

## Objectification of Disability in Media

Berklee ABLE Assembly 2021

Miles Wilcox

The internet is saturated with viral media featuring disability; from video clips of a food service employee feeding a disabled customer, to the story of a high school electing a teen with Down syndrome being elected to prom court. This phenomenon is known as “inspiration p\*rn,” a term coined by the late disability activist Stella Young. It refers to the objectification of people with disabilities in the media, which serves the purpose of making the consumers, namely people without disabilities, feel good inside. The message, either implicit or explicit, can range from, “If this disabled person can do XYZ, what’s your excuse?” to “Look how compassionate this able-bodied person is for offering basic human decency to this poor disabled soul.” It can imply that disabled people are to be pitied, portray an unrealistic view of disability, or that disability is simply a mindset. However well intentioned these stories may be, they cause harm to the disability community. This presentation will focus on how to identify objectification of disabled voices, how to center disabled voices in order to prevent perpetuating these problematic messages, and interrupt the systems of oppression towards the disability community.

What is “inspiration p\*rn”? The term ‘inspiration p\*rn’ comes from a TED Talk by disability rights activist Stella Young. Young says, “I use the term p\*rn deliberately, because they objectify one group of people for the benefit of another group of people. So in this case, we’re objectifying disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people. The purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them and think, ‘Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person.’”

Do any of these catchy phrases sound familiar: “The only disability in life is a bad attitude” or “Your excuse is invalid”? How about these phrases coupled with a photo of someone accomplishing a task in their life, for example playing basketball or playing the violin? Here we see two men doing pull-ups, one of whom is in a wheelchair, along with the factually inaccurate statement that, “the only disability in life is a bad attitude.” No, actually disabilities exist, and they can be just that-- disabling. What about “Your excuse is invalid” paired with a boy in a wheelchair playing basketball. Did you know that disabled people can play sports, too? In fact, some people do it quite well and even compete with each other! And sometimes it’s done so often, that it’s no more noteworthy than an able-bodied person playing the same sport. The video that is thumbnailled shows a woman trying several times before getting her prosthetic arm into place to use her bow on the strings, in preparation to play a piece on the violin. The caption reads, “You think your life is hard? Watch this” with a little ‘praying’ emoji next to it.

These are all examples of inspiration p\*rn or the objectification of disabled voices and experiences for the benefit of the non-disabled. However, the real messages behind

these images can be found between the lines. From the implications that being disabled is inherently bad or somehow undesirable or to be pitied, to the message that disabled people exist to help make others feel better about their lives. Sometimes the post is just highlighting the fact that a disabled person was able to navigate systems that are not built for people with all different abilities. Sometimes, the media decentralizes the disabled viewpoint so much that the story is actually centered around a nondisabled person “helping” a disabled person navigate these systems, when what they are doing is offering little more than the bare minimum of basic human decency. At their most basic, many of these images can be boiled down as really just highlighting that a disabled person has accomplished a task. As if we expect so little from people with disabilities that this is front page news!

There are more examples of this media phenomenon. “Excuses; let’s hear yours again” captions before and after photos of a man who has obviously put a lot of work in at the gym. The man happens to have a limb difference, in that he has one leg. But the caption implies that because THIS man could do it, anyone can. The implication being, “This man’s life is objectively harder than yours, and therefore you have no excuses to not perform at least up to his abilities.”

How about an image of a young girl writing with a pencil, with the caption, “Before you quit, try...” Now, I have taught kindergarten and I know how difficult it is to learn to hold a pencil. But a child learning how to navigate the world they live in with the body they were given is a process that can happen regardless of perceived ability or disability. On the other hand, this feat could have taken quite a lot of perseverance, hard work, and heartache, and who are we to trivialize that experience and minimize it into a feel-good meme?

“Never ignore someone with a disability, you don’t realize how much they can inspire you!!” says the caption above a picture of a woman in a wheelchair at the beach, with her arms flung out as she stares at the ocean. Is this woman inspiring? Why, because she got out of bed and put on clothes and left her house? Even if the answer is, “Because the beach is so inaccessible this woman should be commended for how hard she had to work to get there,” should we *just* be celebrating her, or should we be working to eliminate the hurdles that were in her way in the first place?

Regardless of their intent, these images reinforce ableist ideas. Ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require ‘fixing’ and defines people by their disability.”

Speaker and personal coach Carson Tueller says, “Ableism looks like calling disabled people ‘inspiring’ for navigating a system that is designed for their exclusion, while doing nothing to hold the system accountable.” For example, if we are praising the woman in the wheelchair for the physical feat of getting herself to the beach, should we not really be examining why the beach has not yet been turned into an accessible area?

Often the “challenges” of having a disability are not inherent to the disability itself, but rather how the world has **not** been designed universally, for example stairs being built (which only some of the population can use) instead of a ramp, which can be used by everyone. No amount of “no excuses” or “the only disability in life is a bad attitude” is actually helpful in making these spaces more accessible for all. As Stella Young says, “No amount of smiling at a staircase has ever turned it into a ramp.”

Now that we know what inspiration porn is, how do we spot it when we see it on social media? When you see a post that has the potential to be qualified as disability objectification, there are a few questions that you can ask yourself. First if a non-disabled person did the same thing would you still find it inspirational? So often these posts just show pictures of disabled people living their daily lives. Nobody wants to be infantilized, applauded for leaving the house or getting dressed in the morning. A disabled person getting groceries for themselves is not in and of itself inspirational.

Second, you can ask, Is the disabled person given a voice in the story, or is it told from the non-disabled perspective? Sometimes the perspective of the disabled person is so erased, like when you see stories about a popular boy who befriends a classmate with a disability and “learns a valuable lesson” and in the entire process of telling this story, the disabled child is never spoken to or interviewed once! Disabled voices are silenced, as if it’s not even considered that they may have a perspective or opinions to offer.

And finally you can ask yourself, who is the intended audience of the content? This may not be as easy to determine, and may be found in subtext or through context, like who is sharing the media. It may be found in the language of the post; does it reference a “they”, referring to members of the disabled community? That implies that the post is not intending that those with disabilities will read it.

If for these questions you answered that no if a disabled person did the same thing it would not be inspirational, for example the video of a woman playing the violin. With the caption “You think your life is hard? Watch this”, it’s presuming that this woman’s life is hard. If that IS the case, then we would want to hear that from the woman herself, and not third-party text and emojis stuck on by an anonymous source. If the person in the image is portrayed as one-dimensional, if presumptions are being made as to how easy or hard tasks are for the individual, then you would answer no, the disabled person’s perspective is not given a voice in the story. Finally, assess who the intended audience of the post is. Again, if the language in the post is presuming their readers do not have a disability, that tells you right there.

We can test this out on a post I came across online. You may actually recognize the quote from an earlier post. This image shows a boy wearing glasses sitting in an accessible swing next to a mobility aide. The quote reads, “Never ignore somebody with a disability. You don’t realize how much they can inspire you.” So let’s ask ourselves the three questions. If a nondisabled person was sitting in a swing, would you find that

inspirational? I think not. And what about this boy's voice or perspective in this image? Unfortunately, I have to refer to him as a boy because his name is not found on the image, nor was it on the website I took the image from. And he is reduced to a one-dimensional 'source of inspiration' instead of an individual with independent thoughts and agency. Finally, the audience of the image is made clear in its use of "*they* can inspire *you*"; assuming that *you*, the audience, could not possibly be a *they*, someone with a disability.

If you answer that the boy's smile or his joy is what's inspirational, I ask you again, why? Because it must be so difficult to live with a mobility aide that it's a miracle he can bring himself to be happy? That sure is making a lot of assumptions about this child's life. That says to me, you are making assumptions about his quality of life, and any number of other factors, based on a perceived disability; that is ableist.

Riva Lehrer, American visual artist whose work explores cultural depictions of disability, has this to say about the effects of these problematic narratives of disability. "The story I sometimes get applied is, 'Oh, look at this person who all of these things happened to, yet she makes paintings despite it all.' There is no despite. We all make meaning out of our experiences... When you talk about a disabled person as just inspiration, a wall goes up." What Lehrer is saying is that it reduces people, it reduces the voice of the disabled community. It dehumanizes the disabled person, and turns them into a one-dimensional object that exists simply to be our inspiration.

Now that we have learned what it is and how to identify it, we need to know what to do when we encounter this disability objectification in social media. First things first, don't repost or share the content. That's probably the easiest and quickest way for us to reduce the amount of this we see online, if we all would just stop sharing it.

Depending on the circumstances, such as who shared the post, or what the platform is, you may be able to go a step further and call the person who posted it in (as opposed to calling them 'out') by asking a question or starting a dialogue. Without seeming combative or like you're trying to start an internet fight, you could simply ask a question such as, "I just see a woman living her life, what made you want to share an image like this?" In a perfect world, that would make the person who posted the image think critically about why they chose to share that piece of media. Try your best to share what you know, and point out you don't think the disability community would be behind the post or its content.

To go a step further and help cultivate a positive media landscape for disabled individuals, you can share posts that *do* center disabled voices, that tell real stories *by* disabled voices. You can share content that includes quotes from disabled people, that tells narratives from their point of view, and that celebrates true achievements from disabled individuals. In recent times, the autism community in particular has adopted the phrase, 'nothing about us without us', and this can be broadened to include the whole

disability community. You can take this to heart, and notice when disabled voice is missing from the discussion.

I will close as I began, with a quote from Stella Young. "I want to live in a world where we don't have such low expectations of disabled people that we are congratulated for getting out of bed and remembering our own names in the morning. I want to live in a world where we value genuine achievement for disabled people." Young is not saying that we should not celebrate disabled people for their genuine accomplishments, she is simply saying that we should not necessarily celebrate disabled people for things that we do not celebrate our able-bodied peers for.

I hope that you are able to celebrate and honor all of the amazing disabled people that you know and love, but as Stella Young says don't celebrate them for getting out of bed in the morning. Also please remember that the media we consume can determine our thoughts and therefore actions. Choose the media you engage with wisely. Please watch Stella Young's TED Talk to hear directly from the source and gain even more understanding about the subject.

## **Resources:**

Inspiration porn and the objectification of disability: “I’m Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much”

Stella Young at TEDxSydney (Jun 2014)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/stella\\_young\\_i\\_m\\_not\\_your\\_inspiration\\_thank\\_you\\_very\\_much/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much/transcript)

How To Avoid “Inspiration Porn” by Andrew Pulrang. (Nov 29, 2019)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewpulrang/2019/11/29/how-to-avoid-inspiration-porn/?sh=7ae9276d5b3d>

Inspiration Porn: How “Feel-Good” Imagery Demeans the Disabled Community and Perpetuates Harmful Stereotypes by Lauren Beller. (Jan 24, 2020)

<https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/inspiration-porn-c08b419d35c9>

What Is Inspiration Porn by Meriah Nichols (Nov 30, 2019)

<https://www.meriahnichols.com/what-is-inspiration-porn/>

Please Stop Spreading 'Inspiration Porn' About Disability by Saidee Wynn. (Oct 2, 2017)

<https://themighty.com/2017/10/please-stop-spreading-inspiration-porn-about-disability/>

Inspiration porn by Grace Trumpower

<https://www.able-sc.org/community/inspiration-porn/>

National Center on Disability and Journalism <https://ncdj.org/category/inspiration-porn/>

Disability Inclusive Messaging: What Is Inspiration Porn?

<https://disability-marketing.com/2018/08/23/disability-inclusive-messaging-inspiration-porn/>

Emily Savage Blog: The Problem With Inspiration Porn. (May 15, 2016)

<https://emilysavage.ie/2016/05/15/the-problem-with-inspiration-porn/>

Ableism 101 by Ashley Eisenmenger (Dec 12, 2019)

<https://www.accessliving.org/newsroom/blog/ableism-101/>

Artist Riva Lehrer paints portraits of people with disabilities — minus the mock heroics, the ‘freak show’ or the toxic staring. By Christopher Borrelli (Feb 24, 2021)

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ent-riva-lehrer-artist-disability-activist-20210224-5j57pjmkgzcrnekp5yt3kbtou4-story.html?fbclid=IwAR31Lw8esgQk6B6SnKOZsu18zqwArX4d27AsThqq3x8SeOIRaBeKKltiotY>