

DISABILITY AND DIGITAL MEDIA: A MARXIST CRITICISM OF COMMODIFICATION IN DIGITAL MEDIA CAPITALISM

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Abstract:

This study analyzes the commodification of disability in digital capitalism through Tokopedia, Alfamart, and Rexona campaigns on the YouTube platform. This study aims to identify how digital media presents disability issues in capitalist narratives, how the commodification of disability life in the context of digital media reflects the principles of capitalism, and what impacts this commodification has on public awareness and the structural struggles of people with disabilities. Using the Marxist commodification theory, this study shows that narratives of inspiration and inclusion are often used to attract public attention and associate brands with positive emotions. At the same time, structural needs such as accessibility and systemic equality are ignored. The results of this study reveal that although these campaigns raise public awareness of disability issues, their focus tends to be on individual achievements rather than systemic challenges. In addition, this commodification risks reducing people with disabilities to symbolic tools for the company's commercial purposes. This study concludes that although campaigns like these have the potential to change public perceptions, their contribution to structural empowerment is still limited. This study is significant in opening up further discussions about digital capitalism, social representation, and the importance of a more sustainable approach to empowering people with disabilities.

Keywords: Digital Capitalism, Commodification of Disability, Youtube, Representation, Marxism

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INTRODUCTION

Digital media has become a dominant space for the dissemination of social, political, and economic discourses, including issues related to disability. In the context of global capitalism, narratives about disability are often produced and controlled by dominant structures that focus on profit. Through various forms of representation—news, advertising, and social media campaigns—the lives of people with disabilities are often commodified, making them marketing tools or means to enhance the image of certain brands (Goggin & Newell, 2003). This raises a critical question: Do these representations actually contribute to the empowerment of people with disabilities or simply reinforce the exploitative structures of capitalism?

Inspiration porn, a term popularized by Stella Young, describes how individuals with disabilities are often portrayed in narratives that focus on their struggles rather than the systems that create those challenges. For example, Nike's 2018 Do It campaign featured Paralympic athletes in a narrative that emphasized personal strengths but ignored broader structural issues of accessibility. The campaign was successful in increasing Nike's brand value but did little to actually empower people with disabilities (Nike, 2018).

Another example is the #SeeTheAbility campaign initiated by several large companies. Although it appears to support people with disabilities, this campaign is often used to improve the company's image (corporate branding) rather than providing concrete impacts. A study by Ellis (Ellis & Kent, 2010) shows that most of these campaigns do not directly involve the disabled community in their planning or implementation, making them mere marketing tools.

According to Marx, capitalism is a system oriented towards capital accumulation, where human value is often reduced to a means of production or an object of consumption (Magnis Suseno, 1999). In the context of disability, this approach is reflected through media narratives that focus on "inspiring" or

"motivating" the majority audience but often ignore the structural needs of people with disabilities themselves. A concrete example can be seen in fundraising campaigns that use images of people with disabilities to garner sympathy without providing long-term solutions to the systemic problems they face.

Goggin & Newell's (2003) research revealed that mainstream media tends to be controlled by dominant economic actors who are profit-oriented. In the case of disability issues, narratives are often directed to exploit the emotions of non-disabled audiences, such as sympathy or admiration, which are then capitalized for commercial purposes.

A survey conducted by the National Disability Rights Network (2019) showed that only a small number of individuals with disabilities are directly involved in the media production process, either as content creators or decision-makers. This creates a narrative that tends to be biased and does not represent the real experiences of the disability community (NDRN.org, 2023).

Ellis and Kent's (2010) research revealed that media often reproduces stereotypes that are detrimental to people with disabilities, such as the "hero" or "burden" narrative. However, this research has not specifically explored the dynamics of commodification of disabled lives in the context of digital media using a Marxist approach. This gap is important to fill, especially since digital media is now the main tool of capitalism in creating cultural hegemony.

Several previous studies have explored the representation of disability in the media: Ellis & Kent (2010) discuss disability stereotypes in traditional and digital media but do not highlight the commodification aspect in the context of capitalism. Campbell et al. (2008) critiques a phenomenon called ableism, an ideology that discriminates against people with disabilities. However, this study focuses more on normative discourse than on political-economic analysis. Fuchs (2014) explores the relationship between digital capitalism and labor but does not specifically examine how disability narratives are influenced by digital capitalism.

This commodification theory shows the ideological values constructed by capitalists, including in the mass media (Fraser, 2024). One of the capitalist paradigms in the mass media is always prioritizing profit in projecting its spotlight objects. Objects highlighted by the media are used solely for market profit.

This research has theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of media and disability studies by integrating Marxist philosophy. In this analysis, Marxist commodification theory critiques how digital media represents and exploits the lives of people with disabilities. Practically, it provides insights for policymakers, activists, and media companies to create more inclusive and empowering narratives.

This study offers a new perspective by combining digital content analysis of disability representations in social media and advertising with a Marxist philosophical approach to commodification. With this approach, the study not only evaluates how media shapes narratives of disability life but also critiques how these narratives are used for economic gain while ignoring structural issues such as accessibility, economic inequality, and disability rights.

Studies on disability in digital media usually focus on analyzing representation using cultural theories, such as framing theory (Entman, 1993) or critical discourse theory (Van Dijk, 2008). However, research using a political economy philosophy approach, especially Marxist economic philosophy theory, is still very rare.

This approach highlights how capitalism creates power relations that influence the representation of disability. For example, Fuchs (2014), in his work on the political economy of social media, explains that digital capitalism not only modifies social relations but also transforms human experience into a marketable commodity. In the context of disability, this theory is relevant to analyzing how disabled lives are produced and consumed as economic tools.

Through Marxist philosophy, this study explores the mechanisms of commodification of disabled lives, which involve the exploitation of their emotional or symbolic value for profit. This approach

broadens the scope of disability studies by linking issues of representation to the dynamics of global capitalism.

This study aims to analyze how the lives of people with disabilities are represented in digital media in the context of digital capitalism. Specifically, it wants to identify how digital media represents disability issues in capitalist narratives, how the dynamics of the commodification of the lives of people with disabilities in the context of digital media reflect the principles of capitalism, and what the impact of this commodification is on public awareness and the structural struggles of people with disabilities.

This research is important to conduct because the development of digital media has had a significant impact on the way disability is perceived by society. On the one hand, digital media offers opportunities for the disability community to increase visibility and voice their experiences. However, on the other hand, digital platforms often use narratives about disability as a commodity to generate profit without providing direct benefits to the disabled community itself. This study aims to identify how digital media presents disability issues in capitalist narratives, how the commodification of disability life in the context of digital media reflects the principles of capitalism, and what the impacts of commodification are.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a critical content analysis method based on Marxist commodification theory. This approach was chosen to explore patterns of representation, commodification, and the impact of digital capitalism structures on narratives of disabled people's lives in digital media.

This study was designed as a descriptive-analytical study that explores the phenomenon of disability representation in digital media from the perspective of Marxist political economy philosophy theory (Moleong, 2010). The focus of this study is on identifying patterns of representation of the lives of people with disabilities in digital news, advertisements, and social media campaigns. Explaining the mechanisms of digital capitalism that utilize disability as a commodity. Criticizing the impact of this representation on the disabled community. The study was conducted through textual and visual analysis of relevant digital media content samples. To find the representation, commodification and impact of the structure of digital capitalism, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory is used, which divides signs into three: icons, indexes, and symbols.

Primary data in the form of news, advertisements, and social media campaigns containing narratives about disability. Samples were taken from popular media that are often used to spread social issues. This study focuses on digital advertisements related to disability on YouTube. The sample selection criteria are based on the popularity of the content, the relevance of the issue, and the relevance to the theme of disability. In addition to primary data, this study also utilizes secondary data in the form of literature studies from relevant literature, including previous research, reports from organizations of people with disabilities in digital form, and policies related to digital media and disability (Amruddin., 2022).

Researchers mapped literature related to Marxist theory, commodification, digital capitalism, and disability studies to build an analytical framework. Determination of data selection criteria and collection of digital media content samples. Digital content data was collected through social media monitoring for a certain period (seven days). During the data analysis stage, data was analyzed using the critical content analysis method. Researchers identified themes, patterns, and narratives in relevant media content (Wijayanto, 2020).

In the data analysis stage, this study uses a thematic approach to analyze data, with the following steps (Abussamad, 2021): first, Coding and organizing data based on main themes, such as commodification patterns, framing of disability narratives, and their impacts. Second, Critical analysis, tracing the relationship between data and Marxist theory to identify the mechanisms of digital capitalism. Third, interpretation, connecting the results of the analysis with broader issues, such as social hierarchies in digital capitalism and the challenges of the disabled community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study present directly from the results of data processing and data in the field that have been carried out, by including previous research so that research relationships can be known. The scientific findings in question are research data obtained while conducting research activities for the public. The results and discussion are based on the analysis and interpretation of theory and research results by including the results of data processing.

YouTube, as a digital media platform, is very popular with the public around the world. As reported by (Mortensen, 2024), It is recorded that in 2024, YouTube claims to have 2.49 billion users, a significant increase from 2 billion users in 2019. 47% of all global internet users access YouTube every month, showing the extraordinary progress that has been achieved with more than 2.49 billion monthly active users.

YouTube is a digital media that can represent social identity, spread information, and be used as a learning medium. Large companies can feel these benefits when advertising their products with a variety of images and representations. Therefore, many companies are competing to create images and representations using the YouTube platform.

Moreover, YouTube, as a digital media platform, has become one of the dominant spaces in shaping public perceptions about disability (Ellis & Kent, 2010). Videos featuring people with disabilities are often packaged with certain narratives, such as "inspirational stories" or "extraordinary courage," which attract the attention of the audience. This pattern reflects the mechanism of digital capitalism, where stories of disabled people's lives are often used as a tool to increase the popularity of company content and gain economic benefits through advertising or monetization. In this context, representations of disability often risk becoming commodification that highlights certain aspects of disabled people's identities while ignoring the complexity of their experiences as a whole.

However, YouTube also has the potential to be an empowering space for the disabled community. Some disabled content creators use the platform to advocate for their rights, challenge stereotypes, and voice authentic experiences. This type of content provides an alternative to mainstream narratives that are often homogenous and capitalistic. However, challenges remain, including platform algorithms that prioritize viral or emotional content, which can reinforce certain stereotypes over supporting diverse narratives. This representation demonstrates the paradox of empowerment and exploitation, reflecting the dynamics of digital capitalism more broadly.



Figure 1. Samples Content

One pattern that often appears in capitalist media is inspiration porn or inspirational narratives. In the context of digital capitalism, the lives of people with disabilities are often represented through stories that highlight personal struggles or extraordinary successes. In the Alfamart Youtube video

above, Desti, as a person with disabilities, has succeeded in achieving sporting achievements in the fields of shot put and discus throw, packaged with emotional music and sensational narratives such as "disabled friends are an inspiration to us all" or "limitations do not limit success." This pattern aims to attract the audience that Alfamart supports people with disabilities through advertising and sponsorship.

While the video provides a narrative that can increase the visibility of people with disabilities, it also has the effect of perpetuating stereotypes. People with disabilities are often reduced to symbols of moral strength or objects of sympathy, only valued when they are deemed inspiring to the wider community. In the context of capitalism, these stories are turned into profitable commodities for platforms and content creators without paying enough attention to more substantive structural issues such as accessibility, social rights, and economic equality. This pattern aligns with the Marxist notion of commodification, where human experience is used as a tool to generate economic value.

The video shows how capitalist media uses representations of disability to market products or services. Advertisements featuring disabled models are often used to demonstrate brand inclusivity, but their main purpose is to build a positive corporate image and encourage consumption. Alfamart promotes the value of inclusivity by highlighting stories of people with disabilities whom their company has helped. This reinforces the capitalist structure where people with disabilities are not only consumers but also marketing tools to maximize corporate profits.

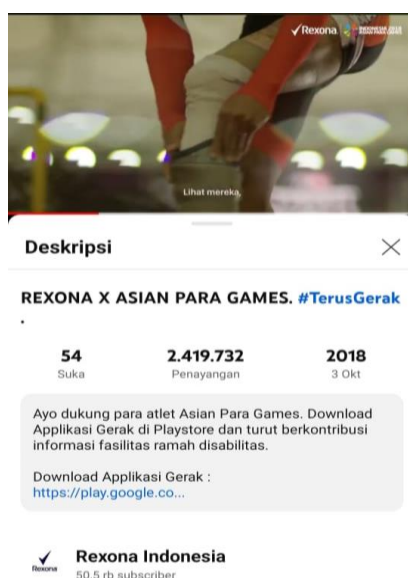


Figure 2. Samples Content Sponsor

The commodification of Disabled Lives in Digital Capitalism. This video shows how narratives of the lives of people with disabilities, especially Asian Games athletes, are used as a tool to promote the company's products and services, in this case, Rexona. Campaigns that combine inclusion issues with promoting products like this reflect a pattern of commodification where the identities and experiences of people with disabilities are turned into marketing tools to enhance brand image.

With over 2.4 million video views, the campaign not only created awareness about the Asian Games but also provided significant benefits to Rexona in terms of digital reach and potential revenue. However, this aspect of representation is biased. Such narratives often only feature the heroic or inspiring lives of people with disabilities. In contrast, the structural challenges faced by people with disabilities, such as social discrimination or accessibility, are not given primary focus. As a result, this representation can be seen as an exploitative strategy that aims to capitalize on audience emotions for commercial gain.

From the perspective of the Marxist idea of commodification, this video shows how digital capitalism transforms human experience, in this case, the experience of disability, into an economically valuable commodity. Rather than being fully represented subjects, people with disabilities are reduced to marketing objects. This representation not only focuses attention on the individual but also shifts the discussion from structural issues, such as universal accessibility and policy change, to consumption and brand loyalty.



Figure 3. Content Sponsor

In this Tokopedia Care video, people with disabilities are represented in the context of kindness and inspiration, showing how individuals with disabilities struggle to overcome their limitations. This narrative is in line with digital capitalism, which often uses personal stories to build the image of a caring and inclusive company. Tokopedia packages this message of solidarity as part of the celebration of International Disability Day, utilizing social momentum to strengthen the emotional connection between brands and consumers.

However, if analyzed more deeply, this video is not only a tool to raise public awareness about disability but also an attempt at commodification. The lives of people with disabilities are presented in a visual format and an attention-grabbing narrative, which aims to strengthen consumers' emotional connection with the brand. This campaign effectively depicts Tokopedia's goodness but actually diverts attention from the structural issues faced by people with disabilities, such as accessibility and systemic inequality, to an individualistic narrative that touches on emotions.

Digital capitalism allows companies to use stories involving social issues, including disability issues, as part of a marketing strategy to build a positive image. In this video, people with disabilities are presented as symbols of inspiration, but the narrative risks reducing them to mere marketing tools. By showing the lives of people with disabilities in the context of struggle and success, Tokopedia is not only promoting products or services but also selling an image of itself as an entity that cares about equality and inclusion. Unfortunately, this commodification does not always have a direct impact on the empowerment of people with disabilities; policy changes or improvements in accessibility are often limited.

Impact of Commodification. The commodification of disabled lives in digital media, as seen in the Alfamart, Tokopedia, and Rexona campaigns above, has a complex impact on public awareness and the structural struggles of disabled people. From a public awareness perspective, the use of inspiring images of disabled people contributes to increasing the visibility of disability issues. Such campaign

videos can spark empathy and broaden public understanding of the challenges faced by the disabled community. However, narratives that focus on “overcoming limitations” are often individualistic, directing public attention to personal success stories rather than systemic challenges that require collective solutions. As a result, such narratives tend to obscure the need for broader structural and accessibility policy changes.

On the other hand, this commodification has the potential to strengthen structural inequality rather than create substantial change. Companies often use the narrative of disability as a branding tool to increase market profits.

Such as Rexona's campaign promoting TerusGerak, Tokopedia Care, and Alfability. The three companies are trying to build an impression of caring about inclusion, but their contribution to empowering people with disabilities directly is still questionable. In this context, people with disabilities are reduced to symbolic tools to support capitalist marketing strategies, while the need for systemic accessibility and sustainable economic empowerment tends to be ignored. Although this kind of commodification can raise public awareness on the surface, its impact on the structural struggles of people with disabilities is often limited and even counterproductive.

CONCLUSION

The commodification of disabled lives in digital capitalism, as reflected in the campaigns of Alfamart, Tokopedia, and Rexona, shows how the identities and experiences of disabled people are often reduced to inspirational narratives to support the company's image. While these campaigns can raise public awareness of disability issues, the focus on individual stories overcoming limitations diverts attention from systemic challenges such as accessibility, economic inequality, and social discrimination. This suggests that the awareness generated is superficial and not deep enough to drive policy or structural change.

This kind of commodification also emphasizes structural inequality, where people with disabilities are reduced to marketing tools without gaining significant benefits in terms of economic or social empowerment. The TerusGerak campaign from Rexona, Tokopedia Care, and Alfability serves as a branding strategy to increase consumer loyalty. However, their contribution to real solutions to the needs of the disabled community is often minimal. YouTube, as a digital platform, provides a space for the disabled community to voice authentic experiences and fight stereotypes. However, the challenge of algorithms that favor viral or emotional content remains an obstacle.

This research underscores the importance of understanding digital capitalism as a system that exploits social narratives for economic gain, often without significant impact on the groups it elevates. This suggests the need for regulation and corporate social responsibility to create structural change that supports the disability community.

This research is limited to analyzing campaign content on digital media, not exploring its impact on the lives of people with disabilities directly. This study also does not include the perspectives of people with disabilities who were involved in the campaign, which could provide deeper insights into their experiences.

Future research could examine the concrete impacts of this campaign on the lives of people with disabilities, including economic and social impacts. Further research could also explore how to optimize YouTube's digital platform to support disability empowerment more sustainably and be oriented toward inclusive structural policies.

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