

Advertising Ideology and the Social Process of Disability

- A Working Paper -

by Mary-Ann O'Donovan

Supervisor: Dr. Katrina Lawlor

(MPhil Student, D.I.T Aungier Street)

The research question is set out as “an investigation into the social process of disability through non-disabled advertising, with an examination of advertising’s body ideal and what this means to the disabled audience”. The research will essentially look at the ‘invisibility of disability’ in mainstream advertising and will call for both an analysis of advertising itself and also deal with issues of what do ads mean to disabled people, how are they used and does advertising play a role in the social oppression of disabled people. This paper examines theoretical ideas and methodological issues around the research question.

Why Advertising?

The question may be asked, why focus on advertising and in particular, why mainstream advertising? Advertising has been described as the most powerful communication system in the world (Schroeder, 1999). It is a pervasiveness form of communication, it is everywhere and is not something we always choose to read and watch. That is, it’s an inescapable form of communication. However, advertising is powerful, not only in its reach, but in its ability to communicate an ideology of its choice. This ideology is said to be a skewed image of society. It essentially promotes instructions on how to live and how to look. These images are idealized, that is, an ideal lifestyle and ideal body image are promoted. Power is also manifested in advertising’s ability to exclude certain groups from its discourse, and in the case of mainstream advertising, disabled people are one such group. A hierarchy of bodies does exist in society (Hughes, 1999) and in advertising, with the disabled body firmly at the bottom of the ladder. Much has also been written about advertising’s moral role in society (Sinclair, 1987). “In the consumer society, marketing and advertising assumed the role once played by cultural traditions and became the privileged forum for the transmission of social cues(Leiss et al., 1990). As Elliott (1999) notes, advertising images are used as personal and social resources by individuals. They

have come to eclipse traditional means by which individuals learn to behave. That is, traditional structures in society are in some cases replaced, like the church, and in others combined, like the family, with advertising communications, to teach individuals in society what is right/wrong or acceptable/unacceptable. O'Donohoe (1993) highlights the marketing and non-marketing uses of advertising by audience members. Marketing uses include information on availability and price, facilitation of choice and quality assurance, whereas non-marketing uses involve advertising as structuring time, as a diversion, as entertainment, as escapism and as play. It was also found that advertising played an aspirational role, in that, models used were seen as role models to aspire to. Females were found to be particularly interested in the physical attractiveness of the women in the ads. Hirschman and Thompson (1997) also note the existence of this inspiring and aspiring role of advertising where media images are viewed as the ideal to strive for, while critical interpretations also exist. Many women within their study felt that a beauty template was put forward by advertising and that they were evaluated in society with regards to how their appearance fits in with this template. Thus, through consuming products and services, people hope to reach the ideal set out in advertising. Such aspirations are a costly affair and the goal of consumers may be more succinctly stated by saying that the audience wishes to appropriate the meaning instilled in the product into their daily lives. Falk (1994: 121) states that, "By consuming – possessing and using – the similar the consumer identifies himself with the status, lifestyle or social identity the object stands for". According to Hirschman (1988: 344) "consumers acquire messages about products from a variety of media vehicles on a daily basis. These messages convey symbolic meanings concerning the use of products to express personal values, social norms, and cultural ideologies". Similarly, Baudrillard (1996) states that, "we consume the product through the product itself, but we consume its meaning through advertising" (p181). Thus, an issue of prime importance is how this meaning transfer takes place. McCracken (1986) describes how culture is the original location of meaning and explains how advertising borrows from the cultural constituted world to link meaning to products. Thus, a process of borrowing and combining various aspects of culture occurs. As such advertising can be described as intertextual, it draws on various cultural texts to create meaning. Advertising is both an influencer within society and also influenced by society; it is reflective and reflected in society. The extent of either relationship is not known. "Advertising is

without a doubt a formative influence within our culture, even though we do not yet know its exact effects. Given its pervasive and persuasive character, it is hard to argue otherwise” (Pollay, 1986: 18). However, it is clear that advertising is part of our cultural landscape and as Holt (1997: 98) states, “Ads are at once informational, rhetorical, cultural, artistic, and magical”.

Pollay (1986) has described advertising as a distorted mirror in that, only certain values, attitudes and behaviours are deemed appropriate. Other descriptive terms, which refer to its obscured and distorted nature, are advertising as a magic system (Williams, 1980) and advertising as a masked ball (Leiss et al., 1990). It is important to note however, that advertising is also used to initiate and engage in social interactions (Ritson and Elliott, 1999) and these authors highlight that, “The absence of any reference to product consumption in this study represents a significant finding because it empirically illustrates the theorized contention that advertising may be consumed independently of the product it sponsors” (p274). Thus, advertising has been found to be consumed in and of itself. So, regardless of product advertised, advertising imagery can be consumed individually or in a group/social context.

Consumer research has shown how advertising influences the lives of minority and oppressed groups, such as women, black people, gay people and unemployed people. As Taylor and Lee (1994: 239) note, “Examination of how minority groups are portrayed in advertising can provide information on how a minority group is viewed by society at large”. Wilkes and Valencia (1989: 20) state that, “The limited portrayals of minorities in the mass media goes beyond a matter of marketing strategy, given that the media portrayal of ethnic minorities plays a role in their acculturation and assimilation”. Furthermore, Taylor and Lee (1994) explain how previous research regarding minority groups and advertising representation found that stereotypes may be harmful to self-esteem and may affect assimilation processes of minority groups. In addition, “Underrepresentation of the minority group in advertising may also communicate messages of indifference or lack of acceptance of minorities by the majority” (pp239-240). With regards to the idealized imagery portrayed in advertising specifically, Hirschman and Thompson (1997) note that, “For example, the idealized images conveyed by media vehicles may engender a sense of displeasure in consumers with their current personal appearance, lifestyle, and

possessions. [...] Individual consumers are subtly enticed to engage in an ongoing cycle of consumption in quest of the ever-elusive ideal” (pp44-45).

Advertising has been found to impact adversely on female self-image, due to the emphasis on the perfect figure, which most women cannot achieve (Richins, 1991). It has also played a part in constructing women’s roles in society. Traditionally women were assigned the role of the homemaker, however, in recent times, these roles have expanded and as Stern (1991) would say, advertising has played a role in constructing different ‘femininities’. Women are expected to be all things at all times. Thus, only certain types of bodies and certain role constructions exist in the world of advertising.

There is also a hierarchy of sexuality in advertising with the majority of images portraying heterosexual relationships. When homosexual relationships are represented, certain aspects of gay culture are ignored (Kates, 1999). The media (including advertising) continue to perpetuate the stereotype of the gay ‘dream consumer’ – an image of gay men with high disposable income, good taste and are well-educated (Kates, 1999). Kates (1999) uses the example of a Toyota car advertisement to highlight the fact that two men pictured together is viewed as positive but that there is no reference made to gay men with aids, gay men of colour, lesbian women, disabled gay men, disabled lesbians, in advertising discourse.

Wilkes and Valencia (1989) note the limited portrayals of black people and Hispanic people in advertising. Hispanic people featured in fewer ads and always appeared in racially integrated crown scenes. However, black people did feature in a greater number of ads and were assigned major roles in 31% of the ads in which they appeared. However, the range of representation was fairly limited with both groups featuring in ads for food more so than any other product category. Taylor and Lee (1994) found that Asian Americans featured highly in ads for technology-based products and were frequently shown in business settings but not in other types of settings or other types of relationships.

In the case of young unemployed people, O’Donohoe (1995) found that marginalisation of young unemployed people in society was coupled by and accentuated by a sense of alienation and marginalisation from advertising. However,

Elliott (1995) found that unemployed people used advertising mainly as an informational vehicle and defended themselves against the unattainable images in advertising by defining themselves as outsiders, that is, not the target market.

Why Disability?

The reason why I began to look at disability studies within the remit of a business degree was due to my personal experience of disability. My brother, is disabled, and as such, disability has always been a part of my life. However, this experience was very much a family thing. It was never thought of as anything other than this is John, this is who he is. There was no notion of a bigger picture of disability studies, disability community or disability rights. While studying for my marketing degree I became intrigued with the notion of advertising and its negative effects, and as described earlier, this is an area that has been studied in light of various minority groups. Of course, I questioned where disabled people fit into this equation and as my readings have found they don't fit into it at all.

Once I began reading into disability studies in-depth I became aware of the notions of medical model and social model, and began to accept the idea of disability as a social process. This highlights the fact that social institutions, government policy, built environment, cultural environment all tell disabled people they don't belong (Morris, 1991). The 'problem' is not located with the individual as in the medical model but with society. As Kitchin (1998) states space is socially constructed both to keep disabled people 'out of place' and to keep disabled people 'in their place'. So not only are disabled people excluded from a range of social spaces but there also exists a structure of segregation in education, housing, employment, leisure etc. Within, this model there is also the recognition that culture contributes to disability, both by excluding certain experiences of disability from cultural representations and also through the stereotypical and stigmatizing images (Wendell, 1996).

There has been a lot written about the types of images of disability in film (Darke, 1997), TV (Shakespeare, 1997) and charity advertising (Hevey, 1992) and the use of disability imagery has been described as a dramatization tool (Longmore, 1985) and metaphor (Morris, 1991; Sutherland, 1997) in film and TV programmes. As with the

representations of black people and women, the focus in this medium is almost always on the body (Hevey, 2002), with no reference to the social aspects of disability. This is because the images are constructed within the medical model, and constructed by non-disabled people (Karpf, 1997). Examples of some common stereotypes in film and TV programmes, include the disabled person as criminal, as monster, as supercrip, as victim, as childlike, as asexual or sexually deviant. Within charity advertising, a medium in which disabled people are described as ‘hyperpresent’ (Hevey, 1992), disabled people are usually portrayed as pitiable and pathetic. There has been some improvement in this area in recent times, but negative imagery still dominate.

These images serve to construct disabled people as the ‘Other’ and perpetuate stereotypes, which sometimes are the only contact with and knowledge of disabled people that some people have. They can increase the fear of disability as these mediums fail to communicate accurate knowledge about how disabled people live. As stated by Elliott and Byrd (1982: 43) “The lack of realistic cultural representations of experiences of disability not only contributes to the ‘Otherness’ of people with disabilities by encouraging the assumption that their lives are inconceivable to non-disabled people but also increases non-disabled people’s fear of disability by suppressing knowledge of how people live with disabilities”. Although there is recognition that the diversity of disability is missing from TV, film and charity advertising and that much imagery is stereotypical, there is still very little focus on the absence of disability imagery in mainstream advertising and what this means.

Though in recent years advertising has become a bit more inclusive of women, different races and different sexualities, there has been very little inclusion of disabled people. There are some isolated examples of companies using disabled people in their campaigns, but these are few and far between, and there are more cases of inclusion in the US than in the UK (Haller and Ralph, 2001) and Ireland. However, even within these limited examples the full diversity of disability is not portrayed and only the most beautiful disabled people are shown (Haller and Ralph, 2001). However, generally disability imagery is deemed absent from advertising.

Hahn (1987) has highlighted that exclusion of minority groups from economic appeals has been a prominent method of exclusion by capitalists over the years and that this serves to perpetuate the subordinate status of these groups. Hardin et al (2001) undertook a study of Sports Illustrated for Kids and found no advertising images of disabled children and only 24 appearances in the editorial over a three-year period. The context within which these children were photographed is also worth noting, with most pictured alone or with other disabled children, and no disabled children were pictured doing high-risk sports. The conclusion drawn was that these images perpetuate the notion of segregation rather than integration. Haller and Ralph (2001) believed that audiences were more receptive to diversity in advertising and were concerned with highlighting the link between profitability and diversity. However, I have not come across any study that specifically looks at what this exclusion means to disabled people, if indeed it means anything at all. I believe it is important to ascertain what role mainstream advertising plays in the lives of disabled people and whether this exclusion can be deemed a disabling factor.

The focus of the research will be visible physical impairment. As advertising focuses on the body, grooming and image, with a stress on perfection, people with visible physical impairments identifiably do not have the perfect body as set out by advertising standards. People may assume that they are automatically excluded from participating in 'beauty' regimes due to their exclusion from advertising and fashion discourses. Thus, their experience of advertising and use of advertising may be different because of this. Although I do not hold the assumption that everybody strives towards this ideal and that everybody is affected by advertising in the same way. My interest is in, if and how advertising contributes to the disabling experience, by increasing feelings of exclusion and alienation at a symbolic level. As Reeve (2002: 499) notes, "Having an impairment that is immediately visible presents the observer with privileged information and therefore power over that body. The gaze is influenced by the stereotypes and prejudices about disabled people, and so the power of the gaze is intimately linked and nourished by knowledge from within social domain". It could be said that the power of the gaze is also influenced by the knowledge we do not have about disability, the knowledge missing from the social domain.

Methodology

Research will be undertaken in Dublin and will involve two stages. One stage will be an analysis of advertising. As already noted the focus is on mainstream commercial advertising, which is essentially non-disabled advertising as it is controlled by non-disabled people and is dominated by images of non-disabled people. The other will be in-depth interviews with disabled men and women to ascertain their views on advertising, their experience of disability and if and how the two combine or are interrelated at any point in time. It will be interesting to see any differences that may be gender based, as gender influences how disability is experienced (Begum, 1992). This point will be drawn out in the research, that is, if disabled men and women have different experiences of advertising. Disabled women live in a world dominated by non-disabled men. They are women in a world dominated by men and disabled in a world constructed for non-disabled people (Wendell, 1997). Morris (1991) explains that women are assigned the role of passive dependent in society and disability serves to confirm this role for women. Tighe (2001) notes how 'disabled' becomes a woman's 'master status', that is, it becomes the sole defining characteristic which serves to exclude disabled women from participation in traditional roles set out for women.

Three areas that a woman experiences differently due to being disabled are sexuality, motherhood and self-image. However, for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be solely on the area of self-image and the associated concept of body image. Begum (1992) notes that self-image is the internal concept people have of the self while body image is determined by messages we receive about how our bodies should look and behave. There is a greater focus in society on a woman's physical appearance than on a man's, and there is more stress on women achieving the perfect body. This is evidenced in advertising. However, disability potentially changes how this pressure on image is experienced. As Garland-Thomas (1997) notes, "...the disabled female figure occupies an intragender position; that is, she is not only defined against the masculine figure, but she is imagined as the antithesis of the normative woman as well" (p288). Wendell (1996) highlights how this stress on perfection is more pertinent in the life of a woman than a man; "Physical imperfection is more likely to be thought to 'spoil' a woman than a man by rendering her unattractive in a culture

where her physical appearance is a large component of a woman's value....." (pp43-44).

However, deciding on the appropriate paradigm to guide the research has been very difficult. Even though the 'emancipatory paradigm' (Stone and Priestley, 1996; Zarb, 1992) has been introduced into disability literature, there were some issues that needed to be resolved. A review of critical theory and feminism provided some insights for the research but the concept of emancipation as the overall goal of research was still a point of contention and there are certain questions that still need answering;

These are ;

- how is emancipation defined? Is it to be a positive thing, emancipation to something or a negative thing, emancipation from something? Or can the two concepts be separated? Hetrick and Lozada (1994) highlight this issue of positive or negative emancipation in terms of critical theory in general.
- Who should define what emancipation is? Is it the researcher, participant, or combined effort?
- How do you know when emancipation has occurred?
- Does emancipation imply some kind of powerful role for the researcher?

As a non-disabled researcher undertaking research in the area of disability studies, I am aware of the various issues that need to be taken into consideration (such as, the need for critical self-reflection and the recognition of non-disabled values being brought to the research process), and I have tried to be aware of these at each stage. However, I feel that choosing a goal like emancipation implies some kind of superior position of the researcher and I want to avoid falling into this trap.

Conclusion

This paper served to highlight some theoretical and methodological issues around the research question. The research will look at the exclusion of disabled people from mainstream advertising discourse and what this means to the disabled audience. Advertising is a powerful communication tool and consumer research has highlighted the impact of advertising discourse on the lives and self-image of various minority

groups. Disabled people have not been included in any previous studies of this kind. Participants for this study will be both male and female, and research will be undertaken in Dublin. However, prior to conducting any research, the various issues raised in the paper will need to be resolved.

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