

Methodological Approaches to Analyzing the Representation of People
with Disabilities in Contemporary Advertising Communication

*Enfoques metodológicos para el análisis de la representación de las
personas con discapacidad en la comunicación publicitaria
contemporánea*

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Abstract:

The doctoral thesis *The representation of people with disabilities in advertising communication: analysis of campaigns and expert perspectives (2018-2024)* proposes, after a systematic review focused on the methodologies used in this field, an explanatory analysis with a descriptive approach. It is based on cultural studies of disability (Berressem *et al.*, 2017; Davis & Drazen, 2010; Siebers, 2008) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Its objective is to examine how disability is represented in advertising. It combines a quantitative content analysis of internationally award-winning campaigns in Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America with in-depth interviews with industry experts. A pretest and Krippendorff's Alpha (2004) are recommended to ensure reliability, while qualitative results are interpreted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with ATLAS.ti 24. Unlike other methodologies, this triangulation facilitates the obtaining of longitudinal results with an audiovisual sample and from the industry's perspective, allowing us to understand the reasons behind the limited presence of this group (7.97%) in advertising. Future research plans to study consumer perception using frontal asymmetry of the electroencephalogram (EEG).

Keywords:

Advertising; disability; inclusion; cultural studies; grounded theory.

Resumen:

La tesis doctoral La representación de las personas con discapacidad en la comunicación publicitaria: análisis de campañas y perspectiva de expertos (2018-2024) propone, tras una revisión sistemática centrada en las metodologías empleadas en este campo, un análisis explicativo con enfoque descriptivo. Se sustenta en los estudios culturales de la discapacidad (Berressem et al., 2017; Davis y Drazen, 2010; Siebers, 2008) y en la teoría fundamentada (Glaser y Strauss, 1967). Su objetivo es examinar cómo se representa la discapacidad en la publicidad. Combina un análisis de contenido cuantitativo de campañas premiadas internacionalmente en Asia-Pacífico, Europa, Oriente Medio, África y Latinoamérica, con entrevistas en profundidad a expertos del sector. Se recomienda realizar un pretest y aplicar el alfa de Krippendorff (2004) para garantizar fiabilidad, mientras que los resultados cualitativos se interpretan mediante un análisis temático (Braun y Clarke, 2006) con ATLAS.ti 24. Contrariamente a otras metodologías, esta triangulación facilita la obtención de resultados longitudinales con una muestra audiovisual y desde la perspectiva de la industria, lo que permite comprender las razones detrás de la limitada presencia de este colectivo (7,97%) en la publicidad. En investigaciones futuras, se plantea estudiar la percepción del consumidor mediante la asimetría frontal del electroencefalograma (EEG).

Palabras clave:

Publicidad; discapacidad; inclusión; estudios culturales; teoría fundamentada.

1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.), an estimated 1.3 billion people—about 16% of the world's population—have some form of significant disability. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes people with disabilities in seven targets that fall under five specific goals, representing 4% of the total set of targets for the Sustainable Development Goals (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales y Agenda 2030, 2022).

Studies on the media and disability, such as *La percepción de las personas con discapacidad sobre su representación en los medios de comunicación* (Vázquez-Barrio et al., 2021), help to understand the need to thoroughly investigate the representation of minority groups in the world of communication, whether due to age, race, gender, or, in this specific case, disability. Likewise, important, and renowned companies are also participating in research on this topic, with the aim of highlighting the issue.

The representation of disability in advertising is a highly relevant topic for research, given its significant influence in the social and cultural sphere, as advertising not only reflects society's values but also contributes to their formation. By analyzing how disability is presented in advertising campaigns, we can understand and potentially influence social perceptions and attitudes toward people with disabilities. This is critical

because positive perceptions can promote inclusion and reduce stigma, while negative or stereotypical representations can perpetuate discrimination and isolation.

1.1. Methodologies used in research on disability and advertising

Previous research provides insights into the wide range of methodologies used in the study of disability in communication, highlighting qualitative and quantitative approaches and, in some cases, triangulation. Exploratory approaches are common due to the scarcity of publications on this topic (Beermann & Hallmann, 2024).

For example, there is a trend toward the use of content analysis (Álvarez *et al.*, 2024; Foster & Pettinicchio, 2022; Houston, 2019; Houston, 2023; Houston, 2024; Kearney *et al.*, 2020; Loebner, 2022; Low, 2020; Vergara *et al.*, 2021) with different approaches that enable a detailed understanding of images and media messages related to disability in advertising. In this regard, critical discourse analysis (Timke, 2023; Vergara *et al.*, 2021), semiotic analysis (Thomas, 2001), and case studies (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2022) are also used.

Similarly, the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews and *focus groups* as research techniques prevails (Beermann & Hallmann, 2024; Houston, 2019; Houston, 2021; Houston, 2014; Kearney *et al.*, 2020; Loebner, 2022; Muralidharan *et al.*, 2024; Palencia-Lefler, 2023; Rubio-Romero *et al.*, 2022). It should be noted that there is a greater inclination toward collaboration with individuals with disabilities, although in some specific cases the perspective of experts in the field of advertising is also integrated.

Some research uses experimental designs and neurological measures such as frontal EEG asymmetry (Álvarez *et al.*, 2024) to assess emotional and motivational reactions to advertisements that include people with disabilities.

Various theories can also be identified, such as planned behavior (Kulkarni & Iyer, 2023) and generational cohort theory (Muralidharan *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, critical and feminist approaches to disability are discovered, which bring an interdisciplinary perspective to the studies (Houston, 2021).

In the last twenty years, it has become common to find studies with ongoing evaluations, such as the analysis of online consumer comments and follow-up interviews, reflecting the importance of constantly evaluating advertising campaigns to adjust and improve representations of disability (Kearney *et al.*, 2020).

The research examined highlights a complex field of study that analyzes both contemporary representations of disability in advertising and the broader implications of these representations in society. It thus highlights the need to continue researching and questioning norms in the field of advertising, with the aim of promoting positive social change towards more inclusive representation.

According to various studies, such as that by Kulkarni & Iyer (2023), advertising that adequately incorporates individuals with disabilities can have a positive impact on

public attitudes and behaviors. This evidence underscores the ability of advertising to promote greater acceptance and understanding of disability.

Some articles criticize current representations for perpetuating stereotypes or using disability as a mere *marketing* tool without addressing authenticity. For example, the concept of “inspirational porn” (Young, 2014) and studies on ableism in advertising indicate that significant challenges remain in representing disability in a respectful and empowering way.

Several research studies use theoretical and critical approaches, such as critical discourse analysis and Crip Theory, to clarify how representations of disability are constructed and received. These help to identify the complexities of how disability is represented and perceived in society.

Certain studies offer concrete recommendations for improving the representation of people with disabilities in advertising. For example, Shelton (2019) proposes specific changes that could help agencies and brands develop more inclusive and authentic campaigns.

Finally, there is significant interaction between disability and other cultural and social factors, such as gender or race. Intersectionality is an important element in understanding the representation of disability in advertising.

In short, the representation of disability in the media is an issue that has gradually gained importance in academic and professional circles. However, research on this minority group in advertising is still limited. Although significant progress has been made, there are still barriers and prejudices that prevent adequate representation of this group. For this reason, it is crucial to carry out continuous analysis and evaluation of advertising practices and strategies.

To achieve this objective, an explanatory study with a descriptive scope and a quantitative and qualitative approach has been carried out to analyze how disability is represented in advertising campaigns recognized worldwide for their creativity at festivals in Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

2. Methodology

An explanatory study with a descriptive scope is proposed that addresses the representation of disability in contemporary advertising (2018-2024) and seeks to account for the causes of physical or social events and phenomena. Its focus is on explaining why a phenomenon occurs and under what conditions it manifests itself, or why two or more variables are related (Hernández Sampieri *et al.*, 2014).

To this end, the research concepts and variables have been defined, as well as the universe from which the data will be collected. A strategic non-probabilistic sample from the World Advertising Research Center (hereinafter WARC) has been selected for the period from 2018 to 2024. Specifically, the WARC Creative 100 ranking has been

analyzed. The WARC ranking methodology determined the selected time interval—between 2018 and 2024—as a different system was used to select the winning campaigns in this classification prior to 2018.

To achieve the established objectives to study the representation of people with disabilities in contemporary advertising worldwide between 2018 and 2024 two analysis techniques were used. In the first stage, a content analysis of campaigns that included disability was carried out. The aim was to obtain a solid base of knowledge and objective evidence on how disability is represented in contemporary advertising. This technique allowed for the identification of patterns and trends, which was used to create the questionnaire for the in-depth interviews, which correspond to the second stage of the research. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted with different agents involved in the world of advertising, creativity, and disability, such as advertisers, advertising agencies, participating members of creativity festivals, and experts in the field of disability. The qualitative analysis shed light on the research and provided information to contrast the results of the content analysis.

2.1. Stages of content analysis, according to Igartua (2006)

The steps taken in this content analysis to obtain inferences, as proposed by Igartua (2006), are: formulation of the research topic; conceptual definition of the variables; operationalization of the relevant variables; selection of the content to be analyzed; data analysis; and drawing of conclusions.

The variables analyzed refer, on the one hand, to formal aspects—such as the category of product advertised—and content—such as the sociodemographic characteristics of characters with disabilities. All of them are relevant or critical, as they are considered central features of the study sample. Variables that are not directly related to the message but to the source of production, such as the advertiser or advertising agency, have also been included.

In total, 38 variables were analyzed, divided into seven main blocks: situation variables; advertising variables; variables related to the presence of disability; variables related to people with disabilities; variables related to the cultural representation of disability; space-time variables; and audiovisual production variables. The variables, in turn, have categorical systems that are both mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

2.2. Validation and reliability of the analysis using Krippendorff's Alpha (2004)

To obtain internal control of the data collection and measurement procedures, a pretest was carried out on the variables and categories that make up the table under study in the content analysis.

In this study, a pretest of five campaigns was conducted, equivalent to 9.8% of the sample. Three coders participated. To this end, the variables under study and the subsample composed of five randomly selected advertisements were shared. After receiving the analysis of these campaigns, Krippendorff's (2004) Alpha was applied to

measure the degree of agreement between the coders. This index was first applied to each variable independently and then to the set of multicategorical variables as a whole.

Microsoft Excel spreadsheet *software* and the ReCal *web* measurement tool were used to calculate this statistical parameter. First, the coders' information was converted into numbers in order to analyze the nominal data. In other words, the numbers in this case have no value, but are labels that simplify the data to facilitate coding.

There were six occasions when Krippendorff's Alpha was < 0.667 and therefore not acceptable in terms of inter-coder reliability. With this information, the variables and their respective categories were reviewed, and the coding rules were redefined until 0.8 was achieved.

2.3. In-depth interviews and evaluation of results with a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Although statistics show the underrepresentation of people with disabilities in advertising (Farnall & Lyons, 2012), approaches based solely on numerical data are not reliable (Houston, 2024). For Rodríguez *et al.* (1996) qualitative research requires a researcher who approaches a real subject, a real individual, who is present in the world and who can, to a certain extent, offer us information about their own experiences, opinions, values, etc. through a set of techniques or methods such as interviews.

For the present study, in-depth interviews were conducted with the aim of learning about events and activities that cannot be directly observed (Taylor & Bogdan 1994). In this way, the individuals interviewed act as informants who describe what happens and how other people perceive the phenomenon under analysis. To this end, a general questionnaire was designed for a multidisciplinary profile in the field of advertising and disability, and, in a second phase, it was adapted to each particular profile, with specific questions for advertisers, creatives, creativity festival judges, and disability experts.

Participants were selected using a convenience sample based on the objectives of the study. An invitation to participate in the research was sent by email to eight people, ensuring a balanced representation in terms of gender, job position, type of organization, and area of expertise.

The interviews, in English and Spanish, were conducted in person, remotely, via Microsoft's TEAMS platform, over a three-month period between July and October 2024. First, Microsoft Outlook email was used to contact the selected sample, and once they agreed to be interviewed, a day and time were chosen to conduct the interview remotely.

Prior to conducting the in-depth interviews, five questionnaires were prepared based on basic thematic lines to achieve the research objectives.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of between 16 and 22 open-ended questions that allowed individuals to respond using their own frame of reference, without being limited to pre-established options. In this way, the interviewees were able to express

their answers in their own words. This type of question provides information that is not accessible through questions with predefined answer options (Igartua, 2006). Depending on the nature of the question, questions were asked about information, opinions, and expectations for the future.

Thanks to an exhaustive analysis of the literature related to the research topic, the most relevant concepts for the study were identified and extracted. First, an initial reading of the transcripts was carried out, followed by the assignment of codes corresponding to this stage of the study. A total of 43 codes were selected. These codes were then organized around six main themes: the advertising industry, the media, advertising, disability and inclusion, the representation of people with disabilities, the exclusion of people with disabilities in advertising, social impact, and advertising festivals.

The in-depth interviews were evaluated using a thematic approach, a method widely used in the analysis of qualitative data in the field of social sciences (Terry *et al.*, 2017), despite being little known and poorly defined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this methodology allows patterns present in the information to be identified, analyzed, and communicated by structuring and detailing them thoroughly in data sets.

Information processing and initial code generation were performed using ATLAS.ti 24 software to provide greater systematization and transparency to the analysis.

3. Results

The methodology used has allowed us to obtain quantitative and qualitative results from the study. In the first case, we have responded to the 38 variables initially proposed, with results from the content analysis on the percentage of advertisements that include people with disabilities between 2018 and 2024 (7.97%), or the significant annual variability in inclusion, with a peak of 11.24% in 2020 and a minimum of 3.13% in 2019 and 2021. On the other hand, it was found that a total of 16 countries contributed to this representation, with the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany having the highest rates of inclusive advertisements. In addition, it was revealed that most representations focus on physical disabilities, followed by intellectual or cognitive and sensory disabilities.

In the second case, with in-depth interviews, various perceptions of inclusion and authenticity in advertising are revealed, showing similarities and disparities in the responses obtained. It highlights how traditional advertising has evolved towards more inclusive models thanks to social media and content creators, and discusses the importance of equitable and authentic representation, as well as the challenges brands face in being socially active without alienating their traditional consumers. It also emphasizes the responsibility of advertisers to be more inclusive and representative of the real diversity of society and mentions the lack of consistent regulation and sufficient support for true inclusion in the advertising industry.

3.1. Methodological issues

The methodology used has yielded interesting results for understanding the current state of representation of people with disabilities in advertising communication. However, the selection of advertisements—campaigns that have won global creativity awards—may not be representative of the industry, which may limit the generalization of the results to the advertising industry.

The lack of similar studies has made it difficult to establish certain categories and variables for analysis, requiring consultation of multiple sources from different disciplines, such as music, audiovisual narrative, communication theory, and cultural studies.

The research of the data obtained from the content analysis has been carried out mainly autonomously, without cross-referencing variables. This may limit the obtaining of significant results that could be of interest, such as identifying the predominant camera shot and angle in advertisements featuring individuals with physical disabilities compared to those featuring individuals with cognitive disabilities.

In addition, certain variables, such as the model of disability representation, the taxonomy of representation of this group (Garland-Thompson, 2002), or the most frequently used stereotypes in relation to people with disabilities, represent categories in which the researcher may acquire confirmation and measurement bias.

Similarly, the absence of an assessment of the impact of campaigns that include representations of people with disabilities—such as increased sales or improved brand image—could omit a relevant aspect of advertising success and the inclusion of people with disabilities.

3.2. Opportunities for improvement in methodological design

We propose designing an analysis sheet that allows for a more systematic, comprehensive, and replicable evaluation of advertising pieces. This sheet should incorporate clearly defined operational categories, along with examples that facilitate coding and minimize variability among different researchers. It would also be appropriate to include variables that allow for cross-referencing of data—such as type of disability, gender, role, or audiovisual resources used—to obtain in-depth and comparable results between different campaigns.

Similarly, it is recommended that the sample be expanded to include advertisements that have not necessarily won awards, to improve the representativeness of the advertising industry as a whole and avoid bias toward productions of higher technical quality. The inclusion of local or low-budget campaigns would enrich the analysis and provide a more heterogeneous perspective on the treatment of disability in advertising.

On the other hand, it is suggested that protocols be established to minimize researcher bias in the interpretation of sensitive categories, such as stereotypes or representation models, to enhance data reliability.

Finally, it is proposed that studies be conducted that consider the perspective of the end consumer to evaluate how representations of disability in advertising influence the perception, attitude, and behavior of the public. This information could be shared with advertisers and creative agencies to educate decision-makers about the impact and opportunities of including this group in their advertisements.

3.3. Methodological recommendations

To mitigate the sample limitation discussed in section 3.1, it is recommended that additional sources be included in the research—market studies, *marketing* and advertising reports from other relevant companies in the industry, and academic studies—in order to provide a broader perspective.

Similarly, and to mitigate or reduce possible researcher bias, it is recommended that a pilot test or pretest of the analysis tool be conducted. This pretest allows for the identification and addressing of possible sources of bias in the measurements, especially in those variables of a more interpretive nature, such as the classification of stereotypes or models of disability representation. The participation of multiple coders (ideally across the entire analysis sample) and the subsequent comparison of their assessments using inter-coder reliability indices, such as Krippendorff's Alpha (2004), is suggested.

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1. Comparison of methodologies: gaps and areas of opportunity

In general, research on disability and advertising has been based on limited samples—both in terms of the number of advertisements analyzed and in terms of duration and geographical scope—which makes it difficult to draw representative conclusions. In this context, working with a broader universe, such as the 703 advertising campaigns analyzed in this study, covering a period of seven years (2018-2024) and a global scope (Asia-Pacific, Europe, Middle East, Africa, and Latin America), has provided a more accurate and nuanced view of the representation of people with disabilities in contemporary advertising communication.

In addition to this temporal and thematic breadth, there is value in adopting a longitudinal approach, which is unusual in previous studies. This type of analysis facilitates understanding the evolution of representations of disability over time and detecting emerging trends in the industry, as well as possible changes in discourses and stereotypes.

Most previous research tends to focus on a specific type of disability—visual, Down syndrome, or disabling diseases such as multiple sclerosis—leaving out other intellectual, mental, or psychosocial disabilities. In this sense, this study broadens the spectrum of analysis by incorporating a more diverse classification of disabilities (physical, mental or psychosocial, intellectual or cognitive, and sensory), which

contributes to a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of the representation of this group in advertising.

Similarly, studies examining the physical or sociological characteristics of people with disabilities in advertisements tend to focus on print media. The analysis presented here, based on audiovisual pieces, provides a more dynamic perspective by including variables such as the role of the character or their relationship with other characters without disabilities (friendship, camaraderie, competitiveness, enmity, familiarity, medicine, professionalism), allowing for a more in-depth evaluation of the narrative and symbolic dimension of the representation.

On the other hand, previous qualitative research has tended to prioritize the voice of people with disabilities, leaving the perspective of the advertising industry in the background. This study incorporates the views of professionals in the sector—advertisers, creatives, and marketing experts—which has made it possible to compare perceptions and detect structural barriers that still limit inclusion. The interviews also reveal a lack of training and sensitivity around the issue, but also a growing interest in addressing it in a manner more consistent with social demands.

Despite the progress observed, there remains a significant gap in the active participation of people with disabilities in creative processes. Investigating how their integration into work teams could improve the authenticity and impact of campaigns is a particularly promising avenue for future research.

4.2. Lessons learned from the methodological approach

From a methodological point of view, the development of this research has highlighted the importance of adopting mixed designs that combine quantitative and qualitative techniques to address a phenomenon as complex as the representation of disability in advertising. Content analysis, when based on comprehensive categorical systems and reliability procedures such as Krippendorff's Alpha (2004), proves to be a robust tool for obtaining data and trends in audiovisual samples. However, its implementation highlights the need for precise conceptual construction and preliminary analyses—such as pretesting—to refine categories and minimize researcher bias.

Following the research, it is confirmed, in agreement with Houston (2024), that systematic coding alone is insufficient to understand the symbolic dynamics involved in this field of study, especially in sensitive interpretation variables such as stereotypes, representation models, or sociocultural attributes.

Complementarily, in-depth interviews or focus groups are an optimal tool for accessing the opinions and experience of professionals, as well as the ethical tensions that shape decisions in the advertising sector. Triangulation between both techniques allows findings to be contrasted and a more complete understanding of the phenomenon to be obtained.

4.3. Future applications

On a theoretical level, it expands existing knowledge on the chosen topic, enriches general theory, and contributes data to its content. By highlighting under-explored areas and gaps in the existing literature, the research underscores the need for a more in-depth and diversified approach in future studies that address this important social issue from multiple and complex perspectives. The representation of people with disabilities in advertising has been studied, and further research along these lines is encouraged.

Furthermore, this type of study can be useful both academically and professionally. Academically, it can serve as study and reference material for students in Advertising and Public Relations, Audiovisual Communication, and even Humanities. By integrating diverse theoretical and methodological approaches into a single academic work, it offers a rich platform for analysis and discussion.

Finally, on a professional level, analyzing the representation of people with disabilities can be useful for advertisers, advertising agencies, and associations that defend the rights of people with disabilities. The data derived from the research can serve as a basis for making more informed and ethical decisions about how to treat disability in advertisements, with the potential to influence the creation of more inclusive and representative campaigns. Based on this type of study, it would be possible to work directly with advertising agencies and brands to develop and test new strategies for inclusion in advertising campaigns and even to develop a set of best practices to guide the sector toward a more authentic and equitable representation of people with disabilities.

On the other hand, empirical research aimed at measurable results—such as public perceptions or impact on sales—is encouraged to assess the profitability and social effectiveness of inclusive advertising strategies. This should be accompanied by a constant review of professional practices, with guidelines, as noted, that integrate academic recommendations and ethical commitments of the industry.

Similarly, it is suggested that further study be conducted on the socio-psychological and behavioral effects of inclusive advertising, with particular attention to the impact on the self-esteem, well-being, and social participation of people with disabilities.

All these proposals underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that combines theoretical, creative, and social perspectives. The goal is not only to optimize representation but also to move toward authentic and sustainable inclusion over time.

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