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Can we really free ourselves from stereotypes? A semiotic point of view on clichés and disability studies

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Abstract: In this paper, we try to build a semiotics of stereotypes through the key idea of enunciation. We investigate stereotypes of Persons with Disabilities in the context of social media networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) by adopting a semiotic perspective. The mainstream idea about stereotypes is that they are necessarily something negative, that must be avoided to maximize inclusivity and fairness. However, in our view, stereotypes are the background of our perception of the world, and we cannot escape from them, because when we leave behind a stereotype, it is only for adopting a new one built on a different basis. Therefore, it is crucial to understand stereotypes and the way they are expressed, since they are one of the enunciating instances that circulate in the space of the Encyclopedia. Through a semiotic point of view, we will follow how stereotypes transform, showing the way they change the modes of existence of meanings, shifting between the virtualized, the potentialized, the actualized, and the realized. Analyzing a huge corpus of social network messages built by the partners of the European project MeMe (Me & the Media: Fostering Social Media Literacy competences through Interactive Learning Settings for Adults with Disabilities), we will show how the advent of social media affected the research field of disability studies. Later, we will point out the variations of the classic stereotypes that have been addressed in the new participatory context of social media through the semiotic theory of enunciation.

Keywords: enunciation; participatory culture; persons with disabilities; semiotics; stereotypes

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1 Towards a semiotics of stereotypes

This paper investigates prevailing stereotypes of Persons with Disabilities' (PwD) spread by social media networks, which are considered as a place where public, social, political, and advertising communication intertwine. Stereotypes are one of the enunciating instances (Coquet 2007, 2022) that circulate in the space of the Encyclopedia (Eco 1984), or in a semiosphere (Lotman 1985), influencing, routing, or determining the production of new enunciates. The fact that in some recent school textbooks it is still possible to find some prejudicial examples, such as the father "works and writes" and the mother "washes and cleans" shows the strength of these stereotypes, which are actualized in the enunciate.

Stereotypes belong to the dimensions of use (Hjelmslev 1942) and, as such, they pulsate in the empty page of the act of enunciation exactly in its emptiness (Paolucci 2010, 2020: ch. 1). In this work, we will consider stereotypes connected to disabilities, trying to underline the way they represent the background of our perception of the world, when we face these kinds of topics.

In the second section, we will analyze how the advent of social media affected the research field of disability studies. Social media allowed the transition from a *use* of the media, in order to enjoy cultural products, to the realization of popular culture *with* the media in the practices of sharing and reuse. The most important result of this transition is the possibility for PwD to contribute to the narrative of disability by performing a collective enunciation model.

However, as cultural semiotics as *fluxorum scientia* has often shown (see Leone 2017), classic stereotypes on disability did not vanish into thin air but have rather been adapted to the new cultural practices. In the third section, we review the classic models of disability, used in public, social, and political communication as well as in advertising communication from the 1970s onwards. The analysis of the hundreds of contributions collected demonstrated that these classic stereotypes of disability have changed their shape through the advent of new cultural practices, that is, the bottom-up model enacted by social media.

The fourth section describes the spread and the value that PwD stereotypes assume in the scenario of new media from a semiotic point of view. On the one hand, the advent of social media led to the development of new forms of engagement and activism while, on the other hand, it's been fostering the resurgence of old cultural stereotypes, a further confirmation of the idea that social media cannot be interpreted with a positive/negative approach.

In the fifth section, we investigate the relationship between PwD stereotypes and photographic images through the fundamental work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. The taxonomy conceived by Garland-Thomson (2001) represents an

archeology of stereotypes through which it is possible to track how the classic models of disability have been reshaped by the traditional media. This analysis represents a starting point because it ends just before the social network era.

In the sixth section, we try to highlight the variations and the changes that *Participatory Turn* and Social Networks have generated in the representation of PwD. We will work in a bottom-up way, starting from the semiotic analysis of the hundreds of contributions collected by our international partners.

Then, we will propose a synoptic table of classic models, stereotype images and “new” stereotypes of disability, to account for the way in which they merged, iterated, and entered into variation in the participatory culture of social networks and the practices of sharing.

Fully escaping from stereotypes certainly cannot be the goal. It’s not about getting out from representations entirely but shaping new ones that are more acceptable and respectful.

2 Disability stereotypes and disability media studies

Data collected in this work arose from a research project funded by the European Commission¹ carried out by organizations, universities and associations located in four European countries (Lithuania, Portugal, Austria, and Italy). However, the data examined go well beyond national borders, since the resources that we dealt with are deployed by the marketing sectors of international networking services and agencies, as well as by participatory cultural practices enabled by social media.

In this paper, with the word “participatory,” we refer to the use employed by Henry Jenkins (2009), and, later, by Ellis and Gogging (2015), while dealing with the relationship between media studies and disability studies. Indeed, the most important feature of the “participatory culture” identified by Jenkins relates with the removal of the access barriers:

For now, we define participatory culture as a culture with:

- Relatively low barriers for artistic expression and civic commitment;
- A strong support for the creation of contents and for sharing creations with others;
- A kind of informal tutorship through which experienced participants share knowledge with other participants;

1 MeMe, Me & the Media: Fostering Social Media Literacy competences through Interactive Learning Settings for Adults with Disabilities. Grant Agreement NO. 2019-1-LT01-KA204-060697. More information at <http://www.memedia-project.eu>.

- A collection of individuals, believing that every contribution is important, and
- A collection of individuals that feel some social link connecting each other. (Jenkins 2009: 67)

In our opinion, the most relevant outcome of the so-called “participatory culture turn” is the opportunity for PwD to actively contribute with narratives about disability, building new representations that do not necessarily derive from social marketing campaigns or from political communication strategies. Before the social network era, narratives and representations of disabilities used to follow a top-down model, while, at present, PwD can obtain an equally (or more) significant diffusion, mobilizing people and activating digital communities’ involvement.² Hence the “participatory culture turn” deals with enunciation: if previously only a few instances had the right to speak and could become instances of enunciation on the discourse on disability, now there are many enunciating instances that coexist in the space of culture, media, and information.

From an historical perspective, the way social networks enabled cultural participation provided the possibility of a process of *collective enunciation* (Paolucci 2020), giving birth to actual “collective concatenations of enunciation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). In other words, we can define these enunciations as ‘assemblages,’ as we prefer to translate the Deleuzian *agencement*, in the sense of the assembly in which heterogeneous voices are gathered and endowed with equal dignity of speech.

Digital communities play an important role in this process of collective enunciation assemblages. Indeed, the book *Manifestos for the Future of Critical Disability Studies* defines a digital community as:

a community that interacts entirely, or primarily, online. They are a community, not by the borders they inhabit, but their sense of comradeship, their shared sense of identity, mission and, in some ways, values and lexicon. They use various modes of social media to congregate, collaborate, and disseminate information that may be used to support or supplement their ideologies and mission. (Ellis et al. 2019: XX)

A digital community tries to build a homogeneous voice, to gather heterogeneous individuals through the sharing of values, identities, and lexicon. However, heterogeneous digital communities coexist in the semiotic space of enunciation of disability, together with the classic institutional voices as we are used to knowing them. The assemblage of these heterogeneous voices gives birth to collective enunciation assemblages, an assembly where heterogeneous entries gather with an equal dignity of speech. On the one hand, this heterogeneity guarantees the wealth of the community; on the other, it limits and endangers it, since every new entry

² The *community mobilizer officer* is a professional figure born in parallel with participatory culture, in which the aim is to manage these – often global – civil action phenomena “from below.” For instance, think about the great following obtained by Greta Thunberg’s *Fridays for future* movement.

contributes with its stories and values at the very moment it melts and gathers with the other ones, putting its cohesion at risk. Of course, this kind of enunciation is not free from stereotypes, ideologies, or false representations at all. On the contrary, stereotypes about disability are the cultural leftovers that make every new discourse and representation about PwD possible.

Indeed, a stereotypical cliché we must fight is the idea that Internet is a “flat” and hierarchy-free space (see Dhamdhare and Dovrolis 2010). In this regard, Bartezzaghi (2019) argues that the idea of social networks as a place where the accessibility and cultural participation is completely realized is a *horizontal illusion*.³ Internet and social networks bring their structure and the entries’ history boosting the possibility, if anything, to reset every unique identity and start over, a sort of “representational virginity” in the eyes of others.

However, in the field of disability media studies, many researchers defend the opposite thesis. When assistive technologies and compensative software are not native, i.e., designed together with web applications and media devices that enable the enjoyment and the revision of cultural content, they lead to frustrating experiences for PwD.

Several examples concerning “architectural barriers” can often occur in online practices: from the recurrent caption fail of YouTube’s subtitles, hindering webinars’ comprehension for deaf people, to the lack of an appropriate HTML code for visually impaired people (Ellcessor 2016). The radical hypothesis expressed by Ellcessor in a recent work – *Restricted Access: Media, Disability and the Politics of Participation* (2016) – is that new media technologies, far from supporting the different types of disabilities, are able to establish new ones through the creation of impracticable programs of action (Ellcessor 2016). This issue is highly relevant for our research since user experience designers ground their projects on stereotypes of a *user model* (Eco 1979). The expectation relies on the application of basic laws of pragmatics and communication theory, starting from the one outlined by Umberto Eco in *Lector in Fabula*: “the receiver’s competence is not necessarily the one of the sender” (1979: 53). The logic supported by Eco – according to which texts do not just foresee the reader’s competence but, instead, they are able to set it up – leads to consider the improper design of interfaces as a contextual disabling operation. This sort of “disability attribution” is in line with the core-idea of the “social model of disability,” namely, the idea that impairments become disabilities only when the cultural context constitutes them as such.⁴

3 “... although unable to realize a real horizontality among the users, social networks are keen on evading the feeling of hierarchy more than the hierarchy itself” (Bartezzaghi 2019: 33, translation by the authors).

4 Whereas disability studies proposed “social models,” critical disability studies have criticized this model, although they recognized their effectiveness for the description of the physical impaired people’s condition. This denial is due to the difficulty for the adaptation of the model to other types of

However, defining what disability is entails walking on slippery ground. The risk is, in turn, sticking to stereotypes. This is where our story really begins.

3 Classical stereotypes about disability

The *social model* of disability is the first classical stereotype the reader can encounter in literature.

The word “classical” must be interpreted in its chronological sense. We will consider under this domain the interpretative models coined before the participatory culture turn (Bruns 2018; Jenkins 2009; Schäfer 2011) where for “turn” – more cultural than technological – we refer to new media studies’ approaches developed over the first decade of the twenty-first century, which have been perceived as a paradigm shift by many scholars in the disability studies research field.

However, classic stereotypes of disability did not vanish into thin air but have been adapted to new cultural practices. We will deal with how such categories are still circulating in the current debate about PwD⁵ and we will deepen how clichés’ and stereotypes’ dynamics shape our subjectivity (Paolucci 2017).

As far as this first classical stereotype is concerned, the “social mode for representing disability identity,” as developed by McRuer (2006), aims to draw a line between impairment and disability:

... we define impairment as lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb organism or mechanism of the body; and disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the main stream of social activities. (UPIAS 1976: 14)

The pamphlet signed by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) recommends the “social model” in opposition to the other three further classical stereotypes listed below.

The second classical stereotype is the *medical model*, built on the conception of PwD as victims of a disease or of a diagnosable physical condition to be healed. Olkin (1999) highlights that treatment or partial rehabilitation are the aims of the medicalization. The “sick role” of the patient is expected to be played by PwD, while a healing power is conferred to the stereotype of the doctor. Words like “invalid,” “cripple,” “spastic,” “handicapped,” and “retarded” come from this medical model

impairments. For a historical excursus about the dialog between disability studies and critical disability studies, see Boxall (2019).

5 See Section 6.1.

(Creamer 2009: 22). The UPIAS pamphlet states several times that getting away from these clichés is necessary.

... But the imposition of medical authority, and of a medical definition of our problems of living in society, have to be resisted strongly. First and foremost, we are people, not patients, cases, spastics, the deaf, the blind, wheelchairs or the sick. (UPIAS 1976: 14)

A similar argument applies for the third classical stereotype of disability, the *charity model*, which represents PwD as victims suffering from their impairments, most of them widely depressed, and in need of assistance by able-bodied people in every possible way (Duyan 2007: 71).

... We reject also the whole idea of experts and professionals holding forth on how we should accept our disabilities or giving learned lectures about the psychology of disablement. We already know what it feels like to be poor, isolated, segregated, done good to, stared at, and talked down to – far better than any able-bodied expert. We as a Union are not interested in descriptions of how awful it is to be disabled. (UPIAS 1976: 14)

A fourth classical model of disability must be mentioned. It is described by Ellcessor (2016) as “the individual embodied tragedy model,” representing disability as a personal and familiar tragedy. It is built in opposition to the social model, and controversial themes such as sterilization or euthanasia often find room inside this framework (Carlson 2010: 5).

These four figures do not cover all the classical stereotypes of disability (see for instance Retief and Letšosa 2018). However, they represent a sort of canon open to its possible variations that categorize our perception of disability. The “social model” is a kind of “improvement” of the other three, authored by some PwD themselves. However, it is a stereotype like the other ones. But this does not represent a problem at all, as we will see in the next paragraph.

4 Semiotic of stereotypes

According to common sense, stereotypes assume a negative value and are considered figures of speech that are better not to employ. Speakers who use stereotypes are often branded as people lacking originality and critical thinking. In this sense, the stereotype refers to the categorization of rigid semantic patterns that show specific boundaries in which some elements are valorized euphorically (as the role of the doctor in the medical model) or dysphorically (stressing the physical impairment). Stereotype gets a recursive feature: as stressed by Bartezzaghi (2019: 42) “the effort to avoid schemes leads you to another scheme.”

In order to understand the evolution of stereotypes representing PwD, it is necessary to change this perspective. Since stereotypes shape our perception of the world, one cannot simply delete them. Therefore, we have to learn the proper way to

inhabit them. The key is to conceive of types as models useful for building new, different, tokens and the forms established by a stereotype as devices enabling us to think in a different way. Indeed, when someone tries to quit a habit, he actually ends up acquiring a new one. It is not about getting out from stereotypes, but it is about building other, more acceptable ones, and inhabiting them with more adaptability, whenever feasible.

From an interpretative semiotic point of view (see Paolucci 2007, 2020), in cultural products such as texts, articles, Facebook posts, photos or artworks, the individual and subjective aspect that people express producing utterances constitutively depends on its shared and social aspects, namely, from the background of stereotypes each subjective act engages and relates with.

1. Stereotypes virtually pulse in the “blank page” before the act of enunciation;
2. Stereotypes take place concretely within enunciates (Paolucci 2020: ch. 2), since they can be actualized, realized, virtualized or potentialized inside the enunciate. Moreover, every new form generated from clichés is in its turn capable of generating new clichés.

As far as point 1 is concerned, the construction of the “social model” in the UPIAS pamphlet precisely represents the attempt to clean the page from the encyclopedic stereotypes that dwell in it. However, it turns only into the potentialization and virtualization of other stereotypes that were actualized and realized inside the enunciates of other models of disability. The social model was already there, in the Encyclopedia of culture. In order to actualize it, it was necessary to transform the modes of existence of the medical model, of the charity model, and of the model of personal tragedy and change their status inside a given community. This operation allowed for the creation of a new Encyclopedia, which is not an immutable reality but constitutes the condition of possibility for any new narration on disability, even when an enunciate seeks to deviate from the set of patterns, norms and uses that represent the background of each singular act producing enunciates.

These new conditions of possibility lead to point 2. The “social model” is generated from clichés that it seeks to virtualize and potentialize, but, starting from the 1970s, it has turned into a stereotype against which certain communities of PwD have struggled.⁶ In the same way, the *medical model* and the *charity model* had found their origin in the anachronistic “moral or religious model” that, in many traditions,

⁶ From the outset, social model ideas were widely endorsed by wheelchair users and people with physical impairments but were less enthusiastically received by people with other impairments, some of whose experiences were missing from early social model discussion. In recent years, discussion has been expanded to include people with a wider range of impairments and some of these more inclusive and nuanced discussions are now situated under a banner of critical disability studies. (Ellis et al. 2019: 199)

used to conceive disability as “an act of God,” thought as a divine punishment for committing a sin or as a test for the faith, to be performed through sacrifice and pain (Retief and Letšosa 2018). From this point of view, both the medical and the charity model assumed a completely different emotional valorization, if compared to the one shaped through the religious model. Since they seem to become gradually more inclusive, the temptation to identify an historical progression of these models takes hold.

In this regard, “Screening stereotypes” (1985) by Paul K. Longmore recommends adopting an historical and cultural perspective when implementing research on stereotypes, in order to connect the topics of disability studies with the ones dealt by media studies. Similarly, *Crip Theory* (2006) by Robert McRuer – while evaluating the taxonomy of stereotypes that Garland-Thomson proposed in “Seeing the disabled” (2001) – warns about how globalization can affect cultural practices able, in turn, to create stereotypes of PWDs.

We won’t follow that path. A linear evolution of those stereotypes was predictable before the participatory turn, since utterances were ruled by publishers, advertising agencies, public, social, and political communication from the institutions. The advent of social media shuffled the cards, and we will deal with that. Indeed, on the one hand, the participatory turn led to the development of new unpredictable forms of engagement and activism. On the other hand, it empowered the new rising of old cultural stereotypes in the very same unpredictable forms. Social media cannot be interpreted either with a positive/negative approach or with a linear evolution pattern. They simply open new possibilities and re-set practices and utterances keen on inhabiting them. It is precisely because they build new heterogeneous collective enunciation assemblages that they can give old clichés the chance to come back, even when they seemed old-fashioned.

5 The wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, the realistic

At the beginning of a fundamental essay about disability studies, Garland-Thomson (2001) quotes both Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes to describe the role of photographic images in the spreading of stereotypes on disability. On the one hand, in her view, Foucault’s idea of the “medical gaze” explains the visual type that drives the perception of disability. Moreover, Garland-Thomson suggests medical photos are one of the causes of the entrenchment of the medical model in the twentieth century.

On the other hand, she introduces a new visual taxonomy aiming at representing PwD by exploiting a reflection by Roland Barthes (Garland-Thomson 2001: 337).

As Roland Barthes claims despairingly in his meditation on photography, “One of the marks of our world is [that] we live according to a generalized image repertoire.” This step is essential in order to understand the new cultural practices that shape social networks at the dawn of the participatory culture.

The taxonomy conceived by Garland-Thomson (2001) represents an archeology of stereotypes through which it is possible to track how the classic models of disability have been reshaped by the traditional media (Garland-Thomson 2001: 337). In this paper, this is a significant starting point: indeed, it is well known that one of the fundamental features of cultural products that circulate on social networks is the fact that they are largely conveyed by images. Hence, what we are going to do is describe in which way the meaning of the stereotyped images has changed subsequent to the rise of social networks.

The first stereotype-image of disability is *the wondrous*. The rhetoric of the “prodigy” builds up a small drama, shaping the spatial relationships established by the perspective of the photographic image. The audience is set on the *ordinary* side, from which it can admire the other, thinking about the *different* as a prodigy (Garland-Thomson 2001: 337). The evolution of this rhetorical model can be reconstructed starting from classical ancient times, where deformed creatures were used to predict the future and inspire wonder. Later, this conception passes through modern age, secularizing through the figure of disabled persons the broken body of Christ, or the monstrous figure of the devil. The contemporary “super-creep” Person with Disability who, despite his impairment, is able to achieve unlikely goals such as climbing a mountain in a wheelchair, is a variation on this canon (Garland-Thomson 2001: 341) (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Alex Zanardi on a special bike for physically impaired people during a competition. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1311252659057123&set=pcb.1311253909056998>.

The second stereotype-image is “the sentimental.” The occurrences of this type present an inverse spatial rhetoric in comparison with the previous example, setting the Person with Disability under the spectator “in the posture of the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor” (Garland-Thomson 2001: 341). This rhetoric arises in the context of the paternalist model (charity model) of the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century. This type of image, mostly used for fundraising in the social and health fields, stages “the spectacle of suffering” through the photographic image of PWDs’ bodies (Garland-Thomson 2001: 341). A body far enough to avoid engagement, but close enough to make one feel empathy and provide financial support.

The same stereotype, at the end of the 1990s, was iterated in some advertising campaigns (Figure 2). Oliviero Toscani’s campaigns for the Benetton brand are his best examples: children with Down Syndrome are photographed smiling and wearing high fashion garments, in order to promote an image of a humanitarian-oriented (and not just profit-oriented) company. The image of the PwD is thus staged as a familiar and comforting presence (Figure 3; Garland-Thomson 2001: 356).



Figure 2: Fisher-Price advertising campaign with a child affected by Down Syndrome. Source: <https://shorturl.at/cfzTY>.

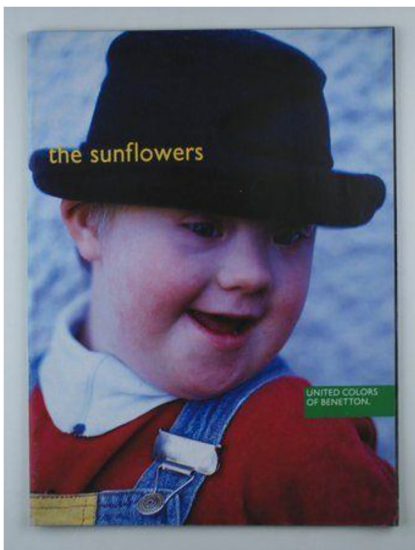


Figure 3: A child affected by Down Syndrome in Benetton’s advertising campaign shot by the photographer Oliviero Toscani. Source: <https://www.pinterest.it/pin/275071489717079268/>.

The third stereotype-image is the “the exotic.” Through this ethnographic rhetoric, the PwD is presented as “alien, often sensationalized, eroticized, or entertaining in their difference” (Garland-Thomson 2001: 343). The exotic rhetoric transforms the viewer into an ethnographer or a curious spectator who keeps herself at a safe distance from the diversity exposed through clear impairments. This photographic stereotype was born in the context of nineteenth-century imperialism, and it is possible to see how it modulates itself “in newly, acceptable, yet still controversial ways” (Garland-Thomson 2001: 358), through the introduction of disabled models in commercial advertisements and on catwalks of fashion designers (Figure 4).



Figure 4: An athletic man with a leg prosthesis. Source: <https://disabilityhorizons.com/2014/02/models-of-diversity-could-you-be-the-next-hot-disabled-model/>.

The fourth and last stereotype-image is the realistic one. Unlike the other models, this stereotype aims at normalizing disability’s features. The spatial rhetoric of the realistic image must “minimize distance and difference by establishing a relation of contiguity between viewer and viewed” (Garland-Thomson 2001: 344). The word “realistic” does not mean that this type of photographic image is capable of reproducing reality in its “elusive and complex substance,” but it is able to generate an effect of meaning, an “illusion of reality,” constructed and conventional like all the other stereotype-images. Here, spatial organization does not encourage any hierarchical relationship between the body of the viewer and the subject of the picture. The signs of the disabled body are neither hidden nor emphasized. The realistic stereotype-image leads to an effect of meaning of normality through a narrative that narcotizes the signs of disability. These narratives deal with people facing personal goals, ordinary life trials and errors that are not related to disability (Figure 5).



Figure 5: A man with a leg prosthesis drinks a beer with friends. Copyright: @josecarloscerdeno.

Such routinization of disability imagery not only brings disability as a common human experience out of the closet but enables people with disabilities – especially those who acquire impairments as adults – to imagine themselves as a part of the ordinary world, rather than as a special class of untouchables and unviewable. (Garland-Thomson 2001: 368)

Once again, the problem is not to get out from the stereotype, but to get out from the one that worsens the lives of people involved, in order to vigorously promote those stereotypes that allow us to live in our cultural environment by attuning ourselves in open and participative ways. Since stereotypes categorize our perception of reality (Paolucci 2017: 355), they constitute the environment for the development of our thoughts, such as placenta constitutes the environment for the development of the baby.

6 Social network and stereotypes on disability

In the following sections we will try to highlight the variations and the changes that the participatory turn and social networks have generated in the representation of PwD. We will work in a bottom-up way, starting from some empirical semiotic analysis made by having taken into consideration thousands of posts and comments on the specific topic of the representation of PwD in the social media context.⁷ In this paper, we have chosen some representative examples of this *corpus*, in order to

⁷ The *corpus* has been built by our fellow partners of the MeMe (Me & the Media: Fostering Social Media Literacy competences through Interactive Learning Settings for Adults with Disabilities) European Project, taking into account topics on disability in Lithuania, Portugal, Italy and Austria and collecting hundreds of posts about disability mainly available on Facebook and Instagram. For an

highlight the way stereotypes about PwD have been reshaped after the participatory culture turn and the realization of new practices of narration and self-narration within the social networks. In the next paragraph, we will see what new models of PwD are and how they emerge in this new context of participation. Finally, in Section 7, we will systematize in a unitary frame the classic models of disability, the stereotype images, and the changes in meaning that emerged in the analysis, in order to build a complete picture of the images of disability and the way they changed after the participatory culture turn.

6.1 *The hero model: the make-up should not cover scars*

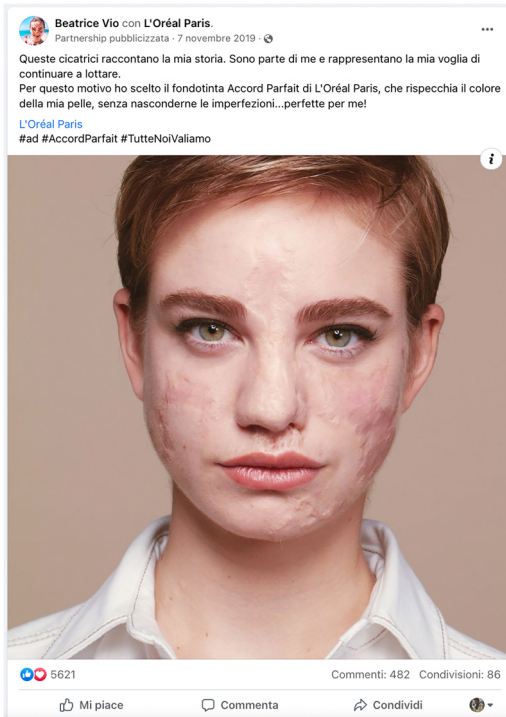


Figure 6: Bebe Vio's post on Facebook to advertise L'Oreal Paris foundation: "These scars tell my stories. They are a part of me, and they represent my will to keep fighting. For this reason, I chose L'Oreal Paris Accord Parfait foundation, which reflects the color of my skin without hiding its imperfections ... they are perfect to me!" <https://www.facebook.com/BeatriceVioOfficialPage/posts/2511193252283898>.

overview of the project and on the work we have done for the European Commission, see <http://www.memedia-project.eu>.

In this post, the paralympic athlete and wheelchair fencer Bebe Vio is a spokesperson for a well-known cosmetics company. When Bebe Vio was 11 years old, she was affected by severe meningitis, which caused an infection and then the amputation of both her legs from the knee, and both her arms from the forearms (Figure 6).

L’Oreal chose Bebe Vio to promote a different image of beauty. The aim is not only to accept disability, but to assume it as a part of the identity, that special part that makes her unique. In this representation, Bebe does not feel uncomfortable with her body at all and what is relevant is the abandoning of a very well-established habit that usually shapes this kind of campaigns. Indeed, in cosmetics campaigns we are used to seeing models with smooth skins and no imperfections, and scars are supposed to be hidden. However, in this case they are magnified like an element of fascination and despite all, beauty. We move from an ordinary campaign where the aim is to look like the perfect model, who is the spokesperson, to a campaign where the aim is to show an inimitable (and maybe undesired) uniqueness that nobody would love to achieve for her/his own skin but is ready to value in a euphoric way because it is the output of a unique story of success that arises from pain and commitment. From the traditional will to look like the model through make-up, we move to the impossibility of doing so through make-up that does not cover your own uniqueness and identity. The complex narrative in the advertisement shows how an unusual image-stereotype of disability can be built upon prior models hindering, at the same time, their fulfillment.

Considering that the athlete has been already protagonist of TV shows and news reports, the reader would be keen on decreeing the representation as a “wondrous” (cf. above). However, motor impairments and limbs-prosthesis are not revealed over the advertisement and our expectations are disregarded on that, showing a major change in the “wondrous” stereotype. The focus is on the face, the scars “tell the story” of Bebe and the spot is advertising a make-up which “does not cover imperfections.” In this perspective, here we can maybe refer to the “realistic” rhetoric (Garland-Thomson 2001: 367); however, despite the analogies, in this case there is something more regarding the relationship with the previous models of disability, or, better said, there is something *less* or *missing*. First, the sensationalism strategy (by exploiting for example realistic images) is totally lacking here, but even more importantly the instance of enunciation is different from the other posts that are present in Bebe Vio’s social media profile, in which she is uttering from her personal Facebook account.

For all these reasons, it is possible to include this representation in the new *hero* model of PwDs, i.e., a model in which the person with disabilities stands out and tells her story of struggle through the signs of her disability. In most cases, this kind of model shows the achievements the person has reached despite all the bodily and cultural difficulties, exhorting a glorifying representation of PwDs. In particular, the

image of Bebe Vio as a sport idol is translated in the beauty industry as a person that, although she does not perfectly reflect the stereotypical way of representing beauty in advertising campaigns, can be beautiful as well and can be the spokesperson for one of the biggest cosmetic companies. It is worth observing how the post is accompanied by few autobiographic lines expressed in first person and linked to a photo representing her in the foreground. The name of the company is only tagged, and together with three further hashtags, these are the only elements that indicate that the image is actually an advertisement. From the hiding of the scars and imperfections to the hiding of the brand that used to make that possible: this is how a new representation emerges from the background of two consolidated images-stereotypes of PwD. A modulation plus a variation realized by subtracting elements and changing the instance of enunciation: a “first-person” that hides a “third-person” (see Paolucci 2020: ch. 2).

Moreover, it is important to state that this advertisement can be considered as a “first example” of a new stereotype, since many other images like this one are now the “new way” of advertising through disability, after the huge success of the L’Oreal campaign. The exploitation of personal accounts on social networks represents the contextual condition for the realization of this new narration, something extremely hard to imagine before the participatory turn. We face a *semiotic distortion* here (cf. Fontanille and Zilberberg 1998; Paolucci 2020: 213): the emerging of a semiotic form (passage from virtualized to actualized) together with the decline of another (passage from realized to potentialized). Through *the* make-up, scars and the imperfections are actualized and made visible, while the original function of *a* make-up, that was usually supposed to hide them, is completely potentialized.

6.2 *The normalization model: Instagram profile of a famous supermodel with Down Syndrome and a linked first-person narration*

Here is a self-description of Madeline Stuart from her Instagram profile (Figure 7):

World’s 1st Super model with D.S Acc featured and followed by @instagram.
 NO.1 game changer FORBES.
 Walked 7 seasons NYFW PFW LFW.
 Run by Team Maddy
https://www.instagram.com/madelinesmodelling_/?hl=it (cf. <https://www.awaressties.us/madelinestuart.html>)

The short presentation comes from the “bio” section of Madeline Stuart’s Instagram profile. It is possible to see how the new meaning that she seeks emerges from the

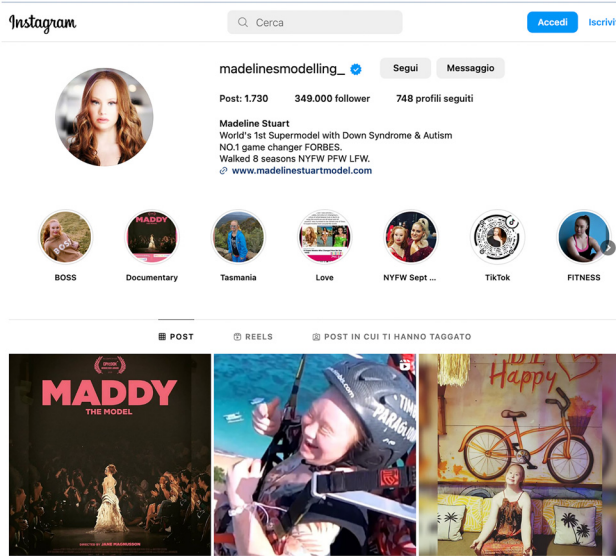


Figure 7: Madeline Stuart's Instagram profile.

pattern that the text establishes with a series of unrealized classical stereotypes. What in the ordinary discourses on disability is usually realized, here is radically potentialized and later virtualized. The reader first encounters fundraising linked to a PwD image that is very different from the examples previously analyzed (see Section 5). The rhetoric usually used to raise funds was focused on the “sentimental” stereotype, that is, on the representation of the PwD as a victim the reader can feel empathy with or a helpless person in need of assistance and protection.⁸ All this changes its mode of existence and becomes virtualized (and dysphoric) in Madeline Stuart's discourse, where the paternalistic-charitable background can be overcome in a fund-raising context through the exploiting of the image of a girl with Down syndrome.

Indeed, the “bio” section of Madeline Stuart's Instagram page mainly provides the following information: (a) she is a “Super Model”; (b) she ranks first in the “Game Changer” chart by Forbes; (c) she has been modeling for eight seasons on behalf of remarkable modeling agencies.

⁸ See Shakespeare (1994: 222): “Charities operate by presenting extremely demeaning images of disabled people, intended to engender pity and sympathy in ‘normal’ people, who are then motivated to donate money.”

This information constitutes a first variation of the “sentimental” rhetoric. PwD’s position is by no means lower in comparison with the reader, or with people without Down Syndrome. Indeed, the social media popularity is considered as a parameter and Madeline Stuart outclasses the majority of her readers on that. Again, here we face a *semiotic revolution* (cf. Fontanille and Zilberberg 1998; Paolucci 2020: 213): the manifestation of a semiotic form (passage from actualized to realized), together with the disappearance of another form (passage from potentialized to virtualized). While all the classic values and stereotypes usually connected to disability are virtualized and disappear as a parameter, new ones emerge. The figurative elements of “pathetic” usually belonging to the fund-raising fully disappear through the representation of Madeline parading on the red carpet, exercising in an expensive gym or shopping in Times Square.

In one of her posts, Madeline made a statement about her role and her will in changing stereotypes on PwDs:

I am very proud to be the person representing people with Down Syndrome for Awareness Ties, for a long time there has been so many stigmas attached to disabilities and so much incorrect information being available around the world. I am here to show people that just because I have down syndrome does not mean I am not successful, worthy and most of all capable of giving back to the community. Everyone on this planet needs to feel wanted and to be included. So, with your help, let’s raise funds to help change the lives of so many beautiful, capable people. Remember, only through total inclusion can we find the true meaning of humanity.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/B73huLbnKH8/>

Madeline declares to hundreds of thousands of followers – by using quotation marks – that her aim is to change the perception of the world towards disability. Taking the floor directly and specifying the campaign’s objective are further crucial elements of variation in comparison to the previous models. The reader of other fundraising campaigns using PwD often runs into the presence of a charity, a non-profit organization or a brand that establishes itself as the receiver of the potential donation, with the aim of sublimating the suffering state of the reader through an economic contribution.

In this case, the PwD takes the floor on behalf of the charity fostering the fundraising campaign (Awareness Ties). Madeline is an ambassador, a spokesperson, a completely different role carried out often by a V.I.P. promoting a particular cause. She is a model and has thousands of followers, like any other model. The message is still the Down Syndrome, the ambassador is a person with Down Syndrome, but the aim of the advertisement here is to destroy all the previous stereotypes, while importing a new one from the domains of fashion and lifestyle. Indeed, as far as “the wondrous” is concerned, the heroic features of PwD no longer relates with the overcoming of a disadvantageous situation.

Here, we face a representation in which the narration puts the disability aside and tries to *normalize* PwD's condition: indeed, in many of her Instagram posts, Madeline shows a model way-of-life, by highlighting the exclusive roles and the benefits a model could have in her situation. Like Bebe Vio, Madeline is a heroin, but she does not focus her narration on her disability: the hero is now the one who gains a paradigm shift, a brand-new and unprecedented perception of the disability condition. The message of the “needs to feel wanted and to be included” is expressed through the language of the luxurious world that the supermodel Madeline Stuart lives in, and her half-naked portraits during a shower or medical examination. A luxurious world that is a very ordinary representation of the success that many people want and would love to be included in. Summing up, the *normalization* model is about putting the PwDs' condition at the same level with able people, flattening the differences about needs and requirements that PwD may have in their daily lives.

6.3 The villain scrounger: a PwD's model snaking among social networks comments?

Since our aim is to highlight how stereotypes emerge and are manageable by users, activists' communities, policy makers, and educators and not to indicate which ones are more suitable to represent PwD, we have to deal with the mechanism of stigmatization, globally known as *hate speech* and fostered by the participatory turn and the social media in an unprecedented way. We will not deal with hate speech phenomena regarding PwD expressed to intentionally bully or hurt, but we will focus on the insidious “free speaking” in the comments' section, in order to express reactions to articles on social media. The following ones are exemplary and very representative of our *corpus*.

6.3.1 *The profiteer model: Vilnius university article in a private TV web portal linked on Facebook: “VU student froze after reading about her practice assessment mark being reduced because of disability”*

Here is an English translation of Vilnius University's (VU) position about the case on the VU Facebook page (Figure 8):

Today, the VU Faculty of Communication started to solve a very unpleasant problem. Our different abilities to move cannot be considered as a limitation to study or to work as a journalist. Therefore, it is important to understand the situations and take decisions not only concerning this case, but as well for future cases, in order to prevent similar situations occurring in the future. We are working on that. <https://www.facebook.com/rimvydas.lauzikas/posts/3102712093077049>.



Figure 8: Facebook post from Rimvydas Laužikas.

This is the comment made by a professor of the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Vilnius, Rimvydas Laužikas, about a TV news story shared on his Facebook account. The news was about a student with a mobility disability who carried on a traineeship in a local press agency. His final vote certifying the traineeship accomplishment was 9/10, followed by this comment by the editor: “bigger opportunities were limited because of the mobility disability.” The post by Rimvydas Laužikas was supportive: the student’s work evaluation should not have been modified by his/her impairment.

Here are some of the comments the professor received:

- I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what this editor did wrong and why the student makes noise at her. She was as good as she could have been, but the assessment mark is defined when all together – disabled and not disabled – are compared. Certainly, if she has difficulties to move and couldn’t go everywhere, she couldn’t do the news reports and articles about everything. It is a hindrance. So where are the roots? Should she be assessed more carefully and artificially better because of it? In my opinion, the healthy person wouldn’t get 10 points if the editor would need to drive him, and he couldn’t do certain tasks.

- It seems that it is more painful for her to accept that she is not as healthy as others, and she does not help herself by writing such articles. It is interesting to consider which employers she will find a job with in the future.

- Don't look for discrimination where it isn't. If the editor thinks differently, then she could go herself to the practice with the student in the village and be her driver or arrange the taxi rides. The newspaper editor has a lot of duties to accomplish. Why should she sacrifice her work time? Instead of 'thanks' – extra complaints? When the student starts permanent work for the newspaper, will the editor be obligated to driver her as well?

- Terrible when the mark is reduced because of disability. It is discrimination obviously.

It is easy to notice the heritage of the most abused stereotype about PwD here. Several people use the term “healthy” to define the “others,” the students with neither impairments nor disabilities. It is the medical model (see Section 3) that shapes the status of PwD. But the old stereotype is not in its ordinary form. *Mercy* is lacking here:

- It seems that it is more painful for herself to accept that she is not like other healthy people.
- I see discrimination towards the healthy students.
- Why should she [the newspaper editor] should sacrifice her work time? Instead of “thanks” – extra complaints?

According to the people in the comments section, the PwD looks to be having difficulties in accepting her non-healthy condition in comparison with her “healthy” colleagues (condition outlined in “the individual medical tragedy theory”; Shakespeare 1994: 218) and, according to these people, this is the main obstacle for her professional career. Notably, the image of a PwD receiving an undeserved privilege emerges in the last two comments in a very ungenerous way.

This interpretation of the PwD in the role of the opportunist hindering the “healthy people” life is able to keep together the medical model with the stereotype of the PwD as scrounger. The disability condition is never taken as challenged (moreover, it is interpreted as an incontrovertible condition of sickness) and the mercy element has simply disappeared from the original stereotype, throwing a shadow of suspicion over the PwD's intentions, who is seen as someone able to profit from her condition. One more time, we face a *semiotic rehash* here (cf. Fontanille and Zilberberg 1998; Paolucci 2020: 213): the emergence of a semiotic form (passage from virtualized to actualized), together with the disappearance of another form (passage from potentialized to virtualized). The medical model, which circulates in the virtualities of our cultural Encyclopedia, is actualized, but empathy and mercy, which were at least potentially present in the medical model, are totally virtualized. The rehash of the medical stereotype gives birth to the image of the PwD as a scrounger, a *profiteer* who tries to take advantages from her/his “unhealthy” condition to get more than what she/he would otherwise deserve.

One study published in the scientific journal *Disability & Society* showed, in a very detailed way, how the institutional communication about austerity politics of UK government with the aim of cutting welfare expenditures had contributed to

foster the idea of PwD as scroungers and “folk devils” in the media (Briant et al. 2013). “Slime and debris” (see Eco 1984) of the old stereotype (medical model) transported into new contexts and practices (social network, hate speech, etc.) have also been boosted and fostered by institutional communication.

Many cases in the corpus of our research empower the semiotic rehash of this stereotype and testify to the huge success of this point of view inside our contemporary social networks. We will now consider three of them, with the aim of showing that such stereotypes are conveyed also by PwD.

6.3.2 *The antagonist model: educational impairments*⁹

The article in footnote 9 is about inclusive education. In Lithuania, it is currently still possible to reject pupils with disabilities if schools don't have enough knowledges or resources. The article is about the change in the law that the Ministry of Education is planning, e.g., to prohibit the rejection of pupils with disabilities from schools. The article was published in one of the main Lithuanian news portals and shared in the Facebook group “Movement for the rights of people with disabilities.” In the comments section, we can find PwD discussing it. Some of them agree with the proposal, but others say that it is too early and claim that people with intellectual disabilities should not be included in the law. We present here below the English translation of some comments to the article.

- This is a good idea
- It should be like this; schools should accept pupils with disability together with the others.
- But what we do if bullying will start?
- I don't think that it's a good decision, everything is ok when children have psychical disability, but much more problems come with intellectual/emotional disability. It will bring more problems for us. We need to examine every individual case before accepting everyone in one single school.

It is worth noting how this dialog suggests to us a topic we have already faced when considering the social model (Section 3). People with physical disabilities assume that they can rightfully be part of a class in a public school but the “others” – those with mental disability – must be evaluated case by case. There is always someone who is more different than you. This idea brings us back to the ages of the social model. Indeed, in 1976, the social model theory of disability was widely supported by people on wheelchairs and by persons with physical impairments, but it was not by people with other kinds of disabilities, because they were feeling forgotten by the first version of the disability studies.

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/161225471317178/permalink/632636474176073/>.

Over the comments we have examined, once such distinction has been established (Boxall 2019), the discussion focused on architectural barriers and similar topics, totally eclipsing the integration of every student with disability at school. The stereotype of the *antagonist* is active. PwD are considered and represented as an obstacle in classes for non-disabled people, and several comments consider that it would be better to set up classes entirely composed of PwD. On this occasion, only people with mental or emotional impairments are considered as PwD, while people with physical impairments are considered as having the very same learning abilities as non-disabled people.

6.3.3 *The victim model: a person with disability towed by a bus in Kaunas*

Kaune autobuso vilkta neįgali mergina: rėkia, kiek galėjau, nes galvojau, kad mirsiu

2020-02-10 15:12:00 Berita Baryšė

Spausdinti Teksto dydis: ©

Internetinis „Kauno diena“ leidinys

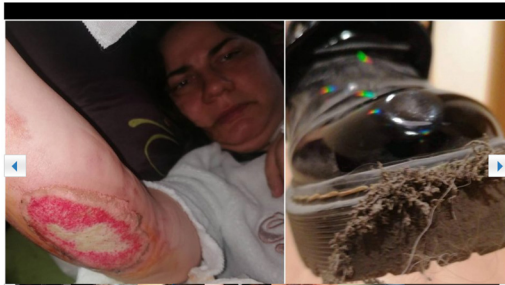


Figure 9: Pictures showed in the article representing the woman's injuries. <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/kaunas/nusikaltimai-ir-nelaimes/autobuso-vilkto-prispaustos-neigalios-merginos-mama-dukra-mane-kad-mirs-952082>.

The journalist describes an accident that happened on a public bus in Kaunas, Lithuania, when a woman with walking difficulties was towed by the bus, because it started to move before she managed to go out. The article is supported by many pictures of the woman's injuries, also representing the woman in the hospital (Figure 9). Here are two comments translated in English:

- [The accident was] caused because the turnaround time on the route was shortened. Drivers are required to stop, disembark, pick up passengers, pass obstacles, traffic lights, and sell tickets within ONE MINUTE. It is not possible to do that without flying, so the drivers themselves are forced to be under constant stress. A couple of weeks ago, it has been shown that Vilnius public transport is in the same situation, and drivers complain that they have to sacrifice their breaks and do not even have dinner to complete their work shift. They cannot even go to the toilet. Persistent tensions lead to many illnesses, even deaths of the drivers due to working conditions. Also, this condition leads to disregarding the safety of passengers. For

them, fast transport is the key. Drivers would be happy to follow the KET [guidelines for safety in public transports] with no hurry and pick up and disembark passengers, but conditions do not allow it.

- I imagine how much this disabled girl has suffered. And neither the driver nor the fleet managers even apologized. (Three days later, the spokeswoman made an apology.) Not only should the injured party be denied compensation for her injuries, but the guilty or her workplace should buy a new outfit for the girl.

The accident raises many questions about public bus regulations and their capacity to consider people with disabilities and assistance in public transportation in general. However, the article seems to aim only at raising emotions and anger, and it succeeded. The comments are angry – aimed at the bus driver, the system, the bus company, salaries, about PwD left alone without any kind of attention to their condition, and so on. Moreover, the title of the article puts PwD in the position of a hopeless victim, quoting only one sentence from the person itself: “I screamed like I was going to die.”

Here, the PwD is represented as a victim. However, the story does not elicit empathy in the reader as far as the woman’s condition and experiences are concerned.

Indeed, most of the users’ comments relate to public transportation policies or drivers’ working conditions. The caption of the images we see in Figure 10 is the most representative expression of the stereotype emerging from the narration, and it is witnessed by the following comment:

Disaster happened. The company, I think, will make every effort to solve the problem. For me, this is an incomprehensible whisper of the editorial staff of Kaunas Day on the companies of Kaunas and Kaunas city! Some mosaics – it’s fun to put their fingers in the wound and enjoy the ugliness of others.

The *victim* we are dealing with is not the subject we are keen on empathizing with. She is represented as “ugly,” wounded, helpless, and completely passive in regards to events.

In the *victim* model, the Person with Disability is represented with no possibilities to live a “normal” life exactly because of his/her impairments. If the “charity model” was used to represent PwD as suffering victims ready to be assisted (Duyan 2007: 71), now the elision of empathy takes over. The *semiotic fluctuation* we find here (cf. Fontanille and Zilberberg 1998; Paolucci 2020: 214) is about the weakness of the victim that loses her/his being a subject to empathize with (passage from realized to potentialized) and becomes a subject you can judge and treat without any kind of mercy (passage from actualized to realized).

6.3.4 *The denial model*: a video about being a person in wheelchair in Switzerland



Figure 10: Screenshot of Hitzi's video. The English translation of the title of the video is 'This is how hard it is for wheelchair users in Switzerland.' <https://www.facebook.com/izzymagazine/videos/1320635514708567/>.

Hitzi, a YouTuber from Basel, describes how Switzerland is not very barrier-free (Figure 10). Since trams stop at cafés, bars, restaurants, shopping centers, grocery stores, pharmacy entrances, and cobblestones on most squares, accessibility seems to be no issue. However, there are many places Hitzi can't visit, and he says: "If I ever find a club, there's usually no toilet for people with a disability."

The video deals with barriers and obstacles for wheelchair users in Switzerland. And it is very authentic how Hitzi, who is in a wheelchair himself, does it. The YouTuber and IZZY Magazine received incredibly high coverage, with over 5,000 likes and almost 500 comments.

Some of the comments we found are against the video. These opponents are also wheelchair users themselves and they complain that they don't want to hear any more whining from wheelchair users since, with a little training, you can easily climb the steps, since the cobblestones or the old door sills are often listed as historical monuments. However, most of the comments seem to be positive, thanking Hitzi for the great video. Furthermore, many comments support the statement that accessibility is still far from accomplished in Switzerland or almost non-existent.

Here, the main point is the fact that, while some PwD tell how it is difficult for people in wheelchairs to live a normal life without barriers, others PwD say that it is

not really a serious argument, because, with some training, it is still possible to climb steps and overcome the barriers. The “scrounger” stereotype is also assumed by PwD against other PwD. Intolerance and comments from PwD against Hitzi get a very broad consent, as seen in Figure 11.

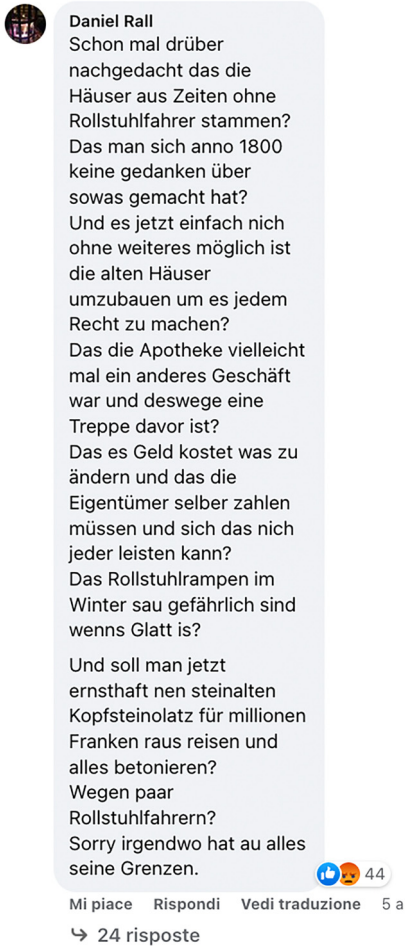


Figure 11: A comment under the video posted on Facebook.

Here is an English translation of the comment in Figure 11:

Have you ever thought that houses were built at a time when there were no people in wheelchairs?
 That in the 1800s people didn't care about these things?
 And that now it is no longer possible to renovate the old houses to please everyone?
 That maybe the pharmacy was another business and there's a staircase up front?
 And again, that renovating costs money, and owners have to pay for that and not everyone can afford it?
 Have you thought that the wheelchair ramp in winter is dangerous if it is smooth?
 And that, to do what you ask, you would have to spend millions of francs?

Because of a couple of people in a wheelchair?
I'm sorry, but there's a limit to everything.

The disappointment from the comments by PwD focus on the fact that Hitzi seems to suggest the image of PwD as a victim, but, starting from here, the narration is shaped on the *denial* model. What is prevalent here is the negation of special needs for people in wheelchair, together with some justifications about the absence of platforms and ramps. The condition of PwD is completely denied and it is stated that people in wheelchairs must arrange themselves to live in the city in the way it is. The comments state that there is no need for further renovations of the public spaces because people in wheelchairs can easily go everywhere with no effort if trained. The result is that, if Hitzi is not able to go wherever he wants, it is his personal fault, not because social spaces does not consider persons with particular needs.

The “tale of the victim” changes meaningfully whether expressed in “first person,” as a personal story, or in “third person,” as a political statement. According to Shakespeare (1994), one of the strategies adopted by media in order to neutralize the political efforts for PwD is “always taking an individualized perspective, focusing on disability as personal misfortune” (Shakespeare 1994).

6.4 *The postcard model*: Facebook post from the President of the Lithuanian Republic about a local restaurant called *First pancakes*, that is operated/owned by people with mild mental and physical disabilities



Figure 12: Facebook page of the President of Lithuanian Republic. <https://www.facebook.com/nausedagitanas/posts/1045051869209505>.

The post was released by the public relations for the Lithuanian President. The team visited a social enterprise located in the Vilnius city center, a pancake restaurant where PwD are working as waiters. The intention of the visit made by the Presidential team was to show how local businesses care about PwD rights, as evidenced by employing some of them in regular jobs, with a view to making them proud and visible.

Here is an English translation of the text in Figure 12:

With the colleagues we had a lunch at the restaurant *Pirmas Blynas* ['First Pancakes'] – it is a social initiative restaurant where waiters are only people with mild mental and physical disabilities, the owner is a young man from Netherlands, which in the free-market environment is taking care about integration of the people with disabilities into the labor market, and by this ensures for them to live a fulfilled life. It is an excellent example of the socially responsible business in Lithuania, which I support a lot and hope that there will be more as such in the future. The first pancake didn't burn at all [reference to a Lithuanian proverb of the first pancake – as the first attempt do something, and which many cases can have some fails].

Despite the good intentions expressed by the President, the comments below the post are controversial:

- It would be so nice, if such business would appear more and in the smaller cities too.
- It should not be emphasized that children with disabilities work, but the fact that children and adults with disabilities are full members of communities. It is still difficult for us to get over our beliefs that such people feel, communicate, learn, work. A little patience, tolerance and more such cool sites. The service and the pancakes are awesome there! Cool guys!
- But what about people with walking or general mobility disabilities who sit in apartment blocks without adapted staircases and can't just go to events, but can't even go to the outpatient clinics?

While the post wants to focus on the importance of the socially responsible business and encourages further similar initiatives, most comments underline the fact that the main character is always the President, leaving the restaurant and its employees unconsidered. In the post, there is no real discussion or hint about what people could do to boost this kind of initiative, what are practical steps, who can assist, there is no feedback from the owner, and no words about the people with disabilities – such as what their role is, what could be advantages for who would like to do the same. Most of the comments are appreciative toward the President and his actions, but there is no attention to what the people with disabilities actually do in this restaurant.

The impression here is that PwD are exploited to increase support for the President, who is exploiting sensitive and popular topics. The role of PwD is to be in the background, like a postcard, setting the stage for others that will talk about them.

This narration is built on a popular stereotype. A person with an institutional role (a politician here) behaves as an ambassador in a solidarity venture for PwD.

However, PwDs' integration is not faced at all, it remains in the background of the very same postcard in which the able people stand in the frontline. As Tom Shakespeare fairly outlines: "Disabled people enable able-bodied people to feel good about themselves: by demeaning disabled people, non-disabled people can feel both powerful, and generous. Disabled people, on the other hand are viewed as passive and incapable people, objects of pity and of aid" (Shakespeare 1994: 60).

According to Garland-Thomson, the product of the narration is able to provide the idea of normalization, a symbol in the ableist culture that

names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries ... Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority, and wield the power it grants them. (Garland-Thomson 1997: 8)

Here, we are in front of what we could call the *postcard* model: the narration originates from the "able-people" that exploit PwD condition to build an image of benefactor. The article seems to focus on disability, but it focuses much more on the politician, and it misses any kind of deepening or original insight on disability. PwD are mostly viewed as passive and incapable people that need help and a normal life.

7 Changing stereotypes

In Table 1, we propose a summary of classic models and stereotype-images of disability provided in this article to give an account of the way stereotypes are merged, iterated, and entered into variation over the participatory culture of social networks and the practice of sharing in the new media.

Table 1: Comparison between old and new models of representation for PwDs.

Modulation	Classic models on disability	Stereotype-images about disability	Participative culture's new categories
Emphasis on the condition of disability	Personal tragedy model	The wondrous	The hero model (to act)
	Medical model	The exotic	The antagonist model (to hinder)
Narcotization of the condition of disability	Charity mode	The sentimental	The victim model (to suffer)
	Social model	The realistic	The normalization model (to make normal)
			The denial model (to refuse or hide)
			The profiteer model (to take advantage)

The first distinction we can notice regards the consideration of the disability itself. Indeed, we confront/face two different ways of representing disability in general: on the one hand, the specific features of disability are emphasized by pointing attention to bodily and cognitive impairments, or using the disadvantageous conditions to build a narration in which people with disabilities are considered in the community merely as being PwDs; on the other hand, we see a narcotization of disability, in which the representations are built trying to hide or overshadow the impairments.

The polarization between the emphasis and the narcotization of a disability's features is able to produce further categories and roles, and to represent disability as a typical form of human experience. This can be done according to very different strategies with very different aims, giving birth to very different roles.

In particular, it is possible to summarize the new models arisen from the analyses following this distinction between emphasis and narcotization. As far as the emphasis of disability is concerned, we can individuate the following four models:

- *The hero (to act)*: the narration emphasizes the traits of disability to arouse acceptance and consider the impaired person as an example of struggle and demonstration of strength against adversities and difficulties that disability entails. In many such narratives, the hero's struggle or endeavor is exactly to propose a glorifying model of PwD.
- *The antagonist (to hinder)*: in this stereotype, PwD are seen as an obstacle to social practices. At school, at work and in the most varied contexts of daily life, narrations that follow this model represent people with disabilities as an impediment to the goals that "others" must be able to achieve. Here, the disability is underlined to show how much the differences matter in the social context.
- *The profiteer (to take advantage)*: In this kind of narration, PwD are described as profiteers who want to take advantage of their condition and disability as is emphasized in narrations to highlight favoritism.
- *The victim (to be hopeless)*: Here, PwD are represented as suffering victims of the social and cultural system, from which they are excluded: they are hopeless because of their impairments. In the most representative cases, there is also no empathy for them, instead they are rejected and considered as repulsive. In this narration of the Person with Disability, the figure of the executioner as *able person* recurs.

As far as the narcotization of disability is concerned, we can find:

- *The normalization (to make normal)*: Here, narrations hide (or do not highlight) disability and try to normalize PwD condition. In these representations, we can find also customized prostheses, concealment of disadvantages, and masking in favor of social integration.

- *The denial (to refuse)*: In these narrations, the condition of disability is somehow overcome. At least for a particular group or type of disability, it is declared that integration has already taken place and that there is no need for greater social integration. The disability is denied, sometimes even by PwD themselves.
- *The postcard (ableism and piety)*: PwD are relegated to the background. Like in a postcard, the subject is an able-bodied person using a PwD activist by advertising his personality or actions for a presumable political or economic profit. The tale about disability is flat and monochromatic, built over the common sense on “what it is usually known about them.”

Moreover, it is possible to notice that sometimes these stereotypes and models combine, giving birth to brand new roles. For instance, we can find:

- Hero + normalization → *spokesperson*: The category, derived from the combination of hero and normalization stereotypes, describes a role in which the impairment characteristics are first emphasized and then narcotized to build a narrative that configures PwD as heroes for the community of reference, without underlining by any means their own disabilities.
- Victim + normalization → *activist*: The person with disability is represented as a victim, but s/he’s not complaining about her/his condition, but s/he carries on with personal battles and aims at improving accessibility, fighting for policy change.

8 Conclusions about inclusion

In this paper, our goal was to recognize the most common stereotypes in social media representations and give account of how social media and participatory culture changed the old stereotypes and built new ones. However, it is worth pointing out that the models we found in the analysis are the most representative of our *corpus*. Indeed, if we compare Garland-Thomson’s models with the new ones detected through our analysis, it is possible to note that the realistic model is missing. In our opinion, this is because our project’s partners didn’t consider the realistic model as a problematic one, and, exactly for this reason, they tended to not report the posts on social media that can be traced back to that specific model. Since they used to think that this was the right way to represent disability and since they thought that stereotypes were somehow “bad” and needed to be amended, the “realistic” model simply disappeared. However, from a semiotic point of view, the realistic model is not the good way to do things while stereotypes are not “bad” in themselves: the realistic model is a stereotype among other stereotypes, the one that tries to delete the marks of disability from the enunciation of disability.

The reason why the realistic model is not perceived as problematic is because this stereotype has changed over time through the shaping of the rhetoric of *inclusion* in the social media context. From the perspective of inclusion, disability is represented neither as a problem nor as a characteristic against to one must struggle today. Instead, inclusion is addressed as a necessity, while people who highlight it as a problematic issue are depicted as outdated. Inclusion is thought to be somehow the form of the ideal society and full integration has to be achieved by building roles and spaces suitable for persons with disability, aiming at their inclusion according to their possibilities. One example in this sense is about the “inspirational” or “courageous” features often attributed to PwD: using those words, just because they have disability, can lead to what some refer to as “inspiration porn,” which assumes that disability itself is so terrible that the mere act of living a normal life with disability is inspirational (Grue 2016). Inclusivity aims at considering these dynamics in the interaction with people with disability, pointing the attention to how PwD themselves want to be considered.

Nevertheless, for the semiotic perspective of this paper, inclusion is also a kind of stereotype, built in order to exclude whoever does not fully embrace it. Hence, inclusion, exactly like all the other stereotypes, is something that categorizes narrations and images in order to render them understandable, and when it proposes itself like the good way to do things, it tries to generalize some particular categorizations, narrations, and images, giving birth to what Turnbull (2016) has called “an illusion of inclusion,” where there is always something that is kept outside, so that it is excluded, for the very same concept (motivation) of inclusion. Inclusion itself is built on the exclusion of other categorizations, images, and narratives that do not conform to its own view.

So, in the end, it is not possible to escape from stereotypes, but this is not a problem: once we have understood the way that they work, it is possible to understand them in order not to be fooled by them in our daily life.

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