



A Qualitative Study on Media's Role in Constructing Disability Identity

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ABSTRACT :

The role of media in shaping perceptions of disability has undergone significant evolution, transitioning from traditional portrayals of pity and victimization to more empowering and nuanced representations. This study explores how media, especially films and visual platforms, influences the construction of disability identity. Through a qualitative approach, drawing on literature reviews, the research examines the ways in which media narratives affect societal attitudes and self-perceptions of people with disabilities. While earlier representations often reduced disabled individuals to symbols of tragedy or heroism, modern portrayals increasingly focus on resilience, autonomy, and empowerment. This shift reflects a broader movement towards more inclusive and diverse media depictions, which are essential for fostering empathy, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for a more inclusive society. The findings underscore the media's power in shaping public perceptions and promoting social change regarding disability, urging further progress in authentic and empowering portrayals.

Keywords: Disability, Media Representation, Disability Identity, Social Inclusion, Stereotypes, Empowerment, Films, Qualitative Research, Social Change, Narrative Construction.

INTRODUCTION :

"Disability is not a fixed attribute of the body or mind; rather, it is a social category shaped by environmental and societal barriers that limit the participation of people with certain types of bodies or minds." - **Lennard J. Davis (2013)**

"Disability is not simply an individual, medical, or biological deficit. It is a complex set of social, cultural, and political phenomena that reflect and shape social inequalities." - **Dan Goodley (2010)**

"Disability is a socially constructed disadvantage imposed on people through exclusion from full participation in society, based on the perceived or actual limitations of their physical or mental capacities." - **Susan Wendell (1996)**

These are some common ideas from various authors about the umbrella term "Disability"; these definitions commonly state what disability is seen from an individual, societal, political or cultural level. Understanding these definitions, the common ideology of disability can be captured. But when specifically looking upon to the disabled individuals, people might have various definitions of their own. In a broader term every individual is a disabled person, some may forget things quickly, some may lack concentration and some may find difficulty in communication. Every small void is seen as a disability at the moment. There are people in special cases, where they face developmental disabilities - even the small void which is mentioned above is a permanent space that is difficult to be cultivated or nurtured. Those are the people the society is really pushing away from mainstream participation.

"Developmental disabilities are severe, chronic disabilities that can be cognitive, physical, or both, originating before age 22 and likely to continue indefinitely. They limit functioning in three or more areas, such as self-care, language, learning, mobility, self-direction, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency." - **David A. Ethridge (1989)**

The common people who do not even realise that these special needs individuals exist on this earth, from where do they come to know about these individuals? This is where the powerful tool called media comes into play. Media plays a superficial role in portraying the lives of these individuals not just only for entertainment purposes but also for educational purposes. Visual representations have more impact than any other modes of representing any issues or social concerns. More than reading a newspaper, people prefer to watch news channels. Though we have read books, it will be more pleasing if we see the same story in a visual representation.

"The media is the most powerful tool of influence in the world, shaping both mindsets and perceptions of reality." — **Susan Wojcicki**

The role of media in shaping societal perceptions of disability has been significant, influencing how individuals with disabilities are seen and understood within both public and private spheres. Media, encompassing television, films, news, and digital platforms, plays a powerful role in constructing and perpetuating narratives around disability, which often oscillate between stereotypical depictions of dependence, pity, or heroism. These portrayals contribute to the construction of disability identity, impacting how people with disabilities perceive themselves and are perceived by others.

This study seeks to explore how media narratives contribute to the development of disability identity. Grounded in qualitative methods, this research will analyze the perspectives of individuals with disabilities and media professionals to better understand the nuanced ways in which disability identity is shaped.

METHODOLOGY :

This study utilizes a literature review approach to explore the role of media in constructing disability identity. The literature review method allows for an in-depth analysis of existing research, theories, and discourse on media representations of disability and their impact on identity formation. Through a comprehensive examination of both academic and industry sources, this method will provide insights into how media portrayals influence societal and self-perceptions of disability.

The data for this study is gathered from a variety of scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, reports, and media industry analyses. Key databases used for source selection include JSTOR, Google Scholar, and PubMed, with searches focused on terms such as "disability representation in media," "media and disability identity," "disability and social identity," and "media stereotypes and disability." To maintain relevance and ensure the quality of sources, the literature reviewed is limited to works published within the last 20 years, allowing for an understanding of contemporary media trends.

LIMITATIONS :

While a literature review provides a broad overview of existing knowledge, it is limited by the available research and may lack the firsthand perspectives obtained through primary data collection. Additionally, the reliance on published studies may introduce publication bias, as more prominent narratives in disability and media may overshadow less examined but equally significant perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW :

Barnes, C. (1992). *Disabling imagery and the media: An exploration of the principles for media representations of disabled people*. Halifax: Ryburn Publishing.

Summary: This book examines how media imagery often reinforces stereotypes about people with disabilities. Barnes argues that common media portrayals tend to perpetuate pity and victimization, hindering a nuanced understanding of disability identity.

Haller, B., & Ralph, S. (2001). Media portrayal of disability: A review of research. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 21(1), 15-22.

Summary: This review synthesizes research on how media portrayals shape public perceptions of disability. Haller and Ralph highlight the predominance of the "supercrip" and "pitiably victim" tropes, noting how these narratives shape societal attitudes and influence self-perceptions among individuals with disabilities.

Ellcessor, E., & Kirkpatrick, B. (Eds.). (2017). *Disability media studies*. New York: NYU Press.

Summary: This edited volume brings together various perspectives on disability representation in media. Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick discuss the shift towards more inclusive portrayals and explore how disability identity is constructed and contested in media spaces.

Clogston, J. S. (1990). Disability coverage in 16 newspapers. *Journalism Quarterly*, 67(2), 327-336.

Summary: Clogston's study analyzes how disability is covered in print media, revealing that stereotypical portrayals dominate news coverage. The research argues that these portrayals contribute to limiting public understanding of the diversity within disability experiences and identities.

Longmore, P. K. (1987). Screening stereotypes: Images of disabled people in television and motion pictures. *Social Policy*, 18(4), 31-37.

Summary: Longmore's work critiques the ways disabled individuals are represented in film and television. He identifies common stereotypes, such as characters with disabilities serving as inspirational figures or tragic heroes, and discusses their impact on the public's perception of disability.

Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (2000). *Narrative prosthesis: Disability and the dependencies of discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Summary: This book explores how disability is used as a narrative device in literature and film. Mitchell and Snyder argue that disability is often depicted as a metaphor or plot device, which can obscure the realities of disabled lives and reduce complex identities to simplistic symbols.

Shakespeare, T. (1999). Art and lies? Representations of disability on film. In M. Corker & S. French (Eds.), *Disability discourse* (pp. 164-172). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Summary: Shakespeare discusses the frequent misrepresentation of disability in film, focusing on the challenges of depicting authentic experiences. He critiques films that simplify disability, reinforcing social stigma and perpetuating negative stereotypes that affect identity formation.

Briant, E., Watson, N., & Philo, G. (2013). Reporting disability in the age of austerity: The changing face of media representation. *Disability & Society*, 28(6), 874-889.

Summary: This study examines how economic policies impact media portrayals of disability. The authors argue that recent austerity narratives have contributed to the portrayal of people with disabilities as burdensome, which influences public attitudes and shapes disability identity in a restrictive manner.

Rimmerman, A. (2013). *Social inclusion of people with disabilities: National and international perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Summary: Rimmerman provides an international overview of disability inclusion, with a focus on the media's role in promoting or hindering social inclusion. The book emphasizes the importance of diverse, positive media portrayals in shaping disability identity and encouraging inclusive attitudes.

Oliver, M., & Barnes, C. (2012). *The new politics of disablement*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Summary: Oliver and Barnes explore the social and political aspects of disablement, discussing how media narratives influence public policy and disability identity. They argue that dominant media portrayals often align with medical models of disability, which can marginalize disabled individuals and reinforce dependency.

Darke, P. (1998). Understanding cinematic representations of disability. *Screen*, 39(3), 223-235.

Summary: Darke analyzes the portrayal of disability in film, identifying the recurring use of disability as a metaphor to represent societal issues or internal character flaws. The review highlights how these portrayals often dehumanize characters with disabilities, reducing their roles to symbols rather than complex individuals, which can contribute to misunderstandings about disability in real life.

Longmore, P. K. (2003). *Why I burned my book and other essays on disability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Summary: In this collection of essays, Longmore addresses the "supercrip" and "pitiable" stereotypes pervasive in film and television. He discusses how movies often frame disability in terms of overcoming tragedy or serving as inspirational for able-bodied viewers, an approach that limits genuine representation and overlooks the broader social context of disability.

Safran, S. P. (2000). Disability portrayal in film: Reflecting the past, directing the future. *Exceptional Children*, 66(4), 503-513.

Summary: Safran's review examines common cinematic tropes surrounding disability, including themes of tragedy, heroism, and fear. The article traces how these stereotypes have developed over time and argues that such portrayals influence public perceptions, often reinforcing negative views that impact the social identity and inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

Norden, M. F. (1994). *The cinema of isolation: A history of physical disability in the movies*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Summary: Norden's comprehensive review traces the history of disability representation in movies, revealing how Hollywood has frequently depicted disabled characters as isolated or villainous. This book discusses the cultural impact of these portrayals and suggests that such depictions have long contributed to the social alienation of individuals with disabilities.

Chivers, S., & Markotic, N. (Eds.). (2010). *The problem body: Projecting disability on film*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Summary: This edited volume brings together essays analyzing the portrayal of disability in various film genres. Chivers and Markotic argue that movies often rely on disability to create dramatic tension or evoke sympathy, which can obscure authentic disability experiences. The book advocates for more nuanced portrayals that reflect the diversity of disability identities and experiences.

Examples of movie characters that have portrayed various forms of disability

The Theory of Everything (2014)

This biographical film about physicist Stephen Hawking, played by Eddie Redmayne, depicts his life with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a degenerative motor neuron disease.

My Left Foot (1989)

Daniel Day-Lewis portrayed Christy Brown, a real-life artist and writer with cerebral palsy who can only control his left foot. The film explores his struggles and achievements in a society with limited understanding of disability.

A Beautiful Mind (2001)

Russell Crowe portrays mathematician John Nash, who had schizophrenia. The film explores his academic achievements and personal struggles with mental health.

Margarita with a Straw (2014)

This Indian film tells the story of a woman with cerebral palsy who explores her identity and sexuality.

Taare Zameen Par (2007)

This film, directed by Aamir Khan, follows the story of Ishaan, a young boy with dyslexia. His struggles with reading and writing are initially misunderstood until a compassionate teacher recognizes his condition. The movie raised awareness about learning disabilities in India, highlighting the importance of inclusive education and empathy for children with special needs.

My Name is Khan (2010)

Shah Rukh Khan plays Rizwan Khan, a man with Asperger's syndrome, who embarks on a journey to prove his identity following a personal tragedy. The film helped raise awareness about Asperger's syndrome and addressed broader issues of acceptance and identity, especially in the context of Islamophobia.

The literature reviews highlight the varied portrayals of disability in media, with some platforms depicting individuals with disabilities as objects of pity and victimhood, while others tend to ignore their experiences altogether. However, the media, particularly films, have played a vital role in giving voice to the lives and struggles of people with disabilities, shedding light on their everyday realities. Through these portrayals, audiences are given a glimpse into the challenges that disabled individuals face, offering greater understanding of their lives.

Over time, media representation has shifted from emphasizing pity to showcasing empowerment, helping to change the narrative surrounding disability. While early portrayals often framed disability as something to be feared or sympathized with, recent films and media productions focus more on the resilience, autonomy, and strength of disabled characters. This shift in narrative has been instrumental in changing public perceptions, moving away from outdated stereotypes towards a more inclusive and empowering view of disability.

Ultimately, the media has served as a powerful tool in educating society, fostering empathy, and advocating for a more inclusive world, where people with disabilities are seen not as victims, but as individuals with diverse abilities and valuable contributions.

CONCLUSION :

The perception of disability has undergone a significant transformation over the years. Today, people have begun to recognize and appreciate the often-unsung challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in their everyday lives. While the physical or visible aspect of disability is often emphasized, there is a growing awareness of the emotional and psychological resilience that these individuals face.

Media plays a crucial role in bringing these hidden stories to the forefront. By highlighting the untold experiences of people living with disabilities, media can inspire others and advocate for greater societal acceptance and inclusivity. It's important for the media to move beyond stereotypes and portray people with disabilities not as defined by their challenges, but as individuals who have unique strengths and capabilities.

People with disabilities are not to be seen as different or inferior; they are ordinary individuals with extraordinary potential. Through more authentic and diverse storytelling, the media has the power to challenge outdated views, shift perceptions, and encourage a more inclusive and supportive society for all.

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