

Increasing the 1%: Investigating the Most Appropriate and Profitable Form of Disability Representation in Advertising

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Abstract

More than 1/5 of adults in America have a disability, but they are notably absent from general advertising efforts. However, these individuals have a substantial market potential (*Visibility of disability*, 2021). For these reasons, this study will show three types of ads that include individuals with disabilities to individuals with physical disabilities, individuals with learning disabilities, and individuals without disabilities to see how they may affect brand perception and sales. One ad will be of individuals with disabilities interacting with a product specifically designed for them, another will be of individuals with disabilities interacting with a product designed for all individuals (individuals' disabilities are not the focus), and the last ad will highlight the shopping experience individuals with disabilities encounter. This proposal expects that the majority of participants are more likely to purchase from a brand after viewing a brand's advertisement where individuals with disabilities are featured. Additionally, individuals may prefer the ad that does not focus on the actor's disability, meaning featuring individuals with disabilities in general advertisements may lead to substantial company profits. Subsequent increased advertising that features individuals with disabilities may lead individuals to have more positive connotations of individuals with disabilities as well.

Introduction

26% of American adults have a disability, which means their market potential is worth approximately \$21 billion. However, they are only present in 1% of TV advertising with more than 50% of these ads being personal care and health-related (*Visibility of disability*, 2021). Assisting companies in identifying the most profitable and appropriate approach to including individuals with disabilities in advertising efforts may encourage them to increase the representation of individuals with disabilities in media. This may simultaneously help dispel the negative stereotypes that exist about individuals with disabilities in the media. Therefore, this study will investigate what type of advertising that features individuals with disabilities is the most profitable and well-received authentic form of representation.

Background/Related Work and Motivation

Several focus groups have been conducted where researchers interview individuals with disabilities in an effort to understand how they developed their disabilities, the challenges they've faced due to their disabilities, and what they would like to see in the advertising world in relation to disabilities. Ability In Progress, a non-profit organization devoted to making the media space more inclusive, sat down with the individuals featured in their Dawn music to do just this. (This music video was created for Kim Planert's song "Dawn." It was devised with the purpose of showing that individuals with disabilities are still capable of partaking and excelling in skills, such as dancing, with their disabilities.) The six individuals interviewed have a variety of *physical* disabilities, more specifically a prosthetic leg, partial paralysis, amniotic band syndrome, dwarfism, and blindness. Many of them mentioned that they used to hide their disabilities in an effort to prevent others from feeling uncomfortable, specifically noting the

feelings of shame and lack of confidence they felt relating to their disabilities. The point that individuals with disabilities are not their disabilities was thoroughly emphasized as well as the importance of authentic representation that would help dispel the negative stereotypes about individuals with disabilities that persist in our society today (Ability In Progress, 2021). The specific negative stereotypes about individuals with disabilities that exist in media have been well-researched by a plethora of scholars, including Colin Barnes who identified 11 categories of stereotypes. These include individuals with disabilities as pitiable and pathetic, supercrip, a burden, etc. (Barnes, 1992). A study titled “Are Attitudes to People with Learning Disabilities Negatively Influenced by Charity Advertising?” highlighted the fact that advertising specifically can perpetuate these harmful stereotypes. It was shown that an older charity advertisement led children to more likely feel poorly for individuals with disabilities (Doddington et al., 1994).

Regardless, the participants of Ability In Progress also highlighted the need for media to include storylines that do not solely focus on individuals’ disabilities (Ability In Progress, 2021). This latter point was researched through a study conducted by the Calgary Society for Persons With Disabilities (CSPD). This organization showed a focus group composed of individuals without disabilities fake ads that circulated around individuals with disabilities partaking in regular tasks, such as doing laundry. Many members of the focus group stated that the ads rubbed them the wrong way, with one person even wondering if the actors can actually do laundry (Calgary Society for Persons With Disabilities, 2019). CPSD, however, did not ask members of the focus group if they would be more or less likely to purchase from the brands after the advertisements were shown. One study titled “Disability Images in Print Advertising: Exploring Attitudinal Impact Issues” served to fill this gap. Four groups composed of individuals without disabilities were created. Three groups viewed three different variations of a major

corporation's advertisement that featured a spokesperson with a physical disability, while the control group viewed an advertisement that did not feature an individual with a disability (Panol et al., 2001). These individuals were then asked to fill out a questionnaire in an effort to "discern the direction of the advertisement's effect (whether positive or negative) on their perceptions, feelings, and purchase intention and behavior" (Panol et al., 2001). (Individuals specifically answered the questions through scales (Panol et al., 2001).) Regardless, it was found that for the majority, there were no significant attitude differences when participants viewed ads that featured individuals with disabilities instead of ads that solely featured individuals without disabilities. However, this study, along with CPSD's focus group, did not survey individuals with disabilities in an effort to understand their opinions on the ads they utilized. Ability In Progress did not include individuals with nonphysical/learning disabilities in their interviews as well. Therefore, this study will ask individuals with physical disabilities, individuals with learning disabilities, and individuals without disabilities their opinions on three types of advertisements that feature individuals with disabilities.

Methods

This study will be conducted through a survey on Prolific.co that will be shown to three groups composed of approximately 100 people each: individuals with physical disabilities, individuals with nonphysical/learning disabilities, and individuals without learning disabilities. These individuals will view three types of ads that include individuals with disabilities. One ad will be of individuals with disabilities interacting with a product specifically designed for them, another ad will be of individuals with disabilities interacting with a product designed for all individuals (individuals' disabilities will not be the focus), and the last ad will highlight the shopping experience individuals with disabilities encounter. The first ad will be Apple's

Accessibility ad which includes Sandy Paulson, a woman with cerebral palsy, editing the ad using Apple's accessibility tools. The latter ads will be created by altering pre-existing static images, such as pexels. (Pexels are free stock images and royalty-free images.) Pre-existing videos will also be edited to create ads by adding ending or beginning slides that mention a hypothetical or real brand. In order to accomplish this, Canva, Adobe Premiere Pro, and Photoshop will be utilized. In the survey, participants will rate how likely they are on a scale of 1-10 (1 being disliked and 10 being liked) to purchase from the brand in the future before and after viewing these advertisements. They will also explain their ratings. Participants will rate the ads on a scale from 1-10, including their opinions on the ads as well.

Expected Results

This proposal expects that the majority of all participants are more likely to purchase from a brand after viewing their advertisement that features individuals with disabilities. This may be because viewers will believe the brand champions inclusivity. (Specifically how highly individuals rate the brand's purchasability may depend on how much they value this concept, which may be correlated with their own experiences with stigmas and inequality issues.) Additionally, all individuals may be found to specifically prefer the ad that did not focus on the actor's disability as the portrayal of an array of diverse individuals utilizing a product demonstrates to viewers that the brand is effective and popular. This means that including individuals with disabilities in general advertising efforts may lead to substantial company profits. Regardless, individuals with physical disabilities and learning disabilities will offer their insights on the type of advertising that features individuals with disabilities (physical and non-physical) that they believe to be the most authentic and appropriate. Individuals with learning disabilities' opinions on their portrayal in advertising in particular have largely been

undocumented. Their opinions may therefore offer some valuable insights for corporations on how to properly incorporate them into advertisements. A research paper will consolidate these insights as well as the results of the Prolific.co survey.

Conclusion

There is a substantial number of adults in the United States that have a disability, but companies do not feature a proportional representation of individuals with disabilities in their advertising. However, companies may be able to generate substantial profits by deciding to target this market (*Visibility of disability*, 2021). Previous studies demonstrate that individuals with physical disabilities themselves want to see authentic representation of individuals with disabilities in general advertising efforts, specifically highlighting that individuals with disabilities are more than their disabilities (Ability In Progress, 2021). Organizations have recreated advertisements with this in mind, capturing how likely individuals without disabilities are to purchase from these brands after viewing the advertisements as well (Panol et al., 2001). However, these studies do not ask individuals with learning disabilities what they would like to see in advertising efforts or ask individuals with disabilities in general how likely they are to purchase from brands after viewing their potential and existing ads that feature individuals with disabilities. This study will therefore ask individuals with physical disabilities, individuals with learning disabilities, and individuals without disabilities their opinions on three different types of advertisements that feature individuals with disabilities. Overall, helping corporations understand that disability representation can be profitable and assisting them in identifying the most appropriate and authentic form of disability representation may encourage them to further include individuals with disabilities in their advertising. This in turn will help dispel the negative

connotations surrounding disabilities, helping society and individuals with disabilities themselves view them in a more positive light.

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| Budget | |
|---|------------|
| Wages | |
| \$15.00*10 hours/wk * 7 weeks *I will not have any work to do during the gathering of the data. | \$1,050.00 |
| Adobe's Creative Cloud All Apps (Photoshop, Illustrator, Adobe Express, Premiere Pro, Acrobat Pro, etc.) | \$ 19.99 |
| \$19.99/month for students | |
| Pexels | \$ - |
| free | |
| Canva | \$ - |
| free | |
| Prolific.co | \$ 840.00 |
| \$600 (300 total participants paid \$2.00 each) + \$200 (service fee) + \$40 (VAT (20% on service fee)) | |
| Total Expenses | \$1,909.99 |

| Timeline | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | Wk 1 | Wk 2 | Wk 3 | Wk 4 | Wk 5 | Wk 6 | Wk 7 | Wk 8 | Wk 9 |
| Video and Photoediting | | | | | | | | | |
| Creation and Approval of Survey | | | | | | | | | |
| Gathering Data | | | | | | | | | |
| Writing Report | | | | | | | | | |