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LOCATING DISABILITY IN THE BODY POSITIVE CAMPAIGNS: ADVERTISING & IN/EXCLUSION

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Synopsis:

This paper explores a three stage history of the advertising industry's movement from near total exclusion of people with disabilities in advertising imagery to very limited inclusion to more progressive campaigns. I argue that the advertising industry helps to construct the symbolic meaning attached to disabled identity and as such, it plays a central role in raising public awareness about disabled people. Campaigns like Pro Infirmis' "Because Who is Perfect? Get Closer" challenge normative constructions of beauty as able-bodied and have the potential to broaden cultural understandings of embodied beauty and diversity.

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This paper explores a three stage history of the advertising industry's movement from near total exclusion of people with disabilities in advertising imagery to very limited inclusion to more progressive campaigns that broaden cultural understandings of embodied beauty and diversity. Prior to the last decade, the advertising industry had a consistent emphasis on bodily physical perfection—an emphasis that is still largely intact, despite the recent body-positive campaigns of the past decade. I argue that the advertising industry, as a major part of the media institution, helps to construct the symbolic meaning attached to disabled identity and as such, it plays a central role in raising public awareness about disabled people. People with disabilities represent the largest statistical minority in the US, and by erasing such populations from their advertisements, advertisers are hiding disability from the general public and contributing to the institutionalized oppression of disabled people.

The rationale for exclusion of people with disabilities has been co-created by consumers and ad executives. Able-bodied people project fears, such as their own loss of mobility, onto the bodies of disabled people. These projections make it difficult for normative bodies to observe non-paradigm bodies without fear and rejection (Wendell, 1996). Advertisers, themselves subject to these fears, are further motivated by the perception that consumers would associate their products with a disabled identity. Rather than risk that potential association, advertisers have historically erased disabled bodies entirely from the world of advertising images. Nor did advertisers or their agencies actively seek to cast people with disabilities in ad campaigns. What little advertising remained that featured people with disabilities involved products designed solely for the use of disabled people, charities, or corporate sponsors of events for people with disabilities. Currently, there are more but still very limited representations of disabled people in advertisements. Such narrow representation in ads contributes to the symbolic level of disability oppression by stereotyping the disabled as passive, dependent, pitiful, and in need of charity to exist, while their exclusion from ads as subjects and models deepens their institutional oppression by erasing them as citizens from society.

This is particularly problematic for women, because even though body positive campaigns have challenged some problematic stereotypes of beauty, disabled bodies are still conspicuously absent. Advertisements both create and perpetuate stereotypes about how the female body should look. The “ideal” body has been socially constructed as thin, white, young, and with an absence of wrinkles/blemishes, disabilities, or deformities (Kilbourne, 1994; Garland-Thomson, 2002). In the past few years there has been a series of body positive campaigns, such as the Dove “Campaign for Real Beauty,” that have purported to offer more realistic depictions of beauty and create dialogue about more inclusive beauty definitions. I argue that while such body positive campaigns marginally challenged the definition of beauty and some of the traditional constructions of the body (regarding body size, for example), it simultaneously reinforced others. My particular focus for the paper is the way in which the campaigns omitted women with disabilities, just as previous advertisers had done, re-inscribing the cultural message that a disabled/disfigured body is not a body one can feel positive about. It is, in fact, a body in need of erasure. Drawing on a feminist-disability framework, I demonstrate that the female disabled body in advertisement is devalued, considered deviant, inferior, and in opposition to the “normal” body.

Finally, I examine current (2012-2014) ads and campaigns like Pro Infirmis's “Because Who is Perfect? Get Closer” that are more inclusive in their representation of disability diversity. In “Because Who is Perfect?” a series of mannequins were created based on the bodies of real people with disabilities. These mannequins were then placed in store windows to advertise fashion. I argue that such campaigns challenge normative constructions of beauty as able-bodied and have the potential to broaden cultural understandings of embodied beauty and diversity.