

Portrayal of Disabled People in the Kuwaiti Media

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This paper explores the views of 10 participants on how the Kuwaiti media represents disabled people. Participants expressed their views through focus groups and interviews. The findings show that, generally, disabled people in Kuwait are shown in a negative light in the media. The media depicts disabled people as ‘pitiable’, ‘violent’, ‘sinister’, ‘tragic’, and as a ‘tool of ridicule’. The findings, however, witness some positive examples of media representation regarding how some TV shows portray deaf people in a positive light. On the other hand, the study suggests that learning disabled people are the most negatively depicted group in Kuwaiti society. There are also indications of implicit endorsement or internalisation by the participants of views of disabled people as ‘extraordinary’ despite the presence of their impairments. The study concludes that it is more important that the media shows the everyday lives of disabled people before showing their abilities and achievements.

Keywords: Disability; Media; Individual Model; Kuwait

Introduction

There are disabled people in all communities worldwide. Therefore, it is imperative for societies to provide good services and accessible environments to accommodate them. However, in some countries, there is a lot that still needs to be done in order to provide adequate services for disabled people and a dignified life. Kuwait, for example, is one country in which disabled people are still disadvantaged as there is a lack of facilities for them. There are many reasons behind this, namely a lack of awareness, specifically among professionals, educators and the general public about disability issues, as these groups tend to perceive disabled people as a vulnerable group that requires medical care and financial aid.

The negative perceptions held by non-disabled people towards disabled people are reflected in how they perceive them in the media through negative representations that do not reflect the real lives of disabled people. For example, many TV shows and soap operas in Kuwait portray disabled people as objects of pity with undertones of ‘tragedy’, ‘sinister’ and ‘ridicule’.

This paper endeavours to explore the perceptions of a number of people on how disabled people are portrayed in the Kuwaiti media. This paper consists of four sections. The first section provides an overview of the Kuwaiti context in terms of culture, as well as the political and economic situation of the country. It also includes an exploration of the television, cinema, and theoretical movement in Kuwait. The second section explores both Kuwaiti and global North literature in relation to how disabled people are shown in the media. The third section addresses the methodology underpinning this research. The last section presents the research findings, followed by the discussion.

The Kuwaiti Context

Kuwait is located on the north-western shore of the Persian Gulf, covering an area of 17,820 sq. km (Nations Encyclopedia, n.d). The population in Kuwait is estimated at 4.1 million (2016 est.), with non-Kuwaitis accounting for about 70% of Kuwait's population (World Population Review, 2017), including those who are labelled by the state as 'Bidun' or 'stateless' residents in Kuwait (Human Rights Watch Report, 2016).

The political system in Kuwait is based on the separation and cooperation of powers (legislative power, executive power, and judicial power). Legislative power is represented by the Amir of Kuwait (head of state) and the National Assembly (Kuwaiti parliament) while executive power is represented by the Amir, the cabinet, and the ministers. The judicial power is vested in the courts in the Amir's name.

Given the presence of an elected parliament, Kuwait is identified as a partially democratic country. Anyone who is of Kuwaiti origin, is at least 30 years old and able to read and write Arabic, is considered to be qualified to be a member of the Kuwaiti parliament. Parliamentary elections in Kuwait are held every four years. All Kuwaitis (men and women) who are at least 21 years old are allowed to vote. However, those serving in the army and members of the ruling family are not allowed to vote in the elections.

The Kuwaiti economy relies on oil revenue. With its oil production and exportation, Kuwait is considered one of the most powerful countries in the world in economic terms. Economic prosperity and welfare in Kuwait is certainly reflected in the lives of the people, in general, and Kuwaiti citizens, in particular. Kuwaiti citizens enjoy a good standard of living and welfare, including a governmental educational system and healthcare, both of which are free of charge. Water and electricity are also available for Kuwaitis at a low cost. Additionally, all married Kuwaitis are eligible to receive a free house after 10–15 years of marriage. These are privileges granted by the state solely to Kuwaiti citizens.

Kuwaiti Culture: Television and Theatre

As this paper focuses on how society responds to the portrayal of disabled people in the media, it is vital to first talk about the nature of television and the theatre movement in Kuwait. The theatre movement in Kuwait dates back to the 1920s (Rubin, 1999). Kuwait is considered one of the pioneers in the Arabian region in television and theatre. The first theatrical production in Kuwait was held in 1922 when the Kuwaiti pioneer Abdulaziz Al-Rasheed launched the first stage play in the Gulf in the theatre of the Alahmadiya school (Alrai, 2010). In relation to television, Kuwait has produced many TV shows and programmes since the first TV broadcast in 1961 (Kraidy and Khalil, 2009). Today, Kuwait produces many soap operas and programmes all year round; many of them are displayed on special occasions such as Ramadan. It has been argued that the drama industry in Kuwait tops that of other nations in the Gulf, with about 15 TV series produced annually (Al Mukrashi, 2015).

Film production, on the other hand, is not as successful as TV and theatre in Kuwait despite its early history. The film 'Sons of Sinbad' produced in 1930 was the first Kuwaiti documentary film that narrated the history of sailing, followed by a number of films such as 'The Storm' (produced in 1965) and *Sea and Silence (Bas Ya Bahar)*, the latter produced in 1972 (Di Piazza, 2007; Arab Times, 2015). However, these early beginnings in film production were not sufficient to achieve success and proliferation in the Arab world. The Kuwaiti film director Walid Al-Awadi states that the failure of Kuwaiti cinema can be attributed to the lack of a basic structure such as the availability of high-tech equipment, locations, and talented crew as well as the lack of funding and support from both public and private sectors (Arab Times, 2015). As a result, Kuwait did not achieve much popularity in cinema as it did in television and theatre.

There is no doubt that since disabled people constitute a substantial population in any society, they must be represented in television, theatre, and cinema. In the next section, I discuss how disabled people are being portrayed in the Kuwaiti media.

Media representations of disabled people in Kuwait

Because the media is the mirror of any society and a tool contributing to discourse within society, it is crucial to explore how disabled people are depicted in the Kuwaiti media. Generally, in Kuwaiti media, disabled people are shown in a negative light. However, Kuwaiti society has no specificity or uniqueness in showing disabled people as such, as many Western societies present disabled people in the same way. In these societies (whether in the global North or South), disabled people are portrayed as 'pitiable', 'tragic', 'sinister', or as a 'tool of ridicule' (Barnes, 1992; Harnett, 2000; Clark, 2003).

Kuwaiti media produces a number of TV shows that portray disabled people as ‘representatives of many of the things they most fear—tragedy, loss, dark and the unknown’ (Hunt, 1966:155). An example of this tragic view is exemplified in a Kuwaiti TV show named *Hebr Aleyon*. In this TV show, the actress Heya Abdulsalam plays the role of a disabled character who cannot hear, speak, or see. The disabled character is kept in a locked room, isolated from her family, rarely going out or integrating within society. This TV show is an example of the negative portrayal of disabled people.

Moreover, a number of Kuwaiti TV shows and plays refer to learning or intellectually disabled people as ‘crazy’ or ‘demented’. For example, the 39-year-old TV show *Alagdar* showed an unknown presumably intellectually disabled character wearing torn and dirty clothes, wandering around an old neighbourhood by himself. He was given a humorous name ‘*Maroob*’, which means ‘frightened’. The people in the neighbourhood oppressed and often insulted him by calling him ‘crazy’ or ‘demented’, and children threw stones at him as he ran.

These and other similar scenes with learning or intellectually disabled characters are still represented in many Kuwaiti TV shows today, especially comedies. In addition, such people are sometimes shown on TV and used as an object or rather tool of ridicule in order to make the audience laugh. This applies not only to TV shows but also to comedy on stage, as the main cast uses learning and intellectually disabled people as well as people with restricted growth to make jokes about them (e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XhdrM-29t4>). Famous actors who frequently follow this kind of farcical comedy in their TV shows and plays in Kuwait include Dawood Hussain and Tariq Al-ali.

However, as mentioned above, the distorted identification of disabled people in the media is not restricted to Kuwaiti culture. It can also be seen in Western societies, especially in Hollywood films such as *Me, Myself & Irene*, *Tropic Thunder*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and many Disney movies. Barnes (1992) and Clark (2003) explored how disabled people became a ‘tool of ridicule’ in many TV shows and films. For example, Clark (2003), who explored comedy around disability in British TV and films, found that non-disabled people often create jokes on certain physical, communication, and visual impairments. Today, many comedians have built their careers on ‘disablist humour’ (Barnes, 1992).

The genre rampant in Kuwaiti media is mainly based on portraying disabled people as ‘pitiabile’ and ‘tragic’ through the inordinate focus on the medical side of impairment as well as on using the disabled body as an ‘object of ridicule’, while some television and theatrical works depict disabled people as ‘violent’ and ‘sinister’. Other genres include the notion of the ‘supercrip’, which addresses the success of disabled people in spite of their impairments (Silva and Howe, 2012:174), though this does not seem to be a prevalent construction in Kuwaiti media. Supercrip stories are more prevalent in Western societies, as seen in Hollywood films (for example, the *X-Men* series). These supercrip films show a disabled

person as extraordinary, someone who can overcome his/her impairment with almost miraculous abilities and become successful in his/her life (Barnes, 1992; Harnett, 2000).

Moreover, disabled people in Kuwait are exposed to an offensive representation in TV shows and plays, offensive undertones also evident in the language used. Alanizi, Secretary of the Kuwaiti Society of Blind People, said to *Alwatan* newspaper (2013) that the use of the phrase 'spend on blinds' is offensive to blind people and can have a negative impact on their psychology when heard on TV. This phrase, popular in Kuwait, is frequently used when a person spends money on something without getting anything in return. Moreover, in an interview, Tariq Al-ali, a famous comedian in Kuwait, used a 'disablist' term when referring to disabled people, saying 'God keep this evil away from you'. This phrase is usually used to refer to illness, for example, chronic or incurable diseases. This popular Arabic phrase means that one is sending hope to someone by praying that God keep evil/illness away from him/her. However, Tariq used it in conjunction with disabled people, as if to say that disabled people (because of their impairments) are evil and he hopes that God will keep the evil/disabled people away from 'normal' people. In other words, he replaced the word *evil* and used it as a synonym for disabled people.

Although there is an explicit article in Kuwaiti disability rights law that emphasises the portrayal of disabled people in a positive way (see Article 22 (3), Law No. 8 of 2010 for the Rights of People with Disabilities)¹, the media in Kuwait still portrays them in a negative light. There is no explicit law in Kuwait that criminalises abuse against disabled people in the media, but Kuwait has signed international conventions that protect the rights of disabled people. By remaining silent on the abuse that disabled people are subjected to in the media, Kuwait is explicitly violating international conventions on disability and human rights.

Portraying a disabled person in the media as 'pitable', 'pathetic', an 'object of violence', 'sinister', or 'evil' has had a negative impact on modern discourse related to disability and has led people to perceive disabled people in a negative light in practice (Barnes, 1992). Shakespeare (1999:165) argues that the media representation of disabled people has nothing to do with the identities and the experiences of disabled people in real life:

The use of disability as character trait, plot device, or as atmosphere is a lazy shortcut. These representations are not accurate or fair reflections of the actual experience of disabled people. Such stereotypes reinforce negative attitudes towards disabled people, and ignorance about the nature of disability.

The media generally portrays disabled people through a medical lens, by showing their inability to interact 'normally' in daily life because of their impairment (Pirsl and Popovska, 2013). This negative portrayal reflects how, in reality, disabled people are perceived in such a 'tragic' way, restricted by their impairments. This view is consistent with the individual

model of disability underpinned by what Oliver (1996:31) calls the ‘personal tragedy theory of disability’:

The individual model for me encompassed a whole range of issues and was underpinned by what I called the personal tragedy theory of disability. But it also included psychological and medical aspects of disability... In short, for me, there is no such thing as the medical model of disability, there is instead, an individual model of disability of which medicalisation is one significant component.

The domination of the individual model is clear in Kuwait through the adoption of international definitions of disability (for example those used by the World Health Organisation) that still define disabled people by their impairments. Kuwait defines disabled people as:

All those suffering from permanent, total, or partial disorders leading to deficiencies in his/her physical, mental, or sensory abilities that may prevent him/her from securing the requirements of life to work or participate fully and effectively in society on an equal basis with others. (Law number 8 of 2010: C1 (1))

Adhering to the individual model also reflects on how officials in Kuwait determine the impairment category. This can be seen through the frequent process of reassessing and re-examining the files of disabled people, something that occurs at the Public Authority for People with Disabilities Affairs (PAPDA), in order to determine welfare benefits.

Methodology

This paper reports on qualitative research that employed focus groups and interviews as the main data collection methods. Qualitative research can provide deeper analysis and offers disabled people a chance to share their experiences on different dimensions, including medical/psychological, political/economic, cultural/social and environmental (Hartley and Muhit, 2003). Qualitative research allows in-depth knowledge rather than a breadth of knowledge on a particular social phenomenon (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2006:64). Academic research in Kuwait, especially qualitative research on the subject remains scarce. In order to give participants the opportunity to explore a wide range of disability issues in Kuwait on different levels, qualitative methods were chosen for this research: ‘if you are concerned with exploring people’s life histories or everyday behaviour, then qualitative methods may be favoured’ (Silverman, 2014:9). The aim of this methodology was to explore how the participants derive meaning from their experiences, and how wider society, in contrast, affects those meanings, while taking into consideration material and non-material realities (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Methods

The main methods employed were focus groups and semi-structured interviews. More open-ended questions provided opportunities for both interviewers and interviewees to discuss different topics in detail (Hancock, 1998; Leech, 2002). Similarly, my role as a facilitator in the focus groups was flexible in order to support group dynamics (Noaks and Wincup, 2004).

I visited a sports club for disabled people in order to engage research participants. I asked the managing coordinator at the club to allow me to meet with the participants, but he was only able to allow me to meet four participants. Later on, participants introduced me to another six of their friends. Eventually, ten participants agreed to participate in the project (six men and 4 women). This included one non-disabled person (female), two persons with a visual impairment (male) and seven with a physical impairment (four men and three women). Participants were invited to participate in two focus groups, two pair interviews, and four one-to-one interviews.

All the interviews were held at the sports club for disabled people in Kuwait. The focus group lasted around one and a half hours, and each interview took about thirty minutes. All the focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and field notes were written in Arabic. I transcribed the data directly after the focus groups and interviews. First, I transcribed each one into Arabic and then translated it into English; the data obtained in both languages were read repeatedly to search for meaning.

In these focus groups and interviews, participants explored a number of disability issues related to the role of impairment in restricting activity and the role of society in responding to disabled people in Kuwait. Participants generally discussed the negative attitudes held by a number of non-disabled people towards disabled people as well as the lack of policies and services available to disabled people in Kuwait. They also explored cultural representations and the role of the media in representing disabled people in Kuwait. In this paper, I will discuss the latter by exploring the views of participants on how disabled people are portrayed in the Kuwaiti media.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed as it has the advantage of going beyond the semantic content of the data to the latent level by examining the underlying concepts and ideologies that shape the semantic level of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In order to identify the themes emerging across the data set, I followed the six phases in thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes,

searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Ethical considerations

Participants were given a participant information sheet and a consent form to be signed, which offered them the chance to decide whether they wanted to take part in the study. Participants also had the option to withdraw from the study at any point for whatever reason. All the participants agreed to participate in the project and agreed to have their information, including audio recordings and personal documents, used, albeit only for study purposes and for presentation at conferences and in publications.

As most of the participants were effectively involved in some of the research processes, such as preparing interview schedules and initial data analysis, I believe that anonymising their names is not appropriate. I believe that giving the real names of the participants will give them credit and recognition in the academic community, which could be beneficial if they wish to continue with disability research. In this project, I have used the real names of the participants with their consent. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Impairment	Occupation
Kholood	Female	26	Physical impairment	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
Saja	Female	24	Physical impairment	Student at the Basic Education College
Yagoub	Male	23	Physical impairment	Student at the Social Sciences College
Abdurrahman	Male	22	Physical impairment	Student at Al Shari'a College
Omar	Male	20	Visual impairment	Student at Al Shari'a College
Abdullah	Male	23	Physical impairment	Student at the Basic Education College
Metab	Male	28	Visual impairment	Working at the Ministry of Information

Sara	Female	24	Physical impairment	Student at art college
Fahad	Male	30	Physical impairment	Employee at a special education school
Manal	Female	52	Non-disabled	Secretary at a primary school

Findings

Participants discussed how disabled people are portrayed in the Kuwaiti media. Findings highlight how the main ways in which disabled people are portrayed in the media are as a ‘symbol of violence’, in a ‘pitiable’ or ‘tragic’ way, and as a ‘tool of ridicule’ in comedy TV shows and plays. The next part will discuss these types of portrayals from the perspectives of the participants.

Disabled people as a symbol of ‘violence’ and ‘evil’

The first main finding is how the media shows a lack of awareness because it fails to show the real lives of disabled people, showing them instead as ‘scary’ and ‘crazy’ people:

Extract 1

When it comes to the media, they don’t do any service at all for the disabled. There is no awareness; there is no programme specifically for them to spread awareness among the public about the importance and peaceful nature of the disabled. They always look at them as violent and harmful. It should be the media’s responsibility to create special shows explaining the nature of the disabled. They shouldn’t show them as crazy people who you should fear. We hope that the media provides this awareness. (Manal, female, aged 52)

Manal is the mother of a child with a learning disability. She spoke about how the media needs to spread awareness about the true nature of disabled people. She stressed that disabled people are peaceful and not ‘violent’, ‘crazy’, or ‘scary’ as portrayed in the media. The findings support claims in literature that in practice, disabled people ‘are more likely to be introverted and sensitive than violent and aggressive, they are more likely to avoid rather than attack others, and when given the appropriate support, they are perfectly capable of living in the community’ (Barnes, 1992, p.12).

The idea of perceiving disabled people as an ‘object of violence’ may be associated with how

evil characters are portrayed on some TV shows in Kuwait. These TV shows (mostly the old ones) depict evil characters as inseparable from deformity. For example, the old Kuwaiti TV show *The Strangers*, produced in 1982, shows the leader of evil plots in the series as a person with a physical impairment person with a ‘scary’ voice. The portrayal of the evil character as a disabled person is not restricted to this TV show, but widespread among other TV shows, especially those related to historical or heritage fantasies (e.g. the work of the Kuwaiti actor Khalid Alobaid).

Portraying evil characters as disabled, raises questions about aesthetic norms. It is notable that the characters of villains’ are often attributed ‘ugly’ appearances (e.g. the character of Freddy Krueger, who appears in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film series, or Jason Voorhees, who appears in the *Friday the 13th* film series). This raises a question about what is considered ‘handsome’ and what is ‘ugly’. Can beauty’s norms be determined based on what is commonly seen in society as beautiful? Garland-Thomson (2010) discussed the story of disability rights lawyer, activist and storyteller Harriet McBryde Johnson, who taught people how to look at her disabled body by showing it on the cover of the New York Times Magazine. Garland-Thomson (2010) stated that Johnson has a rare beauty that is difficult to recognise without her instructions on how to look at her. Johnson starts by describing her body to the audience, and then talks about what happened to her, showing satisfaction with her condition, stating ‘two or three times in my life ... I have been looked at as a rare kind of beauty...some people call me Good Luck Lady’ (Garland-Thomson, 2010, p.202).

Restricting beauty’s standards/norms to certain or common physical attributes can affect disabled people’s psycho-emotional well-being and make them feel less valued, worthless, unattractive or disgusting (Thomas, 2004). This is a classic form of psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 1999, 2004).

Returning to what Manal revealed in the extract above regarding portraying disabled people as ‘objects of violence’, I want to raise a point which is not evident in the data: incitement to violence against disabled people. In some comedy plays in Kuwait, there are scenes that show violence against disabled people, especially on those with learning or intellectual disabilities and those with dwarfism. In many instances, this violence reaches a level of physical harm that a disabled person may be exposed to on the stage, such as beating, slapping and carrying him/her in a ‘funny’ way (see, for example, the stage plays *Hameha Haramaha*, *Momathel Alshaab* and *Alaa Haman Ya Pharaoh*).

Although the participants did not discuss the issue of violence against disabled people in the media, they did talk about it in general, including the stare as well as the physical abuse that a disabled person might be subjected to in his/her everyday life:

Extract 2

...there are others that just hurt you by the way they stare, and even some who would physically push the disabled person, and I have no idea what they are trying to achieve by doing this. (Sara, female, aged 24)

Using disabled people as an ‘object of ridicule’

In the first extract, Manal addressed another aspect related to how disabled people are portrayed in the media, i.e. as ‘crazy’ people. This is often associated with how some TV shows depict learning disabled people. The media may be responsible for how both disabled and non-disabled people perceive learning disabled people:

Extract 3

The majority of disabled roles focus on mental disabilities, where the disabled character in a TV show walks around and people yell at him, ‘Crazy, crazy!’. What does that mean? Every mental disability means you are crazy? No, the media has made it clear that mental disability means you are crazy. (Sara, female, aged 24)

Kholood also confirmed the same notion:

Extract 4

When they play the role of a person with an intellectual disability, even [the disabled person’s] family and people around him say he is crazy. He is crazy, so everyone looks at him...‘Intellectual disability means crazy’. So, the media is delivering a false message. (Kholood, female, aged 26)

In fact, as stated earlier in the paper, a number of Kuwaiti TV shows and plays refer to learning disabled people as ‘crazy’ or ‘demented’. In comedy shows, the cast use disabilities as a ‘tool of ridicule’ in order to make jokes. Portraying disabled people as an ‘object of ridicule’, as highlighted earlier, is not restricted to Kuwaiti culture (Barnes, 1992; Clark, 2003). Sara, who has restricted growth, talked about how disabled people are being exploited

in the media as a ‘tool of entertainment’:

Extract 5

As disabled people, we don’t like to be made fun of, in the roles you see us in. If you want to play the role accurately, then you should show us the way we are. Don’t take the role just for the money. I hope the media spreads a positive image in society that we are not there just so they can make fun of us. (Sara, female, aged 24)

In this extract, although Sara was talking generally about showing disabled people as an ‘object of ridicule’, she may also have been reflecting on her personal experience as a person with dwarfism, as almost all (whether locally or internationally) TV shows and theatrical works that include these people, depict them as an ‘object of mockery’ or as entertainers. The appearance of people who have restricted growth in the media has contributed to the formation of people’s perceptions towards dwarfism. In her article *I’m an actor with dwarfism, but I can do more than just appear in Snow White* in *The Guardian* in 2016, actress Kiruna Stamell talks about the assumptions made by people that restrict the acting roles of those with dwarfism to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. She also confirms that most people with restricted growth are not entertainers or actors as perceived by the media, but that they have normal lives and jobs, hopes and goals, the same as other people do. In other words, through pantomime roles often linked with people with dwarfism, the media constructs and contributes to cultural stereotypes of these people that have nothing to do with their day-to-day lives and roles (Grant, 2017).

Depicting disabled people in a ‘pitiable’ or ‘tragic’ way

The domination of the individual model that is underpinned by the personal tragedy theory of disability, which defines disabled people based on their biological characters (Oliver, 1990, 1996), can be seen in the way in which the media in Kuwait portrays disabled people:

Extract 6

The media plays a role. Everyone has a television set. Everyone watches television programmes during Ramadan. When you get an actor to play the role of a disabled person, he puts white sheets on his legs in a dark room; he is sad all the time and he doesn't study or go anywhere. (Saja, female, aged 24)

Here, Saja criticises some TV shows for portraying disabled people as useless and non-productive, considering this to be a misconception of the reality of disabled people. In this extract, Saja overtly documents her rejection of the tragic view of disability. It is interesting to note here that as Hunt suggested, as far back as 1966, non-disabled people have and continue to see disabled people as representatives of tragedy, loss and darkness. It also echoes the observation of Harriet McBryde Johnson, who pointed out that what people usually recognise when they look at her is 'unbearable pain, insurmountable adversity, a diminished life, and a fervent desire for a cured body' (Garland-Thomson, 2010:202). This provides an example of how people in society perceive, under the influence of the prevalent medical discourse, bodies such as that Johnson in a 'triadic way'.

The extract above shows a clear connection between the physical qualities of disabled people and the tragic perception held by non-disabled people that is conceptualised through the medical gaze. It seems that this tragic perception that is fed by the medical gaze has been configured through the constant monitoring of disabled people's personal lives: 'We often experience the fascination that non-disabled people have with "just how do you manage?" They have a consuming curiosity about how we pee, how we shit, how we have sex (do we have sex?)' (Morris, 1991: 29).

The frequent observation (surveillance or gaze) of disabled people's bodies has led people's curiosity to interfere with their personal issues, and perpetuates differences between people based on 'normality'. People create norms based on 'ableist' ideas, which can influence people's perceptions and attitudes towards disabled people (Campbell, 2008; Goodley, 2014). These norms can lead people to construct and express negative attitudes towards disabled people signified by a pitiable and tragic outlook.

Adopting these 'ableist' norms not only influences non-disabled people's perceptions through establishing constructed negative attitudes towards disabled people, but also influences disabled people's perceptions of their own bodies. This can occur through self-surveillance of their own bodies, trying to make themselves acceptable according to prevalent norms (Reeve, 2002). Both the power of the medical gaze and self-surveillance can affect disabled people's psycho-emotional state, such as feeling worthless and rejected (Reeve, 2002). Self-surveillance often happens when disabled people claim benefits such as Disability Living

Allowance (DLA), while the medical gaze is practised by others not solely through diagnosis, assessing and categorising impairments, but also through daily interaction with people in society:

Extract 7

Here, they look at you and make you feel like you are a strange being... They stare a lot... Disabled people who get used to it just ignore it, but people who do not get used to it, they get upset. (Yagoub, male, aged 23)

Another participant, Metab, in a similar fashion to Saja, criticised the fact that disabled people are portrayed in a ‘tragic’ way, but went further by suggesting how disabled people need to be shown in TV programmes:

Extract 8

The TV programmes always show people with disabilities as people who don’t work and don’t have a purpose in life. That is wrong. Rarely do you see a TV show that has a disabled person as a doctor for example and he’s living his life normally without any problems...Okay, have a character that is disabled but show that he is integrated in society, how he is living, if he’s married and he has kids, and that people use his help in their life or that he is the leader of the family. This is the positive image that should be shown of disabled people; it shouldn’t be negative. (Metab, male, aged 28)

I want to conclude here that perceiving disabled people in a ‘pitable’ or ‘tragic’ way can be linked to the notion of ‘assumed hopelessness’ or ‘assumed helplessness’ of disabled people by non-disabled people. By assuming hopelessness or helplessness, non-disabled people are conceptualising disabled people through the lens of the individual model. Disabled people’s biological characteristics became a ‘master status’ (Forge, 2012:1), which makes non-disabled people perceive disabled people in a ‘pitable’ or ‘tragic’ way.

Disabled people as ‘supercrips’

The notion of a ‘supercrip’ (see above) featured in the participants’ narratives. For example, Fahad discussed his impairment as a non-barrier for getting on with his life and becoming successful:

Extract 9

I have had a disability since birth that was caused by lack of oxygen and that gave me cerebral palsy since birth. However, since this did not affect me, I continued to university and continued in life in the best possible way, thank God Almighty! But, some people look at disabled people in a sympathetic way, and we don't ask for their sympathy. We are well-educated and have abilities and achievements; with that in mind, you sometimes see these people who have a sympathetic view of disabled people as not being educated or anything. We are better than them, we have achievements, and, speaking for myself, I'm a member of the Kuwait national team in shot put at the Kuwait club for disabled people. I have also competed in many places like the United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, and I have earned fourth place in the world rankings, thank God. (Fahad, male, aged 30)

Sara confirmed the same notion:

Extract 10

OK, we are disabled, but we can also be creative. Creativity can't just come from a non-disabled person, we can also be creative in other ways... God took something from us, but he also gave us something else instead. We have many talents; for example, I am an artist, a photographer, and a student. What do you call that? I am displaying my talents, and now I am an athlete too.

(Sara, female, aged 24)

These two extracts clearly show participants' confirmation of success in their lives despite the physical and ontological presence of their impairments. This supports Silva and Howe's (2012) notion of the 'achievement syndrome' referring to the success of disabled people despite their impairments. Both Fahad and Sara used their success and life achievements to prove their presence, demonstrating that such abilities are not limited to non-disabled people. By confirming that their physical and mental abilities are at an equivalent or higher standard than those of any other non-disabled individual, however, they are destabilising attempts by others who are challenging the oppression they feel they experience.

The fact that participants raised these issues implies the notion of classification and preferences among different groups of disabled people. Deal (2003) noticed this classification in the early 1980s, when the term 'supercrip' was used by a group of young men with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. The group used this term in a disparaging way to describe

other wheelchair users who participated in marathons, drove cars and used their upper body strength to the full. Thus, this group of young men created a hierarchy by considering themselves to be ‘genuine’ disabled people while creating a distance from these other more athletic groups of disabled people.

Deal’s (2003) observations took disability to a more complex position by showing that the more ‘abled’ person, is not necessarily the one who wants to distance him/herself from the ‘less abled’ one, as it can be the other way round too. This view contrasts with what some of the participants of this study revealed. For example, Saja is a physically impaired athlete who perceives herself as part of a disabled ‘upper class’, equal to non-disabled people, because of her ability to do similar things and, at the same time, distances herself from intellectually disabled people, whom she views as part of a ‘lower class’:

Extract 11

What can an intellectually disabled person do?... they are not representative. When you say ‘disabled people’, do not put intellectual disability together with mobility problems. (Saja, female, aged 24)

Deal (2003) highlighted this issue in a different way by discussing the views of young men with Duchenne muscular dystrophy (lower class, based on Saja’s classification) who wanted to distance themselves from the athletes (upper class, based on Saja’s classification). This opens up the possibility that learning disabled people, who were considered to be part of a lower class by many participants in this project, preferred to distance themselves from other groups of disabled people.

Moreover, returning to the ideas raised by Fahad and Sara (see extracts 9 and 10), it can be noticed that their ideas are implicitly supportive of the ‘extraordinary’ disabled characters being represented on television and cinema. Let us take two examples here: the first from the *X-men* series and the second from the film about Stephen Hawking, *The Theory of Everything*. The *X-men* films show a disabled character, Professor Charles Francis Xavier, who leads a group of ‘hyper-able’ mutants from his extremely accessible environment. The film obviously reinforces the idea of ‘supercrip’ in two ways. The first is by portraying Charles as an ‘extraordinary’ wheelchair user who has the ability to control and read minds and has never been influenced or restricted by his impairment. The second is by showing the X-men as ‘other’ or ‘different’ people who were born with superpowers and had to strive for equality between mutants and humans.

The Theory of Everything narrates the life of the cosmologist Stephen Hawking. Although the film shows how his impairment impacted him throughout the different stages of his life, it

makes the audience wonder how Stephen Hawking could, despite his condition, manage his work and be a father of three children. In other words, the film raises ‘supercrip’ questions in relation to Hawking’s achievements with his work in cosmology as well as managing his ordinary life, more specifically his sexual life.

Metab addressed the matter from a different angle than Fahad and Sara:

Extract 12

TV and radio programmes run on the same pattern. ‘The disabled club has an event, let’s go cover it’. ‘This person has a hobby, let’s go interview him’. Again, what do they gain from this? Every year, they repeat the same thing. Show a disabled person in a positive light. Interview them about their daily life and what they do. Not just competitions and achievements and saying he is a champion. Don’t just say that this disabled person achieved something. Show him first in his daily life and then show his hobbies. When we see these programmes, they are always the same, what they did and what they achieved. No, we want an interview with a disabled person about his whole life, and then his achievements. (Metab, male, aged 28)

In this extract, although Metab did not reject the idea of showing the achievements of disabled people, he demanded that TV and radio programmes focus on other aspects of disabled people’s lives. He explicitly suggested that before showing the hobbies of disabled persons, these programmes should show their daily lives and routines. In this, it seems Metab suggested that disabled people, like all people, have everyday roles that need to be shown on TV.

Positive images of disabled people in the media

Fahad mentioned one good show, called *Jarh el zeman*, that portrayed disabled people in a positive way:

Extract 13

All my life, I have just seen one show that did this; it is called *Jarh el zeman*. It focused on social problems and also on deaf people and the problems that they go through, from psychological issues to social issues and so on. (Fahad, male, aged 30)

Sara also mentioned another positive example:

Extract 14

Looking from a positive standpoint, they show deaf people in a positive light and that they are included in society...A positive [role] involves an actress named Laila Abdullah. She played the role of a deaf person and she really raised awareness about deaf people. She played the role very positively and she improved the image of disabled people in society. (Sara, female, aged 24)

It can be noticed from these two extracts that the participants mentioned two different TV shows, both of which focused on the issues of deaf people. According to the participants, these two TV shows depicted deaf people in a positive way and helped raise awareness about disabled people in Kuwaiti society. However, the participation of deaf people is not represented in this study; this makes it possible that deaf people in Kuwait might not like these two TV shows and thus demand more in-depth and complex shows that reflect the 'real' lives of deaf people. Exploring the lives of deaf people and their perspectives regarding media representation is an important issue to be followed up in future research.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the perspectives of disabled people in regard to how they are represented in the Kuwaiti media. It was clear from the data that, generally, disabled people are portrayed in a negative way in the Kuwaiti media. Based on the findings discussed above, disabled people in Kuwait are portrayed according to their physical qualities or mental abilities, all hovering around the discourse of 'normality' and 'abnormality'. While there is a wide range of impairments, participants in this study focused their discussion on limited impairments such as physical impairments, intellectual disabilities and deafness.

In relation to physical impairments, physically impaired people are shown in a 'tragic' way, as a 'symbol of violence' or 'evil', or as an 'object of entertainment', especially those with restricted growth. It is also evident that the representation of intellectually disabled people is distorted in the Kuwaiti media, as they are frequently portrayed as 'mad' or 'crazy' people. It is clear from the data that these are represented in negative terms from different angles (i.e. the media and disabled people themselves who have other types of impairments). The findings of this study suggest that intellectually disabled people are the most oppressed disabled group in Kuwaiti society.

The general public in Kuwait has apparently formed their ideas about learning and

intellectually disabled people in similar ways to those in Western societies. From a Foucauldian perspective, as the notion of 'madness' started to be recognised as a 'mental illness' in the eighteenth century (Foucault, 1967), it is clear that some people in Kuwait still perceive intellectually disabled people as 'mad' or 'crazy'. This was clear from the discourse of some participants in the project. Moreover, the presentation of learning disabled people as 'mad' or 'crazy' is obvious in the media. Intellectually disabled people in Kuwait are confined to their homes, and there is no evidence from the past or the present in the Arab world of the Foucauldian 'great confinement' of such disabled people in institutions (Turner, 2015:1300). Additionally, a number of old TV shows portray these disabled people as beggars (e.g. *Darb Alzalag*), but these kinds of characters were not evident in the data.

According to the discourse of two participants, deaf people are represented in a relatively positive manner in Kuwaiti media. These two participants mentioned two different TV shows that contributed to raising awareness about disabled people in society. This implies that deaf people are the best-represented group in Kuwaiti media. However, as the voices of deaf people are absent in this research, further exploration is needed in order to provide in-depth analysis into the lives of deaf people and gather information regarding media representations.

Moreover, despite the lack of support for depicting disabled people as 'supercrips' in the media by a number of disability scholars in the West, there were indicators of implicit endorsement by some of the participants in this study of such a notion. These indicators of endorsement were found in showing the abilities and achievements of participants as of an equivalent or greater standard than those of many non-disabled people. One participant, however, explicitly stressed that in addition to showing the abilities and achievements of disabled people in the media, it is vital to show their daily lives as well.

Other issues related to the language used were not evident in the data. For example, I have seen a number of programmes and interviews on disability issues where the interviewer and his/her guests used offensive language towards disabled people and the words 'normal' or 'healthy' when referring to non-disabled people. Although from a Western or global North perspective, it would be reasonable to believe that many (if not all) disabled people would find these labels insulting, it is evident from the data that disabled people themselves often use these terms. For example, Saja used the phrase 'My sister is healthy, thank God'. Saja, however, was not the only participant in the research who referred to non-disabled people as 'healthy' or 'normal'; this issue was well-established in the discourse of other participants in this project. There is no doubt that the nature of terminologies regarding the notion of 'normality' needs extensive research and there is no room to discuss it in this paper. However, this can be explored in future research.

Finally, it can be noted from the findings that when the participants were discussing the roles of physically impaired (apart from people with dwarfism) and deaf people, they were talking

about a non-disabled person playing the character of a disabled person. There is no evidence in the data that the role of a disabled person should be played solely by a disabled person. Some would argue, however, that the role of a disabled character should be played by a disabled person. Stamell (2016), for example, emphasised that the role of a disabled person should be played by a disabled person, as this helps disabled people be included in society, confirming that disabled people should be everywhere, on stages and screens, and not solely defined by their bodies. This issue seems to be significant for future work.

Notes

¹ *Organizing awareness campaigns through media, motivating media to create a positive image for people with disabilities* (Law No. 8 of 2010 for the Rights of People with Disabilities, Article 22 (3)).

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