

**Exploring the Line Between Representation and Exploitation
of Disabilities in Entertainment Media**

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Consistent with the sociocultural model, consumption of popular media influences a community's thoughts, opinions, feelings, and actions towards groups of people represented. Because of this it is important that historically marginalized groups of people are accurately represented in the entertainment media. However, this is often not the case, especially in regard to the disabled community. To showcase the lack of representation a content analysis of 100 popular media sources with disabled characters was conducted. These sources were then analyzed to see the types of representation in much of the popular media of today, i.e., if characters were played by an actor with a disability or if the disability was a main plot point of the story. Along with the content analysis, ten qualitative interviews with people within the disabled community were conducted to learn about their views of disability representation, exploitation, and existing examples in the media. These interviews asked questions about their view of representation, exploitation, and opinions on the existing examples in the media. This research found that not only is there a lack of representation in the media, but a lack of accurate representation, and this is viewed as problematic by participants in the current study. This research provides guidance on how the entertainment industry can improve the representation of the disabled community.

Key Terms: Disability, representation, exploitation, entertainment media, character analysis

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Acknowledgments

I would like to take a moment to ask you, the reader, to think of characters from popular entertainment media that you feel you can identify with. Can you think of numerous characters who look like you, sound like you, or act like you? Did you watch these characters as you were growing up? Did they help shape your self-awareness and your image of yourself? Now, I would like to ask you how it would feel if these characters suddenly disappeared from the stories, if you could no longer see yourself represented in your favorite movies, television shows, books, etc. Would you feel like your identity was an important contribution to the world? Would you feel that your experience was one shared by others, or that your life story mattered to those around you.

I would like to thank my all of those who have made this work possible. First, thank you to my participants. Without your interviews this work wouldn't have been possible. Thank you to Dr. Anne Noonan for your assistance during the beginning of my thesis process. I would also like to thank Dr. Scott Nowka for all of your support throughout my four years at Salem State. Thank you to my readers, Dr. James Conway and Lisa Bibeau for helping with my writing process. Thank you, Dr. Joanna Gonsalves, for your tremendous advising of my project. I learned so much from you and truly appreciate it. Finally, thank you to my family, for your love and support. I would not be the student, nor person, I am if it weren't for you.

Introduction

Accurate representation in entertainment media is crucial. Television shows, films, and books are sometimes the only exposure people have to encountering certain marginalized and minority groups. Inaccurate representation can be detrimental to how the vast majority view members of these particular communities. One minority group in which inaccurate representation in media is often apparent is the disabled community. A study by the GLAAD organization, a media monitoring organization that focuses on representation of groups of people such as the LGBTQ+ community, released a report stating that only 3.5% of characters in television shows have a disability (GLAAD, 2020). Comparing this to the approximately 15% of the population that has a disability, as reported by the World Health Organization, a large gap is noted (World Health Organization, 2021). Not only is representation lacking, but the little representation that is found in entertainment media is often riddled with inappropriate stereotypes. These stereotypes can be harmful to the quality of life of the disabled community as it can lead to negative opinions, assumptions, and attitudes towards disabled people in the real world.

Literature in the field of disability studies often refers to two main types of disabilities: mental and physical. Throughout this paper, the term “disabilities” will be referring to all types: mental, psychical, emotional, invisible, etc. A person can also have a combination of different types of disabilities. These disabilities should be viewed on a spectrum and looked at through the context of how these disabilities can affect a person as they move throughout the world they inhabit (Olkin 1999).

To understand why it is important to have accurate representation of disabled characters, it is important to first understand how influential entertainment media can be. Entertainment media is influential on our society due to the sociocultural model of psychology. This psychological framework was first introduced by Lev Vygotsky to explain how social interactions with others within one's society and culture help to shape a person throughout one's development (Mercadal, 2021). Sociocultural theory has taken on new meaning and importance as society has changed, especially considering the new abundance of media. This new abundance makes media important to society and culture, more so than it may have been in the past. Now interactions with cultural artifacts, such as the media, influence people's opinions, biases, etc. at a very fast rate. When the majority of a society sees certain images in the media this becomes the norm. These biases are then passed down to the younger generations, eventually becoming the overarching beliefs for a whole society.

Interactions with culture was emphasized by Vygotsky for his sociocultural theory framework (Mercadal, 2021). New interpretations of the sociocultural model explain how humans use certain tools in order to change their relationships with others and their place in society. Entertainment media like books, movies, and television shows are important cultural tools of today. They shape the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of one's culture (Teharian, 2013). In this case the tools used are the media sources consumed. Consumption of media is happening at an extremely fast rate with technological advances. This causes media to be of growing importance to society as a whole. Media is arguably one of the most important societal tools in the media-centric present day.

The term “entertainment media” refers to television shows, movies, or literature that is primarily consumed by an audience during times of leisure. Entertainment can have other purposes, such as education, but the main goal of entertainment media is for audience engagement. Entertainment media has increased in popularity and societal importance due to technological advances such as home internet and streaming services, allowing individuals to immediately access an abundance of entertainment media at any time. This type of access in turn allows for entertainment media to have a larger impact on the daily lives of individuals than it had before streaming services and other media outlets, as if it is a new member of a society itself.

Further explanation of the impact entertainment media has on society is the rise in number of relatable and relevant characters. Movies, television shows, popular literature, etc., “...become extensions of ourselves, extensions of our human senses and capabilities...” (Laughey, 2009). Media consumption becomes an important component of the way individuals view themselves, see themselves in comparison to others, and relate to others. Entertainment media can be a way to connect with others with similar tastes in entertainment media, and to explore one’s own identity as it is reflected to society through media.

Furthermore, in entertainment media, the term “relatable content” refers to content which appeals to a large majority and which will then be consumed readily, leading to larger revenues. As Benjamin Fraser eloquently points out in his book *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts* “...cinema becomes a reflective mirror, a productive expression or a theoretical ground for the integration of perception and concepts that informs our socially negotiated understanding of disability.

Because of the way indexical, iconic and symbolic/arbitrary signification blend together in the cinematic sign, film becomes, like reality, a cognitive code that actively requires questioning, understanding, and perhaps decipherment” (Fraser, 2016).

Members of society use the media to learn about the social norms and rules of their culture (Barnes and Mercer, 2010). Consuming entertainment media that is popular within a community, which reflects cultural norms, is a way of learning about cultural assumptions. Cultural rules and norms can be learned both by members within that society as well as others who are curious to understand the assumptions and belief systems of another culture. When certain groups of people are underrepresented or misrepresented by entertainment media, confusing and inaccurate assumptions can be made with regard to the role of marginalized groups within a culture, perpetuating further the negative impact that marginalization has on individuals. Specifically, as regards the disabled community, many people may feel uncomfortable around individuals with disabilities. They may often see a disabled person as having a misfortunate circumstance or even tragic one (Quayson, 2007). With more abundant disabled characters, this view held by society could begin to shift. Seeing characters who hold jobs, who have love interests, who struggle, and who succeed would help members of society who may hold these views see disabled people as active members of society. The voices of members of the disabled community are often rarely a featured voice in society. There are many reasons for this, but a major one is that society often questions the humanity of disabled individuals, and therefore a right to a voice (Gray and Jackson, 2002).

Looking through the lens of sociocultural theory, we can see how negative images in the media involving disabled characters, can shape society's view of these characters.

Also, not only does inaccurate representation change society's views, it can also impact how the disabled community see themselves (Kraayneoord, 2011). Development of a person's opinions and self-image come from the context of their environment, according to the sociocultural model. If the only representation of the disabled community is and inaccurate one, they will have no other choice but to believe the stereotypes they are seeing. This will change the way they interact with the disabled community. This then changes how a disabled individual may see themselves. Their own self-image may be affected by the negative stereotypes in the media that are also perpetuated onto them in day-to-day life.

Disability media studies has been a growing discipline recently. Not only has the media been more important than ever to society and culture, but awareness for the disabled community is also growing. This is becoming apparent in the new disability media that is being created (Johanseen and Garrisi, 2020). There has been an ever-growing push for media, large and small, to do better in regard to people with disabilities. Major production companies have been responsive to this push, which can be seen with the growing number of disabled characters that have been added into mainstream entertainment media. Certain streaming platforms, such as Netflix and Hulu, have made public statements focusing on representation and inclusion. While this makes for more abundant accurate representation, there is still much work that needs to be done.

Media representation can be defined by “how particular people and groups are portrayed in media, as embodied in images, words/texts, language used, and tone” (Renwick, 2016). Renwick also describes how the media has four main purposes for representation. The first would be to portray real world scenarios to a large audience

through mass media, even if it is exaggerated or factitious in certain ways. Stories about dystopian societies or magical realms still depict stories that the audience can relate to, even if the setting is different from what they experience in their day to day lives. The second is to portray group experiences through an individual character, meaning large groups of people can identify with the life events, personality, etc. of a singular character. The third use is to speak for groups when individuals may not be able to speak for themselves. Popular entertainment media is meant to be seen by large groups of people. If the media focuses on certain societal issues, it can get a message across better than some individuals may be able to. When this is done correctly, it can be a very useful tool. Finally, the media is used as a tool to communicate an idea to its audience. Like the previous example, the media often has a certain agenda it would like to have reach its audience (Renwick, 2016). If these four goals are met while also incorporating an accurate portrayal of disabled individuals, the impact can be positive and far reaching.

There are arguments that the GLAAD statistic mentioned previously is false and that representation of disabled characters is even smaller. A study conducted by Stacy Smith found that only 2.4% of characters in the top 100 films from 2007-2015 were disabled characters who were named or had speaking parts (Smith, 2016). The sources cited above, and others explain media can be seen trying to fulfill a “disability quota” by having a character in a wheelchair just pass by in a scene. The distinction between extras or background characters and characters who are named and have speaking parts is an important distinction to make. While having disabled background characters is important, you cannot get in-depth representation from these characters. This is problematic because

disabled people are rarely showcased and when they are, they are not portrayed realistically.

Exploitation can be understood as taking advantage of people, especially those in a minority or marginalized group, for the personal gain of another. For example, the disabled community is often exploited by society in forms of different ways, like physical, mental, or sexual abuse. Different instructors within one's society have made it so the disabled community is a particularly vulnerable population, including a society's overall acceptance of disabilities and abuse of people with disabilities. With a continuation of exposure and knowledge of the disabled community, abuse would be less accepted, therefore exploitation of the disabled community may begin to diminish (Thornberry and Olson, 2005).

Known exploitation of individuals with disabilities in the world of entertainment dates back the late 1800s in America. Traveling circuses, like The Brothers Grimm Side Show, would boast attractions that included individuals with physical deformities. People with disabilities would-be put-on display to entertain consumers of this form of theater. Popular attractions that featured disabled people included legless wonder boys, armless women, and Siamese twins. These individuals were advertised as "freaks" and the shows were known as freakshows (Fordham, 2007).

Exploitation today occurs as producers of entertainment media continue to exploit disabled individuals by creating characters that are a novelty, or that are used to create intrigue or emotion in the viewer without a realistic portrayal of the individual (Thornberry and Olson, 2005). There are multiple ways that entertainment media exploit the disabled experience in the present time, but two of the biggest ways are the push for

inspiration and the use of ableism, which are discussed further below. Media that features a disabled person often attempts to make their audience feel inspired by the disabled character's story. It often is either a story of pity or inspiration, and has no other nuance (Markotic, 2016). The audience is to feel proud of the character for completing mundane actions. Also, the audience is made to feel happy or lucky in regard to their own life. There is a push for thinking that includes “it could always be worse,” or “if they can do it, so can I.” These story-arches are harmful to the disabled community. When disabled characters are shown typically in day-to-day life audiences often call it astonishing, groundbreaking, brave, etc. (Markotic, 2016). This is offensive, but also just another way to disguise pity.

Stella Young, a disabled activist, has coined the phrase “inspiration porn” to describe this effect in entertainment media. Young states that “inspiration porn can come in many forms, from using a person's story as inspiration to using them to compare how much ‘worse’ your life could be.” Young states “I am not your inspiration...,” a term she uses often, which is the title of one of her TedTalks. (Young, 2014). She talks about how she was often looked at as an inspiration as a child when she hadn’t done anything of note or importance. Just being born disabled made people look to her for inspiration. She continues to be seen as inspirational, but not just because she has a disability. She is an author, a public speaker, and an activist. If entertainment media needs inspirational stories, it should focus on accomplishments such as these, not just because a disabled person exists.

Ableism is also used as an exploitation tactic. Ableism can be defined as discrimination of people with disabilities, from individuals without disabilities, by viewing

disabled individuals as lesser than individuals (Butts, 2020). This can be done by using one's implicit biases against the disabled community to judge, harm, or affect them. A big way ableism comes through in disability media is when producers cast a nondisabled actor for a disabled role. This decision is usually rooted in the argument that the role would have been too difficult for a disabled actor to play. This thinking is extremely ableist. If a story is trying to depict the life of a disabled character accurately, how could it be too difficult for a disabled person to play, meanwhile they are actually living the life. This also exploits the disabled community because it tells the story of a disabled person without actually benefiting a member, or members, of the community.

Certain common story lines are also ableist. When a media source focuses on all the "struggles" of a life with a disability it doesn't accurately portray a disabled person's life. Not everything in a disabled person's life is a struggle, so it does not need to be the only featured story. Struggles can be mixed into the story fairly well but making it the main focus is ableist in nature. Another ableist story line is when the character is written to hate themselves, their lives, and their disability. It is often assumed that because a person is disabled, they must be unsatisfied with their lives, (Fraser, 2016). When a piece of media focuses on this kind of story it perpetuates a false narrative that is assumed by many from outside of the disabled community. This narrative is ableist. For example, in the film *I am Sam*, the stereotype that a disabled individual cannot be an adequate parent, is perpetuated, until an individual without a disability steps in to help "save" the situation. From this movie the audience is made to assume the ableist narrative that disabled people need saving from non-disabled people.

Given the existing research on disability media studies, the current study is an empirical investigation using two different methodologies. First, a content analysis of one hundred media sources containing a character with a disability was examined. This content analysis aimed to look into the existing representation of disabled characters to see what was done well or what is still lacking. Second, qualitative interviews of ten adults with a disability were conducted. The purpose of these interviews is to give insight into how different members of the disabled community feel about how entertainment media showcases disabled characters.

Content Analysis

The content analysis examined one hundred characters from popular sources of entertainment media. The characters had various disabilities from different levels on the spectrum of severity. Content media choices were made with popular movies, television shows, and books from recent media that features a disabled character in mind. Sources from previous decades were considered to track the evolution of the media, both with the number of disabled characters and the type of representation that was featured in the past. Each character was evaluated based on several criteria, including overall demographic information, media genre, and personality archetype portrayed. Other factors included differentiating between actors with or without disabilities and exploring what role the characters had on the story arc, including if the character had a main or supporting role or was an “extra.”

Methods

Most characters evaluated were fictional and the majority of choices were from fictional television programs. However, many fictional portrayals, particularly in feature

length films, state that they are based on the stories of real people, and these were also considered for the purposes of this study. This was done in a limited capacity so as to keep to mostly fictional characters created by writers, directions, etc. When a character is based on a real person and their story it is hard to analyze the inaccuracy of representation because it is based on a real person's story. The content analysis was created in aim to gauge the existing types of representation being created in media.

Cells A-I were included to provide background knowledge to the character or the source of media the character came from. Cell D tracked the time the source came out. This was important to include as it showed the progress, or lack thereof, of representation over time. Cell F tracked if the character was a main or supporting character. This tracked how much representation was included in the media source. Cells H and I were two of the most important cells from the list. They tracked if a character was played or written by a person with a disability, or if there was a disabled consultant available during the production of the media source. Many people within the disabled community say the most important thing about representation of disabilities in media is to have a character with a disability played by someone with a disability. Therefore, these cells were imperative to track.

Cell J tracked which of three archetypes a character may fit into: helpless victim, evil villain, or inspirational hero (Reid, 2019). A multitude of stereotypes are often used in disability media, but these three can be seen very often. An archetype is also relied on even more than a stereotype, because it is the entire basis of a character's personality. The helpless victim and inspirational archetypes play into the inspiration porn narrative. The evil villain archetype presents to the opposite effect, by playing into the stereotype of

disabled characters as scary, freaky, etc. This then perpetuates the stereotype into the real world.

Several existing models with common themes for tracking accurate representations of disabled characters were reviewed. Cells K-P were inspired by a list of different criteria from Renwick (2016) where she describes different ways to include acceptable representation. These included factors like if the character is realistic, if the character is portrayed fairly, and if the character is created simply because of disability. These were important to track to show how well constructed the characters were.

Cell Q was based on stereotypes described by Collin Barnes in his article “Disabling Imagery in the Media. There were eleven stereotypes described:

1. The disabled person as pitiful and pathetic.
2. The disabled person as an object of violence.
3. The disabled person as sinister and evil.
4. The disabled person as atmosphere or curio.
5. The disabled person as a super cripple.
6. The disabled person as an object of ridicule.
7. The disabled person as their own worst and only enemy.
8. The disabled person as a burden.
9. The disabled person as sexually abnormal.
10. The disabled person as incapable of participating fully in community life.
11. The disabled person as normal.

(Barnes, 1992). The eleventh stereotype was left out of consideration for the spreadsheet.

These were tracked by their corresponding 1-10 number on the spreadsheet. These

stereotypes are negative and therefore harmful to the disabled community. The more stereotypes that were seen in the media source the worse the source was in terms of accurate representation.

Results/ Discussion of Content Analysis

The full results of the content analysis are displayed in Appendix A. Overall, the representation of disabled characters was extremely lacking. Looking for sources for the content analysis posed a difficult challenge as there are few movies, television shows, or books that showcased a disabled character. From the ones found, it was very difficult to find a range within the sources, as many of the featured characters had similar disabilities, similar story lines, and similar character arcs. The experience of living with a disability is different for everyone, even people with the same diagnosis, therefore this lack of range comes with a lack of accuracy.

Out of the 100 sources 43 were played by an actor with a disability (this includes characters who were written by someone with a disability or a disabled actor voicing an illustrated character with a disability). From the sources analyzed, this is certainly a good way to ensure accuracy and avoid exploitation of the character. From my perspective a disabled actor playing a character with the same disability will more likely bring in their own life experiences to the character. They can showcase what it is truly like to live with the disability, but they also can make sure the character is well balanced and multi-dimensional. Based on the content analysis, it was observed that the non-disabled actors played their roles in more restrictive and stereotypical ways. For example, the shows *Atypical* and *Everything's Gonna be Okay* are both very similar shows in concept. They both feature a main character, in their late teens- early twenties, who is autistic. However,

the character in *Everything's Gonna be Okay*, Matilda, is played by an autistic actress, while Sam from *Atypical* is not. This makes Matilda's character much more nuanced than Sam's, and her plotlines often focus on other things besides her autism. Sam's interests, struggles, familial relations, are all very stereotypical to how society views people with Autism.

Hiring a disabled actor also helps with avoiding exploitation. Profiting off of the character of a disabled person without benefiting the community in some way is the ultimate form of exploitation. Hiring a disabled actor benefits not only the individual actor but the community they represent as a whole. This can include well known and well acclaimed actors like Peter Dinklage in his role on *Game of Thrones* or in the movie *Elf*. Dinklage being a well-known actor may have led to him getting certain roles, but a really great thing that can come out of hiring a disabled actor is showcasing a new face in the media industry. Actors with disabilities are often overlooked for parts that do not specifically include a disability, so it is especially unfortunate when roles featuring a disability are given to a non-disabled actor. Some examples of lesser-known actors with a disability who began to rise to fame due to being featured in such roles are Josh Thomas and Emma Kramer from their roles in the show *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* and Zak Gottsagen from his role in the movie *Peanut Butter Falcon*.

The media analysis found that disabled characters tend to fit into a storyline in one of two ways. In the first, the character's disability was either the main plot or one of the main plots of the story. In the second, disability of the character was not a main plot point. It appeared to consistently be a part of the story in some way. When a character's disability was a main plot-point there was potential for the media source to really

showcase the accuracy of life with a disability. However, many sources that decided to make the disability a large part of the character or plot in general typically relied on inspiration tactics, like ones described by Stella Young. Many sources also claimed to be for educational or awareness purposes yet lacked accuracy. This made the disability feel inauthentic and potentially offensive to the community. While being disabled may be a large part of someone's identity, it is not their only identity. Even if the disability is important to the story line, it should still not be the entire focus. If the plot of the story required a focus on the disability it should have been accurately portrayed. Including a character with a disability without focusing on it for a plotline offered more multidimensional characters.

The lack of intersectionality that was represented in the characters was noted throughout the content analysis. Nearly all of the characters in the content were straight, white, and male. Women were represented second to most. People of color in general were hardly shown, especially women of color. This limited representation can be detrimental to the way in which people with disabilities are perceived. By limiting portrayal to this demographic, many other groups of people with disabilities continue to be underrepresented, such as women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. This then compounds the already marginalized nature of these minority groups even further.

One of the biggest examples of a lack of intersectionality can be related to one of the stereotypes Barnes explained: non-sexuality. Disabled characters often do not have a romantic or sexual partner. This is in part due to the fact that the people creating the media do not see people with disabilities as romantic or sexual people, as Barnes explained in his ninth stereotype, which is a harmful and incorrect stereotype. When this

is included in the storylines it only makes this stereotype worse. While this has gotten better over time, it is still a part of a lot of today's media. For example, stories like the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* told the story about a disfigured man who was in love with a woman. However, despite their friendship she does not end up falling in love with him, leaving the reader to assume it is because he is unlovable due to his condition. Shows today like *Atypical* and *Special* show characters navigating romance and sexuality while being a part of a certain disabled community. Their struggles are not due to their disability, but rather the struggles everyone faces. Giving these characters' love interests and sex lives really bring dimension to their characters and show itself.

Qualitative Interviews

In order to gain an understanding of the personal impact that the lack of representation and exploitative storylines have on individuals with disabilities, ten participants, all of whom identify as having a disability, were interviewed. The interview method was approved by the Internal Review Board of Salem State University. The goal for these interviews was to get personal perspectives and insight from people with disabilities. By using the input of those who live with disabilities, it is the hope of this thesis that part of the problem of false or inaccurate representation can begin to be addressed.

Participants

Each participant had at some time in their life been diagnosed with having either a mental or physical disability. They could have any degree of severity to the disability, therefore even minor disorders were considered. Each participant was 18 years of age or older and had intellectual autonomy. Out of the ten participants seven were female and

three were male. Each participant had some level of a college education, even if it had not been completed at the time of the interview. Outreach was done in a few different ways to find participants who may be interested in an interview. School classroom outreach as well as posts in emails were utilized in order to recruit participants. Social media and word of mouth recruitment was also used to find participants. Participants were given the choice of how they would like their interview to take place: over Zoom, face to face, or the chance to individually fill out the questions on a document. The identity of each participant is to remain anonymous for this study.

Interview Instrument

The interview conducted with each participant consisted of 11 open- ended questions. Each question asked about the participants' personal feelings on representation, exploitation, and how they saw the existing disabled characters in various forms of entertainment media. The questions were made open- ended and very opinion based to get a thorough gauge of how members of the disabled community felt about the representation and exploitation of disabled characters in entertainment media. Each participant was permitted to not answer any question they did not want to answer. A copy of the interview questions can be found in this paper's appendix.

Procedures

Five of the ten interviews were conducted in person, three were individually filled out, and two were conducted over Zoom. During each interview, notes were taken to transcribe as the participants answered questions. Participants were made aware of the confidentiality of this study before participating in the interview. This was done with the disclosure statement that was approved by the Salem State Internal Review Board. A

copy of the disclosure statement can be found in this paper's appendix. Confidentiality was maintained by making participants aware that the only person who would know their identity was the interviewer, all interview transcriptions would be held in a private computer, and that their names and any information that may disclose their identity would be left out of the paper. Only after receiving the disclosure statement were participants interviewed.

Coding

After completing each interview, the transcriptions were coded to collect data. This coding was done by first paraphrasing each statement and idea a participant presented. After the paraphrasing was done, central themes that were brought up were identified. Nine themes were identified:

- 1.) Representation means all types of people are featured.
- 2.) Representation of disabled characters (especially accurate characters) is lacking.
- 3.) Exploitation means using something/ someone for one's own benefit.
- 4.) A character's disability does not need to be highlighted; in fact, it is better if it's not.
- 5.) Disabled characters need to be multidimensional.
- 6.) People from the disabled community don't often seek out media that features disabled characters.
- 7.) A character with a disability should be portrayed by someone with a disability.

8.) Simply having a disabled character, a part of a piece of media does not mean it will be relatable to a majority of the disabled community.

9.) More accurate representation of disabled characters in media would make disabilities more visible, more understood, and more relatable.

After these central themes were identified each interview was looked over again to mark where the central themes were stated.

Results and Discussion

Each interviewee argued that representation of disabled characters is lacking. The graph below depicts the number of participants who talked about each of the themes at least one time in their interview. Theme two, representation of disabled characters (especially accurate characters) is lacking, was indicated by all ten participants. Theme seven, (a character with a disability should be portrayed by someone with a disability), had the lowest frequency with six participants mentioning it.

Figure 1 indicates that the issues brought up within interviews were of high importance. While this graph tracks that the themes were brought up at least once, in most interviews the themes were talked about many times. The themes show that the overall representation in the media is unacceptable and indicates different ways to make it better. Arguably, the most important theme brought up is theme nine, (more accurate representation of disabled characters in media would make disabilities more visible, more understood, and more relatable). The sociocultural model argues this concept, that more representation would make disabilities more understood in the real world. This theme really encompasses why accurate representation is important.

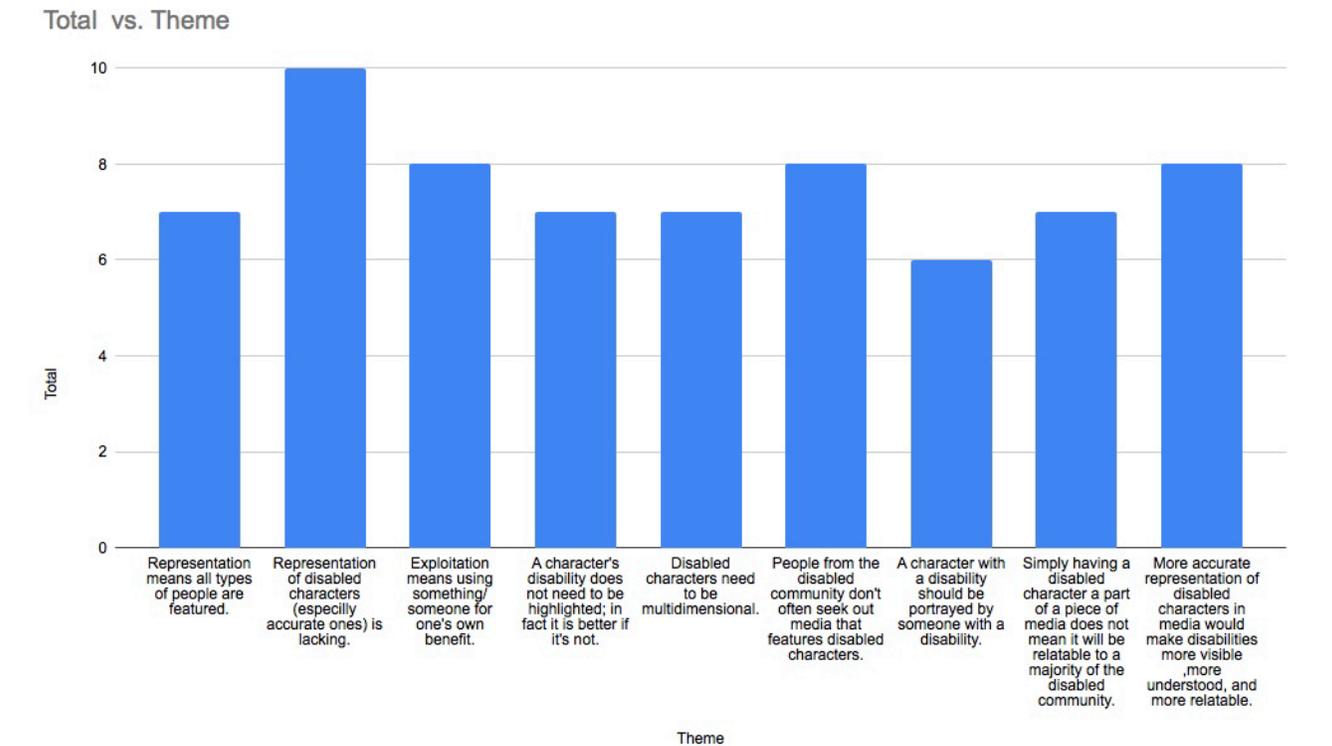
Figure 1**Themes Expressed by Number of Interviewees**

Figure 1 indicates that the issues brought up within interviews were of high importance. While this graph tracks that the themes were brought up at least once, in most interviews the themes were talked about many times. The themes show that the overall representation in the media is unacceptable and indicates different ways to make it better. Arguably, the most important theme brought up is theme nine, (more accurate representation of disabled characters in media would make disabilities more visible, more understood, and more relatable). The sociocultural model argues this concept, that more representation would make disabilities more understood in the real world. This theme really encompasses why accurate representation is important.

The first theme, (representation means all types of people are featured), is a general theme that participants answer when asked to define representation. Theme three, (exploitation means using something/ someone for one's own benefit, was also a more general theme participants stated when asked to define exploitation. The remaining themes are more specific to disability media.

Theme four, (a character's disability does not need to be highlighted; in fact, it is better if it's not), argues for characters to not be written around their disability. Many participants had strong feelings regarding this theme. One participant expressed how they felt that when the media centers around a character's disability it puts disabilities, or a person who has a disability, on a pedestal. This perpetuates the thinking that people with disabilities should be admired or that they deserve special treatment. Another participant described how one children's show worked in a character with a disability very well:

It wasn't 'oh let's talk about what an inspiration she was.' It wasn't such a big deal. She explained she has these braces; you can play with me you won't catch it. I like to do things myself, but sometimes I do need help. Very matter of fact. If they run into a little problem but they adapt the game and move on. It was spot on. The good thing about that is, they didn't put her in for one episode for the awareness and call it a day. She's a regular episode. She's a normal character, and they don't talk about it cuz they already did. She just is a character. (Interviewee 1)

This example shows how a television show was able to create a character with a disability in an educational and informative way, without relying on the disability for a plot point. The show introduced the character's disability by educating the young viewers on what it is. They took the time to teach the viewers about how the disability may affect

her playing a game but explained that she still can. After the initial explanation the disability was no longer focused on and the character remained a part of the show.

Theme five, (disabled characters need to be multidimensional), is based on the same general concept as theme four. However, theme five focuses more on the character in general and how they are showcased themselves. A multidimensional character is one that has a disability but also has many other identities and traits. These may come from being a person with a disability but also should be completely unrelated as well. Many participants said that a good representation of a disabled character would be a well-rounded character. They explained that having a character that is only represented by their disability is overplayed and tiresome. One participant argued that, “A character that represents disability well in my opinion is someone who has a disability but is not being fully weighed down by it or letting it take over their lives. They have a certain disability, and it is clear and affects their life in some ways, but they don’t or try not to let it be the main point of who they are limit their capabilities” (Interviewee 7). This could be done by giving the character a relationship, a job, having them live on their own, etc.

Theme six, (people from the disabled community don't often seek out media that features disabled characters), was another theme that was said by most participants. Only two participants explicitly said they do look for disabled characters in the entertainment media they consume. The participants who said they did not look for it gave a few reasons for this. One reason was that they just did not care to or it wasn't important to them. Some argued that they live life with their disability so when they consume media, they just like to be entertained by media not similar to their daily lives. Many argued that they do not look for it because it is often offensive and inaccurate. “I don't go looking for

it because you won't get the accurate representation you deserve..." (Interviewee 2) One participant went as far as to say if they happen upon media with an offensive character, that they will not consume the media again. Participants did however say that if they happen upon a disabled character that is accurately depicted, they do appreciate it and enjoy it. This theme also explains just how important it is for representation to be accurate. If a media source contains a character of a certain demographic that does not mean it will be relatable to the community, you are trying to represent.

Theme seven argues that disabled characters should be played by disabled actors. Participants who argued for this said it made characters more authentic or realistic. Along with authenticity, participants explained how hiring a disabled actor was great for the community. Highlighting an actor with a disability brings awareness to the disability. It also ensures that the companies won't profit from the story of a disabled person without benefiting someone from the community. Also, an actor with a disability can keep the plotlines in check. One participant did say that they understood that finding a disabled actor may be difficult, but people creating the character should at least put effort into researching the disability. This can be done through talking to members of the community they are trying to showcase or hiring disabled consultants. However, for the best results disabled actors should be present.

Theme eight, (simply having a disabled character a part of a piece of media does not mean it will be relatable to a majority of the disabled community) was also acknowledged by many of the participants. Many felt it was obvious when a character was placed into a piece of content to fit a type of "disability quota." Since many characters are not accurately represented, individuals do not see themselves in the

characters. One participant explained “...people would tell me to read a certain book just because someone with a disability was in it even though it wasn't relatable at all. That was the only reason people were suggesting it to me” (Interviewee 6) Due to many concepts such as disabled characters’ lack intersectionality, accuracy, etc. they cannot be good examples of the disabled experience. To be more relatable, characters should be well rounded. This would make it so more people, not only individuals with disabilities, could relate to these characters.

Theme nine, (more accurate representation of disabled characters in media would make disabilities more visible, understood, and relatable) had some of the most impactful arguments from the participants. Many participants circled back to this theme as they answered interview questions, as this theme gets to the root of the issue. Better and more abundant representation will lead to a better understanding of disabilities in general. When told the statistics comparing the number of disabled characters to the number of people with a diagnosed disability one participant explained that they were “more surprised that the number of people with disabilities is that high...if disabled characters were more featured in the media then I might not be that surprised” (Interviewee 9) This particular participant was not aware that about 26% of Americans have a disability. After some discussion of this they explained that this may be due to the lack of disabled characters they have seen. Another participant explained how more representation would help to normalize disabilities.

“If there’s no representation you think nobody wants to hear your story” (Interviewee 5) This quote has stood out, as it explains why accurate representation in media is important for society. Many other participants argued this as well. It explains

why the representation out there today is so disheartening. Seeing yourself represented in the media is important because it shows you that your identity is important. Without every seeing examples of people who look, act, sound, or feel like you, you may question if your identity is important the society you belong to.

Despite most participants having strong opinions about the lack of accuracy and the abundance of exploitation, it is important to note that not all participants felt strongly about this. This response was followed with commentary on the addition of disabled characters in entertainment media with no evident reason to be included in the story. One participant explained they do not want to be put on a pedestal for representation (Interviewee 4). When this happens, the participant continued, it can feel inauthentic and simply an afterthought in attempts to be inclusive without having a genuine desire to be accurate or representative. When a participant did not have a strong connection to their disability as a part of their identity, they felt the least strongly about the topic. Participants with a strong connection to their disability as a part of their identity felt the most strongly about the abundance of exploitation and lack of accurate representation of disabled characters in entertainment media.

General Discussion

This paper has attempted to increase awareness not only on the significant history of misrepresentation and the negative impact misrepresentation has had on the disabled community, but also on the growing interest to remedy this. By comparing characters from popular media over the past several decades, results of this study show that the prevalence of disabled individuals has certainly increased, and the importance of having disabled actors represent disabled characters has gained support. In addition, the

interviewees confirmed that the existing representation is lacking. Interviewees also gave insight into how the lack of accurate characters and storylines focused on exploitative narratives negatively shape the views of society. This research suggests that greater efforts towards achieving the realistic and accurate portrayal of this population is needed in order to continue increasing awareness and inclusion.

Limitations

The findings of this study, both the content analysis and the qualitative interviews, have some methodological limitations. The content analysis was composed mainly of popular media with North American origins, largely white middle-class society. Because of this the findings may not generalize to how disabilities are seen throughout media produced in other countries. Analyzing media from other cultures would have broadened the range of characters and the media would not have been viewed through a Western lens. Different cultures' media representation could have been even more realistic and inclusive of a range diversity, but there would be no way of knowing this information from this content analysis alone.

Another limitation is that not every disability was represented in the media analysis. Autism, ADHD, and physical impairment were some of the most abundant disabilities from the media sources considered. Having even more disabilities would have lent itself to a more thorough analysis. The most popular media was chosen for this content analysis, including those produced by high-end Hollywood Studios. Due to this not all disabilities were represented, and some were much more present than others. This is because major productions typically focus on the same types of disabilities (certain

physical disabilities like blindness and paralysis or Autism.) With a broadened search of independent studios, a wider range of disabilities may have been available.

The interview's major limitation was that there were only ten interviewees with a range of five different disabilities between them. Having a larger group of participants would have helped with even more knowledge from people with a wider range of disabilities. Representation looks and feels different to all people, therefore having a wider range of disabilities would have provided more thorough insight. Another limitation could have been the fact that the interviews were not done anonymously. While doing a face-to-face interview holds a lot of value, participants may have been more likely to open up if they were answering anonymously. Even though the participants were informed they could decline to answer any question they wished they still may have felt uncomfortable, and therefore more reluctant to answer

Future Research

Future research based on this thesis could work to address the limitations from the studies. A content analysis that included more sources would be the first step I would take into further research. The content analysis would include sources with many different disabilities, and productions from different companies. Media from other countries could be looked at as well. Future research would also include more interviews with people with disabilities. While ten participants did lead to very engaging and informative interviews, I would interview more people. These interviews would include people with different disabilities as well.

Based on the implications from this study, I would like to do some research with focus groups regarding the existing sources of disabilities in entertainment media. I could

show groups of people, both disabled and non-disabled, clips from movies or television shows or read them descriptions of disabled characters. These sources would be both good and bad examples of representation. I would then ask participants their thoughts on each source, like how were the characters represented, were they accurate, did they feel inspiration or pity from these characters, etc. I would then lead a discussion about why accurate representation in the media is important to society. I would ask questions about how important media in their lives is, do they feel represented by popular media and why they think it is important that people with disabilities are accurately represented in popular media.

Implications

From both the content analysis and the interviews there is some evidence that the existing representation of disabled characters in popular entertainment media is inadequate. The amount of representation needs to change, and when representation is included it should be non-exploitative, accurate, and thoughtful. With more abundant representation disabled people will be more visible. With more visibility of disabled people there will be a better understanding of the disabled experience. Communities won't have to rely on stereotypes that they have seen in the media to mold their viewpoints. If they are seeing accurate depictions of disabled characters on screen disabilities will also become more normalized.

It is imperative that we advocate for the disabled community; without a voice in society, you are not understood or taken seriously, you can be overlooked, your needs and wants are not met, and more. This is only made worse by not having many accurate characters or disabled characters at all. The inclusion of more disabled characters in

popular entertainment media could begin to give disabled individuals appropriate recognition and a voice. This would then lead to a more harmonious society in all.

From the studies conducted for this thesis, I have learned a lot about what it takes to create appropriate disabled characters. Because of this knowledge, I synthesized a set of recommendations for the entertainment industry in a *Character Guide* (see appendix C). This guide contains suggested concrete steps that could be taken when creating a character with a disability.

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Appendix A Abridged Content Analysis

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
				Actor or Author w/ Disability	Includes diagnosis & treatment	Adresses cause of disability?	Relatable?	Well- rounded?	Realistic?
1	Movie/TV Show/Book	Character Name	Year						
2	Atypical	Sam Gardner	2017	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	The Good Doctor	Dr. Shaun Murphy	2017	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
4	Speechless	JJ Demilo	2016	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
5	Special	Ryan Hayes	2019	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Fundamentals of Caring	Trevor	2016	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
7	Breaking Bad	Walter White Jr	2008	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	Game of thrones	Tyrion Lannister	2011	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	Everything's Gonna Be Ok	Matilda Moss	2020	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Everythings gonna be Ok	Nicholas	2020	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
11	What's Eating Gilbert Grape	Arnie Grape	1993	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
12	Rain Man	Raymond Babbitt	1988	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
13	Forrest Gump	Forrest Gump	1994	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
14	Justine	Justine	2019	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
15	Theory of Everything	Stephen Hawking	2014	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
16	The Healing Powers of Dude	Amara	2020	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
17	The Peanut Butter Falcon	Zak	2019	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
18	Glee	Artie	2009	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
19	Glee	Becky	2009	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
20	Glee	Sam Evans	2009	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
21	Hunchback of Notre Dame	Quasimodo	1996	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
22	Avatar	Jake Sully	2009	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
23	Lost	John Locke	2004	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
24	Freaks and Geeks	Eli	1999	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
25	Life Goes On	Corky Thatcher	1989	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
26	Glass	Elijah Prince	2019	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
27	Malcolm in the Middle	Stevie Kenarban	2000	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
28	Friday Night Lights	Jason Street	2006	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
29	I am Sam	Sam Dawson	2001	No	No	No	No	Yes	No

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What does representation as a whole mean to you?
2. What does exploitation mean?
3. Representation is important in all aspects of life. But are there different levels of importance as to where/when you are represented? Does representation in the media mean anything different? Or is representation in day-to-day life no different than what you see in entertainment media?
4. Growing up do you remember seeing yourself represented in any specific shows and movies? Has that changed over time?
5. Does watching shows and movies or reading about characters with a disability make you feel represented? Is it important to you?
6. There are subgenres of disability content, would you rather watch this or something else? Do you find yourself looking for content that has disabled characters?
7. While doing this project I have watched and read a lot of content with disabled characters. There seems to be two types of ways the characters are integrated into the content. One way is that the show, movie, etc. uses the character's disability as a main plot point. It gives the audience a lot of information on what the disability is and shows how the character navigates day to day life with the disability. Another way is that the character is just a part of the show, and they just happen to be an individual with a disability. What is more important, the

- subgenre of media that specifically focuses on a main character with a disability or having characters scattered throughout other shows?
8. There is a statistic that says, “People with disabilities make up 26% of Americans but only 2.4% of characters in television, film, or literature have a disability and speak and/or have a name,” have you heard this before? How do you feel about it?
 9. Do you have any examples of representation that is done wrong, as more exploitative, and some that is done really well?
 10. What would a character that represents disability really well be to you? Describe them.
 11. Is there anything else you wish to share?

Appendix C

Character Guide

This paper has attempted to synthesize various research as well as culturally relevant media sources and personal interviews toward the improvement of accuracy in entertainment media's portrayal of people with disabilities. A guide for creating more realistic characters has been a result of the synthesis of these efforts.

Character Guide for Creating a Character with a Disability

Step One: Deciding on Purpose

Decide when and how a person with a disability will be portrayed in the production, and most important, decide why the portrayal is in the production. If it is to provide accurate information and if the character and their disability is an integral part of the story arc, based on the research, this can be a helpful and useful portrayal. However, if it is a character used to garner sympathy or inspiration through their disability, the research suggests this is not useful or helpful to the cause of increasing accurate awareness of individuals with disabilities.

Existing Examples: *Special*, *Family Guy*, *Best Summer Ever*

Step Two: Casting or Consultation

Hire an actor with a disability to portray a character with that disability. This can ensure accuracy, keep people outside the community informed, and give an opportunity to a disabled actor. If this is not possible, hire disabled people to be a part of the media's

creation. For television or movie production, individuals with disabilities should be consulted during the entire creative portrayal of a disabled character. When writing a book with a disabled character, if the author is not disabled, consultation with someone from the disabled community you're trying to show is the best way to ensure an accurate characterization.

Existing Examples: *Everything's Gonna be Okay*, *Breaking Bad*, *Peanut Butter Falcon*

Step Three: Addressing the Disability in an Appropriate Manner

Explanations of etiology, symptoms, treatment, and other aspects of a disability should be limited to their contribution to the story line and not become gratuitous, exaggerated, or superficial. Research suggests that over explanation contributes to misrepresentations and further stereotyping. If it is not relevant to the character development or plot there is no need to address the disability. This can help normalize the image of disabled people as functional and relevant members of society if they are seen in media without highlighting their disability.

Existing Examples: *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, *In the Dark*, *I Care A Lot*

Step four: Creating Realism

Ensuring the portrayal of a well-rounded person, focus on the person first, and allow the disability to be a part of the person, and not their entire identity. This can be done by including characters who have jobs, romantic partners, a sex life, and friends who are both disabled and able-bodied. Focusing on the character's disability is overplayed and trivial, so creating a well-rounded character with many attributes is a

great way to ensure a well-developed character. Allow for accurate personal portrayal which includes positive and negative personality traits as well as pain and joy in their lives.

Existing Examples: *Sex Lives of College Girls*, *Switched at Birth*, *Sex Education*

Step five: Showing but not Exploiting Struggles

If the purpose of the production is to showcase the individual's struggles as a disabled person, include, but don't limit the story arc, to the person's experience as a one-dimensional person whose only contribution to this production is their disability. Create stories for individuals with disabilities that showcase many aspects of their personalities, thus avoiding exploiting the disability by using it to trigger emotion and sympathy.

Existing Examples: *In the Dark*, *Life Goes On*, *Game of Thrones*