Teaching about Intersections of Disability, Gender, and Sexuality through Media Literacy Education

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Abstract

The media used to portray people with disabilities as grotesque monsters whose gender and sexuality were rendered ambiguous. Even today, media representations of disability might still contain ideologies of normalcy that reinforce power imbalances when people with disabilities are represented as gendered, sexual, and attractive. It is, therefore, necessary to critically engage with portrayals of people with disabilities, especially in cases when they are represented as gendered and/or sexually attractive. In this paper we argue that strategies of media literacy education appear to be well suited for this purpose. Using five key questions of media literacy education, we demonstrate how structured media analysis can help viewers uncover dominant ideologies embedded in seemingly improved media texts.

Keywords: media literacy, disability, gender, sexuality, intersectionality

Since early versions of trading cards depicting images of "fair freaks" were circulated in the end of the nineteenth century (Garland-Thomson, 1996), the media have often portrayed people with disabilities as grotesque monsters whose gender and sexuality were rendered ambiguous. Throughout the twentieth century, media representations were slowly becoming more sympathetic, yet portrayals of people with disabilities remained largely asexual while their gender was either marginalized or used to emphasize the difference between them and "the normate" (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 8).

In recent decades, more media representations have attempted to acknowledge that bodies of people with disabilities can be beautiful and sexual (Dupere, 2015; London, 2015; Marriott, 2015; McNab & Radulova, 2015; Roberts, 2008). However, media scholars suggest that when it comes to "improved" representations of any kind, we should be cautiously optimistic and continue to ask questions about the social dynamics that these portrayals are hiding (Bird, 2003). Media representations of disability might still contain ideologies of normalcy that reinforce power imbalances even when people with disabilities are more often represented as gendered, sexual, and attractive. This suspicion aligns with crip theory (McCruer, 2006), which describes how people with disabilities can be oppressed according to multiple identity vectors (race, sexuality, etc.) that reinforce each other.

As noted by Garland-Thomson, "disability is a reading of bodily particularities in the context of social power relations" (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 6). In other words, disability is a cultural construct that reflects power imbalances; its intersections with gender and sexuality might further serve to reinforce the marginalization of people with disabilities (McCruer, 2006). In order to be able to challenge these imbalances, we should learn to notice how disability is culturally constructed through media representations, including seemingly improved ones.

It is, therefore, necessary to critically engage with portrayals of people with disabilities, especially in cases when they are represented as gendered and/or sexually attractive. In this paper we argue that strategies of media literacy education (MLE) appear to be well suited for this purpose. MLE aims to help audiences deconstruct media texts and use knowledge gained in the process to become responsible media producers and civically engaged citizens (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2011; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Kilbourne, 1999). Due to the lack of diversity in the media industry (Bramlett-Solomon & Carstarphen, 2012), it is mostly able-bodied people who create portrayals of people with disabilities. However, since the boundaries between consumers and producers are becoming increasingly blurred (Jenkins, 2008; Bruns, 2008), everyone should be educated about the complexities of representing disability, as well as its intersections with a variety of identity aspects, including gender and sexuality.

What about additional vectors of marginalization, such as race, class, religion, and age? Ideally, MLE classrooms should address all of them. While it is important to explore different intersections of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991; McCruer, 2006), we chose to narrow our focus for two main reasons. First, for educators who have never deconstructed or produced representations of disability with their students, it will be easier to begin with less complex intersections and then slowly increase the depth of their analysis. Second, this approach will make the task less intimidating for students who lack prior experience with this kind of critical inquiry.

Using five key questions of MLE (Hobbs, 2011), we will demonstrate how structured media analysis can help viewers uncover dominant ideologies of disability embedded in seemingly improved media texts. Our theoretical framework includes Garland-Thompson's (1997) interpretation of disability as a social construct that is created by unequal power

relationships rather than by characteristics of individual bodies. According to Garland-Thompson (1997), our perception of disability reflects society's prioritization of "the normate" (p. 8), usually understood as heterosexual, white, able-bodied, and male. Because social spaces are constructed to accommodate this privileged body type, people with disabilities are pushed to the margins. McCruer's crip theory (2006) is also essential for the current analysis: it highlights the need to see the intersection of disability with queerness as a double stigma, while explaining why disability of the heterosexual body is seen as more acceptable.

To discuss the intersection of disability with gender we draw on Butler's (1990) conceptualization of gender as performative—constructed by the repetition of certain behavioral scripts and not by individuals' physiology. According to Butler, the reification of the gender binary also includes performing one's sexuality in alignment with the assigned gender. Gender, sexuality, and physical ability are all, therefore, connected with the construction of the norm in a sense that people with disabilities, homosexuals, and women are compelled to fit the culture built around "the normate." Having a disability also means that one's gender and sexuality (even if one is male and heterosexual) are often seen as questionable or ambiguous. Using the concept of intersectionality developed by Crenshaw (1991), we focus on the intersection of these three vectors of oppression.

Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in the Media

Although the intent to use intersectionality as a framework for our analysis may be interpreted as paying equal attention to all the three vectors in question, we want to provide an important caveat. We focus on *disability* as it intersects with gender and sexuality, which makes disability far more foregrounded in this analysis than the other two categories. This has been a conscious choice on our part. We feel that gender and sexuality are more often explored in media

literacy education literature (Friesem, 2016; Friesem, 2017a; Scull et al., 2014) than disability (Eilers, in press), which remains a topic that is still underdiscussed in media literacy classrooms.

Media representations of disability have been deconstructed by a variety of media scholars (Ben-Zeev et al., 2004; Davies et al., 2002; Enns & Smit, 2001; Esmail et al., 2010; Fraser, 2011; Gerschick, 2000; Haller, 2010; Larsen & Haller, 2002; Majiet, 1996; May & Ferri, 2002; Mendes & Silva, 2013; Nikolaidis, 2013; Poore, 2003; Quinlan & Bates, 2009; Whittington-Walsh, 2002). It is noted that media representations play a role in the way people with disabilities perceive themselves and their opportunities (Ben-Zeev et al., 2004; Davies et al., 2002; Zhang & Haller, 2013). Media portrayals might add to the oppression of people with disabilities and the stigma which surrounds them (Haller, 2010; Steele et al., 2002). The media, therefore, feed into the social construct of disability and the power imbalances associated with it (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

A number of authors focus on how bodies of people with disabilities are expected to perform gender and sexuality (Esmail et al., 2010); some of these scholars specifically discuss media representations (Fraser, 2011; Gerschick, 2000). Because both sexuality and disability remain controversial subjects, their intersection places a double stigma on media representations of disabled bodies portrayed as sexual (Esmail et al., 2010). Since sexuality and gender are perceived as intrinsically connected (Butler, 1990), and because disabled bodies sometimes do not fit cultural expectations of gender performances (Gerschick, 2000; Majiet, 1996; Scott, 2015; Shakespeare, 1994), people with disabilities are often understood and portrayed as lacking sexuality (Esmail et al., 2010), while sexualized bodies are usually portrayed as not having any visible disabilities (Batchelor et al., 2004). Esmail et al. (2010) note that social misperceptions limit opportunities of people with disabilities to express their sexuality more than their disability.

In recent decades, the number of positive media portrayals of people with disabilities has increased. At the same time, such media representations are still few and far between (Farnall & Smith, 1999; Mendes & Silva, 2013) and continue to be infested with stereotypes and myths (Enns & Smit, 2001; Haller, 2010; Larsen & Haller, 2002; May & Ferri, 2002; Poore, 2003; Whittington-Walsh, 2002). For example, messages and images offered through the media encourage the idea of passing. This means that people with disabilities can and should strive to live their lives like "normal" people do instead of questioning the very construct of normalcy and power imbalances it is hiding (Quinlan & Bates, 2010).

Nikolaidis (2013) provides an in-depth analysis of one portrayal of gender, sexuality, and disability using the 2012 film *Rust and Bone*, which tells the story of an able-bodied woman who becomes a double lower leg amputee after an occupational accident. Among the positive aspects of this portrayal, the author describes intimate scenes in which the protagonist's disability is not ignored, but is also not the focus of the interaction between the characters. At the same time, Nikolaidis notes that while the film is progressive compared to previous portrayals of disability, there are many depictions of traditional gender roles between the two main characters, such as masculine strength and protection and feminine objectification. This analysis demonstrates that describing media representations of disability according to their relative improvement does not necessarily allow for capturing their complexity. As Nikolaidis shows, if we take into consideration the intersection of disability, sexuality, and gender, the same portrayal can be considered progressive in some aspects while still lacking in others.

Scholars note that characters with disabilities are often denied the status of "real" men and women because they are considered unable to enact gender according to social expectations (Gerschick, 2000). As a result they are denied expressions of sexuality. Scholars point out that,

with few exceptions, one can seldom see portrayals of how intimate relationships are experienced by people with disabilities (Fraser, 2011). At the same time, when people with disabilities are portrayed as gendered, these representations might reinforce the limiting expectations associated with femininity and masculinity. When people with disabilities strive to pass as "normal" men and women, this can paradoxically reinforce both the norm of physical ability, and the gender binary.

Using Media Literacy Education to Talk about Disability

Throughout its history, MLE has been used to expose power imbalances as they manifest themselves through mediated communication (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2011). Disability, gender, and sexuality can all be understood as social constructs hiding power struggles (Butler, 1990; Garland-Thomson, 1997; McCruer, 2006). MLE may offer ways to tease out problematic ideologies embedded in representations of disability, including seemingly improved ones that portray people with disabilities as gendered and sexual.

Strategies of MLE include addressing issues of authorship and audiences, meaning and interpretation, as well as the politics of representation (The Core Principles, n.d.). In media literacy classrooms, students consider specific questions about media texts such as, "Who created this message and why?" or "What does this message conceal?" that allow them to discover hidden principles of mediated communication and workings of the media industry. Students are also encouraged to think about themselves as media producers and evaluate how their own biases may influence media texts they are creating. Media literacy educators focus on techniques used in various media texts and ask students to analyze how different elements of media texts elicit emotions that may prevent people exposed to these texts from questioning their underlying ideologies (Buckingham, 2003). These strategies of MLE can be used to uncover how the

intersections of disability, gender, and sexuality in seemingly improved media representations might contribute to the marginalization of people with disabilities.

The reason for the persistence of problematic representations of disability is that media producers, professional and otherwise, are not trained to tell stories of people with disabilities and often hold subconscious assumptions about them (Haller, 2010). Helping more people with disabilities to become professional media producers is essential for dealing with this problem. However, according to the social justification theory (Jost et al., 2004) and research on implicit biases (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013), marginalized social groups can hold and reproduce stereotypes about themselves, thus reinforcing their own disadvantage. In addition, in the age of producers and prosumers (Bruns, 2008; Toffler, 1984), everybody—and not only professional media creators —should be educated about potential pitfalls of representing disability, as well as its intersections with other identity aspects.

The *Journal of Media Literacy Education* has recently published a special issue on media literacy and disabilities (Friesem, 2017b). It explores the best practices of media literacy with students who have disabilities but does not discuss media representations that contain intersections of disability with other vectors of marginalization. Although media scholars analyze strategies of helping students deconstruct representations of gender and sexuality using MLE (e.g., Friesem, 2016; Keown, 2012; Ryden, 2001), few scholarly works focus on using media literacy approach to dissect media representations of disability, whether in relation to gender and sexuality, or not (Eilers, in press). Media representations of disability—as well as its intersections with gender and sexuality—have been explored by a variety of scholars (e.g., Ben-Zeev et al., 2004; Haller, 2010; Mendes and Silva 2013; Quinlan and Bates, 2009); however, the use of MLE to deconstruct these portrayals has not been yet discussed in the scholarly literature.

On the following pages we analyze one media text that can be considered an improvement compared to older representations of disability; it portrays disabled bodies as gendered, and challenges beauty ideals by arguing that one does not have to be able-bodied in order to be attractive. We wanted to show how MLE can be used to tease out hidden meanings that might obscure the complexity of disability even as the text in question appears to promote a positive message.

While MLE offers strategies of exposing dominant ideologies in media texts, it also allows people to realize their potential as engaged citizens in a democratic society (Mihailidis, 2018). More and more people in the modern world participate in communication mediated by the latest technologies. Therefore, it is essential to make sure not only that disability is visible, but also that the role of its constructed nature in power imbalances is properly understood. MLE, thus, can be used to ensure that problematic ideologies of disability are not endlessly reproduced through the media.

Deconstructing One Media Representation of Disability

The video titled *Because Who Is Perfect?* that we chose to analyze in this paper was produced in 2013 by Swiss filmmaker Alain Gsponder for Pro Infirmis, an organization based in Zurich, Switzerland that promotes equality and opportunities for people with disabilities (Organization, n.d.). The video is 4.5 minutes long, and it is a part of the "Who is perfect, anyway?" project, which involved creating mannequins based on physical measurements of five individuals with different visible disabilities (Hodgekiss, 2013). The video shows the process of taking measurements of their bodies, producing real-size mannequins in their likeness, the participants' reactions, replacement of able-bodied mannequins in two store windows with

mannequins with disabilities wearing fashionable clothing, and reactions of passers-by to these new displays.

The charitable project and the video documenting its development were widely covered by national and international press, including *Daily Mail*, *Huffington Post*, and *Latin Post*. By the time we are writing the current article, this video has attracted over 25 million views on YouTube. Billed as a response to the lack of representation of diverse body types in fashion advertising and marketing, the video has been described as "breathtaking" (Adams & Krupnick, 2013). We chose this video as a subject of our media analysis because of its emotional nature, as well as the extent of its reach in national and international media.

In order to deconstruct the short film, we used the following key questions of media literacy education (The Core Principles, n.d.; Hobbs, 2011):

- Who is the author of the message and what is its purpose?

- What techniques are used to attract and hold our attention?

- What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented?

- How can different people interpret this message differently?

- What is omitted from this message?

Question #1: Who is the author of the message and what is its purpose?

Pro Infirmis—the creator of the video—identifies itself as a non-profit professional organization for people with disabilities located in Switzerland and funded by governmental contributions as well as private donations (Organization, n.d.). We do not have the exact list of Pro Infirmis members who worked on this campaign, but we can assume that it included people with and without disabilities. We can also assume that people who worked on this campaign were passionate and knowledgeable about rights of people with disabilities.

However, this does not mean that the video cannot contain problematic ideologies that could potentially feed into existing misunderstanding of people with disabilities and their marginalization. According to the research on implicit biases, it is not uncommon for marginalized individuals to hold negative stereotypes about the social groups they are attributed to (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013; Jost et al., 2004). Even people fighting for a certain social cause might hold hidden biases that could make them inadvertently undermine their own efforts (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). Therefore, looking for problematic ideologies in the *Who Is Perfect?* video is an important exercise of critical thinking and awareness-building.

The selection of a professional filmmaker Alain Gsponer to work on the campaign signals Pro Infirmis' intention to create a piece of media which would integrate techniques that are commonly found in media texts intended to attract large audiences. Because of the fierce competition in the media industry, professionals working there have to rely on techniques that are proved to be successful. In Bobo's (2002) words, professional media producers are "under 'ideological pressure' to reproduce the familiar" (p. 212). Although *Who Is Perfect?* aimed to challenge viewers' perception of disability, we can assume that compromises were made to ensure that viewers would not be challenged too much, and will not turn away from their screens.

Question #2: What techniques are used to attract and hold our attention?

Considering that *Because Who Is Perfect?* was directed by an award-winning filmmaker known for entertainment media texts, it is not surprising that the video relies on cinematic techniques used by professionals working in the media industry, such as emotion-evoking visual imagery and soundtrack.

Scenes in this short film alternate between what appears to be a warehouse-turned-makeshift-studio and two upscale window displays. At the warehouse, five individuals with

visible disabilities (one using a wheelchair) arrive to be measured by a mannequin designer. Other artists then craft personalized mannequins by hand. The director uses dramatic lighting and varying depths of field to create a feeling of intimacy between the individuals with disabilities and the viewer. The participants' emotional reactions to seeing the mannequins for the first time are documented extensively. The background music swells, building the dramatic sequence and guiding viewers through an increasingly emotional journey with each of the five individuals as they examine the forms created in their likeness. The participants appear to be thrilled to explore the mannequins from all sides, touching and even hugging them, as if their bodies have become visible for them for the first time.

As each of the mannequins is unveiled, the music continues to build while the scenes cut back to the storefront where able-bodied mannequins are slowly removed and replaced with the mannequins created from the molds of the project participants. After the mannequins with disabilities have been placed and dressed in fashionable clothes, the camera captures reactions of individuals who pass by the storefront. The music dramatically comes to a close with a final elongated note, and the words "Because who is perfect? Get closer." appear on the screen. The slow building up of both the images and music aims to capture viewers' attention, intentionally leading them through a range of emotions invoked by each of these sensory elements.

Even if this video makes us feel good because we agree with its message, we should remember that evoking strong emotions is a known technique of propaganda (Bachrach & Luckert, 2009). When people experience strong emotions it is more difficult for them to critically engage with a message. Because of the video's ability to evoke strong emotions, viewers who are passionate about the fight for the rights of people with disabilities might miss potential drawbacks of this message.

Question #3: What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented?

Knowing the mission of Pro Infirmis, we can assume that those who worked on the project value equal rights for individuals with disabilities. The title of the video as well as the message that appears before the film ends ("Who is perfect?") suggest that the point of view of the video's creators can be interpreted as follows. People with disabilities are sometimes considered "lesser than" able-bodied people because their appearance does not fit common beauty ideals. However, these ideals are not realistic, as nobody is perfect in the way they look. We can conclude that the video stresses the value of being free from limiting beauty ideals that affect everybody but might especially hurt people with visible disabilities. At the same time, the video promotes the idea that people with disabilities are beautiful in their own way, and that their bodies can be seen as attractive once we overcome our attachment to conventional beauty ideals.

The juxtaposition of typical mannequins and those created in the likeness of people with disabilities underscores the idea that there is a lack of representation of people with disabilities in fashion and marketing of department stores. Increasing the amount of such representations appears to be another value that the video producers are supporting. The joyful reactions of the individuals with disabilities seeing the mannequins in their form for the first time highlight the value of helping people with disabilities to be seen and accepted the way they are. We can assume that the point of view shared by the video creators is that people with disabilities want to feel visible, beautiful, and attractive men and women.

Finally, the lifestyle portrayed in the video in that of the middle class. This can be inferred by observing the kind of upscale stores that the mannequins are being placed at. The clothes that are put on the mannequins—a sequined black gown and a black pants/white shirt/black bowtie ensemble—also suggest that the lifestyle represented is that of people who can

afford this kind of apparel.

Question #4: How can different people interpret this message differently?

Viewers who feel strongly about the fight for equal rights will most likely be moved by the video. Because representations of disability—especially with emphasis on gender and attractiveness—are still rare, people who support Pro Infirmis' mission will likely feel that such videos bring important change and are thus to be lauded. Those who will consider the video's message as overwhelmingly positive and important might also feel strongly against criticizing it: we are often especially resistant when invited to pick apart media texts we like (Hobbs, 2011). Although the message of the video and the intention behind it are commendable, it is important to remember that alternative interpretations are also possible.

First of all, we can note that the video does not question the stare that marks people with disabilities as different from what Garland-Thomson calls "the normate" (1997). Passers-by' reactions remain ambiguous as they are staring at the mannequins with mixed feelings, showcasing a range of emotions that could be interpreted as acceptance and appreciation, but also as confusion, curiosity, and pity. How are these reactions different from those previously experienced by fair freaks mounted on pedestals far away from the crowd, while this crowd's normalcy was reinforced by this juxtaposition through the exploitation of the freaks unusual gender and sexuality (Garland-Thomson, 1997)? The new window display shown in the video provides a spectacle for people strolling by, but it is not clear how (and whether) it humanizes the participants whose bodies were used to create these molds. After all, the mannequins do not tell their stories, do not engage passers-by in a conversation. One can note that for the onlookers the mannequins remain simply disabled *bodies* instead of whole individuals with complex emotions and backgrounds, even if passers-by find these bodies attractive (which is not clear

from their reactions).

Furthermore, the video itself focuses on appearance and not on the inner world of the five individuals with disabilities who participated in the project. We do not learn anything about their personalities and life stories, hopes and challenges. Critical viewers might note that by prioritizing appearances over the inner world of people with disabilities the authors inadvertently contribute to marginalization of people with disabilities, even if the video pursues a noble goal of showing them as gendered and attractive.

The mannequins representing participants with disabilities end up occupying the place of able-bodied mannequins, alongside traditional mannequins in other store windows, and wearing clothes made for "normal" bodies. Hence, one can conclude that rather than challenge the norm by expanding its definition the video promotes passing of people with disabilities as "normal." Instead of changing society that does not accommodate people with disabilities , it is suggested that people with disabilities can fit in, especially if they wear fashionable clothing made for physically able bodies. In addition, one might note that the access to conventional beauty standards is portrayed as an ideal worth striving for, instead of questioning those standards, the beauty industry, and the world of consumerism.

In the quest to help the participants pass in the world adjusted for traditionally abled bodies, the video also risks reinforcing the gender binary (Butler, 1990). When mannequins are placed on display, the clothes that they don are clearly gendered. While it is important to help people with disabilities feel visible and accepted, it is essential to think how this can be done without reinforcing limiting scripts of masculinity and femininity. This, as crip theory reminds us, is essential for achieving true diversity and equality (McCruer, 2006).

Some might point out that this feel-good video shows restoring the power balance as easily

achievable: one only needs to create more representations of people with disabilities. While this is certainly important, it is not the ultimate solution to counter the social construction of disability and the fact that our culture is mostly designed to accommodate physically able bodies. Having these mannequins displayed in a prominent place in modern society traditionally reserved for non-disabled forms may evoke a sense of accomplishment or achievement for the disability community that will lead to complacency.

A critical viewer might point out several other weaknesses. For example, when the participants' measurements are taken, their differences are sometimes framed as deficiencies compared to normalized bodies, i.e., "38cm missing" and "only three toes" (Pro Infirmis, 2013). In addition, the person who takes the measurements and designs the mannequins does not have any visible disability. The video, thus, reinforces the stereotype of helpless "cripples" being saved by the non-disabled (Haller et al., 2006; Hayes & Black, 2003). Most people shown in the video appear to be white and Caucasian, which raises questions about intersections with race. No elderly people with disabilities are represented, and the participants seem to belong to middle class. While in this paper we decided to focus on the intersection of disability with gender and sexuality, the video offers opportunities to ask many additional questions about other vectors of marginalization.

Question #5: What is omitted from this message?

As critical viewers, we can also discuss things that the video conceals. Apart from not showing people of different races and ages, the participants' sexuality is not discussed but is assumed to be heteronormative. This is implied by the choice of typically gendered male and female attire that is placed on the mannequins with disabilities. The film positions these mannequins in a department store window wearing clothing marketed to the non-disabled

gendered and presumably heterosexual body. The video does not discuss that individuals with disabilities may have different wardrobe needs or preferences than a non-disabled person.

As noted in the previous section, in the video we learn nothing about personalities of the participants. While their appearances are emphasized, we do not hear anything about their lives, families, interests, or struggles. In fact, the video does not give people with disabilities much voice, instead portraying them simply as bodies that are measured, re-created as mannequins, and then put on display and stared at by passers-by. When they are given voice it is to show their awe and appreciation. We do not hear any criticism; we can assume that the reason for this omission was to increase the positive impact and the feel-good quality of the video.

The lack of participants' voices also does not allow us to find out whether their lives have been dramatically changed by this project. It is most probable that after taking part in it the participants still have to deal with limiting standards of normalcy, with challenges of navigating the world created for physically abled bodies.

Furthermore, the video does not allow us to look deeper into passers'-by reactions. It is possible that many of them felt discomfort of pity, but these reactions are not highlighted or discussed. In fact, passers-by are not given any voice, perhaps because of the fear that they will articulate controversial opinions that would undermine the project's goals.

The film shows the recreating and repositioning of the disabled persons as subjects in the world of fashion and consumption. Being so refigured they become visible, legitimate and "normal." While this may be seen as a more positive portrayal which challenges the reading of disability as a defect, it leaves untouched the whole question of who has the power to define attractiveness and personhood.

There are several other unanswered questions that come up after careful examination of the video. The film shows only two mannequins in the windows. What happened with the other three? Why were these two chosen for the final part of the video and the other three not? How did the participants whose mannequins were not shown in store windows feel about this exclusion? How long did the mannequins stay on display? Are they still there, or were they replaced with the traditional mannequins? Was there any follow-up to this project? Did more stores put mannequins with disabilities in their windows? These and other questions can help the critical viewer discover how this seemingly positive video inadvertently feeds into the social construction of disability, reinforcing power imbalances associated with gender and sexuality, but also with other vectors of marginalization.

No Message Is Perfect

The short film about disability and beauty standards created by Pro Infirmis tells its viewers that no person's appearance is perfect. In a similar way, MLE reminds us that no message is perfect and that all media texts should be critically examined whether we agree with their main idea or not. While the video analyzed above was created to achieve the important goal of bringing more visibility for people with disabilities, we should not assume that this goal guarantees that the message has no flaws. Moreover, it is essential to remember that when we like a media text we are more likely to miss its hidden problematic assumptions.

While it is crucial to increase visibility for people with disabilities, we need to make sure that it is not contributing to misunderstanding and marginalization. After all, fair freaks were also highly visible, yet that did not empower them; on the contrary, their visibility reinforced the power imbalance that pushed people with disabilities to society's margins.

It might appear that portraying people with disabilities as men and women who are beautiful in their own unique way can have only positive outcomes. Yet the analysis of the video created by Pro Infirmis reveals that people with disabilities might be shown to successfully reclaim their attractiveness only to fall into limiting stereotypes. This problem becomes visible when representations of disability are deconstructed using the intersection of physical ability with gender and sexuality. Such exercise in critical thinking will leave us wondering: Should we really strive to have people with disabilities portrayed as "real" men and women, or should we avoid representing people with disabilities as gendered in order not to reinforce the binary? If we want to portray them as attractive, how can we make sure not to reinforce heteronormativity? These questions can have different answers and interpretations, yet the very act of asking them in MLE classrooms can help us move one step further to exposing disability, sexuality, and gender as social constructs.

While in this article we focused only on this particular intersection, media literacy researchers and practitioners should also take into consideration other vectors of marginalization. For instance, they can ask questions about race (notice that all people shown in the video created by Pro Infirmis are white) and class (what about people with disabilities who are poor?). Without discarding the important positive message of the film in question, we should still be able to critically evaluate its ability to challenge power imbalances. Strategies of MLE, in particular the five critical questions that have structured our inquiry, can allow viewers to engage in a deeper discussion not only about the media text itself, but also about the social construction of disability and other identity aspects it intersects with.

Limitations and Future Research

We realize that, as it stands, the analysis provided in this essay remains incomplete as we have never brough our strategy to an educational setting. It was outside of the scope of this essay to discuss such implementation more thoroughly, which inevitably makes the paper more theoretical than applied. We leave the task of testing the approach outlined in this manuscript for future researchers. Indeed, we hope that our theoretical discussion will inspire others to use principles of media literacy education for exploring complex media texts that contain portrayals of disability and its intersections with other identity categories.

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