Exclusionary visual depiction of disabled persons in Malaysian news photographs

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Abstract
Disability has been perceived as a social conditioning phenomenon and a sign system marking the body and mind. Accordingly, photographs of disability could shape our cultural perceptions about disability and disabled persons. In response to this position, we engage in a critical semiotic inquiry into press photographs of disability (N=1002) from The Star, a Malaysian mainstream English newspaper. We adapted Van Leeuwen’s (2008) social and visual actor networks to understand the visual techniques employed in depicting disabled actors in these images. The depiction is examined in relation to their absence and/or presence in these published photographs. If absent, the inclusion of non-disabled is analyzed. When present, the social categorizations of roles, grouping and specific/generic depictions are investigated. Findings reveal disabled persons have been symbolically excluded and thus, socially othered. These exclusionary strategies imply disabling journalistic practices which should be cautioned as they could potentially undermine the advocacy for an inclusive society.

Keywords
Critical disability studies, critical discourse analysis, critical semiotics, discourses of disability, exclusionary practice, news photographs, photojournalism, visual actors

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Introduction

‘Disability’ is an umbrella term which refers to incapacitating conditions pathologically, socially and politically. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines disability as issues arising from the interaction between health conditions and contextual factors (environmental and personal), which affect one’s activities and participation in society (WHO and World Bank, 2011). Known as the biopsychosocial model, WHO’s definition is an all-encompassing model which perceives disability in terms of biological, psychological and social outcomes. In the Malaysian context, the People with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685) defines disabled persons¹ as those who lack long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory abilities, and when met with various obstacles, these prevent their full interaction with the society (Department of Social Welfare, 2009). This definition suggests that incapacity and disablement is a result of a non-supportive environment where disability is marginalized in social life (Goodley, 2011; Marks, 1999). It is essential to probe further into the forms of injustice that might covertly affect the disabled community, as a result of such definition.

The United Nation’s document for Monitoring the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD; United Nations, 2010) recognizes the pivotal role of the media in reflecting, influencing and monitoring society’s attitudes toward disabled persons. Specifically, in the context under study here, photographs of disability are not excluded from semiotic construction and mediation in contemporary news presentation. Previous media studies on the representation of disability have long recorded stigmatizing history and stereotyped representations. Studies on popular disability photography have shown four visual rhetoric categories which encapsulate the stereotypical representations of disabled persons. The first category is supercrip, where admiration is induced for a disabled person’s mastery of ordinary activities such as successfully completing a sporting event (Garland Thomson, 2002). While such a representation seems heroic and inspirational (Hardin and Hardin, 2004), it is criticized as a form of false power for disabled persons (Haller, 2010). The second is sentimentality, where disabled persons are portrayed as sympathetic victims, helpless sufferers, invoking pity and needing charity (Garland Thomson, 2002). The third is exotic, where a disabled figure is seen as strange, alien and distant such as an image of a fashion model with prosthetic legs that mocks the idea of a perfect body (Garland Thomson, 2002). The fourth is realism, which regularizes a disabled figure, for instance, an image of a Lego figure on a wheelchair. These stereotypical representations are culturally fabricated narratives of the disabled body (Garland Thomson, 2002). Based on this stance, this investigation is necessary to unveil how disabled individuals are visually and rhetorically ‘packaged’ in the understudied site of news photographs.

The research literature has documented various perspectives in the study of disability using discourse tools. In the context of special education in America, Fulcher (1989) claimed that the medical, charity and lay discourses, besides the rights discourse, had disempowered disabled persons due to domination of the professionals. Such discriminatory practice resulted in poverty and dependency of disabled persons as they were excluded from the labor market. In the legal discourse, Marchese and Celerier (2017) examined the socio-discursive nature of records of mental incompetence cases filed at
an Argentinian court. Persons with mental health issues were found inscribed with negative social judgments on their mental incapacity rather than mental capacity. Studies of disability in multimodal sites and new media are also emerging. Snyder and Allen (1975) who analyzed literature and film found pervasive use of disability as a device to characterize dependencies. Al Zidjaly (2012) investigated images of disability on the covers and advertisements in magazines published by an Omani disability organization. She found disabled persons being ‘de-voiced’ as organizational policies changed. Her study, however, concentrated only on social action and nexus of culture without addressing any potential ideological motivation. On theorizing the discourses of disability, Grue (2011, 2015) developed theories on how disability is produced by linguistic structures, as well as cultural and narrative entities. His studies, however, were confined to narratives of physical impairments in the context of popular media. Despite these insightful investigations of disability, we lack sufficient understanding of the ways in which disability has been discursively (re)produced, specifically, in the visual news discourse, and this study aspires to bridge this gap.

The site of representation of disability in the Malaysian press has been selected as our major concern. Baskaran’s (2004) study highlighted how individuals with speech disorders were prejudicially represented in the Malaysian newspapers as people with low intellectual faculties and had limited access to intervention services. Haque (2005) who studied newspaper job advertisements found that disabled persons were not encouraged to apply for jobs. This lack of encouragement implied that they were to be excluded from the job market. The discourse in the Malaysian press often construes disabled persons as a community with low social standing and needing charity (Mohd Don and Ang, 2014), and the visibility and voices of disabled persons have also been suppressed in the press (Ang, 2015). Disabled persons in Malaysia are deprived of rights due to public apathy and prejudice, as well as failure of society and the authority to provide the necessary resources and infrastructure for them to function independently (Jayasooria, 2000; Tan, 2014). In light of this, some initiatives have been taken by various government agencies which include the establishment of the National Council for People with Disabilities in August 2008, the adoption of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (2013–2022) and recently, the rectification of these policies as practical actions via the Action Plan for People with Disability (2016–2022) (Ministry of Women Family and Community Development, 2016). This recent shift from welfare-based to rights-based ideal requires corresponding scholarly efforts in the investigation of media representation of disabled persons. Hence, this study is a timely contribution to this critical scenario.

We have presented how the representations of disability are discourses where social and cultural meanings of disability are infused (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1984). Therefore, a critical discourse theoretical framework is apposite here to inform the examination of circumstances which are concealed, abstracted or foregrounded in texts, pointing to any ideological implications (Fairclough, 2014). Since disability is viewed as a sign signaling social practice, we have also incorporated the social semiotic perspective to investigate how news images as semiotic resources construe social meanings. With the adoption of a critical semiotic framework, this study will be able to delineate how the visual representations of disability in the news reflect particular social practice, why it is the way it is and what should be done to improve the situation (Machin, 2013).
Generally, this article carries a twofold aim to first, investigate how disabled persons have been visually represented in press photographs in terms of social categorization and second, what these representations evoke about the understanding of disability and value systems in society. The following sections will review literature in the areas of visual discourse mediation, critical discourse analysis and critical disability studies followed by the methodological decisions. The analytic section will center on how disabled actors are symbolically excluded both in their absence and presence in images; and within their presence, the visualization of their social categorizations of role, grouping and generic/specific representations. The discussion section presents how these practices shape the disabled persons’ social standing and societal perceptions toward disability. Essentially, we propose to media professionals how not to, or rather, how to socially represent disabled persons in the visual news.

Disability as a visual semiotic construction

Disability has been considered a mediated visual semiotic construction in various discourses. In the area of disability studies, disability is argued as a ‘sign system’ (Garland Thomson, 2002: 5) associated with personal tragedy, misery and weakness (Zola, 1993) as well as social stigma (Goffman, 1963). It is also articulated as discourses of deficit (Candlin and Crichton, 2011) which highlight an anatomical, neurological and/or physical loss, lacking, failure and potential repair. This loss of attribute or capacity is socially construed as diminishing one’s life chances. Disability is also communicated in terms of discourses of shaming (Pierce, 2013). It is a social struggle that interdiscursivizes with psychological and moral discourses. Shaming comes from exterior factors located in prejudices within and against disabled individuals as well as their carers. It includes feelings of embarrassment, disgrace, humiliation or shyness as reactions to rejection, feelings of failure and inadequacy by both disabled persons and their family members due to social stigma (Leeming and Boyle, 2004; Scheff, 2000). From a critical discourse analytic perspective, disability has been conveyed via discourses of the othering through membership categorization and the phenomenon of labeling where social actors have been given semantic roles (Darrow and White, 1998). In membership categorization, disabled individuals could be regarded as inclusive, exclusive or differential (Sacks, 1992). The disabled identity becomes a social categorization, and this has implications on the control of the self/others in ranking and rescinding membership to achieve social order.

Press photography claims to represent reality – what was captured accurately reflects the situation or event as it was witnessed (Schwartz, 2012). However, the visual–verbal forms of news and their configurations are argued as forms of resemiotization of particular views and news practices (Caple and Knox, 2015; Iedema, 2001). News photographs are ‘crafted’ (Schwartz, 2012: 231) as photographers make the characterizations of images with choices of equipment, how the equipment is used and influenced by the orientations of photographers themselves (Snyder and Allen, 1975). As such, photographs carry two layering of meanings as proposed in the Barthian (1973, 1977) visual semiotics. They are denotation (what or who is being depicted) and connotation (what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and the way in which it is represented). Photographs are not ‘arbitrary but instead, they are ideological’ (Barthes, 1977: 35–37).
Building on the Barthian view, Van Leeuwen (2008) further argued that meanings are read into the images by the viewers rather than only encoded into the images by the producers. This is true for the corpus examined here as news images were very likely captured on a spontaneous point-and-shoot basis rather than a pre-planned photoshoot. For Van Leeuwen (2008), the denotative question should not merely be the ‘what’ and ‘who’ but also ‘how are the depicted people related to the viewers?’ (p. 137). As such, an important concern in this study is what the depiction of disabled persons could evoke to the audience. Visualizations of disabled persons in photography act as powerful rhetorical figures that elicit responses or persuade viewers to think or act in certain ways. This visual discourse in the news is a social construction which powerfully shapes lives of disabled persons through a ‘slippery’ and diffused way, and their ideological underpinnings are ‘difficult to trace’ (Sandell et al., 2013: 3). Hence, studies engaging the news discourse, including the visual news studied here, would center on critiquing the objectivity or subjectivity of news reporting (Fowler, 1991; Van Dijk, 1998).

Literature in Disability Studies has also suggested that disability is a social construction (Barnes, 1996; Shakespeare and Watson, 1997). It is a form of paternalistic social practice of marginalization based on biological difference (Corbett, 1996), constructed as the embodiment of ‘corporeal insufficiency’ and deviance from the neologism of ‘normate’ bodies (Garland Thomson, 1997: 8). The ‘normate’ is the imagined man who has self-determination, independence rational thinking ability and physical sturdiness (Garland Thomson, 1997), unmarked by stigmatized identifiers of disability (Goffman, 1963). The othering of disabled persons arises from the dichotomy or binary of the disabled person versus the non-disabled through the processes of disablism and ableism. Disablism refers to the social, political, cultural and psycho-emotional exclusion of people with physical, sensory and/or cognitive impairments, whereas ableism is the contemporary ideals on which the able, autonomous and productive citizen is modeled (Campbell, 2007; Goodley, 2014). Without the ability to perform and conform according to societal expectations, disabled persons are put through the process of social conditioning (Shakespeare, 1996).

From a critical discourse analytic perspective, this phenomenon of social conditioning echoes the Foucauldian process of subjection and Faircloughian claim that language is a socially conditioned process. Fairclough’s (2010) dialectical-relational approach explains the interaction between semiotic resources, news mediations and the wider social practices. The representation of disabled visual actors here is argued as a discourse-semiotic issue, subjected to and by news mediation which reflects certain social practices. Discourses can select, transform and add elements from social practices and hence, recontextualize the social practices (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Disability has become more than just a human anatomical or cognitive variation as it has expanded into a social phenomenon that is created, institutionalized and made into tradition by society (Searle, 1985).

Data and methods

The corpus under study here comprises 1002 images from 863 news stories related to disability published in a Malaysian mainstream English newspaper – The Star (July 2008–June 2011). The Star is the chosen newspaper for several reasons. Apart from its
positive stance toward disability, it publishes reports related to disability issues more frequently compared to other mainstream English newspapers in Malaysia (e.g. *New Straits Times*). *The Star* is also the Malaysian newspaper with the widest circulation and highest readership in both print and online platforms (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2014). Being the most influential English newspaper in the country, it is deemed the most appropriate research site of disability-related news.

To analyze the corpus, each photograph was treated as a unique image despite some being published as photo essays. With the aid of the qualitative analytical software, NVivo 10, we tagged the corpus individually; when discrepancies occurred, discussions were held to ensure reliability.

As reviewed earlier, our focus is on the social construal of the visual depictions to viewers. Thus, to combine the analyses of both the visual and social aspects, we adapted Van Leeuwen’s (2008) visual actor network (p. 147) for analyzing visuals and his social actor network (p. 52) originally meant for analyzing verbal texts (Figure 1).

Starting from the left, Figure 1 shows that there is an option of the inclusion or exclusion of a particular member of the society, and in this case, it refers to the absence and presence of disabled visual actors in the images studied. The absence of disabled persons can be symbolically viewed as a form of social exclusion, not ‘acknowledging their existence’ or even decontextualizing them (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 52). This exclusionary technique is known as *suppression* (Van Leeuwen, 2008), where there is no reference to or a total absence of the disabled actors in images.

If the disabled actors are present, then there is also an option of *foregrounding* and *backgrounding*. In the latter, they can be symbolically excluded; that is, they are included elsewhere in the image but they are not the main actors or characters in that image. In other words, they are present in the visual but excluded in representation. If the disabled actors are *foregrounded*, the social categorizations of actors could also evoke the othering. In *role*, disabled persons could be involved in an action as the *agent* or *patient*, that is, either as the doers of action or people to whom an action is done. The *patient* role, such as being represented as the disadvantaged, recipient of charity or a *patient* in the medical context, is confining. The *agent* role could also be limiting if disabled persons are given unimportant, subservient or negative agitative roles.

Depicted actors could also be represented either as *individuals* or as a *group*. Groups are often homogenized by their same or similar appearances to diminish individuality. Actors can be categorized according to socio-cultural or biological characteristics. Markers of biological impairment could come in the forms of standardized or unrealistic exaggerations of physical features to connote certain associations with the socio-cultural group depicted. For instance, an image might highlight the facial characteristics of a person with Down syndrome or short limbs of a person. Alternatively, highlighting assistive devices such as the wheelchairs or crutches are also discursively constructed and meant to enable recognition and also have symbolic values which are essentially cultural (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

An individual actor could also be represented in a *specific* or *generic* manner. Van Leeuwen (2008) differentiated this by focusing on what makes a person unique versus what fits a person into a certain social type through stereotyping. Here, we ask the question: Is this about ‘a specific person with a specific impairment’ or ‘all persons with this
Figure 1. Exclusionary visual techniques (in bold) adapted from Van Leeuwen (2008).
specific impairment’ or even the broader, ‘all persons with disability in general’? Even if it is about a specific person, the visual rhetoric of a depiction such as the supercrip, exotic and sentimental can evoke negative emotive meanings and hence, create distancing from the viewers.

All these exclusionary strategies by themselves may not necessarily be culturally prejudiced. However, with different combinations, at various degrees and when taken in relation to particular histories of oppression, it could evoke a phenomenon similar to ‘visual racism’ (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 333).

**Visual depiction of disabled actors in news photographs**

Of the 1002 photographs analyzed, a total of 670 photos (66.86%) or two-thirds include disabled persons, while the other third (N=332 or 33.14%) are without disabled actors (Table 1). This suggests suppression occurs in a third of the photos, namely, disabled persons are excluded by not being depicted at all. Where suppression happens, more than half of the space is instead used to highlight prominent charity figures and sponsoring institutions (N=148), medical and allied health experts (N=31) as well as leaders of non-governmental organizations (N=18). They are largely published as portrait shots which effectively single out significant non-disabled figures. This technique emphasizes the influential faces shaping the discourses of disability in the country. The interdiscursivization of the charity and medical discourses suggests that the understanding of disability in Malaysia is still fundamentally charity based and medically inclined.

Where disabled actors are present, they are foregrounded in 639 photos, while in other 31 photos, backgrounding is used (Table 1). In the latter, other actors or objects are placed in front of the image, while the disabled actors are placed elsewhere in the background or in a secondary position (Figures 2 and 3).

In Figure 2, the donors and representatives receiving the donation are foregrounded and centered, giving them prominence. The actual recipients of donation (children) are however backgrounded at the side and back of image frame, away from the main visual actors. It renders these children insignificant and dependent on the featured charity givers. In another example (Figure 3), a child with autism is seen behind a chair. He appears to be looking out through the holes of the backrest of a chair, as if hiding behind a clown mask with two eyes, a nose and lips. This visualization of a hiding child could also

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photos with and without disabled persons</th>
<th>Count of photos</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With disabled persons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos with disabled persons foregrounded</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>63.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos with disabled persons backgrounded</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without disabled persons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos without disabled persons</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>33.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of photos in corpus</td>
<td>1002</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
represent the non-social characteristic typical in autism (Richer, 1976). While this could be a fact, the backgrounding of this actor could construe social exclusion of this child. Both Figures 2 and 3 exemplify how backgrounding appears to be a technique that can evoke symbolic exclusion within an inclusion in an image.

Within the presence of disabled persons in images in the corpus examined, they could be showcased either in agent or recipient/patient roles. Table 2 denotes that approximately 60% of photos (N=400) position disabled actors as recipients or patients. The top

**Figure 2.** A *backgrounding* depiction of disabled children (Metro North, The Star, 7 July 2008).

**Figure 3.** A *backgrounding* depiction of a child with autism (International, The Star, 4 November 2010).
three activity types depicting this role include charity events ($N=147$ or 36.75% out of 400 photos), followed by intervention and rehabilitative services ($N=50$ or 12.50%) and *as recipients* of social/financial welfare contributions ($N=41$ or 10.25%). These activity types typically carry the visual rhetoric of *sentimentality* (Figure 4) and render these actors a pitiful and dependent role. Concerning age group, infant and children are the highest in prevalence ($N=206$ or 51.5%), followed by adults ($N=67$ or 16.75%) and teens ($N=58$ or 14.5%). In terms of impairment types, those with intellectual/learning disability appear to be the most common with 170 photos (42.50%), followed by physical impairment ($N=87$ or 21.75%) and reference to disability in general ($N=48$ or 12%). These suggest the attributes of a *patient* are typically infant and children and those with intellectual/learning impairment who are dependent on carers and welfare support. Individuals with these qualities are construed as the more vulnerable subgroups within the disabled community.

In photos of disabled persons in active, doer or agentive roles, there are only 270 photos (40.30%) of the corpus studied (Table 2). In terms of age groups, adults are represented the most in an *agent* role ($N=178$ or 65.92%), followed by teens ($N=31$ or 11.48%) and young adults ($N=28$ or 10.37%). The corpus seems to suggest that teens, young adults and adults are more capable as *agents* compared to children and senior citizens. In terms of impairment types, the group with physical impairment ($N=90$ or 33.33%) and visual impairment ($N=68$ or 25.19%) are generally constructed as more independent and able to take charge of their own lives. Concerning activity types, news stories of disabled persons with skills, talents or outstanding academic and sports achievements are most prevalent ($N=92$ or 34.07%), followed by those who are directly involved in fundraising ($N=29$ or 10.74%) and stories of independence through employment ($N=24$ or 8.89%). Broadly, the visual discourse suggests that adults, those with physical or visual impairment, are more capable as *agents*.

Although Van Leeuwen (2008) highlighted that unimportant or subservient agency roles could be demeaning, this study has excluded this proposition as it would be subjective to gauge the importance or status of roles in the context of disability. For instance, in the data examined here, an actor could have a glamorous fashion model profession or a menial job in a launderette. A disabled person’s achievement must not be measured by the prestige of an occupation but rather one’s level of independence and the severity of one’s impairment. Thus, a positive *agent* role of a disabled actor is an enabling representation, whereas a negative *agent* or passive *patient* role is perceived as disabling.

On how disabled persons are grouped, there are photos of individualized, paired, as well as small and big group representations (Table 3). About half of the photos ($N=357$)

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**Table 2. Roles of disabled persons in corpus.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of disabled person</th>
<th>Count of photos</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recipient/patient</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>59.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>40.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of photos with disabled persons</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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or 53.28%) are images of individual disabled persons with or without other actors. The other half consist of images of pairs ($N=83$ or 12.39%), small groups ($N=149$ or 22.24%) and big groups ($N=81$ or 12.09%). Within the small groups, there are $N=17$ photos that give the illusion of more actors in the background (Figure 5). This pattern is also found in $N=27$ images of big groups (Figure 6). Generally, Table 3 suggests that on one hand, there is a balanced representation of individuals versus groups of disabled persons; on the other, disabled persons are represented collectively in over one-third of the images, which allows for the possibility of homogenization through biological/cultural categorizations in the visuals.

In group images, disabled actors are often marked with typicality or similarities in a repetitive manner which Caple (2013: 99) termed as iterating. One common compositional configuration of iterating found is the same set of outfits worn by the actors (Figure 6). It could also be achieved through repetition of items such as children’s tables and chairs (Figure 5) and objects associated with markings of impairments such as the wheelchairs (Figure 6). Similarities could also be represented by participation in similar activities (Figures 5 and 6). The iterating choices in the composition of photographs emphasize the inter-connections and similarities among actors to stereotype and homogenize them as groups of people with the same attributes.

Analysis also shows that to further amplify a collective representation of both small and big group images, the camera angle is manipulated to show there are more actors apart from those framed. This is achieved through a shot with a series of identical items/persons, captured from a position that places these items/persons along a diagonal axis.
Table 3. Grouping of disabled visual actors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grouping</th>
<th>Count of photos</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>1 person</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair</td>
<td>2 persons</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>Small group (3–9 persons)</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small group (3–9 persons but group appears bigger)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big group</td>
<td>Big group (&gt;9 persons)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Big group (&gt;9 persons but group appears bigger)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of photos with disabled persons</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Representation of a small group of disabled children (Star2, The Star, 24 July 2015).

(Caple, 2013: 106). This is combined with a partial depiction of one item/person at either end of the axis to indicate that there could be more members outside the frame.

About one-tenth ($N=17$ or 11.56%) of 149 photos of small groups have been configured to suggest actual bigger groups. Figure 5 is an example of an iterating top-down shot from the right corner, with repetition of actors and furniture, a partially hidden table and its legs, and an almost unseen arm of a person. This suggests there is at least one person not captured in the frame.

Similarly, there are also big groups photos configured to imply that the actual groups are bigger than framed. A third ($N=27$ or 33.33%) of the 81 images of big groups in the corpus are represented in this configuration. Figure 6 shows serialized wheelchair users positioned in a diagonal axis with a partially hidden wheelchair on the bottom right of the photo. This again hints there is at least another actor ‘in the line’, making it difficult to quantify the actual number of people in the group. This kind of composition further amplifies the collectivized representation of disabled actors as a large homogenized group.

Overall, the angle of shots combined with the iteration of biological and cultural markings or objects in images can create homogenization of disabled persons. It
denies individual characteristics and differences and thus, effecting a disabling representation.

An image could portray actors as unique individuals (*specific*) or as a social type (*generic*). Table 4 shows that only one-third (*N* = 214 or 31.94%) of images represent disabled actors as specific individuals, while two-thirds (*N* = 456 or 68.06%) visually *genericizes* them, either as one of ‘the disabled’ or as a member of a group with a specific impairment.

The representation of the *specific* could be identified via the mention of individual names in the photo captions. Images of *specific* visual actors are mostly related to positive news stories of outstanding or independent disabled actors, and they are depicted as an individual or up to three distinctive individuals. However, if these *specific* images are accentuated by the visual rhetoric of the *supercrip* (Figure 7), the *exotic* (Figure 8) as well as *sentimentality* (Figure 4), they could construe the actors as strange, alien or pitiful. As explained by Haller (2010), *supercrip* is a false power, *exotic* evokes alienation and *sentimentality* diminishes disabled persons to a vulnerable position (Garland Thomson, 2002). While these three visual rhetoric categories are powerful tools to single out individuals, they could contribute to a negative emotive tone or stance. Thus, when images of the *specific* are presented via negative visual rhetoric, they could evoke the othering.

We also found visual representations that could emanate the effect of *genericization*. To explain these, we draw on Van Leeuwen’s (2008: 46) verbal sub-categories of *instrumentalization*, *somatization* and *abstraction*. In this study, *instrumentalization* is a technique of representing disabled actors by referring to the instruments they use. Figure 9 portrays an actor depicted from waist down and marked by the instruments of the white cane and tactile path. This photo does not represent a blind individual but instead has been used to generically represent all blind persons. Without a face, the portrayal is de-personalized and *genericization* of the blind community is undesirably achieved.

*Genericization* is also found achieved through *somatization*. Here, a disabled actor is de-personalized and represented only by an impaired body part. Figure 10 is an example of a close-up shot of a congenital condition of the cleft lip. The close-up technique effectively
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Table 4. Representation of disabled actors as specific or generic type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic or specific type</th>
<th>Count of photos</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific (as individuals)</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>31.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic (as a social type)</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>68.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of photos with disabled persons</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7. A supercrip image of a disabled driver (Nation, The Star, 1 October 2010).

gives salience to the affected lip and nose areas which draws a viewer’s attention to the physical impairment. Such high salience implies that no description is necessary to explain the condition, and hence, it is very likely the reason for this photograph to be published without a caption. This kind of somatized image found in the corpus is used to stereotype a condition and generically represent all persons with that particular condition.

The final technique used to construe a generic representation is abstraction. The quality of a disability, particularly, an invisible condition, has been found abstracted through visualization of its symptoms or outcomes. Figure 11 exemplifies a stock image found in the data set utilized as a typical representation of mental health disorder where a person is depicted with his head in the hand covering his face, also known as the ‘headclutcher’ image (Hawkins, 2015). Without a face, it portrays a single actor looking down that suggests the visual metaphor of feeling down. Depicted against a dark background, it construes a somber atmosphere. It insinuates mental health disorder as a lonesome and helpless phenomenon and that people with mental health conditions isolate themselves. While this could be true, this depiction fails to encourage affected persons to seek assistance but aggravates the risk to continue excluding themselves. Thus, abstraction suggests an exclusionary discursive practice which genericizes a particular condition.
On the whole, this section has investigated the symbolic social inclusion and exclusion of disabled visual actors and the visualization of their social categorizations within their absence and presence in the published images. We found these disabled actors to be predominantly excluded through disabling representations.

**Construal of visual representation**

The analyses have demonstrated a tendency for disabling visual representations in the corpus under study which construe the powerlessness of disabled persons. In the total absence of disabled actors, the space is overtaken by institutional powers such as the charity and the medical. This legitimization of the two institutions is also found in the *patient* role, where highlight is on disabled persons’ dependency on them. Furthermore, the *backgrounding* technique renders no importance nor contributions from the disabled actors in the contexts depicted. In general, the total absence of disabled actors, the depiction of a *patient* role, a negative agentive role and the use of *backgrounding* technique could disempower, objectivate and underrate the potentials and capabilities of disabled persons. They should not be visually *suppressed* or undervalued. To propagate an enabling representation, disabled persons ought to be *foregrounded* and visualized as independent and capable of taking charge of their own lives.

In the two-thirds of the images where disabled actors are featured, half of these are depictions of disabled individuals, while the other half are collectivized representations. While it is acknowledged that disabled persons are also groups of people in society,
group depictions must have the quality of differentiation, not homogenization. Disabled persons should be represented as unique individuals even within a group depiction. Marking them as groups through biological or cultural markings can aggravate their differentiation from the non-disabled.
In the specific and generic analyses of disabled individuals, a third of the photos are specific representations, whereas two-thirds have genericized the disabled actors through means of instrumentalization, somatization and abstraction. These are impersonal depictions where the attributes of disabled persons are defined by their disabilities, not personal qualities. They enact disabled persons as a social type and negatively pack their social standing in society. Stereotyping disabled persons can lead to the politics of collectivization by giving them a categorical group identity (Corker, 1999; Meekosha and Pettman, 1991). In particular, the practices of homogenization and genericization could strain the relationship between the viewers and the viewed and are likely to position the disabled community as the ‘out-group’ and thus, as the other (Said, 1978).

Returning to Barthian semiotics, the disabled bodies and disability are signs that carry denotations and connotations of the system of belief in society. Disability is seen as strangeness in a society which idealizes human strengths and conceptualizes an image of physical and intellectual perfection (Corbett, 1996). Social differentiation is enacted based on markers of physical, biological, physiological and cognitive (in)capabilities. The repulsion for the unfamiliar or a deviant (disabled) body positions disabled persons as the different other and further enacts a differentiation between the ‘superior’ non-disabled bodies and the ‘inferior’ less-abled.

Media accounts are not simply representations of reality but rather active constitution and ideologically inspired with transformation of the facts (Fowler, 1991). Identities are formed in the differentiation of the us/them boundary sustained by social powers and can be reinforced by media representation. Here, we have seen how unstable identities are being formed in the media which have created the gap and othering of these disabled individuals (Siebers, 2008). Such ‘oppressive representation’ (Hevey, 1992: 3) which invites exclusionary and disabling potentials must indeed be critically cautioned.

Figure 11. Genericizing persons with mental health disorder through abstraction (Star2, The Star, 12 September 2011).
Conclusion

Disability is a psyche of disablement (Goodley, 2011) based on ideals of the ‘normate’ and ‘normality’. It gives rise to ableism and disablism, and these are forms of asymmetric power relations that evoke marginalization and discrimination. With the disabled body becoming a form of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), the management of the body, in this case, the visualization of disabled persons in news photographs, ought to be managed for the acquisition of better social status. The visual representation of disability must be one that advocates for the mainstreaming of disability and an inclusive society which interprets disability as a human variation and disabled persons as equal members in society.

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Note

1. In disability studies, the term ‘disabled people’ carries a Social Model understanding to denote people being disabled by societal and environmental factors. In line with this, as well as the social discourse perspective taken in this study, we have adopted the term ‘disabled persons’ instead of the commonly preferred people-first phrase of ‘people with disabilities’. The word ‘persons’ is preferred over ‘people’ as ‘people’ carries a generic denotation, whereas ‘persons’ implies the respect for individuality.

References


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