

**POWER OFF:
The Modern Media and the Slippery Slope of Disability Representation**

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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The Modern Media and the Slippery Slope of Disability Representation

The purpose of this project is to explore the representation of disability in various media formats. With the continued discussion of representation of marginalized groups in the media, it is important to consider the community of disability in a persuasive and pervasive outlet such as the media. Using feminist standpoint theory, feminist disability theory and intersectional theory, this study is grounded in learning how disability is a piece of the puzzle of a person and how that piece is often misrepresented and misinformed.

In reviewing episodic media, a popular and dominant part of the media culture, it became easy to see that disability representation is negative, isolating and easily misconstrued by the audience. In order to gain stronger representation in society and in the media, changes must be made to those representations so that they construct a more realistic picture of the lives of people with a disability.

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INTRODUCTION

The media have a long history of participating in the oppression of marginalized groups through their representation of dominant and/or intolerant prejudices about multiple identity categories, including gender, race, and class, among other markers. These identifications are structural and experiential sources of oppression, showing a complex relationship between the communities in society. The crux of this paper lies in identity and the communities that take on an identity or have one imposed upon them.

Much research has been done on the relationships between the media and various marginalized groups, the history and the changing face of the media that use these groups in order to evoke a particular response from the viewer, such as sympathy or pity. One identity category that has not been given enough attention, both in terms of media representation and critical, scholarly research, is disability. Representations of those with disability remain static, demonstrating an unrealistic viewpoint. Where are the realistic representations in the media? And why is there such a dearth of research in the humanities about the relationship – or lack thereof – between the media and representations of disability?

The media reflect and reconstruct for society a vision of what is normal, helping to create or perpetuate this vision. The vision of normal is supposed to represent an image that is ideally universal, one that will be relatable to by most people in society and allow them to connect to a vision that is created through an image or a series of pictures. These images can be constructed in something short like an advertisement or commercial or in longer modes such as a television show or a movie. The image that is often constructed as normal is a representation and idealization of a stick-thin white person,

who has the privilege of money, is straight and has full bodily autonomy. This “universal” image is rather specific and is not accessible to most people. How is it that “normal” has been constructed based on such a small portion of the American population?

Considering representations of disability in the media is important in seeing what images are being shown to society, what images are giving people the conception of what the differently abled experience is like and how these images of disability further reinforce forms of bodily and social ideals – ideals that do not include disability as a part of “normality.” Disability as distinctly not “normal” can be seen throughout the media, hence why I have chosen to study the media and its reconstruction of images of disability. As the different forms of media are vast and varied, I have chosen to focus on what I call “episodic media,” because this type of media functions on an immediate level. Media that are immediate are important to consider because the images and representations of people are created to entice the viewer. They persuade and seduce more than force the viewer to pay attention as there is little time in which to engage them, so the image must be one that will be remembered and the ways in which these images are presented can be exaggerated as a result.

The forms of media that fall into episodic media are generally easily accessible to a multitude of people, whether on the television or on the internet. Episodic media are media that are short in time, created for the general public for entertainment or sales and are vehicles for both creating fads and reflecting popular trends in society. The media are capable of having the role of both a leader and a follower when trends, ideas and perspectives are involved. The media forms that fall under the category of episodic

media that I will explore are television shows, music videos and television commercials. These three examples of episodic media demonstrate more realistic representations of disability, but still fall remarkably short of what a differently abled person's lived experience may actually be. Having realistic representations can create progress in equalizing disability groups in society by creating an awareness of the groups that allow other groups of people more access to information and knowledge. The more people learn about each other, the more "normal" difference becomes.

It is important to define "differently abled" as a term used in this paper and how it and other terms that name or signify disability may be used. When using words like disability, disabled or other words that describe people who have physical differences, there is always a chance of using a word or phrase that is not entirely comfortable for those in the community of which I (or others) am speaking. I know from my own experience as a hearing impaired individual that it was once considered correct to use the term "hearing impaired". Recently, however, the term has become disputed, as to use "impaired" might signify there is something wrong with this disability and/or the person with this disability, so the new term of the moment is "hard of hearing", a reversion to a term in vogue decades ago. I must be honest; if there is a newer term or phraseology, I am not aware of it. There is a distinction between hard of hearing and deaf, yet many people do not make that distinction and automatically lump those of us who have a hearing impairment into the deaf identifying category, which is not medically correct. I use medically because in some respects it may be socially correct as there are some people who do not see or care about the differences and consider that an ear problem is an ear problem, enough said.

It follows that it is also socially incorrect to automatically combine groups together based on a very small connection, such as ears, because such generalizing automatically creates a potential for misrepresentation and ignorance of the actual disability that a person may have. As many disability activists reject medical terminology, designations and authority, it is important to regard both the medical and social needs of being correct in terms of identification, identity, and the terminology used to designate physical differences. I use this example because it demonstrates that there are terms that have different definitions, yet seem to be interchangeable for “normal” society. I apologize at the outset if I use a term that is not entirely correct in this day and age, or that might potentially upset some readers. I will use the word disability to describe those who have a disability as defined in the medical field, generally focusing on physical disabilities in this paper. I will use differently abled as opposed to disabled when discussing social conditions or concerns. This is a personal choice, but on the same note it is also a political one because designations such as these are important to think about and discuss, not only within the disability community, but within society as a whole. To label an individual as disabled connotes that a person who has a disability is not able to do many things and the term becomes the person, the seemingly only identifier. Having a disability of my own and knowing my own capabilities, I know this to be untrue in many respects. Yes, there may be choices that I have to make differently, but this does not mean I am not capable; it simply means that I am differently abled. When I write fully abled, this means that there is not a physical disability that is easily visible or that has been normalized into not appearing to be a disability, e.g. those wearing glasses or who are quite tall.

The question can be asked: why use disability, but not disabled? The answer lies in identity. A disability is a condition or other bodily difference that someone has, thereby obliging the person to claim the disability as part of their identity. Disabled is a word that is cast upon the person with a disability, becoming their identity with a stigma attached to it that judges that individual as not normal. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson shares, “The measure of all things human, normal is the central concept governing the status and the value of people in late modernity.” (Garland-Thomson 2007) While this specific article discusses how shape creates stories or vice versa, this concept of normalcy creating the “right” shape leads to the idea that identity, positive identity, is founded upon a “normal” body. Taking this a step farther demonstrates that not having the “right” shape will ultimately result in having a negative identity, a negative view of the self. “Normal” has morphed into an aspiration that requires one to take whatever means necessary to become this standard, whether surgically or at the cost of a healthy lifestyle.

The exploration of this paper will critically examine the identities of the characters being shown in my episodic media examples, the reality of the representation and the perception cast upon these characters. Key themes that will be specifically explored are those of isolation, inability to do things and acceptance. Through this exploration, I have chosen to limit how many models of media to study, as going in depth as to each example is more illustrative than approaching every example that may exist in showing disability. I have chosen four examples to delve into in researching and analyzing for this project. There are no perfect examples, therefore, the purpose of my choices lies in what is popular and what made me think – therefore, what can I pass onto you to think about as well. My ultimate purpose is not to be “right” or “wrong,” but

rather to spur conversations by asking you to think about the examples I am presenting and adding your vantage point to the conversation.

CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

Will there be answers? Or more questions?

The purpose of this research is to examine disability in recent popular media, examining specific episodic media formats of television shows, television commercials and music videos. The central question is: What are the social implications of the images of disability being shown in episodic media? This question specifically holds no opinion. When I first set out on this project, I held few expectations for what the media would show me. I knew that historically disability has been represented negatively in the media, but hoped for the best in seeing stronger, more realistic representations. I wanted to see what the media would show me, see what themes emerged and approached the viewings with an open mind. I did think that the media would show more realistic representations as, generally speaking, society and media have become more progressive in their representations and enfranchisements, with other marginalized groups such as women and the LGBTQQ community gaining more recognition. While this recognition is not always positive, the fact that the recognition is occurring on television, in the news and being talked about in society is a step beyond invisible and hidden.

Ultimately, I want to consider how the body is being used to create the representation of disability and ultimately how it is used to construct what is considered the normal body in society. The media are used to present “the” body, which is typically both revealed to be and constructed as the idealized body. “The” body,” as depicted especially in entertainment media, has become a way to articulate the culture of the time. A body, not specifically “the,” is a “direct locus of social control.” (Bordo 2003) This argument suggests that the body is not simply a thing that exists, but is rather a malleable

being that can be manipulated. The ideals of culture (often heavily touted in the media) are enacted upon the body, such as the ideal of being thin. The media are a source of social control, a means through which to dictate what is ideal or normal, what is beautiful and what is necessary to everyday life in the lives of the viewers. As such, it is important to examine how the media are used to extend the boundaries of what is considered ideal, and, thus, what is normal.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH STAGING

Methodology

The research in this paper will be conducted as a comparative cultural object analysis. I will be analyzing four cultural objects: a television show, a music video and two commercials. The four choices are: the television show *Glee*, Lady Gaga's "Paparazzi" music video, a Kay Jeweler's commercial and a Pepsi commercial. All four have aired since 2005, marking them as very current to the time of writing this paper. As I am looking to representations of disability in the media now versus another time period, having recent examples proved important.

Episodic media is a format of media that is heavily viewed via the television or the internet. As noted already and as a short reminder, episodic media are a type of media that tell a story in a short period of time while selling some type of product, whether an external one or the episodic media itself. Television shows, music videos and commercials are heavily viewed both on television and the internet, which make them powerful modes of entertainment for people short on time or needing a quick entertainment break from other life demands. With technology providing a multitude of ways to watch these episodic media formats, they are widely viewed by numerous subsets of the population.

I have chosen to do a funnel style analysis of the media. Television shows come first as they have the longest period of time to set up a storyline and follow it through. Many shows can be stand alone shows, where you do not need to have viewed the prior shows to buttress the episode being watched, which means there is only the 30 or 60 minute time slot (not including commercials) to develop the storyline. Other television

shows do have a continuous storyline, although these will often have a quick introduction scene of what has already happened, so the viewer can begin watching at any point in the season. Music videos are the next longest format. While some are short, others can run to up to 10 minutes long. Many music videos these days contain a storyline, some message that the artist is attempting to publicize. Whether the video always pertains directly to the song is debatable, as often the video adds deeper or different meaning to the song. Music videos have recently made a comeback (after declining since the '90s) as a popular form of visual entertainment with the ability to view them online on popular sites such as youtube.com. The final consideration of episodic media is of television commercials, the closest in relation to print advertisements, as the purpose of both is to directly sell a product to the viewer. Often 30-60 seconds long, commercials have only a few seconds to set-up and complete a storyline, all the while trying to convince the viewer to buy the product by connecting the viewer to the bodies being presented in the commercial.

For each type of media, I have identified one specific example through which I will explore how disability is portrayed. For television, I have chosen *Glee*, a show that aired its first season beginning in the fall of 2009. This show is the most current of popular television shows visualizing a disability. I will place my emphasis on one particular episode and select scenes from other episodes. To highlight music videos, I have chosen Lady Gaga's, "Paparazzi." I will consider the visual narrative of video (not the lyrics) and will offer a critique of how Lady Gaga uses disability as a fully abled person. And finally, in discussing commercials, I will focus on a Kay Jewelers

commercial that aired during the holiday season of 2009, as well as a Pepsi commercial aired during the Super Bowl in 2008.

In each of these, the way in which disability is portrayed will be explored. There are positive moments to be seen throughout the analysis, but the overarching analysis shows distinct problems in the representation of disability. The representations, both positive and negative, need to be reviewed in order to see what themes/scenes/actions can be continued and perpetuated in other media forms, as well as determining exactly what is problematic about the negative views, in order to provide a means by which the representations can be made stronger and more positive. Ultimately, the goal is for the representations of the lived experiences of those with disabilities can be created in a more realistic fashion.

I am looking at episodic media for two specific reasons. The first reason is that the format is fast paced. These media types provide entertainment in a short period of time, holding people's attention so that they remember the product, the message or even the representation of the person being displayed. The more popular the product, star or show, the more an individual viewing the media will recognize or identify with aspects from it, whether this means buying the product when at the store, dressing like the star seen in the media or making assumptions about the way of life of a person who's lifestyle is different than his or her own.

The second reason for considering these three forms of media is for logistical purposes. There are a multitude of media in existence, making it difficult to research all of them. Ranging from articles in newspapers to movies, the entertainment world has a wide range of ways of reaching individuals, attempting to attract them to their product or

to inform them of trends and norms, including what could be the expansion of those norms to include disability. Popular television, music videos and commercials are all short, mostly fictional attempts to attract customers and establish or reflect social norms. I realize that television has a wide variety of shows, including those that are factual or realistic accounts of people, nature or things. There may be shows on the Discovery or Nature channels discussing disability, but these shows are not widely talked about nor do they necessarily reflect and reproduce social norms.

The biggest disagreement that I can foresee with my media choices is my omission of movies from critical analysis. Why wouldn't I include movies as a choice, as they are incredibly popular and have a history of showing disability and hiring actors/actresses with disabilities. While this may be true, the employment of actors with disabilities remains a kind of tokenism as people with disabilities are rarely included in film, even if the theme of disability is present in the film. One reason I have chosen not to focus on film is that movies have a longer time to create a storyline and character base than a television show, music video or commercial. Of the three types of media I will be analyzing, television shows are the most closely related to movies. A television show may have all season to create a storyline and character base, but this requires the viewer to recall what happened the previous weeks and be aware of the progression of the show, whereas in a movie, it is all happening in just a few short hours. A television show either has to be able to stand alone or allude to what happened in the previous weeks in order to continue to gain viewers who do not wish to feel like they have missed anything. In television shows that do have a continuous storyline, there is a repetition in the development of the characters – with the necessity for a message about what happened

the last time on the show – something a movie does not need. Because of these distinctions, movies do not fit in with the episodic media format and the focus of this paper in studying media that are short and create or reflect trends in society. Movies were not a media choice early on in this review, but the choices of why not are necessary to address as movies are a popular and prevalent part of society, as seen by the billions of dollars they can compile in a single weekend.

CHAPTER 3: IDENTITY IN THE MEDIA MATTERS

Importance of this subject

Society looks to the media to inform them of trends and provide guidance about societal issues and people unlike themselves. The media are used as a means by which to establish this guidance, both directly and indirectly. The mass media culture is rich in representations of how people should present themselves. By simply viewing the media, it can be seen from the way the media are presented that people are constantly watching/reading/engaging in the various forms. There are those who consciously look to the media to dictate what is popular. Then there are the unconscious viewings of media, where we are constantly bombarded by images and assimilate those images into our daily routines with nary a thought. When the media misinforms society about a marginalized group, which many people may take as truth, it creates or perpetuates a stereotype that is false and becomes harder to eradicate. The more people see the falsity, the more they internalize that perspective of others; for example, seeing a person with a disability on a television show as pitiful and incapable of helping himself might mean that they will then see the person with a disability on the street as the same. This needs to change. Every group deserves realistic representations, not representations that perpetuate a false negativity, but that establish a representation according to the group's own terms.

Dominant groups in the media have a multitude of representations made of them. An excellent example lies in white people. Removing any other identifying factors for a moment, there are jokes, insinuations and thoughtless situations made frequently about this group of people. But on the same note, there are many positive stories,

representations and situations that create a glowing impression. This group is able to absorb the negative perceptions because it is already an established group that holds power in society on many levels. Until such time as other groups, marginalized groups, have the same kind of ability to weather the negative representations and allow the positive to dominate, it is important to ensure there are enough positive representations in entertainment media that give society the opportunity to see realistic versus theatrical or stereotypical representations.

Print media are not discussed as a form of entertainment media in this paper, but there is one print media format that underscores the importance of studying disability in the media and making it accessible to all people. It comes in the form of a family comic strip, "Baby Blues." (Kirkman and Scott n.d.) This particular strip shows the mother and Zoe, a seven or eight year old girl, talking while sitting on a bed. Zoe and her mother are talking about clothing. Zoe asks, "Why can't everybody be different?" The mother responds, "Well, you could be different." Zoe leans into her mother and asks, "Why can't we all be different together?" Such a simple strip and yet it speaks volumes. Why can't we all be different together? Why can't we all accept differences as the norm? I realize this sounds about as unrealistic as world peace sounds to some, but every step in the direction of equality, every step in the direction of creating difference as the standard of normal, is a strong step. The media have a role in stepping forward to achieve such a goal and it is important to note their complicit actions in not helping to take this step.

CHAPTER 4: THE THEORY BEHIND IT ALL

The media uses bodies that are relatable, that sell. As Nicholas Mirzeoff notes, “[Visual culture] is not just a part of your everyday life, it is your everyday life.” (Mirzoeff 1999) Every day people are bombarded with images and slogans, tools that companies use in the hope of persuading the viewing consumers to buy their products. By using body images in advertisements that are either relatable to or representative of ideals of “normal”, the companies creating the entertainment make a statement on what is acceptable in and to society. If a body image is absent or ignored, then that body is deemed not acceptable. The theoretical frameworks of feminist and disability theories are especially important in considering the role, or lack thereof, of disability in episodic media.

The epistemological vantage point of this paper draws from feminist standpoint theory, feminist disability theory and intersectional theory. It is only within the last 10 years or so that disability as a scholarly concern has moved out of the realm of only medical authority and become an object of sociological studies. My choice to intersect these theories is to pay particular attention to how the premise of feminist standpoint theory lends itself to disability and how that can be applied to continue studying disability and its implications on a societal level. There has been a theoretical field developed specifically integrating disability and feminist theories, denoting that I am certainly not the first to consider disability and feminist theories as capable of being intertwined, however, this academic intersection is a very recent development and much previous feminist research has often ignored disability. “Why should feminists care about disability theory? Because feminists have missed the fact that disabled women’s issues

are different than abled bodied women's issues.” (Schriempf 2001) Recent feminist research and academic pursuit have considered how women (and men) have numerous facets that make up their identity and that it is the intersection of these facets that give each person a separate (but as important as the next) lived experience. To have not considered disability while considering race, class, sexuality and other indexes of community and identity is to leave out an important group and experience. Others have begun to add to the feminist literature on disability and the goal of this analysis is to continue to add to that literature.

Feminist standpoint theory can easily incorporate disability issues, in that it argues that the framework for study in the social sciences should stem from the specific standpoint of women or groups of women. (Jaggar 2008) Feminist standpoint theory argues that studies should initiate from the epistemological standpoint of women. Feminist standpoint theory can either reference the group of women as a whole or communities of women within the larger woman structure. This feminist framework allows for a group of people to have a functional level of solidarity – a quality in common from which to move forward in fighting for equality. By applying this to disability, stepping away from the gendered aspect of feminist standpoint theory, we can look at the standpoint of differently abled people. Those who fall under the disability heading can work together, using the disability part of their identity to connect to each other, to create a stronger presence in the media or to fight for more realistic representations of their group/s.

Standpoint theory is a theory of knowledge, one that can be used in conjunction with other theories to create a more representative, objective account of the world. The

perspectives of marginalized individuals/groups are often invalidated as compared to those groups that have more social power, the social construction as is giving the brunt of the power to white, straight males who are rich.

A criticism of feminist standpoint theory lies in that there is no one standpoint to explain every person in a group of people. To explain, I have a disability, a hearing impairment and one of my friends has a learning disorder, also a disability. We both have a disability, but they have different effects on us, have shaped us differently and we have each experienced different manifestations of negativity and positivity in our lives – not simply because the disabilities themselves are different, but because the other parts of our identity are different. This criticism is an important one to acknowledge, but, I think one that can be used for the purposes of solidarity. While our identities may be different, it does not mean that we cannot stand together to acknowledge/perform/have disability, request change in the media or other parts of society or more. There is rarely a single standpoint, but differing standpoints can certainly work together to effect change – such as demanding that the media make changes in their representations.

Feminist standpoint theory can be married to feminist disability theory for the purposes of this research as both recognize that marginalized epistemological standpoints must be considered – feminist disability theory hones that concept to disability specifically. Rosemarie Garland Thomson is a leading researcher in disability studies and outlines a feminist disability theory that challenges the overt assumption that disability is a problem or a negative difference in her essay “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” in the anthology Gendering Disability, . (Garland-Thomson 2004) She first notes that “Feminist theorists all too often do not recognize

disability in their litanies of identities that inflect the category of woman.” (Garland-Thomson 2004) Many feminist theories are expressly formulated to cross boundaries, to consider differences, multiple marginalized groups, yet disability is often left out or not acknowledged. There are numerous reasons why groups are marginalized or forgotten. In the case of disability, normative bodied groups could refuse to acknowledge disability because they see a disconnect between the communities under the disability heading. These same normative bodied groups, or even other marginalized groups, could only see disability as a medical group, not as a social condition or as a marker of identity similar to race, class, gender and/or sexuality. It can become an excuse to refuse all peoples in their studies and considerations. This is not to say that all or any problems will be rectified if those in the disability community would consider joining together under a singular identifying heading. But, if this type of perspective is considered WITH other perspectives, then a different, maybe stronger answer can be formed in how to create better representations. A strong way to combat ignorance or prejudice is to know how your “opponent” thinks or feels so as not to become like those who oppress you by ignoring their standpoint.

Disability is often seen as something “wrong” about someone, something not normal, which is a portrayal that often comes across in the media. Garland Thomson notes, “A feminist disability theory denaturalizes disability by unseating the dominant assumption that disability is something that is wrong with someone.” (Garland Thomson 2004) She clarifies the use of this critical theory, noting that representation structures reality. While the lived experience of an individual is the actual reality, the representation of the lived experiences creates the reality in/for society, such as the

representation in the media creating the reality. This lends credence to the notion that the media both reflects and constructs reality. Garland Thomson specifically notes that the margins define the center, in this case, normal -- disability on one end, complete lack of disability on the other (perfection) -- the two poles establishing what denotes normal. Disability is on the negative end of the spectrum, the negative pole of what is normal and creates the problem of disability in society being seen as negative, not normal, otherwise not a necessary component of society. Garland Thomson further notes that cultural femininity is denied to women who have disabilities because of their perceived lack of sexuality and inability to care for children. Disability is neither feminine or masculine, it is a classification on its own, one that seems to be evacuated from normative gender roles and proscriptions/expectations. This perception reminds us that it remains pertinent to change the representations of disability in the media so that the created reality in society is one that is realistic versus one that is negative or false.

A final theoretical consideration lies in intersectional theory, or intersectionality. The precepts of this theory have been alluded to throughout both standpoint and feminist disability theories. Intersectionality is a complex theory that has numerous proponents of it, although there are also numerous criticisms. It will be considered from the point of how it will be used and the considerations of it that are assisting in guiding this paper. Intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to “denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s employment experiences.” (Crenshaw 1995) Race, class and gender are all constructed by the other – there is no one that is more important in constructing identity than the other. Each works together to create the whole of the person claiming each

identity, or having that identity placed upon them. Intersectional theory has been expanded to include various social strata and how they intersect to create a person. Disability constructs race, class and gender as much as race, class and gender construct disability. Disability, as a social marker of oppression, is often described using terms delineated from other marginalized groups – myself being guilty of this in using feminist standpoint theory to help construct a way in which to consider disability. This is not a negative circumstance, but rather one to be considered in that very rarely, if ever, does a social strata stand alone. There is rarely JUST a disability problem or JUST a woman problem – there are multiple problems that all need to be considered in light of the other, as well as the solutions to these problems.

CHAPTER 5: LITERATURE TO EXPLAIN VISUAL SCENES

Literature review

The explorations into disability in the field of sociology have been varied. The reason for such variance lies in the fact that there has not seemed to be the same interest in researching disability as there has been for other marginalized groups. I surmise this may be the circumstance because disability has not been recognized as a social community in the same ways that gender and race have been. In researching for this topic of disability in the media, there was not the same amount of scholarship as easily found as with gender and race – of which there were a plethora of articles and studies published and easily accessible. Finding articles and studies revolving around the intersection of disability and the media proved to be more difficult. This could be an error on my part, in terms of not knowing where to look or what search terms to utilize to find the most useful articles, but this does not negate the fact that articles surrounding disability were not as lengthy, as in-depth or as easily found. Rosemarie Garland Thomson brought the subject of disability to critical consciousness with her works in the 1990's. While research had been done prior to this, it is with Garland Thomson that disability research became more firmly established as an issue of critical attention in the social sciences.

The exploration into disability in episodic media is a fresh and current manner in which to study disability. While there has not been a study done on exactly the same media format for me to reference, I can certainly consider other disability studies, as well as media studies that utilize other marginalized groups, especially in the media form of advertising. Race and gender are two identity categories that have been studied in depth

of the roles of women and non-white ethnicities in the media. One example that departs from the episodic media I will explore lies in print advertisements. Print advertisements, especially those in magazines, remain rife with pictures of what beauty is expected to be: thin, white and with little to no bodily imperfections. As Susan Bordo notes, “The endless commercials and advertisements we believe we pay no attention to,” (Bordo 2003) are the very same advertisements that we not only pay attention to, but allow to affect our choices, whether it is in what to buy, what to look like or how to act. Further, the advertising companies “understand that you can be as cynical as you want about the advertisements... and still feel powerless to resist their messages.” (Bordo 2003) This sums up exactly how the advertising companies view the public, as malleable beings who will submit to their control. I would go so far as to say that the media as a whole understands that we are malleable beings who feel “powerless to resist their messages.” If the messages being presented ignore certain identities, then those lack of messages are consumed as much as those being presented, meaning that the lack of realistic representations of disability further reinforces the social and cultural invisibility of disability. Disability becomes a group without an identity. In considering standpoint theory, this becomes an opportunity for the disability community to claim an identity that is suitable for a realistic representation in the media. It may be similar to an identity that has already been claimed or it could be one that aligns the various groups within the disability community to share in a similar identity for purposes of gaining more representational media attention.

Identity can take on different meanings based on with whom you speak, whether we each hold the same or similar identity, can create our own identity or have our identity

created for us by others. Steven Seidman discusses identity within the construct of Queer Theory, explaining a key tenet of how identity can be used. Seidman shares, “Identities are never fixed or stable, not only because they elicit otherness but because they are occasions of continuing social struggle.” (Seidman 1997) Identity becomes more than something you ascribe to yourself, it becomes something that someone else ascribes to you, but more, what society ascribes to you. Furthermore, by having the claim of an identity or opting to claim an identity for purposes of solidarity, the social struggle that Seidman references continues. Identity can be used as a means by which to demand social change – regardless of whether a group ascribes the identity to themselves or integrates an identity given to them by society. The media perpetuates this social struggle by either ignoring the disability group or by ascribing identifying factors to the group that may not be realistic or truthful.

The identity of disability has often been considered as only a medical condition, not necessarily as a cultural identity. It is something you physically have, but nothing more. Mark Jeffreys considers the theoretical view of constructivism in his research, making “possible the argument that disability is itself not so much a pathological or even biological condition as it is a cultural condition, a marginalized group identity that has a history of oppression and exclusion, a stigmatized category created to serve the interests of the dominant ideology and its privileged classes.” (Jeffreys 2002) I would argue that disability is a pathological, biological AND cultural condition. Disability is a pathological or biological condition as denoted in medical research based on the type of disability. Cultural disability describes not only the treatment that differently abled people receive, but in how the words ascribed to them are used in society. Words like

‘retard,’ ‘cripple’ and even ‘fatty’ are attributed to people with disabilities, yet more commonly directed at fully abled people as an insult or in a joking manner. These words further the stigmas against those who have disabilities. While these words are not just used against those who have disabilities, they further the stigma and continue the prevalence of false representation and negative social perception of people who have a disability.

The reason people use words like these to denigrate others is to reassert their fully abled superior status. As Garland Thomson notes, “*disability* functions to preserve and validate such privileged designations as beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent – all of which provide cultural capital to those who can claim such status, who can reside within these subject positions.” (Garland-Thomson 2004) These designations are promoted or disseminated in the media. There is no better place to look for the ‘perfect’ body according to society’s standards than in entertainment media.

Those in the privileged position are the people who are considered normal. Lennard J. Davis tells us that “*normal* appeared in English only about 150 years ago... Before the rise of the concept of normalcy, there appears not to have been a concept of the normal; instead the regnant paradigm was one revolving around the word *ideal*... The key point is that in a culture of the ideal, physical imperfections are seen not as absolute but part of a descending continuum from top to bottom.” (Davis 2002) I think we have both now. Normal is the run of the mill center, where most people are considered to be. Yet, there is an ‘ideal,’ an ultimate goal of beauty and intrigue that everyone is encouraged to occupy, or at the very least, to aspire to become.

Disability in the public eye, as a source of ridicule or shock, has been in existence for hundreds of years, the antithesis of ideal or normal. In Rosemarie Garland Thomson's collection Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body, the various authors examine the history, effects and success of using bodies that were considered abnormal as public entertainment in side/freak shows. As Garland Thomson discovered as written by Leslie Fiedler, "the strangely formed body has represented absolute Otherness in all times and places since human history has began." (Fiedler 1996) The bodies being presented in the "freak shows" were the extreme on the side of the disability, creating a show of spectacles.

The exaggerated, sensationalized discourse that is the freak show's essence ranged over the seemingly singular bodies that we would now call either "physically disabled" or "exotic ethnics," framing them and heightening their differences from viewers, who were rendered comfortably common and safely standard by the exchange. Freak discourse structured a cultural ritual that seized upon any deviation from the typical, embellishing and intensifying it to produce a human spectacle whose every somatic feature was laden with significance before the gaping spectator. (Thomson 1996)

We return to this concept of the ideal, the normal, all the while creating the different body into something amazing, not because it is wonderful, but because it is grotesque. As Garland Thomson herself notes in another work, "Disabled people have variously been objects of awe, scorn, terror, delight, inspiration, pity, laughter, or fascination – but they have always been stared at." (Garland Thomson 2002) As far back as the "freakery" days, it has been socially acceptable to stare at the different body, the body that is not like everybody else's or at least not like the fantasy ideal of what the body should be, the "normal" body. Whether it be in the media or otherwise, staring is an appropriate action when presented with the appearance of the not normal body. When

the media misrepresents the body with a disability, or the lived experience, it only serves to continue to allow for this behavior, this action of staring.

Staring does not only have to apply to the bodies with a disability, but ones that have obesity or obvious skin markers that are not “normal.” Staring extends itself into the media because people are allowed to stare in private, then choose whether to discuss it with others. If millions of people were to see a show, commercial or other media about sexuality, obesity or disability, many would go on to have a discussion about it. Rosalind Gill suggests that the social issues of contemporary life disappear in entertainment media as simply social dilemmas (Gill 2007) – ones that can be pared down to less of a social concern than it actually is. I agree that the social issues of contemporary life disappear in entertainment media as social dilemmas, at times. But I think the concept of social issues of contemporary life disappearing in the media goes further than that. Acknowledging the social issue in any respect, whether positive or negative, opens the door for more discussions, ideas and actions to create a more equal society. While entertainment media may try to ignore the social “issue” part of the equation, ignoring the fight that may be occurring in society around the issue, by acknowledging it, even negatively, they create an opportunity in which to more critically consider that “issue”.

There is a significant body of work that discusses the effect of the media on people, much of this research specifically considering women and teenagers; how race and sexuality are invisible or second-class in the public sphere; and the changing world of food affecting both the rate of eating disorders and obesity. These bodies of work are important to consider when looking at why the media may be showing only certain types of bodies and ignoring others, realizing that there is a history of ignorance that continues.

My specific avenue of research looks at disability, a marginalized group in society, much like the bodies presented in the research that has already been done. The ignorance of certain groups that is perpetuated allows for these groups to remain hidden, invisible, placed in the “other” category. Being placed in this category negates positive representations when they do happen, because this “other” stigma overcomes the potential positive effect. A more pronounced, realistic view of these communities could create more opportunities to negate that “other” category.

It is not simply ignorance that is perpetuated in mainstream media, but the theme of isolation. Martin F. Norden discusses the isolation of those with disabilities in his [The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies](#). While this paper does not concentrate on the movies, the theme of isolation is one that is consistently seen throughout the media being explored. Norden shares that moviemakers (and I would argue, most media outlets) edit their work to show a distinctly able-bodied point of view. “This strategy has a two-fold effect: it enhances the disabled characters’ isolation and ‘Otherness’ by reducing them to objectifications of pity, fear, scorn, etc... and it contributes to a sense of isolation and self-loathing among audience members with disabilities.” (Norden 1994) He further notes that these stereotypes have become so pervasive that they have become mainstream society’s perception of people who have disabilities. The media has become so central in people’s lives that the stereotypes created and perpetuated have supplanted the actual lived experiences of those who do have a disability. The social implication of disability representation extends deep into the recesses of society. As has been shown, the media is extraordinarily pervasive in the everyday lives of those in society, regardless of the body type or identity that people

hold. To continually show isolation, or to show nothing at all, is to create that pervasive image of disability as non-existent or, worse, inconsequential to the daily workings of society other than to provide a means of entertainment or a reminder to breathe a sigh of relief at the normalcy of your own life – as disability is the negative end of the normalcy pole.

With negative and often false images being constantly bombarded in society, whether through the television, computer, on a billboard, or in a magazine, it is no wonder that there are people who are confused as to how to respond to such stimulation. With such a media-centric socialization, people turn to the media for guidance in how to navigate coping with the world around them and their own sense of self. When the media presents conflicting images, people then have to navigate the issues in their own ways. Coleman explores ways that females relate to images, not simply as a separate entity, but the way “in which bodies are known, understood and experienced *through* images, that is, the ways in which bodies *become* through their relations with images.” (Coleman 2008) The concept of understanding the body through an image demonstrates the value placed on the image being viewed. When there is that emotional connection, the value of the image becomes more than just an advertisement or a piece of paper, it becomes a potential want or need within the viewer. Socialization teaches that appearance is an important aspect in the definition of self and in the way others and the self are viewed. (Clay, Vignoles and Dittmar 2005) Eating disorders and obesity are two concerns many women and young girls have to grapple with that seem to be compounded by media; women are exposed to a prevalence of stick thin models yet have access to more food and bigger portion sizes, a very clear example of how the media can affect change, in a marked way. People like to

think of the media as not important or simply available for entertainment purposes, not realizing how they consume this entertainment and its implicit or explicit messages and assimilate those thoughts/opinions/representations in their daily lives. Disability is not often shown in the media, and this invisibility speaks volumes when a person stares at someone walking/wheeling down the street who may not look exactly like them.

The media is not the end-all, be-all of changing society. It is, however, a tool and a strong one at that, in changing the conversations we have about social issues, representations and the lived experiences of people. Media can be utilized to show realistic representations of disability, giving society access to people as they are, not as others see them.

CHAPTER 6: *GLEE*, A TELEVISION PHENOM

As television shows are the longest of the media I am exploring, this section will be the largest part of my specific analyses. *Glee* is a season-long show that builds on previous episodes, doing a recap at the beginning of each show about what has recently happened (although it does help to have seen previous episodes.) As such, there are numerous examples that I can analyze, for example a regular and central character on the show is in a wheelchair and the show quite consciously includes disability issues and considerations into its fictional universe.

Glee is a fictional television show that airs on FOX. “From Ryan Murphy, the creator of ‘Nip/Tuck’ and ‘Popular,’ comes GLEE, a one-hour musical comedy that follows an optimistic high school teacher as he tries to transform the school’s Glee Club and inspire a group of ragtag performers to make it to the biggest competition of them all: Nationals.” (Fox Network 2010) From this short description, rather little is known about the show other than it has music, it is placed in a high school setting, the teacher in charge is male and the students are “ragtag,” whatever that may mean. In analyzing *Glee*, I will first introduce the premise of this show and what the viewer sees, before dissecting the disability storylines, under subheadings of different themes or topics that arise on the show. The set-up will not be chronological, as there are three episodes that showcase disability, one that centers on disability and two that include instances of it. The show had already had token episodes surrounding the black character and the gay character; it was time for one focusing on the differently abled character. The remainder of the episodes center on the attractive, white, able-bodied characters. The intersection of privilege within these characters represents mainstream society and what mainstream

society considers important. It is a continuation of the power structure currently in place in society that places attractive, white, able-bodied people at the top – adding another point of privilege, rich. This delineation that each marginalized character, representing a marginalized group, deserves only one episode to delve into their differences is problematic in and of itself by allowing for the concept that each group can have only a small moment in the spotlight, be given only a bit of recognition, before fading into the background. The concentration of the analysis is on the themes being discussed within *Glee*. The themes that will be considered are: isolation, pity and tragedy. The analysis will round out with a discussion of song choice. Isolation, pity and tragedy were specifically chosen as each of these themes played a consistent and prominent role in each episode that displayed Artie, the main character with a disability. As the show is a musical, song choice has to be considered and why the writers would choose a specific song for the circumstance in which it was sung.

THE CHARACTERS

These “ragtag” students are an interesting mix of marginalized groups and otherwise stereotyped high school students. It is important to consider these characters each in their own element in order to explore that there is not only one marginalized group appearing in the show (disability.) The characters are the root of the show; they are the performers, the ones who are living the insanity of high school life.

The female lead is white and attractive and an obnoxious overachiever who must have her own way. The male lead is white and attractive, a football quarterback who is the captain of the team and who is not always the most astute in the bunch. There are three cheerleaders in the Glee Club, more so to spy for their coach, but they each

represent a type. There is the captain who is also president of the Chastity Club and who is, ironically, pregnant – apparently by the white, attractive, not so astute lead, but not. There is a blonde girl who is vapid, giggles incessantly and is generally not well-regarded. The third cheerleader is not white (her actual ethnicity is ambiguous) and quite manipulative while also preoccupied with sexual activities. There are also three other football players, not including the quarterback captain. Two are rarely given lead time, one being Asian and the other with an ambiguous ethnicity and the third (also of ambiguous ethnicity) being the actual father of the baby while, at the same time, being involved with the manipulative cheerleader. There is a gay male who dresses well and fights for the female lead in a song at one point, an Asian female with blue streaks in her hair and a fake stutter who is rarely given the lead, a black female who wears high tops and tight clothes on a not overly thin body and a skinny, young, white man who is in a wheelchair.

I spent this time setting up the characters and specifically their ethnicities or other marginalizing characteristics because this show goes to great lengths attempting to give voice to these marginalized groups, yet routinely falls short. An entire paper can be devoted to how the show both offers and fails to give voice to the marginalized groups while playing into the stereotypes that are present about the groups. Whether it is the white and attractive leads or the gay male fighting for a female lead or the black female not being skinny and wearing tight clothes, stereotypes are predominant.

This is important to note as the discussion of the disability aspects of the show progresses. Stereotypes and failed representations of disability will be considered, but it is not only the disability community that is represented by the show in such a stereotyped

light. This show does not discriminate in their negative representations. Regardless of the stereotypes shown, it remains important to show representations of disability (and other marginalized groups) in order to debunk those stereotypes and to educate as to the actual lived experiences of marginalized individuals and communities.

Before discussing the differently abled character in the show and the representations of him and other representations of disability seen in the show, the implications of the actor playing the character who uses wheels must be addressed. Kevin Hale, the actor playing a differently abled character, is fully abled off of the show. He has no discernable disability and has full usage of his legs. To not use an actor who actually has a disability and is in a wheelchair on a daily basis is to imply that those who have a disability are not capable of taking on these kinds of roles, whether they do not have the talent or they are not as likeable for press junkets. Hale, as an abled actor, suggests that a boy on wheels cannot sing and roll through the hallways or on stage at the same time. There is no discernable reason why this character could not be played by someone who has the talent and is actually what the character is shown to be, someone who lives his life in a wheelchair, yet has talent and is not shy about using it. The implication is that someone in a wheelchair does not have these talents and that it takes an actor who can walk to play someone who is talented in his own right, wheelchair or not. This is also a reminder of how disability as a marker of identity is not privy to being accepted as a cultural group, further that the standpoint of a person with a disability is being ignored. A rich person playing a poor person receives very little disapproving attention, in fact, it often receives laughter or an amused reaction. A non-black actor would never be cast to play a black role (except as a parody) – with one notable recent

exception being Robert Downey Jr. in *Tropic Thunder*, which created a storm of response from numerous groups that were publicized in the mainstream media. Yet using an actor with no noticeable disability to play a character with a disability is not an issue that concerns the general public and certainly did not create that same response. Neither the media nor society have given disability a place in the social stratification of identity.

ISOLATION

The theme of isolation, as discussed with Norden, presents this feeling or concept of the “other,” the one who is separate, not a part of the group, as outside the confines of what is acceptable. A prime example lies in the premise of the episode “Wheels.” The club wants to travel to sectionals, a music competition leading up to nationals, but the club is not able to do so together unless Artie goes alone and the rest travel by bus or the money is raised to hire a bus that is wheelchair accessible. This automatically sets Artie as the Other, as being separate from the fellow members of the club. Either he has to be alone, not part of the club, or the rest of the club has to do something for him because the school will not. The club automatically asserts that Artie is okay with driving alone, that there is no need to raise money. The camera pans in on Artie in this moment, looking crestfallen, yet when his fellow members look to him, he quietly acts as if it is okay that he is expected to not want more, to not want to be a part of the club.

The assumption that people with disabilities are automatically not going to stand up for themselves, that they will do whatever is expected of them is a negative one. Artie is clearly unhappy with his fellow members, clearly saddened that he does not get to ride with them, yet he says nothing, lending credence to the idea that those with disabilities will always allow for the “easier” option, the option that is easier for everyone else, not

necessarily themselves. There seems to be this expectation in American society that those in wheelchairs have to wait, whether for a special bus, for an elevator, for help if there are no ramps or any other accessibility options. While the representation of Artie may be a bit shallow, the show critiques this societal shortcoming, this marginalizing and patronizing of people with disabilities, it could allow for people who connect to the abled bodied actors/actresses to take stock of their own selves and how they treat others.

Connections happen when people consider each other and their corporeal space. Another problematic moment in “Wheels” arose with Artie’s girlfriend, Tina, where there was not a consideration of corporeal space, but of another disability. Artie’s girlfriend is also in Glee Club and has a stutter when she speaks. It is in this episode that she confesses that she does not actually have a stutter and that she had been hiding behind the stutter because she felt out of place, but that Glee Club showed her that she did not need to hide. She assumed that people would leave her alone if she had something ‘wrong’ with her; that a stutter would make her fade into the background. Having a disability does not mean that a person is automatically a loser and will be discarded to the background. While the issues surrounding different disabilities are not always known or commonly spoken about, to have a character hiding behind a disability that is not real shows the extent to which disability is perceived as a negative aspect of the individual.

Even so, there is one moment where a common disability stereotype was debunked in “Wheels,” one involving Tina. When speaking to his girlfriend about his disability, Artie is sure to make note of the fact that things below the belt do work. It was an awkward, sophomoric moment, yet incredibly appropriate for a high school scenario. There seems to be a stereotype that if a person is in a wheelchair, that they are fully

paralyzed from the waist down, including their sexual organs. For men, this can be an emasculation in how other men perceive them, how attractive they are to women, with the presumption being the ideal in this heteronormative culture. This is an excellent example of how there is no one identity, but rather an intersection of identities. In this context, these three identities, masculinity, heterosexuality and disability are connected because two are generally not ascribed to the third (disability,) yet in this moment all three are interconnected in one character, debunking the stereotype that men in wheelchairs are asexual. Paralysis does not always cover the entire lower half of the body and this awkward, sophomoric moment works to debunk the stereotype that paralysis equals lack of sexual function. Artie is capable of connecting with other people, in many ways, and this moment is one that steps away from the generally negative representations that are shown in the media. The writers have provided a moment that could be taken from the standpoint of a person in a wheelchair, a situation that could be possible without adding the excess of emotion so common in the media when representing people with disabilities.

While this one moment was an excellent departure from negativity, the episode “Wheels” depicted a negative perspective of a different type of disability from that of paralysis, Down Syndrome. It is appropriate to discuss how there is a common theme of loneliness and being alone that connect the scenes of a person with a paralysis and one with another birth difference. It is appropriate because the media discriminates against those who have bodily markers that are different than the concept of “normal.” As Down Syndrome has distinct bodily markers portraying a separation from “normal,” many have included these types of birth differences in the category of disability. As this scene will

show, the representation is very similar to others I have already discussed, one that inspires loneliness.

The coach of the cheerleading squad is about as mean as they come, working her hardest to dismantle the Glee Club. She finds herself with an open spot on her squad when she kicks off the pregnant captain of the team. She is forced to have an open audition, with a variety of students trying out to be a part of the team. Last seen in the try-outs is a girl who has Down Syndrome. It would be difficult to have an able-bodied actress play someone with Down Syndrome, so the talent scouts hired an actress who has Down Syndrome who has worked in the business before to play the character. This is a rather strong part of the show, as it shows that a person with the disability playing the role, demonstrating that anyone can act, not just those who are fully abled. The problem comes later in the show. The coach is working one on one with the young girl. The coach is roaring her head off, generally treating her badly. The coach is treating this young girl like she treats everyone else, not showing her special preference or deference simply because she has a disability. The problem is this young girl was in the gym, alone. The emphasis being shown here is that this girl is alone, separate, not part of the team. She is alone in her treatment and she walks alone to the locker room, without anybody with whom to commiserate. As with Artie, she is isolated from her teammates and society as a whole, because she remains separate. In this respect, the representation of disability in this television show and in the media as a whole, has not changed, perpetuating the idea that those with disabilities are isolated.

It is later seen that the coach has a sibling that has Down Syndrome. It can certainly be considered that the coach has treated her student in such a way to NOT

isolate her as the coach understands how isolating having a disability can be. Yet, this scene only serves to further isolate the Down Syndrome characters as they remain alone in their treatment. It is assumed that they will be isolated and then are isolated. These scenes in conjunction with each other only further perpetuate the isolation theme within the representations of the disability community.

PITY AND TRAGEDY

Pity and tragedy work hand in hand in that often a circumstance is seen as tragic and the response is pity. The episode "Sectionals," contains a scene representing how much of American society views those with disabilities. By the time of this episode, the team has had numerous set-backs, but worked through them and made it to the sectionals competition. At the end of the show, all three teams (Glee Club and two teams from other schools, one a team comprised of deaf students) have performed and the viewer is in the judges' room. All three judges could care less about this competition and are there for various reasons. One judge is a young, vapid, blonde woman wearing all pink, looking perfectly coiffed. This character description is important because this woman is what is often considered "normal:" feminine, blonde and put together. She mentions that it shouldn't be said, but will be said that she doesn't understand why a deaf school was performing, that it all sounded like honking. By having this character say this, it can be construed that the writers wanted to emphasize that it is not the most intelligent of people who have this prejudice or have the ignorance to utter this statement. The character notes that maybe she should not be saying this, but will and although she does realize that she is saying something that may not be particularly palatable, she says it anyway. Because of her apologetic nature, it shows pity at feeling the need to say this about this particular

group of people with a disability. Pity is shown in that she is hesitant and apologetic, that she does not want to say something that will put down this group of kids, knowing that saying the team sounded like they were honking is an insult. This assumes that a deaf glee club thinks they have wonderful voices, which may not be the case. Yet, because the vapid, blonde judge says this behind closed doors to others who are not deaf, it becomes a pity marker and one that is appropriate to society because we would never want to tell these kids anything other than how wonderful they sounded. The writers have reflected society and reinforced what many people may think about other people they view in a given circumstance, in this case opinions about a deaf glee club singing in a competition. For all of the writers to be complicit in allowing for such stereotypes to be presented is a statement on how society is also complicit in allowing for stereotypes to continue and discrimination to be fostered in the communities of American society.

A compelling, complex and problematic episode is “Dream,” an episode that perpetuates the stereotype that those who have a disability want to be “normal” and will participate, or want to participate, in activities that “normal” people can do. The teacher has asked the students to write down what their dreams are, but then another school official tells them their dreams are worthless. Artie’s dream, written on lined paper, ended up being tossed in the trash, which Tina retrieved and read. The paper had one neatly printed word on it, “Dancer.” Tina asks him why his dream is unobtainable and he says, in a resigned voice, “Let’s be honest, I’m in a wheelchair. My legs are never going to work again.” This young man has placed himself in the bubble created by society, one that has normative expectations of what dancing is and who can be a dancer – an isolating

factor, meant to distance himself from his able bodied girlfriend. This moment is meant to inspire pity, sadness and a wish that this young man could have a chance at his dream.

A moment of hope, of human understanding and acceptance comes when Artie's girlfriend asks him to do a dance number with her, seeing as how he gets around pretty well in a chair. Granted, this is an "awww" inspiring moment that is emotionalized because the young girl is offering to give Artie his dream, but at the same time, implies that an able bodied person is necessary to give a differently abled body a chance at their dream. Regardless of this, I believe the writers were writing with the intention of creating hope in the viewer, of making the point that all dreams are possible. The young couple are practicing the dance m, when he stops and asks her to bring him some crutches. He wants to try walking on them, but only trips over his feet and falls to the floor when he makes the attempt. Lying on the floor, his glasses askew, he is clearly upset and asks to be left alone. I had only one question to ask in response to this: did we HAVE to have this moment of tragedy and failure? Yes, situations like this, ones that cause embarrassment or shame, do happen. This portrayal of Artie in denial about his disability, especially after being so positive about it in previous episodes, perpetuates the stereotype that people who have disabilities wish to change their circumstance. It promotes the idea that as long as this one "problem" changes, he will be happy. The intersections of Artie, what makes Artie himself, is based on who he is, not what he has. Yet this scene creates the image of Artie as only a person who is disabled. Disabled, not differently abled, because he is allowing it to affect his functioning in every other sense.

Later in the scene, Artie's girlfriend comes running up to him, excited about research she had done on regeneration of nerves and muscles, telling him not to give up

on his dream of being a dancer. The intention of Tina is sweet, but to assume that a person in a wheelchair cannot dance is to sustain another stereotype – that only fully able bodied people are capable of doing certain actions, such as dancing, refusing to see another way. We saw another way, when the kids were practicing for the dance number. The perception that having a disability means lack is problematic, as it perpetuates the stereotype that there is only one way to do things, and that disability is only and always a lack/insufficiency.

This set up leads to perhaps the most offensive replication of disability stereotype; that the person with disability always and “naturally” desires a normative body. We see Artie talking with Tina and he tells her that he went to the doctor, talked about the new therapies and that his legs are now working. He proceeds to get up and do a dance number, asserting that he has spent so many years trying to get up out of the chair. This was astounding. There is no magic cure to change any disability, not that a cure is even necessary or desirable, but there is an implication that there is a need to change. To further create a divide between those who have disabilities and those who do not, the lyrics of the song Artie sings and dances to state that “you’re friends don’t dance, and if they don’t dance, then they’re no friend of mine.” The scene of Artie practicing a dance routine in his wheelchair is a distant memory. The implication here is that a person must be able to dance, upright on two legs, in order to be a worthy friend. The end of this scene shows that this has only been a fantasy, ending with Artie wistfully asserting, “I’m going to dance one day you know.” This further compounds the point that Artie’s disability is a lack and/or tragedy. This constant revisiting of this point is utterly shocking, driving home the point that people with disabilities are not able to do certain

things according to the norms of society. Artie can dance, he is just going to do it sitting down and rolling on his wheels. It may not be what people are used to, but it does not mean that it is not a valid and worthy way of completing the action.

This episode's reiteration of disability as tragedy continues with Artie going to the school counselor. He shows her the research, telling her that he will need her help to adjust to walking again. She flips through the research, taking a moment to collect her thoughts and in a quiet and hesitant way tells him that his injuries are extensive. He excitedly tells her that he used to believe that he would always be in a chair, but not anymore. She is clearly trying to find an appropriate way to tell him that this is not true and that the research he has found will take years to be developed for human application. She ends by suggesting that maybe he should come see her on a weekly basis, clearly insinuating that this disengagement with his reality is problematic and needs to be talked about. It does need to be taken into account that Artie is young and impressionable, that this may also make a difference in how he perceives life and his disabilities. But to be generally accepting of his disability up to this point and then to markedly change is a dramatic turn, intended to create pity, and a sense of disability as helplessness in the viewer. Artie's disability has become a tragedy. What is, to many, a way of life has been diminished to a heartbreaking moment of wanting too much, of dreaming too big and ultimately never being able to achieve that dream.

Multiple themes are present in this episode and isolation joins pity and tragedy as Artie becomes isolated when he tells his dance partner, his girlfriend, "You've worked too hard on this routine to have a half a partner." She insists that she wants to dance with him, but he tells her that he will never dance, that he has to focus on dreams that he can

make come true. She walks away and he is left alone. To call himself a half a partner, i.e. a half a man, because he is on wheels is prejudicial/intolerant. It is possible that the writers are trying to call attention to this stereotype, but rather than rejecting it, they only perpetuate it.

SONG CHOICE

As this show is a musical comedy, discussing music is apropos in the context of this paper. The song choices for this show are made consciously by the writers. . Each song has a meaning, a purpose, a means by which to further the emotion being portrayed in the scene. One example is “Defying Gravity.” This song is about defying expectations, doing what you believe is right versus what is expected of you. This song was sung as a battle between the female lead and the male gay character. It is an interesting commentary on the young man defying the expectations of society to be heterosexual, to not deny being homosexual to fit what is the accepted norm, a straight young man. This is an excellent example of how the writers choose music that is popular, yet applicable.

Isolation and pity are key themes that arise throughout the song choices, with notable departures from these themes at times. In the episode, “Wheels,” Artie rolls around, strumming on his guitar while singing, “Dancing with Myself.” There is no mistaking that Kevin Hale, the actor, has talent. But this song choice is disturbing. I appreciate that the song choice has dancing in it, implying that those in wheelchairs can dance. But why must this character have to dance with himself? I realize this song choice was made for the purpose of showing that he feels alone because of the way he has been treated, yet this song denotes that the person singing it always dances alone,

with themselves. It is a sad commentary on people with a disability always being alone. On one hand, it could be argued that this scene instructs how able bodied society continually marginalizes people with disabilities, but I am not entirely certain that this connection would be made by people viewing the episode. Being a song number, with only Artie dancing with himself, the immediate reaction is pity or sadness for this young boy who is alone. Media often works as a subliminal message – you remember something from the media at a later time as something reminds you of it. In this case, the feeling of pity or sadness for a boy in a wheelchair alone most likely will resonate.

“Dancing with Myself” is fully applicable in the sense that Artie feels alone, is performing alone, with no one in the audience, yet it has this connotation that he always dances alone that is wrenching, that this is all he has in store for him. This connotation is fully realized when he wheels himself, alone, off the stage, while the teacher watches (Artie is not aware of this.) The teacher then demands that his students make the money to have a wheelchair accessible bus, explains why and has Artie speak for himself. The fellow students feel appropriately ashamed, yet Artie is still alone. I note “appropriately ashamed” as they feel badly, yet do not seem to fully understand how they can help or how their request for him to ride alone was selfish and shallow, with no thought for their fellow member.

This response of his fellow club members is not entirely inaccurate of “normal” perceptions of disability. The accessibility problems that exist in American society go relatively unnoticed by those who are fully abled. Society discounts the issues, assuming that the Americans with Disability Act covers them, or do not think of them at all. To be able to run up the escalator and not have to worry about a working elevator, to be able to

get into school without wondering if a specific building has a ramp are questions/concerns that are hardly ever considered without a direct need to do so, i.e. you run an establishment that needs to be in compliance with the ADA, have a friend/family member who has accessibility problems or the like.

Song choice continues to be important as the kids continue to change or remain ignorant of other issues throughout the season, whether it is being aware of accessibility issues or emotional issues having to do with having a disability. During the course of the episode “Hairography”, the viewer is reminded that this Glee Club will be competing against two schools in Sectionals – one a high school female correctional facility and the other a deaf school. Both schools end up being invited to practice with the McKinley glee club, where the deaf school students see this “Hairography” routine and find it utterly ridiculous, regardless of the fact they cannot necessarily hear the singing, only seeing all this fake, obnoxious hair flying about and wondering what the purpose of it is supposed to be. They see the routine, show a reluctant appreciation of it and get up to perform. They sing and use sign language to perform “Imagine.” The signing was not necessarily the strongest talent of these performers. The fact that they got up to try, that they incorporated their language (sign language), shows the strength in trying, regardless of the fact that, traditionally, deaf people do not sing. The show, in this moment, moves past the stereotypes that deaf people can only do activities that do not require sound, that they would not be capable of competing in a vocal competition.

Secondly, the episode demonstrates that the members of Glee Club have changed since the episode of “Wheels.” As the members watch this deaf club perform for them, they quietly take off their wigs and one by one go up, stand and sing with the deaf Glee

Club, while also learning the signs to the song. That action shows an awareness of other people, along with the desire to learn about them and their culture. In this one scene, we see how a group of individuals can step outside of their own boundaries and sing with people who may not have their level of singing talent or who are different than themselves. This scene is intensely meaningful with the most impact emanating from the song choice, John Lennon's "Imagine." This song could be explored in a multitude of ways, as it has meaning in every line, but a simple explanation is that it is a song that asks the listener to imagine a different tomorrow where there is peace and where all people will live together in harmony, the lyrics ending with, "I hope someday you'll join us – And the world will live as one."

This is an interesting song choice for this particular group on a few different levels. One level lies in the fact that it is a marginalized group singing this song, asking for their listeners to imagine a tomorrow where they are all equal and treat each other with respect. A second level lies in the marginalized group being one with a disability. Discussed multiple times during this analysis of *Glee* has been the isolating norm of people with disabilities and the ways in which the media reproduces the tragedy of a person being alone, solitary, isolated. Yet this song asks for everyone to join together, and in this scene, everybody does. On a third level, this is a rather simple song choice, a remarkably popular one for as long as it has been in existence, but the choice lies not just in the words, but in the simplicity of the song itself. I use the word simplicity to describe the song, because it is straight forward, slow, engaging. Simple does not have to mean without meaning, but jam-packed with meaning in the flowing style that this song has. It is not overdone with a multitude of instruments, or electronic additions. The singing does

not belt out then suddenly grow dim. It does not have the entertainment value that music today seems to hold, with all of the additions (such as the use of technology) that create a different style of music. This simplicity is important because accepting differences need not be complicated.

I can sense one potential disagreement with the “Imagine” scene. The concept of why must it be a group with a disability that teaches these lessons. It seems to be a frequent idea to use marginalized groups to show strength and character, that it takes a marginalized group to be inspirational, to be the creator of change, or to teach a life lesson is also a stereotype. I do not disagree, although having a marginalized group represent a lesson does further isolate the group by creating the group as the “other” and requiring the group to be the one to teach tolerance and equality, the positive lessons that are exhibited in this scene outweigh this possible negative. The deaf glee club is attempting to create change and attempting to work with other people in making that better tomorrow by entering in a competition most people would think they have no right to even be attending. Inspirational or otherwise and regardless of what group was used, there are overarching lessons that debunk stereotypes of groups with disability that are far stronger and more memorable than the potential isolation that this may create. There are always going to be small disagreements, or large ones, in how representations are presented. This is one circumstance where I think it is important to take into account both the positive and negative aspects of this one scene to create a stronger potential in the future. While my overarching analysis is that the media are falling short in showing realistic representations of disability, I do think it is just as important to note when there

is something done correctly, at least by my own estimation, and this “Imagine” scene hit many of the right notes in portraying how people can work together.

The episode of “Dreams” ends with Artie sadly singing, looking on while his girlfriend and another young man dance the tap routine they had been practicing together to the song “Dream a Little Dream of Me.” Here the episode represents that Artie clearly wants to be the leading man, he wants to be the one who gets dreamed about, yet he sees himself as “confined” to a chair, leading the viewer to see him the same way he sees himself. He is dejected, with one moment of solidarity coming from the pregnant teenager who provides comfort. We see one person who understands being outcast comforting another. Artie does not acknowledge this connection, rather only seeing a couple dancing, a couple that he is not a part of because of his disability. As the song, scene and episode ends, he is alone, singing, asking that someone dream a little dream of him. He is mired in his isolation and the stereotype that those with disabilities are isolated, separate from everyone else. What small moments that are positive are lost in the utter tragedy that the writers created, a tragedy that is far from realistic and perpetuates the stereotype of disability as having negative social value.

GLEE CONCLUSION

I love *Glee* for the fact that the show gives something beyond what many television shows offer: the normative white, rich, straight and fully abled homogeneity. By embracing disability, the show has moments that are positive, that make us think and consider our own complicity in denying others the chance of normalcy, or changing what normal is and its definition. Depicting disability begins a discourse or inspires people to write about their perceptions of the representations. What needs to change, though, are

the actual representations. While the show is certainly a step in the direction of realism and of changing the social value of people with disability to a positive construct, there remains a need to hold true to actual experiences, wants and needs of those in the disability community.

The actual experiences, wants and needs of the disability communities differ based on the disability. Each smaller group (much less each person) has a distinctive vantage point, a point of departure for their understanding of the world and their own place in it with a disability. For the purposes of the media, joining in common standpoint, a common identifying marker, could create the potential for a far stronger voice for this larger community. It is hard for one person to stand alone and demand change, if many stand together and demand change, in this case demanding the media incorporate better representations, there is a better chance of success. Further, cohesion in a group can attract allies, more people not a part of the community in terms of the quality that connects them, but those who empathize. The demands being made could be even stronger. Again, this is not to say that all troubles will end by this one step or idea. It is simply to note that we are all complicit in our actions and our connections and that there are times that we do have to combine, connect with others in order to create a stronger opportunity to create change. The media are not allies of the disability community (amongst many other marginalized groups,) and by bonding together, there can be a stronger call for political and cultural action for people with disabilities and their allies to change the representations being shown.

It goes beyond the media and into academia as well. When this is studied, the ideal of feminist standpoint theory needs to be addressed – using the group's vantage

point being studied as the point of departure – not the homogenous, straight, white, rich one. The epistemological viewpoint needs to stem from the disability community, in this case respecting that not only does there need to be a stronger representation in the media, but also ensure that the representations in the studies remain realistic as well. *Glee* provides an excellent example for what can be improved and how we, the viewers, can demand for that improvement and how those of us in academia can view the media in a way that allows for change and understanding – both of the marginalized groups and of the media’s goals.

CHAPTER 7: “PAPARAZZI,” A MUSIC VIDEO

Lady Gaga Pushes the Boundaries

Lady Gaga is a contemporary pop artist who is known for pushing the boundaries in her dress, her music and her videos. She creates a stir because she not only does not conform to the “norm,” but so far exceeds those limits that she is talked about, wondered about, gossiped about, but ultimately gets away with her eccentricities because she is a pop star. In her music video for the song “Paparazzi,” Lady Gaga uses disability as a metaphor for isolation; an isolation from society because she is no longer acceptable. Mitchell and Snyder discuss that “if disability falls too far from an acceptable norm, a prosthetic intervention seeks to accomplish an erasure of difference all together; yet, failing that, as is always the case with prosthesis, the minimal goal is to return one to an acceptable degree of difference.” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000) Lady Gaga shows that disability is a “falling” from an acceptable norm, because she is portrayed as a star who has fallen from grace. To show how this happens, an explanation of both the lyrics and

the video are necessary, to explain what the circumstances are behind the song and its representation in order to understand the metaphor.

In the song “Paparazzi,” Lady Gaga tells a story about the paparazzi in America and our culture’s fascination with celebrity. The paparazzi in American society are photographers who follow, or stalk, celebrities to photograph them not only in their public appearances, but in their private moments as well. The lyrics of the song ‘Paparazzi’ depict a scenario of unrequited love, one where the paparazzi will stalk the subject of their affection or their and society’s fascination until they get what they want.

The music video accompanying the song goes further than this. The video insinuates that the cultural fascination with fame is a symbiotic relationship between the celebrity and the paparazzi, that as much as the paparazzi needs the celebrity, the celebrity needs the paparazzi in order to remain famous, current and popular. We, those of us who are not famous, play a role in this relationship because we consume what the paparazzi produces. We buy the magazines, watch the shows and movies that feature the stars we want to see more of and hear more about. The more we buy, the more the paparazzi produce about that given star. A cycle is created where the media dictates what is popular, but by the same token, we either accept or deny what we are being offered.

The music video introduces itself like a movie starring Lady Gaga. She is seen carousing with her rich boyfriend surrounded by excess, a commentary on the lives of those who have fame. If one in a position of fame does not have a host of materialistic products that testify to their wealth, then they must not be famous – there was such a level of excess in the video that it became clear it is a sarcastic note on those with fame and maybe even on Lady Gaga herself. This excess is only appropriate when there are

people to view it; when there is an absence of people, or the paparazzi, then this excess means nothing – excess is important for people to feel important, that money can buy fame. In the video, the boyfriend gets angry with her for not enjoying the paparazzi attention and pushes her off a balcony. This push off the balcony causes Lady Gaga's character in the music video to become paralyzed. This shocking moment of Lady Gaga sprawled out on the ground to the first moment we see her again, exiting a limo being carried and deposited into a wheelchair, begs the question of why disability? What made her choose to utilize disability in this video? And further, why is it so shocking? Further exploration of the video and the ensuing scenes are necessary when considering these questions.

Throughout the beginning of the music video, scenes portraying Lady Gaga playing the dejected, pitiful person “confined” to a wheelchair are interspersed with scenes of Lady Gaga as herself, fully abled. She needs help when she is in her wheelchair. She is carried out of the limo, she is disrobed and surrounded by help as she is not capable herself. Although she is perfectly coiffed, she is able to move only her upper body, revealing that she is incapable of being fully independent. Instead of showing independence in having a paralysis, she automatically resorts to being entirely dependent on other people, furthering the stereotype that people who have need of wheelchairs are not capable of taking care of themselves. And throughout this, there is an obvious aspect missing from the scene – the paparazzi. They have disappeared from the scene; they are no longer hounding Lady Gaga, no longer playing a part in the symbiotic relationship of fame. This tension of being paralyzed, yet fully coiffed shows that she is ready at all times to be “seen,” yet there is nobody there to see her. Because

Lady Gaga is no longer fully abled, she is no longer wanted to be seen by the paparazzi and, as a result, by the people in society who pay for the products the paparazzi sells. Because she is no longer “perfect” and her public persona of perfection is blemished, she is no longer cared about. Disability here represents the lack of normalcy, the lack of being wanted by the paparazzi or society and loneliness. Disability is distinctly portrayed as the lack of not only normality, but ideality and attractiveness. When Lady Gaga’s character is capable of walking again, she stumbles out of the chair on a pair of crutches, wearing a pair of high heels. This only serves to fetishize the differently abled body. When re-learning to walk or even if a person has to spend the rest of their lives with crutches, high heels are not the first pair of footwear worn. The fetishization only becomes more obvious by juxtaposing scenes of Lady Gaga disabled with ones where she is fully abled which serves to remind us that her particular “disability” is only temporary. Disability is often not temporary, certainly not when it is the type of injury that would be sustained by being thrown off a balcony, which serves as a reminder of how American society responds to disability. Often, either the disability of a person is completely ignored and not spoken about, or the question is asked of when it can be fixed, indicating that having a disability is something undesirable. The epistemological standpoint of the person/people with a disability is not being considered, only the fully abled reaction to the disability. Mitchell and Snyder discuss the use of prosthesis, in a literal sense, as “a body deemed lacking, unfunctional, or inappropriately functional needs compensation, and prosthesis helps to effect this end...The need to restore a disabled body to some semblance of a originary wholeness is the key to false recognition.” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000) In the rhetorical sense, using disability as prosthesis, as a prop, creates a

situation that ignores the actual reality of the disability and shows the social expectations of what is normal and the prevalence of the normative body. Lady Gaga had to become acceptable to society again, be recognized again and being in a wheelchair would be the antithesis of that. The wheelchair, the disability, became a metaphor for her isolation and loneliness through this.

Another vantage point to be considered when watching Lady Gaga in this video is that she is making a mockery of the stereotypes of disability by showing disability in such a ridiculous fashion. Clearly a person cannot immediately begin to walk again in heels, yet she does. The meaning seems to be that she is striving to be fully abled in order to get back into the public eye, back into the paparazzi's clutches, yet those who have a disability are mocked because they do not have this capability of simply getting up and walking, much less in high heels. Her desperate desire to immediately move beyond her disability reinforces the idea that the normative body is what is wanted and desirable, what is acceptable in society. While this critique may have been her intention, it is not entirely apparent as she still acts abled even when pretending to be otherwise and still intersects moments in a wheelchair with her sliding sinuously on a couch.

At the end of Lady Gaga's journey into disability and while in a wheelchair, she crosses her legs. If her character actually had paralysis from the waist down, her mobility tied to a wheelchair, crossing her legs would be impossible so doing so in the video is forgetting that she is playing someone who has a disability. She is not cognizant of her video persona's ability to be able to perform such actions, as they come so naturally to her real persona. To cross her legs when sitting is probably an action that has been ingrained in her for many years, however, to allow this one small action to be depicted in

the video holds a pointed message about the undesirability of disability, that it is an affliction. This one small action made by Lady Gaga is a slap in the face of those with disabilities by showing disrespect and disregard for the inability to do something, rather than celebrating the capabilities each person does have. Lady Gaga is one person, yet she epitomizes American society here because many people do not always carefully consider the differences of others or respect those differences. The video's reinforcement of specific stereotypes of disability further represents how society responds to disability. Disability became a metaphor, a means by which the cycle of the relationship between society, the paparazzi and a star, is broken. It became not a story about disability or the adjustment to having one, but about getting back into the limelight and gaining revenge for having been made into this damaged person. Lady Gaga was, for a few moments in time, nothing but an ordinary person based on her lack of star status. Yet, she cannot be simply ordinary, or normal, and had to use the "shocking" status of becoming a person with a disability in order to retain her "Other" status. The actual social issue of disability, and the lived experiences as such, have been erased, effacing the realities of a differently abled existence. All this does is further make real people with real disabilities even more invisible.

CHAPTER 8: KAY JEWELERS IN COMMERCIAL FORM

Selling wares during the holiday season

Kay Jewelers airs television commercials nationally, with a new commercial arriving on the television screens every few months. Most, if not all, of their commercials feature a heterosexual couple (often white) in a situation where the man is giving the woman a piece of jewelry.

In 2009, the company's holiday commercial aired featuring just this type of couple – heterosexual, white and the man as the gift giver. Two people walk into a room that is adorned with a well-decorated Christmas tree. In the background, there is a fire in the fireplace, a couch and a bay window. As the man leads the woman to the tree and has her kneel with him, he starts to use sign language in a halting manner while speaking out loud for the “benefit” of the television audience. The woman signs back, without speaking, subtitles showing what her signs convey at the bottom of the screen. He reaches for a Kay Jewelers box from under the tree, while the commercial fades into direct marketing of the store's products. It then returns to the kneeling couple and the man asks the woman if she likes the watch he has given her. She signs back (as we read on the bottom of the screen), “read my lips,” and then kisses him. The commercial closes with the company's well-known jingle, “Every kiss begins with Kay.”

As this is a short television commercial, Kay Jewelers has to impart a full scene of burgeoning romance, and Kay's jewelry's role in that romance, quickly and in broad yet specific gestures. The fact that Kay is representing a disability in their commercial is commendable because it recognizes the desirability of people with disabilities and the fact that romantic relationships are not solely for normatively-abled people. As

commercials attempt to use characters who are relatable to a large audience, to use a character with a disability implies that enough of the population will be able to relate to the character. The implication that the man learning sign language for the woman is romantic leads to a potential acceptance of intermixing cultures. Each person is accepting the other's way of communicating and interacting, showing a melding of two cultures. Beyond this, the woman initiates the intimate contact, showing that people with disabilities are capable of romantic/sexual interaction, a positive representation of the interactions between people. These positive aspects are important in denoting what makes them positive and the potential for using such scenes again are good, in that the viewer can respond to the happy themes of romance and holidays in the commercial. Further, there is the potential for an inspiration of goodwill (in following with the theme of holiday personifications) toward all people, not just those who look like or act like the "norm."

The departure from positivity arrives early in the commercial. The man and woman are clearly in some type of serious relationship, yet he is only now beginning to learn sign language. Later in the commercial, he signs asking her if she likes the jewelry. He signs this in 'slang' sign language, i.e. not using the proper usage of signs, but a shortened form. To know the short version of a language prior to learning the language itself seems odd and implies that this is all that is worth learning. These people are seemingly in a serious relationship, as he is giving her what appears to be an expensive piece of jewelry, yet there is a question of how they communicated prior to him learning a few words of sign. There is the consideration to be made that most people would not know that he was not signing in proper sign language, which only goes to further isolate

the disability community. The media is specifically reaching out to the fully abled, “normal” community by not taking strides to have proper sign language use that would be noticed by those who use it.

Further, many deaf and/or hard of hearing people who use sign language vocalize as well. By having the woman remain silent, while using subtitles, the commercial perpetuates the stereotype that deaf people cannot or will not speak. There is a flipside to this problematic moment in the media culture, in the history of the demand that deaf people should speak if at all possible, such as Marlee Matlin exhibited in the character she portrayed in *Children of a Lesser God*. This demands that deaf people fall in line with the normative behavior of speaking, but the assumption relies on the ability of the deaf person to be able to vocalize. This juxtaposition in moments in two different media forms, one where the woman does not speak and one where the woman does attempt to speak is the extension of two different stereotypes. The first being that deaf people do not and will not speak, the second being that all people should conform to the normative behaviors of fully abled people – while noting the fact that the voices of deaf people are anything but “normal,” often with a monotonous, slow cadence style speaking that automatically identifies a person as having a disability. The commercial is speaking to the mainstream society and is played out from the vantage point of the person who is fully abled. The point of departure in studying the commercial becomes from the man who is white, rich enough to afford nice jewelry and dating an attractive, white girl... who happens to have a disability. But he will work around that by learning a few words of sign language to create an “aaww” moment. This clearly notes that the point of

departure in studying this commercial comes from the man, not the woman with the disability.

As there are multiple ways to perpetuate and to challenge or undermine stereotypes, commercials have the capability to work for disability rights, creating social transformation in how people with disabilities are portrayed and how they are perceived. Commercials' ability to sell products is conditioned on their ability to reflect and connect to normative culture – the perceptions, beliefs and understandings of those viewing it. Like all media, commercials have the power to influence viewers to buy certain products, find certain products/behaviors palatable and subconsciously and consciously follow the examples represented. The companies creating the commercials take into account their target audiences and develop commercials accordingly. Therefore, the commercials are an extension of culture, as the target audience is defined in broad terms and an extension of the mainstream culture, the one involving the “norm.” The commercial's creators expect people to connect to a particular scene and through that connection identify with and purchase the product. The media jointly reflects and constructs a version of reality that extends into culture. It does so in different ways under different circumstances. *Glee* showed a circumstance of reflecting social realities in the treatment of those with disabilities, along with the perpetuation of stereotypes. In the case of Kay Jewelers, there was a holiday approaching and the commercial was a reminder for men to buy their female partners expensive gifts for the holiday – the circumstance of constructing a reality that may or may not be true in order to glean a certain response (in this case, romantic with urgency to purchase.) Ultimately, Kay had the potential of sharing a realistic scene of romance between a couple that is not “alike” or “normal,” but rather

they fell short in doing so by generating more questions about the situation being shown than simply motivating the viewer to rush right out and purchase some jewels. The message being subliminally "advertised" suggests that deaf people do not speak and that "their" language is secondary to speaking, that it is not necessary for communication.

Ultimately, the target audience of mainstream society sees the goodwill, romance, and appeal of the holidays. The target audience of mainstream society that this commercial does perpetuate is an intersection of middle to upper class, white and straight. Ironically, those who do have disability status are not part of that target audience even though disability is being shown because we are too aware of the politics of the representations being shown. So while it is a positive representation in some respects for the mainstream or "normal" viewer, those with disabilities remain left out of that target audience.

CHAPTER 9: PEPSI LIGHTS UP THE SUPER BOWL

Finding humor in the night

During the Super Bowl of 2008, Pepsi aired a commercial with deaf people, sign language and subtitles. Before the subject of the commercial begins, a lady signs, with subtitles on the bottom, “This commercial was created and performed by EnAble – a network in PepsiCo which supports diversity with different abilities.” Pepsi has chosen to enlist a group of people who align themselves with a disability identifying marker (differently abled) to help create this commercial. This shows an attempt to consider the actual epistemological vantage point of people with disabilities, using disability as the point of departure versus fully abled. After this we are introduced to two men driving in a car down a darkened street, signing, worried about getting to a Super Bowl viewing party on time and frustrated at not knowing where their buddy, Bob, lives; each man thought the other knew where Bob lived. The driver takes a sip of his Pepsi and proceeds to slowly drive down the block, honking. Houses light up, until one stands out because it remains dark. They pull into the drive and ring the doorbell, which causes the lights inside to flicker, letting the occupant know someone is at the door. The homeowner opens the door, sees the neighbor in a window across the street and waves his apologies.

There are two major issues in this commercial that I considered problematic for or objectionable to groups that are associated with deafness. One is that the commercial is entirely in sign language. There is an ongoing debate within the deaf community about the extent to which children should learn sign language and the extent to which they should be fully mainstreamed. As this commercial was developed by those in the community, at least in part, it would imply that the entirety of the deaf community uses

sign language. The second problem stems from the first, that of isolation. This time the isolation not of an individual but of a group. It is two deaf men sitting in a car, trying to find the house of a third deaf man. It does not distinctly show isolation in terms of hearing people being separate, but having none present automatically presents the deaf group as being separate. The thrust of the commercial lies in differences – noting the way the deaf homeowner is isolated within his neighborhood, which is given visual representation when his house remains dark amidst all the others with lights on when the honking begins. While it can be considered that the solution the two men came up with is conditioned on their knowing interactions with hearing people, the opposing viewpoint is that it can simply be knowledge that hearing people can hear a car horn honking and their deaf friend cannot. Plus, there is the problem that the third man being picked up is apologetic for the solution that the two men arrived at in order to find him, showing that he is aware something happened because all the lights are on and he feels the need to apologize for his friends.

These problems aside, the humor shown in this commercial is an excellent way to start a discourse about communities with disabilities. Realizing that some may find this crass or ignorant of deeper or more hurtful issues, humor has a way of disarming people, of making them more open to a message. A perfect example comes from my own experiences. People often wonder how to ask me questions about my ears, seeing that I wear hearing aids, but are uncomfortable with broaching the topic. Often the conversation starts when I crack some sort of joke about it, such as when somebody says something to me and I completely skewer what they have said. I have a tendency to laugh it off, crack a joke and then the person I am with will start to ask questions, seeing

my comfort level with the topic. It disarms them, makes them laugh and then they ask the more serious questions without hesitancy of how did it happen, what it is exactly and more. I watch this commercial and see the potential for it to generate the same kind of discourse, creating in people the same kind of potential to laugh together and be open to speaking about the topic. When I note people, I mean all different types of people, whether able bodied or those with disabilities.

The use of humor as a tool of social transformation is disputed in disability activism and scholarship, in that the anecdote provided above is argued to be part of the discrimination and oppression of people with disabilities. Rosemarie Garland Thomson has argued that it is always the responsibility of the person with the disability to make the social interaction with abled people smooth, using humor or deference to assure the normatively abled person that the social interaction will proceed comfortably or like any other interaction. (Garland Thomson 2002) This use of humor can be considered a kind of disability minstrelsy with the presumed anxieties of the normative body being assuaged by the person with the physical mark of difference.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson makes a very good point here. Yet, I disagree with much of it. I do not have the years of research that Garland Thomson has, but there can be wonderfully positive aspects about using humor in many situations to change the outcome of the interaction, regardless of who that interaction is between. Having a disability IS a part of the intersection that makes a person that unique individual. Yes, it does seem to be the responsibility of the person with the disability to initiate and make the social interaction with normatively abled people smooth, but ultimately it is important that this not only makes talking about the disability easier on the person who is able-

bodied, but also for the person who has the disability. It gives both a chance to loosen up and construct what can be considered an uplifting outlook on having the disability.

Because I crack jokes about my hearing does not mean I think any less of myself or hate the disability, but rather quite the opposite. So to assume that it is only the anxieties of the norm/dominant body being assuaged would be to assume that all people who have disabilities are comfortable only in bringing up the topic in a serious manner or ignoring the disability all-together until those who wish to know more, ask. I understand the concept of disability minstrelsy, but I also see that as being an extreme use of language for a consideration that is not always negative, nor does it have to be.

Humor is a part of daily life, laughter is considered to be “medicine” and to make every moment of a disability serious can be taxing. To assume that an interaction with anyone will be smooth is to make too much of an assumption. Humor does not always work and yes, can be misplaced. If a person simply does not care to know, or to ask, or wishes to pretend the disability does not exist, then humor is not going to make one bit of difference – no matter who is wielding the humor sword. Ultimately, I believe that humor can be used as an effective tool in gaining more acceptance and dispersing more knowledge about the disability community. As a result, the Pepsi commercial certainly did have some drawbacks, but my final analysis remains that it is a positive (for the most part) representation of people with disabilities. Realizing that my initial theory notated that I expected to find mostly negative representations, this certainly diverts from that. It is a critical example of how a commercial can be developed by those in the disability community and still have problematic moments. I do not believe that there will ever be complete agreement, as there generally is not in any aspect of society. My hope is for

more positive representations, more realistic ones, and I do think that this commercial goes a long way toward fulfilling those hopes.

CHAPTER 10: THE END

Or is it the beginning?

The media has the power in society to create trends, perpetuate, initiate or change stereotypes and can be used as a tool to affect change. Both the media and marginalized groups can work together to create more realistic impressions of the lived experiences of those who are a part of such groups. As it stands, “while literature [and media as a whole] often relies on disability’s transgressive potential, disabled people have been sequestered, excluded, exploited, and obliterated on the very basis of which their literary representation so often rests.” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000) There will always be a discussion of details of disability in the media, for example whether or not something is too representative of only a small portion of the group, as seen in the Pepsi commercial I discussed. But, each step that shows a more realistic representation is one in the right direction, allowing for those disagreements to come to light in the parts of society that interact with the media. The media currently maintains the social politics of exclusion, by perpetuating stereotypes that are not appropriate or are false. By changing the way the media interacts with society, by creating more accurate representations that are not consistently about isolation and tragedy, the disability community may become more integrated into what society considers the norm.

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