



## THE RHETORIC OF DISABILITY ON INSTAGRAM A Post-Qualitative Photographic Analysis

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

*The advent of social media platforms such as Instagram has facilitated the emergence of a new wave of visually compelling images of disability created by the disabled community itself. These images challenge the traditional discourse on disability, offering a more radical and diverse perspective. This study employs a post-qualitative photographic analysis of 100 photographs from 54 Instagram profiles to define a novel rhetoric of disability. This is done with the aim of updating the rhetoric of disability proposed by Garland-Thomson (2001), but within the context of Web 3.0. The new classifications make reference to concepts such as emancipation, sexuality, happiness, supracapacity, rebellion and pride, with the objective of normalising the group and facilitating inclusion and equality.*

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## 1. Introduction

In 2001, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson published a chapter in which she presented her observations on the representation of disability in photography from its inception. The categories, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this introduction, revealed a stereotypical and paternalistic image of disability in many cases. This discourse has been maintained over time, although recent studies have found that there has been an improvement in terms of its representation (García-Borrego & González-Cortés, 2022). The objective of this paper is to analyse the current imaginary of photography on the web 3.0, specifically in the context of Instagram, which is a highly popular social media platform.

It is important to note that “prior to the advent of more contemporary forms of media, the only knowledge that many people had of disability came from films or photographs” (Sanz-Simón, 2022, p.2). The same author posits that this is no longer the case in the contemporary era, as inclusion policies, accessibility, globalisation, and other factors have made it possible for people with disabilities to be found in all walks of life, particularly on social networks. Despite the numerous risks associated with social networks, they have become a valuable resource for learning, advocating for rights, socialising, and expressing emotions (Parra-Gómez et al., 2024). As Martín-García and Martínez-Solana (2019) have observed in other social movements, these platforms offer a powerful tool for social transformation and for challenging the dominant discourse.

The primary distinction between the photography analysed by Garland-Thomson and that which is prevalent on social networks is that the latter is created and/or prepared by people with disabilities. There is no external representation or composition of the image; rather, the subjects themselves choose how to appear and what to show of their lives from their own privacy. This is a crucial point, since in order for the collective to be able to approach the group and for it to leave its testimony (unlike in those remote and not so remote times), the collective must be allowed to participate and take control (Morris, 1991).

For these reasons, the objective of this paper is to define a new rhetoric of disability on Instagram, establishing what the group shows and how it shows it. This is achieved through the use of a post-qualitative methodology based on a photographic analysis, which will be discussed in the corresponding section. As this is a relatively recent phenomenon, there are no precedents of research focused on the analysis of the image of disability on social networks. Therefore, the interest of this work lies in beginning to shed light on this event in digital culture.

The following subsections, which complete the introduction, present a synthesis of Garland-Thomson's (2001) rhetoric of disability and, secondly, discuss the phenomenon of influencers and their potential to change the social imaginary. The article is then divided into four further sections. The first section outlines the methodology, detailing the procedure carried out. The second section describes the fieldwork and data analysis, outlining the phases of the study and the methods used to analyse the data. The third section presents the results and a joint discussion, in which the results are exemplified post-qualitatively and contrasted with the theory. The final section offers conclusions, expressing the main reflections of the study.

### 1.1. *The Rhetoric of Disability in Photography*

As previously stated, Garland-Thomson (2001) conducted a comprehensive analysis of disability photography from the nineteenth century onwards, identifying four distinct discourse categories: the marvellous, the sentimental, the exotic and the realistic. Each of these categories will be briefly explained below.

Firstly, wonder is the oldest of the four categories. This is the look of fear towards wonders and monsters, which has been present since ancient times. In all four classifications, there is a position of the gazer, and in this case, his posture is one of looking up in amazement at the difference. The effect of this encounter can be either wonder or demonisation. Currently, in social networks, the collective is critical of the presence of stereotypes that originate from this wonder, such as supercrip and inspiration porn (Parra-Gómez et al., In 2024, images were created that showed people with disabilities doing things that defied norms, such as climbing a mountain in a wheelchair. This was the image that Garland shared to represent the rhetoric. The images were created to dazzle or inspire society, with no consideration of equality or respect for the people with disabilities.

The second rhetoric is that of the sentimental. This is the next oldest, related to medieval times, when the beginnings of pity towards the disabled and its consequent charity could be situated. In this classification, the individual who is looked down upon, the audience, occupies a position of advantage and superiority. Similarly, the individuals depicted are presented as victims. This rhetoric is thus related to paternalism and infantilisation of the disabled person, placing hope in the ability of the non-disabled society to rescue and help. In essence, Garland (2001) incorporated the epithet "cute", a Victorian convention that elicited a sentiment of pity in the audience. The individual is presented in a manner that encourages pity, despite their physical characteristics being perceived as charming in an unequal manner. Those with dwarfism are frequently represented within this rhetorical framework.

Thirdly, there is the typology of the exotic. The novelty of this rhetoric is that the audience is able to adopt a position of either looking down or up, but always from a considerable distance away from the subject. This creates a spatial hierarchy which, in addition, depicts the person as an "alien, often sensationalised, eroticised, or entertaining in their difference" (Garland-Thomson, 2001, p. 343). The author presents an ethnographic photograph from the nineteenth century, entitled "The Spotted Boys," which depicts three young men with vitiligo and elicits a positive response from the public.

The fourth and final rhetoric is that of the realist. While remaining a construct, a sought-after representation, it diminishes distance and difference by establishing a relationship of contiguity between the audience and the person in the image. Although disability is always visible, it is normalised. Once more, Garland (2001) introduces a sub-label, the ordinary, which emerged with the social movement of people with disabilities in the 1990s in the United States. This phenomenon is evident in both advertising and official portraits, which render the image of the collective as part of the ordinary world. One illustrative example is the portrait of Judy Heumann, who served as Under Secretary of Education during the Clinton administration (1993-2001). This image portrays the woman as imbued with dignity and authority, and her wheelchair is depicted as just one element that characterises her.

In conclusion, the digital photographs that populate social networks are inspired by the rhetoric of realism, which presents an objective and ordinary image of disability in everyday life. As previously stated, the distinction between the photographs discussed by Garland and those on Instagram is that the subjects themselves typically determine what and how they share their lives. There is no staging or external influence on the photography. Nevertheless, within the context of digital realism, it is pertinent to consider the potential emergence of alternative rhetorics that challenge past and present prejudices and stereotypes.

## ***1.2. The Influencer Phenomenon and its Potential to Change the Social Imaginary of Disability***

In addition to the depiction of disability in photography, there is a long list of prejudices towards disability. One such prejudice is the Theory of personal tragedy (Oliver, 1990), which pathologises disability as a limiting problem, defective, inferior, guilty and unable to live a full and joyful life. Morris (1991) further elaborated on this aspect and listed up to 38 assumptions that society has about people with disabilities. These include assumptions about their ugliness, that their lives are a burden to themselves and to those around them, that they envy "normal" lives, that they never give up looking for a cure, that they are not worthy of desire, that they have no possibility of a sex life, and so on. Many of these assumptions continue to be supported by more recent work (Arnau-Ripollés, 2019; García-Cantero, 2021; García-Santesmases, 2016; Kafai, 2021; Senent-Ramos, 2017).

For these reasons, social networks represent an optimal setting for transforming this social imaginary in relation to disability, as evidenced by the aforementioned benefits. In recent decades, especially with the advent of Instagram in 2010, we inhabit a world of images (Huerta, 2021). While platforms such as Instagram continue to perpetuate hegemonic values through their imagery, they also serve as a platform for alternative representations and the voices of influencers who challenge dominant narratives, make visible marginalised experiences, and offer a counter-hegemonic discourse (Martín-García & Martínez-Solana, 2019).

The term "influencer" has its origins in the theory of influence developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld in 1955. In this theory, the concept of personal influence was already being considered as a key factor in the decision-making process when purchasing a product, for example. However, the current

phenomenon of influencers can be traced back to 2009 with the advent of the fashion blogging movement (Martín-García & Martínez-Solana, 2019), which is considered the direct predecessor. This has been further shaped since 2010 with the launch of Instagram (Hu et al., 2014). Consequently, it can be defined as a "new media figure especially linked to the world of fashion and Instagram" (Martín-García & Martínez-Solana, 2019, p. 60), with the capacity to generate references and educate in values and rights, in addition to selling and promoting.

The benefits produced by the use of social networks are beneficial for society in general, and even more so for people with disabilities. In numerous instances, the media facilitate communication and other interactions that might otherwise be hindered by a disability, thereby eliminating the very barriers they were designed to overcome. Furthermore, social networks facilitate social interaction, as they provide convenient access to individuals from diverse geographical locations and enable virtual communication, which can mitigate initial embarrassment and self-consciousness. Similarly, the creation of information networks among peers enables people with disabilities to encourage and inspire each other to undertake actions that they previously felt incapable of due to deeply rooted prejudices (Parra-Gómez, 2023).

An illustrative example of inspiration within the collective, and one who could be considered a disability influencer, is Cisco Garve, a Paralympic tennis player who shares on Instagram his day-to-day life in the different facets of his life. As he recounts in his book, following an injury in around 2018, he began using social networks and discovered that a boy had started playing tennis as a result of watching him. Consequently, he is cognizant that through social networks he can alter societal perceptions of disability, facilitating its normalization and also assisting other individuals in analogous circumstances (García-Vena, 2020).

In summary, our objective was to identify influencers who are more focused on challenging societal norms than on selling products. Given the potential of Instagram to promote this, we investigated the profiles of accounts similar to Cisco's to ascertain the disability rhetoric underlying this content. The following section provides further detail on this information from a procedural perspective.

## 2. Methodology

In order to respond to the stated objective, which has been previously outlined as the definition of a new rhetoric of disability on Instagram, it is proposed that a new classification system be established. This classification system should be based on the realistic one proposed by Garland-Thomson (2001) and should be informed by a descriptive and post-qualitative research methodology. This is achieved through a photographic analysis based on the fusion of the theories of Roland Barthes (1999) and Javier Marzal-Felici (2007). This approach involves seeing the person conducting the research as just another instrument of collection. It also attends to a denotative and a connotative level of analysis. This is achieved by way of a search and balance of the studium (that which is perceived from knowledge and reflection) and the punctum (that which is discovered from personal experience) of each image.

A study was therefore conducted on 100 images sourced from 54 Instagram profiles of individuals with disabilities. The search for participants was both strategic and of convenience (Ballestín- González & Fàbregues- Feijoó, 2018), due to its concreteness. Similarly, the selection of photographs aimed to provide a representative sample of each profile, given that by following each account for an extended period and understanding their typical content, it was possible to anticipate the specific contributions that could be made. Consequently, up to four photographs were taken of some profiles, while others were photographed on a single occasion. This was dependent on the versatility of the profile in question, or the richness of their account, should one wish to view it. The remainder of the procedure is outlined in the subsequent section.

## 3. Fieldwork and Data Analysis

In order to provide a detailed account of the fieldwork methodology, it is necessary to describe the different phases that were undertaken. These can be broadly categorised as follows:

- Prior planning and observation. As part of a doctoral thesis, the present work commenced with a preparatory phase during which the objective was defined, the data collection instrument and the types of data analysis were established. Furthermore, the selection of

photographs necessitated a preliminary phase of research and observation to enable the capture and selection of the various examples within each profile.

- The creation of the image corpus. A total of 100 images were captured and recorded, comprising 97 photographs, two videos and one drawing sourced from 54 Instagram accounts. The aforementioned strategic search aimed to ensure equal representation by gender and age, as well as by content type.
- The images were then loaded into the NVIVO platform and analysed in accordance with the principles set out by Barthes (1999) and Marzal-Felici (2007). As previously stated, the photographs were analysed at both the denotative and connotative levels. The analysis was conducted in NVIVO 14, as it was determined that the use of a hardware solution would be necessary to facilitate the analysis of images, allowing for the comfortable handling of the substantial volume of information.
- The establishment of themes, categories, or rhetorical devices that are common to the different photographs is also a necessary step in this process. The various analyses conducted in NVIVO yielded a number of themes that were subsequently synthesised and merged based on their shared affinities.
- The final report was drafted following a process of reflection and drafting. Following the synthesis of the reflection, the final report was drafted.

With regard to the analysis of the information, following the photographic analysis, it was decided to adopt a theoretical approach (without a specific theoretical framework) to "thinking with theory" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). The concept of "thinking with theory" implies a process of engagement with the surrounding environment of the individual undertaking the research. This may include the influence of external stimuli such as social media posts, news articles, or other forms of media consumption. These elements can potentially shape the research process, contributing to the formation of the research findings. This post-qualitative approach comprises three essential actions: (1) the mixing of theory and data from the information obtained; (2) the establishment of how the two are constituted or made; and (3) the repeated review of the information to establish relationships and tensions between concepts and meanings (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Furthermore, this post-qualitative approach defends the chaos and interrelatedness of the data, as evidenced by the present work. The information is linked to the theory and to each other.

### **3.1. Ethical Considerations**

Indeed, as with any research involving human subjects, the ethical implications of this study were given significant consideration. Consequently, the participants were informed of the research process, the processing of their data, and the subsequent informed consent form.

Likewise, from the role of the researcher, Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) invite engagement with data, which essentially involves two specific commitments: pragmatism and compassion. Pragmatism is concerned with the potential applications of data for humans and agential objects, with which research practices are oriented towards the future. In contrast, compassion refers to the capacity to empathise with the emotions and experiences of others. This implies that the researcher should treat the participants in a way that aligns with a feminist ethic of care, which entails balancing care for oneself and others through compassionate communication. In light of these considerations, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of three key elements: recognition (witnessing), connection (relating) and action (reacting) with the individuals who participate.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The results of this work are presented in conjunction with the discussion, with the information being subjected to a theory-driven analysis. This approach allows for the information to be presented and contrasted with the theory. Consequently, following an investigation into the images and the development of categories, six rhetorics of disability were identified: emancipation, sexuality, happiness, supracapacity, rebelliousness and pride. The following section provides a definition of each of these categories, accompanied by illustrative examples.



#### 4.1. Emancipation

The initial rhetorical stance is that of emancipation. These publications depict individuals with disabilities in situations of independence within their daily lives. This process of visibility attempts to challenge the prevailing stereotype of dependence by demonstrating that individuals with disabilities are capable of leading autonomous lives, residing in their own homes, pursuing employment, travelling, and engaging in other activities. A particularly illustrative example can be found in the profile of @saragranadaaguilera (Figure 1), which was published on the day she was presented with the keys to her own apartment. To gain further insight into the nuances of each rhetoric, a detailed examination of the two levels of analysis applied to each image is essential.

Figure 1. Example of emancipation.



Source: @saragranadaaguilera, 2022, Instagram.

The image depicts a young blonde girl with corrective lenses seated in an adapted chair. The subject is attired in jeans, a red sweatshirt, and maroon military-style boots. Behind the subject, we observe a door leading to a residential property, a switch, and a small telephone on a white wall, which reflects the considerable amount of light that is entering the room. The girl's gaze is directed towards the camera, accompanied by the display of a set of keys in her left hand. This gesture implies that she has access to the house and, therefore, that it is her own.

The element that runs through us, as Barthes (1999) would say, is the presence of the keys. The keys symbolise emancipation, freedom and success. They not only embody the liberation itself, but also the entire path that has led her there. Those who are dependent may perceive autonomy as an unattainable goal. It is therefore of great importance to exhibit situations in which, after the alignment of different aspects, such as economic or social, the news serves to break stereotypes and to motivate other people to see that certain dreams are achievable. One of the most pervasive prejudices is the belief that individuals with disabilities are a burden, as evidenced by the work of Morris (1991) and Senent-Ramos (2017). Fortunately, publications such as Sara's demonstrate the opposite and as previously mentioned, normalise the image of emancipated disability. It is evident that not all aspects of an individual's experience are limited by their own efforts. In many cases, the factors that require alignment are external to the individual.

Similarly, as the examples illustrate, the depicted scenarios do not represent anything exceptional. They also challenge the conventions of supercrip and inspiration porn (Parra-Gómez et al., 2024), as they do not attempt to portray the individuals in question as extraordinary beings worthy of awe. Instead, they seek to portray them as ordinary individuals engaged in everyday activities.

#### 4.2. Sexuality

The next typology is that of sexuality. In the face of prejudices that people with disabilities are not and cannot be sexually active, or desired, or have partners who do not have disabilities, it is necessary to provide content that demonstrates that none of these ideas are universal. Consequently, within this discourse, publications that contain sexual and sensual content are included, which challenge these

ideas. The example provided is from the account @irinarivas\_98 (Figure 2), in which the young woman is depicted lying on a bed with a white bedspread, wearing a black transparent lingerie set as part of a sweepstakes for her followers.

**Figure 2.** Example of sexuality.



Source: @irinarivas\_98, 2021, Instagram.

Also present on the bed are the raffle objects, which include lingerie, a vibrator and a perfume. The subject's demeanour is suggestive of a sensual disposition, as evidenced by her body language and the posture of her legs. However, her gesture appears to be directed towards the raffle objects as if she were posing in a manner that is somewhat incongruous with the context, suggesting a degree of interest in the objects. This is a performance that is highly sought after, as she is accustomed to in her other publications. The young woman is a model who enjoys posing in a suggestive manner.

The publication's primary objective is to challenge the taboo surrounding the intersection of sex and disability. The act of displaying oneself openly, with a sense of desirability and entitlement, serves to vindicate the positive sexuality rights that determine that it is legitimate for everyone to feel pleasure, sexual satisfaction and have the right to eroticism (Arnau-Ripollés, 2019). Furthermore, profiles such as the one in the image or @shaneburcaw, among others that are becoming increasingly prevalent, are beginning to normalise courtships between people with disabilities and people without disabilities. It is also important to raise awareness that people with disabilities are not asexual and do not only have relationships with each other.

In this example, the *punctum* is located in the girl's body, not only because if we were unaware of her disability, it would go unnoticed, but also because in addition to sex, she challenges another stereotype that has been previously discussed: that of ugliness (Morris, 1991). It is a fallacy to assume that disability and beauty are mutually exclusive. Historically, the characteristics of disabled individuals have been largely concealed, and disabled individuals have frequently perceived themselves as outsiders. Nevertheless, the act of displaying and making their bodies visible creates new canons, ones in which diversity can be perceived as beautiful and in which they themselves feel like ordinary, visible people.

### 4.3. Happiness

The rhetoric of happiness is the third most frequently occurring theme in these accounts. These publications depict individuals with disabilities experiencing moments of joy. These images are not the result of staged scenarios; rather, they are derived from the everyday experiences of individuals with disabilities. As with the concept of emancipation, they reveal aspects of life that are typically overlooked, thereby providing a sense of normalcy and inclusion for those with disabilities. This is exemplified by the profile of @silleroporelmondo (Figure 3).

The image depicts a couple, facing each other, smiling while standing in front of the Statue of Liberty in New York. The image was captured during the daytime, as indicated by the light, and it is evident that it was taken during the summer months, as the woman is wearing braces. Both individuals are observed to be wearing prescription glasses and have brown hair. The sky, which is visible in the background of the photograph, appears to have been created by the blurring of the clouds. Despite the muted colours, the image behind the couple is visually appealing.

Figure 3. Example of happiness.



Source: @silleroporelundo, 2020, Instagram.

The *punctum* of the photograph is the restlessness that motivates the couple to travel frequently, having already achieved a certain degree of notoriety. They do not allow any limitations to impede this way of life, which is reflected in their profile. A style that they share with the world is exemplified by a world map, which narrates their travelling story. The destination of this journey, New York, may appear to be an ambitious one. There are cities of this scale that are not at all accessible, and it is a challenge to travel to them with a wheelchair. However, this young man is defying these limitations. The Statue of Liberty, a symbol with historical significance, prompts us to infer the protagonist's concerns beyond the immediate context. Despite his dependence, he is able to live a life that is both normalised and liberated. He is sufficiently autonomous to engage in such experiences, which aligns with the rhetoric of emancipation.

However, the principal focus of this couple's publications is to challenge the Theory of personal tragedy (Oliver, 1990). This man is not consumed by self-pity or dwelling on the perceived tragedy of his situation. Instead, he is engaged in activities that challenge the conventional perception of disability. He is not confined to the domestic sphere, but rather, he is present in public spaces, including airplanes and other transportation. His actions challenge the notion that disability is a source of sadness and instead, he embodies a sense of joy and exhilaration.

Finally, another departure from the established norms is evident in the composition of the couple, which comprises a person with a disability and a non-disabled individual. This combination, whether intentional or not, contributes to the normalization of disability. Furthermore, this profile represents a revaluation of care, as it normalises the fact that a person with reduced mobility can travel. At the same time, it demonstrates that, despite the care tasks they require, their life is just as valuable as that of any other person.

#### 4.4. Overcapacity

The fourth rhetoric is that of supracapacity, a term that is not widely known but which evokes the "exceptional ability, or above what is commonly considered standard, or normal" (García-Cantero, 2021, p. 18). This is the ability of a person with a disability to achieve something that compensates for their impairment. Two strikingly disparate examples are presented in an artistic manner. On the one hand, the profile @delospies\_alacabeza (Figure 4), with an image by photographer Alfonso Reyes Luna, depicts an everyday scene: a man typing on a computer keyboard with his toes.

The photograph, presented in black and white, depicts a wooden desk on which a black computer keyboard is visible, with two feet typing on it. The toes are elongated in order to reach the various keys. It is evident that the photograph's *punctum* is the feet, particularly the toes, which are enlarged and resemble the first toe, or hallux. This is evident due to the contraction of the toes, which initially gives the impression that the feet are not human hands.



Figure 4. Example of supracapacity in the feet.



Source: @delospies\_alacabeza, 2022, Instagram.

A cursory examination of the networks would suggest that the individual in question is engaged in typing, without the viewer realising that the situation is less frequent than it seems. The image plays with the interplay of light and shadow, yet the focus is on two elements: the feet and the keyboard. Prior to focusing on the flashing object, the eyes may naturally seek out a familiar reference point, such as the computer keyboard. As both the photographer and the protagonist himself urge, the photograph aims to show these feet in everyday places in order to challenge conventional perceptions and encourage a shift in perspective. Following an initial period of surprise, the audience comes to recognise that there is little distinction between the activities of people with and without disabilities.

From a terminological perspective, the disability of the young man depicted is located in his arms (due to the absence of his arms). However, this has not prevented him from demonstrating the capacity to write, as well as to perform a multitude of other actions, as evidenced by other photographs in the same collection. He has been able to cope with the necessity (or capacity, if you prefer) afforded to him by the resources at his disposal. This event, which is neither to be seen as pornographic nor as a cause for pity, is once again about normalising his routine and his appearance. The objective is to observe the boy not because of his physical limitations, but precisely because he is capable of performing a wide range of activities, despite the fact that he has no arms. The collection of photographs aims to challenge the viewer's perception of everyday situations, portraying the subjects as natural and elegant.

A second illustrative example is provided by the account @graciefish\_. The image depicts a long-haired blonde girl engaged in landscape painting with a brush held in her mouth. The subject is depicted in a studio setting, with an easel, various brushes, and other canvases visible in the background. Upon initial observation, the *studium* view reveals that the young woman with paraplegia is engaged in painting with her lips in a brightly lit room and a colourful landscape that conveys profound joy. However, from the *punctum*, in light of the girl's personal history, it is evident that her reinvention is a salient feature. Following her seventeenth birthday, when she fell ill, Grace underwent a rebirth and set herself new goals to achieve. The young woman's natural aptitude for artistry was further enhanced by her personal gift for painting, composing, and filmmaking.

In this instance, the substitution of the lips is evident. As previously demonstrated, the feet were capable of performing tasks that the hands were unable to accomplish. In this instance, the mouth of the young woman performs a function that neither arms nor hands are capable of. It would be challenging for any individual to create such compositions solely through the use of their mouth. Similarly, the depiction of the subject is once again naturalistic. The subject is not depicted as a heroine, but rather as a simple young woman engaged in a contemplative act, her demeanour characterized by composure and grace.

Figure 5. Example of supracapacity with the mouth.



Source: @graciefish\_, 2020, Instagram.

However, there is another aspect of Grace's work that is appealing and connects with another rhetorical tradition. This is the inspiration it provides, particularly in its bright, harmonious colours, which convey an optimism that is perceived in an analogous way in her spirit. Furthermore, the young woman herself asserts that her work is intended to promote inclusion. "Being different adds colour to the world," which is why her works, as well as her work in the foundation of the same name, work to promote values of diversity and respect among youth with disabilities in her community.

The substitution or supracapacity exhibited by both examples serves to demonstrate both realities, thereby challenging the prejudices that point to people with disabilities as useless and non-productive (Arnau-Ripollés, 2019). The proliferation of images in which individuals with disabilities, such as the girl in the first example, engage in creative pursuits, including filmmaking, art gallery exhibitions, and everyday activities, challenges the perception of disability as an isolated phenomenon and promotes the normalization of creativity and productivity in individuals regardless of their labels.

#### 4.5. Rebellion

The subsequent rhetorical strategy is that of rebellion. The content of this type of post could be described by other terms, but in essence, it involves non-conformity, re-appropriation and a desire to break the norm without offending anyone. The example, which was deliberately selected by the subject, is from the profile @courtneygabus (Figure 6).

The image in question is a photograph of a girl smoking. The subject of the photograph is a blonde girl with long hair, seated on a wooden bench in a grassy area. She is wearing a long-sleeved black T-shirt bearing the words "I'm not sorry". One of her arms is concealed beneath the wide T-shirt, while the other is holding a canteen of water. A smoking joint is placed against his lips.

Upon initial observation, the image is perceived as provocative, particularly due to the explicit content of the T-shirt and the presence of the joint. Without a detailed knowledge of the woman's story and message, it is easy to form prejudices such as those that the print itself attempts to challenge. However, the *punctum* lies in that very provocation, because with the right information, the call to attention is nothing more than a vindication of the right to define oneself and to leave evidence of who one is and that it is one's own decision as to what is best for oneself. In this instance, the accompanying text celebrates the day of therapeutic marijuana and asserts the right to use it without being subjected to judgement.

It is evident that there is a tendency for certain publications to portray individuals with disabilities in a manner that is perceived to be negative. This is exemplified by the depiction of people with disabilities partying and drinking alcohol. Such portrayals are often accompanied by a cry of outrage, as if the population in question is not entitled to engage in these activities. However, it is important to recognise that individuals with disabilities have the right to participate in these activities and to make decisions about their own lives. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that such portrayals serve to perpetuate negative stereotypes about individuals with disabilities and hinder their efforts towards social inclusion. Furthermore, the young woman is depicted taking a pain medication, thereby demonstrating that this is not an illicit leisure activity. It also appears that she is entitled to express her

views on the pain of others. Consequently, the young woman underscores the significance of not forming judgments based on outward appearances and of listening and understanding with empathy. As Morris (1991) posited, no individual can act on behalf of the collective, nor can they speak on behalf of other people. At the same time, and in contradiction to the aforementioned stereotypes, these publications challenge the misconception that all people with disabilities are inherently good, virtuous beings. They are individuals, just like everyone else, with both positive and negative traits.

Figure 6. Example of defiance.



Source: @courtneygabus, 2022, Instagram.

In essence, this rebelliousness strives to make individuals with disabilities visible in their daily lives, including their experiences, by eschewing the conventional and the sentimental. They embrace a realistic and intimate approach, avoiding the pitfalls of offensiveness and the pursuit of popularity.

#### 4.6. Pride

The final rhetoric is that of pride. In this context, it is important to recognise that this rhetoric is about the acceptance of disability and self-esteem. These publications present their subjects in a manner that is both realistic and self-assured, avoiding the creation or minimisation of the stigmas that characterise the individual. The nature of these images is highly diverse, encompassing the display of the body, as well as the portrayal of fraternal affection towards an individual with a facial difference. These two examples illustrate the versatility of the images in question. The objective is to challenge the Theory of personal tragedy (Oliver, 1990) and the concept of ugliness (Morris, 1991) by demonstrating that there is no sense of guilt or desire to alter one's appearance and that these individuals are deserving of love and acceptance.

The visual example is provided by the profile of @nh487 (Figure 7). The photograph depicts a young woman attired in hospital pyjamas, with the shirt tied in a knot to conceal her scars and the catheter she is carrying. The young woman is depicted holding a stick with a red heart in her hand, as the publication celebrates a different Valentine's Day, one of self-love.

The image does not elicit a neutral response from the audience, even at the level of *studium*. The fact that the woman is hospitalised and the scars on her abdomen do not soften the scene. It is evident that this is a sign of intimacy, as it is not typical to observe someone in such a personal situation. Nevertheless, this level of enunciation makes it evident that the young woman loves herself and asserts this despite the circumstances. Furthermore, her evident beauty, despite the presence of scars and links, as did the rhetoric of sexuality, with the theme of beauty and its opposition to the ugliness of disability (Morris, 1991).

The punctum, however, is the girl's own body. A young body that, nevertheless, can tell many stories. This is evidenced by the idea of leaving evidence (Kafai, 2021). Such tasks, which profile individuals like this young woman, encourage the creation of stories of disability to join the global movement. By

recounting her experiences, this young woman challenges conventional wisdom while also charting her own course, affirming her identity and self-worth.

The latter, in fact, results not only in pride, but also in "radical self-love", which, according to Kafai (2021), is "indeed our inherent natural state, but social, political, and economic systems of oppression have distanced us from that knowing" (p.36). Publications such as the one in the example, therefore, not only make this fact visible externally, but also make the collective itself understand that accepting and loving oneself is something natural to which they have the right.

Figure 7. Example of pride.



Source: @nh487, 2021, Instagram.

Ultimately, Garland-Thomson (2001) posited that his rhetoric of realism was the conduit for change. He argued that "imagining disability as ordinary, as the typical rather than the atypical human experience, can promote practices of equality and inclusion that begin to fulfil the promise of a democratic order" (p. 372). He identified the genesis of this approach in the photography of disability, which has informed the subsequent rhetorics discussed here. The distinction between the two can be observed in the fact that on Instagram, the subjects themselves have been able to incorporate elements of realism, expanding the potential definitions of disability and endowing it with normality in ways that were previously unforeseen.

## 5. Conclusions

In accordance with the analytical approach employed, and as evidenced indirectly in the results and discussion section, all the rhetorics have demonstrated interconnections between them, as a consequence of the relationship between the data and the theory proposed by Jackson and Mazzei (2012). In response to the objective of defining a novel rhetoric of disability on Instagram and establishing new classifications, the six discourses of emancipation, sexuality, happiness, supracapacity, rebellion and pride have been identified. Consequently, each new discourse seeks to challenge existing prejudices towards people with disabilities.

Firstly, emancipation seeks to normalise the image of the group in situations of autonomy and independence, whether this be through living alone or working. This refutes the idea that people with disabilities are a burden (Morris, 1991). Secondly, the discourse of sexuality advocates for the right to sensuality and pleasure. This is already indicated by Arnau-Ripollés (2019), who shows suggestive bodies with disabilities or couples with or without disabilities in a completely natural way.

Thirdly, and as one of the most prominent rhetorics, as it is one of the most deeply rooted prejudices, is joy. The publications classified under this label present everyday scenes of people with disabilities from an optimistic and joyful perspective, thereby challenging the Theory of personal tragedy (Oliver, 1990). With regard to supra-disability (García-Cantero, 2021), in fourth place, there are examples of people who compensate for actions that, due to their disability, they could not carry out, with different solutions; demonstrating that they can be just as productive as anyone else.



In a similar vein, there have been instances of individuals with disabilities themselves taking a stand in protest, advocating for their right to leisure and other pleasures that have traditionally been off-limits to the group. Consequently, the consumption of tobacco, alcohol, or participation in social gatherings is a fundamental aspect of their autonomy and cannot be regarded as a negative practice from an external perspective. Furthermore, this rebelliousness can be understood in the context of the Theory of personal tragedy (Oliver, 1990), as it represents an antithetical discourse to the presumed guilt associated with disability. Similarly, the example demonstrated the importance of listening to one's own group and refraining from judgement until the appropriate time.

In essence, the rhetoric of pride encompasses publications that espouse self-love and acceptance, normalising the beauty and the reality of other bodies while simultaneously providing evidence of their personal histories and their right to be themselves. The aforementioned example allows us to posit the concept of radical self-love (Kafai, 2021), which is a direct consequence of the rebelliousness that demands this as the natural state of their self-esteem.

Flourishing from Garland-Thomson's (2001) rhetoric of realism but composed from within the collective as has already been indicated on several occasions throughout this work, these new typologies support his idea of imagining disability normally, from democratic practices (precisely by giving the collective its own voice and initiative), in this case, on Instagram, so that, above all, they promote inclusion and equality. In any classification, the individuals in question appear in their photographs with dignity and distinction, exhibiting their realities with naturalness and integrity, which is of paramount importance.

As future avenues for research in relation to this work, it would be beneficial to consider conducting a more comprehensive, mixed-methods study that would enable us to make generalisations about the presence and nature of disability content on social networks. The thesis in which this work is included, which includes other data collection instruments in addition to image analysis, provides further insight. In conclusion, a qualitative or post-qualitative methodology is recommended for this type of research, as it focuses on the personal, the details of each individual, their narrative as a source of information and learning about difference, and less on a measurable and/or generalisable search for the whole group. In other words, the approach to the collective is proposed on the basis of individuality.

In conclusion, studies such as this one demonstrate that social networks, such as Instagram, serve as a platform for learning and social transformation. This observation aligns with the findings of the sources cited above (Martín-García & Martínez-Solana, 2019; Parra-Gómez et al., 2024), which indicate that the expansion of the canon occurs through the introduction of new narratives. Similarly, the generalised discourse towards individuals with disabilities has evolved in a favourable manner, as previously noted (García-Borrego & González-Cortés, 2022; Sanz-Simón, 2022). This positive shift can be attributed to the group's active role in shaping its narrative.

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