

Changing the Narrative: Self-Representations of Disabled People in Social Media

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Abstract: The problem of inadequate media representation of disabled people has been changed in recent years by social media, owing to which disabled people can gain at least partial control over their image in public space and thus influence how non-disabled people see them. The article aims to discuss the results of the research on how disabled people use social media to create their image and how this image is different from the one present in traditional media. The study used a qualitative content analysis of the most popular Instagram profiles created by disabled people and addressing disability-related issues. The analysis shows that disabled Instagram users create their image effectively and actively, and the portrayal that emerges from their narratives differs significantly from the dominant ways of presenting disabled people in the mass media, i.e. as “victims” and “supercrips”.

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Introduction – media and disability

Mass media have an undeniable influence on creating the image of disabled people. Not only do the media convey information and reflect reality, but they also shape it, forming the audience's attitudes toward the presented people and social groups (Cocq, Ljuslinder, 2020). This media influence is all the stronger, the rarer the direct and authentic contact with disabled people (Haller, 1999), or, more generally, minority groups (cf. Armstrong, Neuendorf, Brentar, 1992; Tan, Fujioka, Lucht, 1997; Fujioka, 1999). Still, the mainstream media generally approach the issue of disability rather superficially, reproducing and perpetuating existing stereotypes (Barnes, 1992; Clogston, 1993; Haller, 1999; 2000). Such a situation does not only apply to this particular topic. The modern realities of working in the professional media, the lack of knowledge or personal experience, and the requirement to prepare content that will generate mass audience interest have led to a situation in which reliable reporting or documentation is increasingly difficult. This issue has been raised for years by both media studies researchers (Wróblewski, 2013; Głogowski, 2015; Szot, 2016), as well as columnists or journalists (Sędek, 2018; Czubaszek, 2022). Consequently, media have created highly simplified and selective images based on commonly recognized interpretive frameworks (Maćkiewicz, 2020), calculated to engage audiences.

In the context of disabled people, research on their image in the media has so far focused on professional¹ media – both traditional media, such as the printed press, radio and television, and digital media. Colin Barnes (1992) distinguished the main types of recurring media stereotypes: the disabled person as pitiable and pathetic, as an object of violence, as sinister and evil, as atmosphere or curio, as a super cripple, as an object of ridicule, as their own worst and only enemy, as a burden, as sexually abnormal, as incapable of fully participating in community life.

John Clogston, in his study of major American newspapers (Clogston, 1990), defined five media models of disability representation: three “traditional” (stigmatising) categories, which include the Medical Model (disability as an illness or malfunction), the Social Pathology Model (disabled people as disadvantaged), and the Supercrip Model (disabled people as deviant because of “superhuman” feats), and two “progressive” (empowering) categories, including the Minority/Civil Rights Model (disabled people as members of the disability community) and the Cultural Pluralism Model (disabled people presented as non-disabled people would be).

Beth Haller, in her content analysis of the media coverage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (Haller, 1999), added three more models: two progressive ones: the Legal Model (disabled people presented as having legal rights) and Consumer Model (disabled people as an untapped consumer group), and one traditional model: Business Model (disabled people and their issues presented as

1 We use the word ‘professional’ intentionally to distinguish media created by professional editors and journalists (i.e. teams professionally involved in creating and processing information) from ‘social media’ or ‘citizen media’, increasingly equated with media in general. We deliberately avoid the term ‘mass media’, as Internet technologies have changed how ‘mass’ media reception is defined (cf. Goban-Klas, 2022) and, according to many researchers, the Internet does not have many of the characteristics of mass communication models (see Szpunar, 2012).

costly to society and businesses especially). The models outlined above have been a point of reference in many subsequent works (cf. Auslander, Gold, 1999; Power, 2007; Haller, Zhang, 2014).

The issue of the portrayal of disabled people in the media has often been considered in the context of the Paralympic Games (Goggin, Newell, 2000; Golden, 2003; Howe, 2008; Peers, 2009). The dominant way disabled athletes are portrayed in the media is through the frame of the 'super-cripple' (Hodges, Scullion, Jackson, 2015), which is often criticised (McPherson et al., 2016: 661–662).

Polish research on the image of disabled people in the media indicates that the "pity/heroism dichotomy" (Inimah, Mukulu, Mathooko, 2012) is still present. Disabled people are most often portrayed either as unfortunate, dependent, requiring the help of others ("victims"), or as tragic heroes who perform unusual acts "despite" their disability ("supercrips") (Ruść, 2007; Rozmus, 2012; Niedbalski, 2015; Struck-Peregończyk, Leonowicz-Bukała, 2018). A framing analysis of newspaper articles related to disability from the online editions of the two most widely read Polish dailies (see *Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa*, n.d.), "Fakt" and "Gazeta Wyborcza", confirmed the thesis of the dominance of two interpretative frames in the message – 'victim' and 'hero', with the frame of victim seeming to be the more frequently used scheme, imposed on the audience by journalists of both newspapers (Struck-Peregończyk, Leonowicz-Bukała, 2018). Similar conclusions were reached by the authors of an analysis of the content of articles concerning disabled people and disability in the weekly "Polityka" between 1997 and 2016 (Struck-Peregończyk, Kurek-Ochmańska, 2018). Although a decreasing number of articles with pejorative overtones can be observed in the analyzed period, and the image of disabled people evolved from more 'traditional' to 'progressive' models, disabled people were still often portrayed as 'victims' – of fate, the system, unfavorable solutions, or the lack of understanding and tolerance. A study conducted by a team of researchers from the University of Rzeszów in 2020 on Polish programs watched by children and young people identified as many as nine types of representation of disability – nevertheless, basically all of them were set in a pejorative context (e.g. the domain of old age, tragedy, the effect of one's actions, caricature or attribute of negative heroes). They often linked together various unfavorable dimensions of disabled people's lives and implemented the concept – as rightly noted by the authors of the aforementioned study – of intersectionality (Piróg et al., 2021: 246; cf. Crenshaw, 1989). However, these authors also point out that the main categories of presentation and perception of disabled people are reduced to 'objects of pity' and 'superheroes': "Through symbolic violence, these negative and oversimplified narratives often remain unidentified and accepted by the public and, importantly, often by the people these images discriminate against" (Piróg et al., 2021: 249; own translation; cf. Buettgen et al., 2018). Thus, the multiplicity of experiences and diversity of life paths of disabled people are not reflected in the media.

Similarly, changes are slow in the language used to describe disability and disabled people: in the already cited study of the Polish press, a noticeable change was observed over 20 years (Struck-Peregończyk, Kurek-Ochmańska, 2018); however, the examples of stigmatizing language can still be found (Struck-Peregończyk, Leonowicz-Bukała, 2018; Kurek-Ochmańska, Struck-Peregończyk, Lambrechts, 2020). Thus, there is a large gap between how disabled people are presented in the mainstream media, generally by journalists who have not experienced disability, and how they would like to be seen (cf. Thoreau, 2006).

The role of social media in image creation

The problem of inadequate media representations of disabled people has been transformed in recent years by social media. They have become a platform for communicating the concerns and interests of many hitherto niche or unrepresented groups and individuals, giving them a range of free and easy-to-use communication tools (Leonowicz-Bukała, 2022; cf. George, Leidner, 2019). Owing to these popular online platforms, which allow direct contact and the possibility for any user to publish a variety of contents, disabled people have the chance to gain control over their image in public spaces (Cocq, Ljuslinder, 2020). The word “image”, as noted by Agnieszka Budzyńska-Daca (2016: 276), has broad connotations due to the complexity of the tools used in the public communication process and the diversity of its participants. It can be defined as a certain intellectual or sensory interpretation of a person or object, arising in the recipient’s mind and, at the same time, conditioned by its characteristics (Davis, 2007; Łączyński, 2008). The image that is the subject of this analysis is the so-called *self-image*, which – more or less consciously – is created by influencers with disabilities posting on Instagram to evoke a specific desired impression on the audience or to achieve short-term goals (Budzyńska-Daca, 2016: 276).

Social media as tools with ‘democratic’ access, enabling the construction of complex multimedia content for anyone with a smartphone and the Internet, appear to be an ideal tool for creating one’s image and building the so-called *personal brands* and engaged communities – in principle, any user can become a creator of online contents (Larson, Watson, 2011). One of the world’s most popular social media platforms is Instagram, which is based mainly on visual communication. It is projected to have almost 150 million users by 2024 (*Instagram’s growth in Western Europe...*, 2020). A specific place among Instagram creators is occupied by *influencers*, who become opinion leaders for certain audiences, who usually share common interests (Ozgen, Mahmoudian, 2021). In other words, as Crystal Abidin (2016) puts it, they gather a large community around them, for whom they become a trusted source of information. Considering the community’s size, marketing professionals speak of *micro-influencers*, who have gathered a community of between 1,000 and 100,000 so-called *followers*, *macro-influencers* – who are followed by more than 100,000 people, and *mega-influencers* with more than one million followers (Żyłowska, 2022).

Working with influencers is one of the most popular marketing tools today. The key to this popularity is the trust and – perceived as authentic – image that the influencer builds by creating content that is interesting for their audience, using various more or less successful strategies to arouse positive feelings (Kováčová, 2022). According to social media specialists, building an engaged community on Instagram is based on personalised messages but also on naturalness and creating the impression of authenticity. Online creators are inundated with slogans such as ‘Be yourself’ and ‘Don’t be perfect, be genuine’ (see Jaskot, 2020). It is also worth noting that nowadays Instagram users can use various tools within the service to showcase themselves and their activities, opinions and interests, as well as to build and maintain an ongoing connection with their community. In addition to traditional posts (a photo with a caption and possibly hashtags²), they now have at

2 According to the Britannica Dictionary (n.d.), a hashtag is “a word or phrase that starts with the symbol # and that briefly indicates what a message (such as a tweet) is about”.

their disposal the so-called *Instastories*, short dynamic or static materials, often accompanied by additional descriptions, music, and special effects. Instastory can be treated as a tool to show everyday life in its even more natural dimension – more spontaneous, less thought-out and edited, in motion, transmitted live during various events (see Jaskot, 2020). Other tools include the so-called *reels*, short films with music – very popular at the time of writing this paper but still unpopular in Poland at the time of collecting research material. Instagram is developing rapidly and more features are likely to be added in the future.

Social media as a platform to challenge stereotypes and prejudices against minorities

According to long-standing research by social psychologists on the *contact hypothesis* by Gordon Allport (1954), one way of eliminating prejudice against ‘others’ is to establish relationships with them (Bilewicz, 2006), preferably under conditions of the so-called personalized contact and based on cooperation. It should be accompanied by ‘interpersonal openness’, i.e. allowing access to personal information about oneself on the basis of trust (cf. Brewer, Miller, 1984; Miller, 2002). Contemporary adaptations of this hypothesis to the field of communication research have led to the formulation of the *parasocial contact hypothesis* (Schiappa, Gregg, Hewes, 2007; Tukachinsky, Stever, 2018) based on studies of levels of prejudice against gay and transgender people. According to this hypothesis, parasocial contact can provide experiences that can reduce prejudice, especially if a member of the majority group has limited opportunities for interpersonal contact with members of the minority group (Schiappa, Gregg, Hewes, 2007).

As an online platform, Instagram allows direct, two-way contact with people who voluntarily share content related to their personal and professional lives or any other topics they choose. What they have in common is the personal involvement of the content creator, who is available to their followers on a generally equal basis. In the analyzed case, the contact is a personal, voluntary decision of the participants, relatively easily accessible due to the ubiquity of mobile devices, which are frequently used to access social media. They are a ‘window to the world’ for many of their disabled users as they allow, among other things, easier access to information that is limited e.g. for people with mobility problems (Thoreau, 2006: 443). Social networks can also become a tool for the social inclusion of disabled people, allowing for their self-organization and self-help (Verdegem, 2011; Rains, 2018), as well as creating conditions for association, collaboration, and content-sharing (Santoso, 2019: 97). Social media have created an opportunity for disabled people to have their perspective, their stories and their opinions disseminated, as well as to become creators and not only consumers of media messages (Tucker et al., 2017). Their content represents serious competition to how disability is presented in traditional media (Goggin, Newell, 2007).

Above-mentioned Estelle Thoreau (2006) analyzed how disabled people are represented on the Internet (in this instance, the BBC magazine website “Ouch”) when they are able to represent themselves. This image was found to be considerably different from that offered by the mainstream media. It

turned out that, despite expectations, personal narrative predominated: more than half of the analyzed articles presented disability as an individual issue rather than a result of societal oppression (Thoreau, 2006). Copp lie Cocq and Karin Ljuslinder (2020), in their analysis of self-representations in a digital activism campaign against the discrimination of disabled people on Instagram, noticed four predominant narratives that challenge or reproduce contemporary discourses on disability: dealing with shame and guilt, “It’s not me, it’s society”, “I am like anyone else. I am normal”, “I have a diagnosis. I am not my diagnosis”.

In the Polish context, Mateusz Smieszek (2021) raised the issue of self-expression contents that people with sensory impairments present on social media (Instagram and TikTok). The analysis of the collected material showed nine main thematic categories of the content published by people with sensory impairments on social media: everyday life, medical information, modern technologies, forms of support, taboos, humor, social activity, relationships, and leisure.

The character of social media has also given rise to the consideration of whether the activities of influencers with disabilities can be classified as a form of *digital activism*. The most common forms of digital activism, according to the European Economic and Social Committee, include: ‘searching for information on the web; constructing internet sites which provide information and documentation; electronic publications; setting up virtual communities; bulk e-mailing of letters; creating spaces and forums for debate on the net; planning, announcing and coordinating activities; establishing strategic alliances and cooperation; promoting associations; offers of support and/or calls to sign up to collective initiatives already under way’ (Opinia Europejskiego..., 2016). An example of digital activism and a “politics of visibility” (Tembeck, 2016: 8) is #Hospitalglam, a photo-based social movement started by the artist Karolyn Gehrig in 2014. She began posting glamorous selfies³ of herself undergoing medical treatments on the microblogging site Tumblr and her Instagram account. It developed into a community of people, mostly young women, who post their selfies under the #Hospitalglam. The project aimed to reclaim clinical space for patients with chronic illnesses so they could better advocate for themselves. According to Sarah Hill (2017), the #Hospitalglam project is “a useful example of how social media can be used to explore visibility politics and act as a form of advocacy” and social networking sites “provide disabled people with a new voice and enable them to create more connected communities that provide exposure to political issues surrounding disability that have typically be deemed personal” (Hill, 2017: 6).

Methodology

The aim of the research was to analyze how and with what effect disabled people use Instagram to build their image. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

3 A self-portrait photograph of oneself (or of oneself and other people), taken with a camera or a camera phone held at arm’s length or pointed at a mirror, which is usually shared through social media (Sorokowski et al., 2015: 124).

1. What type of content do disabled people share on Instagram?
2. If, when, and how is disability visible on the analyzed profiles?
3. What potential image-related effect can the analyzed narratives have?
4. Does the self-image that disabled people create on Instagram differ from the image created by the traditional media? If yes, how?

The sampling for the study was purposive – the most popular Instagram accounts created by disabled people were selected. The choice of this social media platform, apart from its increasing popularity, was dictated by the fact that it forces users to add visual content, which is the basis of each post. It can take different forms – traditional photos (single or in the form of a photo carousel⁴), videos, graphics or various types of animations. The profiles were searched for independently by two female researchers and two female assistants⁵ in order to eliminate the potential impact of algorithms that adapt to a user's previous searches and preferences in social media applications. The search was based on the analysis of the most popular posts using the most popular disability-related hashtags, which were selected based on long-term observation. These included: *#niepełnosprawność* [disability], *#niepełnosprawnosć* [the word 'disability' written without diacritics], *#niepełnosprawni* [disabled] and *#niepełnosprawni* [the word 'disabled' written without diacritics]. In addition, in order to select the most relevant content-creators, the interactions of profile users (e.g. recommending each other's content, commenting on posts) and the Internet publications on disabled influencers were taken into account.

Then, the accounts which met the following criteria were chosen for further analysis: they had to publish posts or Instastories regularly (an average of one post/story per week during the observed period) and they had to raise disability-related issues either in the content of their posts and photos or by using disability-related hashtags or posting photos which show disability. From the accounts that met these requirements, a sample of 10 accounts with the highest number of followers was selected.

The majority of the analyzed content-creators can be classified as micro-influencers, and only one as a macro-influencer (i.e. with more than 100,000 followers). The average number of followers of the analyzed accounts is 36,400 (ranging from 12,600 to 133,000). Almost all the analyzed accounts (9) belonged to women, and only one to a man⁶. The information provided on most of the analyzed profiles suggests that their creators were between 20 and 40 years old. The majority (9 out of 10) of the *bios* (profile descriptions) included the user's first and last name, and one contained only the first name. The influencers did not hide their disabilities – there were references to them in 7 out

4 An Instagram carousel is a post containing more than one photo or video (up to 10).

5 At this point, we would like to thank Sylwia Buksa (compilation of the list of Instagram accounts) and Izabela Lenczowska (compilation of the list of Instagram accounts and coding) – the students of Journalism and Social Communication at the University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów, for their assistance.

6 Although such a sample composition, with the dominant number of female accounts, might have impacted the observations and conclusions, it reflects the gendered activity of disabled influencers on Instagram. The platform is used more often by women in general, and those female disabled influencers are possibly more popular; mapping the most recognized accounts showed that only one male account could be seen as such (cf. Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022: 226).

of 10 bios, and the disabilities of the remaining three influencers were easily visible in the photos. Regarding the type of disability, 7 out of 10 content-creators are wheelchair users and the remaining three have a visible disability. The content of the analyzed profiles suggests that 7 out of 10 influencers are employed.

As social media content forms a more or less coherent narrative that emerges over time, the last 10 posts shared on each profile were analyzed (altogether 100 posts), as well as Instastories from a period of 14 days (a total of 1079 stories). The analysis of the last 10 posts from each profile means that the posts may have been created within a few weeks or a few months. In the case of Instastories, the analyzed profiles published between 24 and 350 stories during the analyzed period, with an average of 8 stories per profile per day (between 0 and 59 stories). Half of the respondents posted at least one story per day throughout the analyzed period. This frequency might be related to the Instagram algorithm – in order to reach as many users as possible, posts and stories need to be published regularly (Flynn, 2022). Still, it is also important to note that these algorithms are constantly changing and the content-creators' attempts to control the Instagram algorithm can only be partially successful. The analyzed posts were selected and archived in the summer of 2022.

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the research material. Based on the content of messages communicated in a specific context, this technique allows drawing conclusions about the attitudes or intentions of their authors (Krippendorff, 2004: 18; cf. Macalik, 2020). In other words, it makes it possible to observe what is communicated, how, to whom, why, and with what potential effect (Holsti, 1969; White, Marsh, 2006). As noted by Klaus Krippendorff (2004: 57), qualitative content analysis allows the search for certain trends and patterns of communication and is particularly suitable for the study of Internet messages, especially those from social media. In the case of this study, the material was analyzed in a systematic way with the help of a data-driven coding key. The use of this tool made it possible to create categories describing who the disabled content creators are and what they are like, therefore reflecting their image. The coding of the research material was carried out by one coder and verified by both researchers.

In the context of various ethical issues concerning the use of online content as research material, it is important to emphasize that all contents analyzed in this paper come from open, public Instagram profiles. However, as Sarah Hill argues, this content was not created for research purposes (Hill, 2017: 127) and, therefore, given the sensitivity of the topic and the potential vulnerability of the involved content-creators, the decision was made to anonymize the analyzed accounts (see Markham, Buchanan, 2012; Franzke et al., 2019). Therefore, we present a synthetic analysis of the collected material and focus on issues related to the image of disabled people, without analyzing the image of specific users or presenting the content of individual posts. The provided examples have been edited or slightly altered to ensure anonymity while aiming to provide a reliable and accurate description of the analyzed material.

Image of disabled people on Instagram – research findings

In order to examine how disabled people are portrayed on Instagram, their published contents (posts with photos and Instastories) were analyzed, with a particular focus on disability-related contexts. The analyzed posts were categorized according to their topics, with the assumption that each post could belong to more than one category: everyday life, disability, social activity, hobbies (passions, leisure activities), professional activity, and the category ‘other’.

More than half of the analyzed posts concern everyday life. Some authors published long posts, more suitable for blogs, describing recent life events; others posted short captions containing a few words, hashtags, or icons (e.g. fruit or wine glass). Sometimes, they shared some trivial news, such as, for instance, the color of nail polish or details of redecorating the flat; sometimes, they talked about serious or quite personal issues, e.g. a visit to a hospital or a work offer. This might be an example of a narrative which Coppélie Cocq and Karin Ljuslinder (2020) call “I am like anyone else. I am normal”. Its aim is to claim that disabled content-creators are similar to anyone without a disability. This narrative can be interpreted as challenging normative views on what it means to be “normal”.

The similarities between the lives of disabled influencers and their non-disabled followers are strengthened by frequent questions aiming to evoke interaction with followers, e.g. “how is your weekend?”, “are you before or after holidays?”, “whose children start school this year”? Such direct questions help to build a sense of community and aim at raising the followers’ engagement. And indeed, the analyzed posts aroused the interest of the followers, which is indicated by the number of “likes” (in the case of the analyzed posts: from 78 to 18,630), as well as the number of comments (from 0 to 440).

Other topics present in the analyzed posts concerned social lives, holidays⁷, hobbies, and work. This challenges to some extent the popular image of a disabled person as “ill”, being preoccupied with their health condition, not having time or money to enjoy their lives (*victim*) – or, on the other hand, having an unusual hobby or incredible achievements (*supercrip*). Some users referred to their love lives and parenthood, therefore dispelling the myths that disabled people cannot be in happy relationships or be good parents. One influencer even organized a contest for their followers for the best pick-up line aimed at a wheelchair user.

Most (9 out of 10) disabled bloggers talked openly about disability (one person did not raise this topic in their posts, but all the analyzed pictures showed their disability). They mostly referred to the social aspects of disability – social attitudes and relationships with other people as well as social and political activism (theirs or other people’s) aimed at changing the situation of disabled people. Some influencers acted as watchdogs, raising the issues related to the discrimination of disabled people. By highlighting the lack of access to public places, their narratives follow the social model of

⁷ This topic was related to the publication period of the analyzed posts (June–August), which is the holiday season, hence the high number of posts referring to holiday trips.

disability and the type of narrative that Copp lie Cocq and Karin Ljuslinder (2020) called “It’s not me, it’s society”. The creators of the analyzed accounts also described their involvement in events such as conventions and conferences, where they talked about the situation of disabled people in Poland. One of the authors explicitly stated that their mission is to increase the visibility of disabled people in social life and to challenge stereotypes.

An interesting issue in the analysis presented here is whether creating disability-related contents in social media can be described as a form of *digital activism*. In the case of the analyzed accounts, it seems to be the case; however, it takes different forms. The very presence of disability issues contributes to the visibility of disabled people in society – and visibility and contact, however parasocial, is at the heart of changing social attitudes. All analyzed content-creators refer to disability, either directly, by publishing disability-related contents, or indirectly, using disability-related hashtags, writing about disability in bios, and publishing photos showing their disability. Some of the influencers go a step further – they publish educational materials, make people aware of the realities of life for disabled people, dispel stereotypes and myths about disability, and share their experiences, which can motivate others in a similar life situation. Some of the posts included comments on current events (e.g. the lack of accessibility for people with mobility issues at one of the music festivals), pointing to areas of change (e.g. architectural accessibility), calling for joining social events or sharing the published content.

About one-third of posts referring to disability concerned medical aspects (treatment, therapy, health problems). Some influencers wrote openly and honestly about the reality of living with a disability and the resulting limitations – but in the context of normalizing certain experiences and showing ways of coping with limitations, e.g. through the use of new technological solutions or the support of others rather than in the context of showing oneself as a victim. A few posts also referred to myths and controversies related to disability, such as interabled relationships⁸ and common stereotypes (disabled people as less intelligent and less worthy). When talking about disability, the authors of the profiles used neutral, non-emotional language. The most commonly used term was *osoba z niepełnosprawnośc * [a person with a disability], one person used the term *osoba niepełnosprawna* [a disabled person]⁹, and there were also informal, colloquial terms denoting wheelchair users such as *w zkers* or *w zeczek*.

Some influencers decided to talk openly about the fact that they had to come a long way to accept their disability and their bodies. They wrote about dealing with shame and treating their disabilities as weakness and limitation. Some referred to body positivity and shame they experienced, because

8 Relationships in which one person has a disability and/or chronic illness and the other does not.

9 In Poland the term *osoba z niepełnosprawnośc * [a person with a disability] has recently gained a lot of recognition and is considered by many to be the most appropriate and empowering as it concentrates on a person and not on their disability. It is thought to be associated with the social model of disability and the ideas of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In English, there are two widely used terms: “disabled people” and “people with disabilities” and the distinction between them is related not only to linguistics, but also to different ways of conceptualizing disability. The British disability activists tend to prefer the term “disabled people”, explaining that these are people with impairments who are disabled by socially constructed barriers and that this term allows to acknowledge disability as a key part of people’s experience (see Kurek-Ochmańska, Struck-Peregończyk, Lambrechts, 2020: 166). As the Authors of the paper are in favor of the British approach, the term “disabled person/people” has been used throughout the paper.

their bodies did not correspond to the dominant bodily norms (Cocq, Ljuslinder, 2020). This shame was evoked by other people's reactions to their visible disabilities – gaping, comments, facial expressions full of condemn or pity. But the influencers also wrote about their disagreement with such reactions and about finding a way to ignore or even challenge them: (“I will walk around in short shorts and explore my body!”). One person says that now, having accepted their disability, they feel more attractive than ever before.

A small proportion of the posts (1 in 10) had a motivational character, i.e. they show the persons' achievements, successes, fulfilled dreams, and plans. This may evoke one of the dominant ways in which disabled people are portrayed in the traditional media – the *supercrip* model, showing them as achieving success 'despite' their disability. However, as Sarah Hill (2017) suggests, there are two key differences: firstly, in this situation, disabled people themselves are the authors and creators of their image, and, secondly, the genre and medium contexts should be considered – social media abound in motivational content, so it is not surprising that disabled people want to fit into this narrative.

Hashtags are an important element of published content – influencers try to reach a wider audience through their use, so their selection is significant (Gumkowska, Czarkowska, 2017). All authors of the studied contents used hashtags; most often, they matched the topic of the post (e.g. if the post was about holidays, there were hashtags such as: *#natura* [nature], *#urlop* [holiday], *#summer*, *#lato* [summer]). Almost all the analyzed influencers (9 out of 10) used disability-related hashtags – regardless of the topic or only when the post was related to disability. These included hashtags referring to disability in general (e.g. *#niepełnosprawność* [disability] or its equivalent written without diacritics: *#niepełnosprawnosć*, *#osobazniepełnosprawnościami*, *#osobyzniepełnosprawnościami* or the abbreviation *#ozn*), as well as hashtags suggesting the type of disability (e.g. *#wózekinwalidzki* [wheelchair], *#downsyndrom*), the gender of the author of the post (*#dziewczynanawózku* [wheelchairgirl], *#kobietanawózku* [wheelchairwoman]) or the social role they perform (*#niepełnosprawnamama* [disabledmum]). There were also hashtags in English to reach an English-speaking audience (e.g. *#disability*, *#wheelchair*, *#wheelchairlife*, *#wheelchairgirl*). Some of these referred to the hobbies or interests of the profile authors (e.g. *#wheelchairmodel*, *#wheelchairtravel*). Using disability-related hashtags may be evidence of self-identification and a desire to belong to the Instagram community of disabled people.

Every published post included some visual content – a photo (sometimes a photo carousel¹⁰), graphics, or a short video. The selection of visual content on Instagram is very important – the photo is the first thing the audience notice, and based on that, they often decide whether to read a post or not. The vast majority of the analyzed photos showed the creators of the profiles – approximately one-third of the photos were selfies. The people shown in the photos often look directly at the camera, thus establishing a sense of eye contact with the audience and strengthening the feeling of authenticity and trustworthiness. A selfie showing only the upper body can serve as a tool to hide disability (e.g. using a wheelchair), but in half of the analyzed cases, disability was easily visible in the published

10 In the analyzed carousels, the first photo was analyzed as the most representative.

photos. Sometimes, the photo focused on the person, but a detail (e.g. a wheelchair) was visible in the background to 'remind' the viewers about the disability, or the use of a hashtag or the post's content suggested that it was a disabled person. While a selfie might be a tool enabling disabled people to hide their disability, the reason for that might not be just the attempt to create a new, abled-body self, but a desire to concentrate the viewers' attention on assets other than the disability (Powierska, 2018).

The analyzed photos also showed everyday life (car journeys, holidays, singing popular songs), the authors' hobbies (drawing, performing with a band, sports, a trip to the mountains), social activities (participation in various events). There were also some taboo-breaking photos – showing a disabled person in bed with a partner, posing in lingerie in a way intended to show physical attractiveness, posing with a bottle of alcohol.

The vast majority of published images were linked to the content of the post, often reinforcing or complementing the message. In some cases, it was the other way around – it was the photo that was the central element of the content, and the captions and hashtags served as stage directions suggesting how the picture should be interpreted (Tembeck, 2016). In other cases, it was common for a selfie/portrait photo to accompany other content – this may have been due to a lack of other, relevant photos, or a desire to increase the popularity of the posts – typically, posts containing photos with faces generate more engagement on Instagram. Some photos were edited graphically, but most followed the genre of snapshots of everyday life. Their naturalness and spontaneity accentuate authenticity and create illusive participation of the followers in the daily life of the influencers, strengthening the influencer-follower relationship.

Instastories are another important part of the analyzed narratives. They were regularly published by all the analyzed accounts. The stories were classified according to their main topics into one of 7 categories: daily life, disability, social activity/hobbies, professional activity, promotion (of one's own or someone else's products, posts, initiatives), interaction with followers, and the category 'other'. Almost half (43%) of the stories were about daily life – daytime activities, family, shopping, holidays, cooking, etc. This is a common practice of social media content-creators – by showing their imperfections, they build a message that is considered authentic and sincere (Jaskot, 2020). A quarter (26%) of the accounts can be categorized as "other" – e.g. sharing content from other profiles, showing what kind of music a person was currently listening to (e.g. through screenshots showing album art or song names), current news¹¹, sharing selfies, encouraging regular check-ups. Some (15%) of the stories contained contents promoting products, services, events, contents from other online creators, but also their own content or services. Some of the stories promoting products (e.g. cosmetics, clothes) or services (e.g. diet catering, photography) are the so-called *paid collaborations*, which are an additional source of income for the disabled content creators and are also proof that they are recognized as influencers, i.e. people who influence others – also in consumer decisions. There were also stories falling

¹¹ The 'other' category is so large, because one of the authors provided numerous daily reports dedicated to current news from the country and the world.

into the category 'social activity' (6%), e.g. going to a concert, meeting friends, taking part in a photo shoot, performing in a folk band and 'interaction with followers' (6%), e.g. asking questions, creating surveys, Q&A sessions, asking for advice. Only 4% of the stories addressed disability issues directly and almost no stories concerned professional activity (1%), although 7 out of 10 respondents worked.

An analysis of the stories published by the analyzed profiles shows that they are treated mainly as a kind of electronic diary – a record of everyday life, undertaken activities, and interactions with others. Such an approach is also aimed at building a community around the profile-creators by strengthening the feeling of participation in their lives. It can also be an excellent opportunity to increase the visibility of disabled people and show that they live their lives just like their non-disabled followers – do the shopping, raise children, have pets, watch TV, and listen to music.

Conclusion

The active presence of disabled people in social media is undoubtedly an opportunity to bring their voice and perspective to public awareness. The authors of online contents have the chance to manage their image, empower themselves, and actively try to change social reality. On the other hand, the character of social media and its commercialization make this a difficult mission and require a lot of commitment (Thoreau, 2006). Social media users who raise difficult or controversial issues, or who simply look atypical, often face online hate in the form of unfavorable or hateful comments or even actions in the real world – one of the analyzed disabled influencers showed in one of the stories the content of a parcel she had received from one of the haters. Disabled people, who often experience discrimination in real life, may find this type of online behavior particularly difficult to deal with.

The analysis presented in this paper shows that disabled influencers create their image effectively and actively. However, they do so in different ways – from openly stating that they want to change the situation of disabled people and trying to raise public awareness by e.g. publishing educational content to presenting their everyday life and normalizing disability as a life condition rather than a social stigma. The contents they publish are actually not very different from the contents posted by non-disabled Instagram users. Disability is present in their lives, it is not hidden or ignored; instead, it provides a context to certain events or topics covered. The analyzed narratives are likely to contribute to raising the awareness of the presence of disabled people in society and to the normalization of their various problems, but also of their everyday lives, often quite ordinary and similar to the lives of their non-disabled followers. According to the presented analysis, the image of disabled people that emerges from their Instagram narratives disrupts the 'victim–supercrip' dichotomy present in the Polish media (Struck-Peregończyk, Kurek-Ochmańska, 2018; Struck-Peregończyk, Leonowicz-Bukała, 2018), adding the perspectives absent in the mainstream media. Hopefully, thousands of people following these profiles will have a better understanding of the situation of disabled people in Poland and will retain a different portrayal than the one dominating the mainstream media.

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Cytowanie

Monika Struck-Peregończyk, Iwona Leonowicz-Bukała (2023), *Changing the Narrative: Self-Representations of Disabled People in Social Media*, „Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej”, t. XIX, nr 3, s. 62–79. <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8069.19.3.04>

Zmiana narracji – kształtowanie własnego wizerunku w mediach społecznościowych przez osoby z niepełnosprawnościami

Abstrakt: Problem nieadekwatnych reprezentacji medialnych osób z niepełnosprawnościami zmieniają w ostatnich latach media społecznościowe. Dzięki nim osoby te mają szansę na uzyskanie – przynajmniej częściowej – kontroli nad swoim wizerunkiem w przestrzeni publicznej, a tym samym na wpływanie na zmianę postrzegania przez osoby pełnosprawne. Celem artykułu jest omówienie wniosków z badania na temat wykorzystania mediów społecznościowych do kształtowania swojego wizerunku przez osoby z niepełnosprawnościami oraz wskazanie, czym różni się on od tego obecnego w mediach tradycyjnych. W badaniu zastosowano jakościową analizę zawartości najpopularniejszych profili prowadzonych przez osoby z niepełnosprawnościami w serwisie Instagram, jednocześnie poruszających kwestie związane z tematyką niepełnosprawności. Przeprowadzona analiza pokazuje, że osoby z niepełnosprawnościami prowadzące profile na Instagramie skutecznie i aktywnie kreują swój wizerunek, a obraz, który wyłania się z ich narracji, różni się znacznie od dominujących sposobów przedstawiania osób z niepełnosprawnościami w masowych mediach, tj. „ofiary” i „superkaleki”.

Słowa kluczowe: media społecznościowe, Instagram, osoby z niepełnosprawnościami, wizerunek