Inspiring or Perpetuating Stereotypes?: The Complicated Case of Disability as Inspiration

by

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Abstract

This research looks at how inspirational narratives that feature disability, also known as “inspiration porn”, are interpreted by disabled and non-disabled audiences. The project uses *We’re The Superhumans*, a British infomercial for the 2016 Summer Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, as its case study. This research is informed by social science research on disability, critical media studies literature, as well as government documents and official reports. Qualitative data were gathered through focus groups with disabled and non-disabled participants, as well as through comments posted on the infomercial’s YouTube video and on Twitter, and through media coverage. The results of the study show that reactions to inspirational narratives are not uniform among disabled and non-disabled audiences and that negative perceptions of disability persist. This study provides valuable insight regarding the nuances and complexities surrounding inspiration porn and social attitudes towards disability.

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Introduction

The term “inspiration porn” gained prominence after disability advocate, Stella Young (2014), gave a TED Talk in 2014 entitled, *I’m not your inspiration, thank you very much*. In her nine-minute speech, she declares that society has been told a lie – disabled people are exceptional and that having a disability is a “bad thing”. Her talk leaves the audience with the idea that disabled people, especially disabled children, are labelled as the “other”, or outsider with minimal and lower expectations than nondisabled peers of the same age, and they are therefore congratulated and placed on a pedestal for participating in mundane activities from playing in a park to going to school. In summary, Young asserts that the lives of some disabled people are used to “inspire” non-disabled people even though these “disabled inspirers” may be doing the same daily activities as their non-disabled peers. With a sense of exasperation, Young encapsulates the theme of “inspiration porn” by drawing attention to the fact that disabled people are often celebrated for being exceptional and awe-inspiring when they are just using their bodies to the best of their abilities. She wants disability to be viewed as the norm and not an exception to the norm, and for disabled people to be celebrated for genuine achievement. She says that she wants to live in a world where a disabled person is not congratulated for getting up in the morning and going to school, or where a child is not surprised to discover that their new teacher uses a wheelchair. She concludes her speech by saying, “Disability doesn’t make you exceptional, but questioning what you think you know about it does.”

To date, there is not an agreed-upon definition of inspiration porn but in discussions that use the term, it is the practice of describing someone as inspirational because they have a disability (Liddiard, 2014). A disabled person can be labelled as inspirational for a variety of reasons ranging from their participation in high level sports (Orr, 2016), to more mundane

activities such as riding a bike or holding a pencil. Examples of this can be seen in commercials for the Paralympics, funding for charities and in media stories. Images have also been circulated online, such as that of an amputee swimmer, accompanied by the quote, “the only disability in life is a bad attitude,” (Illustration 1).

Illustration 1

This statement about disability reinforces the stereotype that disability is an individual problem and as such it is the individual's responsibility to overcome barriers which requires a positive attitude. Merriam-Webster Dictionary's (2018) definition of "inspiration" is, "a divine influence or action on a person believed to qualify him or her to receive and communicate sacred revelation; the action or power of moving the intellect or emotions; and the act of influencing or suggesting opinions." Oleynick, Thrash, LeFew, Moldovan and Kieffaber (2014) propose that inspiration, "serves the role of a mediator in a statistical sense. For instance, certain virtues that one observes in another person may lead to inspiration, which, in turn, leads the inspired individual to pursue these same virtues in a future self" (p. 2). The term inspiration therefore suggests that an individual has special abilities to influence the thoughts and actions of others, but what qualifies as inspiring depends on an individual's culture and own experiences.

Young (2014) includes the word “porn” because she argues that inspirational narratives in the media objectify one group of people for the benefit of another. Merriam-Webster Dictionary’s (2018) definition of pornography is, “the depiction of acts in a sensational manner so as to arouse a quick intense emotional reaction.” Pornography is perhaps most associated with sexual arousal, but the term also encompasses depictions that elicit arousal that is non-sexual (Merriam-Webster, 2018). In the context of these definitions, we could say inspiration porn is the sensational depiction of people with impairments taking part in sport and everyday activities to elicit feelings of awe and motivation in the audience. The criticism is that these images are used to make non-disabled people feel better about their lives because their problems are not as bad as having a disability. Young (2014) claims, “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.’” And she poses the question, “But what if you are that person?” The reason that “inspiration porn” is objectifying is because it is creating a negative perception of disabled people, one in which they are less capable and their lives are less desirable than their non-disabled peers, in order to make non-disabled people feel better about their own lives. Barnes (2012) writes that it is oftentimes not the impairment that creates unhappiness in a disabled person’s life, but the negative stereotypes and assumptions made about them.

Another criticism of “inspirational” media content is that this type of narrative presents disabled people as “super-crips”; it presents disabled people as superhumans who can accomplish feats considered beyond the “norm”. This social construct is problematic because it embodies four assumptions. First, it is based on the premise that disability is synonymous to lower expectations therefore achievement of any kind is considered the exception. Second, it glossed over the fact that the end result of becoming an excellent athlete or musician takes years

of practice – as with becoming an elite athlete of any kind, becoming a para-Olympian does not happen overnight and there are no miracles that make that happen. Third, the term “super-crip” ignores the many systemic barriers that disabled people encounter in society (Grue, 2016).

Finally, the super-crip construct promotes the “you can” argument, which assumes that if a noted disabled individual or athlete can achieve such momentous goals, any disabled person can; in the “you can” mindset achievement is defined as individual desire not systemic oppression. Young (2014) argues that these images insinuate that barriers in a disabled persons’ life are something they can overcome themselves by simply having a positive attitude. She claims, “No amount of smiling at a flight of stairs has ever made it turn into a ramp. Never. Smiling at a television screen isn't going to make closed captions appear for people who are deaf.” Inspiration porn ignores society’s role in disabling people with impairments, which has the potential to make people with impairments feel like their struggles are their fault.

In contrast to Young’s criticism of inspirational content, “inspiration porn” is viewed positively by some for empowering people to overcome their challenges, regardless of what they may be, and for raising awareness about disability (Haller, Dinca-Panaitescu, Rioux, Laing, Vostermans & Hearn, 2012). Here, it is important to distinguish between inspiration porn and inspiration. Inspiration porn represents an ableist construct of disability wherein disability is considered a catastrophic, life-altering condition that makes carrying out most daily event miraculous and inspirational. On the other hand, disability inspiration refers to inspiring activities that can be considered awesome and beyond the “norm” by all members of society. For example, swimming across Lake Ontario, or climbing Mount Everest or discovering the “Black Hole” in the cosmos are all inspiring life events. Getting up in the morning, going to school, and going to work are not what we would identify as inspiring. If we do see such things as inspiring

when performed by a disabled individual, we are reinforcing the social prejudice that generates inspiration porn. Inspiration is about high achievement, about role models that we all need; inspiration porn is rooted in ableism, and it is about identifying disability as a negative life situation that must be “overcome.” Longmore (2003) describes the difference between inspiration porn and people who are role models to people with impairments as follows:

People with disabilities do need heroes, not uncomplaining overcomers, but real disabled heroes who fight bias and battle for control of their lives and insist that they will make their mark on the world. Christy Brown [disabled Irish writer and painter best known for his autobiography, *My Left Foot*], difficult and dangerous as he is, is such a hero. He embodies the consciousness of a new generation of people with disabilities who assert that for the overwhelming majority of us prejudice is a far greater problem than any impairment, discrimination is a bigger obstacle than disability. (p. 130)

Longmore is arguing that people are not inspirational for “overcoming” their impairments but for pushing past discrimination and calling attention to injustice. This is a different type of inspiration than labelling a disabled person as inspirational for playing basketball or going grocery shopping, which reflects society’s low expectations for disabled people.

Study aims and research questions

My thesis focuses primarily on inspirational porn narratives surrounding the Paralympics. I aim to uncover peoples’ attitudes and feelings towards inspirational narratives of disabled people, using one prominent infomercial, *We’re The Superhumans* (2016). The infomercial was produced by British television network, Channel 4, to promote the network’s coverage of the 2016 Summer Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. The video can be viewed at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IocLkk3aYlk>.

In this study, I explore the emotions that inspirational porn narratives invoke and consider whether there are differences in reactions between the disabled and non-disabled audiences.

Does this type of narrative positively impact disabled people, or does it leave them with negative feelings?

I examine these questions relying on critical disability studies literature and I employ multiple research methods, including media analysis and focus groups to analyze: 1) media portrayals of disabled persons and 2) audience reception of those portrayals, both among the disabled and non-disabled audience members. Audience reception of inspiration portrayals was analyzed through focus groups, Twitter and YouTube comments, as well as in media coverage of the infomercial. The findings reveal that there are many nuances to inspiration porn, specifically the infomercial, *We're The Superhumans*. The content of this media text and the manner in which it is received by audiences are complex and at times contradictory.

The focus groups showed that the disabled participants did not find the infomercial motivating or inspiring, and concluded that it was objectifying disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people. They felt that the infomercial's depiction of disabled people doing everyday tasks such as brushing their teeth to be reflective of society's low expectations for people with impairments. They also spoke about how the infomercial failed to consider societal barriers that prevent disabled people from reaching their full potential in life. The non-disabled participants said they were not motivated or inspired by the infomercial. They felt that the people depicted were achieving genuine success in their sport, regardless of their impairments. They also spoke about how the infomercial sensationalized disability and at the same time seems to work to destigmatize disability, rather than prove to people with impairments that their disability is not a barrier to living an independent and active life.

The comments on the infomercial's YouTube video and on Twitter overwhelmingly praised the infomercial and the people in it for "overcoming" their disabilities. There were also

comments from people with impairments who echoed the infomercial's message that disabled people can do many things. There were some comments that reflected society's negative view towards disability by stating that the people in the video were "less fortunate" than others as they have impairments. Similar sentiments were reflected in the media coverage of the infomercial, particularly from advertising industry magazines which praised the infomercial for including disabled people and for the positive message it portrayed. There were some criticisms of the infomercial as well, such as a column written in the newspaper, *Ottawa Citizen*, which argued that it was exploiting disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people.

This study concludes that the underlying messaging of *We're The Superhumans*, and similar inspirational narratives in the media, is that having an impairment is not the norm. Rather, it is a negative "barrier" in life that can be "overcome" particularly through sports, taking part in everyday activities, and with a positive attitude. The comments of praise towards the people in the infomercial show how society does not expect people with impairments to be active and independent, and so when they do, they are congratulated and praised. For the most part, the infomercial portrays disability as a tragedy and something that can be overcome with a positive attitude, ignoring society's role in contributing to the experience of disability. However, the audience response to the infomercial is both complex and diverse, confirming that audiences are not just passive recipients of media messages.

Researcher positionality

As a person with an impairment myself, I understand and have experienced the positive, and negative feelings, associated with "inspiration porn." I have been called "inspirational" for simply buying groceries at the store, going to school, having a job and for leaving my apartment.

On the one hand, it can feel good to “inspire” someone, but it often leaves me with a negative feeling because the assumption is that society does not expect me to do these relatively “normal” activities. Because I was born with my impairment, I do not think of it as a “bad thing” but rather a normal part of my life. It is often peoples’ comments, which insinuate that my impairment is abnormal, a tragedy, and reveal assumptions that I am less capable than someone without an impairment, that make me feel bad about myself. I also acknowledge that disabled persons have a wide range of diverse experiences, and no single experience of disability can in any way stand in for all disabled individuals.

In this study I use the term “disabled people” rather than “people with disabilities” to more clearly acknowledge how social environments shape the experience of disability. Put simply, “person with disability” centres on the individual, and as such risks failing to recognize the social factors that are entangled with disability. The term “disabled”, on the other hand, signals more clearly that the experience of disability is something that is imposed onto an individual through social environments and the way these environments treat disability. I realize, however, that the term “disabled” is not appropriate in every context.

The rationale behind the use of “person with a disability” is that the phrase recognizes the person first and focuses on their “abilities” rather than their “disabilities,” (Blaska, 1993). Having a disability has significant impacts on a persons’ life, not all of which are negative. Thus, the term “person with a disability” does in some contexts allow for this nuanced understanding of the individual.

At the same time, however, the growing body of literature in critical disability studies suggests a disability is not simply something that a person has, but it entails a range of experiences that are a product of social and cultural surroundings. Hence, disability as a social

construct can be analysed similarly to how we critique experiences of other marginalized or minority groups. In conversations about Black people, for example, we do not say “people with blackness.” Critical race literature commonly uses the term “racialized” in place of “person of colour”. The latter term recognizes the individual, but the former, “racialized”, is a term that more clearly acknowledges the social and cultural nature of race.

I did struggle using “disabled people” throughout my research, as the term clashes with the notion of “person first”. When considering individual experiences, “person with a disability” may still be more appropriate. Moreover, some individuals with disabilities may refer to themselves as “persons with disabilities”, and this is entirely appropriate. However, in the context of this study, I am less interested in the individual experiences and more in the social dynamics that surround disability and its portrayals. For such an analysis, the term “disabled” does the important work of social critique, similarly to how the term “racialized” is used in critical race studies.

In my project, I also distinguish disability from impairment. In the report, *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* by the World Health Organization (2007), impairment is defined as “problems in body function or structure such as a significant deviation or loss,” (p. 9). According to the social model approach, disability is not caused by impairment but the oppression of people with impairments (Swain and French, 2000). For example, a wheelchair user not able to enter a building is not disabled because they use a wheelchair but because the building does not have a wheelchair ramp. It is society’s lack of accommodation and negative attitudes towards impairments that cause the disability. Also, just because someone has an impairment, does not mean they are disabled (2000). For example, someone who is near sighted or long sighted would not be described as having a disability because society typically

provides people with eye impairments coverage for glasses and medical attention to alleviate the problems associated with poor vision. Shildrick (2012) notes, “What qualifies as a disability in any case varies greatly according to the sociohistorical and geopolitical context, and even in a single location the designation remains stubbornly multi-faceted and resistant to definition in terms of both its boundaries and meanings” (p. 33). Therefore, what is classified as a disability depends on social attitudes of the time and place.

Chapter breakdown

In Chapter 1, I discuss how disability is defined by the Canadian Government and the UN and how definitions differ depending on place and time. I also cover current disability legislation in Canada and how it has been a source of contention. This chapter also addresses how disability is represented in the media, in advertising, and what the general attitudes towards disability are. Finally, I discuss the history of the Paralympics and the connection between disability and sport, and conclude by describing my conceptual framework for this study.

Chapter 2 provides a summary of my methods which include focus groups with disabled and non-disabled participants, content analysis of online comments from the *We’re The Superhumans* YouTube video, as well as posts from Twitter, which incorporate the video’s hashtag. I also discuss how I analyzed the comments and how I determined the emerging themes.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of my qualitative findings and offers illustrative examples from the data.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the findings in relation to current literature about disability. I also look at the complexities around inspirational narratives of disabled people. Finally, in the

Conclusion, I reiterate my key findings, reflect on how my research contributes to current scholarship, and provide recommendations for further research.

Chapter 1: Literature review and theoretical framing

This study examines inspiration porn through the lens of Critical Disability Theory. I draw on the growing body of social science research on disability to understand how disability is understood in state and legal frameworks. Since the study entails a particular media text – the *We're the Superhumans* infomercial – I also rely on critical media studies literature to better contextualize media representations of disabled people. In this chapter, I provide an overview of each of these areas, relying on both scholarly and “grey” literature (the latter being government documents and official reports). I then describe this study’s conceptual framework, by explicitly stating how I position my work in these bodies of literature. I conclude the chapter by providing some background information on the history of Paralympics.

Disability in Canada

The Government of Canada (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013) recognizes that “Disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person’s body and mind and features of the society in which they live,” (p. 2). It recognizes that disability can occur at any time in a person’s life and can be temporary, permanent or episodic. Because of the complexity of disability, the Government offers no official definition, but it notes that the most widely accepted definition of disability is from the World Health Organization (WHO), which states:

Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experience by an individual in involvement in life situations (as cited in Government of Canada, 2013, p. 2).

This definition recognizes that disability is not solely a result of impairment but can be imposed on an individual by society through factors like discrimination and inaccessibly built environments.

On March 30, 2007, Canada endorsed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) but it was not until March 11, 2010 that the federal government of Canada signed onto the Convention. The Convention's core principle is disability rights and it seeks to change social attitudes that treat disabled people as objects of charity and to create social conditions for the disabled to be treated as people with rights who are capable of being active members of society. Despite this, compared to non-disabled Canadians, disabled Canadians continue to lag in many quality-of-life categories including education, employment, and income. Prince (2004) posits that the theme of disappointment has run through studies on disability policies over the last two decades in Canada.

According to a Statistics Canada report by Rubab Arim (2015), 14% of Canadians aged 15 years or older (3.8 million people) reported having disabilities that limited their daily activities in the year 2012. The types of impairments in order of prevalence were: pain related, flexibility, mobility, mental health-related, dexterity, hearing, seeing, learning, memory, developmental, and unknown. The report indicates that almost 80% of 25 to 64-year-olds with disabilities had at least a high school diploma compared to 89% of those without disabilities. The report also notes that 45% of those whose disability existed prior to completing school said that it influenced their choice of courses and careers. Thirty per cent reported that it took them longer to finish their level of education, 30% discontinued their studies and 23% reported that their education was interrupted for long periods of time. About 40% indicated that people avoided or excluded them at school and that 27% experienced bullying. For disabled people, 20% had less

than a high school diploma compared with 11% of non-disabled people. Compared to non-disabled adults, disabled people tend to have higher unemployment rates, less education, lower earnings and household incomes. The report states that 47% of disabled 15 to 64-year-olds were employed, compared with non-disabled people at 74%. Canada's First Report to the United Nations (2014) regarding its implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that while progress has been made to increase the inclusion and participation of disabled people in society, there are still barriers to language and communication, learning and training, safety and security.

Literature pertaining to societal relationships between non-disabled and disabled people has been and continues to reveal a contested and somewhat problematic process of interactions. Fox and Willis (as cited in Prince, 2004) describe disability policy as "a convenient and recognizable, though still inadequate way, to characterize interventions that seek to enable people with impairments to live in ways that are personally satisfying and socially useful," (p. 62). Prince adds that this view of disability, policy-makers look at disability policy as formulating programs and providing services for disabled people in need, or those at risk of developing a disability. In contrast, Prince argues that disabled people view disability policy as finding ways to do what they aspire to do and enabling people to function so that they can contribute to society. Put differently, policy tends to view disabled people from a deficit perspective, as objects of support and care, whereas disabled people seek enabling policies that reflect how they see themselves – as receiving resources, so that they can thrive and be contributing members of society.

Disability Legislation in Canada

Disability is recognized under the Canadian Human Rights Act, which was enacted in 1977 and protects Canadians when they are employed by or receive services from the federal government, First Nations government or private companies that are regulated by the federal government, such as banks (Government of Canada, 2017). Disabled Canadians are also protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was enacted in 1980. The Charter, however, did not include a reference to disabilities as a means of discrimination when it was originally developed. After dedicated lobbying by advocacy groups, disability was added to the Charter the following year (“Disability Rights Movement,” 2015). Burns and Gordon (2009) wrote a report in which they compared Canada and the United States’ disability legislation, and questioned why Canada, unlike the United States, did not have federal legislation to specifically address disability. Without federal legislation, provinces are left to implement their own programs and services, resulting in inconsistency across the country.

As noted above, Canada ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010. With this ratification, the Federal Government of Canada committed itself to applying the rights found in the Convention (McCallum, 2012) which defines disabled persons as “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (p. 3).

This international legislation also commits Canada to do the following: protect the rights to equality and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities; and call on States Parties to ensure non-discrimination for persons with disabilities in a variety of areas including freedom of expression and opinion, respect for home and family, education, health, employment and access

to services. The Convention is monitored by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which reviews how the conventions have been implemented by States Parties. Canada must also submit a report to the UN every four years, outlining what it has done to further the rights of persons with disabilities (“Rights of people with disabilities,” 2017). Canada’s First Report to the UN (2014) outlines its legislation and programs that are in place to assist disabled Canadians. For example, the government offers the Child Disability Benefit, which provides additional income support to parents of disabled children.

In 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau created the position of “Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities.” When “Disability” was added to the Minister of Sport’s role, Trudeau wrote in a letter to the first Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, Carla Qualtrough, that her goal would be to “promote healthier Canadians through sport and recreation, and to ensure greater accessibility and opportunities for Canadians with disabilities.” Trudeau outlined that one of Qualtrough’s top priorities would be to “Work with the Minister of Canadian Heritage to include sport and recreation in championing government-wide efforts to promote the celebration of Canada 150, with a particular emphasis on celebrating the achievements of athletes and persons with disabilities.” Qualtrough is visually impaired herself and has competed in the Paralympics twice as a swimmer.

On June 20, 2018, Qualtrough, introduced the proposed Accessible Canada Act to Parliament, which would “take a proactive approach to end systemic discrimination of people with disabilities,” (Employment and Service Development Canada, 2018, para. 1). It aims to remove barriers to accessibility in built environments, employment, information and communication technologies, the procurement of goods and services, the delivery of programs

and services, and transportation. There has since been no updates regarding the bill from the Government.

All this progress is to be commended, however, there remain legislative areas where more work needs to be done. Disability has often been viewed politically as a burden on society. As Prince (2004) suggests, historically and still today, disabled people have been considered objects of charity who are incompetent to function in society. One area of legislation in which negative perceptions of disability have persisted until very recently is immigration. Roy Hanes' (2009) research demonstrates that disabled people and their families have been and continue to be denied entrance into Canada. He explains Canada's immigration history is steeped in anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia and sexism, but over the years legislation reform has removed barriers for these groups, however, discrimination towards disabled people remained (p. 93). Canada's "excessive demand" clause allows the country to turn away disabled people because they are assumed to pose a burden on Canada's health care system. Hanes argues,

in terms of Canadian Immigration legislation, people with disabilities have been and continue to be viewed as helpless victims, as burdens on one's family, as extraordinary costs to the state and, depending on the impairment, people with disabilities have been considered possible threats to public safety and or public health. (p.122)

Earlier this year, Canada moved to change immigration policy to address some of these concerns (Government of Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2018), though it remains to be seen how effectively and efficiently these changes will be implemented.

Through Hanes' work on immigration policy (2009), we can also see that disabled people are politically considered burdens on society, wherein disability is defined as an individual health issue. This perception makes issue out of the potential health care costs,

which even if there aren't any, politically outweigh the positive contributions the disabled immigrants may offer.

Critical Disability Theory

In this study, disability is viewed through the lens of Critical Disability Theory (CDT). The basis of CDT is that disability is not about medicine or health but who has power (Pothier & Devlin, 2008) and it critically considers how society can contribute to a person's impairment or disability. It considers how language and our institutions can contribute to the concept of "disability." Words such as "wheelchair-bound", or "misfortune," are often used to describe disabled people, which insinuates that disabilities are a burden. This also creates a hierarchy between disabled and non-disabled people, with disability perceived as less capable and desirable (Pothier & Devlin, 2006).

Another tenet of the theory, according to Pothier and Devlin (2006), is that disability is a social construct. CDT describes disability as socially constructed or imposed on an individual by society (Hosking, 2008). This position establishes that it is not only the impairment that contributes to disability, but also (and often more so) society's attitudes and institutions, which often meet the needs of non-disabled people. Examples of this are discrimination in the workplace and the lack of ramps in public buildings for wheelchair users. CDT asserts that "impairment" is distinct from "disability." Pothier and Devlin (2006) write that an impairment is a natural defect while disability is society's oppressive characterization of impairment.

Further, CDT emphasizes multidimensionality, which suggests that disabled people are a diverse group and are part of various ethnic groups, socio-economic classes, gender identities,

ages, etc. Disabled people are also multi-dimensional individuals and they are more than their impairment (Hosking, 2008).

Finally, CDT posits that ideas of and stories about disability, whether they be in the news or in film, are often told from the point of view of someone who does not have a disability. This point is important to my project because ideas and stories told about impairment are often formed by people who do not have impairments, and media representations of reveal society's beliefs and attitudes towards impairments.

Critical Disability Theory can be contrasted with the medical model of disability which treats disability as solely the physical or mental impairment and the idea that disability resides exclusively in the person. Unlike CDT, the medical model does not consider how social and external factors, like language, influence a person's disability (Beauchamp, Chung, Mogilner & Zakinova, 2015).

Critical Disability Theory argues that disability is an artificial concept used to distinguish, and thus create power dynamics, between who is "normal" and who is "different" (2012). CDT is a response to the medical model of disability, and it builds on the social model of disability, which was developed in the 1970s by disabled activists in the UK and North America (Berghs, Atkin, Graham, Hatton & Thomas, 2016). The social model of disability marked the early political efforts to make a distinction between impairment (physical/mental/sensory) and disability (the experience of social oppression). Scholars developed those political ideas theoretically, to generate the body of works now recognized as CDT literature.

While the social model of disability considers no impairment to be disabling, only society's lack of accommodation, CDT offers a more nuanced approach (Hosking, 2008). It

recognizes that in order to have a complete account of disability, our understanding of it must incorporate the impairment itself (2008). Vehmas and Watson propose that the use of “critique” is to challenge accepted constructs and ideas about disability (p. 640). They recognize that freeing oneself from ableist attitudes is not enough because some impairments do carry insurmountable realities that affect the quality of a persons’ life. The authors state that there is no clear answer as to what constitutes well-being, but that some basic elements should be agreed upon. They use the example of coronary heart disease prevention programs, which they say are possibly in place because of ableist attitudes, but also because the potential of death is a harm. They write, “Denying some aspects of well-being [that] are so clear... would be absurd, and simply morally wrong,” (p. 642). Therefore, not all negative perceptions of disability are unfounded or based on abelist attitudes. Some impairments do carry negative realities that are not always only socially constructed.

Vehmas and Watson (2014) also go a step further to criticize common assumptions in CDT, namely that it tends to view categorizing people as disabled and nondisabled as problematic. The authors suggest that there does need to be distinction between the two groups because if there was not, there would be no need to implement services for disabled people. They argue that disabled people are often disadvantaged because of the denial of services and that, “It is impossible to fight the oppression of a group of people that does not exist,” (p. 648).

Therefore, disability encompasses a diversity of experiences and understandings and not all negative perceptions towards disability are a result of ablelist attitudes. Whereas criticisms of CDT are valuable, CDT still offers an excellent lens for viewing disability, and forms an important part of this study.

Media Representations

The way people construct social categories like gender, race, sexuality and disability is often influenced by images and narratives portrayed in the media (music, radio, film, television, newspaper, social media, etc.) (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). The United Nations (n.d.) takes the position that images and stories in the media can deeply influence public opinion and establish societal norms. That position explicitly notes that people with impairments are often portrayed negatively such as objects of pity, charity, overcoming a tragic or disabling condition, or presented as superheroes to inspire non-disabled people. The United Nations (Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Inclusive Social Development, n.d.) also recognizes that the media has the ability to counter stigma and discrimination against disabled people.

Although the media is not solely responsible for the ways in which people understand each other and the world, authors Dwight Brooks and Lisa Hebert, Valerie Alia, Robert Harding, as well as Irena Knezevic and Kathy Dobson, all suggest that it does play an important role. The issue of representation in the media is not unique to disabled people as it has been a contested issue in relation to other social categories such as gender and race. Brooks and Hebert (2006) argue:

How individuals construct their social identities, how they come to understand what it means to be male, female, black, white, Asian, Latino, Native American—even rural or urban—is shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by the social constructions of race and gender. (p. 297)

The authors provide the example of the representation of Black women in mainstream media who are typically portrayed as welfare mothers and housekeepers. They argue that this influences how blackness and Black people are seen, and how others will respond to this racialized group. Racialized and gendered ideas about Black women affect not only how society sees Black women but also how Black women see themselves.

Likewise, Valerie Alia (2000) studied media coverage of Indigenous and northern issues in Canada in 1991 and discovered a few themes: Indigenous people only received media coverage during times of crisis or when negative issues were involved and only nationally prominent leaders, such as the former Yukon Member of Parliament Audrey McLaughlin, received media coverage. Robert Harding (2005) similarly claims that the media tends to frame Indigenous people as “us vs. them, civilized vs. barbarian, modern vs. traditional, individual rights vs. collective rights,” (p. 314). Labelling also suggests that people may feel they have to live up to the stereotypes that have been created for them. Harding (2005) makes the argument that the “drunk Indian” stereotype may cause some Indigenous people to feel they have permission to engage in heavy drinking because they are simply fitting into a stereotype given to them by non-Indigenous people.

This is the case with traditional media content, as well as contemporary social media such as internet memes. These memes carry meanings and can be spread easily, particularly through social media. They are known as “still images with a simple commentary or caption (Hadley 2016), as a Google search for “Internet memes” will reveal,” (p. 778). For instance, internet memes have been found to reinforce negative racial stereotypes (Yoon, 2016) as well as stereotypes of people who rely social on assistance by representing them as welfare frauds, lazy, and drug and alcohol abusers (Dobson and Knezevic, 2017). Memes regarding disability are also spread on social media and an example can be seen in Illustration 1. The caption, “The only disability in life is a bad attitude,” accompanying the photo of an amputee swimmer, tells the audience that a disability is a result of an individuals’ attitude, therefore ignoring all social factors.

In the book *Media Gaze*, Augie Fleras (2011) writes that the media often reflects, reinforces and advances discourses in defence of dominant ideology. Fleras argues that when decoding how mainstream media frames images of diversity and difference, “institutional designs and media processes are exposed as raced, gendered, and classed, as well as sexualized secularized, and ageist,” (p. ix). She says that the media tends to portray whiteness, Eurocentrism and heterosexuality as the norm. The media gaze comes across as natural and normal, but Fleras argues that it is constructed and contested. Fleras notes, “media representations are pivotal in determining what is normal, acceptable or desirable,” (p. 3) and adds that people who do not have contact with minority groups, may take the media’s portrayals at face value.

A study conducted for the English Federation of Disability Sport (Marl & Wicks, 2016) analyzed how sport and disability were portrayed in the media, and how the portrayals were seen by disabled and non-disabled people, as well as journalists (2016). A guide was also created for journalists to use when reporting on sport and physical activity for disabled people. The study was conducted by ComRes, a market research consultancy in the UK. It involved in-depth interviews with disabled adults, online community with non-disabled adults, and telephone interviews with sports journalists. This study, with its research questions (on para-sports) and participant population (that included both disabled and non-disabled participants) bears many similarities to my research here, so its findings deserve reviewing at length.

The study found the current media coverage of sport and disability as “broadly of high quality” but that some areas of improvement remained. Many of the disabled adults expressed reservation over the use of words like “superhuman” and noted that disabled athletes should be represented how they would want to be. The disabled adults also said they would like to see more ambassadors to encourage disabled people to participate in sports, and also to normalize

disability in general. The non-disabled adults generally felt that they preferred live reporting of disabled sporting events and that they enjoy learning about an athlete's journey within that sport. The journalists said there is less demand for coverage of disabled sports than non-disabled sports, and that some barriers to increasing disabled sports coverage were: a lack of clear sporting events calendar, poor quality press releases, and weak relationships with sports clubs. The journalists also reported that more clarity and consistency over language and sports classifications would be useful. The disabled research participants felt that the language the media uses in disability sports reporting was appropriate. Words like "inspiring" and "disabled" were viewed positively. Words that had mixed opinions were "Victim", "sufferer", "superhuman", "hero", "brave" and words that were considered mostly negative were "lucky", "confined", "impaired", "wheelchair bound" and "handicapped". The study notes, "Some individuals also mentioned that words such as 'inspiring', being featured in the title is a draw for them as it appeals to their emotions," (p. 16).

The study also found that this type of media affects how people construct their image of disabled athletes. The study indicates that multiple respondents mention that they find it inspiring to read or watch disability sport. "Generally, the sentiment is that if individuals with severe disabilities can play sport at a high level, then anybody can at least have a go at being active and participating in sport," (p. 19). The respondents also reported that these stories impart messages of overcoming difficulties generally in life and can motivate disabled people to overcome their own disabilities. There were also mixed opinions among the disabled respondents regarding in how much depth athletes' disabilities should be discussed. One respondent said:

It's rare to find things where they just honestly report on the sport. There will be a bit about the sport and then it'll always be 'this is how they became disabled' or 'this is how long they've been disabled for'. You never read a football article and then it's like 'this person worked at McDonald's for four years before he did this (p. 12).

Another respondent said, “You can say fifty results and I wouldn’t care unless I knew the personal stories and I thought about the implications of it. That’s what makes sport interesting in my opinion,” (p. 12). The study’s results thus demonstrate the complex relationship between media coverage of para-sports, and the way that coverage is received – a relationship made even more complex by the varied responses of disabled and non-disabled participants. As will be made obvious in Chapters 3 and 4, this complexity plays an important role in my research too.

Disability and Advertising

Historically, images of disability have primarily been featured in charity advertisements and it was often the only way in which disabled people were seen in mainstream media (Haller & Ralph, 2001). Beth Haller and Sue Ralph (2001) suggest that advertisers in the United States, since the new millennium, have realized the importance of including disabled people in their advertising and that disabled people tend to be more brand loyal than other consumers. For example, if someone who is disabled saw that other disabled people were incorporated into a commercial, or if the company offered closed captions in their commercial for the hearing impaired, the disabled audience members would be more likely to choose that brand or switch to that brand. In the United Kingdom, advertisements that featured disabilities were typically developed to promote different charities and to encourage people to donate as a way to bring themselves good karma and “ward off disability” (para. 11). This type of advertising reflects society’s fear of becoming disabled. It also invokes guilt in the audience to donate to the cause, and implies that by doing so they will avoid the same fate as those depicted in the advertisement.

Images of disabled people in charity advertisements should not always be considered negative, however. For example, Jonathan Pitre, a 17-year-old from Russell, Ontario, was a

strong advocate for the charity Dystrophic Epidermolysis Bullosa Research (DEBRA) which provides support to individuals and families affected by Epidermolysis Bullosa (EB), as well as raise awareness about the disease (“Who is Debra Canada,” n.d.). Jonathan shared his story in numerous media articles and was frequently described as inspirational and brave for dealing with the painful, deadly skin disease. When he passed away in April 2018, more than \$27,000 in donations were made in his name to DEBRA and in his short life he had introduced many people to the disease – people who otherwise would not have known about it. In a CBC News Ottawa article from April 9, 2018, a 40-year-old woman with a mild form of EB, called Jonathan a hero who made life easier for others with the same condition. She said that because of Jonathan’s work, she discovered the EB community and the charity, DEBRA. “I actually grew up without knowing there are other people with the disease,” she said. “[It was important to me] just knowing that someone was out there explaining what he was dealing with,” she said.

Pitre’s approach to raising awareness for EB was different than other Canadians who have sought to educate the public about various impairments in more extreme ways. Rick Hansen was paralyzed after a vehicle accident at the age of 15 (“About Rick Hansen,” n.d.). In 1985, he set out on his *Man in Motion World Tour*, in which he wheelchaired through 34 countries to create awareness about the potential of people with impairments, the importance of accessibility, as well as to raise funds for a cure for paralysis after spinal cord injury. In 1980, Terry Fox, who lost his leg to cancer, also attempted to run across the country to raise awareness and money to find a cure for cancer. Christopher Y. Olivola and Eldar Shafir (2011), argue that “willingness to contribute to a charitable cause or collective cause increases when the contribution process is expected to be painful and effortful rather than easy and enjoyable,” (p. 91). The authors call this the “martyrdom effect” and suggest that is often used in charity

fundraising. They argue that “overcoming pain and effort in order to achieve a goal adds meaning to the achievement and a kind of symbolic value to the associated outcome as a result,” (p. 92). There is a connection between going to extremes to raise money for charity and how disabled people are portrayed in the media. There is more value placed on people with impairments when they do regular activities or engage in sports than their non-disabled counterparts, because they are perceived to be “overcoming” and “struggling”.

Representations and Attitudes towards Disability

Colin Barnes (1992) proposes that society’s assumptions about disabled people are based on stereotypes from earlier times, which continue to be reproduced in current media. Barnes completed a study on the media’s portrayals of disabled people in Britain, surveying 25 media organizations and advertisers. While the study is not recent, Barnes’ findings are still noteworthy. The following representations emerged in his research: Disabled people as pitiable, pathetic, an object of violence, sinister and evil, super-crips, object of ridicule, their own worst enemy, burdens, sexually abnormal, incapable of participating fully in community life, and the disabled person as normal. These stereotypes of disability continue today as Paul Anthony Darke notes in the book, *Disabling Barriers – Enabling Environments* (as cited in Swain, French, Barnes & Thomas, 2004). He discusses how disabled people are often portrayed in the media as recipients of charity, as evil characters in movies or as tragic victims of illness or accidents. Reflecting on Darke’s work, Swain and colleagues write, “Such images show disability as impairment and impairment as axiomatically abject and abhorrent” (p. 103). Wendy L. Chrisman (2011) claims inspiration is often put in the same category as pity, fear, overcoming and other negative terms:

Inspirational narratives often carry the attendant baggage of pity and fear, suggesting that disability can and should automatically evoke sympathy or concern from the audience – concern that people with disabilities might be a social or economic burden, concern of becoming disabled themselves. (p. 173)

Authors Haller, Dorries and Rahn (2006) concur that the theme of pity is often infused in news media reports. They note that journalism tends to prefer personal stories of “overcoming the odds” and “exceptional accomplishments” which are laced with themes of suffering. A recent example of such a news report is from CBC News (McMillan, 2018). Pete McGregor is a paraplegic and is travelling across Canada to teach martial arts instructors how to help people with impairments adapt to the sport. Rachel Wise was one individual in attendance who said it was moving to hear how open McGregor is about his disability and the “challenges” it presents. “It was really inspiring to hear him talk about that,” she said. Phrases used by the reporter in the article to evoke pity were, “He was plagued by medical conditions,” and “Competing against people with more abilities than him has forced him to innovate.” Words like “plagued” insinuate that he is suffering and the victim of impairment. The second phrase which describes the non-disabled athletes as having “more abilities” than him also is insinuating that people with impairments are less capable than their non-disabled counterparts. This is also not necessarily true.

The idea of “overcoming” disability is often partnered with the “supercrip” narrative which is that people with disabilities have extraordinary abilities (Barnes, 1992). Silva and Howe’s (2012) cite Hardin and Hardin’s (2008) description of supercrip narratives which is the representation of disabled people as heroic by virtue of their ability to perform activities considered impossible for disabled people (and often unattainable for most non-disabled people). Silva and Howe (2012) summarize the supercrip narrative as disabled people fighting against

impairment to achieve unlikely success. The supercrip narrative is reflective of society's low expectations of people with impairments. Silva and Howe (2012) write:

When it comes to disability, the baseline reference from which mainstream society assesses the worthiness of an event or performance is normally very low. What is judged as 'impossible' for people experiencing disabilities is often based on distorted assumptions and is not a realistic assessment of such individuals' capabilities. (p. 175)

Moreover, as noted in the Introduction, the super-crip narrative glosses over the amount of training that elite performances (in sports or art) require, of disabled and non-disabled individuals have to undergo to achieve such feats.

Hargreaves and Hardin (2009) interviewed several disabled athletes and discovered that they were "tired" of the stereotypes such as sex-symbols, tomboys, inspirational and supercrips. Their findings are also worth considering at length. One interviewee expressed that the mainstream media tends to focus on their disability and the hurdles they have overcome rather than their athletic achievements. Another respondent said:

I think a lot of times people see people with a disability and they still see the story as opposed to the person. As the what happened and why and what have people overcome what hurdles did you overcome you know they're glorified along the way as opposed to you know this is who I am, this is where I am and you know and this is what I am accomplishing. (para 51)

Another respondent, Anne, expressed her frustration with the supercrip narrative. She said:

Our athletic accomplishments are just as good athletically as able bodied people are and it's not because I have super human powers that I go out and play a sports everyday...Disabled athletes are just put in this stereotypical way, like disabled people always need help with stuff and they always need certain stuff done for them and so obviously, they don't do as much as able bodied people. So when we do something like play basketball instead of seeing it as an accomplishment it's seen as some super human thing. (para. 52 & 53)

Beth Haller (2000) discusses how people with visible impairments are often featured in the media because of the unspoken visual and emotional cues they provide. People in

wheelchairs or those who use equipment like canes or who have twisted hands tend to be featured most often because it can be made obvious that the person is disabled without stating it. Haller (2000) argues, “in terms of journalistic norms, wheelchairs and other disability-related equipment may pull viewers to news images through the rhetoric of tragedy and a sense of ‘people coping with tragedy,’” (p. 279). Haller also explains that media imagery tends to rely on mobility impairments that require wheelchair use, even though mobility impairment is one of the least common types of disabilities.

Stories about people with impairments have also been shown to win significant photojournalism awards as the photos draw on drama and human-interest. For example, a documentary on Jonathan Pitre, produced by TSN, won a Canadian Screen Award for the country’s best sports feature segment in 2015 (Ottawa Citizen, 2016). The *Ottawa Citizen* newspaper also won Best Feature Photo in 2015. The article notes, “Among her photo essay on Pitre was an image of the boy crouching nude in front of a heater, his entire body covered in blisters,” (Hopper, 2015). The sense of overcoming tragedy and impairment draws people in to these types of images. It also reflects the idea that society considers disability to be a tragedy (Haller, 2000).

Haller (2000) also discusses, however, that many Americans’ introduction to disabled people is primarily through the media rather than interpersonal connection. This lack of interaction with people with impairments helps to reproduce stereotypes because they become accepted truths. If people without impairments had more contact with people with impairments, they might come to see that impairments are usually not a tragedy or abnormal, rather just another way of going through life.

Disabled people are also portrayed as victims particularly in charity fundraising campaigns. Celebrity Jerry Lewis held an annual telethon to raise money to cure Muscular Dystrophy. On May 20, 2000, he gave an interview on CBS and said (Lester & Ross, 2003), “I’m telling about a child in trouble. If it’s pity, we’ll get some money.” Similar to journalists who use tragedy and negative images of people with impairments to draw in readers, charities can be found to do the same to bring in donations for their cause. In their book, *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, Lester & Ross (2003) state that many disability advocates oppose telethons in particular as they portray disabled people as objects of pity (p. 176). They declare:

Those features are usually shown as childlike, incompetent, needing total care, non-productive and a drain on taxpayers. It is rare that such telethons feature those who manage to live happy and productive lives despite having the featured disease. They rarely point out the accomplishments of such people. (p. 176)

The authors also cited the example of Terry Fox, the leg amputee mentioned above, whose goal was to run across Canada to raise money for cancer. Actor Alan Troy who walks with a leg brace contended “Sure, Fox’s story raised money for cancer, and sure, it showed the human capacity for achievement...but a lot of ordinary disabled people are made to feel like failures if they haven’t done something extraordinary,” (p. 178).

While media and advertising content reproduce and reinforce negative perceptions of disability, they do not bear sole responsibility for the continued negative (and sometimes misinformed) public perceptions. These perceptions are pervasive in other areas of life. For example, Swain and French (2000) point to the prevalence of prenatal screening and genetic testing to determine whether a child will be born with an impairment. Parents are often pressured to terminate the pregnancy if an impairment is detected. This reflects society’s view of disability

as a tragedy and that it would be better to be dead than to live with a disability. Media is responsible for reproducing these perceptions but is certainly not the sole origin of these ideas.

These pervasive perceptions not only marginalize the disabled, but also lead to many assumptions about their experiences. Swain and French (2000) explain that there is the assumption that disabled people want to be “normal” and that many disabling words are placed on them such as “adjust” or “accept their situation,” which can often cause more unhappiness than the impairment itself. The authors outline several reasons why society often holds this “tragic” view towards disability, one of them being a deep irrational fear of non-disabled peoples’ own mortality, and their fear of acquiring a disability.

The fear of disability comes from the understanding of disability that aligns with the medical model of impairment. Hansen, Janz and Sobsey (2008) posit that “impairment and disability are not commonly understood as natural variations in human biology but rather as biology ‘gone wrong,’” (p. 104). Mainstream media tends to react to this fear by portraying disability as not a real possibility for everyone, as something that only certain individuals are prone to (Titchkosky, 2000). Mainstream media portrays disability as something that is “far out” and a deviation from the norm. In contrast to that, bioethicist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, wrote a piece in 2016 for *The Telegraph* contending that “the fact is, most of us will move in and out of disability in our lifetimes, whether we do so through illness, an injury or the process of aging,” (para. 9). An individual’s fear about losing their eyesight, for example, is based on their identifying themselves as someone who is not visually impaired and not having a disability (French & Swain, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

This study broadly relies on Critical Disability Theory (CDT). Put simply, I acknowledge that people do have physical, sensory, cognitive and other impairments, which can pose real life challenges that are not always attributable to social dynamics. At the same time, I also acknowledge that people with impairments are oftentimes disabled by the society in which they live – through discrimination, negative attitudes towards impairment, as well as a lack of funding and resources, such as artificial limbs and other medical equipment. This is in line with much of contemporary work on disability; for instance the World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes that a balanced approach is needed that at once acknowledges both the challenges associated with impairment, and how society contributes to disability (World Health Organization, 2011).

It is important to recognize people with impairments as distinct from those without impairments because by not recognizing disabled people, we fail to recognize their needs which may differ from non-disabled people. “It has been acknowledged that to treat persons with disabilities equally results in their continued discrimination and oppression as ‘it ignores their differences and their need for accommodation,’” (Leslie, Leslie & Murphy, 2003, p. 159 as cited in Dunn, Hanes, Hardie, Leslie and MacDonald, 2008, para. 2).

With CDT as a starting point, I am interested in better understanding how media portrayals of disability reproduce or challenge the popular notions of disability. As discussed above, media can greatly influence public perceptions of social groups, particularly those groups that the audience members have little or no exposure to and contact with in their everyday lives. Silva & Howe (2012) warn that narratives of disability as a tragedy or a problem can limit the ways that public can imagine the possibilities of living with impairments. Citing Pothier and Devlin (2006), they propose that an able-bodied majority rules the social ideology around

disability, which sees the “overcoming” narratives as unquestionably positive, and makes the able bodied understanding of impairment the normalized, taken-for-granted way of seeing impairment.

The media influence, however, is not a linear content-effect relationship, but rather a complex interaction between the content and what the audience members already know and believe. As Stuart Hall (2006) suggests with his concept of “encoding and decoding”, people are active audiences and are not just passive recipients of messages. Through encoding, a text is constructed by its producers to “encode” certain values and perspectives. When audience members are exposed to that media text, they “decode” it through a process of interpretation. According to Hall (2006), individuals do not passively accept messages through the media, but instead interpret them according to their own backgrounds and experiences. In other words, people can think critically about what they see or read and can interpret issues through their own worldviews. Just because a media text is trying to relay a particular message, that does not mean the message will be accepted at face value by the audience.

I rely on these concepts to explore the idea of disability as inspiration in popular media. I understand I will not find a definite answer as to how inspiration is viewed by disabled and non-disabled people, and that is not my goal for this thesis. Everyone has their own opinions and experiences and inspirational narratives may be problematic for some people and not for others, or fine in some contexts and not others. Considering many disabled peoples’ objection towards inspirational narratives, the goal of my research is to explore this topic further by investigating inspirational narratives as “porn” – content that objectifies one social group for the benefit of another.

Stella Young describes inspiration porn as, “an image of a person with a disability, often a kid, doing something completely ordinary – like playing, or talking, or running, or drawing a picture, or hitting a tennis ball – carrying a caption like ‘your excuse is invalid’ or ‘before you quit, try,’” (as cited in Grue, 2016, p. 2). Jan Grue developed a “tentative” definition of inspiration porn, based on Young’s description. Grue writes that Young’s critique needs to be expanded beyond just depictions of disabled people doing “ordinary” activities, to also include depictions that show people doing physically impressive or strenuous activities. Grue’s (2016) consequent definition is the following:

Inspiration porn is the representation of disability as a desirable but undesired characteristic, usually by showing impairment as a visually or symbolically distinct biophysical deficit in one person, a deficit that can and must be overcome through the display of physical prowess. (p. 3)

I take the position that inspiration porn materializes in two different forms: 1) Inspiration porn depicts disabled people as inspirational for partaking in ordinary activities, such as going to school, riding a bike or going grocery shopping. 2) In relation to athletic achievements and the Paralympics, inspiration porn depicts disabled people as “superhuman” and somehow defying the odds and surpassing the low level of expectations associated with impairment. While the latter form can offer positive role models, and even – yes – inspiration to the disabled audience members, both of these forms of media content tend to be aimed at the non-disabled audiences. To that end, the use of the word “porn”, however jarring, becomes appropriate as it suggests a voyeuristic experience of observing without participating, and deriving pleasure from that observation, while objectifying the participants themselves.

Paralympics History

Sport for disabled people became widely known after the Second World War, as many veterans returned home with injuries (“The IPC – Who we are”, 2017). In 1944, Dr. Ludwig Guttmann opened a spinal injuries centre at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital, in Aylesbury, England, at the request of the British Government (Purdue & Howe, 2015). Sport for disabled people was originally for rehabilitation, but it consequently evolved to recreational and competitive purposes (2015). Dr. Guttmann organized the first competition for wheelchair athletes at the 1948 Olympic Games, which he named the Stoke Mandeville Games. These Games later became the Paralympic Games, which first took place in Rome, Italy in 1960, featuring 400 athletes from 23 countries. Since then, the Paralympics occurs every four years, and includes both Winter and Summer Games. The Games are also hosted in the same cities as the Olympics, due to an agreement between the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and International Olympic Committee (IOC). On September 22, 1989, the IPC was founded as an international non-profit organization in Germany to act as the global governing body of the Paralympic Movement. The word “para” means “beside or alongside”, meaning that the Olympics and Paralympics exist side-by-side.

In the Paralympics, athletes are placed in “sport classes” based on their impairment. The classification system determines which athletes are eligible to compete in a particular sport and which athletes are grouped together for competition, similar to grouping athletes by age, gender or weight. There are ten eligible impairments which include: impaired muscle power, impaired passive range of movement, limb deficiency, leg length difference, short stature, hypertonia, ataxia, athetosis and visual impairment. In the 2016 Summer Paralympic Games in Rio, 4,350 athletes competed, and disabilities included spinal injury, amputee, visual impairment, cerebral

palsy, short stature and intellectual disability (“Summer Paralympic Games Overview,” n.d.). When looking at the International Paralympic Committees’ website, the number of athletes competing in the Summer Paralympic Games have increased every year since 1960.

Over the years, the news media has been criticized for not devoting as much coverage to the Paralympics as it does to the Olympics. Howe (2008) echoed this sentiment by describing the lack of journalists who attended the 2004 Paralympics in Athens, Greece, versus its Olympic counterpart. Howe said the media centre, which housed the journalists covering both Olympic and Paralympic Games and could have fit a 200 m track inside, was less than 20% full when the Paralympics came around. The Paralympics occurs after the Olympics and he stated that once the Olympics closing ceremony was over, American broadcaster, NBC, pulled out all of its 3,500 staff. In Canada, Bell Globemedia won the rights to the London 2012 Games. Maika and Danylchuk (2016) found that the Olympic Games received 5,500 hours of media coverage while the Paralympic Games were limited to daily one-hour highlight segments on Canadian television. However, online streaming did provide 580 hours of live Paralympic coverage. Still, there is a significant disparity in the amount of coverage in Canada of the Paralympics as compared to the Olympics. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) held the broadcasting rights to the 2016 Summer Paralympics in Rio and broadcasted more than 1,000 hours of multi-platform coverage, which was the most of any Paralympics in Canadian history (Rio 2016 Paralympics, CBC, 2016).

Beth Haller et. al (2012) analyzed Canadian newspaper coverage of disability issues over the course of a year and found four themes: the medical perspective, the heroic perspective (supercrip), the charity perspective (characterized by the good person coming forward and helping those in need), and the rights perspective. The authors found that stories under the sport,

culture and recreation category, often portrayed disabled people as heroes and “overcoming” their disability (p. 60). Haller et al. (2012) cite Thomas and Smith (2003) who argue that media coverage of the Paralympics may increase the public’s knowledge and awareness of the Games while also reinforcing negative stereotypes about disability. Zang and Haller (2012) also conducted a survey in 2010 and found that the more disabled people were featured as supercrips in the media, the more positive attitudes they felt about themselves and the more the media framed disability as an illness, the more negative they felt about themselves.

The bodies of literature reviewed above, and the theoretical underpinnings described in this chapter form the foundation of my research. I next turn to my research process and describe the methods I used to collect and analyse the data for this study.

Chapter 2: Methods

The aim of this research project is to examine how disabled individuals, especially disabled athletes, are portrayed as inspirational entities in the media, and how disabled and non-disabled people feel or think about these inspirational narratives. I accomplish this through media analysis, focus groups, and analysis of online comments, as outlined in more detail below.

My study uses as its starting point a closed-captioned infomercial called *We're The Superhumans*, which was produced by British television network, Channel 4, to advertise the 2016 Paralympics. I have selected this infomercial because it is a classic example of “inspiration porn” and it was criticized by some, such as Celeste Orr in her op-ed to the *Ottawa Citizen*, for objectifying disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people. The infomercial also encompasses people with various impairments such as amputees, wheelchair users, as well as individuals with visual and hearing impairments, participating in a range of activities from sports to music, and attending school. The lyrics “Yes I Can!” are also repeated in the background, which adds to the inspirational element. The lyrics convey that disabled people need to prove to non-disabled, and perhaps to themselves as well, that they can play sports and do everything from mundane tasks to elite sport. It also suggests that there is an underlying message in society that disabled people cannot do certain things but that with the right attitude, they indeed “can.”

I began my research by analyzing the content in the infomercial, applying discourse analysis to both visual and verbal elements. Discourse analysis is a method in which language, texts, and film are examined as evidence of social phenomena – the social and dynamics and frames that are beyond the individual opinions and positions (Taylor, 2013). “Through the analysis of language and language use, the researcher therefore builds up a picture of society and

how it functions,” (Taylor, 2013, p. 3). Analyzing the visual elements and language in the video, provides a window to the values and power relationships society holds towards disabled people.

I next conducted two focus groups with Carleton University students – one group consisted of two people with physical impairments and the other group consisted of two people without physical impairments.¹ I chose to recruit individuals with physical impairments rather than individuals with mental impairments because the infomercial focuses primarily on physical impairments. It would have been ideal to have a larger sample size, however, I was recruiting near the end of the Winter semester (April of 2018), as final assignments were due, which resulted in low participation. The focus groups ran between 25 minutes and one hour in length.

I began the focus groups by showing both groups the entire three-minute infomercial. After showing the infomercial to each group, I led a discussion where I asked the participants questions to elicit their thoughts and reactions, but also allowing the conversation to flow naturally. The focus group question guide, along with recruitment materials, and the information and consent documents can be found in Appendix A. I sought to understand what they thought about the infomercial and what they thought about the people being featured. Focus groups are an excellent method for this research because, “they are useful in generating a rich understanding of participants’ experiences and beliefs,” (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008, p. 293). The focus groups were semi-structured, allowing me to pursue lines of inquiry that came up in the discussion even if they were not in my question guide.

I recruited physically disabled participants by contacting Carleton Disability Awareness Centre (CDAC). I asked representatives of CDAC to send my “Recruitment Email” to their members which provided a description of the project, the risks involved and my contact

¹ I also conducted a pilot focus group to test the questions. Because only one participant took part in the pilot, the data collected in the pilot was not included in the analysis.

information if they were interested or had any questions. I ensured the messaging in my email about my research project was vague such as, “Discussion about Paralympic media coverage” as to not affect the participants’ responses in the focus groups. I recruited my participants from Carleton University to ensure that my sample is relatively consistent in age and education level. All participants were provided with a refreshment and symbolic gift (\$5 gift card for a coffee shop).

For my first focus group with the non-disabled participants, I used a video recording device to ensure accuracy when transcribing the interviews as it would be difficult to determine who was speaking. However, I found that because the focus group was so small, it provided little benefit. Therefore, when I conducted the focus group with the disabled participants, I felt that using only an audio recorder was sufficient. I transcribed the recordings on my personal, password-protected laptop and then destroyed the video and audio clips. I will keep the transcripts for five years from the recording as they may be used for future research.

At each focus group, I first asked the participants to complete a “Consent Form” to ensure I had their written agreement to participate and permission to make video/audio recordings. The form also included a brief description of the project, the procedures for collecting the information, the time commitment being asked of them, and any risks and benefits associated with participating in the project (see Appendix A). They were also asked to complete a personal questionnaire which included specifying their gender, year of study, whether they are disabled or not (and to specify, if they feel comfortable doing so), whether or not they have a disabled family member(s) and/or close friend(s), as well as if they play a sport(s) and/or are involved in music. This form also allowed me to consider if there are relationships between peoples’ backgrounds and their views towards the infomercial and to provide some context

surrounding their views. I ensured that the participants knew the information provided on the form was confidential and would not be shared with anyone.

I conducted a qualitative analysis of the participants' responses by analyzing what they said as well as their tone. I compared the responses of the disabled and non-disabled participants to see if there are common themes between the groups as well as themes that differ. There are several themes that I anticipated such as "inspiration, assumptions, objectification and exploitation." I also took note of themes that emerged from the focus groups that I did not anticipate. I determined relevant words by identifying if they were used multiple times and if there was a pattern. For the non-disabled participants, I analyzed if there was a difference in their perception of the infomercial between those who have a close relationship with a disabled person compared to those who did not. Overall, I was looking to see whether there was a difference between how the disabled and non-disabled participants felt towards the infomercial and whether it left them with positive or negative feelings, considering the criticism that "inspiration porn" has received.

This study was low risk to the participants because, although the discussion may have invoked emotional responses, the risk of this happening was no greater than what the participants would experience in their everyday lives. Participants also had the right to end their participation at any point during the focus group, for any reason, but due to the nature of focus groups, I told them that I could not remove their contributions from the transcripts. I took care to protect the participants and keep their responses anonymous, but I could not, however, guarantee that all participants would respect this confidentiality. I also offered the participants the option of receiving an electronic copy of the thesis once it has been completed.

Finally, to augment the corpus of data, I also analyzed peoples' reactions to *We're The Superhumans* through collecting online comments. I was interested in the comments posted on the YouTube video, however, I was not able to analyze the comments on the official video on Channel 4's YouTube account as the comment section was "disabled." Instead, I analyzed the comments on the same video posted on another YouTube channel, Self Confidence Motivation, where comments were open. This video was found at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzjuQoNM534>.

I went through all 258 of the comments and specifically looked for comments that coincided or contradicted with what was said by the participants in the focus groups. I also analyzed comments that were posted on Twitter that included the hashtag, "#Werethesuperhumans." I put this hashtag in Twitter's search bar which resulted in 42 tweets ranging from July 14, 2016 to December 13, 2017. Similar to the YouTube comments, I looked for tweets that reflected or contradicted the responses from the focus group participants. Twitter, however, allowed me to know more about the individuals commenting such as the field they stated that they worked in – for instance, I noticed that several of the people commenting work in the advertising industry. I also analyzed media coverage of the infomercial which included articles and opinion pieces from news websites, blogs and advertising industry magazines. I did this by using "We're The Superhumans" as a search term in Google and developing a purposive sample of articles. I looked at blogs as well as any news sites that included quotes or comments about the video, focusing on critiques of and opinions about the infomercial.

There are some constraints to this study. I only focus on portrayals of physically disabled people to keep the project manageable, however, I do recognize that inspirational narratives in the media do include disabled people with other types of impairments. Another constraint is that

the focus group sample is small in quantity and in diversity (all university students), so it cannot be assumed that these views reflect all disabled and non-disabled people. This constraint was mitigated by the additional online content analysis (YouTube video comments, tweets and media coverage).

About “We’re The Superhumans”

We’re The Superhumans is an infomercial that was released on July 15, 2016 on television network Channel 4. It was created by the production company Blink to promote Channel 4’s coverage of the 2016 Paralympic Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro and was a follow up to the network’s *Meet the Superhumans* campaign from the 2012 Paralympics Games in London. It is a three-minute television advertisement and features 140 disabled people including Paralympic athletes and musicians doing extraordinary tasks, and disabled people doing daily activities such as driving. Channel 4’s (2016) news release regarding the advertisement states:

It includes inspirational scenes such as a mother with no arms holding her baby with her feet. It is believed to include more disabled people than ever before in a UK ad – and will be the most accessible campaign ever produced by Channel 4, with subtitled, signed and audio described versions available. (para. 2)

The advertisement was also released on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and was accompanied by a poster campaign which featured Paralympians and non-Paralympian disabled people. This coincided with Channel 4’s 2016 Year of Disability. The advertisement is set to the song, *Yes I Can*, by Sammy Davis Jr., which was re-recorded by disabled singers and musicians. The song was released by Universal Music and the profits made were donated to the British Paralympics Association.

Channel 4’s Chief Marketing and Communications Officer, Dan Brooke (2016) stated:

We're The Superhumans is an unbridled celebration of ability, by both elite Paralympians and everyday people. In 2012 we saw athletes like never before, but now we see that Down's Syndrome graduates and wheelchair users in the workplace are just as Superhuman as blind sprinters and amputee weightlifters. (para. 6)

The difference between the network's *Meet The Superhumans* infomercial and *We're The Superhumans* was that this time around, the infomercial included disabled people who were not athletes or Paralympians. The infomercial became the second most shared Olympic-themed ad on social media of all time ("Campaign of the Year 2016...", 2016). Research found that the campaign changed peoples' attitudes towards disabled people (2016). Seventy-four percent felt more comfortable discussing disability after seeing it and 59% said they felt it improved their perception of disabled people (2016).

The reason this infomercial gained more attention than its predecessor is partially because it was released digitally first and could be shared more easily through social media than the 2012 infomercial. In 2017 the Internet had more than three billion users, with many using social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (Dobson and Knezevic, 2017). Social media facilitates sharing and reposting across platforms enabling certain content to go "viral", a term used to describe instances when something has spread quickly and widely across the Internet, with millions of people exposed to the same image, video, or text (Heylighen 1996, as cited in Dobson and Knezevic, 2017). An article in *The Drum* (Goodfellow, 2016), notes *Meet The Superhumans* helped the London Olympics become the first of its kind to sell out. However, it could be argued that because it is a British infomercial, and the Paralympics took place in London, England, more people were able to attend. Dan Brooke, Channel 4's Chief Marketing and Communications Officer says three per cent of its workforce is disabled and that they are working to increase that number to six per cent by 2020 (2016).

As of June 6, 2018, the infomercial *We're The Superhumans* has been viewed approximately 8.9 million times on YouTube.

We're The Superhumans also won a number of awards. It was named the 2017 Cannes Lions Film Grand Prix Winner and won two Black Pencils through D&AD Professional Awards which recognizes the best in advertising and design. It also won Best Commercial of the Year in 2017 by The British Arrows ("The British Arrows 2017 Winners," n.d.), which honours the best campaigns and craft in British advertising. It was further awarded the Art Directors Club of Europe Creative Distinction Award, which aims to spotlight a creative project "with profound social and cultural impact," (Brewer, 2017, para. 1).

Chapter 3: Analysis

Discourse Analysis of We're The Superhumans

The opening scene of the video shows a close-up shot of what appears to be hands playing the drums. But as the camera slowly zooms out, it is revealed to be a man, who is a double arm amputee (Illustration 2), playing the drums with his feet.

Illustration 2

Next, a singer in a wheelchair enters the scene, singing “Yes I can, suddenly, yes I can. Gee I’m afraid to go on suddenly, Yes, I can.” The singer and the accompanying band, which is made up of people with various physical impairments including people with mobility impairments, people with visual impairments, and people with amputations and missing limbs, as well as persons with Down Syndrome, lead the viewer through scenes of disabled people doing various activities. The cameras show disabled people competing in sports such as wheelchair racing, wheelchair basketball, high jump, and fencing. They also show disabled people taking part in performing arts such as playing the piano and various instruments, as well as dancing (Illustration 3).

Illustration 3

The video also features more mundane activities like a woman at work writing notes with her feet and holding a phone with her feet (Illustration 4), and people with missing upper limbs drinking from a bowl, or driving a car, or filling up the gas in their car. It also shows a wheelchair user buying groceries and a teenager with Down Syndrome graduating from school (Illustration 5).

Illustration 4

Illustration 5

Of particular note is the featuring of double arm amputees who use their feet to complete activities of daily living and wheelchair users who show remarkable skills with their wheelchairs. People with sensory impairments such as people who are blind and hard of hearing get minimal showtime. The upbeat background music is accompanied by the lyrics, “Yes I Can” which is often repeated and said in an assertive tone. It is meant to be uplifting with phrases like, “I can do anything, I can go all the way, yes I can.” The music is fast paced, and the use of trumpets creates excitement. As the music quiets, it shows the negative side of disability.

In one scene, the upbeat music stops to highlight the negative interactions sometimes had between disabled and non-disabled people. In this scene (Illustration 6), a careers officer tells a student in a wheelchair, “No you can’t,” suggesting the teenager is being told he cannot pursue a particular career because of his impairment.

Illustration 6

This interaction between the student and the careers officer demonstrates how oftentimes society makes assumptions about what disabled people can and cannot do. It also shows how disability is seen as an individual problem rather than one imposed by society. In this scene, the student is told he cannot do something because of his impairment, when the real disability is the low expectations the careers officer is placing on the student. Perhaps this student would need accommodations or adaptations to complete the job he is interested in, but it does not mean he cannot do it.

The impairment tends to be the focal point of each camera shot, whether that is an athletes' artificial leg or wheelchair, and the impairment is also highlighted through the use of lighting. When the attention turns to the Paralympic athletes at the beginning of the video, the atmosphere changes from a dimly lit studio to daylight. The scenes with music such as the opening scene with the singer and the band, the lighting is dimmed with the spotlight on the musicians. At one point, a rock band with guitar players without arms is playing on a dimly lit basketball court as wheelchair basketball players zoom past. This adds to the intensity of the sport and creates a superhuman feel. The music is upbeat and fast which is also meant to motivate the viewer to feel that anything is possible.

One purpose of the video appears to be motivational and encourage people with and without disabilities to overcome the challenges in their life. This is evident through the song lyrics and upbeat music. However, the primary goal of the infomercial appears to show non-disabled people that disabled people can participate in sports, the arts and do everyday household tasks. It is also interesting to note that although *We're The Superhumans* is an infomercial for the Paralympics, it includes disabilities that would not qualify for the Paralympics, such as Down Syndrome, and includes disabled people taking part in activities other than sport. It notably does not mention anywhere in the video when the Paralympics are taking place or the times that people can watch the Paralympics, which is important information if the aim is to encourage people to tune in.

It appears that the infomercial is going beyond trying to advertise the Paralympics and show society in general that disabled people can “overcome” their disabilities. As mentioned before, the impairments that seem to feature most prominently are arm, hand, leg, feet amputations and mobility impairments. This could be because it is easy for the viewer to immediately recognize that the person has impairments without having a commentator to explain and describe those impairments. It could also be because people are typically drawn to view the deviant, the different or the oddity from a distance. Doing tasks with one’s feet would be difficult for most people but for many individuals who have been washing, eating, and/or writing with their feet and toes, this is the norm, not the deviant or the oddity as identified and internalized by the outside viewer. Therefore, the viewer is supposed to be impressed by the abilities in the video because they cannot imagine themselves using their feet as they would their hands.

Although the infomercial does not overtly focus on the “tragedy” of disability, it does so subliminally. For example, the lyrics, “*Yes I can, suddenly. Yes I can. Gee I’m afraid to go on*

and suddenly, Yes I can,” insinuates that the disabled people in the video thought at one point that their disability would stop them from participating in sports and being independent but that suddenly, they were able to overcome these challenges.

Focus Groups

As noted above, two focus groups were conducted for the purpose of this study. I next describe the findings from the focus groups, but presenting the analysis in the order that the focus groups took place, the non-disabled group first, and then the disabled group.

Non-disabled Group:

There were two participants in the non-disabled group. They were age 25 (Participant 1) and 31 years old (Participant 2) and both are Master of Arts in Communications students at Carleton University. Participant 2 identified that they have a friend or family member with a disability whereas Participant 1 does not. Participant 1 noted they are not involved in performing arts or sports and Participant 2 noted they are involved in the performing arts and not sports.

When asked how the participants would describe the people featured in the video, Participant 1 said, “I noticed there wasn’t a lot of diversity I felt. It was mostly white people. I think they did a pretty good job, well even the gender balance there was more men but overall they seemed like good people I guess (laugh). Like most of the stuff they were doing, like I couldn’t do that (laugh).” Participant 2 added, “Just talented I guess.”

Both participants took notice of the types of impairments that were being portrayed in the infomercial. Participant 2 suggested there was a “strange emphasis on limb loss as a disability.” As Beth Haller has found in her research (2000), people with visible disabilities are often used in

advertisements because it can be made obvious that the person is disabled and because of the emotional cues it evokes. Haller (2000) writes:

Reinterpreting the old journalism adage, 'If it bleeds, it leads' in terms of disability...people who have visually apparent disabilities are valued within the news because of the unspoken visual and emotional cues they provide. Many have argued that, in modern times, U.S. society has moved into a more visual, rather than text-based, culture (Haller, 2000, p. 3).

Participant 2 observed there was a lack of Down Syndrome as an impairment portrayed as this participant grew up in a town which had an athlete with Down Syndrome who competed in the Paralympics. It is interesting to note the confusion between the Paralympics and the Special Olympics as people with Down Syndrome do not qualify for the Paralympics. Both participants also noticed a lack of deaf athletes in the video, except for one person who was signing briefly in the video when the music stopped. A hearing impairment alone also does not qualify an athlete to participate in the Paralympics. Despite infomercials like *We're The Superhumans* to promote the Paralympics, there is still an association of the Games with the Special Olympics.

The words "normal", "normalcy" and "destigmatize" were also used by both participants. Participant 2 said the infomercial gave a sense of "normalcy" because it contrasted disabled people taking part in sports with disabled people engaging in everyday tasks.

Participant 1 noted, "If you're Deaf, would you compete [in the Paralympics] or would you just be a normal Olympian?" Participant 1 added "I don't really watch the normal Olympics too much anyway, but it definitely made me more curious to seek it [the Paralympics] out." There is a sense here that not having a disability, and therefore the Olympics, is normal, and having a disability, and therefore the Paralympics, is abnormal (Swain, French, Barnes, and Thomas, 2004). Although Abberley's (as cited in Barton) work is from 1989, this quote provides an excellent description as to what gets labelled as "normal". He writes:

Definitions with ‘stickability’ tend to be those produced by groups with power. The most powerful definitions of normality in terms of their effects upon those to whom they are applied are, for disabled people, those propagated and perpetuated by those with the most wideranging and immediate power over us, namely the medical and welfare professions. (p. 57)

When the participants were asked who they felt the infomercial was directed towards, they both said they felt it was for a non-disabled audience. Participant 1: “Yeah, I feel like well maybe people with disabilities already know everything they’re trying to convey. It’s like, ‘Yeah of course we can, what are you saying?’” Participant 2 echoed this sentiment: “Yeah, it seemed more about the notion of de-stigmatization and less about empowerment for people with disabilities.” Participant 1 later commented that the infomercial had voyeuristic aspects to it. The participants said they felt that disabled people would already know that they are capable of doing the activities depicted in the video and that the video was dramatic, leading them to believe the infomercial was meant for non-disabled audiences. The participants expressed some confusion towards the infomercial as they noted it was hard to decipher which activities were actual sports in the Paralympics and which were more stunt or spectacles such as the person in the wheelchair riding off a ramp into the air. Participant 2 observed, “There was an element of disability is a spectacle which was uncomfortable and like you [Participant 1] said, figure out what was an actual sport that’s being represented.” When asked to specify what about the infomercial made them feel it was spectacle, Participant 2 responded, “Kind of like a voyeuristic aspect to it. It’s less about the promotion of athletes and more about...” Participant 1 interjected: “Like look at this person. It’s more about like a YouTube kind of feel to it kind of like, ‘Isn’t this crazy, check this out.’ As opposed to, ‘No this person is an athlete like anyone else doing their thing.’”

Both participants seemed to be unfazed by the disabled people in the video and the activities they were taking part in. They conveyed a sense that these athletes were like any other

athlete. Participant 2 said, “I don’t really get inspired by these sorts of things. Like even just athletic stuff in general, I wouldn’t say I found it very inspirational. It’s impressive but more just watching the feats of skill.” Participant 1 added, “Yeah, like it’s impressive definitely because I couldn’t do half the stuff those people are doing because I’m not a very athletic person at all.” This is counter to the narrative in some of the literature and criticisms of “inspiration porn”, and criticisms in the media of this advertisement specifically, that advertisements like *We’re The Superhumans* is made for the benefit of non-disabled people so that they can feel inspired.

The participants noted that it was interesting to see the adaptations that the disabled people in the video used, such as the woman who was flying the plane with her feet. Participant 1 observed, “The piloting was pretty cool. It makes sense that they would have control elements fixed in to make it accessible but it was still pretty neat to see it in use.” The fact that the woman is flying the plane with her feet may seem “cool” to the participant because it is not part of the norm to fly a plane in this way and it is unexpected. However, this ignores the enormous amount of time it would have taken to train and obtain a license in order to fly. It is reducing the pilot’s achievement to flying a plane with her feet, when in reality, it would be equal to someone flying a plane with their hands and both of those are significant achievements. The real achievement according to CDT, would be that she may have had to overcome discrimination, as many people with impairments have had with finding employment, to gain her piloting license.

When the participants were asked how they felt about the title of the video, *We’re The Superhumans*, Participant 1 responded, “I mean that might just be playing to all the superhero movie hype a little bit.” When asked what they thought about the lyrics, “Yes I Can,” Participant 1 replied, “It just made me think it’s probably something that a differently abled person would have to say a lot to random people or employers who may not be as aware or as accepting.” This

participant recognized that disabled people do likely encounter non-disabled people who make assumptions about their capabilities and place stereotypes on them. Participant 2 also highlighted some of the nuances of inspiration porn by stating that although the infomercial attempts to “normalize” disability, it contradicts that goal by referring to disabled people as superhuman. Participant 2 stated, “It kind of ran counter to some of the narrative within it. Like the idea of normalcy is then upended by that statement. Like I can see what they’re trying to convey. I didn’t really think too much about it.”

Disabled Group:

The disabled focus group was comprised of two Carleton University students who are wheelchair users. Both of these participants brought in interesting perspectives because although they have impairments today, they did not develop them until early adulthood and have therefore experienced life without an impairment. Participant 3 is 25 years old, has a physical disability and is involved in sports and/or performing arts, as well as plays a musical instrument. Participant 4 is 24 years old, has a physical disability and is involved in sports and/or performing arts. Overall, these participants were quite critical of the infomercial, but recognized that because of their academic backgrounds and having studied critical disability theory, their views towards the infomercial may be more critical than even other disabled people.

The first question the participants were asked was what they thought of the infomercial. Participant 4 answered, “At least that’s one of the better commercials. It still sensationalizes disability or exceptionalizes (sic) ability but at least it ties in different perspectives.” This participant also said the infomercial was problematic because it insinuates that the only way a disabled person can be successful is by becoming a Paralympian or by being physically active

but that it is not something that everyone can do. Participant 3 observed they found the contrast between the disabled athletes and disabled people doing everyday activities was an issue:

I didn't really like it because there's a lot of dualism like saying these are the things we do to survive and we're superhuman because of it, like why? And then all of the adaptive sports that we do, why are you calling us superhuman because of it. This is just the way we need to do the sports.

Participant 4 agreed and added disabled people use their body to the best of their ability.

Participant 3 also criticized the lyrics in the video of, "Yes I Can." They said, "Like why wouldn't we be able to? Why would it be, 'No I can't'?" Participant 3 discussed how this narrative is trying to prove to non-disabled people that disabled people can do sport and various activities but that it is a common aspect of a disabled persons' experience that they are constantly proving things to other people – whether it's proving they can take part in a physical activity or proving to the government that they have a disability, so that they qualify for benefits. The word "normal" was used differently in the disabled focus group. In the non-disabled focus group, "normal" was used to describe the experiences of non-disabled people whereas in the disabled group, the participants described their everyday life and how they accomplish tasks and take part in sports as "normal". They find it strange when infomercials such as *We're The Superhumans* focus on the everyday aspects of their life, when they consider it to be very "normal." It is clear that "normalcy" depends on the person and their own experiences (Swain, French, Barnes, and Thomas, 2004).

Both participants were of the perspective that disability is not a "bad thing" but that it is an integral part of their life that does impact how they live and how they are perceived by others. Participant 4 stated, "They're trying to prove you're more than your disability but at the end of the day, your disability profoundly impacts your life the way people interpret your body and respond to you..." Participant 4 felt that the producers of the infomercial had benevolent

intentions and thought that the infomercial was attempting to counteract dominant ideology which is that disabled people cannot do the things depicted in the video: “I think they [the producers] were trying to rewrite the narrative to help us [disabled people].”

When asked what words they would use to describe the people in the video, Participant 4 laughed and said, “Disabled.” Participant 4 responded, “They’re like regular people (laugh) just doing what they need to do, just doing what they love to do.”

The participants were asked whether they had ever thought of disabled people as athletes or performers before viewing this infomercial. Because both participants acquired their disabilities, they had different perspectives before their impairments. Participant 4 said:

To be honest though, before my disability I don’t think I ever really thought of disabled bodies, emotion, or you know, it wasn’t an aspect of my life that I ever thought about. So if I saw this commercial I would’ve been ‘wow, this is so inspiring’ and like, ‘disabled people can be athletes too,’ but now that disability has just become a regular aspect of my life, I do sport, I mean it doesn’t even have to be sport, people with disabilities can do performative arts and whatnot so it’s something very well known to myself.

Participant 3 added, “I was saying the same thing earlier like that to me it’s regular now to be active and in motion as a disabled person, but I agree with you. Before my disability I probably wouldn’t have thought about it.” Participant 4 noted they even had different physical reactions to infomercials like *We’re The Superhumans* prior to their disability. Participant 4 said:

I remember when I first watched it getting like goosebumps and like a little teary eyed because it was overwhelming to see those images and to see disability being portrayed in good positive light. Like seeing the accomplishment and hard work inspired me before and now it’s totally now I don’t even get any type of physiological response to it other than like, aw yeah, there’s another one of these commercials.

Both participants took issue with the comparison of daily living tasks in the video shown against the Paralympic athletes and musical performers. Participant 3 observed the fact that someone is able to brush their teeth or drive is due to homecare or adaptive equipment, and is not necessarily something someone should be celebrated for, especially not in relation to the

Paralympics. They suggested an infomercial about the Paralympics should celebrate people leading the way in sport and adaptive sport, and should not be compared to people doing everyday tasks.

They also took issue with the fact that before the Paralympics happens, there are commercials and advertisements but once the events begin, they thought there was little media coverage of the sports. They further took issue with the fact that the disabled people featured were those with less “severe” impairments. Participant 3 said, “It’s really interesting to think that they only used Paralympic bodies. There wasn’t a single powerchair user in that video.” Participant 4 agreed, “Which is common. It’s usually like a light, least disabled as possible person that gets the coverage.” However, as noted previously, there were some people featured in the video that would not be included in the Paralympics, such as individuals with Down Syndrome. The infomercial is attempting to portray disability as close to “normal” as possible, however, it results in an unrealistic view of disability.

Since the participants were critical of the infomercial, they were asked how they would improve it. Participant 3 said they would want to remove the daily living scenes and focus on the “actual achievements.” Participant 3 also noted it would be valuable to recognize the people featured in the video. They observed, “Like, we see the people doing wheelchair mx, that’s incredible and fantastic, like, I think the guy going down the ramp at the end was the guy who essentially started that sport, but there’s very little recognition to that.”

Participant 4 commented that it was difficult to improve the infomercial, as no matter how it is produced, there will still be an element of “inspiration” to it:

They’re [people are] still going to think of disabled bodies as being exceptional so it’s difficult. Like I like getting rid of those daily activities. Like I think that’s a good idea but I wouldn’t want to get rid of that one part where the guy’s denied a job either at the same time. But it’s like is this even a discussion that needs to happen during the Paralympics?

Like why is this only being brought up like one summer once every four years...I think people kind of exploit the fact that the Paralympics will give them opportunities to talk about this.

The participants noted that an example of a good commercial featuring disabled people was for a Canadian charity called JUMPSTART, which seeks to remove financial barriers to kids participating in sport. The commercial depicts a boy in a wheelchair watching kids outside playing basketball. The next day, the kids put a basketball outside his front door and he sees the boys playing basketball, but this time using rolling chairs and makeshift wheelchairs. The participants felt like the commercial united people through sport and let people know that you do not have to have an impairment to participate in Paralympic sports. They both agreed that it is hard to create a commercial that would satisfy all the issues they raised, but that the criticisms stress the importance of including disabled people in the making of these commercials.

YouTube Comments

We're The Superhumans generated millions of views on YouTube, so it was beneficial to analyze the online comments on the video, in addition to the comments from the focus groups. Channel 4 posted the infomercial on their YouTube channel but ironically “disabled” the comment section. However, there was a copy of the video on the YouTube channel, Self Confidence Motivation, where comments were allowed. As of July 17, 2018, the video had 5.4 K views, 5.1 K likes and 123 dislikes. On the Channel 4 YouTube channel, however, as of July 17, 2018, it had 54 K likes and 1.2 K dislikes and had been viewed 8.9 million times. Channel 4 was contacted by email for a statement about why they disabled the comments for this video, but there has been no response.

The comments on the YouTube video praised the video and the people in it much more than the focus group participants did. From the comments, however, it was difficult to determine whether the individuals had impairments or have close relationships with people with impairments, unlike the focus group participants who completed a questionnaire to answer those questions. Some of the YouTube comments include, “This is not about disability this is about CRAZY talent,” “It’s about talent even with having a disability. It showing that disability don’t always mean inability,” “I prefer to watch the Paralympics than the Olympics. It’s because it’s not only an event of sports but an event of will power and an event of strength and obsession to achieve the goal.” “Yes, I can! Thank you very much for the beautiful lessons of life that give us!”, “Wonderful. Kinda makes you never want to say ‘can’t’ ever again,” and “I applaud these amazing people for such hard work they endure to do the most simple things that we take for granted.” These comments reflect the supercrip theory that the Paralympics is about people with impairments being “superhuman” and having above average talent. They also presume people with impairments are not expected to participate in sports or daily activities, so there is a sense of awe that they have done so.

There were some comments in which the individual specified that they knew someone with a disability. These included: “Having a son (now deceased) who suffered from a disability, this was often said to him especially in high school and college. FANTASTIC VIDEO,” “My relative has a disability and im about to cry I needa call him.” There were also comments from individuals who specified that they had impairments. These include: “I am typing this with my nose. I was born without limbs, and I’m home alone so no one can help me! Haha, but as you can see, YES I CAN,” “I have spina bifida too!!, but I was lucky enough not to be in a wheelchair. Makes me feel kind of more blessed (no offence intended off-course).” Even among people with

impairments, there exists a sense of hierarchy among disabilities and which impairment would be worse to have. Infomercials like *We're The Superhumans* can make disabled feel better about themselves by comparing themselves to people who are perceived to have more severe impairments.

There were very few critical comments towards the infomercial on the YouTube channel's comments. One included, "These are just amazing people...PEOPLE...why highlight the disability? That's all I'm saying." One of the comments in response to this was, "They are unfortunate to not have a full body like most of us, but they are so lucky to have an Olympics to compete in because it means it's not all that bad! So they tried so hard just to actually do this things (sic) that we normal people can do so easily!" This speaks to one of the criticisms of this video that it inspires non-disabled people and objectifies disabled people as individuals who should be pitied. This person used disabling language by stating that people with impairments are "unfortunate" and are not complete because they do not have a "full body." They also used the word "normal" to describe non-disabled people and that disability is abnormal. There is also the assumption here that disabled people must "work harder" to do the same activities as non-disabled people, again reinforcing that there are lower expectations on those with impairments. Another word that was interesting was that the disabled athletes are "lucky" to have the Paralympics. The definition of "lucky", according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018) is, "meeting with unforeseen success; being rewarded beyond ones' deserts." This suggests that society is not required to accommodate their way of participating in sport, but that they are lucky and fortunate that it has been done so through the Paralympics.

We're The Superhumans on Twitter

A hashtag, #werethesuperhumans, was also created for the infomercial. Comments from Twitter included, “#YesICan @Paralympics #werethesuperhumans just amazing @4Creative @ClioAwards #ClioSports,” “The @Channel4 Paralympics trailer is just epic. Not many ads give you goosebumps every time you see it. Incredible work. #werethesuperhumans,” “If you wish to have an inspiring start or end to your day, enjoy this. #WereTheSuperhumans #Paralympics,” “#WereTheSuperhumans is one of the best adverts ever. Inspiring stuff.”

Burning Nights CRPS Support, a UK charity which raises awareness for Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, tweeted: “CRPS can’t stop you doing what you want. #rio2016 #werethesuperhumans #yesican,”

It’s also important to note that many advertising and marketing companies and individuals in the PR industry were tweeting about the advertisement. These include: “Amazing #marketing #campaign this year #werethesuperhumans,” @Channel3 #werethesuperhumans ad for #Paralympics ad for #Paralympics #Rio2016 delivers impressive engagement, “One of our favourite #Olympics campaigns is @Channel4’s #WereTheSuperhumans – getting us in the #Paralympics spirit!”, “There’s no denying @Channel4 & @4Creative have given us an advertising masterclass #WereTheSuperhumans #Paralympics.”

Media coverage

In terms of media coverage, the infomercial received mixed reactions. Louise Kinross (2016), the mother of a child with a disability, wrote an article for *Today’s Kids in Motion Magazine*, and observed that this infomercial excludes many disabled people, and that disabled people should not be painted with one brush. She writes:

What about people who have conditions that affect many parts of the body and their ability to function? What about people who require help with bathing, dressing, toileting, moving in their wheelchair or communicating? What about people who require round-the-clock care? How do they fit into this "I can do anything" realm? (para. 9)

She further criticizes the art director of the infomercial's comment that "Being a superhuman is a state of mind." She argues that having a disability is not just a state of mind, but there can be real barriers for disabled people because of real physical environments that are made for people with two functioning legs rather than wheelchairs or walkers.

In another online column, Nina Muehlemann (2016) writes about how her young son was enthralled by the infomercial. She said:

I'm definitely not a superhuman and can't sing, dance, or do most of the other amazing things people do in the ad, but I'm extremely proud to belong to a community [disabled] that has such creative talent, and happy that the ad provided a big opportunity to showcase said talent for those of us who do possess it. While I cannot bring my little son to exciting new theatre productions by disabled artists, I can celebrate disability pride with him through his enjoyment of this clip. To see disabled artists have another big moment in the mainstream after the magical London 2012 Paralympic Opening Ceremony is wonderful, and it sure gets me excited for the cultural side of Rio 2016. (para. 9)

Another article, printed in the *Ottawa Citizen* and written by PhD candidate, Celeste Orr, from the University of Ottawa, criticizes the infomercial. Orr writes:

Promoting the idea that people with disabilities can overcome their disabilities, be happy, and even become amazing elite athletes if they shift their attitudes – if they just declare, "Yes I can" – encourages enabled individuals to think of disability as a personal issue, not a socio-political issue that they influence. (para. 7)

In response to Orr, Alvin Law, who is featured in the video playing the drums with his feet, defends the infomercial in a CBC News article ("Calgarian Alvin Law defends...", 2016). He counters Orr's criticism as follows:

Once you get something big enough and it has enough views, there's always going to be people that are detracting...I started doing audacious things like this in 1981 to show people an extreme to get them to move to the middle. That's exactly what this project is all about. (para. 9)

He further explains that the video is promoting the idea that Paralympians are just as talented as Olympians. He also observes that society has “come light years” in regards to inclusion and awareness for disabled people. He recalls, “I remember what it felt like to be looked at all the time, to be stared at all the time, to be given these looks of, ‘Oh my God, you’re disgusting,’” (para. 9).

Laura Misener (as cited in Wheeler, 2016), a disability scholar at Western University, in London, Ontario, likes that the 2016 Paralympics incorporated the theme “Superhumans” but indicates there’s little evidence to suggest it would change attitudes towards people with impairments more generally and it can even lead able-bodied people to assume that all disabled people are Paralympians. She argues, “So people will say, ‘you are not trying hard enough – look at the Paralympians’,” (para. 28).

Other articles about the infomercial are largely from marketing websites that praise the infomercial for its message and incorporating disabled people, as well as highlighting the awards the infomercial has received. One of the articles on the website for *Adweek*, an advertising trade publication, reports that the infomercial won the Grand Prix for Film at the Cannes Lion Film Festival (Natividad, 2017). Writer, Angela Natividad notes, “Sometimes, though, a piece unites both expectation and merit. *We’re the Superhumans*, from Britain’s Channel 4, is among them—a contagious celebration of strength and vivacity where most creatives might have leaned into pity or guilt. In three joyful, adrenaline-fueled minutes, it can compel both laughter and tears,” (para. 2).

In the U.K. newspaper, *The Guardian*, an article profiles a few of the disabled people featured in the video. Dimitri Coutya, a fencer, indicates the 2012 Paralympics and the original trailer, *Meet the Superhumans*, had a positive effect on him. “It made me so excited and proud at

the way it promoted Paralympian sport. It inspired me to continue doing my fencing,” (para. 4) he states. Coutya also notes that he is proud of how the 2016 infomercial highlights the talent rather than disabilities and that he hopes it can help reduce the stigma around disability. London Paralympian, Samm Ruddock, agrees and writes, “There are all sorts of wonderful things in there to make you reassess what you can achieve with what you have. If we can do this, there is no reason anyone else can’t...It’s about a positive attitude,” (as cited in Khaleeli, 2016, para. 5). This statement reflects the position that disability is a problem within the individual and that it can be “overcome” by simply having a positive attitude. It ignores the fact that there are issues with access to funding, and there is discrimination that can hinder people with impairments’ participation in various activities.

In summary, the most critical reactions to the infomercial were provided in the focus groups and some articles in traditional media, which cited the inspiration porn narrative as uncomfortable and objectifying people with impairments. The most celebratory comments were found on the YouTube video comment section, Twitter and in advertising magazines, which praised the people in the video for their abilities and reiterated the importance of having a positive attitude to overcome challenges in life. I next turn to the discussion of these finding in relation to existing literature on disability and media representations.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Several themes emerged from the focus groups, video and Twitter comments, as well as the media coverage. These include inspiration, stigma, the notion of disabled people as normal vs. superhuman, manifestations of personal tragedy and medical models, assumptions about being disabled and the confusion between the Paralympics and the Special Olympics. I next discuss each of these in turn and link these findings to the existing scholarship on disability and media representation.

Inspiration Porn

One of the criticisms of inspiration porn is that it exploits disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people. Disability scholar Kirsty Liddiard (2014) discusses inspiration porn as:

Typically ableist images of disability which represent either a person with disability as ‘inspiring’ or which rely upon disability in order to inspire or otherwise shape the behaviours of and or/attitudes of the audience or viewer. (p. 94)

The responses from the non-disabled participants went against this criticism of inspiration porn. The participants revealed they did not find the infomercial inspirational because the athletes had impairments, but rather because of their skills. Neither participant commented that watching the people in the video made them feel motivated to take up sports themselves or overcome their own challenges. Participant 1 did say that the infomercial would encourage them to watch the Paralympics because it piqued their interest. Therefore, it is misleading to assume that “inspiration porn” always inspires or motivates a non-disabled audience member, or that they are benefitting from watching media content like the infomercial. They may not find sports inspiring

in general, and could potentially be more in awe of the level of skill the individuals have, regardless of their disability.

The disabled participants in the focus group also did not find the infomercial inspiring or motivating. Even though they were quite critical of the infomercial, they did note that it was nice to see disabled bodies on television and to see themselves represented in the media. Participant 3 said they felt that the infomercial was generally exploiting disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people.

These participants' views regarding inspirational narratives were in line with Hargreaves and Hardin's (2009) study in which 10 women wheelchair athletes were interviewed regarding their feelings about mainstream and disabled print and web-based sport media. One of the themes that emerged from their study was that the disabled athletes were tired of the inspiration and supercrip narratives. They said, "Not a single participant I interviewed was fond of the inspiration story," (para. 49). However, the disabled participants' in my study and Hardin and Hargreaves' differed from the study by ComRes (Marl & Wicks, 2016) in which 30 adults with various impairments, including physical, hearing and mental health conditions, were interviewed about how they felt disability sport was represented in the media. The study concluded that, "When it comes to specific terms, some words such as 'inspiring/inspirational' are almost unanimously welcomed: indeed many respondents use 'inspirational' of their own accord to describe disability athletes and their achievements," (p. 15). One of the reasons why the participants in my focus group may have had a different perspective on inspirational narratives is because they follow the social model of disability. Participant 2 did acknowledge that because they are aware of this model, that their view towards the infomercial may be critical compared to people with impairments who are not aware of the different models of disability.

When looking at the media coverage of the infomercial, there was not a lot of mention of people being motivated or inspired by it. Most of the commentary pieces to the infomercial appeared to be critical, such as an article printed in the *Ottawa Citizen* by Celeste Orr. She criticized the video for being inspiration porn and using the supercrip narrative. Positive reactions towards the infomercial emerged largely from advertising industry magazines. In an article by *Adweek*, Jury president of the Cannes Lions Film Festival said, “It was a wonderful story that we’re all passionate about.” Galluzzo said:

We watched it at least 20 times, and when I got back to my hotel I wished I could watch it again. It is a wonderful story about celebrating the human condition. We see it as less as a Grand Prix and more of a gift to the festival audience. (as cited in Nudd, 2017, para. 8)

This comment insinuates that the infomercial was merely a gift to festival goers to feel inspired rather than recognizing the infomercial for its production value. This comment reflects the core of the notion of inspiration porn. The infomercial is using disabled people so that non-disabled people can feel better about themselves and feel motivated, and even want to watch the video 20 times. This kind of overly positive portrayal of disability can arguably be as damaging to the cultural understandings of disability, as is further discussed in the next section on stigma.

The comments on the YouTube video and under the #Werethesuperhumans hashtag on Twitter seemed to be where viewers expressed much more of the sentiments of inspiration and motivation. Words like “epic”, “inspiring” and “gave me goosebumps” were used to describe the infomercial. Some people mentioned that they had a disability and seemed to feel proud of the message that the infomercial gave to others in that they “can” do many things. Numerous people also commented “Yes, I Can!” on the video which may insinuate that they felt inspired by it or that they do have a disability and agree that they “can”. For example, the individual who described typing with their nose, closing their comment with “YES I CAN.”

Berger (2008) observes that some researchers have recognized sport participation as a site of empowerment and resistance for disabled people. But the media commentaries critiquing the infomercial point to another side of sports for the disabled. If a disabled person cannot do what is being depicted in the infomercial and similar media texts, they may feel inadequate for somehow not living up to those expectations. The ability associated with sports suggest that disabled people can appear as “normal”, or as close to non-disabled as possible, by participating in competitive sports. That notion can also imply that in order for someone to “overcome” their disability, they must be physically active.

For the most part on social media, the infomercial seemed to incite a sense of excitement for the Paralympics, and also motivate and empower people to feel that they could do anything they set their mind to. This again is problematic because it suggests that disability can be “overcome” with the “right attitude”, similarly to the meme mentioned in the Introduction that claimed, “the only disability in life is a bad attitude.” This locates the disability within the individual and ignores the social conditions and dimensions of disability. I found no negative comments on the video or on social media regarding the infomercial, which stands in contrast to the criticisms that were printed in the mainstream media. It also differs from the more layered interpretations of the infomercial provided by the focus group participants.

The overwhelmingly positive reactions to the video found in social media also suggest that the infomercial, unchallenged and even celebrated, may contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes. Yoon (2016) studied how internet memes about racism perpetuate “colourblindness” by denying structural racism. Bonna Silva argues colorblindness, “reproduces inequality through subtle, institutional and apparently non-racial ways,” (as cited in Yoon, 2016, p. 101). Just as Yoon (2016) suggests that racism has transitioned from being predominantly overtly exhibited to

being expressed more subtly, the same can be said about ableist images in the media. Images may not be overtly racist or ableist, but their subtle nature may be just as harmful, or even more harmful as it can lead many to think such images are fine to reproduce.

The effect that an inspirational infomercial, such as *We're The Superhumans*, has on its audiences seems to be mixed. Some audience members report being inspired, but it is unclear whether or not that inspiration lasts, or translates into any sort of action, whether that is to participate in sports, or “overcome” challenges, or adopt a positive attitude. The focus group data points to some differences in how the disabled and non-disabled audiences respond to inspirational media texts, as the disabled participants reported more critical reception of the infomercial. But looking beyond the focus group data, and examining social media online publications, seems to suggest that the difference between the responses may not be any more significant than the diversity of responses within those groups. Some non-disabled audience members uncritically celebrate the infomercial, while others offer complex and critical reflection. Even among the disabled audience members, there are differing opinions about the infomercial. The participants in the focus group were critical of the infomercial and found that it had no motivating effects for them, but some audience members who disclosed being disabled when commenting on the YouTube video page and in social media praised the infomercial. To better understand these findings, it is helpful to return to Hall's (2006) model of encoding-decoding. Whereas uncritical themes of inspiration may be encoded in this infomercial, audience members decode the message in diverse ways. Their interpretations are influenced by whether or not they are disabled, but also by a range of other individual factors, such as their background, how they view disability and how they have experienced disability in their own life (through personal experience or the experiences of those close to them).

Stigma

The non-disabled participants observed that the infomercial was directed at a non-disabled audience, because in their view, it was attempting to destigmatize disability. Mukherjee, Gill, Mukherjee and Garland-Thomson (2016) quote the Merriam Webster Dictionary definition of stigma which is, “a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or a group of people have about something,” (p. 997). Link and Phelan describe the stigmatization process as having four components:

In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics – to negative stereotypes. In the third, labeled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of “us” from “them.” In the fourth, labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes. (as cited in Mukherjee et. al, 2016, p. 997)

These components of stigmatization were reflected in some of the Twitter and video comments such as, “It’s about talent even with having a disability. It showing that disability don’t always mean inability.” Comments like this reflect how there is a stigma that disabled means being less capable, which is not necessarily true. By labelling impairment as a burden on a person’s life, even without directly stating it, it is creating a negative perception of disability. As Gil et. al (2016) discuss in their study as well, this “us vs. them” language and stigmatization can lead to people with impairments to internalize that perspective and can affect how they interact with other people. The authors note, “Sociologist Erving Goffman theorized that stigma results in ‘spoiled identity’. A person’s very sense of self is eroded by repeated social devaluation,” (p. 998).

The very fact that this infomercial must highlight that people with impairments can brush their teeth or graduate from school, reflects that there are still negative perceptions held by society about disability – that it is a bad thing and a barrier in life.

When considering stigma, we must also pay attention to the overly positive depictions of disability. Many of the comments on the video and Twitter, exclaim how wonderful and amazing people with impairments are. This at first may appear positive, but it also masks the barriers that disabled individuals encounter in their lives. Further, this view suggest that what makes people with impairments “wonderful” is their participation in sports and daily living activities – which are typically associated with non-disabled people. This “positive” representation is discussed further in the following section.

Superhuman vs. Normal

Several comments posted on the YouTube video page and on Twitter encapsulate the supercrip theory, which Colin Barnes (1992) describes as portraying disabled people as having magical abilities and above average talents. An example is blind people are portrayed as having a sixth sense, or having superior hearing. Barnes observes that this theme is popular in news stories, particularly in stories that congratulate disabled people for accomplishing both extraordinary and ordinary tasks. One of the comments on the video that demonstrates this is, “There are amazing things that people with a disability can do so don’t think they are weird because they have a power in them deep down.” Barnes writes that these types of narratives are problematic and have real world consequences. For example, he notes that the belief that blind people can compensate for the lack of sight with hearing, has resulted in a lack of braille. The

focus on disabled peoples' achievements, can also make them feel like they have to overcompensate to be accepted by society.

The disabled participants in the focus groups were critical of showcasing people with impairments as superhuman, as were the wheelchair athletes in Hardin and Hargreaves' (2009) study. The ComRes (Marl & Wicks, 2016) study, which included interviews with 30 people with impairments and the non-disabled online community, found that both groups had mixed opinions as to whether the word "superhuman" should be used in media coverage of the Paralympics. The study did note that concern over use of the word was greater with the disabled participants than with the non-disabled.

However, in the book, *Paralympics: Empowerment Or Side Show?* authors Keith Gilbert and Otto J. Schantz (2008) conducted a study with Paralympic athletes and asked them how they felt about supercrip narratives. They reported that most of the athletes had not heard of the model but they thought viewing disabled people as supercrips could be helpful to both disabled and non-disabled people. Respondent, John, 28, said:

For somebody who just had a new injury, they'll want to hear what happened to Neil, and how he endured – I mean, he was an athlete – he had a great life as an NBA player, but then gosh, his life made a turnaround, and he just has to deal with it. (p. 29)

Another participant, Ethan, said:

...people feel sorry for us because we're always in a wheelchair and they figure that we can't do much of anything anyway. And stories like this refute that – that people in wheelchairs can be just as creative and productive as anybody else. (p. 29)

As with the theme of inspiration, there is a difference of opinion among disabled and people as to whether the supercrip narrative is a positive or negative media portrayal, which can be attributed to their own perception of disability and life experiences.

On the other end of the continuum, the theme of “normalcy” also runs through the responses to the video. Shildrick writes that disability is a way to distinguish between who is normal and who is abnormal (2012). Hansen and Philo (2007) posit that the non-disabled body is the “natural” way of appearing and doing, and everyday spaces like streets, parks, offices and schools, are therefore to be used by non-disabled people. They write:

Many kinds of bodies have arguably yet to ‘belong’ in such places and it is as if their presence is treated as a form of trespass, unwanted or disruptive to silent conventions, thereby engendering an unfavourable reaction. (p. 496)

In the non-disabled focus group, we saw the use of the word “normal” to describe the Olympics, which insinuates that the Paralympics and disability are abnormal. The title of the infomercial paradoxically runs counter to the idea that disabled people are just like non-disabled people because they are referred to as “superhumans”, which insinuates that they are above average. The risk that comes with portraying disabled people as superhuman or being capable of anything if they set their minds to it, is that disabled audience members, who cannot take part in Paralympic sports, can feel like they are not trying hard enough to “overcome” their impairments. Some impairments, however, do cause more restrictions than others and therefore not all disabled people can be painted with one brush. Disability is not just a mindset or a state of mind, but a set of real life impacts on an individual’s day to day life. Fleras (2011) notes that portraying people in particular ways in the media can come across as normal and therefore go unchallenged. She argues, “Media representations are pivotal in defining what is normal, acceptable, or desirable. For audiences who lack meaningful first-hand contact with diversities and difference, these representations are taken at face value, despite their potential to distort or inflame,” (p. 3). She adds that the media normalizes dominant ideas, and in the case of disability,

we could say that the media normalizes the idea that disability makes someone superhuman and inspirational.

One of the issues with congratulating people with impairments for doing everyday, or “normal”, activities like brushing their teeth, is that it can actually make them feel worse. Brittain (2004) observes:

When constantly confronted with negative perceptions about their abilities to carry out tasks that most people take for granted and also bombarded with images of physical perfection that most of the general public could not live up to, it is little wonder that many people with disabilities suffer from low self-esteem. ([p. 439](#))

In the disabled focus group, the participants noted that this narrative of being normal and superhuman can exclude people with disabilities who do not fall neatly into these categories. There could be disabled people who are not able to participate in Paralympic sports, pump their own gas, brush their own teeth or have children. As one of the disabled focus group participants, Participant 4, said, “And it’s like if they’re denying these people [a job] that are less disabled than I am, that are exceptional athletes, then it’s like ‘wow, ok,’ I have no chance.”

Portraying disabled people as achieving “normalcy” and being superhuman is entangled, as both portrayals are about comparing the disabled with the non-disabled. *We’re The Superhumans* is showcasing disabled people doing ordinary tasks like brushing their teeth yet they are being referred to as “superhuman”. It also showcases impressive athletic skills as well as insinuating that they are normal and just like any other athlete. Underlying both of these narratives is the perspective that they are paradoxically not “normal” but can attain normalcy because they have special abilities to take part in these sports and accomplish everyday tasks. That perspective ignores the fact that many disabled people, as all people do, mostly adapt to their situation not out of a special willpower but out of necessity and often as a result of having the proper adaptations, such as braille, artificial limbs and ramps. In cases where an individual is

born with their disability, they likely would not see their involvement in sports or completing daily tasks as an extraordinary accomplishment, as that is the only way they have ever known how to do something.

Personal Tragedy Model and Medical Model of Disability

Barnes (as cited in Watson, N. Roulstone, A. and Thomas, 2012) claims that until recently, disability was almost exclusively portrayed as a personal tragedy and medical problem in the media. However, through the infomercial, we can see that disability continues to be portrayed using these models. Swain and French (as cited in Swain, French, Barnes & Thomas, 2004) write that the tragedy model of disability is pervasive in fictional characters and news media and it is the idea that disability is a tragedy and should be avoided, eradicated and normalised at all possible costs. Language that often signifies the tragedy model are expectations placed on disabled people like, to be more “independent”, to be “normal” and “adjust” to their situation. The authors argue this model often stems from non-disabled peoples’ fear of becoming disabled:

To become visually impaired, for instance, may be a personal tragedy for a sighted person whose life is based around being sighted, who lacks knowledge of the experiences of people with visual impairments, whose identity is founded on being sighted, and who has been subjected to the personal tragedy model of visual impairment. (p. 35)

However, that is not to deny that impairments are experienced as a tragedy for some people (Swain and French, 2000). For example, being born without a limb would likely be easier to adapt to than someone who lost their limb due to cancer as an adult. Although the infomercial is not overtly tragic with sad music and the dramatic back stories as to how the individuals featured became disabled, there is an underlying theme of tragedy. The lyrics, “Yes I can,” suggest that disability is a negative or tragic aspect of their life and they are “overcoming” that through sport

and other activities that make them “normal”. The theme of tragedy is also reflected in the video and Twitter comments to the video where some individuals claimed people with impairments are “less fortunate” than those without impairments and expressing awe because of the low levels of achievement associated with disability.

In addition to the tragedy model, the infomercial also portrays disability through the medical model. Barnes (2012) insists that focusing on the physical impairment turns the public’s attention away from the social factors, such as discrimination, which contribute to disability.

Burchardt (2004) writes:

The social model is often described in contrast to the individual (medical) model, in which limitations in functioning or participation in society are seen as the direct result of a medical condition. The emphasis tends to be on curative or rehabilitative strategies – changing the individual to fit society – which implicitly regard the environment as fixed and neutral. (p.736)

Viewed this way, the infomercial seems to adopt a medical model of disability as it focuses on the physical impairment rather than the external factors which can contribute to disability. It is showing people “overcoming” their impairments – that disability is a state of mind and rests in the individual. The infomercial, and particularly the lyrics of the accompanying song, insinuate that with a positive attitude, disabled people can achieve what they want in life. The only exception to this position of the infomercial is the brief scene where the student in the wheelchair is told “no, he can’t” by the careers counsellor, alluding that disabled people are sometimes told what they are capable of, and how society can sometimes impose restrictions on them.

The medical model perspective is also reflected in the comments on the YouTube video and Twitter such as the following: “With this video, we have to change the statement ‘sky is the limit’ to ‘Mind is the limit’.” Several comments reference attitude and having a positive mindset

as something that would help disabled people achieve their goals, which ignores the social barriers that can prevent disabled people from reaching their full potential.

A medical model understanding of disability is not just socially problematic, but it also has material consequences. Ian Brittain (2004) argues that when people hold the view of disability as a medical model, disabled people internalize that message and the discourse can go unchallenged. That discourse then gets used by organizations and institutions to inform policy or exert power over disabled people. Brittain (2004) adds that this can lead to policies being created that are not in disabled peoples' best interest.

Assumptions

Disability is often portrayed in the media the way a non-disabled person views disability and the assumptions they have about disability. Michael T. Hayes and Rhonda S. Black (2003) write about the way that media texts shape social perceptions of disability. Hayes observes that disability is often situated within a discourse of pity, where the experience of disability is defined by externally, paternalistic social attitudes. He quotes Murphy (1987) as follows, "The greatest impediment to a person's taking full part in his society are not his physical flaws, but rather the tissue of myths, fears, and misunderstandings that society attaches to them" (Para. 2).

The assumptions about disability were evident in the online data, as well as in the focus groups. In the non-disabled group, Participant 1 said:

I feel like they're [disabled people] almost predisposed to going to the Olympics and knowing how to push themselves to the next level because they've already been training against all these other things if that makes sense? Which is cool because it's like you have to work twice as hard as an able-bodied athlete I guess.

Participant 1 also noted that being deaf would not impact someone participating in archery, fencing, hockey or soccer as opposed to someone missing a leg (although, as noted earlier,

athletes whose only impairment is hearing impairment do not qualify for Paralympics). While sympathetic, this is an assumption about the experiences of disabled people and what would be a more “challenging” disability.

A similar confusion was that around Paralympics and Special Olympics. Participant 2 questioned why there was a lack of people with Down Syndrome represented in the infomercial, as they knew an athlete with Down Syndrome who competed in the Paralympics. They likely meant the Special Olympics, which is for people with intellectual impairments. This confusion is understandable because the infomercial was misleading in this respect. It showed a person with Down Syndrome graduating from school, which may have insinuated that they are able to participate in the Paralympics considering that is what the infomercial was promoting. Therefore, when a media text meant to promote the Paralympics, expands its scope to promote the abilities of all disabled people, including intellectual and physical impairments, this likely adds to the public confusion about disability sports. This criticism was echoed by the participants in the disabled focus group who said that Paralympic infomercials often try to tackle too many issues at once. Rather than de-stigmatizing disability, such media content then risks reinforcing assumptions. In addressing too many issues, the participants’ observations allude, the infomercial fails to address any of them well, and in fact can add to misunderstandings of and assumptions about disability.

Assumptions about disability are not just morally problematic. They can have real world consequences. For example, Shakespeare, Iezzoni and Groce (2009) cite that negative assumptions about disability are sometimes held by medical professionals. They posit, “Assuming that people with disabilities are not sexually active, physicians may exclude them from health information or screening that non-disabled receive as a matter of course – for

example, for sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer or HIV,” (p. 1816). Non-disabled people often have ideas about what disabled people can and cannot do which can affect an individual’s confidence and can cause them to feel bad about themselves (Brittain, 2004).

Negative assumptions about disability are also reflected in low employment rates among people with impairments. Martin Turcotte (2014) wrote a report for Statistics Canada on disability and employment. In 2011, the employment rate among disabled people was 49% of those aged 25 to 64 who reported having a disability that limited their activity, compared to 79% of those without a disability (2014). He notes that although some disabilities are so severe that they can prevent people with impairments from holding a job, there are many people who would like to have a job but are unable to, not because of their impairment, but because some workplaces have a lack of knowledge about disability and accommodation. The report noted that 12% of people surveyed were refused a job because of their impairment.

The online comments and non-disabled focus groups reflect how there are still several assumptions that surround disability, such as presuming what they are capable and incapable of doing, as well as which disabilities present more challenges. Therefore, a difficulty associated with having a disability may not be the impairment itself but how other people react to it and the negative assumptions attached to it.

The misunderstandings around disability sport, and the assumptions that such misunderstandings reinforce, suggest that both media and society at large need to give more attention to “disability sport” – through greater and more nuanced coverage – and by extension give greater consideration to inclusion of disabled media professionals in determining and creating media content for broad audiences.

Conclusion

In the final section of this thesis, I reflect on the constraints and strengths of my study and summarize my findings. I also offer some concluding thoughts and suggestions for further research.

Constraints and Strengths

This study is characterized by the typical constraints associated with graduate projects. Limited time and resources prevented me from delving deeper and wider. In trying to keep the project manageable, I limited my focus on the portrayals of physically disabled people, although I recognize that inspiration porn narratives also apply to people with mental impairments. My focus groups were also limited, in part by design and in part by circumstance. I constrained myself to recruiting students on campus for practical reasons, but the resulting groups were small, and I had difficulty recruiting more participants. This was partly due the timing of recruitment, which was affected by delays in getting the ethics approval due to the staffing changes in the institutional ethics board office. As a result, I was recruiting near the end of the Winter semester and students were busy preparing for exams and completing final assignments. With such low participation levels, there was a lack of diversity in the focus groups as the participants were all in their 20s and 30s.

These constraints were mitigated by generating a larger corpus of data to include media coverage of the infomercial as well as the comments on its YouTube video and on Twitter. This allowed me to analyze a broader range of perspectives, which included both disabled and non-disabled people, on different platforms. Because the news media does play a significant role in shaping how people are understood, it was beneficial to analyze articles that discussed the

infomercial. They provided a window into how society views people with impairments and some of the articles specifically addressed the issue of inspiration porn. It was also beneficial to analyze comments on the YouTube video and on Twitter because it provided peoples' immediate feedback to watching the video, offering a deeper understanding as to how it made them feel. Of course, there are also constraints associated with collecting data online. Various search engine and social media platform algorithms affect the results of online searches and are affected by a variety of technological and cultural factors (Snow, 2018). My selection of the purposive sample of media commentaries was a subjective process, although one I performed in an informed manner. Overall, by drawing on a number of data sources, I was able to generate a comprehensive case study, albeit one that would have benefited from more focus group participants.

I further mitigated these constraints by drawing on a range of scholarship, including such distinct theoretical traditions as CDT and media representation/audience effects. I expanded this by consulting public sources of information, such as government reports. This combination of literature helped me build a more comprehensive analytical lens and enabled me to consider more completely the implications of my findings. These implications go beyond how disabled and non-disabled people interpret media portrayals of people with impairments, but also have the potential to inform our collective understanding of disability as well as other stereotypes and social inequities.

Summary of findings

We're The Superhumans provides an interesting view into the concept of inspiration porn. It is an infomercial that has been widely viewed, praised and criticized, in traditional media

as well as on social media. The criticism with infomercials like this is that they objectify disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people so that the non-disabled can feel better about their own lives. But this study suggests that there is greater complexity to that. The findings from focus groups with disabled and non-disabled people, the comments posted on the YouTube video, as well as on Twitter, and media coverage, indicate that the way audiences receive what can be labelled as inspiration porn, is far from uniform. Instead, even if the encoded message in the infomercial is that of inspiration, the decoding process is quite complex, and audience members – disabled and non-disabled alike – display a range of reactions to such media texts, from fierce criticisms to enthusiastic celebration.

The findings offer legitimate criticisms of inspiration porn, but also point to the potentially positive effect of inspirational media content – and the line between inspiration and inspiration porn can sometimes be blurry. The non-disabled and disabled participants in the focus groups all said they did not find the infomercial inspirational, but they acknowledged that it could raise awareness of disability and decrease the stigma around it. The infomercial did pique the interest of one of the non-disabled participants to watch the Paralympics. The non-disabled participants also said they liked seeing disabilities represented on television and that it was nice that the infomercial did not fall into the overtly “tragic” model of disability. All the participants, particularly the disabled participants, criticized the infomercial for its objectification and sensationalism towards disability, especially the scenes where disabled athletes were doing daily living activities. Their response to the infomercial was thus layered and complex.

The comments on the YouTube video and Twitter were the most positive reactions to the video. Many of the individuals reiterated the lyrics to the song, “Yes I Can!” and commented on how amazing the people featured in the video are. Some of the negative reactions towards the

infomercial emerged in mainstream media, where it was also criticized for objectifying disabled people. Many advertising industry publications, however, praised the infomercial for featuring disabled people and for the positive message it promoted.

When the disabled participants in the focus group were asked what they would have done to make the infomercial better, they said that they would have removed the daily living scenes and only included the sporting achievements. One participant also mentioned that it would have been beneficial for the infomercial to name the people in the video as some of them have been ground-breaking in their respective sports. But they noted that no matter how the infomercial is produced, there will always be an element of inspiration because people think of disabled bodies as exceptional.

Concluding thoughts and future directions

Admittedly, it is difficult to show society that disabled people are “normal” without highlighting the ordinariness of their lives. On the other hand, it is difficult to show society that disabled people can have above average talents, just like anyone else, without making them appear to be “superhuman”.

One way to address this is to create more opportunities for the disabled to control the disability narrative – in the media as well as in politics. Including disabled people in the production of infomercials like *We’re The Superhumans* – not just as performers but also as directors, writers and producers – could potentially minimize stereotypes and assumptions that currently characterize media production as well as policy-making. Currently, too many stories about disability are still told from a non-disabled person’s perspective and fall into the medical and personal tragedy models of disability. Society still often finds it amazing when a disabled

person pumps their own gas or can pilot a plane, so the content of the infomercial can be viewed as a commentary on public assumptions, as much as a commentary on disability.

Audience reactions to *We're the Superhumans* also point to the lasting legacy of Hall's "encoding-decoding" model and the way in which that model allows media studies to acknowledge audiences as active participants in the communication processes. If this was a linear process, audiences would demonstrate very similar reactions to media content like this infomercial, but we saw that this was not the case.

Finally, this study demonstrates that there are still negative perceptions held by society about disability through comments that incorporated words like "overcome" and "less fortunate" to describe disability. Although not overtly expressed, the tragedy and medical model of disability persist in media texts. Stories of disability continue to be directed by assumptions about what it would be like to have a disability rather than from the perspective of disabled people. This also demonstrates that the medical model and personal tragedy model of disability continue to dominate the public discourse over the social model of disability.

Further research is needed to better understand how audiences receive media texts that can be described as inspiration porn. Qualitative research that involves more participants could reveal a more detailed landscape of audience reactions and how their personal experiences influence the way they interpret inspiration porn. Despite the limitations of this study, my findings point to the complexity of how disability is understood and portrayed – in mainstream media and social media.

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Appendix A

Research Ethics Forms

Letter of Invitation

Title: Study on Paralympic Media Coverage

Date of ethics clearance: March 1, 2018

Ethics Clearance for the Collection of Data Expires: March 31, 2019

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Leah Cameron and I am a Master's student in the Department of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University. I am working on a research project under the supervision of Professors Irena Knezevic and Roy Hanes.

I am writing to you today to invite you to participate in a study on Paralympic media coverage. This study aims to gain insight into peoples' thoughts on Paralympic advertising.

This study involves one 60-minute focus group that will take place at Carleton University. With your consent, interviews will be video-recorded. Once the video has been transcribed, the recording will be destroyed.

While this project does involve some emotional risks, care will be taken to protect your identity. This will be done by keeping all responses anonymous.

You will have the right to end your participation in the study at any time, for any reason, up until (insert date). If you choose to withdraw, all the information you have provided will be destroyed.

As a token of appreciation, I will be providing you with a \$5 Tim Hortons gift card.

All research data, including video-recordings and any notes will be encrypted. Any hard copies of data (including any handwritten notes or USB keys) will be kept in a

locked cabinet at Carleton University. Research data will only be accessible by the researcher and the research supervisor.

This ethics protocol for this project was reviewed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board, which provided clearance to carry out the research. Should you have questions or concerns related to your involvement in this research, please contact: Dr. Andy Adler, Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at ethics@carleton.ca).

If you would like to participate in this research project, or have any questions, please contact me at [REDACTED] or leah.cameron@carleton.ca.

Sincerely,

Leah Cameron

Consent Form

Focus Group on Paralympic Media Coverage

Date of ethics clearance: March 1, 2018

Ethics Clearance for the Collection of Data Expires: March 31, 2019

I _____, choose to participate in a study on Paralympic media coverage. This study aims to gain insight into peoples' thoughts on Paralympic advertising. **The researcher for this study is Leah Cameron in Carleton University's Department of Journalism and Communication.**

She is working under the supervision of Irena Knezevic from Carleton University's Department of Journalism and Communication, and Roy Hanes, of Carleton University's School of Social Work.

This study involves one 60-minute focus group. With your consent, interviews will be video-recorded. Once the recording has been transcribed, the video-recording will be destroyed.

I will take precautions to protect your identity by keeping all responses anonymous.

You have the right to end your participation in the study at any time, for any reason, up until (insert date). You can withdraw by phoning or emailing the researcher. If you withdraw from the study, all information you have provided will be immediately destroyed.

As a token of appreciation, you will receive a \$5 Tim Hortons gift card. This is yours to keep, even if you withdraw from the study.

All research data, including video-recordings and any notes will be encrypted. Any hard copies of data (including any handwritten notes or USB keys) will be kept in a locked cabinet at Carleton University. Research data will only be accessible by the researcher and the research supervisor. Once the video recordings have been transcribed, they will be destroyed.

Once the project is completed, all research data will be kept for five years and potentially used for other research projects on this same topic. At the end of five years, all research data will be securely destroyed. (Electronic data will be erased and hard copies will be shredded.)

If you would like a copy of the finished research project, you are invited to contact the researcher to request an electronic copy which will be provided to you.

The ethics protocol for this project was reviewed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board, which provided clearance to carry out the research. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Dr. Andy Adler, Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at ethics@carleton.ca).

Researcher contact information:

Leah Cameron

Journalism and Communication

Carleton University

Tel: [REDACTED]

Email: leah.cameron@carleton.ca

Supervisor contact information:

Irena Knezevic

Journalism and Communication

Carleton University

Tel: 613-520-2600 ext. 4121

Email: Irena.Knezevic@carleton.ca

Roy Hanes

Social Work

Carleton University

Tel: 613-520-2600 ext. 3545

Email: roy_hanes@carleton.ca

Do you agree to be video-recorded: ____Yes____No

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

Date

Focus Group Guide

1. What did you think of the infomercial?
2. What words would you use to describe the people featured in the infomercial?
3. Before viewing this infomercial, did you think of people with disabilities as athletes, musicians, performing artists, pilots or parents?
4. What stood out to you in the infomercial?
5. Who do you think is the intended audience of this infomercial? **OR** Who do you think this infomercial is directed at? **OR** What do you think is the goal of this infomercial?
6. What do you think of the infomercial's title, *We're the Superhumans*?