

Heroes in Hype: A Problematic Glorification of Disabled Lives in Indian Ads

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ABSTRACT

Disability representation in media plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes, cultural perceptions, and policy responses. In the Indian context, television advertisements are a powerful tool that is widely consumed medium, and it often depict disability not through the lens of rights or inclusion, but as a spectacle meant to evoke emotion. This paper critically analyses the concept of “inspiration porn,” a term coined by disability activist Stella Young, and how it manifests in Indian television advertising. Inspiration porn refers to media portrayals that depict people with disabilities as heroic or extraordinary solely because of their disability, thereby reducing their lived experiences into sources of motivation for non-disabled audiences. Through a close reading of selected Indian TV commercials aired between 2010 and 2024, this study identifies the narrative tropes, aesthetic strategies, and emotional cues commonly used to position disability as either a tragic burden or a triumph over adversity. The paper explores how such portrayals, while seemingly positive on the surface, perpetuate ableist ideologies by reinstating the idea that disabled individuals must achieve something “remarkable” to be valued. It further critiques how these ads often serve consumer retention more than social empowerment, relying on superficial inclusion that lacks harmony and understanding of disability rights. In addition to textual analysis, the paper draws from key theories in disability studies and media criticism to examine how inspiration porn erases agency, depoliticizes, dehumanises disability, and contributes to tokenistic representation. The ethical implications of such media practices are also discussed, particularly the emotional manipulation of viewers and the reinforcement of exclusionary narratives that glorify individual “success” while ignoring systemic inaccessibility. While analysing two commercials which were aired between 2010 and 2024 through a close reading this study identifies the narrative themes with recurring themes, aesthetic strategies, and emotional cues commonly used to position disability as either a tragic burden or a triumph over adversity. The paper explores how such portrayals, while seemingly positive on the surface, perpetuate ableist ideologies by reinforcing the idea that disabled individuals must achieve something “remarkable” to be valued.

Keywords: Disability studies, inspiration porn, dehumanize, social media, Indian context advertisements, TV Commercials.

INTRODUCTION

Disability studies, as an interdisciplinary field, challenges dominant narratives around bodily norms, functionality, and identity. It seeks to foreground the experiences, voices, and rights of people with disabilities by critically analysing the social, cultural, and political forces that shape their representation. In India, where over 2.2% of the population lives with a disability (as per Census 2011, though the real figures are considered significantly higher), mainstream media continues to struggle with inclusive and respectful portrayals. Instead of fostering empathy and awareness, many media forms—including television advertisements and they tend to objectify or romanticize disability through limited and problematic frameworks.

One of the most pervasive frameworks in this context is what disability activist Stella Young termed “inspiration porn.” This term refers to portrayals of disabled individuals that frame them as inherently inspirational simply for living their lives, or for achieving basic tasks that are viewed as extraordinary only because of their disability. Such portrayals are not intended to uplift the disabled community, but rather to inspire non-disabled audiences

by presenting disability as a personal tragedy that can be "overcome" with willpower and determination. These narratives often reduce complex lived realities into heart-warming, commercialized spectacles of courage.

The issue with inspiration porn lies not only in its reductive sentimentality but also in the power dynamics it reinforces. It centres the emotions of the non-disabled viewer while marginalizing the agency and authenticity of the disabled subject. Indian television advertisements, despite increasing attention to inclusivity, continue to reproduce this trope. Ads often feature disabled characters accomplishing something against all odds, without addressing the structural barriers—like lack of accessibility, discrimination, and social stigma—that continue to define the everyday lives of people with disabilities.

This paper explores Indian television advertisements utilize inspiration porn to shape narratives around disability. It critically analyses specific commercials aired between 2010 and 2024, examining how they portray disabled individuals, what emotions they evoke, and whose stories are being told and for whom. The aim is to reveal how such ads frame disability and whether they contribute to social empowerment or perpetuate ableist ideologies under the guise of motivation so as to create a difference.

This study takes a qualitative content analysis approach, grounded in critical disability studies and media theory. It can be observed that scholars such as Tom Shakespeare and Anita Ghai, interrogate how visual and narrative strategies are deployed in Indian ads to construct the disabled body as either heroic or pitiful.

Understanding the basic idea of Inspiration Porn

Inspiration porn involves treating people with disability as commodity into emotionally charged narratives that centre non-disabled viewers' feelings rather than disabled people's lived experiences. As Stella Young famously stated, *"We are objectified in this way because we are not expected to live a full, normal, and meaningful life."* These portrayals are not meant to empower or reflect the realities of the disabled community; rather, they exist to make non-disabled people feel inspired, thankful, or uplifted. The result is a form of media that appropriates the disabled experience without engaging with the deeper political and social issues it entails. It is needed to redeem the negative narrative and try to conquer enormous odds often basic life activities like attending school or participating in a sport—as though these actions are extraordinary due to their disability. This presents a harmful binary of either the "helpless cripple" or the "superhuman overcomer." Some of the elements that make a recurring pattern in advertisements that fall under the category of inspiration porn are such as Emotive Storytelling, Supercrip stereotype and External validation. In the case of emotive storytelling the ad makers use emotional background music, slow motion visuals, emotionally charged dialogues to make the scene intense and arouse the emotions of the viewers, it is done in order to evoke emotions of pity, admiration and awe. When it comes to understand inspiration porn in terms of supercrip it refers to presentation of disabled people as defying their limitations be like bodily or mentally, to transcend their impairments and achieve the unachievable. External Validation is the case when success or happiness of the disabled person is often validated through the reactions of non-disabled people. This reinforces a power dynamic where the disabled individual's worth is determined by how much they can "inspire" others.

Consequences of Inspiration Porn

While explicitly positive, inspiration porn can have deeply problematic consequences. It promotes normal or able bodies by celebrating disabled people only when they achieve something "against all odds," such portrayals suggest that living a normal life with a disability is not enough. This feeds into the broader ableist narrative that people with disabilities are either tragic or heroic, with no room for ordinariness or complexity. Invisible barriers are created through inspiration porn as it ignores the role of environmental, social, and political barriers in disabling people. It reduces disability to a personal problem rather than a matter of collective responsibility and societal reform. These narratives place enormous pressure on disabled individuals to constantly "prove" their worth through inspirational actions. Those who live ordinary lives, or who do not conform to the heroic stereotype, are rendered invisible or unworthy. The emotional reactions these portrayals are designed to provoke often exploit disabled bodies and stories without consent, consultation, or compensation. The goal is not representation, but commodification.

Inspiration Porn denies authentic portrayal of disabled individuals, an important difference can be seen through media portrayal of disabled people, it tries to show their life as low, how their life is struggle, how others with abled bodies should take inspiration from them as the ads sensationalise their story for TRP (television rating point) and to gain consumers. Authentic portrayal involves meaningful inclusion behind the camera of disabled writers, actors, directors, and consultants so that the storytelling does not become an outsider's interpretation of an insider's experience. The story when portrayed on reel, should be an pleasing and positive experience.

Global Versus Indian Context

While inspiration porn is a global media trend, it manifests in unique ways across cultural contexts. In Western media, it has been widely critiqued and discussed in disability discourse, though it persists in mainstream films, viral videos, and commercials. In India, the issue is compounded by cultural values that often frame disability through religious, moralistic, or charitable lenses. The dominance of medical and charity models in Indian media narratives means that disability is either seen as a tragedy to be mourned or a burden to be overcome with grace.

Indian advertisements often rely on emotive storytelling, melodrama, and moral messaging, making them fertile ground for inspiration porn tropes. The social model of disability—which sees disability because of an inaccessible society rather than an individual's impairment—is still not widely understood or reflected in Indian popular culture. As a result, disabled characters in ads are often stripped of autonomy and presented as tools for inspiring others or promoting a brand's "social values."

Case of Indian TV Advertisements

Indian television advertisements serve as potent cultural texts that shape, reflect, and reinforce societal attitudes. When it comes to disability, ads are often framed to evoke admiration, pity, or envy rather than understanding or solidarity. This section critically analyses a selection of Indian advertisements featuring disabled individuals, revealing how these commercials utilize tropes associated with inspiration porn. These case studies are not intended to dismiss the intent behind the campaigns but to highlight how even well-meaning efforts can perpetuate problematic narratives when they are not grounded in authentic, inclusive storytelling.

Advertisement 1: Limca's "Khud Pe Yakeen" Campaign

The Limca ad campaign titled "*Khud Pe Yakeen*" (Believe in Yourself) features individuals with disabilities who pursue athletic or artistic goals despite adversity. One version showcases a girl with a limb difference who trains rigorously in swimming, overcoming societal doubt and physical difficulty. The ad concludes with a triumphant moment where she wins a competition, set against a powerful emotional soundtrack.

While the advertisement is intended to inspire, it clearly fits within the framework of inspiration porn. The protagonist's story is stripped of any social or structural context; her triumph is framed as a purely individual accomplishment. The focus is not on how society or systems could better support her, but on her own willpower, reinforcing the idea that disabled people are valuable only when they achieve something "exceptional." There is no exploration of accessibility, coaching support, or inclusion in sports infrastructure. The ad celebrates the individual's "resilience" and strength but negates the collective responsibility to remove barriers.

Advertisement 2: Nescafé's Ad Featuring a Stand-Up Comic with a Stammer

In a popular Nescafé advertisement, a young man with a speech disorder (not explicitly labelled as disabled, but widely read as such) becomes a stand-up comedian. The ad uses humour and warmth to highlight his journey, and Nescafé positions itself as the beverage that fuels his courage and creativity.

This advertisement is more nuanced than others in its portrayal of difference. The comic owns his stammer and integrates it into his performance, which can be seen as a reclamation of identity. However, the ad still falls partially into the inspiration porn category due to its use of exaggerated way and the underlying implication that the character has "overcome" his limitation to succeed.

The focus is on what the non-disabled audience is meant to feel admiration for his courage instead than a deeper look at how the performance space is (or isn't) accommodating to people with speech impairments. Moreover, the brand uses this narrative to generate intense emotion, suggesting that difference is acceptable so long as it produces a feel-good, promotes their brand promotion

Where these Ads fail and succeed:

While these advertisements do create visibility for people with disabilities in Indian mainstream media a space where they are often absent at the same time, they fail to challenge the deeper narratives that marginalize the community. They succeed in sparking momentary emotional engagement but fall short in promoting long-term awareness, inclusion, or dialogue about rights and systemic change. These ads make use some repeated patterns and mistakes that make them a failure. They set their ad around individual triumph, showing what is to be 'overcome' achieving something against the odd, deform or lacking. There is also an absence of noticing the social scenario, like infrastructure, barriers arising from non-disabled people's attitude, or any social stigma associated with ethnicity. Use of emotional music, lights, voice over, slow motion movements to maximise the impact and viewership of their ads so that audience feel inspired rather notice the information and details about the character being played.

Henceforth things notably absent in these campaigns is the active participation of disabled creators, consultants, or activists in shaping these narratives. Without these voices, advertisements are at risk of misrepresenting the community they claim to uplift.

CONCLUSION

The way disability is shown in Indian TV ads plays a big role in how people understand and treat those with disabilities. Many of these ads are created to make viewers feel inspired—but in doing so, they often end up showing people with disabilities as objects of sympathy or admiration, instead of as real, like every day common life. These kinds of stories can unintentionally spread wrong ideas, overlook real-life challenges, and reduce complex lives into feel-good moments.

To bring about change, we need to stop treating disability as something unusual or dramatic. Instead, we should present it as a normal part of society—just like race, gender, or age. This means letting disabled people speak for themselves, telling their own stories, and showing the barriers they face every day, such as poor accessibility, lack of support, or negative attitudes.

Real inclusion in ads isn't just about putting a disabled person on screen. It's about telling stories honestly and respectfully, giving them proper roles, and showing their full lives—not just their struggles or achievements. Brands and media creators have the power to shape public understanding. If they truly care about inclusion, they need to go beyond emotional appeal and focus on fairness, respect, and real representation.

In the end, inclusive advertising is not just about looking good—it's about doing good. When brands choose to share more meaningful, diverse stories, they don't just connect with more people—they also help build a more thoughtful and accepting society.

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