Article title:

Polysemic interpretations: Examining how women with visual impairments incorporate, resist, and subvert advertising content

Journal name:

Journal of Advertising

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Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Professor David Bolt for his generosity in providing encouragement and feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

No funding, or disclosure statements, to declare.

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Abstract

This article takes a feminist disability studies approach to the analysis of women with visual impairments' responses to representations of blindness, disability and gender in advertising. Empirical data gathered via semi-structured interviews with women who are visually impaired (N = 5) enhances existing understandings of oppressed audiences' polysemic interpretations of advertisements. The research findings reveal participants' subversion of stereotypical approaches to visual impairments, ocularcentrism and gendered constructions of blindness, which are found in advertisements (N = 3) produced post-2000 in the United Kingdom and United States. Participants highlighted subtle stereotyping in advertisements through exploring the intersecting nature of disability and gender identities. Advertisements were used by participants as prompts for reasserting their affirmative senses of self and as a means of critiquing sociocultural attitudes towards women with visual impairments. Recommendations for future research and practice in relation to advertising polysemy and the representation of disabled women in advertising are provided.

Key words:

Advertising polysemy; feminist disability studies; stereotypes; women with visual impairments; ocularcentrism.

Texts produced within popular culture – such as advertisements – reflect "ideological incorporation and resistance" (Ellis 2016, 12). The influence of sociocultural ideologies on the content of texts cannot be ignored. However, nor should the potential for audiences to interpret texts in critical ways be underestimated. The concept of advertising polysemy addresses the "dynamic" relationship between advertisements and audiences (Hackley 2017, 43). As well as relating to individuals' agreement or disagreement with advertising messages, polysemy occurs in evaluations of whether or not messages are meaningful and useful (Høngsmark Knudsen 2012). Audiences interpret advertising content in divergent and unexpected ways and, when making sense of advertisements, draw on their sociocultural contexts, similar events they have experienced and their personal values (Puntoni, Schroeder and Ritson 2010). There are micro (subjective values and experiences) and macro (awareness of wider sociocultural ideologies) factors that influence interpretations of advertisements.

Advertisers benefit from advertising polysemy. A scene, social interaction, or ambiguous message depicted in one advertisement can appeal to many people because of the various interpretations they produce (Hackley 2017). The use of ambiguous taglines and scenes in advertising enables advertisers to appeal to individuals who are part of "sub-cultures", in a subtle way that is unlikely to offend conservative audiences. A commonly cited example is "gay window advertising" – a term used to describe advertisements that subvert heteronormativism in ways that are not immediately noticeable (Borgerson et al. 2006; Tsai 2012).

Marginalized audiences often interpret advertisements through their "subcultural identity" and reflect on how their portrayal in advertising will likely be perceived by audiences who are not oppressed (Tsai 2012, 43). The research presented in this article contributes to existing understandings of oppressed audiences' polysemic responses to advertisements by demonstrating how women who are visually impaired explored intersections of disability and

gender identities in their analyses of advertisements (N = 3) produced post-2000 in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and United States (U.S). The findings highlight how participants resisted stereotypical messages in advertising through drawing on their embodied knowledge of blindness, disability and gender. Previous studies indicate that marginalized audiences demonstrate sensitive awareness of their "disadvantaged social status" when interpreting advertisements (Tsai 2012, 51). The study presented in this article finds that women with visual impairments use advertisements as prompts to critique disabling and sexist attitudes, and discusses how advertising can raise awareness of, and help to challenge, discriminatory attitudes and practices.

The analysis of women with visual impairments' explorations of advertisements is informed by feminist disability studies – which merges feminist and disability studies theory, research and values. Feminists call for radical changes in society in order to challenge the systemic oppression of women, on the basis of their gender. Feminist activism addresses various issues, such as violence against women, labour and pay inequalities, voting and reproduction rights (Griffin 2017). Disability studies highlights societal structures that disable people with impairments and contends that inaccessible environments and attitudes create disability - as opposed to the belief that people who have physical, sensory or cognitive impairment, chronic illnesses, or mental health issues require interventions in order to fit into society (Swain et al. 2013). Feminists' appreciation of personal and so-called private issues as politically relevant – such as housework and childcare as unpaid labour that disproportionately impacts women - enriches disability studies inquiry, which has traditionally concentrated on disabling barriers that are external to individuals, rather than exploring embodied experiences of disability (Morris 1996). Perspectives from disability studies, in turn, enhance the inclusiveness of feminism through calling for greater incorporation of disabled women's voices (Bê 2020). The pejorative use of disability

metaphors in feminist critiques of the patriarchy (for example, bell hooks' use of the term "emotional cripples" when discussing how men are encouraged to be emotionally distant) have also been challenged (Schalk 2013).

At the heart of feminist disability studies is "critical cultural work" that uncovers how taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding disability and gender are shaped by cultural ideologies and "system[s] of representation" (Garland Thomson 2005, 1557). Taking a feminist disability studies approach to the analysis of disability and gender in advertising involves examining how representations reflect and/or challenge sociocultural ideologies that oppress disabled women. Feminist disability studies is inherently intersectional, as it explores how disability and gender identities "mutually construct, inflect, and contradict" each other (Hall 2011, 15). Intersectional analyses appreciate that people, social events and relations cannot be fully understood with reference to one aspect of identity or element of oppression (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). Disabled women's narratives reveal the ways that they are impacted by gendered expectations – for example, in relation to care giving and housework responsibilities (Thomas 2006). Within the parameters of this article, participants' disability and gender identities are focused on in order to provide a sustained exploration of their intersection. Participants referred only to their disability and gender identities when discussing advertisements – as such, it is not possible to speculate how other aspects of identity shaped their responses.

Feminist and disability studies analyses of advertisements often converge. In a similar way to feminist critiques of unrealistic beauty standards in advertising (Kilbourne 2017), disability studies scholars find that disabled people are often altogether excluded from constructs of beauty in advertising – including campaigns that claim to be pro-diversity (Heiss 2011; Davis 2013). "Femvertising" – the supposed promotion of female empowerment in advertising – has been examined through feminist frameworks (Windels et al. 2019, 1). For example, the

notion that women can gain self-empowerment through altering their appearance in ways that support narrow constructs of beauty and femininity has been challenged (Gill 2009). In a similar vein, disability studies scholars suggest that "cherry-picked" portrayals of disability are frequently used in pro-diversity advertising campaigns (Davis 2013, 4). Women who have visual impairments are aware of sociocultural ideals surrounding beauty, and are able to absorb these ideologies through various sensory means, and with support from assistive technology (Fannon 2016). However, women who are visually impaired - and disabled women in general – are frequently omitted from constructions of beauty in advertising. Moreover, comparisons can be drawn between the historic portrayal of disabled people in charity advertisements as pitiable and passive, and the traditional tendency in advertising to place women in subservient roles, in comparison to their male counterparts (Goffman 1976).

The following section presents key themes surrounding the representation of visual impairment in culture, including: the reinforcement of ocularcentrism (a term that defines the privileging of vision above other senses (Jay 2013)), and the impact of stereotypes surrounding blindness in culture on societal attitudes towards people with visual impairments. A review of existing research and theory relating to the representation of visual impairments and diversity in contemporary advertising is provided in the next section. The qualitative methodological approach taken to the study of women with visual impairments' interpretations of advertisements is then outlined. The research findings highlight the reinforcement of gender roles, within the resistance of disabling stereotypes. 'Worthy' and 'cringe worthy' narratives in representations of women with visual impairments in advertising are also examined. Finally, the research's contribution to understandings of oppressed audiences' polysemic responses to advertising and recommendations for future research and practice are highlighted.

The terms *blind/ness* are used in this article, in reference to the phenomenon of blindness (for example, the cultural representation of blindness). All participants occasionally referred to themselves as *blind*, which can be understood as recognition of the social identity they have been ascribed, and as positive reclamation of blind identity. Use of the terms *people/women with visual impairments* and *disabled women/people* is influenced by the British social model of disability, which distinguishes between impairment (bodily variation and/or limitation) and disability (discrimination that is directly linked to an individual's impairment). The term *disabled people* represents the collective power and affirmative culture shared by people who identify as disabled (Andrews et al. 2019).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Getting a sense of privilege: The reinforcement of ocularcentrism in culture

Ocularcentrism refers to the privileging of vision above other senses, for instance the assumption that knowledge of external realities is best captured through vision (Jay 2013). Feminist critiques of ocularcentrism indicate that vision is associated with "distance, detachment, and objectivity" (Devorah 2017; Walden 2002, 119). When sight is understood as the "leading sense and as an objective sensory mode representing reason" (Hammer 2019, 8), visual impairment becomes akin to the "loss of a fundamental quality that makes someone human" (Kleege 2009, 113). Cultural representations of blindness have historically endorsed ocularcentrism through equating blindness with darkness and loss of awareness (Bolt 2005). Disabling metaphors such as "knowing is seeing" equate sight with "enlightenment" (Michalko 2003, 76), and blindness with ignorance (Kleege 1999; Vidali 2010, 42-3).

Ocularcentrism plays a complex role in the lives of women with visual impairments. For some women the reduced exposure to "constant visual feedback" on their appearance is liberating. However, women who are visually impaired sometimes enact "hyper-aware

feminine performance" in order to gain social acceptance, rather than pity, on the basis of their disability identity (Hammer 2012, 407-8).

Ocularcentrism is a form of ableism – a term that refers to the unquestioned dominance of non-disabled people's navigation of the world (Bolt 2019). When sight is presumed to be the most important sense, the "failure to ask about difference, to imagine human being-ness differently" is implicit (Campbell 2009, 4), and sighted people's experiences are naturalised (Dokumaci 2018). Ignorance of people with visual impairments' understandings of the world leads to ocularnormativism - the inference that an individual must be able to see in order to have a fulfilling life and contribute to society (Bolt 2014). Advertising representations of blindness have endorsed ocularnormativism. For example, an advertisement produced in 1990 by U.S. based fashion company Levi Strauss & Co shows a woman going into public toilets to change her clothes, after she has robbed a bank. She notices a man, wearing sunglasses, who is sitting by the sinks. His white cane drops onto the floor and he reaches around before picking it up. After she changes her clothes – metres in front of the man – she walks over to him and slowly buttons up her jeans inches from his face. There is the sound of a toilet flushing and another man (who is visually impaired) leaves a cubicle as the woman rushes away. He is greeted by the seated man who passes over the white cane while shaking his head in bemusement. In its attempt at provocative humour the advertisement endorses ocularnormativism through playing on the idea that individuals must possess sight in order to be aware of their surroundings and to get sexually aroused (Timke 2019).

The concept of advertising polysemy highlights the potential for people with visual impairments to challenge the reinforcement of ocularnormativism in culture. Individuals can resist the privileging of sight through drawing on their embodied knowledge of blindness. However, those who do not have lived experience of disability are more likely to absorb stereotypical narratives attached to disabled people. Cultural disability studies theorist David

Bolt (who identifies as having visual impairment) recalls an encounter when he was waiting for a friend outside a bar, and was approached by a stranger who presumed he was "collecting for the blind". Stereotypes that pervade literature and culture – such as the "blind beggar" – influence social responses to people with visual impairments (Bolt 2014, 11). Stereotypes are often communicated in simple terms, however, comprehension of them is complex as it is dependent on awareness of existing social structures, norms and values (Perkins 1997). In this case the stereotype of disabled people as inherent recipients of charity reflects disabled people's "struggle for recognition" due to historical media coverage of disabled people as supposedly "in need of pity and charity" (Shapiro 1996, 59).

Stereotypes contribute to "metanarratives" that supposedly explain, and define, the experience of blindness by tying people with visual impairments to "an overriding narrative that seems to displace agency" (Bolt 2017, 10). Despite the hyper-visibility of disabled bodies in public spaces (in terms of receiving unwanted attention and being subject to staring), people with visual impairments are often not truly "seen" by others and granted recognition beyond their disability identity (Lourens and Swartz 2016, 214). However, individuals actively resist being tied to metanarratives of blindness. In her feminist disability studies research on visually impaired women's experiences of being stared at, Hammer (2016, 426) explores how individuals challenge metanarratives of blindness in creative ways. One participant in her study – Noa – played the "blind beggar" in a musical performance and carried a can labelled: "I'm a blind woman, stricken by fate, pity me". She encouraged the audience to reflect on their perceptions of blindness and brought attention to their voyeurism by inviting them to stare at her. Noa reflected her polysemic response to the stereotype of the blind beggar through using it as an opportunity to prompt non-disabled people to rethink their attitudes towards blindness, rather than perceiving the stereotype as a topic that is best avoided.

The representation of people with visual impairments in twenty-first-century advertising: Visionary content or tokenistic approaches to diversity?

The benefits connected to the promotion of diversity, such as the opportunity to appeal to wider audiences and association with inclusive values, are recognised increasingly in twenty-first century advertising (Haller and Ralph 2001; Lee, Williams and La Ferle 2014; Panol and McBride 2001). Disabled people have not always been recognised as a potential consumer group - aside from featuring in charity campaigns, representations of disabled people have been historically absent in advertising (Bolt 2014). Despite the introduction of legislation – such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) – which requires private services to ensure equitable access for disabled consumers, companies have perceived disabled people to be "a source of concern and expense" (Burnett and Paul 1996, 47). The fear of portraying disability "incorrectly" or accusations of exploiting disabled people is a common reason behind advertisers' reluctance to include people with impairments in their advertisements (Timke 2019, n.p.).

The growing popularity of pro-diversity advertising campaigns is constructive when considering that "mass imagery emanating from advertising and the media has played a major role in perpetuating discrimination against citizens with disabilities…" (Hahn 1987, 566). The increasing volume of realistic, rather than dramatized, portrayals of disability is noteworthy because advertising has historically endorsed "physical integrity, "body beautiful", personal appearance, health [and] athletic prowess" (Panol and McBride 2001, n.p.). Depictions of disability in advertisements influence societal attitudes towards disabled people on a vast scale and impact on the extent to which disability is viewed as "part of the social landscape", due to their global reach via multimedia platforms (Haller and Ralph 2016; Loebner 2020; Parashar and Devanathan 2006, 13). Finding spaces where people with impairments can be valued is complex as disabled people are frequently depicted as

dependent on welfare, charity and health-care systems (Goodley et al. 2019). It is, therefore, important to highlight areas where representations of disability are progressing. However, realistic and multifaceted portrayals of disability continue to be absent in the majority of advertisements (Bolt 2014, 2019; Davis 2013; Heiss 2011; Houston 2019). A key issue is that advertisers continue to conceptualise diversity in limited ways and do not offer radical alternatives to commonly accepted beauty norms (Davis 2013; Heiss 2011).

A recurrent narrative in advertisements that are seemingly aligned with pro-diversity and feminist values (referred to as "femvertising") is that "change is within the grasp of individuals who choose to grab it" (Sobande 2019, n.p.). The message that individuals can change their circumstances and chances of success through self-determination detracts attention from social inequalities and systemic barriers faced by women (Gill 2007, as quoted in Windels et al. 2019). Advertisements that supposedly empower individuals provoke polysemic responses from audiences: some individuals perceive these messages as affirmative, while others critique the promotion of self-empowerment in advertising as a "manipulative" marketing strategy (Feng et al. 2019, 5). When messages and values that have originated from activist movements (such as feminism) are approached in a tokenistic way, activism is reflected in a "depoliticized and commodified form" (Windels et al. 2019, 3). An example is the misappropriation of self-care – a radical feminist concept regarding the importance of self-care for marginalized people who live in oppressive environments. The portrayal of self-care in advertising typically "starts and ends with consumerism" (Lorde 1988, as quoted in Sobande 2019, n.p.). A similar concern is that tokenistic representations of people from marginalized backgrounds leads to the "hollowing out of diversity" (Gill and Kanai 2019, n.p.). An example is the integration of models with impairments that are able to "[pass] as nondisabled, or, at least, not too disabled" and fit in with "pretty people" standards in advertising (Mitchell and Snyder 2015, 14; Parashar and Devanathan 2006, 15).

"Slice of life" depictions of disabled people's everyday lives can be used in advertisements that seek to portray diversity as a commonplace aspect of life and want to move away from dramatic portrayals of disability that trigger emotive responses such as fear and pity (Bolt 2014, 28). The use of everyday imagery in advertising is an effective way of encouraging audiences to imagine a brand or product as a meaningful part of their own lifestyle (Saxena Arora and Arora 2017). However, the trend for commonplace experiences to be sensationalised in advertising potentially limits the growth of realistic representations of disability and impairment (Loebner 2020).

Emotive portrayals of visual impairments, which encourage stereotypical attitudes towards blindness, continue to be promoted in advertising. For example, the Royal National Institute of Blind People's (RNIB – a U.K. based charity that offers support to people with visual impairments) 'See the Need' (2015) advertising campaign depicts visual impairment as "negative to the extreme" (Bolt 2016, 1161). The campaign features five advertisements focusing on a famous person's mostly fearful reflection on how they would be impacted by acquiring visual impairment. Realistic, yet inaccessible, portrayals of women with visual impairments have been found in some advertisements produced as part of Dove's (a personal care brand that originated in the U.S.) 'Campaign for Real Beauty' (between 2007-12). An advertisement for deodorant depicts a woman, who is visually impaired, getting ready to go out with her friends. However, a lack of audio descriptors means that people with visual impairments might not be aware of the beauty product that is marketed, and suggests that they were not considered as part of the target audience (Bolt 2014). When using scenes and images that encourage audiences to relate brands and products to their own lifestyles, and produce personal interpretations of advertising content, it is important that advertisers not only consider how purposeful polysemy attracts wider audiences, but also pay attention to which audiences are included, or excluded, in this approach.

METHODS

Participants and procedures

The study of polysemy in advertising is complemented by a qualitative methodological approach, which seeks to "make sense of phenomena from the participant's viewpoint" and pursues depth, rather than breadth, of understanding (Merriam and Grenier 2019, 6). In a similar way to the recognition that advertisements "[interact with audiences'] knowledge, expectations, emotions and motives" (Elliott and Elliott 2007, 5), qualitative researchers aim to uncover the meanings and sentiments that individuals attach to events (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). Qualitative methodologies are favoured in feminist disability studies research that seeks to retrieve disabled women's "dismissed voices and misrepresented experiences" (Garland Thomson 2005, 1557, in Clifford Simplican 2017, 49). Disability studies researchers use qualitative approaches as a way of uncovering complex themes surrounding portrayals of disability in advertising (Farnall and Lyons 2012).

The data drawn on in this article is taken from a larger study that examined representations of women with either mobility impairments, mental health issues or visual impairments in advertising, and analyzed how advertisements impact on disabled women's wellbeing and sense of self (Houston, 2017). Following ethical approval, data was gathered via individual and one-off semi-structured interviews (each lasting sixty to ninety minutes) with five participants who self-identified as women with visual impairments. A small participant sample was established because the aim of the study was to capture participants' nuanced interpretations of advertisements – as opposed to developing generalised understandings of women with visual impairments' responses to advertisements. In contrast to quantitative studies that aim to develop claims which are representative of populations or large groups of people, qualitative approaches enable researchers to create intricate accounts of a small

number of participants' perspectives and experiences in a sustained way (Crouch and McKenzie 2006; DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019). The use of a small participant sample meant that it was possible to become immersed in each participant's complex interpretation of advertisements. Designing research that facilitates close readings of disabled people's stories is necessary because people with impairments are often concerned that their contributions to research will be misconstrued and represented inaccurately by researchers (Kitchin 2000).

Participants were recruited via disability community electronic mailing lists. All participants described themselves as having some degree of sight, lived in either the U.K. or U.S., and were over the age of eighteen at the time of interview (brief biographies can be found in Table 1). Participants received information sheets containing a full briefing of the nature of the research and were able to ask any questions regarding the research aims and design, before contributing to the study. Incentives were not offered to individuals who took part in interviews, which were conducted in person or via video-call.

[Insert table 1 here]

Semi-structured interviews – which are flexibly structured and prompt participants' exploration of key topics through the use of open-ended questions - are widely used in qualitative research as they encourage participants to steer discussions, while retaining relevance to the research (Rabionet 2011). This method of data collection is favoured in feminist research as deeper empathy between researchers and participants is enabled (Jayaratne 1983, in Westmarland 2001). Disability studies researchers recognise the potential for semi-structured interviews to facilitate disabled participants' identification of personal experiences and events they believe are most important and relevant to the research topic (Moore, Beazley and Maelzer 2008).

Six open-ended interview questions (included in appendix) were used to prompt participants' exploration of advertisements, and whether and how the advertising content connected to any of their personal experiences. Each participant was asked the same six questions, in relation to each of the three advertisements. Occasionally participants would share a story, ending with the phrase, "do you know what I mean?" or "you know?" If I had a similar experience, I felt comfortable in sharing it and recognised this as building rapport and trust - which are core elements in building "connectivity" and mitigating power imbalances between those involved in semi-structured interviews (Brown and Danaher 2019, p. 81). Participants and I bonded over our shared aspects of identity – I am a woman who identifies as having some impairments, however, I am not visually impaired. In my role as a sighted researcher, who examined women with visual impairments' narratives, I strove to "[complicate] my understanding of sight and blindness" (Hammer 2013, n.p.) through learning from the stories participants shared about their experiences and identities. Lengthy quotations from interviews are included in the discussion of findings in order to enable participants to share their stories in their own words.

Following the transcription of interviews, narrative analysis was applied to interview data. Narrative analysis – in its broadest form – is the examination of "storied" data (Kohler-Riessman 2008, 539, as quoted in Grant 2014), which enables researchers to explore how participants construct their identities and negotiate significant life events they have experienced (Grant 2014). Paying close attention to participants' narratives encourages in-depth understanding of the embodied experiences of people who have been historically oppressed in research (Fraser and MacDougall 2017), and enables participants to share their stories as a means of "self-representation" (Couser 2005, 605). Carol Thomas (1999) – whose work is foundational in feminist disability studies – suggests that attending to disabled

people's life-stories challenges the historical positioning of personal experiences as private, rather than political.

A sociological approach to narrative analysis was taken. Rather than focusing on linguistic features of narratives or individuals' performances of stories, participants' navigations of sociocultural attitudes towards blindness, disability and gender, and the meanings they derived from advertisements were explored. Individuals' stories were understood as reconstructions of past experiences, rather than absolute records of events as they happened (Andrews et al. 2017). Narrative analysis enables researchers to examine how participants reflect on their experiences, acknowledge sociocultural influences that shape the meanings individuals take from these encounters, and draw on research and theory in order to make sense of participants' stories (Smith and Sparkes 2008).

Narrative analysis was applied through the following steps: each printed interview transcript was read, and broad themes and key events referred to by participants were noted. Then, each transcript was re-read and different colors were used to highlight each instance a key event, character, or theme was referred to. For example, the color yellow was used for instances where participants referred to stereotypes surrounding visual impairment, and blue was used when participants referred to their careers. Tables were created for each participant: themes from their interview transcripts were used as headings, and supporting data was stored underneath each relevant heading. A list of all themes across interview transcripts was compiled, and any that were closely related were combined in order to reduce the volume of themes and make the process of data analysis more manageable.

Advertisements featuring women with visual impairments were found via internet search engines (google.com and bing.com). The following key terms were used in searches: "disab*", "disabled wom*", "women with visual impairments", "blind*", "advert*",

"advertising campaign", "U.K." and "U.S.". Only two search engines were used, as the aim was to identify advertisements that portray women with visual impairments, and have generated public interest, rather than to produce a systematic review of advertisements featuring disabled women. Searches uncovered direct links to advertisements, webpages and newspapers relating to women with visual impairments in advertising. Details of each search and results were stored in a table, which noted the search engine used, date of the search, relevant search results and whether or not advertisements met the inclusion criteria (published post-2000 in the U.K. or U.S., and featuring a woman with visual impairment as the sole or main character). Twelve advertisements, in total, met the inclusion criteria. Three advertisements were selected for inclusion in the study in order for participants to have enough time to closely analyze advertising content during interviews. The three advertisements (detailed below) were chosen because they offer in-depth focus on women with visual impairments and provide variety in either their format, target audience or approach to blindness, disability and gender.

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (*Guide Dogs*) is a British charity that offers a variety of support to people with visual impairments – such as mobility training, practical and emotional support to people who have visual impairments and their families, and advice on assistive technology. *Guide Dogs* campaign on issues people with visual impairments experience, for example, access to public services. Part of their fundraising strategy involves television advertising campaigns. The television advertisement examined in this article was produced as part of *Guide Dogs'* (2014) 'Sponsor a Puppy' campaign. The advertisement – which lasts for one minute - begins by focusing on a guide dog puppy (Jazz). The advertisement is narrated partly by Emma's (a woman who is visually impaired) young son. Emma, her two young sons and Jazz are shown spending time in a playground and grocery

shopping. The final scenes feature Emma and her sons petting Jazz, while Emma narrates and explains how the audience can donate to *Guide Dogs*.

Vanda Pharmaceuticals is a global pharmaceuticals company, with headquarters in the U.S. The company markets the "first and only FDA [Food and Drug Administration]-approved treatment [Hetlioz®] for Non-24-Hour Sleep-Wake Disorder (Non-24)", which is defined as a "serious, chronic disorder that disrupts a person's circadian rhythms… [experienced by] 70% of people who are totally blind" (Hetlioz® 2020, n.p.). The marketing strategy for Hetlioz® includes television advertising. In this article, an advertisement (lasting for one minute) that first aired in 2014 is examined. The advertisement depicts a woman, who is visually impaired, doing laundry. Towards the end of the advertisement she greets her young daughter who arrives home from school. The woman mainly narrates, and talks about her experience of blindness. At the end of the advertisement, a male narrator provides contact information for the company.

The *Dame Kelly Holmes Trust* is a U.K. charity - founded by Dame Kelly Holmes (a retired Olympic athlete) – that offers mentoring surrounding wellbeing, employability, education and leadership to young people who are described as having disadvantaged backgrounds. The print advertisement analyzed in this article was produced as part of the charity's first brand campaign (launched in 2014), and features a young woman (Haleemah) who has visual impairment. An image of Haleemah is the main focus and comprises the majority of the frame. Her stare is fixed towards the upper left of the frame, she bears a determined expression on her face, wears a small stud in her nose, a headscarf and a long-sleeved top. Haleemah and the blank background are depicted in grey-scale, the text is in white font, and there is a gold-colored ring in the centre of the frame. The tagline is: "My Double Gold / Lost my Fear / Found my Flair". There is smaller text encased in the gold ring: "Haleemah may be visually impaired. / But that didn't stop her holding her first fashion show. / With mentoring

from our team of world-class athletes, she found her courage. / And that's something double gold medallist Dame Kelly Holmes knows all about".

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Advertising portrayals of women with visual impairments: The reinforcement of gender roles, in the resistance of disabling stereotypes

Advertising depictions of women with visual impairments in traditional gender roles, such as carrying out housework and taking care of children, provoked mixed responses from participants. Existing research on advertising polysemy suggests that audiences who are oppressed are more likely to produce "resistive readings" of advertisements (Puntoni, Schroeder and Ritson 2010, 57). However, the research findings demonstrate that women with visual impairments' shared aspects of identity and experiences of marginalization did not invoke equally critical responses to advertisements.

J.K. and Lily reasoned that advertisements produced by *Guide Dogs* and *Vanda Pharmaceuticals* - which similarly depict women with visual impairments carrying out household tasks such as grocery shopping, doing laundry and taking care of children - are likely to encourage non-disabled audiences to question the stereotype of disabled people as inherently dependent. Bolt (2016) uncovered the connection of fear to blindness in RNIB's (2015) 'See the Need' advertising campaign, meanwhile J.K. and Lily suggested that *Guide Dogs'* and *Vanda Pharmaceuticals'* advertisements challenge deficit-based understandings of blindness, as both women are depicted as capable and happy mothers.

Lily proposed that both advertisements present "slice of life" representations of women with visual impairments' everyday lives (Bolt 2014, 28). She argued that the advertisements challenge the misconception that people with visual impairments are "vulnerable" through

providing “inside knowledge” of how some people with visual impairments complete daily activities:

> For someone who hasn’t got knowledge of visual impairment, they see impairment as things you can’t do... For someone who’s got inside knowledge because of living with it, it’s more than that. I can’t drive a car because of my visual impairment, but - actually - I live my life in the same way as anyone else who hasn’t got a visual impairment would… Rather than seeing them [people who are visually impaired] as vulnerable - it’s about having positives in life - what you can do.

In a similar way to Lily, J.K. responded warmly to advertisements produced by the *Dame Kelly Holmes Trust* and *Guide Dogs* because she was able to connect her personal values and life experiences with the portrayal of women with visual impairments’ achievements and enjoyment of various activities. The focus in advertising on oppressed individual’s potential to succeed, despite social barriers, is critiqued in feminist analyses of femvertising (Sobande 2019). However, J.K. contended that advertising portrayals of women with visual impairments’ successes challenge deficit-based approaches to disability:

> [The *Dame Kelly Holmes Trust’s* advertisement] is showing that she’s [Haleemah] done this and she’s succeeded while not having full vision… I was declared legally blind before I went to university and got a bachelor’s degree, a certificate, my Master’s… I want to live my life – I don’t just want to sit around and wait for something to happen. The ad reaffirms that despite what is termed a disability, I’ve travelled to different countries, I’ve completed fieldwork, and a Master’s… The ad affirms how I feel about myself… I think prejudices of some people are, ‘my taxes are affording you to live in this area or do something’, which isn’t really true, you know? Just informing that, ‘hey, we have our own technology, we can work, we can do

> anything you can do'… and, Emma [referring to *Guide Dogs'* advertisement], can drop her children off at school and pick them up. They [Emma and her children] go and do this [shopping and going to the playground], so she is a more alert mother… it's almost a negative that they would portray a woman like this, but I still think the overall message is positive because it shows that she can go out and do things, and be independent… it reinforces how I feel about myself and also the blind community, where I know very independent people.

J.K.'s multi-layered responses to the advertisements, and her discussion of the extent to which they challenge societal attitudes towards disabled women can be understood as "diachronic polysemy" – a concept that addresses how individuals detract multiple meanings from the same advertisement (Puntoni, Schroeder and Ritson 2010, 52). In a similar way to existing accounts of marginalized audiences' responses to advertisements, J.K. appreciated the normalisation of blindness in the advertisements (Tsai 2012), and suggested that they inform non-disabled audiences, "we can do anything you can do". However, in terms of gender representation, she described *Guide Dogs'* advertisement as regressive insofar as a woman who is visually impaired is portrayed as living an active life through performing gendered roles. Her analysis reflects how gradual – rather than radical – challenges to misconceptions of disability are often depicted in advertisements (Ellis 2016).

Annie suggested that *Guide Dogs'* portrayal of a woman with visual impairments in a parenting role challenges the assumption – which is rooted in ocularcentrism – that blindness hinders an individual's ability to parent. However, she was concerned that the problematic notion of vision as a "fundamental quality" of being human is reinforced (Kleege 2009, 113), through the inference that Emma's ability to be a mother is dependent on support from her guide dog. For Annie, advertisements should portray people with visual impairments as "independent, and not just because they have a guide dog".

At one point in *Guide Dogs'* advertisement Emma's son remarks, "see Jazz help mum be mum". Towards the end of the advertisement, Emma states, "every hour someone in the U.K. goes blind. For just a pound a week, you can sponsor a puppy like Jazz and change a life like mine". Annie argued that these messages portray Emma as "helpless":

> I'm torn with this one – it's positive because it's showing that visually impaired people can do a lot of things, like parent. A lot of people think that disabled people shouldn't be parents: 'how can you take care of a child if you can't see it?' On the other hand, it's making [Emma] look helpless – without the dog she's nothing. And at the end when [Emma's child] says, 'help mum be mum', it's like she can't be herself without the dog…

For participants who problematized advertising depictions of women in care-giving roles, a key issue surrounded the lack of creativity in advertisements that reinforce gendered narratives. Fran suggested that advertisements produced by *Guide Dogs* and *Vanda Pharmaceuticals* do not realistically reflect the lives and ambitions of many women with visual impairments who pursue work outside of their homes. In a similar vein to the suggestion that blindness is often equated with "loss" (Rodas 2009, 116), she proposed that the advertisements lack imagination and do not appreciate the diverse ways that disabled women can be successful – by pursuing education, a career, enjoying hobbies or their own interests:

> I'm sure there are plenty of jobs that blind people can do but that's not really represented in the adverts… I don't ever really plan on just sitting at home, doing the laundry and welcoming my kids home. Despite not being able to see very well, I've been able to do my education, get a degree, get a job… I don't think it's very empowering to just show disabled women who are staying at home… It doesn't really

> represent me, as a woman, or as a disabled woman... I think it could have given more viewpoints - if people were trying to work, or trying to have their own hobbies and interests and do things for themselves… I think if it was an advert aimed at men, would they have a blind man putting on the washing machine and saying, 'look how well I'm doing?' Or, would they be at work, giving some sort of business meeting with a cane, do you know what I mean?

Some participants argued that women with visual impairments' "hyper-aware feminine performance" is portrayed in advertisements produced by *Guide Dogs* and *Vanda Pharmaceuticals* (Hammer 2016, n.p.). Participants highlighted subtle reinforcement of gendered narratives, within the resistance of disabling stereotypes, by drawing on their embodied knowledge of the intersecting nature of disability and gender identities. Participants' analyses of advertisements reveal how, in attempting to normalise disabled people's lives, advertisers borrow from – rather than reach beyond – gender roles. However, this issue did not cause participants to dismiss the advertisements as wholly problematic. Instead the advertisements were used as prompts to reflect on how appreciation of disabled women's capabilities can be progressed in advertising and society more broadly.

The spectacle of worthy and cringe worthy narratives in advertising representations of women with visual impairments

All participants responded warmly to the portrayal of Haleemah's fashion show success in *Dame Kelly Holmes Trust's* advertisement. For some of the women interviewed, the advertisement reminded them of their own achievements, and provided a counter-narrative to deficit-based approaches to disability. Lily connected the advertisement to her experience of facing disabling barriers in school, then going on to succeed in university, where she was able to access more support. In a similar manner, J.K. interpreted the advertising message:

"Haleemah may be visually impaired. But that didn't stop her holding her first fashion show" as encouraging greater awareness of people with visual impairments' diverse achievements. Fran, too, interpreted the message as helpful: "It is empowering… it's showing that people of all abilities can achieve things".

A positive aspect of the advertisement, for Alice, was the normalization of Haleemah's involvement in the fashion industry: "there isn't a lot of tendency for disabled women - especially blind women - to be associated with the fashion industry and stuff like that… Haleemah being part of that was quite normalized". Alice appreciated that the advertisement acknowledges the support offered to Haleemah by the *Dame Kelly Holmes Trust*, yet does not infer that she is dependent on this assistance. In doing so, the advertisers avoid contributing to dramatized and pity-provoking narratives that have historically dominated advertising portrayals of disability (Bolt 2014).

However, Alice suggested it is "ironic" that the advertisement is in print format, which means it is accessed primarily through visual means. A similar point was raised by J.K., who mentioned that the predominantly grey-scale colors used in the advertisement hinder accessibility: "when it is in shades of one color it's difficult for me to tell the difference". Advertisers are often concerned with color effectiveness (such as researching colors that appeal to different audiences, and the use of colors to encourage audiences to associate brands and products with certain messages). Less attention is given to color accessibility (for example, the use of certain color combinations to promote accessibility) – which means that some people with visual and/or color-processing impairments are unable to fully engage with advertisements (Kaufman-Scarborough 2001). Advertisements featuring disabled people cannot be described as inclusive on this merit alone, if they are inaccessible to the people they are supposed to represent (Bolt 2014).

For some participants, the *Dame Kelly Holmes Trust's* advertisement reinforced the stereotype of disabled people as inherently inspirational. Alice connected her experience of being featured in a newspaper when she received excellent exam results to the advertisement's "nice" but "patronising" portrayal of Haleemah:

> … when I got my A-Level results I was in the newspaper… I got straight A's… There were no [disabled students] in our school or blind students in our area. It was just… one of those inspirational stories. There were a lot of people who got straight A's in my year group and none of them got in the paper… It's similar to Haleemah's story - what she's done is great but I don't think necessarily that it needs that kind of attention [being the focus of an advertisement]. There are a lot of people studying fashion that are equally as good probably… It's nice in one way but a bit patronising in the other… It's an expectation that goes along with inspiration that you've got to have done something really great and all disabled people are inspirational. When, actually, most of us are quite normal… It's that you have to be inspirational in order to be validated… I don't think most of what we do is especially inspirational – we're just getting on with our lives. I think inspirational is actually quite an alienating term.

She highlighted how the portrayal of disabled people as inspirational rests on a "desirable but undesired" logic, which infers that a disabled person's success seemingly "compensates" for their impairment (Grue 2016, 843). In Alice's words, "it's that you have to be inspirational in order to be validated". Her critical reflection on awe-inspiring portrayals of disabled people is comparable to feminist critiques of the notion in femvertising that individuals can surpass social inequalities through personal ambition and success (Sobande 2019). As well as detracting attention from the social barriers marginalized identity groups face, inspiring advertisements can potentially encourage patronising and alienating attitudes in audiences who are not oppressed.

It is important for advertisements that focus on disabled women's individual achievements to avoid equating impairment with deficit. In their analyses of the *Dame Kelly Holmes Trust's* advertisement, Alice and Annie interpreted the message that being visually impaired "didn't stop [Haleemah] from holding her first fashion show" as inferring that visual impairment impedes an individual's potential to achieve (which reinforces non-disabled embodiment as taken-for-granted default (Dokumaci 2018)). Annie did not uncover any overt stereotypes surrounding disability and gender in the advertisement, however she suggested that it is likely to reinforce – rather than challenge – the assumption that a person's impairment is an obstacle to what they want to achieve:

> I don't really understand how being visually impaired would stop someone from doing that [organising a fashion show]. I know it's positive because she's achieving things but it would be positive for anybody to achieve that… I didn't like the fact that it said 'she may be visually impaired, *but*... [participant emphasis]', it implies that it's a huge hindrance – that it stops people from doing things - but it really doesn't. The biggest issue I've found is people not really understanding visual impairment… When I went abroad volunteering, people were like, 'that's amazing'. The guy who was my airport assistance asked where I was going and I said, 'I'm going abroad to teach for a few weeks,' and he was like, 'oh my god - you're visually impaired and you're still doing it?'. But I wanted to do it - my visual impairment didn't stop me doing it. Maybe it hindered my confidence a little bit because I was going to a developing country where the resources weren't as good, but that kind of made me more excited to go.

Both women's "insider" readings of the advertisement enabled them to identify the subtle stereotyping of Haleemah as inherently inspirational, due to her disability identity (Tsai 2012, 49). Rather than passively commenting on the reinforcement of this stereotype, participants

explained why it promotes flawed understandings of disability, and – by drawing on their affirmative senses of self – suggested alternative ways to conceptualise visual impairment. An example is Annie's critique of the assumption that visual impairment is a "huge hindrance" – in order to challenge this misunderstanding Annie explained how being visually impaired has made her "more excited" to pursue her goals.

Despite criticism of the advertisement's subtle inference that Haleemah's visual impairment posed a risk to her success, all participants suggested that Haleemah is portrayed as someone who is worthy of praise and recognition, on the basis of her achievement. Participant responses to the *Dame Kelly Holmes Trust's* advertisement are markedly different to critiques of *Guide Dogs'* portrayal of blindness. In a similar way to the *RNIB's* depiction of blindness as "negative to the extreme" (Bolt 2016, 1161), Alice suggested that in *Guide Dogs'* advertisement, the opportunity to reflect people with visual impairments' varied experiences and capabilities is lost, in the aim of provoking audience pity:

> I'm not a great fan of *Guide Dogs'* advertisements. I feel like they are very, very patronising. They make it look like blind people can't do anything without the help of a guide dog… there's that thing that unless you've got a dog, you can't be a functioning human… At the moment I don't have a dog and I'm perfectly capable of doing more than what Emma is portrayed as doing. I don't think it's a big deal that I can walk somewhere or go to the shops… As soon as I saw a *Guide Dogs'* advert I cringed. I think *Guide Dogs'* representation of visually impaired people is absolutely dreadful. It's patronising and… it makes me cringe. I'm thinking of "normal" [quotation marks gestured] people watching those advertisements and thinking, 'those poor blind people'. I think that's what *Guide Dogs* are going for – sympathy… I found it so infuriating… 'to support a life like mine' [quoting from the advertisement] - like blindness is some sort of disease. I know it's funding for guide dogs – great, but

> it's like begging… It's like if you haven't got a man to guide you, you need a dog to guide you because you couldn't possibly manage on your own as a woman… The problem I have is that people are going to see it and think it's not just Emma – all blind people can't do it either. I know that losing sight must be difficult and I know there must be people in Emma's position – but, she's being made out to be a victim of her circumstances.

Alice argued that the depiction of Emma as a "victim of her circumstances" contributes to a metanarrative of blindness that "displace[s] agency" (Bolt 2017, 10), by encouraging the audience to perceive her as a "poor blind [woman]". In contrast to disabled people's call for rights and recognition rather than pity (Shapiro 2011), the advertisement encourages non-disabled audiences to feel sympathy for people with visual impairments. She suggested that the pity-invoking depiction of Emma is gendered: "it's like if you haven't got a man to guide you, you need a dog to guide you because you couldn't possibly manage on your own as a woman". Alice uncovered a similar example in *Vanda Pharmaceuticals'* advertisement – she highlighted that when statistical information regarding 'non-24 disorder' is given, the narration changes from a female voice (belonging to the main character – a woman who is visually impaired) to a male's. In her words, "it's almost like, 'I'm in charge of statistics and facts – you're just a poor blind woman'". Not only did Alice illustrate why aspects of the advertisements are problematic, she also drew on her embodied experiences of blindness in order to offer a counter-understanding of visual impairment: "I don't have a dog and I'm perfectly capable of doing more than what Emma is portrayed as doing".

Fran's contention – which is similar to the argument that being "looked at" is not the same as being "seen" (Lourens and Swartz's 2016, 214) – was that patronising and "cutesy" approaches to visual impairment in advertising alienate visually impaired audiences who feel that they are misrepresented and misunderstood:

> [*Guide Dogs'* advertisement] was a bit cutesy – I guess it was because they were trying to get people to donate money - look how cute the puppies are, give us some money. It was a bit patronising… I think this advert in particular was very much these poor blind people can't do this and they can't do that. Someone might be sitting at home thinking, 'well actually, I can't see but I can do these things'. I don't think people like to be told they can't do things that they feel they can. They probably feel that they're being defined by somebody who doesn't understand the position they're coming from.

In her analysis of the advertisement, Fran cautioned that it is important for advertisers to be mindful that advertisements which do not reflect multifaceted experiences of disability will disengage disabled audiences. Participants highlighted that pity-invoking and cringeworthy portrayals of blindness offer misleading depictions of people with visual impairments' everyday lives and, in some ways, reinforce ocularnormativity through implying that visual impairment threatens a person's ability to lead a fulfilling life (Bolt 2014).

CONCLUSION

Limitations and recommendations for future research and practice

Drawing on a small sample of women with visual impairments' interpretations of advertisements meant that it was possible to capture their rich stories and multidimensional responses to advertisements. A potential limitation is that generalisations regarding how women who are visually impaired perceive the portrayal of blindness and gender in contemporary advertising cannot be reached via this approach. However, when considering the research finding that women with visual impairments' interpretations of advertisements cannot be predicted on the basis of their collective identity, it is recommended that the pursuit of generalisations should be approached with caution.

The key issues discussed in this article should be considered in relation to the participant sample and types of advertisements included in the study. In their analyses, participants referred to their disability and gender identities, but did not mention other aspects of identity (such as age, race, religion, sexuality or social class). It is not possible, therefore, to comment on how other aspects of identity influenced participants' accounts. Widening the intersectional framework used in the study by examining how other aspects of identity influence individual's responses to advertisements would develop the research findings. The advertisements differ in various ways - either in regards to the role a woman with visual impairment is cast in, the producer of the advertisement, or the target audience. They do not, however, offer exhaustive coverage of blindness and gender in contemporary advertisements produced in the U.K. and U.S. It is also noted that the amount of time participants spent analysing advertisements encouraged critical reflection, which may not be similar to everyday encounters with advertising (Høngsmark Knudsen 2012).

Considering how advertisers can portray audiences' complex and diverse life experiences is not straightforward. The research findings indicate that "slice of life" depictions of disabled people's everyday lives challenge dramatized narratives surrounding disability (Bolt 2014, 28), and can reflect women with visual impairments' capabilities. However, the study finds that the extent to which they reflect a volume and variety of disabled women's experiences is not guaranteed. It is recommended that advertisers should avoid approaching women with visual impairments – and disabled people more generally – as a homogeneous identity group, and they should monitor whether taken-for-granted assumptions regarding disability and gender are reinforced in their advertisements. Advertisers who seek to challenge subtle assumptions and misconceptions regarding visual impairment will find the discussion of overt and covert reinforcements of ocularcentrism in the sample of advertisements particularly helpful. By hiring staff who are disabled, employing disabled actors and

developing sustained campaigns - rather than only trying to promote diversity in one advertisement - advertisers can make meaningful commitments to inclusion (Loebner 2020).

Contributions to theory and research

The findings contribute to understandings of polysemy in advertising by demonstrating how oppressed audiences subvert stereotypical depictions of blindness, disability and gender through using advertisements as prompts for reasserting their affirmative senses of self and as a means of challenging sociocultural attitudes towards women with visual impairments. The research highlights participants' shared belief in the potential of advertisements that feature disability and gender to influence societal attitudes towards women with visual impairments. Advertisers who are "silent professionals" give little consideration to the impacts that representations of identity groups in advertising have on societal attitudes, and assume that regulatory bodies "filter out" portrayals that are likely to cause offence (Tuncay Zayer and Coleman 2014, 5). Not only did participants believe that problematic advertisements reinforce disabling and sexist attitudes, they also argued that depictions of disabled women's capabilities prompt audiences to rethink their assumptions surrounding disability.

The research demonstrates that participants' embodied experiences of blindness and gender were central to their interpretations of advertisements. However, their perceptions of whether or not advertisers represented visual impairment in a realistic and responsible way markedly differed. Existing research highlights how marginalized audiences draw on their "subcultural identity" when interpreting advertisements (Tsai 2021, p. 43). By drawing on an intersectional approach – which is informed by feminist disability studies – the research findings enhance awareness of the ways in which individuals draw on multiple aspects of identity and oppression when responding to advertisements.

Participants highlighted areas of progression in representations of disabled women in advertisements – for example, the depiction of individuals' capabilities and fulfilling lives challenges the historical tendency in advertising to portray disabled people and women as passive and dependent. However, participants uncovered the reinforcement of ocularcentrism across all advertisements – from Emma's son's plea that by sponsoring a guide dog puppy the audience can "help mum be mum" (*Guide Dogs*), to the subtle inference that Haleemah did not let visual impairment "stop her" being successful (*Dame Kelly Holmes Trust*). Through endorsing sight as the taken-for granted default, and positioning visual impairment as a potential hindrance to individuals' chances of success and happiness, advertisers miss the opportunity to "imagine human being-ness differently" (Campbell 2009, 4).

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Appendix: Interview questions

1) What do you think is the overriding message in the advertisement?
2) Could you describe the situation or event depicted in the advertisement? Have you ever experienced a similar situation?
3) Do you think the words, terms, or any other details surrounding the representation of visual impairment in the advertisement are empowering or disempowering?
4) Do you think that the producers of the advertisement could have included any other details or aspects of everyday life that people with visual impairments might experience?
5) Could you reflect on your experience of living with visual impairment – can you identify any stories or experiences that you would define as particularly meaningful?
6) Can you define whether and how the advertisement impacts on your sense of self and/or wellbeing (how you feel about yourself and how you perceive you are valued in the world)?