Physical Disability and Physical Activity Involvement Portrayal in the Media

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Abstract: Disability media studies articulates the formation of a new field of study, based in the rich traditions of media, cultural, and disability. Television, film, current periodicals, and other mass media are a part of our everyday lives. Attitudes regarding a variety of issues can be affected by these media, not the least of which are attitudes toward disability. Media is a significant part of contemporary society and culture and is subsequently crucial to our understanding of disability. The representation of disability in the media in the last ten years is pretty much the same as it has always been: clichéd, stereotyped, and archetypal. Media representation of and for the disabled has been recharged in recent years with the expansion of new media worldwide. Interactive digital communications [such as the Internet, new varieties of voice and text telephones, social media, and digital broadcasting] have created a need to explore the constructs of media and the media relationship with disability. To explore this topic, we asked the same questions posed by scholars, how exactly does the media interact with disability and vice versa? Does the media adequately reflect the lives of people with disabilities?

Keywords: Amputation, Paralympics, CTE, Social Media, Vision Impairment, Cyberbullying, Representation

About the Authors

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1. The Paralympic Games: An Introduction

Media plays a large role in how society views elite athletes who participate in sports who also have a disability. Through the use of television, social media, and newspaper articles, perceptions and attitudes can be greatly affected. To be a part of the Paralympic Games, one must meet the impairment eligibility which can include physical or intellectual disability. Within the Paralympic Games, male elite athletes who also have a disability are shown in the media and gain more coverage than female elite athletes with disabilities [1-6]. Also, another article states, “when the Paralympic Games began, the majority of athletes were injured male soldiers and wheelchair sports…who tend to be young, high-risk-taking men” [6]. This could potentially [hopefully] change within coming years due to the change of societal attitudes towards gender equality. Additionally, the media tends to cover able-bodied elite athletes over ones that have a disability or use the term “supercrip” to describe the athletes that have a disability. On the contrary though, the media coverage for the Paralympic Games is growing significantly [7]. Over 20 million more viewers from the games in 2004 to 2016 [7]. While media coverage is still needing to improve, there has been a shift in attitudes towards broadcasting time for the Paralympic Games and the amount of coverage the media covers.
2. Amputation and the Media

One physical disability that is affected by the media is amputation disabilities. These disabilities can be congenital or acquired, but both can be positively or negatively affected by the media. With media being a large aspect of today's society, it plays a large role in how the world views people with amputations. Mainstream media has three approaches to represent this disability, which is using “supercrips”, viewing them as disadvantaged, or even viewing them as ill victims. Media has on occasion portrayed individuals with amputations to be feared and villain-like such as Hook from Peter Pan [8]. Because of this, others may view individuals with amputations in a negative way or associate them with evil and fear. Viewing amputees with the “supercrip” ideology is a better perspective, but individuals react to the concept of “supercrip” both positively and negatively. When watching the Paralympic Games, some individuals may be in awe of Paralympic Participants’ capabilities despite their disabilities, or some may view it as unrealistic goals and feel insecure about their own abilities [8]. The latter two types of individuals are more stereotypical and negative for people with amputations and cause them to feel insecure or helpless with their disability. Through research, there have been findings that using hashtags when posting to Instagram, a social media platform, creates communities within the hashtag name and everyone that uses it in their posts. Therefore, people with amputations create communities with individuals that have similarities of having an amputation. This use of social media can create communities for people to have if they need others that understand their difficulties that they face, but also bring awareness and normalize the physical disability of amputation. Three resources which elaborate on how physical activity and inclusion can be improved with individuals with amputation are [9-11].

3. Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy and the Media

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) is a disease of the brain found mostly in people who have repetitive head impacts. Athletes such as boxers, football players, and hockey numbers are higher because these sports are all involving high contact [12]. Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy affects the brain by causing memory loss, confusion, impaired judgement, aggression, and many other harmful things. With CTE becoming more popular in sports, the media has begun to show more attention to this disease – a major movie was even released recently discussing the National Football League (NFL) and the link of concussions to CTE staring movie star Will Smith (see Concussion, 2015). Sport talk shows have discussed how CTE can affect retired players and have made the youth more cautious about contact sports. Because of the rise of CTE in the media the NFL started to try to make the game safer by changing the rules of the game, making the gear worn more protective by doing this the numbers of CTE victims and players with concussions started to gradually decrease.

4. Vision Impairment and the Media

The definition for blindness is the state of condition of being unable to see because of injury, disease, or a congenital condition. Trischa Zorn, who was born blind, is one of the most decorated Paralympians of all time. Trischa has won 55 medals throughout her swimming career and is one of the most popular for her success [13]. Because of Trischa’s impact on the sports world and her marketability, there has been a positive effect in the media. When the media covers Trischa’s story in an inspiring way - because of what she has overcome to become so accomplished – the world of adapted sport is brought to the attention of individuals like her. Swimming fans across the world know about Trischa, but even people who may not be interested in sports can be inspired by her. A resource which elaborates on how physical activity and inclusion can be improved with individuals with vision impairment is [14].

5. Social Media

People living with disabilities can use their social media platform to bring awareness to their particular disabilities and their own personal issues that they deal with. There are instances of individuals with disability using Twitter for positive outreach and exchanges. One individual, Mac, has been partially deaf since the age of three. Mac has a following of thousands of people on Twitter, and uses his kind ways to bring happiness to people – thus promoting positive and a positive image of deafness and disability in general. Another example of is of a blind film critic, Tommy Edison. Edison uses social media to educate viewers about blindness. Some of the topics Edison shows is how to use an ATM or how to cross the street [15]. Because of what Edison and my Mac are doing, social media can be helpful when used to promote inclusion, acceptance, education, and compassion. A
This page contains text discussing the impact of technology on various aspects of life, with a focus on cyberbullying and representation of disabilities. It mentions the rise of remote learning due to COVID-19 and its impact on screen time and mental health, particularly for those with disabilities. It also discusses the importance of accurate and positive representations of disabilities in media, emphasizing the need for research on the nuances of disability experiences in everyday life. The text concludes with a call for more inclusive and accurate representations of disabilities in media and technology.
disabilities to speak out about their own personal experiences. Most of the time when disabilities are addressed on a social media platform, it is by an able-bodied person [21]. While there are good intentions, the message would come across more accurately by a person who has a disability. These posts about disability awareness posted by able bodied people are mostly interacted with by people with disabilities [21]. These posts offered a safe place for individuals to share their experiences. The comment section also offers support for this community; this is a tool that is special to social media and allows these people to make connections. Posts about disabilities where individuals can share their background are great because they raise awareness, break stereotypes, and start discussion [21].

Accurate representations of people with disabilities are pushing to shift digital culture into changing expectations on what is considered normal [22]. Representing people with disabilities in the media causes a disturbance in society, disabilities are not considered normal; when it is hidden, people do not have to think or confront the idea [22]. People with disabilities should be represented in an accurate, positive manner in order to educate and raise awareness to people who are not affected. For society to recognize disabilities as normal, people with disabilities should share their story and experiences. Giving this community a voice and accurate representation, will change the societal expectation of normal.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

There can be hope for change. Social media offers for participation from all groups of people and allows these people to interact and learn from each other. With the evolution of technology, there have been websites specifically designed for people with disability to interact [23]. These social media networks are not as widespread as other social media networks but are very beneficial because they allow the individuals to make connections and friendships while reinforcing social constructs such as sharing life experiences, empathy and reciprocity [23]. The dilemma is most people with intellectual disability do not have access to the internet, it was found that only 6% of people with intellectual disability use the internet regularly. The large network of social media offers opportunities for the younger generation with disability greater opportunities for inclusion [23]. Often, the natural instinct when seeing someone with a disability is to look or turn away. Society has the narrative that disabilities are not normal. With recent campaigns to raise awareness to disabilities, the "boundary" of normal is being pushed.

Additionally, there is a need for educational institutions to consider social media-enriched learning environments. By default, designers and developers of virtual learning environments tend to design for learners without disabilities. The consequences for learners with disabilities are enormous. The challenges that learners with disabilities face when interacting with learning systems is present and stronger than ever [24]. With the change we have faced in online education, the rise of cyber and media disability is increasingly growing every day.

References


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Yes

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