

MEDIA REVIEW: Liking for Like's Sake - The Commodification of Disability on Facebook

Author's Note

This review uses the terms "disabled people" and "disabled person" rather than people first terminology such as "people with disabilities" or "person with a disability." This reflects the position that disability is a valued (but not sole) part of a person's identity and that "disabled" comes from a place of pride rather than shame. I also use the term "impairment" to refer to the physiological condition of the body (I recognize this term is also both contested and contestable), and the term "disability" to refer to the social, cultural and material factors that can mediate the experience of impairment.

This review is a modest attempt to critically explore dominant representations of disability on social media, or more specifically, Facebook. These are very specific images – or internet “memes” – of disability which have been labeled “inspiration porn” and “cripspiration” by disabled people. The terms “inspiration porn” and “cripspiration” refer to typically ableist images of disability which represent either a person with disability as “inspiring” (usually doing an everyday activity, rather than anything actually heroic or inspiring) or which rely upon disability in order to *inspire* or otherwise shape the behaviours and/or attitudes of the audience or viewer. Interestingly, disability scholars and activists have given little attention to disability imagery on social media, despite the fact that these are wide scale technologies which have become “thoroughly embedded and routinized in the societies where they are most widely used” (Livingstone & Lievrouw, 2006, p. 1). This is further problematic because of the significant presence and visibility of people with disabilities online, where new forms of citizenship are being claimed due to the Internet (or “online spaces”) providing more accessible avenues for participation, communication, education, entertainment, and employment than in the “real life world” where significant barriers to these areas of social life forcefully prevail (Hollier, 2012; Seymour, 2001).

Just to clarify, Internet memes are “small units of culture, analogous to genes, which flow from person to person by copying or imitation” (Shifman & Thelwall, 2009, p. 2567); therefore, memes flourish through being shared via social media, as they are passed from person to person. On Facebook, this takes place through a user “Liking” and “Sharing” the meme. The meme then enters the user’s Newsfeed – the Facebook user’s “main page” (through which they learn the activities, events, comments, and images of their Facebook Friends) – and is potentially further “Liked” and “Shared” by Facebook Friends, and so on. Regardless of specific content, there are striking similarities in the ways in which many disability memes main-

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tain ableist notions of our lives: that we're seldom more than objects of pity, in need of sympathy; that if we just try hard enough we can make our lives "better"; that we need to be told that we are beautiful (usually a disabled woman or girl features in these images) or worthy; or that we are brave, courageous and plucky in our "overcoming" of disability. These images are the classic ableist narratives of disability reproduced and (re)told in social media form.

While some disability memes are created in, at best, good faith, many others are created and distributed merely for profit – a "Facebook Scam" (Pearce, 2012). These memes are part of an underground Facebook "Like" trade culture, which is unique to a social media context, and serves to (re)produce the disabled identity as something for sale; an ableist commodity for consumption. It is seldom known that when Facebook users click "Like" on certain images, they are simultaneously joining the fan page which hosted the original meme. This is then "Shared" with all of their Facebook Friends via their Newsfeed. Some creators of fan pages enlist the use of images or memes which evoke sympathy, fear, anger or laughter, in order to accumulate "Likes." It is important to state that Facebook users can also "Comment" underneath memes, which serves no other functional purpose than to generate interest in order to gain more "Likes." Fan pages are then sold on to companies and businesses as a means of reaching potential new customers; the higher the amount of "Likes," the greater the value of the fan page. Therefore, it is in the interest of fan page creators to accumulate as many "Likes" as possible. There is real ambiguity surrounding how much revenue the sale of a fan page can generate; estimates range from tens, to thousands, of dollars. Some memes are futile, employing taglines such as, "'Like' if you hate cancer, ignore if you don't" and "'Like' if you think these puppies are cute." However, others are far more exploitative and fraudulent, being linked to fake charitable organizations and used as a way to extort money in the form of donations.

In this review, then, I look at some of the most common disability memes currently being shared on Facebook. I explore the ways in which these memes work to (re)produce sanctioned (heteronormative) gendered disabled identities and subjectivities which are inherently *saleable* (or commodified) and which enable fan pages to be sold for profit. Importantly, I reflect upon the

consequences of this for people with the label of intellectual impairment, and people with disability more broadly. I conclude by looking at the ways in which disabled people are speaking back to – or *cripping* – such ableist representations of their identities, lives and bodies.

Gendering and Psychologizing the Dis/Abled Subject

One of the most widely circulated, or "viral," memes on Facebook and Twitter is a photograph of Paralympian and Olympian Oscar Pistorious in a running race with a disabled young girl. Fittingly, both have J-shaped carbon-fibre prosthetics (more popularly known as Cheetah Flex-Foot prosthetic limbs). The tagline reads "The only Disability is A Bad Attitude" – a quote from Scott Hamilton, a former figure skater and testicular cancer survivor. The young girl, whose white skin, blonde hair and exceptional beauty offer a palatable embodiment of female disability and impairment, is Ellie May Challis; a 5 year old who became a four-limb amputee following infant meningitis. Challis is the youngest person to ever have been fitted with Cheetah Flex-Foot prosthetic limbs, which were funded by her local community after she experienced severe difficulty negotiating standard prosthetics (Bennett-Smith, 2012). She also represents the normative embodiment of happy childhood and girlhood: her gender presentation is appropriately feminine in a bright short yellow dress (which reveals her prosthetics) with matching colored hair ties securing her ash blonde hair in cute pigtails; she appears smiley, gregarious and confident as the centre of attention in the photograph, but is coy and non-threatening with it. While Challis doesn't have a label of intellectual impairment, she does embody and represent the notion of "eternal innocence" which is routinely ascribed to people with the label of intellectual impairment. Markedly, she also appears the "correct" weight for her age and size – essential in the context of Western moral panics around childhood obesity (Throsby & Roberts, 2010) – and appears appropriately active, agile, and sporty. Importantly, for the audience, Challis counters the very ableist constructions of disabled childhood and girlhood: a pathologized childhood of segregation, institutionalization, marginalization, medicalization, hospitalization, bully-

ing, sadness, isolation, and the denial of play – an objectifying construction of childhood which renders disabled children “environmentally vulnerable travelers on a biologically determined road to adult status” (Priestly, 1998, p. 208). Challis, then, is the *exception*.

The same can be said for Pistorious who was, prior to his imprisonment for culpable homicide in October 2014, readily hailed as both an ableist symbol of overcoming and beacon of exceptional hyper-masculine embodiment. Further, his use of Cheetah Flex-Foot prosthetic limbs offers an ableist cultural imaginary the possibility that we “could reconstitute our bodies, both as mechanical and organic” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 60); thus Pistorious is hybridized, a mix of flesh and machine (see Haraway, 1991). Pistorious famously made history by becoming the only sportsperson to ever compete in both the Paralympics and Olympics; a notion *overcoming* officially sanctioned, then, by the Court of Arbitration for Sport and International Association of Athletics and, not surprisingly, by global media. Not only do his hegemonic masculine heterosexual materiality and extraordinary sporting achievements contradict common understandings of disabled masculinities as asexual, partial, fractured, and lacking masculine power and privilege (Gerschick, 2000; Shakespeare, 1999), but, as a man of remarkable aesthetic beauty, his image has been eagerly commodified through corporate sponsorship and advertising, alongside his non-disabled sporting peers. Pistorious, then, is also an *exception*.

These “real life” stories of exception materialize the dehumanizing ableist ideal of the “supercrip” – a popular depiction of disability “where the person with disability is assigned super[hyphen]human, almost magical, abilities” (Barnes, 1992, p. 10; Crow, 2000). Importantly, the supercrip is rooted in neo-liberal and capitalist ideology, valorizing individual effort and a *humanly* will to overcome. Thus, the supercrip is understood to have broader social and moral significance for us all; one which serves to uphold hegemonic normalcy (Davis, 1995) and stabilize the apparent boundaries of dis/abled and normal/other. This is through inciting self-surveillance and regulation of our physical, mental and spiritual bodies and the incorporation of individualist labours and efforts into our per-

sonhood as a means to secure our citizenship. The supercrip only celebrates disability and impairment which can be *normalized* through exceptionalism.

The supercrip is a discursive construction of disability to which *most* disabled people are implicitly and explicitly measured, classified, marked, and “Othered.” Interestingly, however, people with the label of intellectual impairment are seldom, if ever, positioned as supercrips within in our popular culture and media – affirming their Otherness and infantilized personhood. If we think of popular supercrips – Christopher Reeve; President Roosevelt; Helen Keller; and Stephen Hawking – we can see that the supercrip image is, for the most part, only bestowed upon white, privileged, men with physical impairments. While I am not advocating for people with the label of intellectual impairment to be revered as supercrips in such oppressive ways, the lack of representation in the supercrip image does offer important insights into disability hierarchies, as well as insights into who is assumed to have the “personal characteristics” to access the supposed privilege of being able to *overcome* impairment and disability.

Ultimately, the supercrip is a *dangerous* construction of disability; mostly, because it masks the environmental, economic structural, cultural, and political causes and consequences of disability and impairment. Moreover, this danger is exacerbated in current contexts of global economic recession where governments are actively scapegoating oppressed Others as the root cause of financial crises; mainly, because of their supposed “over-consumption” of welfare. In Britain last summer, the Paralympic Games’ rebirthing of disabled athletes as “super[hyphen]human” was undoubtedly heightened by its stark *contrast* to emergent discursive constructions of disabled Britons as “scroungers,” “lazy,” “feckless” and “undeserving”; constructions which are currently permeating within policy, political, media and public discourse as a means to justify significant austerity measures. This particular austerity culture is routinely highlighting the costs, and therefore undermining the value, of disabled people. The correlated sharp rise in disability hate crime in Britain is a marker of how grave, threatening, and violent such constructions can be in the lives of disabled people (Quarmby, 2011).

Additionally, the tagline *"The only Disability is A Bad Attitude"* draws upon ableist culture's unequivocal propagation of "compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer, 2006, p. 2): an overarching, all-consuming ableist ideology (intertwined with compulsory heterosexuality) that bodily normalcy is the exemplary human embodiment which, where absent, should be unquestionably endeavored, regardless of human, economic, cultural and societal cost. An ideology of compulsory able-bodiedness not only devalues disabled people's very existence (Campbell, 2009), but is doomed to fail because it is "never really guaranteed" (McRuer, 2006, p. 9). Inevitably, the tagline affirms traditional stereotypes of disabled people as emotionally damaged, bitter, and cruel; as well as individualist models of disability which posit disability as that which *can* and *should* be overcome through willpower intrinsic to the self. Thus the tagline is worryingly uninformed in that it psychologizes disability as a matter of character, motivation, fortitude, and resolve, rather than a broad intersecting network of multiple systemic and institutional oppressions. Assembling "good" and "bad" attitudes regarding disability and impairment only acts as a means to govern and regulate disabled people's emotions and their emotional interactions with oppression in the social world (Reeve, 2004). Thus, this analysis begs for the question: other than maintaining oppressive constructions of disability, what are these images actually *for*?

Monetizing and Commodifying Disability

The common usage of disability as a primary theme in many of these scams – or spams – is perhaps unsurprising. Many of the memes routinely feature disabled people (especially children and babies) and even "disabled" injured animals as a means of evoking an emotional reaction worthy of a "Like." One of the only cases to surface explicitly as "fake" was that of Katie Johnson, a nine year old girl with Down syndrome. Katie was used within an image which included a photograph of her with the words *"This is my sister Mallory. She has Down syndrome and doesn't think she's beautiful. Please like this photo so I can show her later that she truly is beautiful."* Incredibly, the image attracted over 5.5 million "Likes" and remains one of the most

prevalent images on Facebook (Shepherd, 2012). This fraudulent use of Katie's image as Mallory was revealed after it turned up in Johnson's mother's Facebook Newsfeed.

Importantly, there are two people to consider, here: Katie *and* "Mallory" (hereby Mallory). Firstly, Katie's image has been stolen – and it has been utilized without her (or her parents') knowledge or consent. A recent related court case has highlighted the significance of this particular kind of abuse for people with the label of intellectual impairment and their parents and families. Adam Holland, a young man who lives with Down syndrome, had his image "obtained," manipulated, and used in the commercial advertising of media company, Cox Media – without his or his parents' consent. Holland's parents are currently in a legal battle with Cox Media. The company digitally altered an original photograph of Adam smiling and showing a piece of his artwork to the camera, to make it appear as if he is holding a sign which reads "Retarded News." Another version of Adam's image is currently flourishing on Flickr, an online photo management and sharing application. In the Flickr version, Adam's artwork has been replaced with a sign which reads, "I got a boner." In each of these versions, Adam is reduced to an object of ridicule and derision, and his personhood is denied. In this latter version, Adam is routinely hypersexualized – as people with the label of intellectual impairment, and people with disability in general often are – being assumed to have an uncontrollable, deviant, and unmanageable sexuality (Liddiard, 2012).

Secondly, like Adam, Katie's image has been occupied and "re-written" for (financial) gain. Katie's disabled identity it is important here, because the notion of financial gain affirms the ways in which people with the label of intellectual impairment can be exploited economically on the basis of their perceived lack of understanding: either through inequitable or unpaid employment; through a denial of financial control and decision making regarding their own personal finances; or through assumptions about vulnerability and financial abuse (Abbott & Marriott, 2012).

Thirdly, this image has been shared amongst millions, subjecting Katie to an ableist gaze which both invites and incites pity, admiration, approval and awe. She is objectified, dehuman-

ized; (re)imagined as a spectacle and embodiment of freakery. Each of these acts, I propose, suppresses Katie's own voice and denies her personhood, agency, and autonomy, thus emerging as a form of (online) violence. For Mallory, (and other young girls with Down syndrome, whose identities are also exploited within this representation), as a disabled girl – who consequently sits at the intersections of “devalued forms of embodiment” (Titchkosky, 2005, p. 664) – it is assumed that she both *needs* and *seeks* affirmation of her intrinsic value only through her ability to meet the normative standards of female and childhood beauty. This sum of ableism and sexism not only forcefully (re)produces such standards, but, at best, only serves to include an acceptable and agreeable disabled femininity. Lastly, as a person with the label of intellectual impairment, Mallory's voice is also silenced. Instead we hear *her* “story” only through the words of another, serving to reinforce dominant notions of people with the label of intellectual impairment as incapable of speaking and advocating for themselves.

Another appropriated image features Merlin German, a young Black male marine who lived with scarring and facial difference after being burnt in an explosion while serving in Iraq. The image of German proliferating on Facebook features a split-screen revealing “before and after” shots with the tagline “*Like if you respect him, ignore if you don't respect him.*” Thus, as with each of the Facebook memes, the audience is instructed not only to observe, but to *act* upon their emotional response to the image. Significantly, in both images German is in military attire emphasizing his very hegemonic masculinity, bravery, and patriotism. The image emphasizes the types of strong, macho, tough bodies and sane, rationale, capable minds that are accepted in the military; at the same time, then, as additionally highlighting those bodies and minds which are inherently unwelcome. I wondered, upon first seeing this image, whether this was in fact symbolic of the (assumed) acceptance of Black Americans regarding their barbaric history at the hands of white settlers? Or, maybe the patriotism theme is purposeful in some way to “play down” the prevailing racial tensions and institutional racism endemic to American culture? Alternatively, it could be that this theme merely upholds a colonial and war-hungry national identity at a time of global instability (between America and the Middle East)? I'm asking more questions here than I answer.

Regardless, on a more human level, it is important to highlight that this use of German's image and identity is still farmed for profit, despite the fact he died in 2008. Thus, even in death the disabled identity is relegated to a spectacle and, in this case, becomes a marketable commodity.

Interestingly, the depiction of German “before and after” positions his impairment only as an “unwelcome presence” (Shildrick, 2009, p. 32). The “before and after” presentation is emblematic of our cultural thirst for bodies that have *transformed*, or that are in transition. By this I mean that, in Western neo-liberal cultures, an individualizing and disciplining of bodies takes place which ensures that they are always in progress, or are always *transforming*. Thus, our bodies are never good enough, strong enough, healthy enough, thin enough, beautiful enough, and “normal” enough and, as such, our individual bodies become a project upon which we must work in order to secure our neo-liberal citizenship. Throsby (2008, p. 118) calls this the “discourse of [the] re-born ‘new me.’” Paradoxically, certain bodies and minds are excluded: intellectual impairment is largely viewed as non-transformable. The infantilization of those with this label ensures that they are positioned as forever in “childhood” or as lacking adult “capacity” – as ultimately intellectually inferior and thus unable to develop (see Borthwick, 2010). Thus, in the dominant culture of transformation, people with the label of intellectual impairment are distinctly marked by their *lack* of ability to transform.

Notably, many of these common body stories are readily televised and otherwise recorded for wide audiences. Whether this may be through televised weight loss (*Biggest Loser*, NBC); cosmetic surgery (*Extreme Makeover*, ABC; *I Want A Famous Face*, MTV; *Ten Years Younger*, Channel 4); the infamous “make over” (*Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*, Bravo); the “new wardrobe” (*What Not To Wear*, BBC); or just a platform upon which weird, wondrous, and freaky bodies can be exhibited, examined, and ultimately exploited (*Embarrassing Bodies*, Channel 4), increasingly mainstream media sources are actualizing a modern-day “freak” show where bodies transform before our very eyes. However, within the context of ableist norms, German's changing face – having been deemed to go from “normal” to “abnormal” (or normate to freak) – works against this, and thus his facial difference becomes figurative of the grotesque and a rou-

tine source of fascination and gaze. Markedly, unlike the history of freakdom as articulated by Clare (1999), whereby certain (historical) freaks could harness both the control of and profits from freak shows – simultaneously making freaks of the audience rather than themselves – the disabled subjects (or objects) which feature in many disability memes, I argue, are omitted from any gain, regardless of the currency. Thus, the true gain is reaped only by the producers of disability memes, rather than those who feature within them, who remain as saleable objects.

Drawing Some Conclusions

So, what are the meanings of this unique commodification of the disabled identity? Can we call it *unique*? The disabled identity and impaired body *already* exist as both commodified and commodifiable in ableist cultures, in myriad ways. For example: in entertainment (film, television, arts, literature) and media industries (Garland-Thompson, 2005); in fashion (Kuppers, 2002; see also Masters, 2011), and other vehicles of consumerism (Haller & Ralph, 2006); through charity (Hevey, 1992); human service systems (Pedlar & Hutchinson, 2000; Albrecht, 1992); via care systems and institutionalization (Russell & Malhotra, 2009); and, ironically – as I write from within it – the academy (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2012). Thus, disability, as a cultural *production* of normalcy and compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006), generates profit within capitalist consumer cultures (easily as much as we are told it “costs”). It is a consumable; a tool; it is utilizable, functional and even necessary; occupiable and accessible, and thus exploitable.

In the case of disability Internet memes, however, context is crucial. Marwick (2005; p. 9) argues that “as people move through internet structures, they are increasingly tied to unitary, and immediately commodified, concepts of identity.” By this she means that, because the Internet is primarily a commercial space, our online identities – as constructed through profile-based social networking sites like Facebook – generate revenue and thus are commodified and commodifiable. On Facebook specifically, this is through the tracking of our personal information, our interactions with Facebook Friends, our Likes, and our networks and associations. Therefore, all of our (online) lives

become data for global corporations, regardless whether we are disabled, labelled, or not.

What are the consequences of dis/ableist memes for people with the label of developmental disability, and disabled people more broadly? Firstly, it is clear that Facebook provides yet another space through which ableist notions of our lives – and all of the associated violations which emanate from these – are preserved. Secondly, as I have suggested, is the way in which such imagery serves only to (re)produce sanctioned (heteronormative) gendered disabled identities and subjectivities. Thus, images of *us* are recreated – or (re)told – only in normalizing ways. Thirdly, is the way in which underground Facebook “Like” trade cultures emerge as a form of online violence. As I have shown through the cases of Katie, Mallory and Adam, all of whom are people with the label of intellectual impairment, this is either through selling stolen (and manipulated) images of our bodies or through inviting and inciting dangerous and confining discourses of pity and misfortune for financial gain. This is not a new charge for Facebook, however, which has been heavily criticized by feminists, women’s groups and violence organizations for endorsing violence against women through not closing down misogynistic Fan Pages (e.g., *Domestic Violence: Don’t Make Me Tell You Twice*) which are “populated by photos of women beaten, bruised and bleeding” (Chemely, 2013, no pagination). Thus, in the broader context of such *overt* hatred and violence – and Facebook management’s ignorance and inability to control this – it is highly unlikely that seemingly sympathetic and compassionate representations of disability (regardless of the means through which they are created, or their harm) will ever be considered either as problematic or violent. This is despite the fact that such representations contribute to the harmful discourses of “vulnerability” which plague people with the label of intellectual impairment, and which are not only disempowering, but dangerous (Hollomotz, 2010).

Importantly, disabled people *are* beginning to loudly speaking back to these representations (simultaneously using Facebook as a platform to do so) via crippling, which is a means of subverting ableist meanings of disability and impairment. As Sandahl (2003, p. 37) states, “cripping spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions

and exclusionary effects." In this case, disability scholar Bethany Stevens has created Facebook Fan Page called "This is What Disability Looks Like." Stevens (2012, no pagination) states:

This is What Disability Looks Like seeks to counter messages that disability is a tragedy or inspirational. Our goal is to explore the rich representations of people with disabilities. This is a visual culture project featuring images of people with disabilities that do NOT pander to sentimentality, inspiration and/or paternalism like many images that have circulated around social media of late. Instead, this is a community run project - in which people submit photos and they are posted after I add text. This is What Disability Looks Like will feature the rich diversity of our disability communities. Please add to this richness with us! This is a community LOVE project for all of us to spread the word that disability is awesome, natural and not just a tool to make feel pity and social distance from us.

Contributors' pictures have self-written taglines which express the sentiment of the image; for example, "This is what disability looks like: Parenting"; "This is what disability looks like: Fuck Normal"; "This is what disability looks like: Elected"; and "This is what disability looks like: Rocking the Mic." These images of disability hold critical transformative power; not only because they unsettle ableist assumptions and depictions of our lives, or because they are produced by people with disability (who have a wide range of different impairments) themselves, but because they fundamentally undermine and expose the ideology of the norm. This project is marking a new cultural moment in our online disability histories; resisting and disrupting the inherent ableism of Facebook visual cultures at the same time as countering the routine violation of our identities. Most importantly of all, this is done with great pride, solidarity, and diversity, simultaneously bringing together, building and celebrating Crip communities.

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