

**DISABILITY, IDENTITY AND MEDIA: PARALYMPIANS  
IN ADVERTISING**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores representations of Paralympians within media and advertising. Scholarly research on disability is extremely limited, with current research focusing on print media, and few studies going as far as to perform a discourse analysis. Media representations play a prevalent role in constructing “disability” and have the power to define what it means to be a disabled person. Using a poststructural theoretical framework, I undertake a critical discourse analysis of television advertisements produced by Nike and Visa to uncover what narratives regarding disability are circulating with regularity. I find these advertisements featuring Paralympians serve to reproduce the myth of the “supercrip”, failing to acknowledge the complexity of individual experiences of those living with disabilities. Further, the simultaneous celebration and marginalization of Paralympians, a key dialectic found within these advertisements is indicative of a larger polemic circulating with regularity regarding people with disabilities within our increasingly neoliberal society.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Athletes, Disability and Representation**

#### **Introduction**

With the celebrity emergence of athletes such as Aimee Mullins and Oscar Pistorius in recent years, combined with a move to elite sport programming, the Paralympic Games have garnered increasing media attention. The Paralympics are proving to be a valid source of investment for advertisers and sponsors; there has been a significant expansion in Paralympic coverage in the media, as well as more sponsorship opportunities for Paralympic athletes (Howe, 2011). Since collaborating with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2001, the Paralympic Games and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) have grown exponentially. This growth has not only included participation and patronage, but also a shift from “participation sport” to “elite competition” (Brittain, 2010). Seemingly, this would lead to an increase in exposure for the games and its athletes. Therefore, it is critical that we analyze how these athletes are being represented to the general public and their fans. Who is being represented and in what ways? How is “disability” presented within these emerging discourses of Paralympic sports and related advertising?

The Paralympics and its athletes have attracted an increasing amount of attention in the media following Beijing 2008. In many ways, this is due to the achievements and apparent controversy surrounding South African sprinter Oscar Pistorius. In 2008, Pistorius was deemed ineligible to compete with able-bodied athletes by the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) based on findings that suggested his

prosthetic legs—the Ossur Flex-Foot Cheetahs—provided him with a distinct athletic advantage. Specifically, it was thought that “the blades would enhance his sprinting speed by 15-30 percent” due to the fact that they are lighter than intact lower limbs and allow him to stride faster than able-bodied competitors (*Sciencedaily*, 2009, p.1). The IAAF also claimed that through their research they found that Pistorius used less oxygen and burned fewer calories due to the bounce provided by his prosthetics, and thus he was banned based upon a rule that relates to running shoe technology, which employ springs (Sokolove, 2012). A team of independent analysts hired by Pistorius however, discredited this claim. The “Cheetahs” were shown to “have an elastic energy return of 92% where as biological tendons offer between 93% and 95%”, a longer leg swing time, and Pistorius’ strides were actually shorter than his non-amputee competitors (Administrator, 2011, p. 2). The initial study was also discredited due to the fact that it only analyzed Pistorius in a straight-line running setting, failing to acknowledge the disadvantages faced by the South African in the acceleration and cornering phases of the 400m race (About, 2011). Thus, the initial ban put in place by the IAAF was unanimously overturned on May 16, 2008. For communities of disabled persons and social activists alike, however, the prohibition of Pistorius from “able-bodied” competition was symptomatic of the ways in which disabled subjects continue to experience discrimination in an “ableist” world. The ban was overturned on the condition that Pistorius compete on only the prosthetics that have undergone this rigorous testing (Howard, 2011). While Pistorius failed to qualify for the Beijing 2008 Olympics, he later qualified and competed in the 2012 Olympics in London.

Pistorius is being hailed as the first globally renowned “disabled” athlete by his fellow Paralympic competitors (Davies, 2008). Perhaps this is what makes him the ideal candidate for the sponsorship of Nike, Oakley, Ossur and Thierry Mugler. As Aaron Saenz notes, “despite the controversy around his legs, or perhaps because of it, Pistorius has been the subject of several successful ad campaigns” (2011, p. 3). Pistorius earns well over \$1 million per year, with the bulk of his earnings coming from endorsements and appearance fees (Sokolove, 2012). Indeed, Pistorius is becoming the most recognized elite disabled athlete in Paralympic and perhaps even Olympic history. In some ways, this serves to further demonstrate how the boundaries between “able-bodied” and disability or the “other” are becoming more porous and blurred.

Much like sexual and racial “minorities,” athletes with disabilities are historically viewed as the “other” in sporting contexts. Karen DePauw argues that athletes with disabilities “have not yet become full and equal participants in the sporting arena and, of greater significance, perhaps, their entrance has not so impacted the sporting arena so that it has yet been redefined” (1997 p. 421). Their competition is viewed as inferior and less than their able bodied competitors. They are often seen as more of a “human-interest story”, with their disability overshadowing their athletic accomplishments (DePauw, 1997). When they are not being illustrated as a human-interest story they are being depicted as the “supercrip”. Briefly, a “supercrip” depiction is when a person with disabilities is celebrated as being heroic for simply performing day-to-day tasks common to the “able bodied” (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). These representations seem to continually return us to a narrative of the pathological “other” often associated with disabled persons.

These current models of representation serve to reinforce the dominant understandings of disability and the practice of ableism as “the oppression of people with disabilities, placing them at the bottom of a hegemonically defined social hierarchy where a higher value is put on ‘normal’ bodies that are a part of the working majority” (Hardin & Hardin, 2004, p. 7). For Robert McRuer (2003; 2006), able bodiedness is compulsory within our society, and often goes unnoticed. He suggests that the primary goal of disability related studies is to critique not only the representation, but also the site of production of the representation, in order to create new meanings and more nuanced depictions and discussions of disability (2006). Such objectives are very much in line with the purpose of this thesis, which is to deconstruct and bring light to the current illustrations of disability within advertising, drawing attention to the politics of representation. Here the commercial celebration of Paralympians, most notably Pistorius, offers an entry point into a complex and textured discussion around the nuances and ongoing limitations of depicting “disability” in popular culture. Within an emerging discourse of Paralympic advertising, the purportedly “positive” depictions of disability are fraught with tension and contradictions that both enable and constrain a critical pedagogy of “normativity”.

While there is extensive research on advertising, the body and disability discourses, the topics seldom converge in critical scholarship. Many major companies are currently capitalizing on the popularity and successes of elite athletes with disabilities within their marketing campaigns. These campaigns and their discursive effects have thus far mostly evaded critique within academic literature. This demonstrates the need for a critical discourse analysis of advertisements featuring Paralympians. However, two key



texts surrounding disability in advertising have been produced recently. Duncan and Aycock (2005) look at how disabled subjects are displayed in advertising, while Riley (2005) discusses how the advertising industry uses disability to promote consumption. Riley (2005) also looks specifically at how Paralympians came to be incorporated into several marketing campaigns. There have also been several studies on elite disability athletes in media and newsprint, which will be discussed in this section.

Specifically, this project picks up from where Duncan and Aycock, Riley, and other theorists leave off and looks critically at television commercials that utilize Paralympic athletes, drawing particular attention to the critical intersection of sport, disability and the body. The four texts chosen for this study feature Oscar Pistorius, Rohan Murphy, Cheri Blauwet, and former Paralympian Craig Blanchette. The rationale for the reason for choosing these advertisements will be discussed later within this chapter. These athletes have been prominently featured in advertising campaigns for Nike and Visa. It is therefore necessary to look at the sponsorship and advertising techniques, and practices of these major corporations in order to contextualize their incorporation of “disability” within the broader discussions of “ability”, as well as among other socially constructed identity categories. As a result, I have chosen to move away from a medicalized discussion of disability and focus on the ways in which disability is represented culturally.

The Nike campaign featuring Oscar Pistorius was released in 2008 and coincided with the Beijing Olympic and Paralympic Games. This thesis discusses his “Bad Listener” advert, which features Pistorius chronicling each of the sporting activities he was told he could not do, most importantly running (via the voiceover). The visual

aspects tell a different story in the advertisement, which shows Pistorius actually partaking in these activities, culminating with footage of him running on a track. This campaign, upon initial inspection situates Pistorius as a “supercrip” who must overcome daily obstacles and face the list of things he cannot do. The ad is grounded in the irony of the caption “that a man with no legs can’t run”. While the advert promotes empowerment and athletic achievement of disabled peoples, offering a seemingly positive depiction of disability, it also situates Pistorius within a “supercrip” narrative.

In a similar context, Cheri Blauwet, a prominent wheelchair racer is featured in VISA’s “Go World” campaign in 2008. Morgan Freeman, who highlights all of the “super human” qualities and accomplishments of Blauwet, narrates the commercial. For the entire commercial Blauwet is featured in motion, with snippets of both competition and practice settings. This contradicts the normative representations that place female athletes in passive, non-athletic, sexualized poses (Buysse & Borchering, 2010). Here, VISA is attempting to align itself with the qualities associated with a world-class athlete.

Perhaps the most interesting advertisement in this compellation is the Nike ad, which features US Paralympian Rohan Murphy. Murphy is a wrestler, whose feats of strength are featured within the advertisement. These feats are accompanied by Burl Ives’ cartoonish “Donut Song”, which encourages the viewer to “watch the donut, not the hole”, or in this case what could be interpreted as, “watch the athlete, not the impairment”. This piece is extremely ambiguous, as it showcases the spectacle of strength and fitness, yet does not apparently appear to be selling anything other than the Nike brand and philosophy, which appears rather vague at times.

These narratives can all be compared to an earlier commercial produced by Nike that featured Paralympian Craig Blanchette. This commercial, entitled “Cross Training with Craig Blanchette” was released in 1990. The advert demonstrates that in fact, incorporating athletes with disabilities into advertising campaigns is not a new phenomenon; it is however becoming more prevalent as many major companies such as Nike search for new and relatively untapped markets for sales<sup>1</sup>. The advert, much like others produced by Nike featuring Pistorius and Murphy draws attention to the disabled body as “in action”, a relatively new portrayal for athletes with disabilities. At one and the same time, the advert celebrates the Paralympian but also reduces him or her (him in this case) to a “supercrip”. The “supercrip” narrative encourages the individual to fight to overcome his/her impairment in order to achieve success in daily life or elite settings, which is problematic due to the fact that it reproduces societies low expectations for persons with disabilities, and reiterates their existence as a problem to be managed (Silva & Howe, 2012).

There is a growing need to explore how these athletes are represented, where these advertisements are shown or viewed, and some of the discursive effects of Paralympic sport. As a result, this thesis is guided by the following research questions: How are Paralympic athletes represented in advertisements? Are these advertisements as progressive as we think, or are there limitations to them? What are the discursive effects of these advertisements? How can these images of “disability” be read in competing, if not transgressive ways? Are there similarities between the portrayal of Paralympians and “disabled” characters in popular film and television? How is disability as “difference”

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the first TV advert featuring a person with disability was a Levi’s advert released during the 1984 Olympics (Riley, 2006).

framed, contained and celebrated? Each of these questions marks an entry point into a more detailed discussion of how difference and “disability is packaged as a commodity, particularly in recent narratives of Paralympics in TV advertisements (Nike in particular). Such advertisements also tell us much about disability identity politics and consumer culture in late capitalism and how TV narratives of disability have changed since the advent of the multi-mediated Paralympics. Using a critical discourse analysis informed by the work of Stuart Hall, I explored the social and political importance of “disability” advertisements, which will be discussed in relation to three overlapping themes: (1) disability identity politics; (2) neoliberalism and consumer culture; and (3) advertising and disability. This study is theoretically informed by critical disability studies and poststructuralism, and grounds an analysis of disability advertisements within and against neoliberal discourse as a set of ideological assumptions and a historical juncture linked rather intimately to late capitalism.

### **A Brief History of the Paralympic Games**

Before a dissection of representation can begin, one must look at how the Paralympic Games have evolved to become the mega event that they are today. A discussion of this shift is necessary, as according to David Howe, “it was not until the Paralympic Movement forged closer links with the Olympic Movement that large corporate sponsors became interested” (2008, p. 84). The evolution of the games has had a direct impact upon the types of athletes that attend these competitions. This in turn impacts how disabled athletes are represented. Thus, I charted the move from a participation based or “rehabilitation” focus of the games, to the present day centering of the games around “high performance.”

The onset of World War II had a profound effect on the course of disability sport. Brittain notes that “prior to World War II, the vast majority of those with spinal cord injuries died within three years following their injury” (2010, p. 7). After the war there was an influx of disabled veterans due to new developments in the medical field, particularly in the pharmaceutical industry that made spinal cord injuries survivable (Brittain, 2010). Thus, sport for the disabled was born out of the rehabilitation sector of the medical field in order to help disabled veterans return to a more normalized, productive life.

Sir Ludwig Guttmann is viewed as the founder (albeit contentiously)<sup>2</sup> of the Paralympic Movement. During his tenure at the National Spinal Injuries Unit at the Ministry of Pensions Hospital at Stoke Mandeville, Aylesbury, Guttmann observed the physiological and psychological benefits of sport to the rehabilitation process (Brittain, 2010). Patients began a small exercise regime which included activities such as archery, darts, netball (later to be known as wheelchair basketball), and snooker (Brittain, 2010). This led to a demonstration of archery being held on the same day as the opening of the 1948 London Olympics (Brittain, 2010). The demonstration was so successful that over the years it would eventually morph into the International Stoke Mandeville Games.

The ninth incarnation of the International Stoke Mandeville Games held in Rome in 1960 is historically viewed as the first Paralympic Games (Brittain, 2010). These games were also the first successful games held at a location other than Stoke Mandeville (Howe, 2008). This marked the beginning of an official relationship between the

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<sup>2</sup> See Peers, D. (2009). (Dis)Empowering Paralympic histories: absent athletes and disabling discourses. *Disability and Society*, 24(5), 653-665.

Paralympics and the Olympics, as well as a transition from rehabilitation based sport to competitive or elite sport.

According to Howe (2008), the shift towards an ethos of high performance at the Paralympics legitimized the need for the establishment of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). The IPC was formed in Dusseldorf, Germany, on September 21, 1989 with the first president of the organization being Dr. Robert Steadward (Brittain, 2010)<sup>3</sup>. Howe marks this as the beginning of the Paralympic Movement (2008). The Movement has had its struggles as the shift from participation-based sport did not occur overnight. Instead, it slowly created a hierarchy of athletes, between those who wished to train and compete like high performance athletes and those who wished simply to participate in the games (Howe, 2008). According to Howe, “by the time of the games in Athens in 2004 the ethos of high performance was all there was room for” (2008, p. 40)<sup>4</sup>. The IPC would then seek to move the Paralympics to a more elite competition, and to increase working relations with the IOC. It would also lead to a shift in how disabled athletes were to be viewed within sport and popular culture, followed by a subsequent increase in

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<sup>3</sup> There are many contentious issues surrounding the shift to a single governing body for disability sport. However with respect to length limitations, these arguments are outside the scope of this thesis. In order to contextualize this project however, the contentious moves by the IPC that have been made under the guise of the discourses of “elite sport” will be viewed as contributing to a more efficient, spectator, media and sponsor friendly games that would encourage the reproduction of an elite, normalized and aesthetically pleasing event. For more information see Howe, P.D. (2008). *The cultural politics of the Paralympic movement: Through and anthropological lens*. London & New York: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> While the discussion of the implications of this schism is outside the scope of this thesis, it is important to note how the move from participation based competition to elite disability sport impacted both the athletes and the games. For more information see Howe, P.D. (2008). *The cultural politics of the Paralympic movement: Through and anthropological lens*. London & New York: Routledge.

sponsorship and media opportunities for Paralympians. It is within this “high performance” era of the Paralympics that my investigation is situated.

### **Social Constructions of Disabled Athletes**

Within academic literature, disabled athletes in advertisements are critiqued as the “other,” “abnormal” or “inferior,” and as the “supercrip”. While these constructions are examined primarily in terms of print advertisements or print news coverage, they persuasively illustrate some of the discourses that circulate with regularity surrounding disability. In the following section, I highlight these social constructions surrounding athletes with disabilities through a review of the prominent academic literature. The dominant themes surround disability and advertising include the poster child used within cause marketing, marketing to caregivers, and specifically within sport advertising the “supercrip”, which serves to contain disabled athletes as inferior by prioritizing disability over and above athletic accomplishments.

#### **Disability identity politics**

A poststructuralist formulation of identity and identification is used throughout this study. The notions of identity are synthesized through the work of Stuart Hall (1996a; 1999). For Hall, identities are never fixed or unified; they are “increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (1996a, p. 4). Identities are also increasingly complex, historically constructed and positional (Hall, 1999). They are entwined in relations of power and are the product of differentiating between difference and sameness (Hall, 1996a). In other words, identities operate within an economy of “difference”.

A poststructural notion of identity enables a discussion of how “disability” intersects with other identity categories (such as gender, race, and sexuality, for example) within the television advertisements. Will the stigma of disability overshadow other identity categories as Alston, Bell and Feist-Price (1996) suggest? And how are these categories represented in relation to disability and athletics specifically? Further exploration of identity politics, and how the material realities of impairment impact identification are elaborated on and teased out in Chapter Two. It was essential to examine how “normal” develops in relation to “abnormal” and how “ability” is intricately linked to “disability”. Further, one must ask how disability intersects or articulates with gender, sexuality, and race, within the context of sport to create the identity of the elite disabled athlete. To what extent is the “difference” of disability contained or “neutralized” by “normative” categories of middle-class whiteness, masculinity or femininity?

Danielle Peer’s work assists in understanding the complex nature of the Paralympian identity. Briefly, she explains that the identity of the heroic, empowered and grateful Paralympian cannot exist without the tragic, passive and anonymous disabled identity (Peers, 2009). Similarly, she also discusses how the IPC and various able bodied experts are positioned as “progressive, empowering and benevolent” within Paralympic discourses to the exclusion and potential disempowerment of Paralympians themselves (Peers, 2009, p. 654). These complexities are unpacked in greater detail within Chapter Two of this thesis.

While discussions of mental and physical disability in popular film and television are increasingly widespread there are very few texts in the area of advertising that feature



persons with disabilities. This number decreases yet again, when we look at advertising specific to sport. Margaret Duncan and Alan Aycock (2005) provide some insight into representations of disability, in their groundbreaking study on sport advertising in print magazines. They examine representations of disability as it intersects with other identity categories such as race, sexuality, gender and class. They note that at present, within the dominant discourse of ableism people with disabilities are situated as the “other” or abnormal (Duncan & Aycock, 2005). As such, within sport an institution that privileges the able body—the “other” or the “abnormal” body is situated as inferior (Duncan & Aycock, 2005). Duncan and Aycock (2005) analyzed the samples included in their study in terms of eight key factors. These included gender, sexuality, race, class, setting, visibility, age, setting, and focus.

There are two apparent limitations to the Aycock and Duncan’s analysis. The study often lacks specificity, as it tries to cover a broad range of topics. There is also very little engagement with myth, discourse and discursive effects. Further, the study is limited to strictly print advertisements. While my thesis does not focus on print advertisements, many of these evaluation factors are used in the analysis process. This is because in discourse analysis it is important to examine social factors as well as linguistic ones. Specifically, Hall (2006) notes it is necessary to contextualize representations and the influence contextual factors have on the “making” of meaning. I examine how narratives of gender, race, age, class and sexuality articulate around the “disabled” body, particularly that of the Paralympian. I also problematize how the television advertisements used in my thesis relate to the broader social and political climate in

regards to the recent 2001 agreement with the IOC regarding sponsorship and publicity alliances between the two organizations.

### **Neoliberalism and consumer culture**

Academics and political economists have coined the term “neoliberalism” to explain the relatively recent but increasingly pervasive appeal to the market as a “cure all” for social, political and economic ills. This model is said to have gained momentum in Britain under Margaret Thatcher, and in the United States under Ronald Reagan (Harvey, 2007). However, it is now strongly incorporated into social life in much of the world, with its strongest site being the United States. Key components of neoliberalism include private property rights, consumption, free market philosophies and a dismantling of social services (Giroux, 2004; Hall, 2011; Harvey, 2005). Specifically of interest to this study are neoliberalism’s tenets of self-responsibility, individualism and consumption. These tenets will be explained further through the use of theorists such as Stuart Hall (2011), Henry Giroux (2004; 2008), and David Harvey (2005; 2007). Similarly, in specific relation to disability, a discussion of “crip theory” will be facilitated through Robert McRuer (2003; 2006). Briefly, crip theory is a critique of compulsory able-bodiedness and heteronormativity, with a keen interest in identifying how late capitalism (the dominant economic and cultural system as driven by market priorities) has constructed sexual and embodied identities in problematic ways (McRuer, 2006). It is here that the celebration, appropriation and containment of Paralympic athletes, as well as notions of compulsory able-bodiedness in athletics will be explored.

As I illustrate in Chapter Three, there is an increasing overlap between the rhetoric of neoliberalism and the many narratives of disability, particularly those of the

“supercrip”. As indicated earlier, the “supercrip” posits the disabled person as heroic simply by his or her ability to perform seemingly mundane feats (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). These narratives resonate with the focus on personal responsibility, self-management, and liberal individualism that is found within neoliberalism. This focus on individualism and personal responsibility provides the logic for the reduction of the welfare state and pathologizes disabled persons unable to “overcome” their “condition” without social assistance. It also situates disability as a problem best resolved through the market and increasing access to consumption, a theme that resonates with the increasing product endorsements made by Paralympian celebrities.

In his book *Disability in the media: Prescriptions for change*, Charles Riley suggests that the world of advertising is much further ahead than many other media types in terms of its incorporation of disability. Riley (2005) suggests the advertising industry is the first division of media to recognize disabled people as consumers. According to Riley “ad agencies were out in front in the representation of people with disabilities as empowered individuals” (Riley, 2005, p. 112). This is partially due to the competitiveness of the industry in the race to stay on top of the next big thing, which offers a space for a broader inclusion of difference (Riley, 2005). Many of these empowering advertisements however, are often presentations of the “supercrip”. An apparent limitation to this argument is that Riley is concerned with disability as a consumer demographic rather than a political category or social movement. Carol Thomas (2002) provides a unique link back to the social movement in her discussion of the materialist perspective of disability. She does this by looking at how economic change, and change in working conditions served to situate disabled persons as

dependants rather than providers (Thomas, 2002). The question remains, does inclusion of “disability” into the marketplace and world of advertising provide an adequate response to the social and political struggles waged by various disability activist communities?

With increasing neoliberalization of the workforce in more recent times (which, as will be discussed shortly, may allow for a more flexible work environment thus providing more opportunity for disabled persons to participate), leads myself, and Riley to ask how the disabled subject has transitioned from dependant to consumer? How is citizenship, in this sense, connected to “productivity” and in ways that limit or potentially pathologize the “disabled” subject? Is there a new consumer demographic that is leading Nike (among others) to create advertisements that are directed at this large group that has now in fact gained their autonomous buying power? And how, when specifically looking at sporting goods and the sporting world, has the increased notoriety of Paralympians such as Oscar Pistorius influenced these changes?

### **Advertising and disability**

The “supercrip” is currently the most common way disabled persons or athletes are represented within advertising and popular media in general. As previously mentioned, the “supercrip” is grounded in a narrative of overcoming, normality and heroism based on the performance of daily tasks (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). Moreover, disability is presented as an obstacle to be overcome. It is an abject entity.

When we look at illustrations of disability within a wider context of media in general, we find many similar types of representation. For example, in a case study involving the Sydney 2000 Paralympics researchers analyzed newspaper coverage of the

Games. They found that there were eight ways that Paralympians were portrayed (Cashman & Darcy, 2008). While the apparent breadth of representations belies the dearth of depictions of disability noted by several critics, each narrative of the Paralympian tends to pivot around a point of “pathology”. Similarly, in a more recent study, Pappous, Marcellini, & Leseleuc (2011a) found coverage of the Paralympics is limited within North America. This is attributed largely to the fact that no major American television network purchased rights to the 2008 Paralympic Games (Pappous, et al., 2011a). This lends support to the earlier claim made by Duncan and Aycock (2005) that athletes with disabilities are rarely seen in mainstream media and advertising. While these studies by Cashman and Darcy (2008) and Pappous et al., (2011a) provide valuable information regarding Paralympic media coverage, they are limited to print media. In addition, they do not focus on the body specifically. This study attempts to fill the gap in the literature by focusing on the body and problematizing these representations. It also serves to fill the need to explore other mediums, rather than simply looking at print media or magazines by moving to the medium of television advertisements. Lastly, it is important to discuss some of the advertising tactics used by Nike, which provide the main link between the television advertisements selected for this study. A background in advertising theory is explored through theorists such as Michelle Helstein (2002), Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson (1998), along with subsequent discussions through Robert McRuer (2003) and Charles A. Riley (2005) within Chapter Three of this study.

Nike, unlike many other sports apparel and equipment manufacturers, has been able to master the art of marketing a brand or lifestyle (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Nike’s ability to maintain an insiders view of sport, while maintaining their industry

leading advertising techniques makes their appropriation of difference appealing. Much like Riley (2005) discusses, incorporation of difference and availability of new markets for sales prompts Nike to be in constant movement, so as “not to stay in one place for too long” (Helstein, 2002, p. 38). As well, its advertising is no longer about a product per se, as opposed to keeping the brand itself visible (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Their logo and slogan “Just Do It” have allowed the brand to align itself with a certain lifestyle, which the everyday citizen can then consume. This is perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Nike advertising (Goldman & Papson, 1998).

Another topic of particular importance to this discussion is the ideal of transcendence found within Nike advertisements. Much of the study of transcendence has been done in regards to gender, however I believe it applies to Nike’s incorporation of Paralympians (disability) into its advertising campaigns as well. Nike, along with IBM and McDonald’s is one of the first companies to identify people with disabilities as consumers. Thus, this opens up another market for sales, much like Helstein (2002) discusses in relation to the female market. Briefly, Nike uses transcendence to sell products through their narrow view of the term “athlete”, and thus encourages consumers to subscribe to this narrative in and through the consumption of Nike products (Helstein, 2002). However, while Helstein’s study draws important attention to Nike advertisements specifically in relation to gender, it does not focus on bodies and abilities per se. In this thesis, I unpack Nike’s incorporation of the disabled body in order to market its brand. In addition, I explore how these depictions are progressive in that disability and difference is celebrated, but also regressive in the containment of disability, identity politics, and neoliberalism.

## Theoretical Overview

Poststructuralism provides the theoretical foundations for this study.

Poststructuralist theories are often associated with the works of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler. According to Chris Weedon (1987) the movement builds on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and his work in semiotics. For Weedon, poststructuralism

takes from Saussure the principle that meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by language, and that individual signs do not have intrinsic meaning, but acquire meaning through the language chain and their difference within it from other signs. These principles are important because they make language truly social and a site of political struggle. (1987, p. 23)

Thus, the meanings of “disability,” for instance, are neither permanent nor singular; instead, they are more or less anchored by the specific social and historical context in which they circulate. This project also includes earlier works of Barthes, which are considered more structuralist in nature. This is necessary in order to unpack how dominant meanings and understandings of disability are internalized and reiterated in and across popular and political culture. However, a poststructuralist approach will be maintained regarding the “making” of meaning through the use of the work of Stuart Hall (2006). Hall’s encoding and decoding model, as well as his theories of articulation will serve to ground the discussion in poststructuralism.

For Marion Corker (1998), poststructuralism “deals specifically with language and discourse and, as such, is bound up with issues of meaning, representation, and identity” (p. 224). Weedon echoes this focus on language and discourse in saying that poststructuralism encompasses a wide range of theories ranging from “deconstructive criticism... rewriting the meanings of gender and language... and the detailed historical

analysis of discourse and power in the work of Foucault” (1987, p. 19-20). Weedon (1987) claims that language serves to construct an individual’s identity and subjectivity, which is never unified or fixed. Language also constructs our social reality (Weedon, 1987). Poststructuralists often use textual analysis to understand and explore how meaning is made and socially constructed. This study specifically looks at how “disability” is socially constructed. As such this project utilizes a constructionist approach to meaning and representation (Hall, 1997). The importance of “disability” as a social construction lies in its complex relation to the material, as a result of “impairment”. This argument is situated within debates in critical disability studies regarding the separation of “disability” and “impairment”. Much like there is no clear division between “impairment” and “disability”, within theories of poststructuralism the divisions of “ability” and “disability”, as well as the “natural” and “impaired” body are not stable or natural concepts.

In regards to meaning, poststructuralism builds on structuralism by dealing with the problem of multiple possible meanings, or plurality. It does so by “questioning the location of social meaning in fixed signs” (Weedon 1987, p. 25). Barthes’ early work on myth focuses on these fixed signs, while his later work regarding relay and anchorage acknowledges that there is simply a temporary fixing of meaning. For Weedon “the signified is never fixed once and for all, but is constantly deferred” (1987, p.25). Meanings can shift in relation to the discursive context within which they are situated. This is particularly evident in discussions around the “normal” human body. Textual analysis, as performed in this study, looks at the advertisements in question in relation to their context, as well as other texts from the period in order to uncover the power relation



involved in their creation, and their subsequent effects. As well, poststructuralism is used to demonstrate how the meanings of disability—particularly those found in advertising—are polysemic and unstable rather than unified and “natural.”

### **A social model of disability**

For Thomas (2002), the social model of disability is linked to poststructuralist theory through its focus on the body as a social construction caught up in power relations. She suggests that “the social constructionist character of much of the theorizing ensures that it is the cultural representations and discursive positioning of bodies (that is, of ‘normal’ bodies) that is the focus of interest” (Thomas, 2002, p. 45). Both Foucault and Butler view the material body as a key aspect of social life. For Foucault the material body is central to subjectivity and identity and is situated in and by discourses. Foucault (1984) asserts that identity and subjectivity are constructed by and through power relations and discursive practices. Weedon reiterates this by saying Foucault proposed the body as a “discursive field” or site of political struggle on which “an attempt to understand the relationship between language, social institutions, subjectivity and power” is made (1987, p. 35).

Recent critical disability studies have challenged the medical model of disability, which located the “truth” of disability in the “abnormal” body, and moved towards the use of the more progressive social model of disability, which informs the theoretical framework of this study. Before we can go on to discuss the social model of disability, it is necessary to outline the medical model that has been a dominant ideological force surrounding the political and social discussions of “disability”, in both the past and

present. These notions have served to influence our perceptions of the disabled body, both in a larger social or cultural context, and more specifically in sport.

Under the medical model of disability, impairment is viewed as a private, personal problem. Here disability is defined as an individual deficit, or of personal tragedy and loss (Shakespeare, 2006). In other words, impairment is the problem of the individual, a theme that resonates with certain neoliberal ideologies (discussed further in Chapter Three). The medical model also serves to situate disabled persons as in need of institutionalization and rehabilitation, as an “ailing” body to be “cured” (Shakespeare, 2006). Thomas adds that within the medical model perspective “disability continues to be equated with the impairment itself – ‘the disability’ is the impairment” (2002, p. 40). She also adds that discourses of rehabilitation exist within the medical discourses of disability, with their purpose being to return or allow disabled persons to live a life as close to “normal” as possible (Thomas, 2002). Under this perspective, impairment always supersedes the disability.

Developed in Britain, the social model of disability gave an opportunity for those with disabilities to organize and resist many of the claims made by the medical model, and became a tool with which to fight oppression and protect the rights of disabled persons (Thomas, 2002). Led by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) the disabled peoples movement came to fruition in the 1980s (Thomas, 2002). According to Thomas, its goals were “to resist among other things, their regulation to residential institutions, their exclusion from the labour market, and the opportunity to earn a living wage, and their enforced poverty” (2002, p. 39). This has served to re-situate the issue of disability from the realm of the private to the more public

realm of the social (Thomas, 2002). The social model serves to challenge and refute claims made by “medical, welfarist and other cultural discourses – that restrictions of activity and social disadvantage are the inevitable and tragic consequence of being impaired” (Thomas, 2002, p. 40). This allows for the enablement of disabled individuals to call into question the “nature” of their exclusion.

The social model of disability, in direct contrast to the medical model, removes the blame from the individual and places it on society (DePauw, 1997). The model provides a clear distinction between impairment and disability. Impairment is defined as “any loss of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function” (Shogan, 1998, p. 273). Disability is then defined as the “disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairment” (Shogan, 1998, p. 273). This leads to the exclusion of people with disabilities from “the mainstream of social activities” (Thomas, 2002, p. 39). In other words, impairment is a physical limitation, while disability can be seen as social exclusion, though the two categories are at times difficult to untangle (Shakespeare, 2006). The social model has been a very effective political tool in changing the perceptions, language use, and self-image for persons with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2006). Viewing disability as socially constructed acknowledges that disability is a dynamic concept, which is constantly being renegotiated (Shogan, 1998). This is due to the variety of impairments that can impact the body, as well as the different forms of social barriers, which exclude those with impairments. This interaction produces different material effects for each individual body with an impairment. Also, recent use of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) amendments made in 2008 show we (as a

society) are still coming to terms with definitions of impairment, and how the rights of persons with disabilities can be further respected.

Many poststructuralists and postmodernists have questioned the medical model and argued for further use of the social model. Corker (1998), for instance, uses a postmodern framework to interrogate the limitations of the medical model of disability. She defines postmodernism as a widespread rejection of “the dominant beliefs of western cultures” and “the idea that there can be an ultimate truth about reality” (1998. p. 222). In other words, it is a rejection of a grand metanarrative. This is due to postmodernism’s belief in pluralism, which asserts that there is a co-existence of multiple discourses operating at the same time, which are often context dependent and markedly different than white, male, Eurocentric standards (Corker, 1998). In terms of disability, this means that there can be no essential reduction of disability to the individual, which the medical model of disability attempts to do (Corker, 1998). To this, I would add that there could also be no reduction of disability to only the environment or the social. It must be considered an interaction between the two that produces the experience of disability. As Butler (1993) suggests, the material and ideological aspects of social reality are inseparable. Therefore, we can see the importance of the social model in providing persons with disabilities a political and social tool to resist an overly simplistic reduction of impairment to the individual and human physiology; the social model enables an interrogation of power relations and discursive effects related to images, narratives and experiences of disability.

Within this thesis, the social model is used to uncover the power relations involved in and the discursive effects of disability. It will prompt us to consider what it

means to think of disability as a social construction, as well as the limitations involved in viewing disability in this light. In discussing disability as a social construction, we are able to explore in greater detail how discourses of the Paralympian relate to larger debates concerning disability identity politics, neoliberalism and consumer culture as well as disability in advertising.

## **Method**

As previously mentioned, the texts will be subject to a critical discourse analysis as influenced by Stuart Hall. Hall's focus on the body helps to situate this study in a poststructural vein, while his consideration of historical specificity, language and practice make his style of discourse analysis methodologically attractive. Herein lies what Douglas Kellner calls a "contextual cultural studies" approach (1995). This is in conjunction to a theoretical grounding in critical disability studies, poststructuralism and a critique of neoliberalism. Since their association with the transnational corporation Nike largely connects the texts, providing a background in Nike advertising techniques is necessary for the reader as well. The intention of this analysis is to discover where and how Paralympians are being represented within advertising and to what effects. The results of the discourse analysis are written up in the form of a discussion. This discussion will specifically look at how these representations intersect with broader theories and ideological positions present in our society during the time period of the study, contextualized in relations to key events, such as Pistorius being granted Olympic eligibility, the release of his Nike advertising campaigns and their continued use of his image, as well as several important policies such as the ADA and the IOC-IPC cooperation agreement.

## Data collection

This study looks primarily at television commercials from 2008 to present that feature Paralympians. The primary focus of the study is on Nike advertisements featuring Rohan Murphy, Oscar Pistorius and Craig Blanchette, as well as an Visa advertisement featuring Cheri Blauwet. The Visa advert was chosen to show how female athletes are represented, as at present Nike has yet to produce an advertisement exclusively featuring a female Paralympian, although they do sponsor them (Sarah Reinertsen, most recently). As well, it serves to demonstrate that Nike is not the only company incorporating “difference” into its advertising campaigns, and how Paralympians are represented in advertisements in consistent and contrasting ways across various campaigns<sup>5</sup>. While these advertisements will form the basis of my discourse analysis, I also draw extensively from other popular culture texts, such as *Push Girls*, *Murderball*, and *Warrior Games*, among many others to contextualize, complicate and nuance my analysis. Further, the Nike “No Excuses” campaign will also be incorporated to contextualize and critique the use and representation of “disability” within neoliberalism.

Texts for this project were retrieved largely from the Internet, as this is the main source of Paralympic sport coverage. The magazine *The Paralympian* does not contain any advertising, and to compound this no major US network picked up Paralympic coverage of the 2008 or 2010 Paralympic Games (Howe, 2011). The games were

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<sup>5</sup> The current study does not cover print advertisements, though there are some associated with these television campaigns. The reason for this being that, while these print advertisements were pervasive, they would simply provide an extension of previous work already completed in this area. Thus in order to keep this analysis specific and to add new work to the literature print advertisements are not included.

broadcast via live streaming on Paralympicsport.tv, the official YouTube channel of Paralympic sport. Thus, many of the commercials compiled in this study will come from a variety of YouTube archives and athlete websites.

### **Data analysis**

The search for advertisements began on the Internet, primarily on YouTube. All advertisements featuring Paralympians as the primary focus were then downloaded and stored on a hard drive. This allowed for easy access to them as needed, and lowered the risk of the ad being removed from the Internet in the future. The advertisements were then reviewed and the four primary advertisements discussed above were chosen; three involving Nike and one by Visa. The advertisements then underwent a frame by frame analysis, in which I attempted to answer the following questions: do the advertisements reinforce the dominant discourses found in the academic literature and are the advertisements resistive to the dominant discourses or do they simply reproduce them? Following the method prescribed by Hall (1997), the advertisements were also analyzed in terms of discursive statements, discursive rules, discursive subjects, discursive authority, historical specificity, and how the social institution of media influences and reinforces or challenges dominant discourse surrounding the representation of elite disabled athletes.

In keeping with the poststructural focus of this thesis, which underscores the intersection of language and power, a critical discourse analysis is an appropriate methodological choice. Stuart Hall's (1997) interpretation of discourse analysis was chosen as a methodology for this project. For Hall a discourse analysis examines not only,

how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied. (1997, p. 6)

Hall's discourse analysis is also methodologically attractive in that it calls for a historically specific critique (1997). Historical specificity is important for Hall due to the fact that meaning can never be "*finally* fixed", rather meaning is expressed temporarily, which subjects it to more influence from contextual factors (Hall, 1997, p. 23). This makes Hall's type of analysis similar to what Douglas Kellner (1995) calls "contextual cultural studies." Kellner's approach "employs social theory to properly contextualize, interpret, and analyze the nature and effects of media culture... we need to understand the structures and dynamics of a given society to understand and interpret its culture" (1995, p. 4). He also clarifies that while media texts are not apolitical or innocent, neither are they simply carbon copies of dominant ideology; they are complex pieces, which take on the social and political meanings of the discourse in which they were created. As a result, a text like a film, novel or "disability" advert, for instance, must be read, critiqued and interpreted within the "political economy, social relations, and the political environment within which they are produced, circulated, and received" (Kellner, 1995, p. 4). This then reinforces the importance of media culture, which influences how individuals understand and construct their race, class, gender, and sexuality as well as how they view power relations. Contextual cultural studies also hints at the merits of textual analysis, which serves to situate and deconstruct these representations within the political, social, and cultural discourses in which they were created. Thus, it is imperative to situate the discussion surrounding disability, identity and sport within wider sociopolitical struggles and events (such as the increasing neoliberal turn to a reduction of social services and



individualization, among others), in order to unpack the key political issues that are articulated within the advertisements in question.

Hall (1997) argues, with significant influence from Foucault, that discourse is what produces our knowledge and meaning, rather than the things themselves. Specifically, he states “subjects like ‘madness’, ‘punishment’ and ‘sexuality’ only exist meaningfully *within* the discourses about them” (Hall, 1997, p. 45). This argument can be extrapolated to include topics of “disability”, sport and advertising as well. As a result, Hall suggests that a cohesive discourse analysis must contain six crucial elements. First, all the statements surrounding the topic of, for example disability, “which give us a certain kind of knowledge about these things” need to be examined (Hall, 1997, p. 45). Second, the rules, which construct the ways of talking about a topic at a particular historical moment, need to be investigated (Hall, 1997). Third, the subjects who personify the discourse are examined (Hall, 1997). Within the discourse of disability these could include the “expert”, the position of disabled or the Paralympian, or the able-bodied subject position. Next, how this knowledge on the topic acquires authority at a historically specific time must be critiqued (Hall, 1997). One must also critique the “practices within institutions for dealing with the subjects” (Hall, 1997, p. 46). This could include treatment for the disabled or the classification process for disabled athletes within the IPC and perhaps most importantly for this thesis, how media (as a social institution) deals with the “disabled” subject. This is especially important as media practices are (re)producing a particular knowledge about disability (and its subjects) through its practices of, for example relying on the “supercrip” narrative. Lastly, we must recognize that these discourses are historically specific. Hall encourages us to

acknowledge “a different discourse or *episteme* will arise at a later historical moment, supplanting the existing one, opening a new *discursive formation*” (1997, p. 46). This will lead to our social practices being regulated in new and different ways (Hall, 1997). The texts in this thesis underwent a rigorous critique following these key steps outlined by Hall.

Roland Barthes’ concept of relay and anchorage is also be used to identify and deconstruct the relationship between image, sound, and text in advertisements. According to Barthes, the signification of the image is intentional not arbitrary in advertising (1977). The viewer of the ad receives “at one and the same time” the literal and cultural meanings displayed in the advertisement (Barthes, 1977, p. 36). The function of anchorage is to limit “all of the possible (denoted) meanings of the text”, to repress unwanted meanings, and to direct the audience to a predetermined meaning (Barthes, 1977, p. 39). Anchorage is similar to Hall’s encoding process.

Relay is the reciprocal relation between the text and picture (or image), or the relation between sequences of pictures, such as in a comic strip (Barthes, 1977). The text and image “stand in a complimentary relationship” (Barthes, 1977, p. 41). Arguably, most often relay and anchorage are used together in order to direct the reader to a predestined meaning, which the author of the ad would like them to find in a very short amount of time. In the case of television advertisements, this is often less than 30 seconds.

The use of music is also important for Barthes. Music, which is often used in advertising, and more specifically, (including Nike advertising), carries a message which can be read (Barthes, 1977). These messages are embedded within the production or

composition of the song, which are interpreted by the listener following the set of codes within the piece (Barthes, 1977). This interpretation is of course contextual, as we know music can convey different meanings based on the context it is used in (such as in an ad versus in a film) or the historical setting. An example of this would be the use of the Beatles song “Revolution.” When set within the 1960s conveys a vastly different message than when it is used within a Nike advertising campaign. Further, advertisers want to align the legitimacy of the music with their brand name (Bradshaw, Sherlock, & McDonagh, 2004). Thus, it is important to critique the use of music within the selected advertisements to uncover how it works within the context of the advertisements to convey a particular message.

Hall’s (2006) work on encoding and decoding is essential when looking at the power relations and discursive effects of advertising messages. It also helps us to reconcile the discrepancies between the endless deferral of meanings and the seemingly fixed meanings from Barthes earlier work on myth. The encoding portion of this process provides the viewer with the limits and parameters within which the decoding will operate (Hall, 2006). The encoding process serves to appropriate the message as meaningful discourse, which can then be decoded (Hall, 2006). The decoded message and its associated meanings “‘have an effect’, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioral consequences” (Hall, 2006, p.165). While one could arrive at multiple, even conflicted meanings, codes serve to limit the possible meanings by encouraging the viewer to arrive at dominant or preferred meanings, which are reinforced through repetition across various media texts and institutions (Hall, 2006). According to Hall, there exists a pattern of

“‘preferred readings’; and these both have institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized” (2006, p. 169). For Hall, if one is operating inside the dominant code they are in the “dominant-hegemonic position” (2006, p. 171).

There can however, be alternate readings, which advertisers and television producers try to avoid. When one occupies the negotiated position, one may come up with an alternate reading (Hall, 2006). Hall states that

decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated level), It makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule. (2006, p. 172)

Thus, while there can be infinite meanings, codes act to direct us to a limited number of these meanings during the decoding process. This study is particularly interested in the decoding process and the discursive effects of the representations of Paralympians in advertising. As previously mentioned, poststructuralism is concerned with the deconstruction of relations of power and language, which serve to produce (albeit temporary) meanings. This deconstructive logic is also intrinsic to the social model of disability.

### **Rationale**

Scholarship regarding Paralympic athletes, or any sort of disability for that matter, in advertising is fundamentally limited. Currently, research is limited to general depictions of disability in advertising. In regards to disability and sport, research is limited to disability and recreation, if it is present at all (Duncan & Aycock, 2005). Often in these contexts products are sold to or marketed towards caregivers, leaving the

disabled subject unrecognized as a consumer. Riley (2005) however, suggests just the opposite; advertising has served to incorporate the disabled person into the category of consumer. With pervasive media exposure and an increase in Paralympic endorsements there is a translation of disability identity politics and social struggles to the realm of consumer citizenship, where equality is apparently measured by increasing access to the marketplace; “empowerment” is realized within rather than against a mode of production that has historically disempowered disabled people. Therefore, it is necessary to explore these contradictory positions further through research on disability and advertising. As Duncan and Aycock (2005) suggest, several media studies regarding the representations of disability have been conducted in the areas of television, photographs and cinema. These include studies in the areas of disability and literature, disability and film, and representations of disability in television. The convergence of the topics of advertising, sport and disability however, remains largely unexplored.

In relation to media coverage of disability, there have been several studies conducted that explore the use and depictions of elite (or average) disability sport participants in print media. These often fall under the format of content analysis, or a mix of content analysis and discourse analysis such as those found in the work of Smith and Thomas (2005), Maas and Hasbrook (2001), and Pappous, et al., (2011a). They often look at the frequency of images in newsprint, whether males are disproportionately portrayed as opposed to females, and what types of disability sports are featured<sup>6</sup>. While

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<sup>6</sup> For examples see Pappous, A., Marcellini, A., & de Lesseleuc, E. (2011). From Sydney to Beijing: The evolution of the photographic coverage of Paralympic games in five European Countries. *Sport and Society*, 14(3), 345-354. Or, Buysse, J.M., & Borcharding, B. (2010). Framing gender and disability: A cross-cultural analysis of

the discussions from these types of media studies serve to inform this study of common representations in media, they often lack descriptive analysis. In other words, they tell us little of *how* disability is depicted and to what ideological ends.

It is imperative to discuss the representations of elite disability athletes due to the increase in media attention surrounding the games. For the most part discussions of Paralympic sport and advertising are largely absent from sociology of sport literature. The Paralympics are now broadcast live via the Internet during all events in an effort to increase exposure. This, combined with a recent agreement of cooperation between the IPC and the IOC, in which the IOC will help to support the IPC in terms of broadcasting and marketing has increased the need for attention to this topic<sup>7</sup> (IPC-IOC Co-operation, n.d.). Due to increased media exposure, the rate of athlete sponsorship is also increasing for Paralympians. In 2008 Cheri Blauwet signed an endorsement deal with Visa worth approximately \$100,000 per year (Chester, 2008). Oscar Pistorious, perhaps one of the most renowned Paralympians to date is currently sponsored by Nike, Oakley, Thierry Mugler and Ossur (the company that makes Pistorius' running prosthetics) allowing him to bring in approximately a million dollars per year in endorsements and appearance fees (Sokolove, 2012). This increasing sponsorship is occurring alongside an increase in the neoliberalization of most developed nations, that is, a celebration of consumerism and the market as solutions to social problems.

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photographs from the 2008 Paralympic Games. *International Journal of Sport and Communication*, 3, 308-321.

<sup>7</sup> For more information see [http://www.paralympic.org/IPC/IPC-IOC\\_Co-operation.html](http://www.paralympic.org/IPC/IPC-IOC_Co-operation.html) or Howe, D. (2006). Classification of disabled athletes: (Dis)Empowering the Paralympic practice community. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 23, 29-46.

This study attempts to unpack why sponsorship is potentially problematic. A reading of Kellner's work (2001) suggests that sponsorship is an issue within the sociology of sport, because it gives the corporation the authority to determine the most "profitable" image of the celebrity athlete, who is often discouraged from engaging in any practices or politics at odds with the corporate status quo and the logic of capital. Kellner uses the example of Michael Jordan and Nike to illustrate this problem of policing athlete behavior, both on and off the playing field. He also questions how Jordan (and by extension current sponsored athletes such as Tiger Woods, LeBron James, and perhaps even Oscar Pistorius) promote the commercialization of sport, while circulating the capitalist and neoliberal values of wealth, greed, and "the replacement of social values with monetary ones" (Kellner, 2001, p. 59). Kellner (2001) also calls into question how media creates, promotes, and mediates consumption of these values, products, and celebrities, all while blatantly promoting consumer culture. Herein lies a vital connection between sports celebrity, commercialization, the media spectacle and the increasing reduction of sport to market logic (Kellner, 2001).

While Kellner looks at how sponsorship of celebrity athletes is problematic, he neglects to inquire how "disability" and "abnormal" bodies complicate sponsorship. In response, my study of advertising and Paralympians extends this discussion by exploring how sponsorship both promotes the image of the corporation, but also serves to produce a reciprocal representation of disability. My analysis interrogates what it means to "worship" through media, and to celebrate a "disabled" body. An analysis and discussion of disability identity politics would suggest that this is quite different than celebrating "normativity" (though it often is influenced by "normative" identities like whiteness,

masculinity and heteronormativity, for instance). This shift from “problem” to “hero” hints at the instability of the disabled athlete identity category, keeping very much in line with theoretical notions of poststructuralism, in which identities are never stable or fixed.

### **Limitations**

While some might question the lack of a large number of source material to be analyzed, when situated within the theoretical and epistemological aims of this study, sample size is no longer a concern. This concern is also minimized because the study is limited to television advertisements, rather than print, and as well due to the fact that people and athletes with disabilities are not often represented in advertising at all (Duncan & Aycock, 2005). It is important to critique television, because as Kellner (1995) notes, it remains the center of media culture. In addition, there are slightly different methods of advertising used in print advertisements, as opposed to television advertisements. Thus, in order to keep this study specific, television advertisements were chosen. This medium was selected due to the lack of critical analysis of the relationship between “disability” and television within both sport and cultural studies, and more specifically, these advertisements were chosen due to their involvement with sport and the centrality of Paralympic athletes within the advertisements. The texts provide us with important descriptive content and rich cultural meaning regarding disability itself, as well as disability sport and its competitors. These texts, though few in number, provide significant messages about the converging discourses of neoliberalism, consumerism and identity politics.

In addition, there are some issues with the methodology of discourse analysis itself. As mentioned, discourse analysis does not attempt to propose an absolute solution



to the apparent social problem being studied. It does however attempt to point out the imbalances of power, inherent contradictions, and hidden motivations behind a specific text or set of texts (Dijk, 2003). The goal of discourse analysis is to deconstruct, question, and interpret a set of problems or texts. Kellner (1995) helps to unpack the purpose and importance of media culture here. For Kellner, “the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or failure, powerful or powerless” (1995, p. 1). Media culture shapes our values, perceptions of race, class, gender, ability and sexuality; it shapes our identities and our perceived places in the social world (Kellner, 1995). It promotes consumption of the popular, and is a mode of socialization. Kellner goes as far as to say “media culture *is* the dominant culture today” (1995, p. 17). Therefore, it is extremely important to deconstruct the imbalances of power, inherent contradictions, and hidden motivations that can be found within various media texts.

As a result of this, numerous interpretations could be made in regards to the same set of texts. As well, all subsequent interpretations are subject to similar deconstruction. However, it is then critical to contextualize, or situate such projects within a particular time period, context, or set of theories that serve to limit the number of interpretations that can be made. As Dijk (2003) points out discourse analysis is highly interdisciplinary, which makes it methodologically attractive to this study.

## **Conclusion**

Within the academic literature on print advertisements featuring Paralympians, or persons with disability the most common discourse is that of the “supercrip”. This study suggests that this appears to carry over into the television advertisements put forth by

both Nike and Visa. This study undertakes the task of building on the current academic literature, while moving into the relatively unexplored areas surrounding elite disabled athletes and advertising. Specifically, my research picks up where other theorists have left off and looks at sport advertising and elite disabled athletes as their representations have a direct impact on how our society views disability. Further, their representations are also indicative of the dominant discourses surrounding disability, as their subjectivity is both produced by and subjected to these discourses (Hall, 1997).

In what follows, the results of this study are separated into chapters following the major themes of this project, which include disability identity politics; neoliberalism and consumer culture; and advertising and disability. The project strives to answer my main research questions, which include, but are not limited to: How are Paralympic athletes represented in advertisements?; Are they as progressive as we think, or are there limitations to them?; Are there similarities between the portrayal of Paralympians and “disabled” characters in popular film and television?; What are the discursive effects of these advertisements?; How can these images of “disability” be read in competing, if not transgressive ways?; How is disability as “difference” framed, contained and celebrated? This research is significant because, as Kellner (1995) notes, popular media is influential in deciding which discourses become dominant and which discourses are marginalized. If we can draw attention to the dominant discourses surrounding disability, sport and advertising that appear with regularity, we may be able to resist or challenge these discourses and reduce the marginalization to which people with disability are often subject.

## Chapter Two

### Disability, Identity Politics and the Paralympian

In Chapter One I drew upon existing literature to demonstrate the dominant discourses that surround athletes with disabilities in relation to media and advertising. These discourses include athletes as a human-interest story, as inferior to Olympians and perhaps most regularly the “supercrip” (DePauw, 1997; Hardin & Hardin, 2004). The “supercrip” narratives can be found with regularity throughout, not only advertising but also television, film and literature as well. In this chapter I expand on poststructural notions of identity through the work of Stuart Hall (1996a, 1996b 1999), Judith Butler (1993) and Claudine Sherrill (1997) to explore in detail how disability intersects with other identity categories such as race, class, gender and sexuality. In doing so, I undertake a discourse analysis of four Paralympian advertisements in order to examine how discourses of disability and articulations of identity are reproduced within advertising. With the opening of the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics nearing<sup>8</sup>, we are already seeing the Paralympian being increasingly used within advertising for companies such as Coca-Cola and BP Oil. Thus, it is becoming imperative to explore how these bodies are portrayed, and more importantly the discourses that they are reproducing.

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<sup>8</sup> The writing of this thesis occurred prior to the start of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which will run from July 27-August 9 and August 29-September 9, 2012 respectively.

## Poststructuralism and Identity

A poststructuralist formulation of identity and identification is used throughout this study. In this approach, identities are never fixed or stable; they are fragmented and fractured and often constructed across multiple discourses, practices and positions (Hall, 1996a). For example, in the “docudrama” reality television series *Push Girls* the intersections of disability, sexuality and femininity are explored and in some ways celebrated. The show very progressively depicts the four women it follows as independent, active, beautiful, as well as sexual. However, a more nuanced reading exposes the complexities of disability and identity in that the girls are often reduced to traditional markers of femininity such as an interest in “manly” men, the ability to procreate and traditional standards of beauty (such as hair, makeup, slender frames and so on). This demonstrates that representation of identity and disability is not so cut-and-dried. Identities are increasingly complex, historically constructed and positional (Hall, 1999). For example, representation of developmental disability in *I am Sam* (2001), a film released in a post-“Americans with Disabilities Act” (ADA) era is vastly different from that of *Rainman* (1988) in a pre-ADA era. In *Rainman* Raymond (played by Dustin Hoffman) is initially presented as a burden on his family and society and is thus institutionalized for most of his life, while Sam Dawson (Sean Penn) is depicted as an independent, self sufficient, caring father in *I am Sam*. These examples show that identities and their subsequent representations are contextual and influenced by political and cultural discourses. Identities are entwined in relations of power and are the product of differentiating between difference and sameness (Hall, 1996a). Specifically for Hall, identity refers to a suturing or the

points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. They are a result of a successful articulation or ‘chaining’ of the subject into the flow of the discourse. (1996a, p. 6)

These temporary linkages can be broken, as they are only sustainable under certain conditions (Hall, 1996b). Similarly, they can be “re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’” (Hall, 1996b, p. 141). This “suturing” raises important concerns of how disability intersects with other aspects of identity, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, among others. For example, when affluent celebrities like Michael J. Fox or the late Christopher Reeve are diagnosed with an impairment, news media coverage and fundraising typically increases. However, when the lesser-known citizen is diagnosed or becomes disabled there is very little fanfare. In other words, disability is experienced differently according to one’s racial and gender identity, economic privilege or perceived sexual “normativity.”

In many ways, identities are constructed within representation (Hall, 1996a). They are historically situated across both popular and political cultures. “Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical naturally constituted unity” (Hall, 1996a, p. 4). As such, identities are constructed *through* rather than outside of difference (Hall, 1996a). By this logic, identity operates in an exclusionary way. This is done through the “discursive construction of a constitutive outside, and the production of abjected and marginalized subjects” (Hall, 1996a, p. 15). For example, in the ability/disability binary disability is marginalized while ability is naturalized as “normal”. Likewise, the process of identification occurs through splitting, “splitting between that

which one is, and that which is the other” (Hall, 1999, p. 147). The “other” however, is necessary for the self to exist, and vice versa. As a result, we can think of

identity as contradictory, as composed of more than one discourse, as composed always across the silences of the other, as written in and through ambivalence and desire ... [rather than] a sealed or closed totality. (Hall, 1999, p. 148)

This creation of the “Other” allows the self to in fact exist. Colonial binaries, as Homi Bhabha reminds us, are discursive constructions used to legitimize colonial domination and various “civilizing” missions (1994). An inversion of the black/white binary cannot be sustained; neither can that of the privileging of disability over ability, as there will still be a marginal identity. For example, while the privileging of the Paralympics rather than the Olympics as the premiere international sporting event may seem inherently positive, it will not serve to solve the ability/disability binary that posits identities as mutually exclusive and self-contained. There is a need to step outside the use of binaries that serve to limit and contain, in order to shift our views to see difference without stigma.

In this chapter, I sketch some of the theoretical dimensions of disability identity politics, examining how the material realities of impairment impact identification in and beyond sports. Specifically, I discuss how ideas and narratives of the “normal” develop in relation to the “abnormal” and how “ability” is intricately linked to “disability”. If identity emerges through an exclusionary practice in relation to race, gender and sexuality, as several social theorists suggest, it also develops in relation to “ability” and the body. As a result, it is imperative to discuss how the performative aspect of identity allows for the citation of the rules and normative regulations, which serve to constrain and contain the disabled subject (Butler, 1993; Hall, 1996a). By this I mean how the rules prescribed by the dominant discourses surrounding disability are taken up and

enacted by subjects with a disability. Further, one must ask how disability intersects or articulates with gender, sexuality, and race, within the context of sport to create the identity of the elite disabled athlete.

### **Identity and Disability**

If identities are intertwined with power relations and subsequently are constantly shifting, it stands to reason that (dis)ability is also socially constituted, multidimensional and involves interaction between “self” and “other” (Sherrill, 1997). Disability, in other words, is only but a fragment of one’s identity. According to Sherrill disability is a “personal descriptor that is unique to each individual” and is subject to influence and change “by cultural norms in attitudes to disability, political expediencies, and other aspects of the ever changing environment” (1997, p. 259). This is demonstrated in the changing representations of disability in popular media, from the “criminalization” of mental illness in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), the tragic but redemptive story of disability in *Forest Gump* (1994), the “heartfelt” infantilization of disability in *Radio* (2003), and to the pervasive “supercrip” of advertising. Further, it is asserted that the personal meaning of disability may be more influential in self-concept and identity, than the disability itself (Sherrill, 1997). It appears that the social construction of disability occurs at both the cultural and individual levels, making the experience of disability unique from one person to the next.

Herein lies what can be broadly described as disability “identity politics” as a “last outpost” of civil rights struggle increasingly understood in relation to other identity categories. During the 1980s the movement was a fight for even the most basic rights, such as the right to vote, have children, to an education, and to employment (Funk, 1987).

Further, activists sought to “humanize” people with disabilities, to have their individual needs recognized and subsequently to have public policy reflect and meet these needs (Funk, 1987). Informed by a social model of disability, the disability rights movement placed a political emphasis on “de-institutionalization” and self-efficacy, which culminated (and was perhaps contained) by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The success (though some would say limited) of the ADA has in many ways facilitated the incorporation of an identity-based political movement into a consumer demographic increasingly courted by advertisers and marketing campaigns (which will be explored further in Chapter Three) (Riley, 2005).

Research surrounding disability’s interaction with other identity categories has focused primarily on gender. This could be due to the fact that disability is normalized as a stable, homogenous identity and does not take into account the uniqueness of each individual experience of disability. However, some theorists argue that this is because individuals are impacted more by their minority status as disabled than by identification with other social groups (Sherrill, 1997). The cast members of *Push Girls*, for instance, share similar disabilities and gender values that “unite” the four women featured in the show. As in *Murderball*, where the intersection of masculinity and disability is strongly defined by “normal” sexual functioning, emphasis on the ability to have relationships and perform sexually is also found in *Push Girls* (albeit presented in slightly different ways). In terms of gender, however, it has been noted that women with disabilities often face a higher level of stigma than males (Sherrill, 1997). As discussed in the following section, this trend continues in the arena of disability sport.



## **Advertising, Disability and Identity**

Margaret Duncan and Alan Aycock (2005) provide some insight into representations of disability in sport advertising in their groundbreaking study on sport advertising in print magazines. They look at representations of disability, and how disability intersects with other identity categories such as race, sexuality, gender and class. Much like the discourses of ableism that run throughout other cultural representations, people with disabilities are situated as the “other” or abnormal, and subsequently inferior in the advertisements. In terms of visibility, Duncan and Aycock (2005) found that the focus of the advertisement was not the disabled person; in fact, many of the advertisements were directed at caregivers, rather than at the disabled person themselves. Women were presented as passive, in the company of children, and smiling, while men were more likely to be presented in action, showing facial expressions of exertion (Duncan & Aycock, 2005). Sexuality was also depicted in a stereotypical way. Any reference to sexuality was compliant with heterosexual norms (Duncan & Aycock, 2005). As well, many of the advertisements Duncan and Aycock studied had the effect of suggesting “persons with disabilities are, or should become asexual because they are physically ‘inferior’ and ‘unattractive’” (2005, p. 144). It was found that all persons in the advertisements were white and according to the authors “dark haired models are extremely rare, let alone *dark skinned*”, and dark skinned males were entirely absent in the advertisements (Duncan & Aycock, 2005, p.143). In conjunction with race, it was found that the advertisements depicted a high-class lifestyle and often featured elderly persons (Duncan & Aycock, 2005). This contradicts the actual lived realities of

disability, as the majority of the disabled populations are young males, many of whom are living in poverty or on social assistance (Duncan & Aycock, 2005).

There are two apparent limitations to the Duncan and Aycock study. Firstly, it often lacks specificity and is limited to strictly print advertisements. Similarly, the focus of the print advertisements was mainly leisure and recreation, rather than elite disability sport. Within my own project television advertisements produced by Nike and Visa are examined to illustrate how narratives of gender, race, age, class and sexuality articulate around the “disabled” body, particularly that of the Paralympian. Dominant trends that were found include the use of select types of disabled bodies, the creation of a hierarchy of acceptable “media friendly” disabilities, the focus on the body in motion, and the privilege of the white male athletic body through the ability to narrate their own advertisements. These trends are discussed in the following sections.

### **Identity and Disability Sport**

For some disabled communities, disability sport “seems to offer positive opportunities for self esteem development” (Sherrill, 1997, p. 280). It offers a place for athletes to interact with others “like themselves” and become part of a group identity, some possibly for the first time (Sherrill, 1997, p. 264). However, many disability sport scholars note that labels and categorization can lower expectations of achievement and perceived ability for athletes (Peers, 2009). Identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality and class can impact the type and amount of coverage an athlete receives within media and advertising. Schell and Rodriguez (2001), and Buyesse and Borcheding (2010) suggest that in able-bodied athletic coverage female competitors receive significantly less, and often different types of coverage. This is due to the fact that the

celebrated sporting body is the strong, able, male body (Buyesse & Borcheding, 2010). Similarly, female elite disabled athletes are under-represented and often face more severe stigma than male athletes (Sherrill, 1997). For example, Cashman and Darcy (2008), as well as Pappous et al., (2011a) found males were featured more often than females in photo and newsprint coverage of the Paralympics Games. Similarly, a recent study by the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) showed that on primetime television only 6 of 647 characters have a disability, and of those six all were white and only one character was female (Paxton, Kane, Mattia, & Avruch, 2011). When looking at gender in Paralympic newspaper coverage Buyesse and Borcheding (2010) found that female athletes face a threefold disadvantage in that they are not able-bodied, conventionally sexually attractive, or male. Likewise, Pappous and colleagues (2011a) found that female athletes were largely under-represented in photographic coverage of the Paralympics; however they explain this through the breakdown of the five major national teams and conclude this could be impacted by the disparity between the number of female and male Paralympians in attendance at the games. Their study also found that Paralympians both male and female in Beijing were only shown in action 38% of the time (Pappous et al., 2011a, p. 349). This indicates that while there has been an increase in quantity of coverage, there has been a regression in the quality of the coverage from Sydney 2000 to Beijing 2008, in that coverage has returned to “disability first” framing (Pappous et al., 2011a).

Huang and Brittain (2006) found that female athletes also stressed the need to point out the multiple facets of their identities (i.e. wife, mother), which are contextual and coincide with “passive” and “pleasant” traits of hegemonic femininity. In terms of

masculinity, male athletes found it necessary to combat stereotypes of weakness and inactivity by portraying the prominence of their skill and muscularity (Huang & Brittain, 2006). According to Huang and Brittain, “their sport prowess and masculine body image also gives these male participants sexual confidence, which affirms their gender identity as sexually able heterosexual men” (2006, p. 363). This claim is replicated in Cherney and Lindemann’s (2010) analysis of *Murderball* in which they found that the male quad rugby players constantly strive to embody traditional notions associated with hegemonic masculinity through exceptional athletic skill and muscularity. Here the desire to be perceived as “normal” includes an appeal to a troubling version of “manliness” rooted in heterosexual conquest. With respect to the intersection of race, disability and representation, very little research has been done, save for the section on race in the Duncan and Aycock (2005) article, in which they found a virtual “white wash” in their advertising sample. This leads us to question if these stereotypes regarding the disabled body are reproduced within the advertisements put forth by Nike and Visa. Given that disability sport already receives less coverage than able-bodied sport, it is necessary to investigate how various identity categories are presented when coverage is actually received.

The centrality of the body in sport is an aspect of identity that cannot be ignored. For some, the idea of an “incomplete” disabled body participating in sport is difficult to comprehend, as traditionally the athlete is a signifier of bodily perfection. Sport is an arena within which a multitude of identities are negotiated and embodied (Huang & Brittain, 2006). In their study of identity and disability sport Huang and Brittain (2006) found that Taiwanese and British athletes identified two dominant themes: “I am

impaired and I am disabled” or “I am impaired but not disabled” (2006, p. 358, 360). In the “I am impaired and I am disabled” category, athletes used a biomedical view of their impairments and abilities, where the disability is perceived as intrinsic to the body of the individual rather than socially constructed (Huang & Brittain, 2006). In the “impaired but not disabled” theme, athletes rejected the negative connotations associated with their impairments and found their “self definition in what they are able to do” rather than a medical model view (Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 361). Huang and Brittain also found that “elite sport provides a base for disabled people to redefine themselves and think beyond the dualism of disabled-nondisabled in self identity” (2006, p. 265). The study also suggests that athletes with disabilities acknowledge that they have multiple facets of identity, with disability being only one (Huang & Brittain, 2006). This is very much in line with the poststructural notion of there being no unified, essential identity, including the category of “disabled.” Thus, it is important to observe what other facets of the Paralympian identities are portrayed within the advertisements. Are all Paralympians equal in the so-called multicultural marketplace? How is racial, gender and sexual “normativity” shaped by the narratives of disability as “difference?” Do the advertisements resist or conform to the negative perceptions associated with impairment and disability sport?

### **The paralympian**

The identities of Paralympians, as Danielle Peers (2009) explains, are complex and ever unstable. She explains that the discourse of the heroic Paralympian cannot exist without the tragic disabled subject, a narrative that is rather commonplace in popular film and television (Peers, 2009). Further, she notes that the identity of the Paralympian relies

on a tragic moment of disablement, resulting in an introduction to Paralympic sport (Peers, 2009). Here the identity of the Paralympian is positioned in the discourse to rely on individuals such as volunteers and Games founders for their resulting empowerment, often to the exclusion and potential disempowerment of Paralympians themselves (Peers, 2009). Such reliance reduces expectations regarding the results and abilities of the athletes, much like the slogan “the Paralympics are where heroes come” (Peers, 2009, p. 656). This implies that Paralympians are heroes simply for their ability to merely attend the games, rather than their accomplishments and feats achieved. The slogan suggests “Paralympians need only appear disabled and appear at the event in order to be considered heroic” (Peers, 2009, p. 656). This positions both disability sport and its athletes as less than their able-bodied competitors, as suited primarily for a “feel good” narrative. Viewing the disabled athlete as inferior reflects the broader societal view that disabled persons are second-rate to their able-bodied counterparts and thus promotes the discourse of ableism. This can be found in *Radio*, a Hollywood “feel-good” narrative of disability in which the eponymous character (played by Cuba Gooding, Jr.) overcomes discrimination as an assistant to a football team, winning the hearts of the players, coaches and community. These discourses of disability and the narrative of “overcoming” are evident in much of the media (news stories, ad campaigns or press releases) surrounding the Paralympics and its athletes (Peers, 2009). Thus, they must be unpacked and challenged by both academics and athletes alike.

Both Peers (2011; forthcoming) and Howe (2008) indicate that a large part of the Paralympian identity revolves around the process of classification<sup>9</sup>. This is perhaps an aspect of identity unique to the elite disabled athlete or Paralympian. The current classification system at the Paralympics is the functional classification system that sorts athletes according to ability or function (Howe, 2008). Within this system “athletes are classified according to what they can and cannot achieve physically rather than by the severity of their disability” (Howe & Jones, 2006, p. 36). Athletes are then placed in categories with athletes of similar ability or function (Jones & Howe, 2005). The purpose of the classification system is to ensure fair and equitable competition among competitors (Jones & Howe, 2005; Howe & Jones, 2006; Howe, 2011). This type of classification, however, is often described as “cumbersome and logically problematic, as well as a potential threat to the marketability of the games” due to the high number of classes within each sport competing for medals (Howe & Jones, 2006, p. 36).

The functional classification system reproduces a biomedical view of disability (Peers, forthcoming). Peers claims that in a sense, the experts involved in classifying athletes “create people with disabilities” (forthcoming, p. 4). Through the labeling and classification of “different” bodies, entire industries, products and services are created for “normalizing and treating abnormalities” and thus, they become “increasingly tied to their disabled identities” (Peers, forthcoming, p. 4). This classification not only empowers these athletes to compete in Paralympic sport, but it also serves to contain them and perhaps prevent them from competing in Olympic sport. The classification

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<sup>9</sup> Classification will be used in this thesis under the context of identity/identification. The contentious issues surrounding the process and effects of classification are outside the scope of this thesis. However more information can be obtained through the various works of David Howe (2008; 2011), Jones & Howe, (2005) and Howe & Jones (2006).

system exemplifies what Judith Butler (1993) calls the “double-bind” of subjectivity; the subject can only “act” once “acted upon”.

Along related lines, the classification of athletes creates a “hierarchy of bodies” within the Paralympic athletes themselves (Howe, 2008, p. 64). For example, elite athletes with physical disabilities prefer to have no association with athletes with mental disabilities due to the more severe stigma associated with their participation and training regimes, electing to have separate games (Sherrill, 1997). Howe and Jones (2006) point out the difference in acquired and congenital disabilities in relation to identity. They also assert that the identities of an elite disabled athlete are not reducible to impairment; Paralympians can be “distinguished as members of subgroups by their race, ethnicity, class, and gender” (Howe & Jones, 2006, p. 42). This contradicts popular depictions of disabled athletes in, for example, newspaper coverage of the human-interest story, where disability and the “tragedy” of disablement is often presented as the focus. This hierarchy of bodies coincides directly with the IPC’s move to make the games more marketable (Howe, 2008). The IPC accomplishes this through the use of select bodies as “acceptable”, including those with “media friendly” disabilities such as amputees or wheelchair users. Amputees and chair users are used as they have distinguishable visual markers of difference (the wheelchair or prosthesis), but are only a fraction of the participants competing in the Paralympic Games. Thus, it is apparent that (Paralympic) athletic identity is extremely multidimensional and complex (Peers, 2011). Therefore, a critique of how it is represented and reproduced in media, and specifically in advertising must be undertaken. In what follows, I will discuss the current literature available on the



intersection of disability with other identity categories, as well as engage in a discussion of the findings from the four advertisements undertaken for analysis within this project.

### **Disability Advertising and a Hierarchy of Bodies**

In order to begin my analysis and discussion of the advertisements I must first outline them in some detail. I will begin with the oldest advert in the sample, which is the “Cross Training with Craig Blanchette” ad produced by Nike. Within the commercial Blanchette is referred to as a 1988 Olympic Bronze Medalist and is seen competing in a variety of activities such as weightlifting, basketball, and tennis. The soundtrack is upbeat and enhances the intensity Blanchette brings to the various activities. Blanchette states “I’ve found it’s easier to stay in shape when I do a lot of different things, that way I never get bored” (Cgbinoly, 2008). After twenty-three seconds it is revealed that Blanchette is a wheelchair athlete; the camera pans away from his face as he is turning away from the camera and he says: "So I never quit," and races away down the track in his sports wheelchair (Cgbinoly, 2008). The screen then flashes to Nike’s tagline “Just Do It” and the viewer is left with the image of the Nike logo.

Wieden and Kennedy Amsterdam produced the Nike advert featuring Oscar Pistorius entitled “Bad Listener”. The spot was created by David Smith and Sezay Altinok and directed by Brent Harris. The commercial’s release coincided with the 2008 Beijing Olympics and Paralympics and was part of Nike’s “Courage” campaign. The advert chronicles Pistorius’ various athletic achievements in rugby, motocross, water polo and track, highlighting the fact that he has proven the many naysayers wrong by achieving greatness in all of these endeavors (most notably track). This is highlighted by shots of his impressive trophies and medals, and subsequently abandoned prosthetics are

seen throughout each sporting scene. Throughout the commercial Pistorius chronicles each of the sporting activities he was told he could not do, most importantly running (via the voiceover). The visual tells a different story in the ad, which shows Pistorius actually partaking in these activities, culminating with images of Pistorius sprinting on a track. Nineteen seconds into the ad, we see Pistorius running hard around a track. This footage is accompanied by the line “and that a man with no legs can’t run. Anything else you want to tell me?” Similar to the Blanchette ad the screen then flashes to Nike’s tagline “Just Do It” and the last thing the viewer sees is the familiar Nike Swoosh. Again, Nike is trying to associate their brand with the qualities of a high-performance athlete and maintain their authenticity within the sporting equipment market. The corporation, in other words, seems to enable the achievements of Pistorius by way of sponsorship.

Another Wieden and Kennedy creation is the “No Excuses” advert featuring Paralympin Rohan Murphy, an American powerlifter and wrestler. The advert was part of the “No Excuses” campaign that was released in January 2008 in order to inspire people to exercise and maintain a healthy lifestyle (CatchSpark, 2010). This campaign also included a second spot featuring Matt Scott, a fellow American Paralympian (which will be further interrogated in Chapter Three). Within the commercial Murphy is featured working out and performing feats of impressive strength. There is no narration or voiceover in this advert; rather the accompaniment is the Burl Ives “Donut Song”. It is not until sixteen seconds into the ad that we see Murphy has no legs. This is minimized however, by focusing the camera on Murphy’s muscular upper body throughout the spot. Thirty-seven seconds into the commercial (nearing the end of the forty-six second advert) the viewer sees Murphy hop into his wheelchair and casually wheel away. At this point

the song has reached its chorus “watch the donut not the hole”. Again the viewer is left with the image of the Nike swoosh and the “Just Do It” tagline.

Lastly, the Visa commercial featuring Cheri Blauwet was produced in 2008 as part of Visa’s “Go World” campaign during the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Morgan Freeman, who has become the voice of Visa, narrates the spot. Freeman highlights all of the “supercrip” qualities and accomplishments of Blauwet, which include attending medical school, volunteering/mentoring, as well as becoming a musician and chef (bluegirl55ful, 2010). Blauwet is seen throughout the commercial racing in her sports chair. The last scene of the commercial features Blauwet raising her arm in victory, with Freeman concluding with a description of Blauwet as a “world class athlete”. The viewer then sees “Go World” on the screen followed by the symbol of the IPC and the Visa logo. Freeman then links the attributes of a world-class athlete to Visa by telling the viewer “Visa: proud sponsor of the Paralympic Games, and the only card accepted there” (bluegirl55ful, 2010). This matches the elite athlete to the elite status of the Visa card (in being the only card accepted at the Olympic and Paralympic Games). Initial readings of the advertisements reveal the consistent use of the “supercrip” narrative, as well as a distinct focus on the body. Specifically, this focus on the body in motion (independently) is unique to progressive representations of the disabled body.

While the advertisements produced by Nike and Visa may not partake in a functional classification, they do present what David Howe calls a “hierarchy of bodies” within both the circles of athletes themselves, as well as within much of the media surrounding the Paralympic Movement and Games. In all four advertisements, the athletes selected were either amputees such as Pistorius, Murphy and Blanchette (who

was born without femurs or kneecaps) or are wheelchair users such as Blauwet (who suffered an early childhood spinal injury). This appears to suggest that the Paralympic bodies of wheelchair users and amputees are more media friendly than perhaps athletes with Cerebral Palsy or those with mental disabilities (Howe, 2008). It also may imply that only certain disabilities, bodies, and athletes are acceptable recipients of our praise and celebration, like the veterans of *Warrior Games* who are achieving sporting recognition over and above other athletes due to the overlapping discourses of military training and technology with the rhetoric of high performance sport and its corresponding technological requirements. The *Warrior Games* feature Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans (mainly amputees and wheelchair users) in their advertising campaigns, and has resulted in the documentary *Warrior Champions: From Baghdad to Beijing*, which aired on the Documentary Channel. Others are to remain hidden from view and their accomplishments further marginalized.

Similarly, in all of the advertisements signifiers of disability were present at some point. These included items such as wheelchairs and prosthetic limbs. For example, Blauwet is featured in her chair throughout the entirety of the Visa commercial, while Murphy and Blanchette are featured briefly in their wheelchairs in their respective Nike advertisements. In a somewhat different vein, prosthetics and chairs within the Pistorius commercial (other than his Ossur Flex-foot Cheetahs he is seen running with at the end) are presented as symbols of limitation, and outdated material that he has overcome in order to participate in more mainstream able-bodied activities (which are listed within the commercial audio). Regardless of placement within the commercial, it appears that they are included in order to reproduce the binary between able and disabled bodies.

Wheelchairs and artificial limbs are “narrative prosthetics” that situates the athletes within sport, but also within a wider discourse of disability in popular culture (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). This inclusion serves to at one and the same time celebrate the Paralympian for overcoming disability, and yet also contains him or her by reducing their accomplishments through the framing of the athlete as disabled first, athlete second. This reinforces the view that disabled persons are inferior to their able-bodied counterparts and thus promotes a discourse of ableism.

Within the Nike and Visa television advertisements bodies of both male and female Paralympians are displayed in action. Cheri Blauwet is shown racing in her chair throughout the entirety of the Visa commercial. This is progressive in relation to other gendered sporting images in that it situates her athletic accomplishments as the primary focus and her femininity as secondary. However, when viewed in terms of sexuality the representation serves to reinforce the notion of the female disabled athlete as asexual (Schell & Rodriguez, 2001). This is due to the fact that able-bodied female athletes are often presented as (hyper/hetero) sexualized (Schell & Rodriguez, 2001). This can be seen in the media coverage of female athletes such as Anna Kournikova, who is presented as a sexual object or Hailey Wickenheiser who is presented as a wife and mother in advertisements. While we hear much about Blauwet’s academic accomplishments and volunteerism, we hear very little about her social life. This omission lets the reader assume that she is heterosexual, if she has relationships at all. Much like the findings in the Schell and Rodriguez study of media coverage surrounding Paralympian Hope Lewellen, Blauwet’s “disability is decontextualized, couched entirely within *heroic overcoming* and is segregated from her full identity” thus allowing her

sexuality to remain ambiguous and de-eroticized (2001, p. 133, original emphasis). So, while Blauwet challenges traditional gender representations, she also reinforces the notion of the disabled body as asexual, raising important questions of what it means to “desire disability.”

Similarly, the advert featuring Blauwet highlights other aspects of her identity beyond just her athleticism. This differs from the way that the males are presented in the selected advertisements. The focus of the commercials featuring males is strictly athletic accomplishments. For example, while highlighting various other sports Pistorius participated in as a child in the “Bad Listener” ad, such as rugby, water polo and motocross among others, nowhere in the commercial do we hear that he is also a university attendee or mentor to children, as we do in the Blauwet commercial. While all the commercials seek to frame the difference of the athletes within the “supercrip” narrative, the Visa ad featuring Blauwet seems also to highlight her femininity by showcasing her multiple accomplishments in other aspects of her life, like being “an accomplished musician, a mentor to children, an aspiring chef, a student at Stanford’s Medical School” (bluegirl55ful, 2010). The way that Blauwet is represented not only fits the “supercrip” portrayal, but also supports Huang and Brittain’s (2006) claim that athletes with disabilities acknowledge that they have multiple facets of identity, with Paralympian being only a fraction of their whole identities. And yet highlighting her accomplishments in other areas first and foremost in the commercial also has the effect of reducing the importance of her athletic accomplishments and returning her “femininity” to a non-sporting social space (such as being a student, a volunteer, etc.). This also seems to support the claim by Buyesse and Borcheding (2010) that female and male

Paralympians are often represented in media quite differently. In addition, the necessary inclusion of the Visa commercial in this study to determine how female Paralympians are represented is a reflection of the underrepresentation of elite disabled females within media and advertising (Pappous et al., 2011a). This is due to the fact that Nike has yet to produce an advert that solely features a female Paralympian (however, Paralympian Sarah Reinertsen was recently featured in a “Nike Running” medley among other prominent female runners).

Three of the four advertisements feature males, all produced for Nike and thus, the intersection of masculinity and disability became another avenue for examination. The narratives of masculinity within the advertisements resemble the masculine narratives of *Murderball* (and *Warrior Games*). Within the Nike advertisements masculinity appears to be defined through the performance of physical feats and “toughness.” In the advertisements, which keep with Nike’s motivational rhetoric and our understanding of the “supercrip,” the male Paralympians perform amazing feats of strength and skill. For example, Blanchette is seen working out and playing a variety of sports; Murphy showcases his immense upper body strength; Pistorius is featured running on the track. Further, advertisers call on our previous knowledge of these competitors (and in the case of Nike, our insider knowledge of athletics) in which we are invited to recall that the athletes are top competitors in their respective sports (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Along with masculinity through physicality, the male Paralympians featured in the Nike advertisements are presumed heterosexual. While this heterosexuality is not as blatant as it is within *Murderball*, where heterosexuality was used to “establish its characters as ‘real sporting men’” it is however, assumed within the Nike advertisements

(Gard & Fitzgerald 2008, p. 135). This is done through the association of the athletes with other predominant aspects of masculinity, such as strength, competitiveness and so on, allowing heterosexuality to be a logical (though certainly not inherent) assumption. This is due to the fact that heterosexuality is a key component of hegemonic masculinity, and thus aligned with the ideal male athletic body (Buysse & Borchering, 2010). This also helps to elide the fact that the male bodies within the advertisements are “incomplete” and to restore a sense of sporting superiority to the athletes.

Of the four advertisements selected, only one features an African American athlete. Nike uses Rohan Murphy, an American Paralympian in their “No Excuses” campaign. Much like the results of Duncan and Aycock (2005) no female athletes of ethnicity are featured within any disability advertisements produced by Nike or Visa. According to Goldman and Papson in previous Nike advertising campaigns, the company has tended to make “race disappear” or attempt to render it ambiguous or neutral, all the while still focusing on “the grace and power of their muscled black bodies” (1998, p. 100). This happens in the Murphy advert as well, as there are no markers of race such as racialized dialect, hip-hop music or urban clothing, key attributes of “blackness” in consumer culture. This allows Nike access to the African American market (including those with disabilities in this case) all the while maintaining their authenticity (Goldman & Papson, 1998). In other words, Murphy’s “blackness” is a distinguishing feature, but he is also a commodity within the Nike stable of black athletes (Goldman & Papson, 1998).

However, when the Murphy “No Excuses” advertisement is viewed in its entirety, it becomes much more problematic. When the aspects of masculinity through physicality



are combined with race and the inclusion of the Burl Ives “Donut Song” that is played throughout the ad several issues emerge. Firstly, Murphy’s displays of upper body strength, combined with the other aspects of the commercial spot seem to create a spectacle of both his race and disability. The upbeat circus-like melody of the “Donut Song” combined with his displays of strength seems to create a carnival atmosphere. When this is articulated with his disability it serves to put him and his wrestling accomplishments on display much like the uncanny characters of sideshows and circuses. Second, the use of a children’s folk song serves to infantilize Murphy and thus degrade his achievement and talents as an athlete, a slight anomaly within the sample of advertisements. In similar ways, analysis of media coverage of the Paralympic Games in European countries was found to have “offered evidence of a more latent stigmatization process which ‘infantilized’ and ‘trivialized’ the Paralympic athletes” (Pappous et al., 2008, p. 347). This displays a troubling reflection of the societal view that elite disabled athletes and their accomplishments or participation are “less than” their able-bodied counterparts, and subsequently disabled people are viewed as second-rate citizens.

It is imperative at this point to explore the use of Burl Ives and the use of music within Nike advertising. Companies such as Nike and Visa often use certain images, music and text (or in the case of TV advertisements narration) to connote certain meanings and encourage the reader or viewer to make certain linkages (Barthes, 1977; Goldman 1992). For example, the Visa ad encourages us to associate the qualities of the elite athlete (Cheri Blauwet) with their company and products. In the Nike ad featuring Rohan Murphy the use of Ives’s music is important in a very similar way. Ives is a well-known actor, writer and folk singer. Ives is considered to be a “great American icon” by

many, and thus Nike is perhaps asking the viewer to associate this quality with their company, positioning them as an important American institution. Nike is notorious for using music within its television advertisements. For example, it used the Beatles' "Revolution" and John Lennon's "Instant Karma" in separate advertising campaigns (named after the respective songs). Nike faced incredible backlash from Beatles fans, and even faced a lawsuit by the Beatles record company Apple over the cooptation of "Revolution" (Bradshaw, McDonagh, Marshall & Sherlock, 2004). Similarly, we find AC/DC's "Rock and Roll ain't Noise Pollution" in Nike's "Awake" ad, and Groove Armada's "I See You Baby" in its Fuelband advertisements. Nike has also used the likes of Marvin Gaye, Donna Fargo and Mogwai and scores from movies such as *The Last of the Mohicans* in their campaigns featuring able-bodied athletes. These songs are used often as motivational tools to encourage viewers to participate (and thus, to purchase Nike products). They also serve to add emphasis to the accomplishments and feats achieved by the athletes featured in the advertisements. By comparison, the use of the Burl Ives song featured in the Murphy advert seems to infantilize and thus downplay his athletic achievements. This is achieved through the recognition of the "Donut Song" as a children's folk song and the association of it with childlike qualities and dependence, discourses often associated with a medical model view of disability. However, in a more positive light the chorus of the song "watch the donut not the hole" may encourage the viewer to watch the athlete not the disability.

The depiction of class within the Nike and Visa advertisements is very ambiguous. However, in many of Nike's other TV commercials, especially those featuring African Americans, they offer a message of overcoming poverty and

transcending through sport and physical activity (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Sport is viewed as a way of socializing the underprivileged into middle-class values including the consumption of Nike products (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Portrayals such as this often reproduce the myth of meritocracy and legitimize the American dream. This is juxtaposed with the pricing of Nike shoes and apparel, which are often only made available to affluent consumers. The use of Paralympians within the advertisements seems to reinforce a portrayal of upper middle class, as much of their equipment or prosthetics for sporting participation is quite costly (Howe, 2008). Thus, access to sporting equipment implies a certain income bracket. Similarly, Visa is a company that promotes spending on credit, and access to their cards often requires a certain income level as well. So, while the depiction of class within the actual advertisements themselves is relatively vague, when contextualized in terms of the companies and the athletes used, the reader can and is encouraged to make several educated inferences regarding socioeconomic status.

These depictions are supplemented by a reading of the language of the voice over, music, and scenery found within the advertisements. In the “Bad Listener” commercial, the scenery of a modest house (and subsequent absence of any “ghetto” references) and access to team sports and expensive sporting equipment, mark an approximate middle-class setting. As well, the language of the voice over for both the “Go World” commercial and the Pistorius commercials are free from slang or racialized dialect signaling a middle-class depiction. Moreover, the choice of Freeman as voice over in the Visa commercials provides the viewer with a “safe” depiction of race. Freeman is known for playing slaves, servants and “buddies” of white characters (as in *The Power of One*,

*Driving Miss Daisy* and *Shawshank Redemption*) and is thus mediated as a “good black”. The music of Burl Ives and the background rock score found in the Visa commercial also have associations with the middle class. Ives, performed in several exclusive Broadway shows, but also has folk albums that are available to the masses. He could also be found on television (*The New Adventures of Heidi*; *Little House on the Prairie*) and film (*East of Eden*; *Two Moon Junction*) making him an important pop culture icon available to many. These factors all come together to create an atmosphere that aligns itself with middle-class values.

Another distinct trend within the advertisements was the dominance of white male narration. Blanchette and Pistorius, who are both white males, are allowed to narrate their own advertisements. Blanchette speaks about his training regimes, while Pistorius discusses all the times he was told he could not do things in his life. In contrast, Morgan Freeman narrates Blauwet’s advert, describing all of her accomplishments in life; while Murphy’s ad has no narration at all; rather it is accompanied by the soundtrack of the “Donut Song”. For Murphy and Blauwet, the body is the source of expression and articulation rather than verbal skills and elocution. However, there remains a problematic display of whose athletic voices are valued within both the sporting and advertising realm.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing upon poststructuralism, and using the method of discourse analysis prescribed by Stuart Hall (1997) and the use of poststructuralism, the predominant themes and trends regarding the representation of Paralympians were identified and discussed within this chapter. Poststructuralists view identity as increasingly complex,

fragmented and ever changing (Hall, 1996a). Hall refers to one's identity as a temporary point of attachment of the subject within the discourse (Hall, 1999). These articulations are ever changing and subject to the conditions of the discourse in which they are operating (Hall, 1996b). With this definition of identity in mind, I sought to explore the intersection of disability with race, class, gender, and sexuality. The dominant trends showed that the male Paralympians reproduced traditional views of masculinity through the display of physicality, and the voice of the white, heterosexual male was preserved through the athlete's ability to narrate their own advertisements. Females, like their male counterparts were portrayed in "action", thus putting their athletic skill first and gender identity second. This in turn displayed them as potentially asexual and undesirable. By using athletes of colour and females, Nike and Visa strategically open themselves up to new markets of disabled consumers. Race was depicted by Nike as a spectacle and was subsequently infantilized by the use of a children's song within the advert. Class, as it is in most television commercials, was left vague and ambiguous for the viewer (middle class by default). However, Nike's use of their rhetoric of transcendence and overcoming via sport was continued through the strategic intersections of race, gender and disability (Goldman & Papson, 1998). The analysis suggests that disability's intersections with other identity categories are complex and subject to various social, cultural and political contexts. In the following chapter I discuss how disability identity politics are translated through the marketplace with an emphasis on consumer empowerment, and the growing trend of transnational corporations attempting to tap into the ever-increasing buying power of consumers with disabilities. This narrative of empowerment nevertheless

reproduces some troubling narratives that appeal to the neoliberal rhetoric and normative understandings of the racialized, gendered sexualized and disabled body.

## Chapter 3

### Neoliberalism and Consumer Culture

In Chapter Two I demonstrated the complexities of disability identity politics and the Paralympian, aiming to analyze the intersections of disability with other identity categories such as race, class, gender and sexuality. I further explored how these intersections are represented within advertisements for Visa and Nike, most notably. These representations, however, are strongly influenced by our increasingly neoliberal socioeconomic climate, which in turn impacts our understandings of disability. To explain and illustrate this climate of neoliberalism I turn to the work of David Harvey (2005; 2007), Henry Giroux (2004; 2008) and Stuart Hall (2011). This overview inquires as to how neoliberal policies are impacting access to services such as education and residential living/respite care programs, cuts to contraceptives for disabled females, and access to medical professionals and care, among many other effects. Further, I will explore how the advertising practices of Nike employ a rhetoric of transcendence or overcoming through the “supercrip” narrative that relates to the current rhetoric of neoliberalism. Specifically, Nike’s “No Excuses” and “Courage” campaigns feature prominent Paralympians and intersect with practices of neoliberalism that emphasize self-management and individuality. The advertisements demonstrate the tensions between the neoliberal narratives of the market providing and “overcoming”, the use of only certain types of disability within the advertisements, and the actual lived realities of many with disabilities who are simply struggling for the rights to the daily services they require. The key question throughout this chapter is: How do the Nike and Visa advertisements

speak to and support recent changes in social services and funding for disability? It is increasingly important to unpack these intersections, as they exemplify and reproduce dominant discourses surrounding disability within our contemporary era.

### **A Sketch of Neoliberalism**

As noted in Chapter One, the neoliberal model gained momentum under Thatcher and Reagan within Britain and the United States respectively. Neoliberalism, according to Hall “is grounded in the ‘free possessive individual’, with the state cast as tyrannical and oppressive. The welfare state, in particular, is the arch enemy of freedom” (2011, p. 10). This means extreme cutbacks to social services, welfare programs, education, and healthcare, all of which are perceived by the prophets of neoliberalism as a hindrance to “free will” and “prosperity” (apparently provided by the market). For people with disabilities this means reduced funding for assistive or medical technologies, reduced funding for education and availability of teachers’ aids in classrooms, as well as a reduction of integrated programming. Further, Harvey claims the framework is “characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade” (2007, p. 22). And yet, as Giroux adds, “neo-liberalism wages an incessant attack on democracy” in its promotion of constant growth and expansion to new markets, rather than focusing on the welfare of citizens (2004, p. 495). Giroux (2004; 2008) also notes that under a neoliberal model there is an increase in self-responsibility, privatization, and an attack on non-commodified values. Cuts to publically funded programs for people with disabilities also puts strain on the private sector to provide these disappearing programs. For example, cuts to respite care funding in the UK are forcing many to go without proper care or seek it out privately themselves, as well as the



abolishment of the daily living allowance for those working (and for those whom work is impossible) are leaving many with mental or physical disabilities with no income at all. Further, allowances that enable many people with disabilities to live independently are being cut. The severe reductions demonstrated here are neatly aligned with and justified by the neoliberal rhetoric of providing for oneself and reducing the reliance on government and social services. There is increasing pressure for disabled subjects to find ways to procure these services for themselves, which subsequently privileges the affluent, as these services when obtained privately are extremely costly.

Further, heightened commodification, a key feature of neoliberalism is also demonstrated through Nike's constant reproduction of excellence, bodily improvement through consumption and individual effort rather than government subsidies, and "failure" as a problem of the individual (or more importantly as "not an option"). As a result, "under neoliberalism, everything is either for sale or is plundered for profit" (Giroux, 2004, p. 495). This promotes rampant consumerism and has led to a more flexible style of accumulation, allowing large companies such as Nike, Visa and McDonalds among others to explore niche or specialized markets (Kellner, 1995).

The neoliberal movement follows a free market philosophy, which leads to an increased gap in the distribution of wealth among citizens (Hall, 2011). This reduces the responsibility of the state and increases responsibility for the individual to be cutting edge and competitive. Any "failings"—such as poverty and disability—are reduced to individual, rather than social problems or structural inequalities. This idea of the competitive individual within the market aligns itself nicely with a discussion of the rhetoric of the high performance athlete and professional sports where competition and

excellence are key components. These are narratives that are reproduced with regularity by Nike within both ad campaigns that feature able-bodied athletes and Paralympians. Of particular interest to this project then are neoliberalism's tenets of personal responsibility, self-management and consumerism championed by Nike and Visa through the use of Paralympians.

The relationship between capitalism and disability is multifaceted and has changed markedly over time. Thomas (2002) notes that industrial capitalism in many ways fueled the economic marginalization of people with disabilities. Unable to keep up with increasing demands of labour hours and increased production rates, many people with disabilities were unable to sell their labour power. Moreover, as Oliver (1990) points out, industrial capitalism also *created* disabled subjects who were then excluded from the workplace because of debilitating injuries sustained, for instance in factories and assembly-line production plants. The result was "they were socially positioned as dependants, excluded in the economy of generalized commodity production" (Thomas, 2002, p. 46). Thus, people with disabilities became a social "problem" in need of management. These early developments have influenced the plight that many with disabilities face in the twenty first century regarding access to employment, housing, social services and recreational activities. It has also led to their increased pathologization within our increasingly neoliberal society. However, as Thomas (2002) notes, more studies need to be done on how people with disabilities are fairing in the transition away from industrial work to a more technology based era, to uncover whether employment and household income rates are on the rise.

A discussion of neoliberal policies and tendencies is essential to this study when looking at the pathologization of disability in our society and, conversely, the emergence of the disabled subject as consumer. As one might note, neoliberal policies are reflective of disability as an individual failure and support a medical model view of disability. Cuts to respite care and hospital cutbacks resulting in lack of access to appropriate professionals and assistive technologies are just some of the impacts of neoliberal policies for those with disabilities. To be specific, in 2009 the Alberta government cut \$12 million dollars from their People with Developmental Disabilities program, which had a direct impact on community living programs, number of respite hours available, and job placement programs. These cuts are increasingly justified in the name of efficiency, or the need to balance government budgets. This leads to cuts to welfare and social services, which often directly impact the most vulnerable populations first. It is the responsibility of the individuals to provide for themselves, which promotes neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and individualism. Disabled subjects are encouraged and increasingly forced to find services and support *on their own*, a feature of neoliberalism that clearly privileges those with ample economic resources. In this chapter I argue that certain neoliberal discourses of disability and Paralympic advertisements reproduce complementary messages that may seem progressive, but are ultimately problematic. Due to the entrenchment of the medical model in the biomedical field, as well as our ever increasingly neoliberal society people with disabilities are often pathologized and encouraged to adapt to the able-bodied world. This focus on adaption and overcoming, rather than a modification of the able-bodied world is reiterated (and normalized) throughout neoliberal rhetoric and the “supercrip” narrative.

Under neoliberalism, differences are celebrated under the guise of the acceptance of individuality, particularly in the marketplace (McRuer, 2006). McRuer asserts that this is more accurately an act of appropriation and containment (2006). For example, the Paralympics are potentially a celebration of difference; however, they can also be viewed as a way of containing Paralympians in their own games, to avoid the “contamination” of the Olympic games. Disability studies for McRuer (2006) then, is concerned with critiquing the social construction of normalcy. He argues that there is a need to critique not only the representation, but also the site of production of the representation, in order to create new meanings and more positive representations of disability (2006). Specifically, McRuer uses “crip theory” to critique the notions of ableism often found in our neoliberal society, which is particularly useful for a critique of ableism in sport. Crip theory is a critique of compulsory able-bodiedness and heteronormativity, with a keen interest in identifying how late capitalism (the dominant economic and cultural system as driven by market priorities) has constructed sexual and embodied identities in problematic ways (McRuer, 2006). Crip theory is essential to a discussion of neoliberalism and disability below.

In keeping with neoliberal logic, many scholars such as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007) identify an ongoing shift to citizenship through consumption. In other words, there is a movement away from the strictly political definition of citizenship and identity-based political movements, towards one that engages with politics through consumption of goods, a set of practices that privileges the affluent. Through media, consumers are asked to be brand loyal, which perpetuates elements of citizenship through brand membership (Banet-Weiser, 2007). Nike campaigns, for instance, ask consumers to be

loyal to the brand and in return for this loyalty, weekend warriors and everyday amateur athletes or fitness enthusiasts gain membership into the elite Nike club and all the authenticity that the Nike brand entails. Of course the key problem here is that corporations promise “empowerment” to a consumer “citizen” but are answerable to shareholders rather than a social or political citizenry. Unlike governments, they are not always held accountable to “citizens” per se.

While Banet-Weiser’s discussion focuses predominantly on Nickelodeon and the child consumer, there are some parallels that can be made to our discussion of Nike and disability, such as the focus on empowerment. In regards to Nickelodeon the concept of “empowering kids is shaped by marketing strategies, so that empowerment only makes sense in the culture of the market” (Banet-weiser, 2007, p. 20). In other words, the *appearance* of diversity is made to stand in as proof of socioeconomic equality across multicultural communities. Similarly, Nike engages with a narrative of empowerment directed at both their female and disability markets. This empowerment is said to be achieved through subscribing to the Nike “lifestyle”, constant body work, and of course the consumption of Nike products. The second area in which the two discussions parallel is the ways in which marketers capitalize on “otherness.” Banet-Weiser notes, “branding is involved in the marketing and making of people” (2007, p. 22). This is done through commercial culture forming aspects of identity and belonging. By this logic, “minority” groups are now seen as consumers at the same time as their “difference” is capitalized on to sell products (Banet-Weiser, 2007). In other words, the perceived political threat of “difference” is diffused and promoted as commodity. This can be seen through Nike’s incorporation of African American, Latino, and athletes with disabilities into their

advertising. This allows the corporation to gain credibility and access to diverse markets, and most importantly, the ability to use “alternative” stories to “inspire” the already captured middle-class market. According to Banet-Weiser “branding thus becomes a point of entry for identity – generational identity is not simply sold through brands such as MTV, Nike and Nickelodeon, it is created and made meaningful by these brands” (2007. p. 22). One must note the important shift occurring here; the “productive” citizen is being redefined through consumerism (rather than political activity) in the shift from industrial capitalism to late capitalism.

The discussion of “difference” and consumerism, or the “marketplace of multiculturalism” increasingly relates to “disabled” subjectivities in that advertisers are now targeting the disability community specifically. In its bid to stay cutting edge and ahead of the game, the advertising industry was one of the first media genres to incorporate disabled bodies. The use of disability in advertisements began with the “poster child”, a fundraising technique meant to tug at our heartstrings and invoke pity (Riley, 2005). This was followed by the first TV advert featuring a person with a disability done for Levi’s (and featuring a Paralympian) during the 1984 Olympics, and followed by Nike’s “cause-marketing” campaign featuring Casey Martin, a professional golfer (and current head coach of the men’s golf team at the University of Oregon) who suffers from a rare birth defect that impacts his ability to walk a full round of golf. In 2001, Martin successfully sued the PGA Tour for the right to use a golf cart during competition under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Regardless of the multiple questionable campaigns (such as the Dri-goat sneaker campaign that was criticized for mocking people with spinal cord injuries) that may be circulating within the sector, the

advertising industry was the first to acknowledge the disability community as consumers. Again it is here that we see the emergence of a contradiction, as this shift has both positive and negative consequences for those living with disabilities. Riley estimates that the approximately 54 million Americans with disabilities have a combined “aggregate income of a trillion dollars to spend (\$220 billion in discretionary income)” (2006, p. 68). It is important to distinguish here, the difference between the disabled consumer demographic and the marginalized and displaced disabled subject. As a result, companies such as Nike, McDonalds, Coca Cola, Nordstrom, Nokia, Visa and many of the major car manufacturers are beginning to take notice of this attractive market. A survey completed by a Paralympic committee revealed “54 percent of all households pay more attention to and patronize businesses that feature people with disabilities in their advertising” (Riley, 2006, p. 71). Thus, this niche market is extremely attractive to major corporations. This is combined with the success of films like *Ray*; *I am Sam*; *Rainman* and *My Left Foot* in Hollywood as well as success of the television series such as *Glee* (which features a wheelchair user) and *Push Girls*, all of which attract audiences with disabilities for advertisers.

This desiring of “difference” is directly related to disability studies and questions of resistance. McRuer (2003) asserts there are four ways to desire disability, three of which are to be guarded against and one which is to be explored and advanced. First, McRuer (2003) says desiring disability can be used as a universal dismissal, which advocates that disability does not have to be taken seriously. For example, sport coverage of the Paralympics is often presented as second rate athletics, infantilized, and trivialized (Pappous, et al., 2011a). Second, disability can be fetishized and appropriated

to create stereotypical representations to alleviate the fear of disability that able-bodied consumers often experience (McRuer, 2003). This can be seen for example, in depictions of the “supercrip” where “safe” disabled bodies (such as amputees and wheelchair users) are chosen and celebrated for their everyday achievements in order to sell products. These “safe” bodies are used because they have visual markers of difference that uphold the binary of able/disabled, yet are not so “abnormal” as to invoke fear. The third meaning of “desiring disability” comes in the form of using disability to maximize profit (McRuer, 2003). This is done through the necessity of ability in capitalism. However disability cannot be privileged without the creation of an alternate, marginalized identity of disability (McRuer, 2003). According to McRuer, “even as capitalism has desired disability to define able bodiedness or to maximize profit, it has disavowed it, or institutionalized it, or left it to die in the streets” (2003, p. 14). Finally, the fourth definition of desiring disability comes from a standpoint of resistance. This desiring of disability gives the disability rights movement political significance and allows the movement to critique the system that marginalizes it (McRuer, 2003). However at this point, contextualized within neoliberalism, as McRuer (2003) notes disability is “used” by companies such as Nike, through the bodies of Oscar Pistorius to embrace the imperfect, disabled category, which opens up a new market of consumers for their products and services. For example, it is interesting that The Hartford, a financial and life insurance company should be one of the first companies to incorporate the disabled or ill body, as those are the bodies that are often rejected (for coverage) by major insurance companies.



## Nike Narratives

In order to further the discussion of neoliberalism, it is important to unpack the narratives and logic used in Nike advertising<sup>10</sup>. In 2007, the company's advertising budget was a staggering \$1.91 billion, which allowed Nike to monopolize not only the shoe market, but areas of apparel and sporting goods as well (Andrews, 2008). Such a large budget also allows Nike to explore niche markets such as the female and disability markets. Nike uses a variety of companies to produce their advertisements, although some of their most notable campaigns have been produced by Weiden & Kennedy. Phil Knight's once fledgling shoe company has grown into a transnational sporting goods corporation, which is so naturalized within the sporting realm that it has become more than just a household name.

According to Goldman and Papson (1998) what makes Nike so attractive is the company's ability to be cutting edge and inventive. They state, "within the realm of popular culture, Nike advertisements constantly surprise and excite, because they are unafraid of being controversial" (Goldman & Papson, 1998, p. 3). In efforts to reach as many markets as possible with its advertisements, Nike's motivational rhetoric is attractive to men, women, disabled and able-bodied, the elderly and both athletes and non-athletes (Goldman & Papson, 1998). In terms of its female market, Nike promises empowerment and emancipation in various advertisements aiming to capture a growing female market. Evidently, Nike's advertising is no longer about a tangible product per se, as opposed to keeping the brand itself visible (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Its logo and slogan "Just do it" have allowed the brand to align itself with a certain lifestyle,

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<sup>10</sup> While this project acknowledges the issues surrounding Nike and labour, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage in a dialogue with these critiques.

which the everyday citizen can then consume. This is perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Nike advertising from a marketing perspective (Goldman & Papson, 1998). According to Helstein, “rarely today, do Nike commercials explicitly feature a product as the subject of their advertising. Instead commercials feature narratives that reproduce Nike’s philosophy and highlight stereotypical concerns and desires of the sub-culture Nike is hailing” (2002, p. 39). Within its various advertising campaigns, Nike uses the values of hope, motivation, “resistance” and transcendence to sell a particular lifestyle (Goldman & Papson, 1998). In the past, Nike advertisements have featured signifiers of “resistance,” including the use of the Beatles’ “Revolution” song and images of beat icon William Burroughs and tennis “bad boy” John McEnroe. This allows Nike to claim both the mainstream and alternative markets, rendering “difference” not only desirable but also profitable.

As Helstein (2002) notes in regards to gender, in terms of the “alternative” iconography of disability, however, Nike attempts to define who the disabled athlete is, who may or may not qualify as an athlete with disabilities, and as a result, attempts to demonstrate its insider knowledge of sport. Within Chapter Two it was noted that all of the Paralympic bodies used within the television advertisements were either amputees or wheelchair users, thus demonstrating that these are the disabled athletes that are considered of value to companies such as Nike. This reinforces the hierarchy of Paralympic bodies, in which bodies with visual markers of difference, such as wheelchair users and amputees are of greater “value” commercially. This connection with various sporting communities “allows them to speak not only to the group to whom they are attempting to appeal, but also as part of that group” (Helstein, 2002, p. 39). This gives

Nike a certain authenticity to consumers. Uniquely, in the case of the “No Excuses” and “Courage” campaigns featuring Paralympians, it appears the use of elite disabled athletes is not only appropriated for access into the disability community, but also to inspire able-bodied people to embrace the Nike lifestyle (and subsequently consume Nike products). It is imperative to keep in mind here that Nike is less concerned with whether or not people are actually physically active, but rather that you are moved by the lifestyle and thus identify with Nike and its products. This reiterates what McRuer (2003) notes as the “use” of disability to maximize profits and to define what it means to be able bodied, all the while systematically placing it as inferior.

Just as Nike’s female athlete can allegedly transcend the ordinary, so can the consumer (athlete) with disabilities be emancipated. Nike perpetuates this ideology of emancipation by providing a very narrow definition of who the disabled athlete is and how empowerment and consumerism coalesce in paradoxical ways (Helstein, 2002).

This ideal is, of course, unattainable for the average consumer. According to Helstein,

the ideal is deliberately out of reach so that one can aspire to it, so that one can be empowered to transcend their limitations. This transcendence is itself an inspiring ideal. Therefore, Nike attempts to sell the ideal, that is an image of who you want to be, an image of more than whatever you are right now. By extension, this suggests that whatever you are right now is not good enough. (2002, p. 42)

In other words, knowledge, effort, desire and of course Nike products will free us to become “who we want to be” (Helstein, 2003, p. 287). Thus, what people with disabilities are being “emancipated” from is their current states or selves, which due to sports’ focus on the body is consequently a “deviant” body. The female and disabled bodies are deviant in that they are not able-bodied or male, which is viewed by many to be the ideal sporting body. Following a neoliberal logic, the “deviant” bodies of the

Paralympian are viewed as failures of the individual (Helstein, 2002). In other words, it is up to the individual to “overcome”, adapt or change any “deficiencies”. Thus, they are called to pursue the prescriptions made in Nike advertising (Helstein, 2002). These prescriptions include hard work (on and off the playing field), dedication, perseverance and of course, the consumption of Nike products. Evidently, political protests against government cutbacks to social and healthcare services are out of the question. What allows the emancipation narrative to be so successful, according to Helstein (2003), is its ability to be continually postponed or deferred. The pursuit of emancipation and excellence (or the best self that you can be) is never a stable concept; it is always under construction and is thus always ambiguous. The narrative of emancipation echoes aspects of neoliberal logic where we find a focus on the self without the social, but also incorporates the ethos of overcoming found within the narrative of the “supercrip” that circulates with regularity surrounding the elite disabled athlete.

### **The supercrip**

In keeping with the emancipatory narratives of Nike, the use of the “supercrip” narrative comes as no surprise. Specifically, for Hardin and Hardin the “supercrip” is defined as “the presentation of a person, affected by illness (often in the prime of life), as ‘overcoming’ to succeed as a meaningful member of society” (2004, p. 2). In other words, the person with a disability is celebrated for being able to accomplish everyday tasks not thought possible for people with disabilities. For example, in *Push Girls* Angela, a former model and now quadriplegic is often celebrated for being able to put on her daily makeup by herself (makeup being a key aspect of femininity). For Ronald Berger “supercrips” “are those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage,

dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible” (2008, p. 648). Further, Howe (2011) adds that within the Paralympic sport context, the “supercrip” is someone who wins during competition, and attains a high media profile. An excellent example of the athletic “supercrip” is Oscar Pistorius whose media profile is beyond anything previously seen from a Paralympian. Similarly, the majority of his advertisements (such as the Nike “Bad Listener” commercial used in this project) use the “supercrip” narrative. As Silva and Howe brilliantly note the verb to “overcome” is “almost exclusively conjugated in the first person, ignoring the complexity inscribed in disability experiences and accentuating disability as an individual matter that is a personal responsibility” (2012, p. 179). This focus on the individual and personal responsibility ties the “supercrip” narrative intimately to discourses of neoliberalism that work to reduce, if not eliminate, government programs in the interests of profit and privatization. Poverty and disability become problems of the individual rather than of a late capitalist and “abelist” society.

Within the sample of advertisements under investigation in this thesis, all of the subjects are ensconced within the “supercrip” narrative during their TV spots. The Nike “Bad Listener” advertisement chronicles all of the things Pistorius has had to overcome in order to attain his elite athletic status. Similarly, in the Visa commercial Cheri Blauwet is celebrated as a “supercrip” based on her accomplishments of attending Stanford medical school, as well as being a chef, a mentor to young children and a Paralympic Wheelchair racer. Rohan Murphy is celebrated for his displays of strength and acrobatics throughout his Nike commercial, while Craig Blanchett is shown as a “supercrip” through his ability to participate in a variety of activities only thought to be participated in by able bodies.

This variety within the sample shows that there can be many storylines found in the “supercrip” narrative, however the underlying connotation is the same in all of the commercials. The message is one of overcoming through individual desire, choice, and hard work to participate in daily life, and in the case of the Paralympians attain celebrity. Disability remains an abject entity.

The “supercrip” model has some inherent contradictions or tensions that complicate the purported “progressiveness” of recent representations of disability. The model provides disabled people and/or disabled athletes with, at the very least, a form of representation, which according to Duncan and Aycock (2005), is often absent in North American popular culture. At first glance, it appears to be extremely progressive, celebrating the disabled body for its ability to adapt and overcome. In a sporting context it does provide a significant challenge to dominant views of disability as synonymous with inferiority, inactivity and dependence. However, the downside remains that the primary focus of such a representation is always disability first, athlete second. In addition, the “supercrip” “reinforces the low societal expectations of people with disabilities; it also plants the idea that all people with disabilities should be able to accomplish at the level of the disabled hero,” a logic closely connected to neoliberal notions of “self-reliance” and individual responsibility (Hardin & Hardin, 2004, p. 7). Berger (2008) echoes the concern of unrealistic expectations, lack of acknowledgement of individual experiences, and the dangerous reproduction of ideologies such as “blaming the victim” and the “self-made man”. Further, for Silva and Howe “it is the negative ‘ethos’ of disability that feeds the low expectations placed on the individual labeled as disabled in a way that any achievement is easily glorified, no matter how insignificant”

(2012, p. 179). One could add that due to the fact that there is no single experience of disability, there is also no standard reference for extraordinary feats when factoring in disability, unless societal expectations of those with disabilities are already low (Silva & Howe, 2012).

Low expectations of persons or athletes with disabilities are compounded when one cannot afford the assistive or mobility technologies necessary to engage in daily tasks<sup>11</sup>. For example, in the case of the Paralympics, assistive technologies such as Pistorius's Flex-foot Cheetahs are intimately tied to the "supercrip" narrative (Howe, 2008). So what becomes of the highly trained athletes that do not require these technologies, and thus have no visible markers of difference? David Howe (2011) asserts that they can never fulfill all of the requirements to embody the constructed "supercrip" narrative. The "supercrip" narrative serves to reinforce ableism and a medical model view of disability. It does this by focusing on the person or athlete's ability to overcome and adapt to an able-bodied environment, rather than press for social change within institutions that perpetuate "compulsory able-bodiedness", and once again places the blame for the disability or illness on the individual (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). For Silva and Howe (2012) the "supercrip" narrative perpetuates an understanding of the existence of disabled bodies as a "problem" thus limiting the possibilities of those living with disabilities. To this end, the "supercrip" narrative becomes a handmaiden of sorts to ideologies of neoliberalism. One that suggests that disability is a problem of the

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<sup>11</sup> The discussion surrounding the disparity or inequity between have and have not countries due to the cost of high performance technologies at the Paralympics is a necessary one, one that is however outside the scope of this project. For additional information see the work of David Howe (2011), Ted Butryn (2002; 2003), and Brendan Burkett (2010).

individual and that if only those with disabilities would “try harder”, they too could be as successful as the “supercrip”, thus perpetuating discourses of individualism, self-reliance and ableism.

### **Nike, Neoliberalism and Disability**

Many aspects of popular culture have been critiqued for reproducing narratives of neoliberalism. Films such as *Rambo*, *Top Gun*, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Too Big Too Fail* all incorporate various components of neoliberal ideals. While many have questioned the reproduction of neoliberal narratives within film and television, few have thought to investigate the advertising sector. Nike has created two campaigns, one entitled “No Excuses” and the other “Courage,” both of which feature advertisements utilizing Paralympic bodies and simultaneously reiterating narratives associated with the logic of neoliberalism. In what follows I will unpack some of the discursive effects of these advertisements.

The “Courage” campaign is one of Nike’s first montage commercials and features 31 multigenerational athletes, both able bodied and “disabled”, from 17 countries competing in a variety of sports (Thomas, 2008). The original commercial is a montage of clips of athletes such as Lance Armstrong, Oscar Pistorius, and John McEnroe, among others interspersed with other courageous acts such as an astronaut preparing for take off and a child taking her first steps. The piece is accompanied by The Killers song “All These Things That I’ve Done” and features the tagline “everything you need is already inside” along with the “just do it” slogan. The campaign even has its own website, which features small bios of all of the athletes featured within the commercial.



Most importantly for this project, the campaign is also associated with Pistorius's 30-second "Bad Listener" advert, which highlights the various physical activities once thought impossible for the South African runner. The spot ends with Pistorius running on the track (hailing the viewer to recall his prowess there, as well as his bid to compete in the Olympic games) and of course the "Just Do It" tagline. According to a Nike spokesman, the courage campaign "celebrates courage as the essences of the 'Just Do It spirit'" and highlights the obstacles that all athletes must overcome (Thomas, 2008 p. 1). The campaign was launched by Nike just prior to the Beijing Olympic and Paralympic games in 2008.

The "Courage" campaign has several implications for viewers; I will begin with those most pertinent to the social construction of disability. Pistorius's commercial, while motivational and inspiring, creates some issues for people with disabilities. While it does provide a significant challenge to the dependent, inactive, "tragic cripple" narrative and provide aspiring athletes with disabilities an excellent role model, it also fails to acknowledge the individual experiences of those with disabilities. When this is combined with the neoliberal rhetoric, which promotes individualism, success at all costs and consumerism, it creates the problem of presenting the image that all people with disabilities can emulate Pistorius "if only they would try hard enough." This implies that "if they (Paralympians) can do it, why can't you?" This circulates a narrative of blame for individuals who require assistance, due to vastly different circumstances than those of the Paralympians we are exposed to in the media (which in North America are only amputees and wheelchair users, a small fraction of the various disabling conditions that are a reality for many). Here we can see the linkages between the messages within the

advertisements and the government cutbacks; by presenting a limited and homogeneous image of “disability” governments are able to justify cutbacks to funding and services based on the assumption that many people with disabilities are in fact “able” to provide for themselves, but they choose not to because social services are available. In reality this is not true, as each individual experience of disability is vastly different.

It is also critical to note that the vast majority of Nike consumers are able bodied, as Nike has just recently begun to produce athletic gear for “disabled” athletes. Thus, it appears that Paralympians have been co-opted not only for their access to the disability market, but to inspire the already captured able-bodied market. This perhaps lends support to Riley’s (2006) assertion that many consumers are more likely to patronize companies or stores that utilize people with disabilities within their advertising. It also privileges a particular type of disabled subject, one of relative affluence. However, one must not forget the Paralympian is more than merely a passive recipient and transmitter of neoliberal ideology. They are also paid quite handsomely, provided with products and technologies, and perhaps most importantly the time with which to fuel their pursuit of excellence in sport (for if one is sponsored, one may not need to hold down a traditional nine-to-five job to support training). For example, Pistorius earns approximately \$1 million per year from endorsements and appearance fees (Sokolove, 2012). This is again demonstrative of the complexities of the intersections between high performance sport, neoliberalism and disability, ones that are largely unexplored within the sociology of sport. Again, not all disabled persons are equal or have equal access to economic resources.

The Nike “Courage” montage is also at first glance meant to continue Nike’s motivational themes. The advert is meant to show all the challenges that *all* athletes must face and “overcome”, which aligns itself nicely with the “supercrip” narrative and neoliberalism. Set to the aforementioned Killers song, the advert keeps with Nike’s motivational rhetoric, and intends to inspire the warrior in us all (highlighted by the chorus line “I’ve got soul but I’m not a soldier”) to take on both the athletic and non-athletic challenges in our lives with all the gusto associated with the Nike ethos. The call to the “warrior” in all of us to overcome anything that stands in the way of our goals is a fitting analogy when one contextualizes the commercial within the Bush era and the beginning of “Operation Desert Storm”. However, the “I’ve got soul but I’m not a soldier” chorus line could also be read in the context of Live 8 as an anti-war sentiment. Either way the song’s use was most likely left ambiguous to draw in both the counter culture and mainstream culture buyers and was co-opted by Nike for its motivational purposes. This, much like the use of multigenerational athletic figures, which allows the commercial to appeal to a variety of age groups, while the use of both able-bodied and disabled athletes allows Nike access to both of those markets as well. Nike employs the strategy of engaging as many markets as possible within one commercial.

The Nike “No Excuses” campaign was also released in January of 2008 and had hopes of inspiring people to create and stick with their workout programs (and of course, purchase Nike products to do so). “No Excuses” features two advertisements that utilize the Paralympic bodies of Matt Scott (wheelchair basketball) and Rohan Murphy (wrestling). The commercial featuring Scott is a full one-minute long, with Scott shown from the chest up until the last eight seconds of the ad. While aggressively dribbling two

basketballs simultaneously, Scott proceeds to give the viewer 55 excuses that are often given for not working out or being active. These are things such as “I’ve got a case of the Mondays”, “it’s too cold”, “I’m too fat” and “my favorite show is on”. For the final excuse (#56) the camera pans to a full body shot of Scott in his wheelchair, who then slams the two balls on the floor and ironically throws out the final excuse of “and my feet hurt”. As he wheels away the familiar “Just Do It” flashes on the screen.

The “No Excuses” campaign evokes several emotions for the viewer. First, many viewers can identify with at least one or all of the 56 excuses listed in the commercial. Thus, when they see Matt Scott as an elite athlete with a disability, the viewer experiences shame or guilt for not being physically active/participating in sport. This is because Scott, and others with disabilities have perhaps the best “excuse” for not participating, yet they have “overcome” this to be the best in their sport. Nike has found the epitome of the “Just Do It” slogan, perhaps in the people who have every reason not to. The depiction of Scott as active, athletic and empowered serves to displace the social and political underpinnings of disability, difference and inequality. This is done by the presentation of Scott as “normal” because he is active regardless of disability, and reframes the viewer as “abnormal” for not already participating in athletics, subscribing to an active lifestyle, or at least to the “Just Do It” philosophy. In other words, Scott (and subsequently his disability) are momentarily “normal” because he is an athlete. The second emotion is motivation, a major aspect of Nike’s overall rhetoric. The viewer whether he/she is able bodied or otherwise should want to become active after experiencing guilt. Thus, the viewer is prescribed to do this through the purchasing of Nike products, as one needs athletic gear in order to participate.

Further, the “No Excuses” advertisements tie in nicely to the rhetoric of neoliberalism. Nike does this by reiterating the belief that there is in fact no excuse for failure. Within the neoliberal paradigm, failure or an unwillingness to be the best is attributed to the problem of the individual. Due to a whittling away of social services, there is very little available in terms of social assistance should one lose a job, become injured/sick and need medical care, or become for any reason unable to work. For example, new amendments to disability “out-of-work” benefits in the UK will cause many people to live in poverty. As well, major reductions have been made to short and long term disability living allowances, to mobility payments, as well as in budgets for respite care providers, meal programs, and residential housing programs. This has some media outlets speculating that there could be a return to institutionalization. Ironically, in the UK these cuts are being billed as ‘efficiency savings’. Further, cuts to healthcare make it much more difficult to obtain rehabilitation services, and in many cases even immediate treatment within the US. This is based on the belief that the market shall provide (Hall, 2011), which also reiterates the myth of meritocracy and upward social movement that is associated with the “American Dream”. However, if one is affluent, one can provide these things as they have been privatized and are available for purchase. Similarly, physical activity has become a private industry of “injury prevention” under neoliberalism. A healthy, fit worker is injured less and takes less sick time, therefore is more productive long term. Physical activity and sport has also become a means of rehabilitation (both mental and physical), as we see within *Warrior Champions*, which documents the rehabilitation of injured war veterans, and their road to the Paralympic Games. Thus, the “No Excuses” rhetoric put forth by Nike aligns itself nicely to a

reading under the tenets of neoliberalism. It may not be much longer before many will be claiming the excuse “I’m too cold” because they cannot afford to pay their heating bills or “I’m too thin/too weak” because they cannot afford food if neoliberals continue on this warpath of budget cuts for marginal populations.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to highlight the importance of discourses of neoliberalism within media and advertising. Of particular importance are neoliberalism’s tenets of individualism, self-management, consumerism and privatization (Harvey, 2008). These are upheld through the reduction of social services, which has a largely negative impact upon the daily lives of those living with disabilities. This serves to increase and exacerbate economic marginalization and pathologization of people with disabilities. Although, the increased use of Paralympians within advertising, in conjunction with more progressive representations of disability within television and film stands to provide a significant challenge to these narratives, it may also help to further marginalize and stigmatize those who do not live up to these “progressive” representations. I have also attempted to demonstrate the inherent tensions within the narrative of the “supercrip”, a narrative touted as progressive. Yet upon a more rigorous critique it is exposed to be reinforcing a medical model view of disability and discourses of ableism. Furthermore, this chapter has shown that there is a distinct link between the messages of neoliberalism found within the advertisements featuring Paralympians, and the justification of recent cutbacks to social services and funding for those living with disabilities.

I concluded this chapter by showing how the Nike “No Excuses” and “Courage” campaigns employ a rhetoric of neoliberalism within their advertisements and unearth the

discursive effects that this may have on people and athletes with disabilities. The predominant theme throughout is that one can avoid discourses of blame and guilt if one simply subscribes to the prescriptions of hard work, dedication and self or bodily improvement given by Nike. And let's not forget through the use/purchase of Nike products. Nike has now moved into the sporting goods market for athletes with disabilities by releasing the Nike Sole, which attaches to the Ossur Flex-Run carbon fiber blade used by many amputees for both track and distance running. Prior to the Sole, runners would simply cut off and attach the sole of a regular runner to their Cheetahs. Thus, keeping with the rhetoric of neoliberalism has allowed Nike to keep expanding and growing into new markets.

Further, I have also attempted to bring to light to an interesting tension that emerges between the pathologization and desirability (or fetishization) of disability in advertising media and neoliberal narratives. As McRuer (2003) notes, capitalism desires disability in order to profit or define what it means to be able-bodied, while simultaneously marginalizing it. This desire is limited, as this chapter has continued to demonstrate, to only "safe" disabled bodies with visual markers of difference so as not to blur the boundaries between able and disabled. By incorporating the difference that is disability, there is an attempt to elide the fact that "disability", much like "blackness", is a sign that has historically evoked feelings of fear within the able-bodied population. However at the same time, it is this desiring of disability that aids in lending political significance to the disability rights movement and allows the movement to critique the system that marginalizes it (McRuer, 2003). This exemplifies the contradictions and tensions found in a discussion of disability within neoliberalism.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conclusion**

My research investigated representations of Paralympians within advertising. The project focused primarily on advertisements produced by Nike and Visa, however, it did draw examples from television, film and other media sources in order to situate the discussion within broader cultural representations of disability. This research was guided by most importantly the need to uncover how Paralympic athletes were represented in advertisements. Are they as progressive as we think, or are there limitations to them? And further, what are the discursive effects of these advertisements? To do this I employed a method of discourse analysis as interpreted by Stuart Hall (1997). Hall's method of analysis is guided by a poststructural notion of language, meaning and representation and utilizes a constructionist approach to representation. It was found through a preliminary literature review that the dominant form of representation for those with disabilities within print media is the "supercrip", followed by passive poses, photos receiving medals rather than action shots, and infantilization of both male and female Paralympians. My research adds to the literature by examining how Paralympians are depicted within television and online advertisements, as well as a discursive analysis of these representations. This research is significant due to the prevalent role media plays in constructing "disability". For Pappous and colleagues, representations of people with disabilities within media have the power to confirm, "what it means to be a disabled person in this society" (2011b, p. 1183).



A study of this nature is timely as it is contextualized within the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. These Games were highly anticipated as Oscar Pistorius, a double below the knee amputee sprinter from South Africa, was allowed to participate within the Olympic games. This has sparked discussions in many circles regarding segregation and integration, based within discourses of “fairness”, “equality” and technology. These are discussions that are highly entrenched in not only disability, but also discourses of high performance sport. While in-depth analyses of these issues within Paralympic and Olympic events are better left for future studies, and are outside the scope of this thesis, it is important to highlight the complexities present at this historical moment in order to contextualize the importance of this study. Should Pistorius not succeed in making the 400m final, the stage is set for an argument for segregation or in other words containment of disabled bodies to only the Paralympic Games and a reproduction of disabled athletes (and thus, disabled people) as inferior. Should he succeed there is evidence towards two arguments. One being that the credit for his success will be attributed to his Cheetah technologies, and thus the argument surrounding “unfair advantage” will be reopened. Second, it will further the neoliberal message that all people with disabilities can emulate Pistorius “if only they would try hard enough,” implying that “if they (Paralympians) can do it, why can’t you?” This logic fails to acknowledge individual lived experiences of disability, including aspects of class, gender and racial privilege. Thus, it is very much in line with the goals of this study to acknowledge these complexities and to contextualize this project within these discussions.

Nike was chosen as point of entry for this study as they have a significant marketing platform involving “lifestyle” choices, as well as a history (albeit a short one) of incorporating disabled bodies into their advertisements. Further, their marketing technique of addressing their advertisements to as many populations as possible through their motivational and emancipatory narratives lends itself to a critique within and against neoliberalism. Nike advertising attempts to motivate the average person to become active and subscribe to the Nike philosophy of excellence through constant work on the body, and subsequently the consumption of their products. This allows the consumer to be emancipated from whatever “they are” at the current moment (which is never enough) and become someone and something “better,” a concept that is deliberately kept out of reach (Helstein 2003). Nike has begun to market this ethos to not only the disability community, which within North America has a very high level of untapped discretionary income, but also it has appropriated Paralympic bodies for the motivation of the able-bodied community. Thus, it became increasingly important to investigate what discourses regarding “disability” are circulating with regularity within these advertisements.

Due to the fact that Nike had, at the time of this study, not released an ad featuring a female Paralympian, an advert from Visa’s “Go World” campaign was included to depict how female Paralympians are represented within the contemporary advertising landscape. It was found that the discourses circulating with regularity regarding disability were very similar in both the Nike and Visa advertisements. Therefore, one can conclude that the use of the “supercrip” narrative is not limited to Nike. It is being incorporated into campaigns for companies such as Nike, Visa, The

Hartford, McDonalds, BP Oil and Coca Cola, among others and is a narrative employed throughout not only the advertising sector, but also as this thesis has demonstrated, other areas of popular media such as television, film and print media as well. Given the trends and themes noted within the literature review, it became imperative to investigate whether or not these trends continued throughout television (which is now more often than not viewed online) advertising.

## **Results**

First, results regarding narratives of elite disabled athletes indicated that the medical model of disability is still highly entrenched within disability sport. The identities of Paralympians are dependent upon (in both the media and the classification process) a tragic moment of disablement. This, at one and the same time serves to challenge stereotypical narratives of disability by creating the moment at which they are introduced to Paralympic sport embodying the active, empowered and heroic athlete, but also to reproduce the discourse of the tragedy, dependency (upon volunteers/organizers), and anonymity. The simultaneous celebration and marginalization of Paralympians is perhaps the key contradiction within the advertisements. A focus on the medical model of disability, as it is embedded in the sporting realm, serves to reduce expectations of the athletes and position them, as well as the Paralympic Games as inferior to the able-bodied athletes and the Olympic Games. However, the use and celebration of Paralympians and Paralympic sport covers over this constructed inferiority. Further, the separation of the two games (and thus, the two types of bodies) can be seen as an act of containment (of disabled bodies) in order to avoid contamination of the Olympic Games. The narrative of “overcoming” and “tragedy” is not unique to the Paralympic Games. As was

demonstrated within Chapter Two, it is also evident in television, film and other forms of media representations of disabled bodies.

Further, all of the bodies within the advertisements were either wheelchair users or amputees. This relegates other disabilities such as Cerebral Palsy, or bodies within the “Les Autres” categories away from the media spotlight. This suggests that amputees and wheelchair users are more media friendly (and thus marketable) than many of the other bodies that participate within the Paralympic games. It is also important to note that all of the Paralympians within the advertisements were physically fit and “conventionally” attractive. As wheelchair users and amputees all have visual markers of difference present within the advertisements (such as prosthetics and sports chairs) it serves to clearly uphold the binary between able bodied and disabled. It seems that advertisers are not ready to engage with the blurring boundaries between able/disabled by portraying bodies with other visual markers of difference.

An examination of the articulation between disability, athletics and other identity categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality revealed some unique complexities. Athletes within the advertisements were presumed heterosexual. Further, the privilege of the white male was upheld through their ability to narrate their own advertisements, or in other words to speak for themselves. Though female bodies were depicted as “in action,” femininity was reinforced through a highlighting of, for instance, Blauwet’s accomplishments outside of sport, situating her within the “supercrip” narrative, as well as to return her femininity to a safer, non-sporting space. Representations of the female Paralympian are progressive in that Blauwet is viewed as an athlete first, a phenomenon not often seen within able-bodied advertisements featuring athletes. However, when this

same representation is examined from a sexuality standpoint it becomes problematic as it presents the female Paralympic body as asexual and undesirable. This is perhaps one of the key polemics found within the results. There is a continued contradiction in the representation of disabled females as *momentarily* athletes first rather than disabled subjects, yet when contextualized within the entirety of the advertisements they are continually returned to the “supercrip” stereotype which privileges disability as the sole defining characteristic of the athlete.

No female athletes of ethnicity are featured within any disability advertisements produced by Nike or Visa. However, male African American bodies are incorporated. This is consistent with Nike’s use of race within other campaigns in which traditionally the company seems to celebrate black bodies while also making race “disappear” (Goldman & Papsan, 1998). Murphy’s body, for example, is situated as a commodity for use or sale by Nike. Further, when we explore attributes of Murphy’s “No Excuses” campaign specifically, it becomes apparent that race and disability become a spectacle, a set of signifiers removed from socioeconomic conditions and sold as commodities. Race and disability are also infantilized through the use of the Burl Ives “Donut Song,” creating a curious contradiction; Murphy’s “blackness” is depicted as both “safe” or “neutral” and yet is also presented as a “spectacle”.

Class within the advertisements is left ambiguous and was thus middle class by default. The articulation of the cost of Paralympic sport technology, with the price point of Nike products, as well as the income level required to access Visa products lead advertisements viewers to assume the advertisements are directed at an affluent market.

An examination of the advertisements revealed that all of the advertisements conformed to the “supercrip” narrative. This narrative depicts people or athletes with disabilities as exceptional, simply for being able to perform everyday acts and to participate in society (Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Berger 2008). For athletes specifically, it also involves attaining a certain amount of success and notoriety, like athletes featured within the advertisements, most notably Pistorius (Howe, 2008). Most often the narrative prioritizes disability over athletic accomplishments and involves a narrative of “overcoming”, much like the rhetoric of emancipation or transcendence that has become synonymous with Nike’s motivational advertisements. The fact that low or ambiguous expectations are often attributed to people and athletes with disabilities enables and encourages the audience to celebrate them for daily accomplishments or simply for, as Peers (2009) asserts “showing up”.

However, the “supercrip” does provide a significant challenge to the view of people with disabilities as lazy, dependent and anonymous. It offers an alternative, one that views people with disabilities as active, capable, independent and identifiable. These are the inherent tensions of the “supercrip” representation. What is problematic about the “supercrip” is in its use as inspiration to the able-bodied population. It places shame, blame, and value judgments on people with disabilities, and risks oversimplifying the complexities of disabilities to one of attitude (Young, 2012). It hides the need for changes surrounding language use and treatment of people with disabilities within society. Moreover, it risks further “othering” people with disabilities through the process of singling them out *because* of their disabilities (Smith, 2012). These tensions cannot continue to go unnoticed, as while they are helpful to the disability rights movement they

must be viewed with caution since they are not always entirely reflective of the lived experience of those with disabilities. This demonstrates the complexities and contradictions of the use of disability by advertising and media. Again, disability is at one and the same time celebrated, yet marginalized.

Chapter Three critiqued the “supercrip” and the Nike “No Excuses” and “Courage” campaigns within and against neoliberalism. Neoliberal policies of individualism, self-management, free market, and reduction of social services are of most importance to the disability agenda. Results show that the “supercrip” narrative associated with disability works seamlessly with Nike’s advertisements involving gender and class (class issues are most often associated with representations of race as well), which feature narratives of overcoming and transcendence (Goldman & Papson, 1998). To the detriment of people with disabilities these types of representations often reproduce values closely tied to neoliberalism. For the “average” person with disabilities, who may not be able to overcome their social or economic circumstances without aid neoliberal narratives provide an unattainable goal. Further, it was shown throughout the critique of neoliberal aspects of the advertisements that there is a complementary relationship between the neoliberal rhetoric displayed within the advertisements, and the justification of cutbacks to disability services and funds. In forcing people with disabilities and their families to turn to private providers, these cutbacks are reproducing a key aspect of neoliberalism that often privileges the affluent. The rhetoric of individualism and self-management demands that one be able to provide for oneself and family without a reliance on public programming and social services. Similarly, Nike presents a singular,

supposedly stable version of disability (which then constructs identities of disability), which is often unattainable to many of those living with a disability.

### **Key Contradictions and Complexities**

As is demonstrated by the above discussion, while some definitive answers to my research questions were obtained, I have also been left with several lingering questions. For instance, what does it mean to desire “disability” in the advertisements and by extension popular culture? What might a transgressive narrative of disability look like and why do we rarely see them in popular culture? In what follows I will attempt to work through these remaining queries by turning to bell hooks (1992) and Anne Millett (2004) to build on the discussion of McRuer’s (2003) desiring disability put forth at the end of Chapter Three. Although I do not attempt to provide any definitive solutions or answers to these questions, I do acknowledge that they are perhaps key polemics that must be engaged with in future studies of disability within media and popular culture. As it is within a discussion of these contradictions that we can perhaps see a glimpse of the various options, examples and limitations of the “future” of disability in advertising and media.

As noted in Chapter Three, McRuer (2003) points to the ways in which disability is desired. He puts forth a critique of “desiring” disability to maximize profit in which disability is simultaneously used yet marginalized at the same time. This is a problematic reflection of how disability is positioned as the “other” and devalued. The momentary celebration of difference and appearance of diversity simply serves to gloss over how disability is constructed within North American society. In other words, the perceived political threat of “difference” is diffused and promoted as commodity.



Similarly, the “fetishization” of disability serves to reproduce stereotypical representations of “disability” (such as the “supercrip”) and objectify people with disabilities. By objectifying people with disabilities it allows capitalism to avoid viewing them as people and thus a valid political subjects. In other words, to fetishize disability is to depoliticize it.

But McRuer (2003) also identifies a desiring of disability that allows for resistance. This desiring of disability gives the disability rights movement political significance and allows the movement to critique the system that marginalizes it (McRuer, 2003). By critiquing dominant narratives of disability within advertising and popular culture we are able to expose some of the dominant contradictions found within these representations. In grounding this critique in disability rights politics we can engage in “practices of freedom” – practices that would work to realize a world of multiple (desiring and desirable) corporealities interacting in nonexploitative ways” (McRuer, 2003, p. 14).

It is here we can add the work of hooks (1992) to this discussion. Without wishing to conflate the political movements of race with disability, as both are their own important rights movements, we can however draw some parallels between the two arguments in terms of resistance. Inadvertently, hooks (1992) helps to return the discussion of “disability” to the realm of politics. She suggests in the case of race that we are rarely given an alternative worldview to white supremacy, which situates “blackness” as inferior. Further, hooks argues “racial integration in a social context where white supremacist systems are intact undermines the marginal spaces of resistance by promoting that social equality can be attained without changes in the cultures attitudes

about blackness and black people” (1992, p. 10). Perhaps this argument rings true for disability as well. What is needed is the deconstruction of the category of “ability.” Just as we have learned to over-value “ability” we have at one and the same time learned to devalue “disability” (hooks, 1992). Thus, it is the ethos of inferiority, inadequacy, and disabling language and institutions that need to change in order for there to be positive representations of people and athletes with disabilities. hooks (1992) identifies a starting point of resistance in simply acknowledging (without fetishizing or depoliticizing) positive recognition and acceptance of difference. Perhaps at this point in popular culture this positive recognition and acceptance may be considered transgressive narratives of disability.

When we critically look at the advertisements through this lens, with the help of hooks (1992) I argue that in their current form the advertisements do not provide a significant challenge to ableism. This is due to the fact that the advertisements in this study reproduced the problematic stereotype of the “supercrip” as well as discourses of inferiority and infantilization. These stereotypes uphold and sustain ableism rather than contesting dominant abelist discourses (McRuer, 2003). In presenting an image of equality or homogeneity, the advertising community is able to gloss over the power relations in ableism that allow for the domination and subjugation of one group over another (hooks, 1992). Advertising has embraced “difference” in a way such that it is “no longer about keeping up with the Joneses, but about being different from them” (1992, p. 17). This allows the industry to use “disability” to define what “ability” is, rather than to actually embrace disability or difference.

This leaves us with the question of what a transgressive disability advert or narrative might look like. Despite the widespread circulation of “supercrip” narratives, there are some examples of resistive narratives within popular culture. Millett (2004) argues the Disney Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* is a transgressive representation of disability. She suggests this due to the fact that Nemo and other characters such as Dory and Marlin among others have a variety of differences, yet none of them is presented as deficient, vulnerable or inadequate (Millett, 2004). Further, there is no tragic moment of disablement for any of the characters within the film. In other words disability in the film is not cause-related or medicalized (Millett, 2004). In contrast to traditional narratives of disability there is no reduction of the characters to only “disability”, which often promotes the need for therapy, repair or overcoming to return to a state of “normalcy.” *Finding Nemo*, in other words, presents no signals of danger and no attempts to elicit pity for “disabled” characters (Millett, 2004). Instead disability is depicted as “a flavorful ingredient in cultural diversity-both remarkable, yet necessarily everyday, perhaps even disguised in the tides of life” (Millett, 2004, p. 2). Disability is presented within the film as complex, multidimensional, but never as “bad”, inferior” or something to “overcome”, perhaps leading some to overlook the very presence of disability within the storyline. This is just one example of what may be considered a transgressive narrative of disability.

In Britain, Channel Four has also run a promotional campaign for its London 2012 Paralympic coverage, which features bodies other than wheelchair users or amputees. Not incidentally, Paralympians from “Team GBR” were consulted regarding the production of the advertisements (Usborne, 2012). According to the production team

the advertisements aim to solidify the credibility of the Games (Paralympics) as a premiere sporting event (Usborne, 2012). The advertisements attempt to “flip the supercrip” and begin the narrative of Paralympians with sport rather than disability. This could perhaps be another example of a sports specific transgressive narrative of disability. While I attempt to depict just a few examples of transgressive narratives, there may be several others circulating as well.

### **Reflexivity**

In an attempt to remain reflexive throughout this process, I realize that due to my educational background within sport, kinesiology and media studies I may read these advertisements differently than the average viewer. I viewed the sample thoroughly to examine the language, discursive silences and narratives within the advertisements. The average viewer may overlook the political messages and societal views that are portrayed within these advertisements and simply view them for motivation, inspiration or entertainment value. Thus, it is extremely important to critically engage with these advertisements to analyze the dominant discourses present within each and decipher its discursive effects on societal views of disability.

I came to this project after working with young people with disabilities, in the positions of support worker and recreational activities planner. It soon became apparent that within a small southern Alberta town there were very few opportunities for youth with physical disabilities. Furthermore, there were very few role models available for these budding athletes to identify with. This then became an area of inquiry in my undergraduate work within sociology of sport and morphed into a graduate thesis project. What started as a small inquiry into the sponsorship of athletes with disabilities became a

sociological critique of representations of Paralympians. Over the course of this process through the use of critical disabilities studies literature, a key tension became apparent between the celebration and marginalization of these athletes; one that requires much further unpacking within the area of sport sociology. The use of Paralympians simultaneously challenges dependency and inactivity often associated with people with disabilities, while also serving to further marginalize them by objectifying them as “inspirations” to the able bodied community. As a result, over this process I have learned to become critical of the rhetoric of “inspiration”, which is often couched in a disability first, pathologizing narrative, as the discursive effects of this for people with disabilities are far more complex than I had previously understood.

Further, I also acknowledge that I am able-bodied and that this may influence my reading of the advertisements. As such, I may be coming from a vastly different subject position (with respect to power relations) than perhaps a researcher with a disability. Throughout the research process I have attempted to take measures to ensure that the writing of this work is neither patronizing nor condescending to those with disabilities, but rather that it can expose the inherent tensions of the ability/disability binary. To do this it is important to note that the research process, as well as the construction of identity takes place within the political, social and cultural realms rather than apart from it, creating a space in which able bodied and disabled persons can work together to critique these social constructions (Hughes, 2012). As hooks notes we must be willing to acknowledge “that individuals of great privilege who are in no way victimized are capable, via their political choices, of working on behalf of the oppressed” (1992, p. 13). Moreover, I hope to create a work that recognizes the disability movement as politically

and socially important and acknowledges the need to deconstruct and critique ability as well, rather than simply the construction of disability (hooks, 1992).

### **Contributions and Future Research**

This thesis adds to the literature on disability sport by providing a critical discourse analysis of the representations of Paralympians within sport advertising. While the area of disability sport studies is a relatively unexplored but burgeoning field within sociology of sport literature, the need for the continuation of projects of this nature is increasing as the Paralympics Games are currently the second largest sport mega event, second only to the Olympics. My thesis contributes a greater understanding of how representations of disability are reproducing neoliberal narratives that may not in fact be as beneficial to people living with disabilities as they are made out to be.

This study is timely as it is contextualized within the midst of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, with both events garnering significant attention based on the allowance of Oscar Pistorius into the Olympic Games. Channel Four's unprecedented coverage of the Paralympic Games is resulting in the increasing notoriety of its athletes is on the rise. Since the beginning of this study Nike has, in conjunction with Ossur, released an advert featuring Sarah Reinertsen that is ripe for unpacking. Further inquiry into these purportedly progressive advertisements, their effectiveness in the promotion of the games, their impact on the disability sport community, and their role in reproducing neoliberal sensibilities is needed. Future research could also include an inquiry into the nature and location of what might be viewed as "transgressive" disability advertisements is also needed. Similarly, there is a need to inquire how the disabled community and Paralympians specifically perceive and internalize advertisements of this nature. There is

also room for analysis of the advertisements produced by Channel Four in Britain in conjunction with London 2012, which could be positioned as a comparative analysis to those produced in North America in an effort to uncover the similarities and differences of representations of athletes with disabilities. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, inquiry must be made into how the solidarity of identity-based politics is or is not compromised by the increasing “individualization” of identity. That is to say, if we are all unique in our own special ways, what happens to the “community” and “solidarity” of political movements in an era of neoliberalism? These are just some of the critical investigations that will help to further our understandings of not only the use of disability within advertising, but identity politics, disability rights and disability in the era of neoliberalism.

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