Paralympic cripvertising: On the gendered self-representations of Paralympic athletes on social media

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Abstract

Paralympic athletes are increasingly using social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to (self-)represent and engage audiences in disability counter-narratives that resist dominant disability stereotypes. This is particularly the case at the intersection of gender and sexuality where social media is being harnessed to visibly reclaim gendered and sexualised disabled identities in new and diverse ways. In this article, we advance scholarship on female Paralympic athletes' self-representational practices through an intersectional visual media analysis of the most popular female British Paralympic athletes' Instagram pages. We capture a particular trend in Paralympic athletes' self-representational practices, termed cripvertising, that intersects with gendered heteronormative scripts centred on neoliberal ableism, kinship normativity and consumption ('branding') capabilities. We discuss the contradictions and complexities of Paralympians' self-representations and their role in relation to the subversive, pedagogical and emancipatory potential for shaping new disability media narratives, disabled (online) normativity and representational politics.

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Introduction

For feminist media scholars, Instagram has provided a pre-eminent site from which to map the shifting logics of online self-representation practices at the intersection of gender and sexuality and with it the emergence of new digitally mediated feminist sensibilities, cultures and activisms (see, for example, Baker and Walsh, 2018; Cotter, 2019; Pruchniewska, 2018; Savolainen et al., 2020). This has often included a focus on the self-representational practices of women 'on the margins' – 'bodies that are physically/materially/actually oppressed within a sexist/racist society' (Edwards and Esposito, 2018: 342) – and their use of Instagram as an affective and productive apparatus for new forms of visibility, resistance and cultural (re-)production. While research on this topic has extended across multiple and intersecting female identities (see Edwards and Esposito, 2018; Peterson, 2020; Reade, 2021), women with disabilities[1] and disabled online cultures more generally have remained largely under researched (see Cocq and Ljuslinder, 2020; Hill, 2017; Toffoletti, 2018 as exceptions).

Contributing to this area of feminist inquiry, in this article, we explore the self-representational practices of a specific group of disabled women – female Paralympic athletes. In the last few years, with the rapid growth and commercialisation of Paralympic sport, Paralympic athletes have gained much representational currency across popular culture (see, for example, Dolezal, 2017; Pullen and Silk, 2020). Certainly, in the UK context at least, Paralympians have featured in top shows across broadcast television, in glossy magazines such as *Vogue* and *GQ*, and in advertising campaigns as official ambassadors for popular brands. As such, Paralympic athletes are some of the most ephemerally (hyper-)visible disabled subjectivities in popular mediated spaces (see Pullen et al., 2019). Despite this, however, the user-generated content of Paralympians on social media networking sites has rarely been the focus of scholarly critique (see Toffoletti, 2018 as an exception). While this is a notable empirical omission, it has also meant a relative absence of theoretical dialogue(s) between (feminist) digital cultures and critical disability studies, particularly at the intersection of sport media and communication.

This article seeks to contribute to this nascent dialogue through an intersectional visual analysis of the Instagram pages of 22 female British Paralympic bloggers. Our intent is to unpack the ways gender and sexuality intersect with disability in the refashioning of an online 'self'. Drawing on a range of interdisciplinary debates and theoretical lenses that lend themselves to intersectional analysis, we ask how gendered and sexual logics *condition* the performance and popularisation of disability on Instagram. Specifically, we attend to the multiple ways that neoliberal ableism, social mobility, consumption ('branding') capabilities and forms of homonormativity are enacted in female Paralympians gendered performances of disability on Instagram. In so doing, we explore the extent to which these female Paralympians gendered/sexualised performances rearticulate disability's stigmatised representational history – particularly at the intersection of gender/sexuality (Garland-Thomson, 2002) – while simultaneously shaping, with Ahmed (2012: 163), the 'specific terms' of disability inclusion in digitally mediated spaces.

Social media and postfeminist digital culture

We situate this article within the sizable body of cultural scholarship on digital communications with a particular emphasis on the role of visual social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and TikTok in performances of an online 'self' (see, for example, Abidin, 2016, 2018). This body of work has critiqued the various ways social media platforms provide opportunities for both emancipatory *and* exploitative (self-)representational practices (Dobson, 2015), particularly in the context of marginalised groups who have historically been subject to limited/stigmatised representations within 'mainstream' mediated culture (Talbot et al., 2020). Media scholars have done much to highlight how the digital 'promise' of emancipation – often described as 'self(ie)-empowerment' – is limited by the affordances and control mechanisms of social media's attention economy, the rise of an 'influencer industry' (Abidin, 2016: 3), neoliberal interests, audience expectations, algorithms and emerging media culture(s) (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015).

Certainly, the design affordances of platforms such as Instagram have been central to understandings of online visibility. For instance, Marwick (2015) highlights the extent Instagram encourages bloggers to invest in content curation that aligns with neoliberal consumer logics whereby demographics, tastes, trends and monetary goals are central to performances of the self (see also Genz, 2015: 546). This trend – what Marwick (2015) identifies as 'microcelebrity' – captures the extent the political economic dimensions of visual social media sites operate to reproduce representations centred on heteronormativity, including the embodiment of conventional (Western/Eurocentric) beauty standards propagated on white cis-gendered norms and displays of wealth/consumerism (Duffy and Hund, 2015).

Such work has largely informed feminist inspired critiques of gendered self-representation practices in online spaces. Drawing heavily on postfeminist theory as articulated by scholars such as McRobbie (2004), Gill and Orgad (2017) and Banet-Weiser (2018), there exists a burgeoning field of scholarship focused on feminist digital culture (Dobson, 2015). This work has provided insightful contributions around the extent social media sites such as Instagram reward a 'gendered politics of looking' (Mahoney, 2022: 5) characterised by postfeminist imperatives that centre renewed forms of gendered empowerment promoted through individualism, entrepreneurialism and meritocracy (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Research on postfeminist digital culture has extended to critique of gendered performances at the intersection of other minority identity markers (e.g. Muslim women, trans and queer identities) (see, for instance, Baulch and Pramiyanti, 2018) – although few studies to date have focused on disabled women (see Toffoletti, 2018 and Raun and Christensen-Strynø, 2021 as exceptions). Here, research has highlighted the extent 'difference' is managed through an 'intensification of beauty norms . . . felt most by those at the periphery of normality, i.e., transwomen more than cis women, and disabled women more than able-bodied women' (Elias et al., 2017: 27). Indeed, for women at the intersection of 'other', a significant degree of aesthetic labour is invested in manipulating images to approximate normative postfeminist standards of beauty (see Elias et al., 2017). In the context of disability, Rembis (2013) has used the term 'passing' to describe the way disability is concealed or hidden (where possible) to 'pass' for, or approximate, able-bodiedness. Rembis' (2013) notion of 'passing'

can be read as a form of 'internalised ableism' (Campbell, 2009) centred on distancing (from notions of 'disabled') and emulation (internalising and performing non-disabled norms). For females with disabilities, passing (Rembis, 2013) or emulation (Campbell, 2009) becomes a double-bind action to approximate both able-ness and/with normative femininity.

For us, female Paralympians' social media content cannot be analysed outside of the political economic dimensions of social media and as it relates to postfeminist/ableist performances of the self. We need to hold together these understandings with scholarship on disability, gender and Paralympic media before turning our attention to the key analytical concepts used to frame our readings of female Paralympians' Instagram content.

Disability, gender/sexuality and Paralympic media

Across much of our media(ted) history, disability has been represented as the 'other' through performances of dependency, vulnerability, 'freakery' and asexuality/sexual deviancy (Ellis and Goggin, 2015). Feminist disability scholars have pointed to the extent these stigmatising affects disproportionately impact females with disabilities – as bodies located at the intersection of *at least* two devalued body politics (Garland-Thomson, 2002) – leading to representations of infantilisation and asexual objectification (Barnes and Mercer, 2010).

However, contemporary Paralympic media coverage has been recognised as an important harbinger for renewed forms of disability representation that challenge stereotypes at the intersection of gender/sexuality (McGillivray et al., 2021). In the last few years, Paralympic coverage has been influential in transmitting highly affective images and vicarious experiences of disability which is sutured by gendered/sexual and commercial logics akin to that of able-bodied sport coverage (Pullen and Silk, 2020). This has stimulated the (embryonic) emergence of a disability/Paralympic celebrity culture which has popularised Paralympic figures such as Aimee Mullins, Oscar Pistorius (prior to his conviction in 2015), Markus Rehm and Sophie Pascoe (to name a few).

There is now a small, but growing, body of scholarly work that has explored the role of figures such as Mullins on the gendered politics of disability representation across mediated culture(s) (see Dolezal, 2017; Montalti, 2022; Tamari, 2017). For example, Dolezal (2017) has highlighted how Mullins – a retired Paralympian, below-the-knee amputee, disability model, brand ambassador and advocate – has challenged ableist perceptions of disabled women as vulnerable, asexual or anti-feminine by promoting her disability and use of prosthetic legs as *the* objects of beauty. Indeed, according to Dolezal (2017), Mullins plays on her non-normative embodiment and technological alterity to both subvert and *reclaim* a form of disabled femininity. For both Tamari (2017) and Montalti (2022), this form of subversion can be seen to invoke a new cultural aesthetic – a 'prosthetic aesthetic' (Montalti, 2022; Tamari, 2017) – around *select* disabled bodies that has shaped new modes of gendered/sexual politics in disability representation. In contradistinction, contemporary debates concerning the use of prosthetic technology in male disabled athletes have most often (and especially in the case of Oscar Pistorius) centred on their 'cyborg' corporeality and the extent this disrupts ableist binaries and sporting ethics (e.g. cyborg 'doping') (cf. Howe and Silva, 2017; Swartz and Watermeyer, 2008).

Such contributions have offered insightful and important understandings as to the role of Paralympic athletes as pedagogically powerful subjectivities in affecting the politics of disability representation as it intersects with gender/sexuality. Yet, despite this important backdrop, unlike mainstream Paralympic media coverage (e.g. broadcasting, print news, marketing), there exists a paucity of scholarly attention paid to the self-representational practices of Paralympians on visual social media sites such as Instagram. There are some exceptions (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2021), with Toffoletti's (2018) study on the self-representational practices of Australian female Paralympic athletes most contextually relevant here. Using a postfeminist lens, Toffoletti (2018: 272) highlights the extent athletes' social media posts challenge the historical invisibility of disabled femininity in visual culture(s) with images and posts that 'refute gendered stereotypes of disabled women as asexual, helpless and dependent, as objects of pity, as incapable of participating in economic and consumer life'. Moreover, Toffoletti (2018: 265) argues that the overt display of femininity is a sign of 'the efforts and compromises women with disabilities often are required to make in order to be recognised in ableist worlds'.

Aligned with Toffoletti's (2018) call for greater comprehension of the gendered/sexual renderings of Paralympic athletes' social media content, in this article, we explore how gender/sexuality is not simply made visible in 'ableist worlds' but is propagated by a particular intersectional assemblage of gendered ableism centred on upward social mobility, consumption and self-branding capabilities and normative sexual scripts that make content relatable, popular *and* challenging in specific ways. In doing so, we complement the use of more familiar postfeminist critiques (e.g. Toffoletti, 2018) with intersectional analytical frameworks; together, they offer a novel way of thinking through the terms in which disabled and gendered/sexual 'others' are rendered (in-)visible in ableist mediated spaces.

Ableism, intersectionality and inclusion

For critical disability scholars, ableism – the ideology which produces and maintains disability as an inferior, devalued and unproductive body politic – has been central to the biopolitical management of disability *and* other minority groups in neoliberal culture. Although commonly associated with scholarly critiques of disablement, ableism has been a productive concept for intersectional theorising when read with, and against, other identity markers (e.g. Berne et al., 2018; McRuer, 2006; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015; Puar, 2007).

An entry point into this area of scholarship is Robert McRuer's (2006) Crip theory, which has been particularly influential in thinking through the role of sexuality and gendered normativity in the production of ableism (see also Hall, 2017). Emerging from intersectional engagement with queer theorising, Crip theory highlights how ableism is 'thoroughly interwoven with the system of heterosexuality that produce queerness' (McRuer, 2006: 2). Indeed, for McRuer (2006), heterosexual norms are always implicated in ableist discourse, a mutually constitutive logic that serves to nourish the ideological 'othering' and marginalisation of disabled *and* non-normative sexualities (see, for example, McRuer and Mallow, 2012). This logic has reinforced the historical invisibility and/or stigmatisation of disabled sexuality/sexual pleasure in visual media cultures with

depictions of disabled sexuality often centred on pathological narratives of 'either tragic deficiency or freakish excess' (McRuer and Mallow, 2012: 1; see also Barounis, 2009). For many scholars, Crip theory has provided an important framework for interrogating the conjunctural relations between disability, sexualities and ableism from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives (see, for instance, Berne et al., 2018; Martino and Schormans, 2020; Siebers, 2008).

More recently, scholars such as Puar (2007, 2017) and Mitchell and Snyder (2015) have added nuance to aspects of McRuer's (2006) Crip theory, particularly in contextualising ableism within the current cultural moment whereby discourses of equality, diversity and inclusion have created a more flexible and participatory social sphere for marginalised groups. Thinking with this 'moment', Puar (2007, 2017) and Mitchell and Snyder (2015) have highlighted how a politics of neoliberal inclusion has provided opportunities for renewed forms of recognition and participation of formerly marginalised/minority identities (e.g. disabled, queer) within the cultural sphere. Cautioning against this seemingly progressive trend, Puar (2007, 2017) and Mitchell and Snyder (2015) highlight how inclusion operates within a limited domain replete with embodied heteronormative and ableist expectations centred on intersectional axis of 'white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity and bodily integrity' (Puar, 2007: xx). This process of neoliberal inclusion, termed 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2007) and 'ablenationalism' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015) as it extends to *some* queer and disabled bodies, respectively, captures the narrow terms in which minority groups are included within contemporary neoliberal culture. As such, for these authors and others, ableism and its intersectional discursive foundation continues to propagate many of the progressive trends or mainstreaming of minority groups. For us, such analytics provide for an important intersectional intervention into how specific forms of gendered ableism are made visible – and the conditions for visibility – on social media platforms.

Method

The data in this article are based on an intersectional visual analysis of the Instagram pages of 22 female British Paralympic bloggers. This data set was part of a larger integrative methodological approach that included a mixed-methods content analysis of Paralympic articles in online news features and lifestyle magazines (such as *Vogue, GQ, Wired*) conducted over a 3-month period which included the Tokyo Paralympic Games (held in 2021). The sample consisted of the most popular (or rather 'followed') British Paralympians with accessible public accounts drawn initially from a list of current Paralympians generated through the British Paralympic Association (BPA) website. Analysis of online news articles further assisted our sampling of the Instagram accounts given we also sought to include Paralympians who had featured in the online news articles and who actively and publicly blogged on Instagram – although many already fell within the parameters of our sampling criteria. Following a similar methodological approach to Toffoletti (2018), Paralympians Instagram pages were chosen for this study based on their public popularity and accessible profiles. The sample included athletes aged between 18 and 40 years competing across a range of sports and Paralympic disability classifications.

The first and second authors conducted the data analysis process. In the first instance, images were collected to provide an initial corpus of visual content for data familiarisation. This stage included initial discussion between authors regarding early interpretations of the wider visual assemblage and interplay of semantic content (comments, hashtags, tag lines) constructed at the intersection of our scholarly backgrounds, theoretical understandings/deductions and analytical resources. To reduce our sample of images to a manageable data set for focused visual analysis, we selected the 10 most recent images per Paralympian. We subsequently developed a coding protocol based on multimodal discourse analysis which provides a familiar methodological map in explorations of visual media online self-presentations (see, for example, Zappavigna, 2016). Multimodal discourse analysis consisted of a focused reading of multi-modal content, that is, compositional, semiotic and (critical) discursive elements and the interplay/relationship between various elements (compositional, positioning, discursive, hypertext – e.g. hashtags) in the image (see Van Leeuwen and Kress, 2001). In the analysis, we focused attention on the ways such multi-modal content represented disability at the intersection of gender/sexuality drawing analytical inspiration from the literature and intersectional theorising (e.g. Crip theory).

Although the Instagram pages of the Paralympians we analysed were public accounts, we have chosen not to reproduce direct images and captions in this article and rely instead on thick descriptions and interpretive work. We have taken this approach after reflecting on debates within the field concerning the ethics of reproducing social media images, despite being positioned as 'public', without 'users' consent (see, for example, Ravn et al., 2020). While we recognise that thick descriptions in replace of actual images may be limiting for some, many of the images in our data set included the partners, peers and/or children of the Paralympians and we felt it important to engage with the ethical 'principles of consent, privacy, and ownership' (Ravn et al., 2020: 44) where direct consent was not given.

Disabled femininity and the technological aesthetic

Across the sample, there was an overarching trend towards content generation that drew attention to feminised/sexualised performances at the intersection of disability. Many of the images posted by athletes often called attention to their disability by making it *visible* through stylised visuals that centred bodily impairment and marking it via semantic content such as disability and popular gender-related hashtags.

An emblematic example of this trend can be observed in the Instagram posts of British wheelchair basketball player and amputee, Amy Conroy. With a physique that notably conforms to white feminine cis-gendered beauty norms, Conroy has gained increasing currency within visual culture having featured in top shows on broadcast television, across print and lifestyle media and as a model for a recognised online fashion retailer. Conroy often posts beauty and fashion images that involve the feminine stylisation of her prosthetic limb captured alongside hashtags such as #disability, #amputation and #womenempowerment. For instance, in one post Conroy can be seen wearing a short red dress pointing to her prosthesis with the caption '*first time in heels . . . repping the Rheo XC knee and pro flex foot*', an image that showcased a new type of prosthesis which enables

her to wear high-heeled shoes. In another image, Conroy is captured on the basketball court in her wheelchair with the basketball raised above her head ready to 'shoot'. The image is highly performative; it captures Conroy from behind, alone on the court, and centralises her athletic physique made visible by her feminine sportsbra. Both images clearly depict a form of feminine styling that confirms to conventional heteronormative registers and 'mainstream' feminine aesthetics – a somewhat mediated performance of gendered (feminine) sexual subjectivity.

Likewise, a similar feminine performance can be depicted in the Instagram posts of British wheelchair racer, Hannah Cockroft. In a series of images, Cockroft is captured promoting a new sportsbra brand. Wearing just a sportsbra and accentuated by the downward angle of her body position in the racing wheelchair, the 'gaze' is actively drawn towards her breasts. These images are a clear performance of gendered/sexual subjectivity at the intersection of disability; they visibly provoke a sexual subjectification, following Gill's (2003, 2006) use of the term, that operates through the performance of gendered/sexual autonomy and self-empowerment sutured by a (hetero-)normative aesthetic or 'gaze'. Indeed, they are images that thematically resonate with the sexual/feminised discourses of the contemporary sportsbra/sportswear akin with able-bodied sport and 'fitspiration' media (see Schultz, 2004; Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2021), rarely, if at all, associated with disability and disabled bodies. Importantly, though, both sets of images (Cockroft and Conroy) function as a counterpoint to normative notions and representations of disabled sexual bodies (McRuer and Mallow, 2012: 1) and conjure (as we unpack below) a specific set of gendered/sexual relations.

The explicit feminisation of images across the Paralympians' Instagram pages is perhaps not unsurprising given previous research by Toffoletti (2018) and the extent to which platforms such as Instagram reward the reproduction of gendered aesthetics in content creation (Marwick, 2015). Indeed, as Elias et al. (2017) remind us, in a postfeminist digital culture where gendered labour is *expected*, female bodies 'on the margins' have often been seen to intensively reproduce normative beauty norms. However, of particular interest here is the extent to which the gendered logics of such images rest on the use of disability technologies, such as prosthesis and/or wheelchairs. For instance, in the emblematic examples described above, Cockroft's racing wheelchair and Conroy's feminine stylisation of her prosthetic leg are instrumental to enhancing the gendered and sexual affects of such images (see Shaviro, 2010) – producing, we suggest, a kind of *gendered* 'prosthetic aesthetic' (Tamari, 2017).

This line of analysis gives us productive pause to consider how disability assistive technologies intersect with disability and gender in *specific* ways. Certainly, assistive technologies such as prosthesis and wheelchairs – particularly the kind of innovative and expensive technologies on display in many of the Paralympians' Instagram pages – are also a marker of upward social mobility. Interrogating this disability-gender-technology assemblage offers an optic for thinking through the parallel intersections of disability-gender and social-economic privilege. With Mitchell and Snyder (2015), while disability assistive technologies accentuated in these posts provide greater levels of physical mobility, they are designed to approximate ableist corporeal standards both in functionality and aesthetics. In other words, for the most economically privileged and socially mobile disabled person, disability technologies have become 'a *consumer* item' with

investment in design/engineering producing assistive technologies that intend to create 'a symbiotic relationship with the wearer' that shifts the focus from use of technology as 'necessity' (i.e. increased functioning) to 'consumption and pleasure' (Burton and Melkumova-Reynolds, 2019: 207). Dolezal (2017: 69) forms a similar conjecture in her feminist critique of Aimee Mullins, noting how her prosthetic limbs, designed to look like 'pretty legs' – largely undetectable as prosthetic limbs – afforded her greater degrees of gendered/sexualised currency in mainstream media.

With this in mind, we can begin to see how the *visibility* of assistive technology in the stylised images of Conroy and Cockroft assists in the approximation of ableist corporeal standards. They act as markers of their consumptive capacity and upward social mobility (both consumer and owner of assistive technology), *and*, importantly, as a kind of gendering agent. Indeed, Conroy's post centred on showcasing the '*Rheo XC knee and pro flex foot*' – with a tag price of approximately $60,000 – alongside a new set of feminising high-heeled shoes provides a poignant example.

Arguably, while these types of images convey the message that disability can be fashionable, beautiful and sexy, there is an extent to which they articulate a familiar return to the postfeminist position of femininity as a 'bodily property' (Gill, 2007: 147) largely premised on a performance of heteronormative 'passing' (Rembis, 2013). Indeed, following Dolezal (2017: 74), as with the popular images of Aimee Mullins, images of Conroy and Cockroft remind us 'that being differently embodied can be celebrated, just as long as you can do all things that normal – read: white, young, beautiful, athletic – bodies can do'. Central to Dolezal's (2017) critique is that the ability to 'pass' entices a 'politics of looking' (Mahoney, 2022: 5) premised on familiar ableist and gendered heteronormative scripts wider of visual culture and thereby co-opts the subversive potential of such images to defy neoliberal corporeal conventions (see, for instance, Baulch and Pramiyanti, 2018; Elias et al., 2017).

Although this critique holds much currency, it tends to reduce gendered self-representations to nothing more than normative (re)production. With others, we suggest the notion of 'passing' is more complex than simply the concealing of difference through heteronormative aesthetic labour (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Schlossberg, 2001). This is especially true in the context of physical disability (as with the images described above) *and* visual social media platforms where there is a clear and *visible* violation of ableist standards of normative embodiment despite approximation to heteronormative beauty standards. Put differently, while approximation is performed, bodily impairment is not erased nor is it attempted. Indeed, there is a need to perform disability – to make disability visible – in accordance with the cultural expectations and logics of visual social media platforms (see Marwick, 2015).

Indeed, in this context, 'passing' is somewhat nuanced. For Conroy and Cockroft, 'passing' offers a biopolitical opening for reclaiming a *visibly disabled* gendered and sexual identity in a visual culture that has long silenced and/or stereotyped disabled sexual autonomy. With critical disability scholar, Linda Schlossberg (2001: 4), there is an extent to which passing in this context may establish 'an alternative' gendered disabled narrative that can challenge dominant disabled sexual stereotypes of 'either tragic deficiency or freakish excess' (McRuer and Mallow, 2012: 1). Certainly, in one sense, these images (and images alike) begin to reconfigure alternative narratives of disabled sexuality in

subtle but important ways. Although they do not radically disrupt heteronormativity in the production of a gendered ableism (McRuer, 2006) – indeed, and with Campbell (2009), there is a degree of internalised ableism at work here in the emulation of non-disabled norms suitable for the 'microcelebrity' performance – they do begin to rupture, and reconstitute, normative disabled gendered/sexual relations. That said, however, the ability to establish and be included within such a narrative is certainly easier for those with *some* forms of physical disabilities and where the use of prosthetic technology can facilitate the more obvious performance of disability while approximating familiar corporeal conventions.[2] In this sense, we can read 'passing' here as partially productive but somewhat exclusionary and thus pedagogically affective as it relates to a *specific form* of gendered disabled female body.

Cripvertising

In the above passage, we suggest that across the female Paralympians' Instagram pages analysed, there exists a distinct form of feminisation/sexual subjectification composed through the visual aesthetics, stylistic compositions and material expressions of heteronormativity which operate to locate disability within familiar ableist sexual and gendered discourses. Notwithstanding critique, we suggest these images cultivate new representational modes of disabled femininity on visual online platforms. However, as we will begin to unpack here, these representational modes are largely propagated by the gendered commodity culture and attention economy of platforms such as Instagram.

Indeed, many of the most popular female Paralympians within the sample often posted feminised/sexualised images in their capacity as commercial brand ambassadors. For instance, the highly successful Para swimmer, Ellie Simmonds – typically known as the British Paralympic 'poster girl' (see Pullen and Silk, 2020) – can be seen promoting a swimwear brand in several aesthetically feminised photoshoots. We see a similar trend in the posts by the popular para-cyclist, Kadeena Cox, and wheelchair basketball player, Amy Conroy – both of whom are brand ambassadors for fashion and sportswear labels.

These examples demonstrate how popular female Paralympians have embraced Instagram's 'influencer industry' (Abidin, 2016: 3), providing opportunities for producing stylised and feminised images. Utilising the commercial affordances of social media platforms to leverage gendered visibility has also been studied in the context of Australian model, Madeline Stuart, who has Down's syndrome (Raun and Christensen-Strynø, 2021: 10). Indeed, with Raun and Christensen-Strynø (2021), our analysis reveals how gendered content generation at the intersection of disability is inscribed in practices of 'self-commercialisation' and expressions of an entrepreneurial citizen (see also Marwick, 2015). This form of gendered self-commercialisation is typically accompanied by messages and hashtags that promote inclusionary sentiments that resonate with meritocratic discourse centred on promoting self-motivation and entrepreneurialism as a means to inclusion (see Littler, 2017). Indeed, in the examples above, much of the highly stylised and normatively feminised visual content is accompanied by motivational tag lines (e.g. 'Invest in yourself' and 'reassess, take accountability, make bigger goals and impress yourself' [Conroy]) alongside hashtags such as #inclusion, #motivation, #selflove and #womenempowerment.

This trend, which we term 'cripvertising' – playing on Hunt and Serazio's (2017) 'femvertising' – captures the extent to which certain disabled subjectivities have become entangled in the gendered self-branding practices of visual social media platforms such as Instagram and harnessed by influential brands seeking to align themselves with inclusionary messages. This of course is not a new phenomenon and has been discussed at length in work by Banet-Weiser (2018) and others (Duffy and Hund, 2015), although rarely in the context of disability (see Raun and Christensen-Strynø, 2021 as an exception). As such, we suggest cripvertising as one way to read contemporary modes of disability representation on social media: casting disability as a 'palatable and even admirable' form of bodily difference in its embrace of the commodity, individualising and commercial labouring opportunities of neoliberal media culture (Burton and Melkumova-Reynolds, 2019: 207).

Furthermore, cripvertising animates the ablenational (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015) insofar that it provides opportunities for new forms of disability recognition – as beautiful, feminine, sexy, empowered – for the most privileged disabled subjects within neoliberal frameworks. On the one hand, cripvertising appears to do important cultural work by 'norming' particular forms of disabled corporeality at the intersection of gender/sexuality. Indeed, as feminist disability scholar Garland-Thomson (2002: 25) reminds us, 'such routinization of disability imagery – however stylized and unrealistic it may be – nevertheless brings disability as a human experience out of the closet and into the normative public sphere'. While we agree, in part, with Garland-Thomson's assessment, we would argue that this form of disability representation does in fact do far less to reveal disability as a *human experience* – however visible and beautiful it may be – than it does to obscure the realities of everyday life for the majority of disabled people and the role of ableist systems and disability inequalities outside of social media worlds. Certainly, cripvertising *does* enable forms of disability recognition. Yet, rather perniciously, the condition of this recognition is premised on a form of disability exceptionalism (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015) underpinned by liberalising tendencies that bind disability to the affective structures of neoliberalism centred on a kind of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011: 1). In this sense, cripvertising may be read as an interactive site of fantasy-making that, borrowing from Robert Stam et al. (2015: 128), enables (disabled) subjects to become invested in the 'toxic normalcy of institutions, relationships and social systems that undermine any possibility of social happiness'.

Crip/queer intimacies

The role and performativity of queerness further complicates the disability-gender assemblage we unpack above. The term 'queer' is often used as an umbrella term to describe nonnormative sexualities (for instance, as it relates to the Q in LGBTQ+). Here, we use the term queer as a descriptor but complement the use conceptually following the work of scholars such as McRuer (2006) and Puar (2017) who use queer – or queerness as it designates a particular condition or temporality – as a postfoundational lens from which to deconstruct the uneven and tenuous incorporation of naturalised sexual scripts at the intersection of 'fixed' identities[3] (gender, race, class). The term queer then is both being *and* doing, descriptor *and* analytical optic, from which to critically read, understand and examine sexual alterity.

Within the sample of female Paralympian bloggers, there were several athletes who openly identified as queer and shared content that drew attention to their queer identity. One particularly emblematic case is the Paralympic blogger and wheelchair basketball player, Robyn Love. Love received significant media attention throughout the Tokyo Paralympic Games, with online news articles often referencing her sexuality and LGBTQ+ ambassadorial work. Indeed, in the mainstream British media at least, Love has become the face of a Paralympic movement that, akin to the Olympics, is becoming increasingly open and diverse in LGBTQ+ athlete representation.[4] Her public image as an LGBTQ+ disabled advocate extends across her Instagram content. Here, Love does much to display her queer identity via intimate relationship images and posts celebrating LGBTQ+ Pride – semantically organised around the hashtags #lgbt, #disabilitypride, #disabilitypridemonth, #lesbianvisibility – alongside sporting and feminised content representative of the wider data set.

This type of content generation is particularly interesting when considering the history of sexual discourses in disability representation. As McRuer (2010: 107) and others (see Garland-Thomson, 2002) remind us, sexual identity has historically been rendered invisible in popular representations of disability with disabled people 'commonly positioned as asexual – incapable of or uninterested in sex'. Although contemporary representations of disability have started to break from this representational script and engage with disabled sexuality, this has typically been through the lens of heterosexuality (see, for instance, Barounis, 2009). This logic, following McRuer (2006), continues to validate heterosexuality as a fundamental organising principle of ableism – promoting 'compulsory heterosexuality' and 'compulsory able-bodiedness' as mutually exclusive principles in the regulation of disability and nonnormative sexualities.

Arguably then, Love's social media content, alongside other queer Paralympians, does much to break with disability's silenced sexual history and thereby problematises the heterosexual norms of contemporary disability representation. However, notwithstanding the importance of this content, there is an extent to which Love draws on specific visual and compositional elements – for instance, posts of intimate relationship images that capture Love with her partner celebrating their engagement (caption: '*she said YES' #proposal #loveislove #lgbt #gaywedding*), romantic weekends away (caption: *'celebrating us' #paralympics #lgbt #pride*) and the adoption of a puppy (caption: '*we found our little ginger bear and 3 weeks later our family became a lot fluffier! We like to think it was meant to be' #dogmum #dogmom #dogmomlife*') – that engage performances of sexual/intimate relatability or 'digital intimacy' (Barnwell et al., 2021; Reade, 2021).

In this context, we suggest digital intimacy is complicated by what Puar (2007) has described as queer (disabled) domestication signalled through images and content that infer forms of kinship normativity. While kinship normativity is an emblematic theme in studies on digital intimacies, it does important cultural work in the case of Love's queer disabled identity and the politics of recognition and incorporation of minority (queer disabled) identities in mediated spaces. Indeed, following the work of Puar (2007, 2017), kinship normativity, or queer domestication, is premised on a process of homonationalism – in other words, the progressive cultural inclusion and mainstreaming of queer nonnormative sexualities. Despite being recognised as a progressive trend in neoliberal inclusionary politics, homonationalism is a *conditional* form of inclusion – typically

extending to queer bodies at the intersection of white racial, ableist and socio-economic privilege who have mobilised around a 'privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (Duggan in Puar, 2007: 38).

In this regard, Love's kinship Instagram content (which gains huge amounts of 'likes' and positive comments) – the self-identification with her partner as 'dogmums', traditional marriage proposal and romantic weekends away to celebrate relationship milestones – is clearly 'anchored in domesticity and consumption' (Duggan in Puar, 2007: 38) incited by sexual scripts of kinship and heteronormative relations. And yet, what complicates this homonormative assemblage is the extent to which Love's content begins to undo the privileging of the *able body* in constructions of homonormativity (Puar, 2007) and (re-)construct the homonormative *disabled* body. For us, this marks an important scholarly intervention given that disability and homonormativity have rarely, if at all, featured in discussions of sexuality and disability. Here, on closer inspection, we begin to see a subtle but important shift in homonormative relations at the intersection of *disabled* bodies in contemporary disability (online) culture. That said, it would be remiss here not to recognise the role of social mobility and the centrality of white racial privilege. Some Paralympians, like Love, have far more purchasing power than many disabled people by virtue of their 'microcelebrity' status and middle-class whiteness which enables a homonormative privileging. Arguably, the implicit whiteness in our dataset[5] of both female and male Paralympian bloggers is perhaps indicative of the wider role white racial identity plays in the reclaiming of an empowered gendered and sexual disabled subjectivity for Paralympic athletes in online spaces.

That said, however, there is emancipatory value in Loves Instagram content as it makes visible a disabled sexual politics outside of the dominant heterosexual norm (McRuer, 2006). While working within the existing neoliberal economy and practices of Instagram, Love provides a welcome and progressive voice for disabled LGBTQ identities. Critically, while making her queer disabled identity visible, her crip/queer activist content is certainly not *queering* (at least not in the anti-normative sense of the term). Arguably, the popularity and relatability of Love's content rests on its relationship with/ to 'a normative notion of deviance, always defined in relation to normativity' (Puar, 2017: 23) generating content that is both partially progressive and double-binding.

Reflections

In this article, we have attempted to better understand how Paralympians' self-representations on Instagram is propagated by a particular intersectional assemblage of gendered ableism centred on upward social mobility, consumption, self-branding capabilities and (homo-)normative sexual scripts. We argue that this assemblage underpins the popularity of Paralympians' content, offering relatable representations which can also challenge dominant disabled gendered/sexual stereotypes. Through engaging theoretical approaches that lend themselves to intersectional analysis and interdisciplinary dialogues, we have attempted to complement the use of familiar postfeminist critiques of disabled females' self-representational practices (e.g. Raun and Christensen-Strynø, 2021; Toffoletti, 2018) with intersectional analytical frameworks that offer a novel way of thinking through the complexities in which disabled and gendered/sexual 'others' gain visibility in new mediated spaces.

Through this approach, we have identified an emergent trend in Paralympians' online content generation, termed 'cripvertising' where disability – at the intersection of femininity/sexuality – is recognised and rewarded (in 'likes', branding opportunity, visibility and monetary opportunities, etc.) via the embrace of social media's attention economy (Marwick, 2015). We suggest this embrace is predicated, in part, on a 'politics of gendered looking' (Mahoney, 2022: 520); an affective gaze sutured by neoliberal ableist logics and axis of privilege, but which does important cultural work in 'normalising' disability on social media platforms and promoting emancipatory forms of disabled gender/sexual representations. Furthermore, by turning our focus to the self-renderings of queer Paralympians, we reveal how certain content both complicates disability/compulsory heterosexual relations and speaks to a mode of disabled homonationalism premised on disabled kinship normativity and domestication.

Our critique has begun to expose the normalising and subversive complexities in Paralympians' Instagram content. Yet it is important to consider the broader role of this content on mediated 'disability aesthetics' (Siebers, 2010: 3) as it relates to a broader disability politics. Indeed, when considering the extent disability has been 'written out of visual culture' (Burton and Melkumova-Reynolds, 2019: 206), it is important to recognise the role of Paralympians' self-representations as one way of making visible – *of writing back in* – disability within popular mediated texts. Indeed, the import of social media here is itself significant. Much prior work has been conducted on Paralympic broadcast media in which disability becomes most (hyper-)visible in an ephemeral fashion based around major sporting spectacle (Pullen and Silk, 2020). Social media offers more of a sense of permanence and *auteurship*, offering perhaps a more pedagogically powerful platform for the visibility of disability within popular cultural texts beyond the broadcast spectacle.

We recognise that Paralympians' self-representations are framed by the language and aesthetics of market logics (see Banet-Weiser, 2018); their popularity partly centred on normative relatability, privileged disabled identity and the algorithmic bias of such platforms that promote ableist content. On the one hand, such images provide important, albeit partial, selective (somewhat permanent) openings for gendered/sexual and queer expressions of disability that has affective power in instantiating a different kind of *public* discourse around disability at the intersection of gender/sexuality. Yet, this discourse – and its broader potential to challenge disabled sexual scripts – is limited by the conventions of social media and the extent to which such images are produced, 'read' and framed within normative conjunctural relations. For us, while such images may challenge the status quo, they do little to cultivate a potentially new form of disability feminist politics centred on an *alternative* crip beauty/crip sexuality. In this sense, and as Berne et al. (2018) remind us, 'to unravel ableism, racism, and these frameworks, people need access to imagery that contests those images (242) . . . Liberation is about being liberated from "beauty" and, in turn, approaching beauty with our own terms' (244). Furthermore, and by way of a tentative final thought, we recognise that critical questions remain as to how such images are received (and contested) by disabled and non-disabled audiences. How do such images serve broader political value in fostering forms of cultural disability belonging and gendered/sexual disabled experiences? And, in what ways

can such images transcend the spaces and conventions of social media to positively shape lived disabled realities?

Authors' note

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Notes

1. There is debate within disability studies scholarship around the use of people-first ('women with a disability') or identity-first ('disabled women') language. In this article, we use both terms. For a thoughtful reflection on this debate see https://www.ideasinall.com/disability-identity-neurodiversity-me-or-should-me-be-first/
2. Athletes with physical and non-physical disabilities were represented in the data set. For athletes with non-visible disabilities, images typically drew attention to disability via semantic content (such as disability hashtags) and images related to medical intervention/treatment (e.g. in a hospital bed).
3. While we have attempted to define our use of queer theory here and within the scope of our article, the concept of queer is much more open ended and relational. In summarising queer, Annamaria Jagose (2009) writes that queer is 'a concept that predominantly insists on the radical unknowability of its future formations' (p. 158).
4. See www.skysports.com/basketball/news/26864/12388804/tokyo-paralympics-gb-wheelchair-basketball-stars-laurie-williams-and-robyn-love-on-flying-the-flag-for-womens-team-sports; www.outsports.com/2020/2/23/21149647/wheelchair-basketball-paralympians-engaged-great-britain-uk-robyn-love-laurie-williams; www.bbc.co.uk/sport/disability-sport/58246980
5. It is important to note here the lack of diversity within the Great Britain Paralympic team. At the 2016 Paralympic Games, 7% of the team were non-white. This figure is markedly low when compared with the Great Britain Olympic team and UK population statistics.

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