

# **‘Mabel is Unstable’: A Feminist Disability Studies Perspective on Early-Twentieth-Century Representations of Disabled Women in Advertisements.**

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## ***Abstract***

The representation of women with mental health issues in early twentieth century advertisements supports the stereotype of women experiencing mental health issues as ‘unstable’, ‘unworthy’ and inherently ‘lacking’. This paper finds that women with mental health issues are overwhelmingly placed as lone figures that are deserving of close scrutiny and objectification by patriarchal society. A cultural model of disability is outlined as a key perspective that can be used to provide a foundation for a feminist disability studies inquiry that seeks to empower disabled women, in some small way. The medical ‘gaze’ dominates the representations of ‘madwomen’ through the persistent discourse of pharmaceutical intervention and the omnipresent message that cognitive enhancement is a necessary and ‘effective’ way of securing women in the home. Textual analysis suggests that the advertisements collectively carry ableist and sexist discourses that reflect hegemonic ideals of mid-twentieth-century UK society. Specifically, an application of critical discourse analysis finds that the discourses support the oppressive and ableist binary of ‘sane/insane’. Intersections between gender and disability are further developed in order to shape understandings of how disabled women are repeatedly silenced through constant medication and surveillance in order to maintain the ‘status quo’ (Garland Thomson, 1996).

## ***Keywords/terms***

Feminist Disability Studies, Cultural Model, Medical Gaze, Social Model, Medical Model, Patriarchy

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## **Introduction**

*'Because such bodies are rare, unique, material, and confounding of cultural categories, they function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs.'*

Garland Thomson, R. (1996) *Freakery, Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York: New York University Press, p. 2.

The presence of disability, or rather the lack of it, in advertising is commonly overlooked (Longmore, 2003). It is noted that Britain has been much slower than other parts of the world to promote representations of disability in cultural texts, specifically mainstream advertisements (Scott-Parker, 1989). Tropes surrounding disability and impairment in the vast majority of advertisements support medical model notions of bodily difference. This supports ableist myths that the 'normal' body is a state of reverence (Davis, 2010). This message perpetuates oppressive binaries that consistently marginalise people with impairments and further increase prejudicial actions and attitudes (Longmore, 2003). Namely, representations of disability in advertising often fall into the 'ability/disability' category through promoting the de-humanising belief that we are all fixed into socially ascribed identities (Bolt, 2014). If a person 'discloses' an impairment or if an outward 'symbol' of disability is made evident then the common expectation follows that this is the singular and most important feature of their character (Bolt, 2012).

Considering cultural tropes of disability that emanate from such stereotypes, it is vital to consider the intersections of oppression. It is recognised that critical analysis of cultural representations of disability are fundamentally deepened by inquiry into the other various identities that are also represented, such as, race, gender, sexuality and social class, to name but a few. However, for the purposes of a critical feminist disability studies analysis, gender and disability are the primary focuses of this article. A formative understanding outlines that sex is to gender what impairment is to disability (Shakespeare, 2014). This basic analogy brings forward critical realism of how bodies that fall outside of the dominant spectrum of 'able' and 'male' are fixed into the outskirts of society (Garland Thomson, 2011). In this sense, the disabled and female body falls subject to a 'double' oppression (Garland Thomson, 1997). Building on this information, representations of disabled women in advertisements need to be scrutinised through a lens that considers the socially ascribed meanings placed on both identities (Heiss, 2011). Many feminist disability studies theorists consider the term 'double oppression' to carry negative connotations through suggesting that disabled women are unduly passive (Morris, 1993; Stuart, 1992 and Mallet and Runswick-Cole, 2014). Therefore, a critical move towards viewing disability as gendered (Thomas, 1999) encourages transformative research into disability and gender as socially constructed categories that are intertwined.

According with my own feminist-disability studies leaning, I am concerned with research that challenges the traditional and manipulative way that research has further silenced the voices of disabled women in the guise of ‘help’, ‘improvement’ and ‘intervention’ (Barlie, 2013). Traditional research paradigms have dominantly served to increase the surveillance tactics of an individualising society that aims to measure people against one another in order to prioritise ‘normative’ behaviour and bodies (Zarb, 1992). Challenging this research history by researching the misinformed and misguided representations of disabled women redirects societal attention towards cultural (mis)understandings. Within this understanding, research asks society the question of why you have denied us full social participation – from where does this arise and what ends does it seek to meet? An exponential answer to this may arise from recognising that the human form is natural, fluid and uncontainable (Garland Thomson, 2005). A society that priorities sexist and ableist values inherently wishes to control and subdue this knowledge (Davis, 2010). A primary way through which this ableist ideology can be achieved is by obscuring the stories and voices of the people whom it seeks to oppress in culture (Bartky, 1991). Therefore by reclaiming our cultures and the stories of disabled women through research, a study into mainstream consciousness is built upon the foundational knowledge and aims of feminist disability studies.

### ***A Methodological Approach to Analysing Advertisements***

*‘Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy.’*

Foucault, M. (1967) *The History of Sexuality: 1*. Sherdian, A. [trans]. London: Penguin, p. 102.

Constructing a qualitative methodological approach to research that constitutes a hybrid of feminist and disability studies requires an openness to transformative research methods and instruments (Waller, 2005). More than establishing a commitment to ‘good’ or ‘responsible’ ethical practice, feminist disability studies research must recognise the achievements of feminist and disability activists in demanding new and emancipatory ways of challenging daily struggles and political injustices through research (Bartky, 2014). From this history, methodology that is explicitly named as embracing a feminist disability studies framework names traditional focal points of objective and scientific research, specifically, objectivity, reliability and validity as vaguely defined distractions that detract from the holistic and rich nature of qualitative research (Waller, 2005). Research that aims to measure the ‘validity’ of a theory is inherently flawed due to the knowledge that the researcher is always biased and influenced by their surrounding environment and pre-existing theoretical leanings (Ronkainen, 2014).

The use of textual analysis is designed to sustain research that is created with the intention to empower disabled women (Humphries *et al.*, 2000). The methodological approach of textual analysis sustains the belief that discourse and images in texts require rigorous analysis in order to highlight the inconsistencies in hegemonic messages that are supported (Thomas, 2001). By breaking down the words and terms in texts through critical discourse analysis, research is steered towards social justice objectives by tackling the covert pathologisation of disabled woman that often goes unnoticed (Fairclough, 2003). This approach sustains the belief that both superficial and deep rooted misconceptions that support the oppression of disabled women must be challenged (Heiss, 2011). The practice of actively searching for such inconsistencies hidden within discourses and 'signs' acknowledges that both obvious and covert hegemonic messages are influential in sustaining patriarchal conceptions of the disabled and female form (Garland Thomson, 2011). In researching the representations of disabled women in cultural texts, critical discourse analysis is essential due to its focus on deconstructing what is implied in both discourse and 'signs' (Gee, 1999). Research into the representation of disabled women in advertisements has the potential to disrupt traditional power-imbalances by amplifying the position of embodiment and subjective experience in order to raise critical consciousness on cultural production and hegemony (Scholz, 2010).

### ***Early-Twentieth-Century Advertisements***

*'There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique.'*

Freidan, B. (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*. London: Penguin, preface.

The sample of early-twentieth-century advertisements reviewed in this paper are all produced by pharmaceutical companies and contain discourses centric to the medical model view of disability. This perspective towards disability and impairment places the individual as the locus of 'defect', thus requiring that the person must submit to bodily and behavioural manipulation in order to meet the requirements of society (Shakespeare, 2014). From this perspective, people with impairments are constantly cast under a 'eugenic gaze' which works to dehumanise people and devalue natural bodily variation (Hughes, 2012). A primary analysis of the advertisements uncovers a dominant theme of presenting women who identify as having mental health issues as experiencing stress and unhappiness. Such negative emotions are presented as juxtaposing with their surrounding which resemble sterile and idealistic living standards, such as shining cutlery and freshly cut flowers in crystal vases. It seems that the capitalist aims of woman as 'home-maker' and 'chief consumer' are largely at play. Indeed, they are undermined by the anxious and contorted faces of women

who bring an essence of 'disarray' into the spectacle of domestic bliss. Initial insights into the advertisements bring to mind Picasso's (1937) portrait of the 'Weeping Woman'. This outlines a representational problem as disabled women are at once linked with a cultural icon that seeks to portray universal suffering. It is clear that the pharmaceutical companies are striving to make a moral judgement on the unruly behaviours of women who are not happy with their 'lot'. The outcome of this is to deem the people whom they seek to represent as 'unfit' and 'deficient' (Goodley *et al.*, 2012).

A strong support of the binaries 'ability/disability' and 'male/female' is indicated in the advertisements due to the angst-ridden depictions of disabled women, designed to provoke an emotive audience response (Barnes, 1992). The representations of disabled women in the advertisements are silenced receivers of the 'gaze'. The focus is on producing provocative images that entice stares and strong reactions instead of producing responsible and realistic images of mental health. By representing disabled women as objects of 'instability' the advertisements actively stigmatise mental health issues and dictate that personal privacy and decision-making is unimportant in this effort to expose disabled women for their 'fragility' and inherent 'unworthiness' (Shakespeare, 1994). The central message here is that of disabled women as deserving of pity, instead of empowered beings who demand a voice in society (Haller, 2010). Media depictions that are more involved with dramatizing the lives of disabled women instead of focusing on promoting inclusion through positive representations are clearly following an ableist and patriarchal agenda (Haller, 2010). The use of short and catchy phrases, such as, 'Mabel is Unstable' and 'Bridget the Fidget' are no more than sugar-coated weapons of aggression and oppression that undermine the lived experiences and human rights of marginalised peoples (Longmore, 2003).

A further theme identified regarding the representations of women surrounds the 'ideals' that women are pressured to meet in a society which prizes the capitalist goals of men as the 'breadwinner' and women as 'consumer' who is delegated hours of unpaid labour in the household (hooks, 1984). There is a dominant message that the pharmaceutical drugs advertised are necessary components in the aim of organising women and maximising their levels of 'competency' and 'efficiency'. In a society where bodies are fixed into rigid binary codes that demand constant checking behaviours in order to meet 'normative' standards, the pharmaceutical advertisements pledge their commitment to making 'docile subjects' (Foucault, 1975) out of bodies who negate mythical expectations. Textual analysis shows that the sample of advertisements contain a strong juxtaposition of women as paragons of domesticity whilst highlighting their 'feeble' natures. This notion follows the extreme concept that disabled women are either fantastically able, due to courage and infallibility whilst facing 'strife' or as objects of pity who require medical intervention (Bolt, 2014). Through this message, pharmaceutical drugs are portrayed as 'saviours' of modern day life

(Smardon, 2007). The following reaction to this concept suggests that the people whom the advertisements purport to represent threaten the 'stability' of domestic life. In this sense, textual analysis highlights the use of discourse that directly supports medical model intervention in the lives of disabled women. Words and terms, namely, 'sedative', 'emotional control', 'she just can't help being impatient and exasperating' and 'tranquillising', pertain to the patriarchal desire to stifle the fluid natures of women in order to suppress creativity and empowerment (McRobbie, 2007).

### ***Conclusion***

This paper supports the knowledge that advertisements reflect the values and attitudes held by society (Haller, 2010). Textual analysis reveals the discourses and 'signs' that construct gender and disability in fixed and misinformed binaries that serve to continue the marginalisation of disabled women in society (Garland Thomson, 2011). Through challenging this hegemonic belief, it is recognised that females with mental health issues are subordinated in society as ableist and sexist ideologies aim to stifle the creative voices of people who challenge the status quo (Bartky, 1991). Pharmaceutical advertisements are outlined as key cultural texts that both reflect and influence society's dominant acceptance of medical model approaches to impairment and disability. Further research is needed into the discourses surrounding gender and disability in advertisements that help to uncover covert attitudes held in society towards disabled women.

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