throughout this research as bionic and heroic imagery. The representations presented in the model as bionic and heroic include the inspiration porn, supercrip, bionic and superhuman, pity and heroism trap as well as the tragedy-charity representations of disabilities described and categorized above.

### **Extension**

In extension, identified as a key function in the transmission model of communication in all instances involving the elicitation of inspiration (Thrash et al., 2014), a person is inspired by qualities represented by another object, action or person, creating the potential for the person inspired to materialize the qualities viewed in the object, action or person in themselves or in another object (Thrash, et al., 2014). This potential for materialization of inspiration is proposed as leading to approach motivation on the part of the non-disabled consumer, or, the actualization of ones' new vision established through feelings of inspiration. The potential for materialization of inspiration by way of extension could appear in the form of reporting higher scores on the Inspiration Scale on the likelihood for the consumer to do something inspirational themselves. By portraying persons with disabilities in these superhuman and heroic ways, it is proposed that advertisers foster extension on the part of the non-disabled consumer. By portraying qualities and feats such as endurance, conquering, or the physically disabled in the advertisement overcoming

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obstacles, advertisers are using disabled models in these ways to elicit inspiration on the part of the non-disabled consumer.

**Proposition 4:** *Advertisements featuring disabled models are more likely to elicit the potential for extension or the materialization of inspiration than advertisements not featuring a disabled model.*

The potential for extension, or the materialization of inspiration, will be tested using the aforementioned Inspiration Scale (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Participants would be shown an advertisement not featuring a disabled model and would then be asked to rate their feelings after viewing the advertisement on questions three and four of the Inspiration Scale, “I am inspired to do something” and “I feel inspired (Thrash & Elliot, 2003).” Subsequently, participants would be shown the identical advertisement, except featuring a disabled model, and asked to rate their feelings on the aforementioned questions of the Inspiration Scale.

### **Approach Motivation**

One of the components in Thrash & Elliot’s (2003) conceptualization of characteristics defining inspiration, approach motivation is defined as the stimulation by, and physical or mental movement toward, an incentive or reward (Greenaway et al., 2015). High approach is often characterized by feelings of energy or excitement upon seeing another person in pursuit of a goal or reward and these feelings are intensified as one sees another achieve the goal (Greenaway et al., 2015). As the bionic and heroic advertisements featuring persons with disabilities often portray those with disabilities overcoming or enduring obstacles, non-disabled consumers may experience high approach motivation, leading to increased reported levels of inspiration.

**Proposition 5:** *Upon viewing of an advertisement where a disabled model overcomes an obstacle, non-disabled consumers of the advertisement will report higher levels of approach motivation and feelings of inspiration.*

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To measure the approach motivation of non-disabled consumers of the advertisement, participants would be asked to respond to the statement, “Right now I feel:” rating their feelings on four high approach states—energized, powerful, capable, competitive— and two low approach states—relaxed and cooperative—after reviewing an advertisement with a model with a disability overcoming an obstacle (Greenaway et al., 2015).

### **Social Dominance Orientation**

Allowing for the individual consumer differences and biases that may exist or surround disabilities, social dominance orientation is proposed as a potential non-disabled consumer hindrance to the elicitation of inspiration upon viewing advertisements featuring models with disabilities. As interpretative bias, discussed above, deals with personal perception or reception of the advertisement, social dominance orientation is proposed as an additional reception and individual, consumer-based quality, hindering the elicitation of inspiration from the advertisements. Social dominance orientation is the individual preference for group-based hierarchy and inequality (Ho et al., 2015). Social dominance orientation has been tested in the context of perceptions, biases or discrimination of various racial and ethnic groups and has been found to predict the subtle or forceful psychological or physical perception or oppression of these groups (Ho et al., 2015). Through the lens of social dominance orientation, it is proposed that an individual’s social dominance orientation would lead one to view these advertisements in a negative light rather than viewing the bionic and heroic imagery as inspirational.

**Proposition 6:** *Individual’s reporting higher levels of social dominance orientation will report lower levels of inspiration when viewing an advertisement featuring a model with a disability.*

To explore specific targets of prejudice in investigating the social dominance orientation of non-disabled consumers, which would aid in better understanding non-disabled consumer

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attitudes toward a marginalized group, such as persons with disabilities, items from the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) Scale will be included on a survey of participants (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994). Particularly, those questions analyzing non-disabled consumers' focus on hierarchies would be included. Examples of questions to be rated on a Likert scale would include: "Some groups of people are simply inferior to others;" "Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place;" "It would be good if all groups could be equal;" and, "Group equality should be our ideal (Pratto et al., 1994).

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

While literature examining the representation of disabilities in advertising exists, no attempts at categorization of these various representations, particularly those representations of disabilities pertaining to the elicitation of inspiration on the part of non-disabled consumers currently exists. Various research examining media representations of disabilities focused on one categorization of the representations such as inspiration porn (Grue, 2016) or supercrip (Hardin & Hardin, 2004) separately, never categorizing the various representations that are posited as being used as inspirational. Additionally, while the social model of disabilities encompasses the cultural understandings of disabilities, this model does not account for the media representations, specifically advertising's representation of disabilities. Models of disability are necessary to ensure the proper care and accurate understanding of the way disabilities are portrayed and thus perceived by persons without disabilities (Enwereji, 2015). The proposed inspirational model of disability achieves this by revealing the way advertising's use of bionic and heroic imagery, the representations presented in the categorization above, foster these non-disabled consumer feelings or expectations of persons with disabilities to be inspiring or to perpetually be portrayed in these inspiring ways.

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Future studies could test the categorization of the use of disabilities as inspiration through content analyses to determine any new or additional uses of disabilities as inspiration, expanding upon the current categorization. Additionally, future disabilities research should aim to identify and categorize other media representations of disabilities. As other researchers have identified (Grue, 2016), defining the ways in which disabilities are discussed, represented and analyzed is something that should occur constantly, verifying the accuracy of representation as well as being aware of researchers' and society's rhetoric surrounding disabilities.

Another proposed direction for future research would be to determine why advertiser's use and represent disabilities in these inspirational ways, establishing if the reason for use is for fiscal gain, believed accuracy of representations, or something else entirely. While this study relies on previous research examining the disapproval of these inspirational representations in the disabled community, additionally assessing the inaccuracies of these representations from the perspective of the individuals with disabilities and working with them to provide and propose accurate ways to represent disabilities, would aid advertisers in realizing the inaccuracies of the current representations and directions for the future of representing disabilities.

Lastly, this research solely examined physical disabilities, wholly grouping a variety of physical disabilities. Inaccuracies additionally exist in the way mental disabilities are represented, particularly in pharmaceutical advertisements for drugs to treat mental illness (Carty & Peppin, 2003). As each disability, physical or mental, may carry their own preconceived beliefs regarding the disability and are inherently different, studying more specifically and identifying the types of disabilities most often used as inspiration in advertisements as well as determining the types of companies using disabilities in this inspirational way, would aid in pinpointing where the problems in disabilities' representation lies.



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As little research has assessed the use of disabilities as inspiration in advertising, the categorization of disabilities as inspiration in advertising was developed from a smaller number of published research on the topic. Additionally, as was aforementioned, the study solely addressed physical disabilities and addressed advertising wholly. Analysis of particular brands' advertising as well as analysis of a particular disability's use in the advertising might yield more in-depth information into the various ways specific disabilities are used inspirationally. Moreover, as advertising in various platforms may be consumed or received differently by consumers, focusing on a particular category of advertising such as online advertisements or magazine advertisements may aid in limiting the scope of the study to yield a more thorough analysis of disabilities as inspiration. Lastly, while the study contributed to the disability research community through the addition of a categorization of terms used to discuss disabilities as inspiration and a model for how this imagery fosters inspiration, the study does not make a statistical contribution to the community but will assess and produce the statistical contribution in future studies.

In conclusion, while previous research has identified the use of disabilities as inspirational as problematic to the accurate representation of disabilities (Grue, 2016), the categorization and model proposed above will aid in organizing future discussions and research of the use of disabilities as inspirational in advertising. Furthermore, the model proposed will aid in analyzing how this bionic and heroic imagery creates and fosters feelings of inspiration as well as expectations of disabilities to be inspirational in the minds of non-disabled consumers, potentially creating unrealistic and inaccurate expectations of persons with disabilities.

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